

CHAPTER 5

Places of Performance as Sites of Contesting Values

The objective of this chapter is to analyse the meaning system of place as it is the base of action and expression of identity. Places of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, particularly the monument in the city, *Wat Salaloi* temple, and other places outside the city, are not rigid physical environment. They are similar to theater, and they are designed for performers and clients to utilize votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. They are built by civil engineering science but founded by knowledge of sign. For example of analogy, the concrete floor not only makes the place strong and stable, but also makes people feel and perceive that strength and stability. The meanings of strength are interpreted from the physical characteristics of concrete. Hence, places of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* are designed with the intentions and sign interpretations. Sign classification concerns the creation of collective consciousness and differences of social spaces and self-images. However, a person cannot know the whole meanings because some signs are scattered; some are hidden. He can only get interested in some signs, but ignores the existence of other signs in which the other one is interested. A person can only classify sign for his own interest. For example, the concrete indicates the strength and it has meaning from social interpretation of a person. Accordingly, the signs of place are different and various according to the intentions. I would like to explain and compare different performances of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in these different places to reflect the power relations of sign construction and meanings at these places.

Michael Herzfeld (1991) suggests that a monumental place is a battle field between institutional knowledge and social memory of people. He explains that “place does not only belong to its citizens, it is also part of a modern nation-state with a monumental conception of history” (Herzfeld, 1991: 5). It is also entwined with many

other ambiguities of local identity (Ibid., 24). Thus, it becomes contestation between realization of history and inhabitants' rhetoric adaptation in self-defense (Ibid., 6).

When the story of *Thao Suranari* monument is put in a conceptual framework of the nation-state, it can be interpreted by the citizens and can be changed into social memory, which is a tool of destiny management when it is involved with the spirit cult. It makes people notice the existence of the condition that is called "pastness" when they see the monument area. Therefore, it encourages them to imagine the root of the nation-state and also the root of local identity because *Thao Suranari* is remembered as a national heroine and a local high-class lady. When votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is performed in different places, this set of meanings of nationalism and localism are woven with many other meanings. Hence, the action of people in different places is the outcome of classification of signs, or interpretation of signs.

Margaret Rodman (2003) considers a place as voices. It is multilocality and also multivocal. A place is not only a feature of historical discourse but also produces meanings from practices of inhabitants. A single place may be experienced quite differently. Therefore, all the multiple meanings can be socially connected, overlapped, and contested in various practices and contexts (Rodman, 2003: 208-212).

5.1 The Plaza of Signs in the City Center

Nowadays, *Thao Suranari* monument in the city becomes a strong sign of nationalism, patriotism, as well as localism. It is often used as a political stage by some politicians to give their vows to be honest and patriotic. Everyday, a lot of people come to pay respect, and hire votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. It is located in the middle of a concrete ground facing the gate of the city called *Chumpon Gate*. The gate signifies the security of ancient town since it is a construction which was not destroyed during *Vientien-Nakhon Ratchasima* war in 1826. Hence it represented national security. *Saipin Kaewngamprasert* (1995) suggested that *Thao Suranari* monument has become more important sacred place of the city than the city shrine since 1934 (*Saipin*, 1995:124-125). As such, *Thao Suranari* monument represented localism.

The town center where the monument is located is also a sign of development and commercial activities. Behind the monument, there is a road straight to the city shrine which is the sign of ancient society. Along the road are located shops and companies, which reflect the development of the city. Moreover, the monument is a junction of many roads such as *Ratchadamnern*, *Jomsurangyart*, *Phoklang*, *Suranaree*, that lead to the center of the city or the city shrine, and *Chumphon*, *Asadang*, *Jomphon*, and *Mahatthai* Roads, that head out of the city. It is the place passed by most buses, and it is located not far from market, military camp, government center, train station, or department stores. There are a lot of shops and stalls in front of the buildings along the roads, which are full of advertisement. Furthermore, the monument is a place to relax, as on the right and left sides is a park where various activities are often held, such as fairs to launch campaigns about social problems and environment issues, commercial fairs for sale promotion, and political stages for or against the government. Behind the well-ordered image of the monument ground, it houses the untidiness as at night the park is inhabited by homeless people, and is a work place of prostitutes, who hide from police and municipal patrol.

Opposite the monument lays *Rachadamnoen* Road where souvenir shops are located. The popular shops are named in Chinese. Their remarkable products are processed pork. Moreover, on this road is situated *Chao Por Fai* spirit house, an ancient Chinese spirit house, which, according to the belief, protects people from fire and extinguishes fire of suffering. If one walks farther between the gap of the spirit house and the commercial buildings, one will find municipal pawn-shop and a stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* of *Chen Huarotfai* group.

The monument is a sign of the city where everyone can access and see. In other words, it is the center surrounded by commercial and political activities. In the annual victory commemoration festival, the parades will pass the front of the monument. In 1990s, some processions in the parade were performed by students especially from schools relating to history of *Thao Suranari* such as *Suranari* School, *Bunloer Wittayanusorn* School, and *Mahitsarathibodi* School. But nowadays the parade is organized by local administrative offices from each district. Although it represents political decentralization to localities or villages, it still reflects the centralization of

signs through the reverence of the monument of national heroine. In the parades, there is a demand that each village has to present their own identities. The parades are comprised of stories of *Thao Suranari*, worshipping dance of female public officers, businesswomen, and wives of local politicians or wives of public officers. Moreover, in the festival there are local art and culture exhibitions such as earthenware, silk, *Likay*, and votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. There are exhibitions from public and private sectors, including sale of local products, industrial products, and consumer goods. Hence, the monument area is not only a sign basis of locality, but also a sign of progress of capitalism developed by the state and provincial merchants. It can meet emotional needs of seeking the roots of self-image and virtue from images of *Thao Suranari*. It also fulfills an imagination about modernity of *Nakhon Ratchasima* which can signify the development due to the mercy of good heroine spirit. The parade in the annual ceremony can be considered a confirmation of belief in the monument's sacredness. In addition, it encourages people to show concern about localism, nationalism, citizenship, modernity, and generosity. It is, therefore, an annual action of *Khorat* people to express the village citizenship accepting symbolic power of central state.

Thao Suranari monument is situated in the middle of the empty ground, constructed of concrete and covered with stone tiles which are the sign of stable locality, and the open space builds the atmosphere of public area in the city. Although individuals can come to share this area, they do not need to greet each other. It is also an area for the exchange between clients and votive *Phlaeng Khorat* performers. The monument is settled on a high platform, so it has an upward perspective. People have to look up, and that makes them feel its power. As *Thao Suranari* monument is located on a high concrete platform, it implies an untouchable power, or it presents a super political power of a national heroine¹. But on the other hand, people can pay respect

¹ *Nidhi Eaooseewong* (1995) explains about the Equestrian Statue of King *Chulalongkorn* that "due to the high platform of the statue, visitors needed to look up to see, and the equestrian position was elegant showing his absolute power" (*Nidhi*, 1995: 98). *Nidhi* explains that Thai people were in a traditional society where they built memorial objects to the deceased such as pagodas, stupas and stone jars to contain bones and ash of the deceased. They might pray to these memorial objects thinking of spirits, gods, and religious images (*Ibid.*, 89). Therefore, Thai people consider a monument as an image of worship. The more the monument is settled in a public area, the more it becomes a collective property of people who share the same idea because it is a tool for turning a history selected by the government into a concrete object that is easy to understand, to get an access, and to encourage the people. A monument of human statue is often worshipped by humans (*Ibid.*, 92-96).

and put gold foil on or hang garlands to the small replica in front of the big statue. People can easily access to this small replica. They respectively treat it as a real person such as putting on gold foils, hanging garlands, clothing the statue. Both the big statue and the replica hold the roles of central state and local interpretation. The big statue particularly shows the meaning in national context while the small one allows people to touch it and access to its “generosity”.

Moreover, *Thao Suranari* monument is a space of promise between an individual and the spirit of *Thao Suranari* to exchange the goods of the sacred. So, while the stable physical basis of the place provides the experience of “solid modernity”, “soft modernity” can be accessed through mercy of the spirit. Human-like statue does not scare people. Instead people feel safe and can reach the mercy of the “spirit” because it is in an open space. When people come to this place at night, they might feel more the magical power and sacredness. In addition to physical stability of the place, there are ceremonial activities of many people who reproduce nationalist history, the pastness, and sacredness of the monument. The frequency of ceremonial activities and votive *Phlaeng Khorat* turn the meaning of the monument to the “reality” people can see. The place allows people to reach for meanings of the monument; meaning of the nation-state and meaning of modernity in the city environment. The location of the monument reflects symbolic centralization of political authority of central state. It is also a core of modernity in *Khorat* society unlike ‘rational’ modernity of industrial society, because it is articulated with the belief in the spirit and the practice of spirit cult. Its web of meanings supports the central state in teaching *Khorat* people to recognize and to accept the hierarchy of power.

The monument has walls and *Chumphon* city gate as the background which represent the antiquity and long history of this town. Some parts of the walls are bare. They let some old and untidy bricks be seen while some are coated of cement and remain white. The ancient bare walls support sign of pastness, long history, and courage of *Thao Suranari* reminisced through the monument, which then are woven to be a web of meanings which can highlight the existence of the sacredness in the monument area. The ancient wall and city gate emphasize the significance of the

monument that it is presenting the leadership of *Thao Suranari* who leads the people from the old town of *Khorat* to face the development and modernity from Bangkok. In particular, the monument was designed to face the direction of Bangkok which is the central of modernity of the country. The sign relation among the walls of ancient town, the monument, and Bangkok, present the relationship between local and the capital city or the central state. Hence, the monument is a representative of the sacred and generous state. The locals are defined as good citizen and they are proud to be controlled by the generous power of the sacredness associated with national power.

Thao Suranari monument never lacks of worship ceremonies from inhabitants, public officers, and especially politicians, because it is a tool of their self-construction and self-expression as a person who does not give up or a person who works for the country. Although some of them are corrupt, worshipping *Thao Suranari* or moral spirit in public allows them to be able to present themselves as good persons of good morality. Various meaning of the monument, therefore, is exploited by everyone in the construction of self-image, especially, in political “self-presentation”.

If one faces the monument, on the left hand side one will find a terraced concrete ground paved with stone tiles. Next to the ground, lay the fountains to a road called *Utsadang*; trees stands parallel with the fountains which are not active unless it is a special occasion. Normally, they are just unlively stagnant ponds. On the right side, there is a modern Thai *Sala* which is an open-air building. Next to it is a rectangular pond reaching *Mahatthai* road. There are ranges of tress in the five-metre-wide garden parallel with the pond. The *Sala* was paved with stone tiles. It is actually a ceremonial *Sala*, but in normal days it is used for relaxing, hiding from the sun. It represents the construction of Thainess which protects people from the heat of surrounded modernity.

Beyond the *Sala*, it locates shops selling flowers and praying objects. The metal structure shops are seperated by gypsum board walls; the size of a shop is around 1.80 x 4.00 x 2.00 metres (wide x long x high). The shops were constructed with strong material, but they seem ready for moving. The quality of material might indicate the way of trading of which changes are possible. However, the metal structure might imply the stability of the business, as the shops have long term rent contract with the

municipal. The shops are located at the edge of monument area; that might signify the division of commercial sectors from ceremonial sectors for sacred worship or moral spirit. Yet, the location of the shops situated in front of the monument ground facilitates the clients who want to pray for *Thao Suranari* so that they need not to walk too far, and they can clearly see the front of the monument. Moreover, the shops are situated right at the crosswalk when one crosses the road from the other side (which is full of souvenir shops). The location of the shops is a business connection of both sides of the roads. While the shops across the road are selling particular products like souvenirs of the province, the oblation shops sell particular products for worshipping *Thao Suranari*. The use of the area for the commercialization of sacredness suggests that we can pay money to buy things to please the spirit and to express the good citizenship.

Finally, when one deeply watches, one will see three stages of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* far behind. Next to the stages is a modern building situated reception and counter service of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* groups. This building has concrete structure of which the walls are decorated with bricks signifying security. There are only two things made of wood; the watchtower of the *Chumphon* city gate and the stages of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. Wooden structure gives the feeling of locality, antiquity, and especially “liveliness” of wood which reflects the easy changes in accordance with time. The stages of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* located at the edge of the monument platform, and next to the road at the back side of the monument ground. Behind the stages there are billboards on the other side of the road, *Chumphon* road where traffic circulation is available all the time, especially at lunch time. *Maw Phlaeng* are struck by air and noise pollutions from vehicles; they are often disturbed by the noise of product advertisement and shop advertisement that use cars with loud speakers. The problems reflect that their traditionalized identity is being enclosed and attacked by these modernities.

The stages of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* were built in traditional Thai *Sala*; rectangular open-wide *Sala* whose roof is supported by four wooden pillars. The roof is orangish earthenware tiles similar to ceremonial *Sala* and reception, but its wooden structures give impressions of simplicity, naturality and locality better than concrete

and metal. Therefore, they well represent signs of locality and Thainess. However, it separates emotional participation between performers and clients. The stages are lifted up from the ground around 60 centimetres and wide x long x high about 3.00 x 3.00 x 4.00 metres. The size of the stages is limited by the performance area and the audience area. If clients want to see the show, they need to sit on the benches on the side of the stages which is lower than the floor of the stage. So, they need to look up to see the show. However, apart from the stage that separates the area between the performers and the clients, the relationship between the performers and their clients tends to be more separated by noises around the area.

Votive *Phlaeng Khorat* performs for the sacred, so the clients let the performers work without inspecting the performers, as they trust the performers as collective representation of *Khorat-ness*. The more the clients do not watch the show, the more space and emotion are separated although clients and performers share the same meaning of *Thao Suranari* and have collective consciousness about the *Khorat-ness*. The stages and the cashier counters are separated implying the separation of financial or payment area and the area of performance to offer more of the feeling of gratitude to the mercy from the sacred. The area of performance makes the performers the favorite grandchildren of *Ya Mo* or the *Thao Suranari*'s artists. Their performance strictly respects the regulation of municipal; they do not perform with obscene words and dance. Because they are presenting sacred structure of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, they act a role of showing their honesty to *Thao Suranari*. Even though most clients do not watch the performance till the end, sacred structure already relates *Thao Suranari* to the clients. Though the clients ignore the show, the artists honestly continue their duty on the stage because they convey shared meanings of respect from clients to *Ya Mo*.

The stages at the monument area are used by two performer groups: *Chen Huarotfai* group and the groups in the Association of *Phlaeng Khorat*. *Chen Huarotfai* group gets concession from the municipal as they are the pioneer of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* at the monument since 1991. They are not the member of the Association of *Phlaeng Khorat* which started using this area in 1993. The Association was cooperated by 23 groups of *Maw Phlaeng*, except for *Chen Huarotfai* group. Both

Chen Haurotfai group and the groups in the Association of *Phleang Khorat* used the stages and the reception together. Both of them have to rotate their round; they can use the stages two days at a time.

The rules of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in the monument area appointed by municipal are the followings this announcement: (my translation)

An Announcement of Nakhon Ratchasima Municipal Government

Subject: The ordering of the *Phlaeng Khorat* performance in a votive offering
In order that the performance of *Phlaeng Khorat* as votive offering to the monument of *Thao Suranari* spirit, can be performed in good order and to the benefit of the people who come to make the offering, and also to protect the reputation and culture of *Khorat* people, the municipal therefore issue on order that performance of *Phlaeng Khorat* as votive offering to *Thao Suranari*, shall strictly observe the following procedures:

1. All *Phlaeng Khorat* performers have to wear the card issued by municipal government on the chest.
2. During the performance the group should show the group's name on the signboard which was approved by municipal government.
3. All performance should be performed by 2 males and 2 females.
4. Performers and staff are not allowed to suggest contract with customer around the place.
5. Rate of performance should not exceed 400 bath per a half hour, and 700 baths per an hour. All performers must complete the performance as agreed with the clients.
6. Performance for votive offering must strictly adhere to traditional pattern.
7. If someone sees the performer violated the above law, please report to municipal government at 1559

Announced as public information

Announced on the 21st September 2004
Vice-Professor *Cherdchai Chokratanachai*
Nakhon Ratchasima Mayor

The rules of municipal involve maintaining orderliness, protecting everyone's benefits, and most importantly preservation of culture. The municipal has to interfere because votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is considered to be "collective identity" rather than "artist's identity". So *Phlaeng Khorat* which was once artists' family's wisdoms became everyone's wisdoms or common property, which gives authority to public officers to become keepers of public interests.

In addition, the interference of the municipal indicates two points. The first point is that the local government influences over the local identity of the votive *Phlaeng Khorat* and management of the public space under the discourse of "order". The second point is that this order reflects bureaucratic thinking and its impact on folk performance. It is not only preserving its power over the performance but also protecting the sign consumption.

Since the stage is situated in a public area, the acts of *Maw Phlaeng* are watched by other people. However, municipal rules and audiences/clients' gaze apply only to performances on the stage. Off the stage the performers who are waiting for their turn can freely use the stage to do their personal activities such as chitchatting, playing their mobile phones, and eating. The rules act as a governing tool that turns performers into labourers, not artists. Therefore, the change of their self-image caused by the rules of the municipal, decreases their artist dignity to only hired-hands. However, to relieve the pain of this change, some performers insist that they are artists of the heroine.

Under the rules and regulation concerning 'governing' 'appropriate pattern' of performance, apart from the chant, the dance is also regulated to avoid obscene postures or "postures of sexual harassment" such as "touching posture" that a male performer acts as if he wants to touch a female performer sexually. Polite dancing postures are performed to support the recognition of *Thao Suranari* morals. The change of dancing postures reflect the condition of 'civilized' modernity where moral construction has developed to 'protect' women's status, despite the fact that traditional *Phlaeng Khorat* was full of sexual dialogues between male and female performers. But when it becomes votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, performing in a public area in the city, the politeness of a 'civilized' nation must become its main characteristics.

The performers can show traditional ‘grace’ through costumes. Both men and women often wear *Jongkraben* or *Sarong* by putting it around the back and leveling the edges at the front, knotting the fabric at the waist to get the long bit left over, twisting this bit around and put through between the legs and tucking in the back. Women use a belt and men use a loincloth to tie around their waist to keep it tight. They normally wear plain colored *Jongkraben* without design. Men usually wear round collar shirts, short sleeves, sometimes plain, sometimes with flowers pattern. Women wear blouses or fitter shirts than those of men. Some performers design their own uniforms. For example; the performers in *Chen Huaroffai* group wear their costume colors according to seven daily traditional colour codes. One will notice that they communicate signs of traditionality. Their costumes and dancing postures are a reinvention of traditionalistic traits. They create their own traditional symbols to work in a monumental place of a ‘civilized’ nation.



Figure 5.1 The plaza of *Thao Suranari* monument



Figure 5.2 Stages of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in the plaza of *Thao Suranari* monument

The Marginal Space of Maw Phlaeng

Chen Huarotfai group owns the first votive *Phlaeng Khorat* performance stage at the monument. It uses the common stage at the monument ground, and also has its own stage. Once it had been expelled from the monument ground, it was settled in an empty space behind shopping buildings in a narrow alley of three-metre width. It is in the same area of municipal pawn shop. The floor of the ground covered with grinded stones, so there is some dust when it is windy. The physical relation between the stage and the monument is, therefore, separated by the road, vehicles and shops. Inside the alley, ironically, there are two important contradictory activities; the performance of sacred votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, and commercial activity of pawning. *Theerapap Lohitkul* (2008) complains that it is a graceless stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, notwithstanding that it performs the arts to worship the sacredness of the town (*Theerapap*, 2008:113). The atmosphere of private area and distance from the monument may be factors reducing the sacredness of votive ceremony, but it makes the performers more concentrated because they are not disturbed by any noise and

vehicles on the roads. Accordingly, it is the space originated by being driven out of the public ground of the monument, but it is safe and peaceful for them.

There are three stages. If one is facing the stages and back to the monument, there is a middle stage just in the front. One can still see the monument from this middle stage. It is always the first stage to be selected for the performance. These stages are Thai style pavillions with high platforms and four sides opened. They are metally structured, roofed with tiles and floored with wood. From my analysis, if the stage were built from a pile of tanks with a flat board above it, it would be considered a temporary stage that was ready for any contingencies. But if it were built in a construction of cement, it would be considered permanent reservation. Therefore, signs of these wood materials indicate something in-between. The stage conctructed from wood is in a level of stability though it is ready for any contingencies as well, because it is situated in the rental area of the municipal with a limited period of contract. Wood and tiles soften the stiffness of modernity, but they represent locality signs or naturality and simplicity.

Their size is different from the stages at the monument ground: it is 1.50 metres high. At this height, the performers can make use of the space under the stages, in particularly, those of the other two stages, where they can store some food, electric appliance, and other things. There is also empty space to install performers' bed. If there are no clients, the stages will serve as places to sleep, cook, and eat. Some *Maw Phlaeng* sometimes sleep overnight there. There are temporary bathrooms made of zinc sheets while *Maw Phlaeng* who use the stages outside have to use public bathrooms. There are lockers, small kitchen. The stages are like their "house", so they have their privacy to do their daily routine although next to the stage there is a municipal pawn-shop.

If one sees its condition, one may think that its order and hygene are not very well attended, contrast to the condition of the center stages of the monument. Environment and daily activities of performers in this area are so disodered that you may feel the simplicity and informality, or in other words, it looks less modern than the outside stages. It may be coincidence that the stages of *Chen Huarotfai* and the pawn shop are in the same area. It seems like these two places are hidden behind the

liveliness of shops outside. They are the places where marginal people; *Maw Phlaeng*, clients of pawn shop or even clients of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, do not get a fair share of a use of the ‘modernized’ space.

After *Chen Huarotfai* group was banned in 1991 to perform at the monument area, they have rented the area in front of the pawn shop to work. They, alone, have the right to use that area. Now, the municipal allows them to perform at the monument ground like the Association of *Phlaeng Khorat*, but they still use this stage. *Chen Huarotfai* group has its reception desk in front of the alley, which sometimes is used by *Maw Phlaeng* of the Association because the clients are used to contact for the shows here. Most clients do not care or know which group *Maw Phlaeng* belong to, either *Chen Huarotfai* group or the Association of *Phlaeng Khorat*. General clients do not select or specify *Maw Phlaeng* by the capacity and performance styles, contrast to the selection of *Maw Phlaeng* groups in villages. The location of the stages does not affect the clients’ decision, but it may affect the decision of the clients if a particular client wants more private atmosphere. Its private area helps the performers be less disturbed by air and noise pollution. At the same time, it helps the clients hide votive activities away from chaos of modernity at the monument ground.



Figure 5.3 The main entrance of *Chen Huarotfai*’s stages

Even though this stage is hidden behind shopping buildings, the performance here is also controlled by the rules of the municipal. The performers and clients can still see the monument which helps maintain the relation between this marginal area and the power of the monument. Though it is a private area, it reflects that rules also cover private areas even when they escape from the public area owned by the municipal. Rules do not only mean the control of physical areas, but they also signify the control of local quality of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*.



Figure 5.4 *Chen Huarotfai's* stages

The stages of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* are at the monument ground and in the alley of the open spaces. Clients and other people can see what the performers are doing. Once the clients hand their order to the performers, four of them will stand abreast on the stage and put the hands together in salute to the monument. Then they read the order detail indicating the name of the clients, duration of the show that the clients “buy”, problems or reasons why the clients ask for help from *Thao Suranari*, the spirit of Miss *Bunloer* recognized as *Thao Suranari*’s assistant during the war, and the spirit of the Deputy *Thong Kham*, *Thao Suranari*’s husband, in order that they can attend to the show and recognize that the clients have already gotten *Thao Suranari*’s help and are doing what they had promised or “making their votive offerings”. To start the performance, *Maw Phlaeng* will perform in couple of male and female alternately, while another couple is waiting for their turn. They usually sit on the stage and do other activities such as chitchatting, playing their smartphone, putting on their make-up, eating and just sitting. At the end of the performance where *Maw Phlaeng* have to sing and bless the clients, they will perform together again.

On the stage, therefore, there are not only the shows, but also private behaviors of *Maw Phlaeng* who are waiting their turn to perform. However, not every one pay attention to the private behaviors. They would rather be interested in the performance (if they care enough to watch it). While the stage separates *Maw Phlaeng* and audience, there is also another more important separation, i.e., the separation of values of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* from private life and problems of *Maw Phlaeng*. Conservationists of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* usually focus on preservation of ‘traditon’ rather than daily problems of *Maw Phlaeng*. In fact, *Maw Phlaeng* become marginal people in town. They get only limited space and time to express themselves as artist.

Although *Maw Phlaeng* is the medium through whom the sacredness of *Ya Mo* spirit can manifest, they have been pushed away by the municipality into small dirty lane. This reflects the construction of the municipality wanting to preserve the sacredness through votive *Phlaeng Khorat* on one hand, but on the other hand the municipality is also concerned with staging a modern space of cleanliness and orderliness of the public space of the *Thao Suranari* monument.

5.2 In the Garden of Commercialization of Sacredness: Stage at the Temple

Wat Salaloi temple is recognized by local people that it was built by *Thao Suranari* in 1827 to commemorate and donate merit to the deads in the war; both the *Khorat* people and Laotian army. There is a stupa containing *Thao Suranari* relics. Mr. *Chom Meethaonon*, 76, an attendant of the temple said that in 1960s the temple was in the jungle surrounded by rice paddies. One could get there only on foot. In mid 1980s, *Wat Salaloi* temple got attention from people involving the spirit of *Thao Suranari*. He said that a medium lady came from Bangkok telling villagers that she was possessed by the spirit of *Thao Suranari* who wanted her to make merit at this temple. At that time, villagers were renovating the old chapel, but there was no sign of accomplishment due to the lack of budget. That medium told the villagers to continue the renovation because *Thao Suranari* would help them. After that many people came to make merit at the temple and often said that *Thao Suranari* helped them to win lotteries, so they returned their gratitude by giving the offerings to the temple (*Chom Meethanon*, 2013, interviewed). *Wat Salaloi* temple is a place where spirit possession ceremony is allowed, unlike the monument in town.

Mr. *Chom Meethanon* lived in *Salaloi* community. He used to vow to *Thao Suranari* because he knew of the spirit possession of a medium at the temple for the first time in 1982, but his desire was not fulfilled. He asked *Thao Suranari* to help him get a job in Saudi Arabia as he had financial problems because he had changed from farming to engage in commerce since the beginning of 1960s. He had to be a labourer for construction, but the income was still not enough for the family. In late 1970s, young men in the village liked to go to work in Middle East, so he decided to sell two *Rai*'s of his rice paddy and some buffaloes till he got 300,000 baht to pay the expense to go abroad. He was worried under the pressure of loss of a big amount of money but the chance to get a job was uncertain. So, he really needed to go to Saudi Arabia to succeed. Although he contacted several recruitment agencies, none of them contacted him back while a lot of his friend had already left for Saudia Arabia. Once the spirit possession ceremony was organized at the temple, he pleaded with *Thao Suranari* to help him, but he got the answer from *Thao Suranari* (through the medium) that "I won't let you go. You must stay here with your Grandma". He interpreted that *Thao*

Suranari wanted him to stay and develop the temple. Since then, he has worked for the temple till assigned as the committee of the temple.

As the temple often opens opportunities for mediums to organize the ceremony, he met different types of mediums. He suggests that the authenticity of the mediums of *Thao Suranari*'s spirit can be proved by their politeness because *Thao Suranari* was an upper class lady. Those who express aggressive and rude manners are imposters. He said;

“*Ya Mo* was a high-class lady, wife of deputy, polite and well-behaved; she did not vulgarly speak to people, so the mediums of her spirit have to be polite. The mediums who show their power, yell at people with rude words are, therefore, imposters”.

He noticed that the mediums of *Thao Suranari* were all from other places; none of them are from communities near *Wat Salaloi* temple (*Chom Meethanon*, 2013, interviewed). The stories of the temple and *Thao Suranari* told by Mr. *Chom* show the adaptation of the temple. At first, it was in an exclusive service only for people in the community, but when *Thao Suranari* cult became more popular, the temple became an open space for outsiders.

The vow to *Thao Suranari* with votive *Phlaeng Khorat* became popular only ten years ago. It took place at the same time with the trend of *Chatukamramtep* cult in the South during 2007 – 2008. The first group of performance was *Saeng-Somchid* group (*Saeng Somchid*, 2013, interviewed). A client of *Saeng-Somchid* group, *Thatpong Kongsip*, 23, is an outsider of *Salaloi* community and a young man. He is from *Nongbuasala* Sub-district, *Mueang Nakon Ratchasima* District. He finished his high school from Assumption School of a Christian foundation. Now he is a sergeant in Bangkok. He chose to do votive offering at *Wat Salaloi* temple because he believed that this place was the original place of *Thao Suranari*. He remarked that *Wat Salaloi* temple was built by *Thao Suranari*, and also her relics stupa was situated here which was an evidence confirming that *Wat Salaloi* temple was the real residence of *Thao Suranari*'s spirit. He explained that the monument in town was constructed far after this place; it was built to honor the warriorship of *Thao Suranari* rather than

grandmotherhood. Hence, he thought that the monument was the place for visitors and tourists rather than the place of authentic *Khorat* people. He felt that the spirit at the stupa in *Wat Salaloi* temple was something he could feel the presence and the generosity of *Thao Suranari* better than at the monument in town (*Thatpong Kongsip*, 2015, interviewed). *Thatpong* defines *Thao Suranari* and the space of *Wat Salaloi* temple that they show the antiquity and the authenticity of the spirit, and they create the feeling of locality better than the monument ground in the city.

While the temple tries to open the area to the public like the monument ground in the city, and tries to give the meaning of the temple relating to the meaning of *Thao Suranari* in national level, the locality of the temple gives the special feelings to clients of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. It is a specific place for local people because it helps them to closely keep in touch with *Thao Suranari*'s spirit unlike the atmosphere at the monument ground in the city. So, the signs of old locality is consumed as it gives power to local people because they can claim about the authentic or originality of *Thao Suranari*'s spirit. The votive ceremony at *Wat Salaloi* temple helps local people have their own space, and it helps them build different meaning of *Thao Suranari*'s spirit from national meaning.

The stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* at *Wat Salaloi* temple is situated in the back of the temple where *Lamtakhong* canal passes. If you are from the front gate of the temple, you will see a parking lot which can park 100 cars. On the left side, there are toilets, food and beverage stalls and lottery stalls. Next, it locates meeting hall and monks' houses. There is a small board saying "fortune teller, prolong destiny, get luck here" at the entrance of the building. In front of you, is a three-metre cemented hexagone building with thick platform whose second floor is wide opened without wall. The platform is decorated by earthenware painted the story of *Nakhon Ratchasima* city during the age of *Thao Suranari*, from life style and production methods of peasant society, plays and dance, fighting action, to admiration and promotion of *Thao Suranari*. In this building, there is a statue of *Thao Suranari* and worship objects. On the right side of the parking lot and behind "*Ya Mo Chedi*", there is a pavement leading to *Thao Suranari*'s worship area and votive *Phlaeng Khorat* performance stage. When you reach this area, you will see an old chapel. It was said

that it was built by *Thao Suranari* in 1827. There was a statue of *Thao Suranari*'s husband. In front of the chapel, it was paved with cemented brick.

This area seems like a field full on ceremonies, small buildings and a lot of objects communicating the meanings of sacredness such as the stupa containing the relics of *Thao Suranari*, the statues of *Thao Suranari*, the statue of Mother of Earth or *Mae Thorani*, the pavillion of the grand medicine professor named *Jīvaka-Komārabhacca*, the pavillion of Happy Buddha or *Phra Kaccāyana*, the Buddha image of *Buddha Mahasettee Nawakoti*, the statue of *Rahu* riding *Garuda*, and votive *Phlaeng Khorat* stage. The area is surrounded by donation boxes and merit activities such as a stall selling tiles for the chapel, a stall for donation to by lands for the temple, a stall selling birds and fish to free them, a stall for infants donating to infants aborted around the world. On the right side of the stupa is a remarkable construction looking like a boat. It is a modern chapel constructed in 1967. It is a white concrete building. Monks and committes of *Wat Salaloi* temple (2011) explained that it was designed by combining the arts of four eras; the arts of *Sukhothai*, *Ayutthaya*, *Thonburi* and *Rattanakosin*. It was constructed by mixing ancient and modern objects; earthenware tiles and reinforced concrete (Monks and committes of *Wat Salaloi* templ, 2011: 20-21). The chapel houses the big principal white Buddha image. The characters of the chapel clarify the meaning of “*Salaloi*”, and the ceremonial area where the stupas are the center, can be called the central of “sanctity garden”.

The stupa containing the relics of *Thao Suranari* is situated on the cemented ground covered with granite tiles. There are two statues of *Thao Suranari*. They are not very big; one has the same size of a person, the other is smaller. Both have the same pose as the statue of the monument in town. Moreover, there is a statue of Miss *Bunloer*, an imporant assistant of *Thao Suranari* in Vientien-Nakhon Ratchasima War mentioned in the record. Monks and committees of *Wat Salaloi* temple (2011) explained that the ancient stupa was built by the husband of *Thao Suranari* in 1852, then was renovated in 1983 (Monks and committes of *Wat Salaloi* temple, 2011: 24). These three statues facilitate people to be able to get closer to the statues such as hanging garlands, covering with blankets, dressing up, and praying closely.

There is another statue of *Thao Suranari*, but its pose is different from the two statues; it is in a sitting and praying pose situated in the front and facing the chapel similar to a boat. It is less worshipped than those in front of the stupa. It represents peace and courtesy as well as interests in Buddhism, which is different from other meanings of *Thao Suranari* as a warrior and a conqueror of problems.

A bit further, there is a statue of Mother of Earth squeezing her hair believed that it helps for selling promotion. Behind the stupa, is situated the pavillion of the grand medicine professor named *Jīvaka-Komārabhacca* believed that it is for good health; inside the pavillion there is a statue of a hermit as a sign. In the front, there are a flask of fortune sticks and a closet containing the interpretation. The pavillion is decorated with Chinese styles; next to it, there is a statue of *Phra Kaccāyana* (Happy Buddha) helping for financial stability, intelligence, progress and admiration from others. Nearby, a group of fortune tellers are on action, and there is an exhibition concerning how to succeed the merit according to the horoscope. This exhibition shows the predictions of the famous fortune teller in Thailand, named *Luck Rekhanithes*, to invite people to donate for buying some land to the temple, and presents the ceremonies of this fortune teller in the temple as well. There is also a statue of *Buddha Maha Setthi Nawa Koti* and *Rahu* riding *Garuda* built in 2011 by *Luck Rekhanithes*. First belief is about wealth, and the second one is about changing the bad destiny to the good one, power and wealth.

Normally, *Wat Salaloi* temple often organizes votive ceremonies and sell amulets and talisman. The atmosphere is full of the scent of incense and advertisement sound inviting people to donate and buy some amulets and talisman. Various activities are to meet the hope, to get rid of bad lucks, and to support good destiny of people. It is very crowded on weekends. “Sacred garden” is shaded by trees, so it is cooler and more pleasant comparing to the monument ground in the city. Its common space allows various activities to take place in order to ask sanctities to relieve people’s suffering. It relates individuals to economic structures of the country, and at the same time it modifies the temple from common place to become “commercial space of god and spirit”.

The sacredness of this place is significantly celebrated every year. It is connected to the annual celebration of *Thao Suranari*. In the morning on every 23rd March, *Wat Salaloi* temple arranges a worship ceremony to *Thao Suranari*'s spirit in order to invite her spirit to recognize or attend the celebration with the citizen. For example, in 2013, the parking is full, there are more restaurants and lottery stalls than previous years, but most stalls use the umbrellas screened with logos of big companies in the country such as banks, assurance companies, Wall ice-cream and Nestley drinks.

On this day, the temple is more crowded than usual; the celebration is attended by important people such as the governor, heads of various public sectors and heads of business groups in the province, including groups of elderly from different communities. The ceremony at the temple is organized with Brahman style to make it look ancient, sacred and rational, while at the monument ground in town the evening ceremony focuses on modern shows such as contemporary plays, parade and fire work. On this day, the monument and *Thao Suranari*'s stupa are decorated by offerings comprising of her favourite fruits, and flowers. It makes an atmosphere of security and richness under "the rule of *Thao Suranari*" There are two 7-level tiers standing close to the monument, which means seven levels of heaven or the stairs connecting the human world to the spirit world or modern society to traditional society. It is a specific area organized by Brahmin only. Next in the front row place the seats of the governor, heads of public sectors, and businessmen. Next rows are for the elderly who participate in the performance of *Ram Thon*, and most people stands outside.

The Brahmin who leads the ceremony starts with vibrant and strong prayer in order to plead with Hindi gods, *Phra Siamdevathiraj*, spirits of ancient kings, guardian spirits, Mother of Earth and *Thao Suranari* to meet and accept the offerings. Once the Brahmin interprets that the spirits recognize and accept the worship, there will be a small break for those sacred spirits to consume their offerings, then the Brahmin will ask the sacred spirits for the rain, economic development and the blessing for people who participate in the the ceremony. He especially asks *Thao Suranari* to protect *Khorat* people from any harm, afterwards he asks the governor to sprinkle the flowers

to the offerings and around the monument as a sign of worship. Traditional Thai music is played aloud to communicate with the spirits through modern technology of amplifiers.

The governor talks the sermons over in Pali and Thai to the spirit of *Thao Suranari* saying that; “Today is your victory celebration. Your grandchildren here offer you your favorite offerings and local play. Please, Your Honor, *Thao Suranari*, make *Khorat* people happy. And please, Your Grace, ancient kings, protect *Khon Khorat* and Thai people so that they can develop the nation, and can maintain the institutions of nation, religion and Royal”. Then, he asks everyone to stand up and sing a song for *Thao Suranari* (along with a lyric sheet given prior the ceremony); its contents describe *Thao Suranari*’s mercy. Then they sing *Ratchasima* March, the song of the province telling that *Khon Khorat* and *Thao Suranari* fought Laos army and protected the country for the offsprings.

After that, votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is performed to define the meaning of locality as it is *Thao Suranari*’s favourite show. Votive *Phlaeng Khorat* plays an important role to communicate with *Thao Suranari*; swordplay of students is to define the meaning of martial arts of the ancient and the courage of local people. Finally, *Ram Thon* performance of the elderly represents the joy of local people after beating the enemy and overcoming the obstruction. People gradually quit the ceremony, but some stay close to the offering stand. Although votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is performing, very few people are interested in it. They only want to take food, fruits, flowers, and sweets of the offerings because they believe that these objects are sacred as they belong to *Thao Suranari*. The persons who are closer have more chance to get them before anyone. Once the offerings are all grabbed, the elderly start their worship dance called “*Ram Thon*” rhymed by a music instrument similar to a drum. Other people pay respect to the monument. The temple is full of merit activities and donation.

Its atmosphere is full of incense scent and noisy information of each activity from speakers. Apart from the interest of *Thao Suranari*’s stupa, this ceremony pay special attention to the role of provincial governor and other VIPs.

On that day, the performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is not very audible and comprehensible because during the performance, other activities are making unbearable disturbing noise. This noise of “modernity” is sent from electronic appliance: speakers and amplifiers which are representatives of capitalist noise because they try to attract people by turning “merit” into goods. They persuade people to make merit by donating and buying things in the temple. In the contrary, votive *Phlaeng Khorat* seems to play its role to communicate with “inaudible voice” between performers and audience. It seems like “voice of tradition” existed in this sacred garden in order to connect to the recognition of *Thao Suranari* only.

People assign *Thao Suranari* to be an audience of the outdated performance for them. The existence of *Thao Suranari* is used to serve those people who want to consume “signs of cultural root”. Donation and purchase are their main target, and the roles of Brahmin and the governor are also more important while the stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is empty because *Maw Phlaeng* of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* participating in the worship ceremony performing their show next to the stupa. It seems that votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is especially for *Thao Suranari* and not for general clients. The voice of the performers did not even attract people to come to watch the show.

Normally, the stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is located near the stupa and *Thao Suranari*’s statute. Clients have to contact staff of *Phlaeng Khorat* group at the front desk situated under a tent not far from the stage. Its temporary location indicates preparation for change. At the front desk, there are some offerings, and drinking water for sale. This is another way to make some income for *Maw Phlaeng* especially Sang-Somchid group who has an important role managing votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in the temple of which they are developers. There are two stages of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* similar to small pavillions with wooden structures and floors, roofed with brown scale tiles, sized width x length x height: 3x3x6 metre, lifted from the ground about 0.9 metre. There is no curve on anything, which indicates local simplicity while the areas between the posts and the top plates of the stages at the monument ground are curved. The stages at the temple are shaded by trees, so they are cooler and more shaded than those at the monument. Sometimes, *Maw Phlaeng* take some rest in small pavillions

behind the stages, or sometimes in bell tower pavillion. Though they are located very close to the sacredness of the stupa and the statue of *Thao Suranari*, its atmosphere is quite informal.

5.3 Replica of the National Heroine in Formal Rural Administration Space

Stages of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in rural areas and other places are not permanently constructed. They are built only for occasional votive performance. Unlike the stages in town and *Wat Salaloi* temple where votive *Phlaeng Khorat* has to fiercely fight against many other signs, from signs of modernity to signs of other sanctities, the stage in the rural area may be built of wood putting on 100-litre gasoline tanks or putting on metal construction temporarily assembled. The size of stage is not fixed; sometimes it is arranged like a concert stage which people can see only from the front, sometimes it is placed on a center like stages in the past that everyone can see from all directions. Stages in a village are significantly different from those in town and at *Wat Salaloi* temple; they often use speakers and microphone. Hence, when votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is performing, it makes the loudest noise in the area. However, it is not allow to make too loud noise to disturb other activities. Votive *Phlaeng Khorat* stage in rural area is sometimes the center of the ceremony, but sometimes it is marginal and put at the edge of other activities.

An example of a ceremony organized by rural administrators is *Thao Suranari* worship ceremony on 13th April 2014 at the monument of *Thao Suranari* in front of local government center of *Huay Thalaeng* District. The monument is located on cemented ground surrounded with lawn; far beyond from the buildings of other public offices. At the monument area, there are not often votive making ceremony, but the ceremony that day is held due to the occasion of *Songkran* or Traditional Thai New Year by Municipal Administration, public officers, and elected local politicians. This ceremony involves local politician competition, so local politicians are very active.

However, they put votive *Phlaeng Khorat* aside to the edge. If the monument is considered as the center, the stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* would be found on the far end on the right side. The tent for honourable guests is situated from the monument of *Thao Suranari* about 20 metres, and the stage of *Phlaeng Khorat* is

about 30 metres. Yet, if considering the first row of the VIP guests as the center, in front of these guests it is the monument where there is only Brahmin working under the sun, and on their left hand side it is the stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. Therefore, the important areas of this ceremony are the direct vision between the monument ground and the persons sitting in the front row; the monument and the VIP seats is the center, the stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is found at the edge.

The ceremony begins at 9.30 am leading by Brahmin as the director of the ceremony. He uses a microphone to invite the heads of public sectors such as the district chief officer, the mayor, the police superintendent, the director of the hospital and the director of Educational Service Area to offer pedestal trays of flowers to the monument and to tie seven-colored cloth around the base of the monument. During the ceremony, the master of the ceremony standing on a podium in the left corner of the tent recites the history of *Thao Suranari*. So, ceremonial actions of these leaders are being woven to “voice of nationalist history” confirming the necessity of co-living between the history of *Thao Suranari* and righteous power of these leaders, including the existence of the area of ceremony.

After offering the pedestral trays of flowers and tying the cloth, the master of ceremony blesses everybody by asking for the power of *Thao Suranari* to help them win a lottery. Later, the Brahmin prays worship chants in Pali-Sanskrit, and changes the clothes of the monument with new clothes. Then, he says in Thai to plead *Thao Suranari* to make all participants happy, full of luck, prestige, admiration and professional progress. Interestingly, this blessing weaves the presence of *Thao Suranari*’s spirit based on the past to the destiny and hopes of people floating in the future. Pali-Sanskrit adds the sacredness of *Thao Suranari* as a goddess while Thai is a tool to facilitate people to reach the power of the sanctity.

At 9.45, *Maw Phlaeng* group arrives at the performance stage contemporarily constructed. Its wooden structure and wooden floor are put on several 100-litre gasoline tanks. There is no roof; there is only shade from nearby trees to cover from the sun. It is a little bit bigger than the stage at *Wat Salaloi* temple and the one at the monument and it is 1.50 metre high. *Maw Phlaeng* change their clothes beside the stage; men wear *Jongkraben*, round collar shirt buttoned while women wear

Jongkraben, short-sleeve shirt. *Maw Phlaeng* get dressed and put on makeup; the leader of *Maw Phlaeng*, the oldest, asks for information of the organizer and the objectives of the ceremony from the master of the ceremony who stands on the nearby podium while other *Maw Phlaeng* assemble at the stage. They have nothing else to do in other areas.

At 9.50, after the *Thao Suranari* worship ceremony of Brahmin, firecrackers are lightened and there is only the noise of the firecracker at that time, signifying everyone to pay attention to the action of Brahmin at the monument ground.

At 9.55, the master of ceremony invites the district chief officer to praise *Thao Suranari*; The district chief officer uses the microphone and tells *Thao Suranari* that he and the participants of the ceremony have come to offer her the offerings. Then he recounts her history to everyone and admires her as a heroine who protected the country from the enemy. An interesting point is that the history of *Thao Suranari* is told the second time in a row in one day. It is told to support the righteous authority of the public officers. The district chief officer can attract listeners better because other activities has stopped, so everyone can his voice clearly. After his speech, he asks everyone to stand up and bow to *Thao Suranari* together to show their respect. It could be seen that the roles of the district chief officer is a powerful person because at that time there is only his voice.

At 10.00, worship dance for the spirit of *Thao Suranari* is performed by 22 female students from a famous public school in this district; *Huay Thalang Wittaya* School and *Chumchon Ban Tapsawai* School. They dance around the pedestral of the monument along with traditional Thai music playing through the amplifiers. Apart from their roles of dancers, this electric appliance help them get more attention. However, they are not considered as individuals because their names are not mention, but they altogether are watched as a representation of public educational institution. The success of the worship dance of students indicates the leadership of the state who has provided education and transfered Thai culture to local people while other local cultural performances are quietly waiting for the show.

At 10.15, after the worship dance, votive *Phlaeng Khorat* performers start their show. Though they use microphones and speakers, very few people are interested in them because there is a voice of the master of ceremony informing that the possession ceremony of *Thao Suranari* is about to start. Most people are more interested in this ceremony. The Brahmin comes back to conduct the possession ceremony. The medium is a middle-aged woman wearing white clothes. The Brahmin says some prayers not in Thai to invite the spirit. The ceremony conducted by Brahmin makes the spirit of *Thao Suranari* to be considered half spirit half goddess. It changes the power of signs of the monument to be able to talk with people. The important thing is that it is the center of all interest.

At 10.30, the performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* has to stop because the master of ceremony announces through the microphone asking *Maw Phlaeng* to temporarily stop the show. Everyone concentrates on the medium being possessed by the spirit of *Thao Suranari*. The head of *Maw Phlaeng* gets down from the stage to see the medium like everyone. The Brahmin called her to get closer to the medium. He tells everybody that “*Maw Phlaeng* are real grandchildren of *Ya Mo*, come closer to grandma”. However, the person who is closest to the medium is the lady mayor. It seems that the recognition of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is tightened with the existence of *Thao Suranari*. This recognition helps the head of *Maw Phlaeng* to reach the medium. However, it seems that the person who owns political power like the mayor would have more privilege. Hence, the monument may not give any social-cultural space for *Maw Phlaeng*, but the existence of the spirit gives them that space. Within the variety of memorial ceremony for the locality, the stage for votive performance is important as a sign of a space of *Maw Phlaeng*. It helps them automatically learn their position and status although it does not get any attention.

At 10.38, the spirit of *Thao Suranari* quits the medium. The lady mayor holding her role as leader informs everyone that *Thao Suranari* wants everyone to be united and wants to improve scenery around her monument; then she shows the numbers given by *Thao Suranari* for lottery to the participants. After the possession ceremony, votive *Phlaeng Khorat* restarts.

At 11.00, votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is still performing. Some *Maw Phlaeng* waiting for their turn are obsessed with their 'modern' gadgets. Some smoke, some are wearing earphones listening to music from their smartphones, some are preoccupied by their smart phones. The audience, most of whom are elderly (about fifteen people) dispersedly sit under the shaded trees. At the same moment, workers begin taking the chairs out of the area.

An old man watches votive *Phlaeng Khorat* full of emotion. He tries to make fun of *Maw Phlaeng* many times and encourages male *Maw Phlaeng* to dance and harass female *Maw Phlaeng*. He says "It needs to tease *Maw Phlaeng*. Amusing *Phlaeng Khorat* has to be beastly, but nowadays *Maw Phlaeng* are not very nasty," yet *Maw Phlaeng* do not do as the request of the old man, but continue debating about the history of *Thao Suranari*.

This incidence indicates that the experience of the old man about traditional *Phlaeng Khorat* for entertainment in agricultural society is negotiating with the self-expression of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* as the performance for the sacredness and for serving local administers. So, the style of performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is based on recognition of making *Phlaeng Khorat* sacred performance which is sign consumption system in urban society.

At 11.50, female *Maw Phlaeng* sing country songs entitled "Bow to the feet of *Ya Mo*", which signifies the final period of the performance. Other *Maw Phlaeng* stand up and clap their hands for the rythm despite the lack of musical instrument. The audience shouts and asks for *Phlaeng Khorat* Cing, and *Mawlum*. A *Maw Phlaeng* answers that "We can't do it, because today we're prepared for 'ancient' *Phlaeng Khorat*". However, the head of the *Maw Phlaeng* group sings a modern country song instead.

At 12.00, *Maw Phlaeng* come back and perform votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. It is a farewell song and blessing song for the organizers. Its contents are to ask for the spirit of *Thao Suranari* to support the mayor with fame and fortune like *Thao Suranari*. After that, *Maw Phlaeng* arrange their belongings and change their costume into casual clothes, get paid and leave.

It can be seen that singing modern country songs complied with the sacred occasion as the country song talking about the sacredness of *Thao Suranari* could fit the need of sign consumption for something ‘modern’ and contemporary and something ‘sacred’ at the same time.

The performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in this rural space is aranged within the frame of recognition of *Thao Suranari*’s sacredness (symbol of the central state) combined with local politicians’ authority. It, therefore, is performed with politeness and order, signifying the ‘civilized’ tradition as a root or foundation of Thai modernity. However, that votive *Phlaeng Khorat* has not been given center-stage to its status (comparing to the monument and front-row seats of guest) signifies the secondary place or space of the “traditional world” or pastness as compared to the modern nation-state and its, in this case, local power-holders.



Figure 5.5 Replica of *Thao Suranari* in *Huay Thalaeng* District



Figure 5.6 Stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in *Thao Suranari* worship ceremony
Huay Thalaeng District, 13th April 2014

5.4 Village as Space of Mundane Entertainment

Normally, the performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in rural villages limits the duration of the performance, and the fees are charged in accordance with duration of the show like the performance in town and at *Wat Salaloi* temple. Yet, since the performance in the village sometimes is not only for votive action, but also for entertainment, and clients often hire *Maw Phlaeng* to perform both votive *Phlaeng*

Khorat and applied *Phlaeng Khorat* because they can sing with a music group, karaoke and live. *Maw Phlaeng* may extend the duration of the performance for clients if they still enjoy the performance. This feeling occurs when the relation between *Maw Phlaeng* and clients developed during the performance. In other words, the clients become audience who interact and share the feelings with the performance.

Votive *Phlaeng Khorat* may be performed at clients' house or common place in the village, where there is only an image of *Thao Suranari*. But it is not necessary to perform at the monument of *Thao Suranari* in the village, unlike votive performance in town, *Wat Salaloi* temple and public ceremony. In the village there are a lot of audience, most of whom are relatives and neighbors. It is fun when *Maw Phlaeng* are pulled to share the same feelings with the audience or are pulled into social structure of community.

I watched the performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* at *Chakarat* District. An audience told me to notice pronoun uses by *Maw Phlaeng* such as “*ku*” (I) and “*mueng*” (You). He explained that *Maw Phlaeng* used these words because they wanted to show the equality in the group. He explained that either men or women at any age use this pronoun “*ku*” and “*mung*” for those with whom we talked though in modern Thai culture these two pronouns were considered rude. Moreover it would be fun if *Maw Phlaeng* used vulgar and rude words (Mr. *Adirek Takkratok*, 2014, interviewed). This is because it creates a performance space of equality.

Votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in the village is designed for entertainment rather than for formal ceremony. It offers the space to contest among *Maw Phlaeng*, each using rude words. It seems like a space full of vulgarity which is being placed in the same space as sanctity admiration. It is like a field of contestation situated on equal relation under watching eyes of the spirit as the keeper of unity among rivalries.

On 12th April 2014 at 8.56am, I accompanied the group of *Maw Phlaeng* to *Suksombun* village, *Samaklhee* sub-district, *Wang Nam Khiao* District, around 65 kilometres from town. When we reached there, *Maw Phlaeng* gathered next to the stage. They hurried to change to their uniform of performance immediately. A woman from the village brought some food and fruits to *Maw Phlaeng*. A male *Maw Phlaeng*

asked the client about the name of the host and the objectives of the arrangement for the performance. He noted the detail on a piece of paper.

Most villagers in the village are facing de-stability of lands overlapped the national park. They gain their income from small agro-tourism business, homestay and resorts. They normally get high income in winter, from November to February, contrast to summer season from March to June where the income decreases. So, during *Songkran* festival most of them stay in the village, and people who are working somewhere else return home. The atmosphere of the place was full of these people at various ages, from children eating some food and sweets to adolescents dancing along very loud music due to huge speakers even when they want to talk to each other. The elder were sitting in a pavilion.

That day they organized worship and votive ceremony to ancestor spirits of the village; *Chao Por Luang Rach*. It was half rite half party for them. The stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* was located next to a small house of *Chao Por Luang Rach* spirit under a big tree. It was temporarily built in common place of the community. It was built with wood and metal of width, length, height 5 x 8 x 3 metres. It was a terrace of two floors. The first floor was 1.50 metres from the floor prepared for votive *Phlaeng Khorat*; the second floor was 1.50 metres from the first one prepared for musical instrument, speakers and computer.

Normally, the center of this common place was the spirit house of *Chao Por Luang Rach*, but that day, the stage full of modern electronic material became the center. The front of the stage was a pavilion built with concrete and wood. Around the stage, it was clear earthen ground.

The reasons to hire votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in this ceremony was that a group of local politicians made a vow to *Chao Phor Luang Rach*. They promised the spirit if they won the election for Sub-district Administration, they would hire a group of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* for *Chao Por Luang Rach* and villagers. They have organized this ceremony annually and consecutively for six years.

Mr. *Kritchakorn Kloomklang* was assistant village headman and an important person who decided to bring *Phlaeng Khorat* to this votive ceremony. He explained that, apart from his personal preference, he originally lived in *Nonsoong* District where traditional *Phlaeng Khorat* was still popular and there were several famous *Maw Phlaeng*. He said that:

“I selected *Phlaeng Khorat* because I want new generation children to remember *Phlaeng Khorat* as it is a sign of *Khorat*-ness and story of *Ya Mo (Thao Suranari)*. The new generation children may not like and may not enjoy it, but if I hired an electone music group, that would attract them. I hired *Phlaeng Khorat* because *Maw Phlaeng* could perform many things, from votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, traditional *Phlaeng Khorat*, country music and general popular songs. They could also perform with music and without music (*Kritchakorn Kloomklang*, 2014, interviewed).”

As he is a representative of a group of local politician, you can see that they are interested in votive *Phlaeng Khorat* not only as a ritual performance or a show for spirits, but also as a kind of entertainment. Therefore, localism of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is not only the desire of signs of pastness but also it includes the applied *Phlaeng Khorat*. It does not only build the righteousness to politicians for local management and being integrated with community, but it also links people in different generations.

At 9.15, the master of ceremony used a microphone to announce the beginning of the ceremony. He invited the heads of the ceremony, the president and vice president of local administration, to the stage. They made a short speech to open the ceremony, and then the ceremony of monks started. The monks gave a sermon to villagers. After the religious ceremony, the villagers gradually poured water on the monks and the elderly and at that moment votive *Phlaeng Khorat* started. The ceremony started from the representatives of politic power, moral power of Buddhism, elderly power and clients, respectively.

Male *Maw Phlaeng* went up to the stage introducing themselves and the name of the group, saying thanks to the hosts and apologizing in advance in case that they might have made errors. Another male *Maw Phlaeng* started singing for blessing the organizer with good luck, and good health. Meanwhile one female *Maw Phlaeng* offered the spirit of *Chao Phor Luang Rach* the offerings prepared by the organizer comprising of alcohol drinks, candle and incense, flower cone. Then she got up to the stage and sang blessing such as wishing the clients to win a lottery and get rich (*Rum Ruay*).

A client shouted that “we want to get rich (*ruay*) not rum (“*rum*” here means sexual intercourse). It signaled *Maw Phlaeng* to change status from the performance for sanctity to the performance for entertaining people. This dialogue interaction between *Maw Phlaeng* and clients changed the clients into audience. This relation also invites the performers to share common “emotion”.

Noticeably, often *Maw Phlaeng* could not remember the name of the village; many times they took the note out to read. So they often paused and lost the rhythm of the chant each time they wanted to mention the name of the village. It means that they did not prepare the script and that they sang directly within the structure of the verses and the performance. The mistake of the performance was not important. Besides, the undisciplined behaviors of *Maw Phlaeng* seemed to amuse the audience. A male *Maw Phlaeng* drank a little before the show. He sang *Thao Suranari*’s history, Deputy *Thongkam* or *Prayamahisarathibodi* or the husband of *Thao Suranari* and Miss *Bunloer*, a niece of *Thao Suranari*, who, according to collective memory of local people and national history, was assigned by *Thao Suranari* to burn the carts containing gunpowder of Laos army and Miss *Bunloer* died in that explosion.

You will see that *Maw Phlaeng* inserted the history of *Thao Suranari* between them and the audience even though the relation between them was developing to the structure of impertinence, uncertainty, and indiscipline. It is a relation that they do not have to realize about modern politeness of discipline and they do not have to expect certain patterns of contents and performance, but when *Maw Phlaeng* returned to the contents of the heroine. They became more polite and composed.

At 9.50, after pouring water to the elderly, *Maw Phlaeng* changed from votive *Phlaeng Khorat* to country songs as requested by the audience. This was different from performing in other places (i.e. the center of the city, *Wat Salaloi* temple, and the local government center), which they decided to refuse the same request of the audience. Later, they sang country songs interchanging with votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. The audience included from teenagers to elderly. Around 40 people dancing in front of the stage, most of whom were women. Some held an alcohol bottle in their hands drinking. While *Maw Phlaeng* sang country songs, the audience made fun of *Maw Phlaeng*. The switch of modern country song reflected the mundane funs of modernity.

At 10.13, the performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* was stopped temporarily. The audience was back to their seats because the stage offered the Sub-district headman to present himself to the crowd. The Sub-district headman, just arriving, inform public news to the villagers. He seriously repeated about the accident during *Songkran* holiday, the forest burning and drugs. It could be seen that the stage stopped votive *Phlaeng Khorat* to open the space to public information and the self-image of local officer. These two things became the center of interest as the heaman and assistant headman used the stages to make official announcement. The stage, therefore, are not reserved for only *Maw Phlaeng*, but is also a space for local politicians' authority.

At 10.25, *Maw Phlaeng* resumed performance, but this time; they sang country songs only. People shouted and danced in front of the stage again. When a male *Maw Phlaeng* who drank sang a song entitled "*I don't have time to suck mistress' tits*" (original title is *I don't have time to see my mistress*), the audience cheered with fun and satisfaction with the naughty singing by *Maw Phlaeng*. Besides, he used the microphone to invite more people to dance. "*Come to dance, please form your line in an order of tits size!*". The atmosphere or emotion at this time was that each person focused on his/her own pleasure by music, no interaction between *Maw Phlaeng* and the audience. *Maw Phlaeng* played the role of happiness and emotion producers while the audience played the roles of happiness and emotion buyers. Both producers and buyers together pushed away problems of modernity that the Sub-district headman

just announced because what they were interested in was different from the objectives of local officers/politicians though they paused to listen to his announcement.

At 10.50, another *Maw Phlaeng* announced that he asked for a period to perform “*Phlaeng Khorat*”, but the audience booed and shouted that “*don’t want Phlaeng Khorat, we want to dance ... the elderly already went home*”. *Maw Phlaeng* negotiated with the audience, so he proposed that he would perform “*Phlaeng Khorat*” first because there was some trouble with the computer playing karaoke. The audience accepted and felt bored, walking back to their seats and waiting. *Maw Phlaeng* started to perform votive *Phlaeng Khorat* again. The atmosphere was silent, but it was the moment that votive *Phlaeng Khorat* presented its most remarkable identity.

For a moment, the drinking *Maw Phlaeng* exploded again. He shouted out that:

“Sit well, the cunt will be out (be careful about *sarong* or skirt will open and show women’s vagina) ... because elder monk (*luang phor*) was very strict. He prayed ... *Winyou...Hee...Ti* (*Hee* has homophone as the word *Hee* in Thai meaning women’s sexual organ)”.

The audience answered with scream of satisfaction. The atmosphere returned to happiness again, especially the joke of matching the monk with women’s sexual organ or matching something signifying sacredness with something signifying obscenity. In the past, the obscenity was a core of traditional *Phlaeng Khorat* but that day *Maw Phlaeng* used it to attract the audience.

However, the complexity of the relation was that though the audience as consumers were less happy with history than obscene story, they willingly accepted the history. Moreover they used it to create awareness about their self-image. They got back to the seats and heard votive *Phlaeng Khorat* telling about the history of themselves as *Khon Khorat* and “grandchildren of *Thao Suranari*”. It could be seen that the history of *Thao Suranari* did not concern anything about obscenity, but when it was placed on the same stage, it helped confirm the co-existence of two world; that

of the mundane and that of the sacred; in other words, that of the locals, and that of the national.

Moreover, the stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in the village is an area of relation management between signs of sacredness and signs of mundane. *Maw Phlaeng* create rationality of this sacredness through the history of the national heroine, but they also present the mundane by citing about sexual organ of women in order to challenge a status of monks and condition of sanctity. These two signs are representatives of feminine quality, but they have opposite meanings. The interaction of *Maw Phlaeng* and the audience reflects an implication of the significance of femininity. They show that people in Thai society today are aware of the classification of feminine gender in two opposite meanings, the ‘respectables’ and the mundane fun-loving.

The mundane responds to emotional expression, while ‘reasons’ imprison both *Maw Phlaeng* and audience behind the rules, and regulations, both in intellectually and physically acts. When *Maw Phlaeng* has to perform their traditional dance, the audiences are back to their seats. But when the stage is opened to show the mundane, it becomes the area of both *Maw Phlaeng* and especially several female audiences dancing in front of the stage. When sacredness is placed on the same stage with the mundane, both worlds intermingled.

At 11.00, the computer used for karaoke was fixed. It is a tool for a couple girls in the villages to go up to the stage to perform karaoke of country songs or *Phlaeng Lukthung*; the stage again belonged to women. Most audience participated in the show with strange dance, and drank alcoholic drinks while some *Maw Phlaeng* became dancers, and gained some tips 10-20 baht from time to time. One *Maw Phlaeng* sat and watched the karaoke show as if he was an audience, not a performer. The atmosphere at the moment was full of fun and disorder.

At 12.15, a male *Maw Phlaeng* who did not drink asked to perform *Phlaeng Khorat* again. It was a sign of the end of the show. He sang a song concerning the blessing for the audience. He sang and pleaded with *Thao Suranari* and *Chao Phor Luang Rach* to promote progress and wealth to the audience, and also asked both

sanctities to protect the audience from any harm. After he finished, other *Maw Phlaeng* also sang blessing songs, and the audience got quietly back to the seats. Some put the hands together to show the acceptance of the blessing, some danced with the blessing songs. The atmosphere returned to pleading of sanctity after releasing themselves of ‘rationality’ and problems.

It was the moment of recognition of the existence of power of traditional institution that helps them overcome the problems in modern society. *Maw Phlaeng* could recite the power of *Thao Suranari* in order to rationalize for the last time that *Phlaeng Khorat* and *Thao Suranari* stay together, so it is the climax of the story because in the middle of the performance votive *Phlaeng Khorat* had to give way to the mundane karaoke computer. However, at the end this story *Maw Phlaeng* twisted the game and made people aware of the importance of “tradition” which is a tool supporting the existence of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* and making it alive.

At 12.28, every *Maw Phlaeng* said good-bye, then quit the stage and got their payment. This is the goal of *Maw Phlaeng* to make an economic earning.

The stage of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in the village allows the expression of feeling for entertainment. There are varieties of performance, both traditional patterns and exciting modern patterns. Moreover, it focuses on dialogical relation of verbal language that *Maw Phlaeng* and the audiences tastefully interact. Furthermore, the audience can have a participation on the stage while *Maw Phlaeng* plays the role of audience and dancers. There is rarely a line between the performers and the audience. However, sometimes *Maw Phlaeng* tries to insist the performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* because it is an important sign of their existence, especially, the chant about the history and sacredness of *Thao Suranari*.

The stage in *Ban Suk Sombun* village reflected the ‘real life’ of the juncture of sacred and mundane world. It suggested the interplay of sacred power to govern and the resistance of the villagers in their mundane lives to disobey. Yet, by the end, all returned to ‘normal’. Everybody went home. The stage was left vacant.



Figure 5.7 Votive *Phlaeng Khorat* was performing at village, *Samaklhee* sub-district, *Wang Nam Khiao* District, 12th April 2014



Figure 5.8 Votive *Maw Phlaeng* were performing *Phleang Khorat Cing* at *Suksombun* village, *Samaklhee* sub-district, *Wang Nam Khiao* District, 12th April 2014

5.5 To Reiterate

Since *Thao Suranari* is created by the state as a sign of good citizenship who obeys the central state, it allows people to express themselves as good citizen. It provides collective memory about the nation created by heroic deeds of citizen. The locality of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, therefore, meets the needs of consumers consuming ancient history in short period. They can consume the detailed and complicated history very quickly. Yet, the city center appears as a ‘plaza of signs’ comprising both of sacred activities and commercial activities.

The stages of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* at *Wat Salaloi* Temple are situated in the middle of a diversity of sacred activities. They are a part of ‘commercial’ transformation of the sacredness into goods like other activities. This sacredness can be exchanged with money. The wooden stages indicate locality and simplicity. Although they are only ten metres from the stupa, they are quite private for *Maw Phlaeng*. They are also shaded by trees, so they are quite peaceful except on a very hot day, or on a day where there are other noisy activities. Comparing to the stages at the monument ground, these stages seem like a refuge from the chaos of the city. Yet it also appears that the temple is a garden of “commercialized sacredness” of competing sacred figures.

Votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in the village is used by local politicians to legitimize their positions, and to create bonds between villagers. However, sometimes villagers used the opportunity of the stage set up to release themselves. The stage becomes a place of contrast between politeness and obscenity, the contrast of order and disorder, and the contrast of moral power and political power. The audience can influence the change of performance structure starting from sanctity and nationalist history to obscenity. Moreover, the audience can also add their part of karaoke show that makes them become performers, while *Maw Phlaeng* are preserving the status of sacredness and history. However, *Maw Phlaeng* sometimes arouse the emotion of the audience with obscenity to the point that people have strong power to change the structure of the performance. Yet, at the end of the performance, *Maw Phlaeng* use the sign of *Thao Suranari* to communicate with the local spirit who can help everyone. It brings them back to the structure of sacredness again; it represents the structure of patron-

client system in rural space where more powerful people can help those who do not have any power. It is not only about exchanging and helping each other, but also a recitation of the power of sacredness amidst the chaos of modern mundane life.



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