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Who, Wat, Where, and Wai:

The History of Wat Thai Los Angeles

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

by

Danny Anuphong Dechartivong

2012

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Who, Wat, Where, and Wai:
The History of Wat Thai Los Angeles

by

Danny Anuphong Dechartivong

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Min Zhou, Chair

This article traces how the creation of a Thai Theravada Buddhist temple, known as the Wat (Temple) Thai Los Angeles, in North Hollywood, California, gave rise to the formation of a Thai community in the greater Los Angeles area in the 1970s. The research examines how the Thai community throughout Southern California came together and formed such a grand project at the time. The paper focuses on the people who created the idea of erecting a temple in Los Angeles. In this study, I present oral history accounts of people who were directly involved in the project highlighting community volunteerism and activism. I examine how religious institutions can serve as the centerpiece of ethnic community formation in the United States.

The thesis of Danny Anuphong Dechartivong is approved.

Valerie J. Matsumoto

Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo

Min Zhou, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

DEDICATION PAGE

To the working-class of Thai Town, Los Angeles. I remain yours.

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GLOSSARY

Khun	A courtesy title to be put in front of a person's name
Wai	Thai greeting consists of a slight bow, with the palms pressed together in a prayer-like fashion. Also used as a sign of respect
Wat	Buddhist temple

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Lastly, I would like to recognize Khun Urai Ruenprom and Khun Sawattana Pinwathana for sharing their stories in this thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the crowded intersections and the rush of traffic zooming by overhead on the 170 Hollywood Freeway there is a building that makes people take a second glance. The pointing of fingers and awestruck stares come down to a simple question, “What is that?” It might be a question that whips through one’s mind while speeding on the freeway or a question that baffles others as they sit in traffic in the busy intersection of Coldwater Canyon and Cantara Street in North Hollywood, California. The aim of this study is not just to answer those questions, but to reveal the history of Wat Thai Los Angeles and the large ethnic community it represents. The study highlights how interdependent religious institutions and ethnic community are on one another in terms of immigrant settlement and adaptation to the United States.

The mission of my research is to document community members who were directly involved in this massive project during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Most of the first-generation Thais who were involved are now entering their senior years which make it even more important to document their stories for future generations of Thai Americans. It is a story of how a Thai Theravada Buddhist temple came to be and how it brought a community together through an ambitious, collective goal of creating an ethnic space in the heart of Los Angeles. The stories of Mr. Urai Ruenprom and Ms. Suwattana Pinwathana, both longtime community activists, paint a vivid picture of an emerging Thai American community and its role in the overall history of multiethnic urban Los Angeles.

Approximately 120,000 Thais live and work in California. The largest Thai American community is in Los Angeles, with about 80,000. In Southern California, Thai families can find a support network and seek social services from religious institutions such as Wat Thai and community centers like the Thai Community Development Center (CDC). To accommodate the

growing number of Thai immigrants in Los Angeles, the Royal Thai Consulate was established in 1980 to help with immigration policies and legal services.¹ The hundreds who flock to Wat Thai Los Angeles in North Hollywood every weekend enjoy the majestic beauty of ancient Southeast Asian architecture, the teachings of the Buddha, home-cooked meals for complete strangers, and a sense of belonging for Thais living in Southern California. For Thais, it is a space of remembering and for Thai Americans it is a space of learning. Wat Thai serves as a space where second- generation Thai Americans can explore their connection with their parents' homeland. The temple provides workshops and classes on Thai languages, dance, and the arts.²

Wat Thai serves as more just than a place of worship but as an integral community center connected with the vast social network of Thai communities throughout the United States. The temple is an important cultural center for first and second generation Thai Americans. This thesis examines the early stages of the large Thai migration to Los Angeles in the mid- 1960s. I will first provide a discussion of why Thais immigrated to America and the challenges they faced in a new country. I then examine in detail the roles of religion and community formation such as ethnic Thai-centered non-profit organizations and associations which were the driving-force for creating Wat Thai Los Angeles. Lastly, the thesis will provide details of the actual construction of the temple.

Literature Review

The Thai community in Los Angeles is the largest Thai population outside the Kingdom of Thailand. Often referred to as Thailand's 78th province, Thai Town in East Hollywood,

¹ Thongthiraj, Rahpee. "The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity, and Change in the 21st Century." Asian Week Publisher. 2003. 102.

² Thongthiraj, Rahpee. 102.

California has grown so rapidly it begs scholarly attention. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research done on the Los Angeles Thai community. Most literatures of Thais in the United States are focused on religion, in this case, Buddhism in an American context. But strides are being taken by a few scholars of Thai American Studies and community activists/leaders—all shedding light on the Los Angeles Thai community.

Thai American Studies scholar Jiemin Bao focuses on Thai American middle-classness, their sense of Thai ethnic identity and how it interplays with Buddhism. Her valuable fieldwork and participation in the community provide readers a chance to hear the stories of Thais and Thai Americans in the Bay Area of northern California. Bao's vast interviews cover a wide range of Thai and Thai Americans with different faiths, socioeconomic, gender, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. She highlights how transnational networking between middle-class Thai Americans and Thailand's elite dictate how Buddhist temples are created and operated in the United States. Their relationship is critical due to the fact that the costs of constructing temples are reaching into the millions of dollars. The overall cost of constructing Wat Thai Silicon Valley in 2004 was in the range of \$2.8 million.³

Buddhist Studies scholar Wendy Cage focuses on Thai immigrant temples and meditation centers which attract largely white American participants in Cambridge, Massachusetts and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Like Bao, Cage engages with her research subjects by participating in the everyday operations of the temple and with the Thai immigrant community. She explores the similarities between Thai immigrants and white Buddhist converts by highlighting Buddhist teachings and philosophies of the Thai immigrants and the individualistic psychology of the

³ Bao, Jiemin. "Thai American Middle-Classness: Forging Alliances with Whites and Cultivating Patronage from Thailand's Elite." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12:2. Johns Hopkins University Press. 2009. 168.

white American practitioners. She asserts that practicing meditation and embracing the collective nature of Buddhism counters the individualistic psychology of American culture.

Leading Buddhist Studies expert Paul Numrich also focuses on immigrant Buddhist temples in the United States. Numrich's pioneering work challenged the discourse on American Buddhism which had focused exclusively on the views of white American converts while no attention was paid to the immigrant community the temple itself represented. He found that the "immigrant Buddhists" and the "American converts" formed "*parallel* congregations" within the same temples that "*intersected*" but did not "*interact*," for the immigrants were ritual-oriented and American converts meditation-oriented. Such patterns are also evident in my findings at Wat Thai Los Angeles. American converts mainly attend the temple to meditate and seek advices from resident monks but hardly ever participate in the day-to-day operations of the temple. Only those who have Thai partners are active within the Wat Thai Los Angeles community.

Buddhist Studies scholar George Bond is a leading expert in Theravada Buddhism which is the majority Buddhist sect in Thailand. Bond gives a detailed historical account of Theravada Buddhism which traces back to 3rd century B.C.E India. Theravada Buddhism is widely considered to be the most conservative of all Buddhist disciplines.

Sociologists, Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III, focus on the socioeconomic mobility in Laotian and Vietnamese immigrant communities in Louisiana and how it affects their respective religious institutions. In their groundbreaking study, they used qualitative data from observation and census data to examine how Southeast Asian religious institutions have been transformed by their members' participation in the social and economic structure of the United States. They also shared how those changing institutions have, in turn, affected the socioeconomic fortunes of their members. Such patterns are also evident in other immigrant communities as Bao highlighted in

her work of the immigrant Thai community in the Bay Area and also my findings at Wat Thai Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Thai community

Thai American Studies scholar Rahpee Thongthiraj focuses on the Thai American experience in the United States. Thongthiraj gives a brief but nonetheless important introductory into the Los Angeles Thai community. She highlights how the Thai American community is changing the ethnic landscape across Los Angeles. Thongthiraj situates Thai Town in East Hollywood as a vibrant ethnic enclave with its many restaurants, grocery stores, shops, and entertainment for residents and visitors alike to enjoy.

Community activists and authors Chanchanit Martorell and Beatrice Morlan of Thai Community Development Center (CDC) focus on photographic narratives that provide a visual history of Thais in Los Angeles. Their work is the first to concentrate on the Los Angeles Thai community. Martorell, executive director of Thai CDC, founded the non-profit community-based organization in 1994. She chronicled hundreds of old photos belonging to numerous families who lived in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s. The priceless photos provide an intimate look at the early history of Thais in Los Angeles.

Sociologist Tetsuden Kashima focuses on how ethnic religious institutions play a key role in an ethnic group's attempts to maintain their sociocultural survival and adaptation in the United States. Kashima highlights how extremely important ethnic religious institutions are to the Japanese American community. The ethnic religious institutions such as Buddhist temples allow Japanese Americans to retain their religious beliefs and practice, and also build a sense of community solidarity to counter discrimination and hostility from the society at large. His work draws parallel with the same issues and concerns facing Wat Thai Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Thai community today.

Methodology

In this study, I make use of qualitative data from interviews with two community members who were directly involved in the early planning and construction of Wat Thai Los Angeles. The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2011 and ranged from thirty minutes to two hours. Both interviewees are still active volunteers for the temple. The interview site was on location at Wat Thai Los Angeles in North Hollywood, California. Both interviewees, over the age of fifty, came to Los Angeles in the late 1960s/early 1970s in their early-twenties as college students and workers. I also draw from the census data to highlight the growing Thai population in the United States.

I also draw upon my extensive fieldwork observations from 2009 to 2012. I forged strong working-relationships with members of Wat Thai Los Angeles and its surrounding community by working for a non-profit organization which provides social services to the working-class Thai immigrant community. By collaborating with community activists and leaders from various ethnic Thai-centered organizations, I became invested in the issues facing Thai Americans—both academically and personally. As I transitioned away from being an outsider and into an active participant in the Thai American community, many Thai Americans shared their stories with me in the same fashion an elder passes down lessons to the younger generation.

The following chapters are based on my personal experiences and impressions as a participant at Wat Thai Los Angeles and the Thai community from 2009- 2012. Chapter one will focus on Thai immigration to the United States, post-1965. The chapter will also highlight the socioeconomic background of Thai immigrants and settlement patterns in Los Angeles. Chapter two will discuss the roles of religion and Wat Thai Los Angeles and how it influenced the formation of a Thai enclave in Los Angeles. I will also examine the traditional structure of the

temple. Chapter three will give a brief history of Theravada Buddhism and its relationship to its adherents, in regards to Thai emigration to the U.S. Chapter four will focus on the history of Wat Thai Los Angeles and the class dynamic faced by Thai Americans in its establishment. Chapter five will examine the rise of community volunteerism and power dynamics of the laity. Lastly, I will provide oral history accounts by long-time community members who were instrumental in organizing the construction of Wat Thai Los Angeles.

CHAPTER ONE

THAI IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Coming to America

The first wave of Thai immigrants, between 1965 and 1975, consisted mainly of college students and professionals from Bangkok⁴. The majority of students came to the United States seeking a western education because university degrees would lead to social advancement back in Thailand. The larger Thai society, especially Bangkok's urbanites, stresses the importance of a western college education. Students will sometimes bypass Thailand's most prestigious universities and vie to enter state and city universities and junior colleges in the U.S. Thai professionals were largely doctors, nurses, engineers, scientists, and pharmacists. Inflation was high and job opportunities and professional mobility low in Thailand at the time factors that led many Thai professionals to migrate to the United States.

In addition to students and professionals, a number of Thai women who had married American servicemen stationed in or visiting Thailand during the Vietnam War immigrated to

⁴ Bangkok is the Capital of Thailand. Bangkok means *Krung Thep Maha Nakhon* which translates to "the City of Angels."

the United States during this period. From 1968 to 1977, 14,688 Thai women immigrated to the United States as wives of American servicemen. Most came from peasant families and had only primary school education. Today many are middle class, and not just because they “married up,” if their husbands happened to be technicians or engineers, but because they found jobs and brought income home. Thai American women have outnumbered Thai American men by about 20 percent for the past thirty years.⁵

During the second wave, between 1970 and 1980, public outrage against the military dictatorship in Thailand led many Thais to immigrate to other countries such as the United States. This wave again consisted largely of professionals and students but now included semi-skilled laborers.

Socioeconomic Wave

What sets the third wave apart (1980 to present) apart from the other two waves is that the majority of immigrants are working-class. In the Los Angeles Thai community, although the immigrants share some similarities with other Asian immigrant groups, the Thais differ in their demographic and occupational characteristics, in their initial motivations for migration, and in their distribution within the Los Angeles area. The attraction of better opportunities and the desire to join relatives already established here were the primary reasons for immigrating to the United States. Therefore, Thais are considered economic immigrants. Unlike other Southeast Asians, Thais are not political refugees fleeing persecution or civil strife.⁶

Due to the decreasing economic opportunities in Thailand, many Thais, especially from the rural areas, entered the United States as ‘undocumented’ immigrants and became the new

⁵ Bao, Jiemin. 172.

⁶ Martorell, Chanchanit and Beatrice Morlan. *Thais in Los Angeles*. Arcadia Publishing. 2011. 9.

‘cheap labor’ source in labor-intensive industries such as garment manufacture.⁷ On August 2, 1995, over six dozen Thai nationals were discovered working in conditions of slavery in a makeshift garment factory just east of Los Angeles in El Monte, California. The case drew international attention as the first case of modern slavery in the United States since the abolition of slavery in 1860.⁸ The contemporary Thai American community represents both sides of the socioeconomic spectrum from middle/upper-class professionals and college students (who are professionals to-be) to the working-class immigrants working within the ethnic economy in the low-paying service industries with no advancement into the mainstream American workforce.

Settling in Los Angeles

Southern California was the main destination point for many Thai students and professionals during the first wave of the mid-1960s. The city of Los Angeles captured the imaginations of young, educated middle-class Thais. American popular culture such as music and movies, synonymous with Hollywood, were very popular in Thailand. With the vast selections of universities, colleges, and junior colleges throughout greater Los Angeles—picking Los Angeles was desired by many Thais in the mid to late 1960s.

Subsequent migration waves also chose Los Angeles due to the migration networking established by the first wave. A small but growing concentration of Thais was settling in Hollywood and north Hollywood area due to affordable housing. Thai restaurants and grocery marts started to open up in the area. The Thai population soared as Thai entrepreneurs needed more workers from Thailand and settled professionals started to sponsor their families to come to Los Angeles. Metropolitan Los Angeles became the epicenter for Thai migration with the

⁷ Thongthiraj, Rahpee. 102.

⁸ Martorell and Morlan. 25.

creation of Wat Thai Los Angeles serving as the catalyst. The temple was the main reason second and third wave immigrants decided to settle in Los Angeles than any other major city in the United States.

TABLE 1
Admission to the United States from Thailand

YEAR	ADMISSIONS
1969- 72	10,093
1973- 76	21,039
1977- 80	14,828
1981- 84	21,127
1985- 88	33,044
1989- 92	32,733
1993- 96	21,589
1997- 2000	12,362
Total	166,815

Sources: 1969- 75, Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service; 1976- 2000, Immigration and Naturalization Service Statistical Yearbooks.

CHAPTER TWO

REINCARNATION OF A COMMUNITY THROUGH WAT THAI LOS ANGELES

The villagers' life could not be separated from Buddhist monks and the temples. It is intermingled. The villagers had to depend on the temple, and the temple had to depend on the villagers.

-Phraya Anuman Rachaton⁹

⁹ Rachaton, Phraya Anuman. "Lifestyles of Thais in the Old Days." Essay.

The formation of a Thai enclave in the City of Angels

Such cultural practices were still kept during migration to the United States. Although new immigrants had to adapt without having a physical temple to attend, they still maintained small altars within their households. The need for an ethnic-Thai space in Los Angeles grew as more Thais decided to settle instead of going back to Thailand. During the mid-1960s and early 1970s, Thais were heavily concentrated in the Los Angeles metro area but also had pockets peppered throughout the southland. The temple, as in Thailand, is the center of a community and was being (re)created by the emerging first-wave Thai population in California.

TABLE 2
United States Census 2010: Thai Population

STATE	2000	2010	% Change
Alabama	925	1,481	60.1081%
Alaska	942	1,533	62.7389%
Arizona	2,695	4,977	84.6753%
Arkansas	562	1,018	81.1388%
California	46,868	67,707	44.4632%
Colorado	2,565	4,232	64.9903%
Connecticut	921	1,705	85.1249%
Delaware	327	544	66.3609%
District of Columbia	261	497	90.4215%
Florida	8,618	15,333	77.9183%
Georgia	3,090	5,168	67.2492%
Hawaii	2,284	3,701	62.0403%
Idaho	384	799	108.0729%
Illinois	7,231	9,800	35.5276%
Indiana	1,286	2,176	69.2068%
Iowa	1,531	2,212	44.4807%
Kansas	1,083	1,576	45.5217%
Kentucky	727	1,235	69.8762%
Louisiana	909	1,466	61.2761%
Maine	241	516	114.1079%
Maryland	3,782	5,513	45.7694%
Massachusetts	2,747	4,712	71.5326%
Michigan	2,336	3,212	37.5000%
Minnesota	1,498	2,734	82.5100%

Mississippi	440	703	59.7727%
Missouri	1,678	2,471	47.2586%
Montana	177	324	83.0508%
Nebraska	630	921	46.1905%
Nevada	4,220	7,783	84.4313%
New Hampshire	403	705	74.9380%
New Jersey	2,586	3,923	51.7015%
New Mexico	607	944	55.5189%
New York	8,158	11,763	44.1898%
North Carolina	2,536	4,782	88.5647%
North Dakota	148	219	47.9730%
Ohio	2,496	4,024	61.2179%
Oklahoma	1,476	1,943	31.6396%
Oregon	1,991	3,692	85.4345%
Pennsylvania	2,309	4,103	77.6960%
Rhode Island	380	591	55.5263%
South Carolina	995	1,797	80.6030%
South Dakota	187	284	51.8717%
Tennessee	1,178	2,183	85.3141%
Texas	9,918	1,6472	66.0819%
Utah	1,210	2,276	88.0992%
Vermont	154	266	72.7273%
Virginia	5,406	9,170	69.6263%
Washington	5,527	9,699	75.4840%
West Virginia	273	389	42.4908%
Wisconsin	1,273	2,050	61.0369%
Wyoming	114	259	127.1930%
Puerto Rico	36	46	27.7778%
TOTAL	150,319	237,629	58.0831%

* 2010 data taken from QT-P8 – Race Reporting for the Asian Population by Selected Categories: 2010

* 2000 data taken from QT-P7 – Race Alone or in Combination for American Indian, Alaska Native, and for Selected Categories of Asian and of Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander: 2000

Wat Thai Los Angeles serves as more than a site of worship for Thais and Thai Americans. It serves as a hub for the Thai communities scattered throughout the Los Angeles area. Studies have considered the importance of religious institutions for promoting the

psychological well-being of immigrants or for affecting the normative adaptation of immigrants to the host country and also the structural role of immigrant religious institutions as potential network centers for providing access to information about jobs and housing.¹⁰ Wat Thai Los Angeles serves as the nexus for Thai and Thai Americans from throughout the Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Orange counties. Wat Thai Los Angeles represents a space in which Thai people can worship, conduct business and socialize. In essence, ethnically-based religious institutions are a place where new immigrants can find work, public assistance, and housing. This indicates that although socioeconomic mobility initially contributes to the formation of ethnically-based congregations, congregations can in turn facilitate mobility [within the host country].¹¹ Thus, Wat Thai Los Angeles serves as the network center for the socioeconomic foundation and mobility of Thai Town and vice versa.

Wat Thai Los Angeles played an important role in the formation of Thai Town in East Hollywood, California. Centered along Hollywood Boulevard on the six-block stretch between Western and Normandie Avenues, Thai Town is approximately 10 miles southeast from the temple. Los Angeles boasts the largest Thai population outside Thailand itself. Thai Town was officially designated in October 1999 by the Los Angeles County City Council 13th District which makes it the first and only Thai Town in the world. In 2003, First Lady Laura Bush granted Thai Town recognition as a “Preserve America” community eligible for federal grants. Both the Thai community and non-Thai visitors are drawn to the local businesses such as restaurants, grocery stores, textile shops, massage day spas, and entertainment.

¹⁰ Zhou, Min and Bankston III, Carl L. “De Facto Congregationalism and Socioeconomic Mobility in Laotian and Vietnamese Immigrant Communities: A Study of Religious Institutions and Economic Change.” *Review of Religious Research*. 2000. 456.

¹¹ Zhou, Min and Bankston III, Carl L. 456.

Thai cultural events such as Thai Cultural Day at Barnsdall Art Park in Hollywood, California and the annual Lotus Festival in the nearby city of Echo Park are popular amongst Angelenos. Songkran, or the Thai New Year Festival, in April has become a major festival akin to the Chinese New Year celebration in Chinatown in downtown Los Angeles. Community events such as these are organized by Wat Thai Los Angeles and various Thai social clubs and associations which form their own planning committee. Every year the Thai New Year planning committee collaborates with Thai corporations and the Thai government for financial and program support as well as with the local city government for logistical support. This makes possible the closure of up to 13 blocks of Hollywood Boulevard for the festival grounds. The festival boasts over 250 food and handicrafts booths, a Muay Thai or Thai boxing ring, stages for folk, cultural, and contemporary entertainment, a beauty pageant, a parade, and religious ceremonies.¹²

Wendy Cage highlighted the interconnected relationship between the temple and the surrounding community in Philadelphia and Cambridge:

Primarily, temples [in the U.S] focus their social services efforts not in Thailand, but on the communities around their temples. Several Abbots spoke with us about attending meetings about safety in their communities. Others belong to local chambers of commerce and allow their buildings to be used for voting on American election days. Some monks work with ministerial and social service organizations to donate food and supplies to charities and homeless shelters, and a few visit prisons to teach interested inmates about Buddhism. The Health Department in one city specifically invites the monks to visit and give support to sick people a few times a year. Many temples also make financial donations to their local communities or national organizations to help with natural disasters.¹³

¹² Martorell and Morlan. 71.

¹³ Cage and Sangdhanoo. 22.

Similarly, Wat Thai Los Angeles also provide social services to its surrounding communities. The temple is highly involved, not in just the Thai community, but overall Los Angeles County communities. Wat Thai Los Angeles also serves as the physical space for community organizations. There are two community-based non-profit organizations which specifically serve the working-class Thai community in Los Angeles. Both organizations located in Thai Town are heavily embraced by the working-class Thai immigrant community and Wat Thai Los Angeles. The Thai Community Development Center (Thai CDC), founded in 1994, is an organization which focuses on development, civic engagement/empowerment, and immigrant workers' rights.

Thai Health and Information Services, Inc. (THAIS, Inc.), founded in 1995, is the only community organization which provides health and social services to working-class Thais living in Los Angeles County. The organization assists Thais ranging from young families to isolated older adults who are in need of health and social services. The organization serves as a bridge between the neglected working-class Thai immigrant community and to the various local, state, and federal agencies and their services. THAIS, Inc's programs and services include free health screenings, transportation access with the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, affordable housing through the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, food bank, job placement, outreach education, and youth/senior activity programs. Both organizations rely heavily on Wat Thai to disseminate information about their respective services to the Thai communities throughout southern California.

Way of the Buddha

Religion is part of everyday life in Thailand. The majority of people are Buddhist and they bring this religious tradition with them when they migrate to the United States. A small

network of Thai Christian churches has also formed in the United States, but the number of people who attend them is certainly smaller than those who attend Thai Buddhist temples.¹⁴

Thailand is 94.6% Theravada Buddhist and religion is part of the national identity. The modern Thai culture is heavily connected to Buddhism and its temples. In every Buddhist household, regardless of socioeconomic background or location, there are small alters displaying a statue of the Buddha, incense pot, fresh flowers and fruits, and pictures of deceased loved ones. Families would send their sons to live in the temple from two weeks up to two months to be educated by the monks and learn the ways of the Buddha. This practice is usually the rite of passage for adolescent males into adulthood. The temple serves as the center of community life. Members of the community would donate money to the temple and also volunteer, which can range from assisting monks to doing everyday chores and maintaining the temple itself. These rituals are still being practiced today and serve as a main staple of ethnic Thai identity, not just in Thailand, but throughout Thai diaspora. Wat Thai Los Angeles was the first to recreate such rituals in the United States in the early 1970s.

Reincarnation of a Thai Temple in Los Angeles

Wat Thai Los Angeles became increasingly important during the early 1970s due to increased Thai emigration. The temple provided a safe space for Thai immigrants to gather and socialize. In the 1970s, Thai immigrants reflected the same experiences faced by Japanese Americans in the 1920s since the [immigrant] parents could not, except in isolated instances, enter the American mainstream society, they created their own social, political, and economic organizations. Therefore, many community organizations revolved around the Buddhist

¹⁴ Cadge, Wendy. Sangdhanoo, Sidhorn. "Thai Buddhism in America: An Historical and Contemporary Overview." *Contemporary Buddhism*, Vol 6, No. 1. Routledge. 2005. 18.

churches.¹⁵ Wat Thai Los Angeles started to play a central role for immigrant families especially for their American-born children.

Wat Thai Los Angeles focused on the growing population of American-born Thai children in the community. The temple created programs and activities instituted strictly for the youth. Various programs and activities such as athletic events, American song and dance performances, temple socials, youth summer trips to Thailand and Sunday schools were all used for social adaptations. Such programs as the youth summer trips and Sunday schools were/are non-existent at temples in Thailand therefore making it a uniquely cultural product of the Los Angeles Thai community.

Thai immigrant parents and the temple stressed the importance of having programs aimed at educating the young about the language, culture, and religion of their parents. The Sunday school was one method the temple used to counteract the prevalent use of English by the American-born Thai children. The youth summer cultural-immersion trips to Thailand, sponsored by Wat Thai Los Angeles, were also an effective method. Although immigrant parents' dreams were to return to Thailand, their actual ties to the United States were their American-born children. Aware of the settlement patterns of the community, temple leaders aggressively instituted more programs, organizations, and activities aimed at the youth. Books about Theravada Buddhism were translated from Thai to English and geared from grade-school to high-school texts.

¹⁵ Kashima, Tetsuden. *Buddhism in America: The Social Organization of an Ethnic Religious Institution*. Greenwood Press. 1977. 36.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORY OF THERAVADA BUDDHISM

Way of the Elders

Wat Thai Los Angeles is a Theravada Buddhist temple. The predominant form of Buddhism in Thailand is Theravada (the Way of the Elders). Theravada Buddhism is widely considered the most conservative of all Buddhist traditions due to its strict adherence to the forms and doctrines of the Siddhartha Gautama or the Buddha.

Early Buddhism extended from the Buddha's time in the fifth century to the reign of the great Indian emperor Asoka (third century B.C.E.). Buddhism first arose as the movement of "renouncers." Centered on a monastic community of monks and nuns, Buddhism renounced the efficacy of a worldly or householder's lifestyle in the quest for liberation or Nirvana. Male and female disciples gathered around the movement and were known to reach the highest levels of spiritual attainment.¹⁶

Today's Theravada school traces its lineage back to the conservative faction in a monastic schism that followed the historically dubious Second Buddhist Council in the fourth century B.C.E. According to a Theravada text, the Third Buddhist Council, convened by Asoka, ordered missionary monks to ancient Ceylon and Southeast Asia and this form of Buddhism began to be practiced there. During the fifth century, a number of commentators in Sri Lanka, including Buddhaghosa, Buddhadatta, Mahanama, Upasena, Dhammapala I, and Dhammapala II, established the classical doctrine of the Theravada, and the basic structure and form of the Pali canon was established, which has remained central to the teachings and practice of Theravada

¹⁶ Numrich, Paul David. *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples*. University of Tennessee Press. 1996. xvi.

Buddhism. This form of Buddhism later spread to Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. The proximity of these countries to each other enabled Theravada Buddhism to flourish as individual countries received support from leaders in other parts of the region over the next several hundred years.¹⁷

George Bond stated that traditional Theravada provided a religious system of moral virtues and ritual actions designed to procure merit for better rebirths. The monastics of traditional Theravada, by living the ideal lifestyle and through preaching and presiding over rituals, became the religious specialists in this system, constituting a “field of merit” for the laity. Traditional Theravada also accommodated popular spirit or god worship, which addressed the mundane needs of people on the lower levels of an increasingly “gradual” or extended path to Buddhism’s ultimate goal of Nirvana. Meditation, which when seriously practiced offered the means to attain the higher levels of the gradual path, became the specialty of the few, whether monastics or lay devotees.¹⁸ The teachings of Theravada Buddhism are central to the Thai culture. Such religious and cultural practices are still evident in the Los Angeles Thai community today.

¹⁷ Cage, Wendy. *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*. University of Chicago Press. 2005. 23.

¹⁸ Bond, George D. *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response*. University of South Carolina Press. 1988. 25.

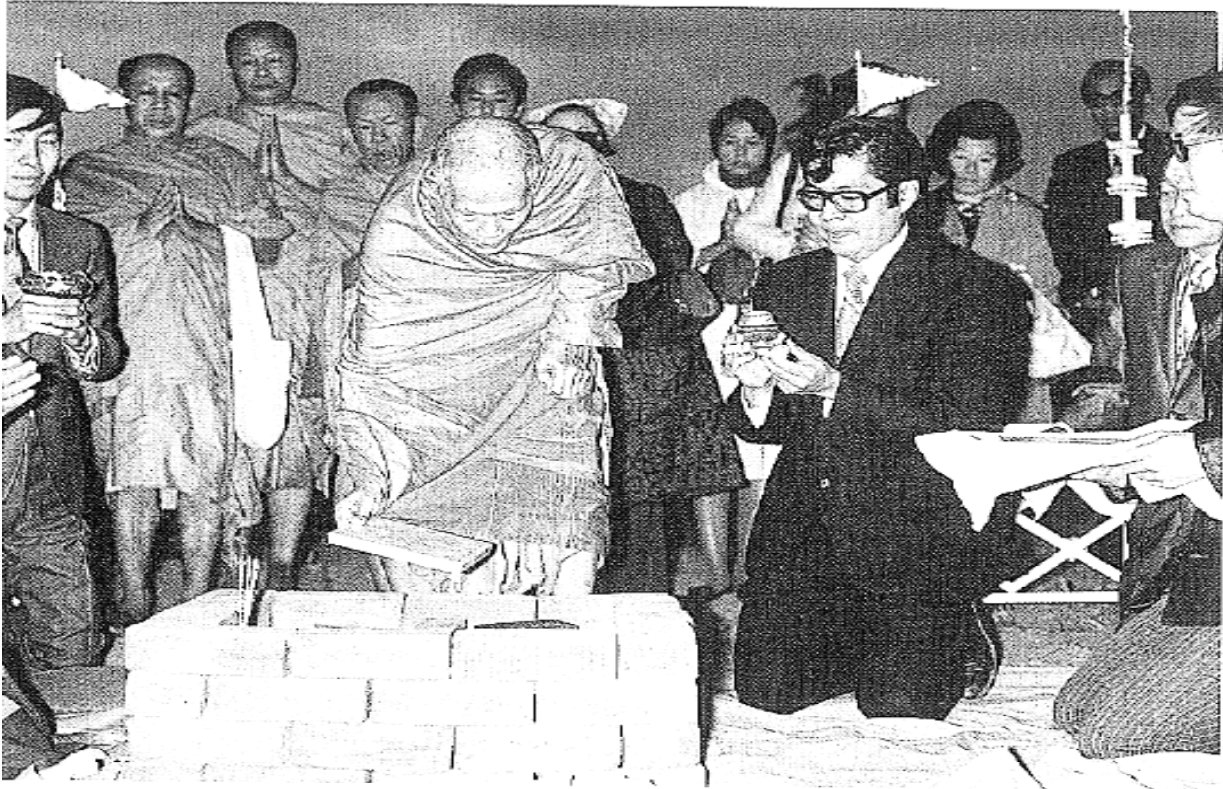


Figure 1. The Supreme Patriarch Somdej Phravanarat laying the first foundation stone at the presentation ceremony with Poonsak Sorsothikul (Right). Source: Urai Ruenprom Circa 1972

CHAPTER FOUR

FOUNDATION STONE: THE BIRTH OF THE THAI AMERICAN MIDDLE-CLASS AND WAT THAI LOS ANGELES

Part of the In-Group

Class dynamic is a very serious issue in Thailand. Socioeconomic divisions heavily influence political and social conflicts within the Thai kingdom. The 2008-2010 political crises stemmed from class conflict between the rural working-poor and Bangkok's political elites. A popular saying in Thailand is: "There are two nations within Thailand—there is Bangkok and there is

everywhere else outside of the capital.” Rural working-class feel they are ostracized by the central government which is dominated by Bangkok urbanite elites. Class divisions are so deep-rooted that it is part of the cultural identity. No two surnames are the same in Thailand therefore family names are important markers which can determine an individual’s embrace or rejection by the Bangkok upper-class elite. Thai immigrants also reproduced traditional class structure within the Los Angeles Thai community but also created a structure uniquely their own.

Thai American middle-class, with their transnational resources and network, were able to gain upward mobility within the traditional class structure in Thailand. Such phenomenon did not exist prior to 1965 Thai migration to the United States and the building of Wat Thai Los Angeles due to the rise of the Thai American middle-class. Thai immigrants who established themselves financially in the U.S. were now in position to gain recognition and prestige from Bangkok elites. As Jiemin Bao shows:

Thai royal family members and monastic leaders have promoted Thainess and Theravada Buddhism among Thai diasporas in order to encourage them to support the “motherland” and to help with development projects in Thailand. Ironically, if they still lived in Thailand, it is unlikely that these ordinary middle-class citizens would have had such abundant opportunities to network with these elites. Living far from Thailand and equipped with U.S. citizenship or permanent residence, they actually become more worthy than ever before in the eyes of the Thai elite. Their higher education and expertise in different fields enable them to obtain special treatment and patronage. It is, in part, their Americanness that makes their Thainess more appreciated. Nevertheless, these middle-class Thai-Americans are much less appreciated in the United States than in Thai society. This fundamental difference needs to be understood in relation to the current status of the United States as a world superpower.¹⁹

¹⁹ Bao. 186.

Established Thai Americans found the class structure in the U.S. to be open and fluid instead of the closed off, exclusive nature of the traditional class formation in Thailand. Having ordinary middle-class Thai Americans being accepted by Thailand's elites did not mean the new Thai American class structure did not have flaws and imperfections of its own. Thai American middle-classness replicates and reinforces old habits of the traditional class dynamic of Thailand. Many Los Angeles-based ethnic-Thai centered social clubs and associations mainly consist of college educated middle-class professionals who are part of the American mainstream economy and society. Such professional network clubs and associations are reinforcing traditional class formation of Thailand by inadvertently shunning working-class Thai immigrants who do not share the same socioeconomic and U.S citizenship/resident backgrounds as of the members. Many Los Angeles working-class Thai immigrants have no desire to join these clubs and associations because it does not offer anything which addresses issues within the low-income immigrant community. They view these organizations with cautious because they see these groups as an apparatus of the Thai oligarchy; a symbol of Thai classism.

According to Bao, contemporary middle- class Thai Americans join through transnational networks with Thailand's royal family, political, business, and monastic elite to shape the power structure of temples in the United States. The origin of Wat Thai Los Angeles in the early 1960s went through the same process of how temples are organized and constructed today. In essence, the idea of building Wat Thai Los Angeles created an opportunity for the Thai American middle-class to form an alliance with Thailand's elite.

The Formation of Wat Thai Los Angeles

The idea of establishing Wat Thai Los Angeles started in 1969 among Thais living in metropolitan Los Angeles. On June 23, 1969, the abbot of the famous temple Wat Wachiradhammasatit in Bangkok, Phraku Wachiradhammasopon, came to Los Angeles as an honored guest hosted by Panya Chooprasert, a prominent figure within the Los Angeles Thai community. It was the first time a head monk from Thailand visited Los Angeles.²⁰ News of the abbot spread fast throughout the Thai community both in the southland and in the Bay Area. The relationship of the small Thai community to monastic leaders in Thailand was strengthened as Abbot Phrakru stayed as a personal guest at the home of Mr. Panya.

The relationship between lay people and Thailand's monastic elite grew in the late 1960s. During Abbot Phrakru's short stay in Los Angeles, he attended numerous social events in the Thai community throughout the city. One event was to perform a blessing at a Thai wedding ceremony. It was there that a group of young Thai college students and working professionals introduced themselves to the abbot. The group was named the Thai-American Buddhist Association (TABA), a non-profit organization from Los Angeles. They discussed how fortunate and special it was to have a Buddhist wedding ceremony in Los Angeles and the potential benefits of having a Thai Buddhist temple in the city. TABA gave examples of temples in other countries such as England, India, Malaysia, and Singapore. The group struck a chord with Abbot Phrakru.

The lay people utilized their vast network within Thai communities throughout the United States in organizing for the potential funding of the temple. A few days after the wedding, Mr. Panya invited TABA to his home for an informal meeting to discuss further the possibility of

²⁰ Thoongsuwan, Chawapot. "Origin of Wat Thai Los Angeles." Essay.

building a temple with the help of Head Abbot Phrakru.²¹ TABA had their own social network which spanned beyond Los Angeles into other parts of the country. There were pockets of small Thai communities peppered throughout San Diego, the Bay Area, Chicago, and New York City. Young college students had contacts with other students throughout the nation. Professionals also had their business connections. TABA reassured the head abbot that they had the resources, not just in the United States but also Thailand, to construct the temple. Abbot Phrakru returned to Thailand to make arrangements for monks to come to Los Angeles. He also spearheaded fundraising in Thailand in support of TABA's project. Through TABA's vast networks, the organization gained the endorsements of the Thai royal family, prime minister, and major corporations such as Thai Airways International which was, and still is, Thailand's national flag carrier.

Gathering momentum, TABA submitted an official letter to the Supreme Patriarch in Thailand asking him to assign monks to Los Angeles. The Supreme Patriarch, appointed by the King of Thailand Bhumibol Adulyadej, as the Head of the Buddhist Order, granted their wish and sent six monks. They arrived at the Los Angeles International Airport on July 23, 1969. TABA and other community members along with the Thai press greeted the monks at the terminal. The monks stayed at a home of a TABA member in Studio City, California for the first three months.²² Again, word spread fast throughout the Los Angeles Thai community. Thai people started flocking to the house in order to be blessed by the monks. People showed up to offer breakfast and lunch to them. They donated basic necessities such as food, water, toiletries, and clothing. The monks were invited to perform Buddhist rituals at people's homes such as the

²¹ Thoongsuwan. 5.

²² Thoongsuwan. 5.

house warming ceremony, blessing an opening of a business, weddings, birthdays, and funerals. The monks quickly established a strong relationship with the Los Angeles Thai community.

On August 2, 1969, TABA along with the monks organized a Buddhist ceremony called *Asalaha Boucha* which is the most sacred day in Buddhism for it is the birth of the Buddha. TABA held the celebration at Lynwood High School in Lynwood, California. The ceremony was the very first Asalaha Boucha Day ever practiced on U.S. soil.²³ The high school's assembly hall was decorated with Thai Buddhist artwork, lotus flowers, burning incense, and candles. Local Thai restaurants catered the event and invited residents from Lynwood and the surrounding areas to enjoy the festivities. About 1,000 people came to participate in and observe the sacred ceremony. The ceremony was covered by local media and also by the British Broadcasting Corporation which broadcast the event in Thailand. The event was a success, not only bringing together the Thai community throughout the southland, but also creating a physical and transnational space for Thai Americans. By the end of the evening, TABA had raised more than \$4,000 for the temple. Thai Buddhists generally believe that making donations to the *sangha*, or order of monks, and to the temple increases their chances of a favorable rebirth in the next life, so they are generous in making donations to their temple.²⁴ The event in south Los Angeles was the starting point for Thais to really believe that building a temple was possible.

Word spread rapidly among Thailand's monastic elite about the events in Los Angeles. In 1971, another head abbot, Phra Dhammakosajarn of the Wat Ratbamroong in Thailand, made an official visit to the United States. The head abbot and his team visited the Thai Embassy in Washington D.C and then on to New York City. After their East coast trip, they stopped in Los Angeles to meet with TABA and see firsthand the Los Angeles Thai community. The meeting

²³ Thoongsuwan. 6.

²⁴ Cadge and Sangdhanoo. 6.

was held at the home of another prominent figure in the community, Kait Prachasaisoradej. At that meeting the dream of building a temple became something tangible thanks to another prominent community member, Poonsak Sosothikul.²⁵

The working relationship between Los Angeles and Bangkok was forged between prominent community members who were middle/upper-middle class and Thailand's elite. Poonsak was the son of an affluent family in Thailand. The family had purchased numerous plots of land throughout Los Angeles. Poonsak offered to give one of his properties to TABA. The patch of land was in Sepulveda City (present-day North Hills) near the Van Nuys Airport in the San Fernando Valley. Poonsak and other key members of TABA created a non-profit organization called the Theravada Buddhist Center, Inc. (TBCI), which was the original name of the temple, later changed to Wat Thai Los Angeles.²⁶ The non-profit organization's original committee members were Poonsak, President; Kait, Vice President; Urai Ruenprom, Treasurer; and Nikorn Seesurat, Secretary. Poonsak also purchased for the monks a single-family home in Sepulveda that was a short walking distance from the proposed site.

TABA and TBCI faced many obstacles to building the temple. They met with fierce backlash from the local community. The monks along with other Thais were harassed by their neighbors. Author Jiemin Bao also highlighted the same problems Thais were facing at Wat Thai Silicon Valley in 1983:

At first, however, these middle-class Thai transmigrants were not welcomed to the neighborhood. They were misrecognized as poor immigrants or "boat people," although they were predominantly urban, affluent, well-educated professionals. The neighbors expressed fear that these newcomers would "ruin" the neighborhood and that Thai cooking smells would be "offensive." These concerns

²⁵ Thoongsuwan. 6.

²⁶ Thoongsuwan. 6.

were raised at public hearings held when the temple pleaded for permission to build a chapel. The [Wat Thai Silicon Valley] boards realized that racialized prejudice was being hidden behind some legitimate claims.²⁷

In 1971, the sudden influx of Thais and traffic angered many residents in the local community. Town hall meetings were quickly organized to counter the proposed site. Numerous meetings were held with city officials. The Thai community knew they were losing ground. The city denied the permit to build the temple due to the close proximity to the airport. The design of the building had to be built in the style of traditional Thai temple architecture with grand halls which are usually very tall and therefore it was not approved by the city—all to the delight of local residents.

TBCI and TABA were forced to find a new location but they didn't have to look too far. The parents of Poonsak owned a small patch of land in North Hollywood which used to be a plant nursery owned by a Japanese American family. The lot was smaller than Sepulveda—only 2 ½ acres. The property was donated to TBCI. The two organizations met with local residents and city officials to negotiate the proposed project. The permit was granted. On May 18, 1972, there was a presentation ceremony of the offering of the property title deed from the parents of the Poonsak family to TBCI. The ceremony was held at the residence of the first Thai Consul General to Los Angeles, His Serene Highness M.J. Yuthisathiera Sawaddiwat. Also present was the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand Somdej Phravanarat and other foreign dignitaries.²⁸ The event was heavily covered by the Thai media.

The very next day, May 19, 1972, at 6:09am, the Supreme Patriarch laid the first foundation stone into the ground of the site. The public event drew many people to the ground-

²⁷ Bao, Jiemin. "From Wandering to Wat: Creating a Thai Temple and Inventing New Space in the United States." *Amerasia Journal* 34:3. 2008. 6.

²⁸ Thoongsuwan. 7.

breaking ceremony. Monks gave their blessing to the site. People came with food and clothes to give to the monks and to be blessed by them. Construction workers with their large earthmovers waited respectfully. At 9:00 a.m. after the ceremony concluded, the workers and bulldozers moved in and construction proceeded. Thai Americans regard the day as “the Birthday of Wat Thai Los Angeles.”²⁹

The main assembly hall, known as *Sala*, was designed by architects at the Religious Ministry Department in Thailand. The two-story temple had window frames, roof tiles, and doors imported from Thailand. In May, 1974, the lower level of the temple was completed, consisting of two classrooms, two restrooms, a library, and large dining room. The total expense for the lower level was \$258,000. Construction of the upper level was delayed until 1977 due to lack of funding. On October 21, 1979, the upper level was completed. The main assembly hall is the center of all activities of the temple. It is used to perform all religious functions and rituals which include birthdays, weddings, and funerals. The main altar is also located in the main assembly hall. The total expense of constructing the upper level was \$534, 000.³⁰

²⁹ Thoongsuwan. 7.

³⁰ Thoongsuwan. 7.

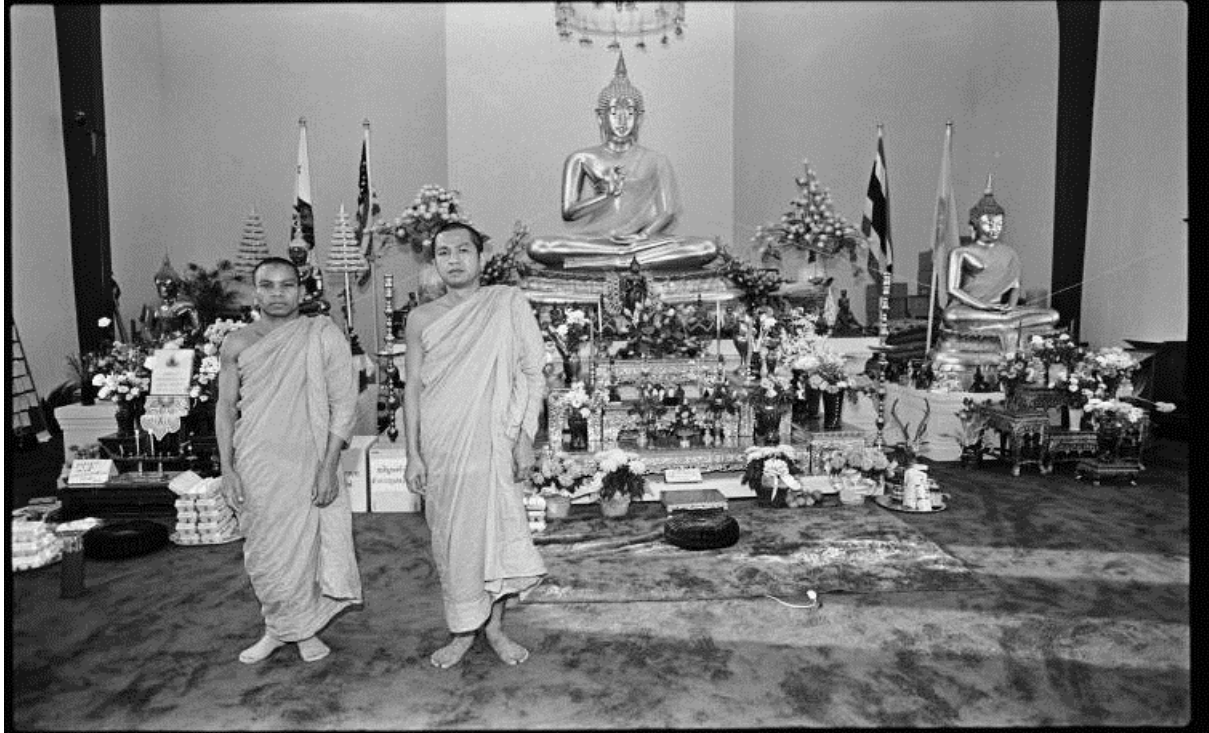


Figure 2. Monks standing in front of the main Buddha statue (Center) in the main assembly hall at Wat Thai Los Angeles. Source: Rick Meyer; Los Angeles Times Circa 1982

The main Buddha statue in the main assembly hall is known in Thailand as “Phra Buddhanorthepsada Dipyanagarasathit” and sits in a blessing posture. The ceremony, at which His Majesty King Bhumibol officiated, was held in Bangkok on December 22, 1979. The following March 30, 1980, the statue was brought to Wat Thai via the Thai Airways International Company. It was the flag carrier’s very first Bangkok-Los Angeles flight, serving as host for the shipment of the statue. His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch officiated as the unveiling of the Buddha statue at Wat Thai was held on April 4-5, 1980.³¹

During the construction of the main assembly hall, some small buildings were also completed in 1976. The three buildings were the living quarters known as *Kuti* of monks and nuns living on site at the temple. The three buildings consisted of multiple bedrooms, restrooms,

³¹ Thoongsuwan. 8.

praying rooms, dining areas, kitchens, and offices. The living quarters were not built in traditional Thai architectural style but rather with an American residential aesthetics to blend with the surrounding neighborhood. The total expense of the three living quarters was \$57,000.³²

In 1974, Wat Thai Los Angeles started a Buddhist Sunday School which was held at the newly built lower level of the main assembly hall. Monks and volunteer teachers provided Thai language classes, Buddhist Studies, introduction to Thai culture and customs to Thai children and non-Thais, free of charge. The school was officially opened on November 20, 1975, with a separate board committee exclusively focusing on the Sunday School Program.³³ Wat Thai created a close working relationship with leading universities in Bangkok which sent students to Los Angeles for summer volunteer programs and to teach at Wat Thai Sunday Schools. The program was highly successful and popular amongst students, parents, and volunteer university-student teachers that it had to extend to Saturdays which prompted the name change to “Wat Thai Buddhist School of Los Angeles.” The program still persists today, offering classes from Thursdays to Sundays. The construction of the school was completed in 1980.

³² Thoongsuwan. 8.

³³ Thoongsuwan. 9.



Figure 3. Members of The Theravada Buddhist Center, Inc. with Monks from Thailand at Wat Thai Los Angeles. Source: Urai Ruenprom **Circa 1972**

CHAPTER FIVE

THE RISE OF COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERISM AND POWER DYNAMICS OF THE LAITY

Role-Reversal

The role of lay leadership is the foundation of the formation, social function, and direction of Wat Thai. The everyday operation of the temple is managed by the leadership of the laity. The

power dynamics between the Wat Thai Los Angeles clergy and laity contrast with those in Thailand where the clergy is the center of all leadership and operation of a temple. The role-reversals are due to the pressure of a new environment faced by the clergy. Monks coming from Thailand are not familiar with American customs and lack proficiency in English. Thailand's monastic elite are foreigners in the United States and therefore need guidance from the Thai American community. In consequence, the lay people take over the responsibility of the decision making process of the temple. Working relationships with local, state, and federal agencies on behalf of the temple are handled by the Thai American laity, most notably the established Thai American middle-class.

A Helping Hand

In May 25, 1972, the Supreme Patriarch hand-selected six monks from Thailand to be the first group to reside at Wat Thai Los Angeles, led by Head Abbot Phra Maha Sobin Sopako. The monks stayed at a single-family home next to the construction site. Volunteers acted as care takers for the monks and handled daily chores as well providing transportation. The care takers lived with the monks for days on end and created different shifts to rotate with other volunteers. Community volunteerism symbolizes not just the importance of religion but the ultimate respect given to monks as community leaders.

The resident monks and community volunteers were heavily involved in the day-to-day construction of the temple. The abandoned lot was full of overgrown weeds, thick brush, dead trees, and trash which required intensive manual labor. Monks and volunteers cleared the lot and helped the construction workers in any way they could. They helped paved the parking lot and painted buildings. Volunteers also worked on the old home of the monks. Thai volunteers in

various trades, crafts, and employment backgrounds-- mechanics, construction foremen, electricians, plumbers, landscapers, and masons-- all offered their services free of charge.

The volunteerism unfolding in North Hollywood mirrored that of temple/community life in Thailand. More than a place of worship, temples also function as community and cultural centers, schools, public space, food banks, and shelters for the homeless. Wat Thai Los Angeles is in the center of the Thai community, especially the working-class, and serves as the only option for assistance and resources to counter the social ills that plague America's poor. Therefore, monks are more than religious leaders but also self-taught social workers and counselors helping their Thai constituents. The temple depends on the community and the community depends on the temple. The abandoned lot in an old industrial district which was being nurtured from the ground-up by the monks and the Los Angeles Thai community exemplified such a relationship.

The lay people who fill the position of decision-making are generally influential community figures. They have the status of higher education and upward socioeconomic mobility which in turn enables them to negotiate easily between ethnic community and the larger American public in financial or legal matters. Such tasks are simply out of reach for monks coming from Thailand. This rise of a lay leadership in the monastic community is linked to the tendency for socioeconomic success to be expressed in the temple, as the neighborhood's central institution. Social status in the community is closely linked to one's position in the temple. Lay committees frequently determine temple policies and activities, including fund-raising, preparation for holiday celebrations, and social services.³⁴

³⁴ Zhou, Min and Bankston, Carl. 461.

Thai American laity and other volunteers are very involved in the daily operation of Wat Thai. The laity and volunteers provide a bridge the temple to the larger mainstream public in regards to fund raising, media attention, and collaborating with city and other government officials. Agency is therefore shifted from the clergy to the lay people. The author Phayvanh Phounindr has highlighted a similar trend among Laotian Buddhist temples in Australia: “Temple projects in the new country are often started by lay community service groups, with some government funding. This means that the lay committees of the parent body like to continue the control of the temples, much against the wishes of many Buddhist monks who would prefer to look after their own religious affairs without the direction and interference of laypeople as was traditional in Laos.”³⁵ It is the work of the Thai American temple volunteers which gained Wat Thai Los Angeles attention from the American mainstream. One such example is the highly successful weekend food fairs on the grounds of the temple.

Gender, Class, Regionalism, and Pad Thai Noodles

Wat Thai Los Angeles weekend food fairs were created by working-class women temple volunteers. Most of the women worked as cooks at Thai restaurants throughout the Southland. The weekend food fare highlights how gender, class, regionalism, and food-way are intertwined within the Thai American community. Women volunteers would gather to cook and sell Thai foods to temple-goers on the weekends. The original kitchen, built in the mid-1980s, was located in the basement of the main assembly hall. At first, the weekend food fair wasn't a fair at all. It was small event and only geared for Thais who visited the temple on the weekends. The basement kitchen was small and had little ventilation. Nonetheless, the women volunteer cooks

³⁵ Bankston III, Carl. Kim, Rebecca Y. Zhou, Min. “Rebuilding Spiritual Lives In The New Land: Religious Practices Among Southeast Asian Refugees In The United States.” AltaMira Press. 2002. 58.

would make traditional Thai food, drinks, and specialty desserts every single weekend for the monks and guests to enjoy.

The weekend food program was an instant success with Thai temple-goers. The program also started to gain the attention of non-Thai guests. Slowly the weekend food program had to expand the kitchen to meet the growing demands of customers. Ultimately the kitchen was moved out of the small basement and outside to the main courtyard of the Sunday school building. As Thai cuisine was gaining popularity in the U.S. in the 1990s, the weekend food program at Wat Thai Los Angeles became the main destination for non-Thai ethnic food aficionados. The program gave way to the Weekend Food Fair which exploded onto the Los Angeles scene and became a community event Angelenos can enjoy every weekend.

The original volunteer cooks and the outdoor kitchen could not meet the growing popularity of the fair. The temple started to have vendors open booths around the temple grounds. Each booth had propane gas and a small portable sink serving as a small kitchen. The number of women volunteer cooks grew exponentially. The food fair attracted hundreds of guests every weekend. The fair was closed down in 2007 due to the pressure of neighbors complaining of traffic in narrow residential streets, parking problems, and littering. From the inception of the food program to the frenzy heights of the food fair, working-class women volunteer cooks were at the forefront of organizing and implementing such a successful program which made Wat Thai Los Angeles open up to the rest of the Southland and promoted integration amongst Angelenos through a delicious plate of Thai food.

Most of the women volunteer cooks are working-class Thai immigrants. The majority of them were from small provinces outside of Bangkok. Living in Los Angeles was probably their first experience residing in a large urban metropolis setting. Thai restaurants throughout the

Southland gave a microcosmic look into gender, classism, and regionalism of Thailand. Even today, most cooks in the back of the kitchen, invisible to the American customers, are mainly older women from rural working-class backgrounds. Being working-class immigrants, they were unable to enter the American mainstream workforce and therefore only could stay within the ethnic-Thai enclave economy. In contrast, most of the waiters, visible to the American customers, were from Bangkok with middle-class and upper middle-class backgrounds. They were college students studying in the U.S. and working part-time. Such class integration in a restaurant working environment hardly ever exists in Thailand. Working at restaurants in Thailand as a waiter is an undesirable position, often looked down upon, for the middle-class therefore it is only occupied by the rural working-class.

The Voices of Wat Thai Los Angeles: An Oral Historical Account

One of the lay volunteers who were instrumental in the creation of Wat Thai Los Angeles was Urai Ruenprom. Mr. Urai, 80, came to Los Angeles from Bangkok in 1965 as a college student with the intention of returning to Thailand upon finishing school. He quickly met other Thais in the area which made his transition a bit easier. It was Mr. Urai's first time living on his own and away from his parents. He was making new Thai friends and discovering Los Angeles, all of which he recalled as "a very exciting time in my young life."³⁶ The majority of other Thais he met were fellow classmates at an adult school learning English as a Second Language near downtown Los Angeles in the Westlake/Pico Union area.

Most Thai students, like Mr. Urai, worked in Thai restaurants and grocery markets throughout the greater Los Angeles area. Thai restaurants served as the primary social space for

³⁶ Urai Ruenprom, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, Ca., 5 June 2011.

newly Thai immigrants, providing a sense of comfort and safety. A handful of restaurants would open late; some would be open until 4 a.m., to cater exclusively to the students who usually get off work or class at night. Indulging in home-cooked Thai food, drinking with friends, and karaoke into the early morning are staples of socialization in Thailand and they were being reproduced in Los Angeles in the mid/late 1960s.

TABA was created by working-students in the Los Angeles area in 1965. TABA aimed to connect with Thais from other areas and schools and created a large social and professional network. Mr. Urai was one of the founding members of TABA. When TBCI was established, he was appointed Treasurer of the community-based non-profit organization on December 22, 1971. He is currently a board member of Wat Thai Los Angeles, a seat he held for almost 40 years. He commented on the need for a Thai Buddhist temple in Los Angeles, “We needed a place of worship because we are Buddhist, and also, we needed a community center where newly immigrant Thais can get help finding a place to stay, to find a job, make friends, seek advice from Thais who have experience living in America... to help them get situated in L.A because it is hard trying to do it on your own in this country.”

Mr. Urai was involved in all stages of Wat Thai. The grassroots work done by the community was a great sign of unity and determination. Everybody shared a common goal of creating Wat Thai. He reminisced out loud, “...we worked tirelessly with high-ranking officials in Thailand in the planning of the temple. We had to convince banks in Thailand to give us loans, also had to set up hearings with city officials here in L.A—our community did everything.” Any free time Mr. Urai had went into the Wat Thai Los Angeles project.

Sawattana Pinwathana is currently the Head Master (Principal) of the Wat Thai Buddhist Sunday School. She came to Los Angeles when she was 23 in 1974 in the second wave of

working-class immigrants. Ms. Sawattana already had some close friends (my aunt included) and extended family members living in Los Angeles at the time. The migration network within the Thai community gave her a job opportunity and place to stay in Los Angeles which was already secured for her months in advance. She worked long hours in a sewing factory in the industrial district of downtown Los Angeles to which she commuted by bus from Hollywood.

She started to visit Wat Thai on her days off. “Going to the temple, being part of the temple—it gave me a strong sense of home because I was really home sick when I first came to L.A. At the temple, I get to meet other Thai people, speak Thai, and eat Thai food.”³⁷ For her, the temple was not only a place of worship but also a space that offered her emotional support and the comforts of home. Due to this deep connection, she became heavily involved with the temple. As she spoke, she closed her eyes and her voice trailed off as if lost in a day dream, “I helped out every which way I could. I helped out in fundraising. My cousins, girlfriends, and I would cook and make all kinds of Thai food including desserts and snacks and sell them at work to raise money for the temple.” Thai restaurant and grocery market owners would host fundraisers on their property and she and her friends would help organize the events.

Ms. Sawattana has been teaching at the Sunday school for the past 35 years. Her classes range from introductory Thai language to history and culture. Most of her students are Thai American-born children from kindergarten age to teenagers in high school. She recalled the early stages of the temple when she had an idea of creating a school for Thai families with young children who frequently visited the temple. “Parents would come to the temple with their children and the parents would do their Buddhist rituals with the monks while their kids are running around playing. Kids would be everywhere... running inside and outside the temple—

³⁷ Sawattana Pinwathana, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, Ca., 11 June 2011.

out into the parking lot. They would grab things in the temple as though it was a toy. It was a big headache for the parents.” Parents would have a hard time keeping a watchful eye on their kids while trying to pray and meditate. Various meetings would also be held at the temple with parents having trouble keeping their children out of trouble.

Ms. Sawattana’s idea of creating a daycare/school was two-fold: find a way to contain the energetic children and educate them about Thailand as well as Thai culture. “I was like a nanny. I kept watch on the children while their parents would go pray or attend meetings. I make sure the kids are ok and don’t go running off out into the street.” Her journey as a self-taught educator began when she noticed most of the children were American-born, “that was when my friends and I thought the temple needed a school for the kids. We brought up the idea to the head monk and board and they all agreed. I soon found myself teaching Thai language to kids in a little room down in the basement of the main assembly hall. My first class I had about 7 kids.”

Her mission as an educator remains the same since the inception of the school: “...the school is very important for the kids. I teach them the Thai language and also to be proud of your Thai heritage and culture. I remind them to embrace their Thai identity and learn to speak Thai. I feel knowing the language is very important and it is a major step into learning the Thai culture... especially for the kids who are born here in America.” The school is a big part of her life. She has been teaching and managing the school for 35 years purely on a volunteer position. She holds a fulltime job as a cashier working night-shifts at a local gas station in Hollywood.

Ms. Sawattana highlights the importance of a religious institution to an ethnic community in the United States. The institution serves as the social center of an entire community. It serves not only to preserve and reproduce Thai culture but to adapt in a new country. Not only has the temple brought people together in a place where information are exchanged about services and

opportunities within the Thai immigrant community, but also, it creates a space for spiritual and mental comfort for new immigrants. “I feel the temple is very important to the Thai people here in L.A. The temple helps Thais who just came here. It helps them not to feel alone in a new country. Wat Thai helps them find jobs working with other Thai people, find housing living amongst Thai people... it is so lonely and hard to try to survive on your own as an immigrant in America.”

Ms. Sawattana has witnessed firsthand how new working-class Thai immigrants struggle to cope with living in the United States. “I have met Thais who are all alone—lonely in a new country. Just work and send money back to their families in Thailand. They have no family here, no friends, and no support. Don’t know where to go if something happens to them like getting sick, injured, or any other emergencies; scared to go to police and no money to go to hospitals, plus knowing little English.” They have a hard time surviving in Los Angeles, but when they come to Wat Thai; they are home. They find help at the temple by meeting other people who are going through the same experiences. The monks are all counselors for the working-class immigrants. Wat Thai not only offers spiritual renewal through worship but has valuable resources to assist the community’s most vulnerable. Her voice cracks as she looks sternly at me with tears building up in the corners of her eyes, “The temple helps a lot of people--more than you ever know.”

CONCLUSION

This research analyzed how an emerging Thai population created a visible ethnic space through a religious institution in metropolitan Los Angeles during the mid-1960s and early 1970s. The archival investigation puts all the individuals who were involved in the early stages of the temple

into the foreground. Two oral history accounts put a human face in this study- both of whom are leading actors in the multi-ethnic urban landscape of Los Angeles. My fieldwork enabled me to see firsthand how the temple was created, and most importantly, to build friendships with community members who were directly involved from the early stages to present day.

The study also highlighted the role of lay leadership and middle-classness. I had attempted to suggest these are general patterns within religious institutions in immigrant communities across the United States. Examining lay leadership in Thai immigrant religious institutions uncovers a vast network of prominent community members in the United States and elites in the homeland. Prominent community members are mostly all college educated, middle/upper-middle class urban professionals. Living far from Thailand and equipped with U.S. citizenship or permanent residence, they actually become more worthy than ever before in the eyes of the Thai elite. Their higher education and expertise in different fields enables them to obtain special treatment and patronage.³⁸ Simply, Wat Thai would not have been built without the networking and leadership of the Thai American middle-class.

Growing up in Los Angeles and being a former student of the Sunday School Language Program, Wat Thai Los Angeles has always been part of my life. Yet it took my investigation and fieldwork to make me a full participant at the temple. The research gave me the opportunity to (re)discover Wat Thai and the community. Senior monks and laypeople who were part of the first and second-wave immigrants remembered me as child running around the temple grounds. The research made me delve deeper into the history of the temple and Thai Town through the experiences of long-time community leaders.

³⁸ Bao. 186.

In summary, interviewing *Khun* Urai and *Khun* Sawattana³⁹ enabled me to understand the history of Wat Thai Los Angeles and its significance not only to the Thai American community but the overall urban mosaic of Los Angeles. Their respective volunteer work highlighted how important, spiritually and culturally, the temple is to the surrounding community. Documenting their stories also gave a glimpse into the history of Thai immigration from multiple socioeconomic statuses. Both their journeys started on different paths in regards to socioeconomic backgrounds and reason for migrating but found common ground at the temple. After my time conducting interviews and fieldwork, I realized Wat Thai Los Angeles is just that - a common ground for all Thais adapting in America.

³⁹ Khun is a courtesy title. First names are addressed instead of surname.

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