

Study for an Approach to Using Ghost Belief as Cultural Capital to Develop Isan Local Communities

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Received: 9 October 2022; Revised: 22 February 2023; Accepted: 2 March 2023

Abstract

"Isan" a unique region in north-east Thailand demonstrates a strong belief in the power of ghosts and spirits. This belief could potentially be embraced to become embodied cultural capital for local communities. This research surveys the current status of Isan ghost belief through the examination of local community rituals in the Tao Ngoi sub-district where 20 rituals have been continuously organising, aiming to discover a direction for the use of ghost belief as cultural capital to develop the economic and cultural aspects of local communities. To approach an overall understanding, a contextual survey, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation are used. Research results show; 1) Isan ghost belief resides deeply in its local people's way of living and is ultimately understood as valuable embodied cultural capital for Isan. This belief appears in two forms; "Tangible and Intangible" and is situated at 3 levels namely; Individual level; where rituals are arranged individually according to personal purposes, Community level; where ghost rituals and ghost-religious related rituals are collectively arranged by local people with a common purpose and Regional level; where rituals are communally-arranged between community. Individual and community level rituals (non-religious related) possess the greatest potential for development as local cultural capital having retained their authenticity, whilst at Regional level less so, due to their transformation from external influences, 2) Isan ghost belief is comprised of 2 components; "Purpose" and "Form", 3) The major factors affecting a decline in ghost-belief include connectivity to the urban and the expansion of Buddhist religion, 4) A three-fold community classification based on ghost belief explicitly; "Untransformed Community", "Transforming Community, and "Transformed Community". The harnessing of ghost belief as cultural capital - and its use in the development of local communities - needs to be carried-out according to these three different community types; 4.1) The "Untransformed Community; should focus on cultivation of ghost belief for future generations by developing a stronger awareness of its cultural heritage amongst its own people. Individual and Community level rituals could be used to convey local cultural essence to anyone seeking a deeper authentic experience through community activities and services, 4.2) "Transforming Community"; its focus should be on ritual at the Individual and Community level, developing continuity between the authentic local and modern urban. Here, Community level rituals, set up by local people could allow outsiders to become ritual participants, touched by involvement with locals through 'homestays' where tourists might experience ghosts in an entirely more intimate way, 4.3) "Transformed Community" should focus on ghost belief at a Regional level through festivals for outsiders to increase cultural value, 5) There are no proper locations for ghost rituals within the 4 communities. A specific place as a centre for ghost belief representation could act as a potential landmark for ghost belief helping it to take root. Thus, with an appropriate method, strategy and mechanism it becomes possible to utilize ghost belief as a cultural capital to develop economy community, whilst still preserving its inherent authenticity.

Keywords: Isan Local Community Development, Embodied Cultural Capital, Level of Ghost and Spirit Belief, Community Classification

Introduction

Isan or the north-eastern region of Thailand has a variety of cultures. This region's cultural diversity – inherited from its ancestors – is still present in its younger generation today. Isan culture continues to believe in intangible, ethereal, spirits and ghosts due to a strong relationship with natural elements such as forests, water, land and soil. Such beliefs are reflected in its way-of-life, particularly through rituals within its communities. This has



manifested as embodied cultural capital, understood as habits or cultural practices based on knowledge and demeanours learnt by being part of a specific group. These qualities create a uniqueness for small local communities, bringing with it a potential for tangible income to drive economy community. However, recent research shows a decline in ghost belief within local communities, revealed as a decrease in ritual participants, the attendance of ghost rituals solely by elders and late adults, and a dilution and transformation in the original purpose of ritual. Such concerns could be addressed through an intensification of ghost belief as cultural value. This research focuses on utilizing the current status of ghost belief – and its accompanying rituals – as embodied cultural capital within Isan local communities. This belief is situated at three levels (Individual, Community and Regional) across 4 communities within the Tao Ngoi sub–district, Sakon Nakorn, Thailand. It aims to establish a direction in which ghost belief can be used as local capital, providing a framework for increasing economic and cultural value. This can be achieved by the grouping of similar cultural capital, which in turn builds opportunities for economic capital (Natsupa & Lertwicha, 1998). The benefit of research findings is to ultimately use ghost belief as a cultural capital, helping discover directions for cultural and economic development within communities such as increasing local income, while maintaining an original sense of local cultural value for the future.

Research Objectives

- 1. To survey the status of ghost belief and its accompanying rituals within Isan's local way-of-life through the examination of 4 communities in the Tao Ngoi sub-district at Sakon Nakorn.
- 2. To discover potential directions for the use of Isan ghost belief as cultural capital to develop economic and cultural advantages from within local communities.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research began with a literature review. Next, four key informants from four communities were interviewed to ascertain a sensitive approach to future field research. The objective of field research was seen as two-fold. Firstly, it attempted to grasp the present status of "ghost belief" within the region as manifested through rituals and ritual production. This was done at 3 levels namely; Individual, Community, and Regional. Secondly, it aimed to discover factors effecting the transformation of local ghost belief in Isan communities. Researchers spent the period from March 2021 to February 2022 undertaking data collection and its analysis. This led to additional exploration and its confirmation from which final conclusions were drawn. Field research was divided into 3 parts; 1) Contextual Survey - to understand overall community characteristics, the current status of ghost belief through the ritual and ritual production in both daily life and at special events, 2) In-depth Informal Interviews with 3 groups of People - conducted with 20 participants using semi-structured/open-ended questions. Interviews were undertaken to grasp local attitudes toward ghost and spirit belief, and opportunities for its use in future community development. The following participants were selected via purposive and non-probability snowball sampling; 12 local people, 4 local philosophers, and 4 local district staff, heads of community, and heads of the district cultural council, 3) Participatory observations of cultural ceremonies and rituals within the four communities - where researchers had the chance to participate in ghost and spirit rituals at Individual, Community and Regional levels.



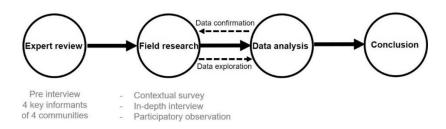


Figure 1 Research Methodology Diagram.

Literature Review

Cultural Capital and Isan's Cultural Capital

Sengpracha (1996) as cited in Srisontisuk (2015) defines culture as the outcome of learning behaviour, social heritage and collective human creativity that improves over time. A local culture has its own uniqueness through different content, form, and roles that reflect a specific way-of-living. Pongsaphit (2004) as cited in Muenjanchoey (2013) divides culture in two ways: firstly, by traditions and beliefs, and secondly by invention and architecture. Throsby (2001) instead defines "cultural capital" as capital which can be embodied and stored within a community, providing cultural value toward economic value. He divides culture into two categories; Tangible and Intangible. These are of central interest to research as it focuses on both tangible (ghost shrines) and intangible (rituals and their processes) phenomena. Bourdieu (1986), first conceptualized the term "cultural capital" to qualify capital derived from the social process, which in turn becomes a personal quality. He classified cultural capital into 3 forms; Embodied state; in the form of long-lasting dispositions of mind and body, Objectified state; in the form of cultural goods, and Institutionalised state; in the form of objectification which must be set apart such as educational qualification. From Bourdieu's point of view, people with the same cultural capital collect a higher social capital. Consequently, higher social capital can then create symbolic capital and in turn progress to economic capital (Wantanasombut, 2019). Ray (2001) as cited in George (2004), divides cultural capital development into; 1) the private family sphere from traditional memory and knowledge, 2) the community sector, and 3) regional revivalist movement. George (2004) states that rural communities have managed to turn cultural events and celebrations into tourist attractions. Other communities tend to embrace a 'museumization' approach, presenting snapshots of historical points-in-time within their community.

"Isan" is the biggest region of Thailand containing a diversity of ethnic groups. It has been an agricultural community from past to present. The Isan region is highly-attached to nature and is reactive to natural cycles. The Isan community has itself expanded from families within the same settlement. Natsupa & Lertwicha (1998) claim that 'family' remains the major relationship allowing people in diverse communities to live together harmoniously. Among community members, elders are the most respected along with local philosophers, monks, and spiritual leaders. A specific characteristic of Isan communities is their freedom from domination. In being located far from central government, communities in this region have tended to define their own way-of-living, setting their own social rules. Isan remains one of the Thai Kingdom's most authentic areas with its own exceptional cultural, musical and culinary traditions (TAT Newsroom, 2017). The most successful cultural capital from Isan is its food (Somtum) and music (Morlum). These examples reflect a persistence in Isan's cultural capital through its nuanced evolution over time, in accordance with social changes. Isan culture is known to be based on informality, amusement, fun, and can be reformed and changed around a core cultural foundation. In this way, local Isan culture endures, even as it undergoes modernization.



Ghost Belief in Isan Culture and Role of Ghost as Isan Cultural Capital

In Isan, ghost belief is tied to the lives of its people from birth to death. The "Su-Kwan ritual" is the earliest ritual encountered, one protecting new-borns from evil spirits and petitioning guardian spirits for protection. The "Boon Khao Pradubdin", is another, enacted towards ancestors to bring benefit to a family's past and future lineage. Yet another, conducted during wedding ceremonies, requests that ancestral spirit-guardians bless the marriage union. When getting sick, Isan people will ask ghost communicators about their illnesses and how to recover from them. Isan agriculture (a common local career) is highly-dependent on natural weather conditions and Isan people believe that ghosts can inspire rain. The "Boon Khunlan" ritual gives respect to rice field guardians, to ensure the good luck required for a high quality and yield of rice. Ghosts thus influence local Isan people in many respects. The usage of the term "Ghosts" should not be understood as spirits of the deceased, but rather refers to local sacred spirits who live in different places such as mountains, forests, rivers, farms etc. These types of belief are likely to have emerged due to Isan's landlocked geography that has historically made it difficult for external cultures and beliefs to enter its indigenous society. Since ancient times, in the absence of such formal religion, Thai people have believed in ghosts, leaning toward the supernatural due their proximity to natural forces (Oranratmanee, 2011). Uitekkeng, Panich, & Laomanacharoen (2021) describe ghosts as being a very important external power, with a duty to enforce social rules so villagers can live in peace. Additionally, Isan ghosts and spirits symbolize a higher power over both nature and the human, and these powers may be applied to inspire both happiness and suffering (Potiwan, 2016). Isan ghosts can be divided into three classes; firstly, a bottom class of evil spirits causing illness; secondly, a middle class of natural guardians and finally; a top-level of community guardians or ancestral spirits. Thongtow & Liamprawat (2020) state that the role of ghost and spirit belief influences four areas of Isan's way of life namely; 1) mental stability, 2) social control, 3) preservation of nature, and 4) entertainment.

Ghost and spirit belief existed prior to the arrival of Buddhism. It was engrained in the Isan peoples' way-oflife and difficult to separate from them. The arrival of Indian religion did however bring great change to Southeast Asia. As these more sophisticated religious structures began to compete with earlier beliefs, new hierarchies that included Brahmins and Buddha began diminishing local ghost belief. The original sanctity of shamans was progressively transferred to priests, whether Brahmins or monks (Jumnian & Pisolyabutr, 2022). This transition remains somewhat incomplete as ghost belief still highly influences social rules such as before the local peoples start doing important activities of their life, they need to inform community's ancestral guardian or when they got sick, the cause of sickness can be diagnosed by the shamans. For instance, Nilkort (2003) as cited in Srisontisuk (2015), explains that the ghost-raising ritual is not only used to pay respect to ancestors, but is a process helping shape Thai society in the current millennium. The 'Phee Ta Khon' in the Dan Sai District is a contemporary wellknown example of an Isan ghost festival. In the past, the Phee Ta Khon festival would have been terrifying with its masks made from natural materials and clothes from old monk robes. However, following the government's invitation to the private sector to promote local festivals to tourists, festivals have been transformed to suit contemporary tourists through flashy colours, modern materials, additional light and sound, and modern music. The previously held 'play' at Phee Ta Khon has become a Phee Ta Khon 'party', losing much sense of originality and local history (Phungpracha, 2005). Regrettably, the important role ghost belief has played in local communities since their settlement appears to be slowly diminishing due to interventions like the expansion of Buddhism, and community transformation through ill-considered economic development. Such poorly-thought-



out developments should be cause for concern. Clearly, a proper mechanism is needed to maintain original ghost belief, one that can reflect local ways-of-living and be used as cultural capital to bridge between the authentic local with the modern urban.

Site Selection for Field Research

The phenomenon of ghost belief can be seen both in local rituals, and the diverse symbols distributed across different locations within communities. Such symbols may typically include a "Pu Ta shrine", symbolizing the natural guardians that many Isan communities place within community forests. Similarly, "Ta Hak shrines" can be found placed within rice crops and humble "Ancestral shelves" are omnipresent in personal rooms where they emanate a protective presence for the family. Current ghost beliefs are therefore highly–diverse and exist to varying degrees at both private and public scales within local communities.

In this regard, the Tao Ngoi sub-district and its diverse communities was chosen as case study. Communities here hold onto ghost belief to varying extents as part of their daily lives. The Tao Ngoi sub-district is composed of seven small rural communities, with a total of 2,108 families, 63.6% of which are adults and elders. Four of its seven communities were chosen as case studies. The site selection criteria composed of 1) Variety of Urban-Local connection, 2) Appearance of ghost belief, and 3) Diversification of ghost belief ritual:

Community A: 'Tao Ngoi Moo 1' is located nearby the district centre, it is a tourist location, easy to access and well-connected to the public. This is where the sub-district temple is located, serving a total of 7 communities, particularly during regional festivals.

Community B: 'Na Ngoi' is a location for social enterprise and has a learning centre operated by KMUTT university. Over half of the people in this community work at Doikam Royal Factory.

Community C: 'Phon Plaloh' is where the Doikam Royal Factory is located and most locals are employed.

Community D: 'South Tao Ngoi' is a community with no specific connection to outsiders as they have their own social enterprise. The major industry of the South Tao Ngoi local people is broom-making. This community is the only community without a temple, possessing instead a house for priests.

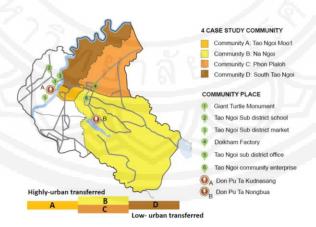


Figure 2 Tao Ngoi Sub-district Map.

At present, all 4 communities engage in ghost rituals. Our research framework focuses on the comparison of rituals within the four communities based on; 1) ritual function, 2) location and duration, 3) symbols of belief, and 4) ritual transformation.



Research Findings

Research shows there are 2 ghost belief components. The first component is "Form of Belief" expressed through tangible or intangible symbols. The second component is "Purpose of Belief", understood as the intention behind local ritual production. Current rituals have evolved according to many different factors such as social changes, involvement of Buddhism in the community, and level of community connection with outsiders. These factors cannot be underestimated for their direct influence on the transformation of ghost rituals in communities. At the moment, observations show that most ritual participants are local elders, while teenagers and kids are few in number. The President of Tao Ngoi cultural council Mr. Charnchai stated that ghost and spirit belief – originally transferred from local ancestors – should be conserved and passed on as cultural inheritance to future generations. At present however, there is the possibility that ghost belief culture is set to progressively decline.

1. Current Ghost Belief Rituals Appearing in All 4 Communities

1.1 Individual Level

Individual Ghost beliefs are integrated into a person's daily routines. They are acknowledged in daily merit making or during 'special occasion' rituals. Belief at the Individual level is expressed through local respect to ghosts and spirits. Below, a selection of rituals from field research are explained and their ritualistic patterns (such as daily merit-making and worship of Ancestral Spirits and Guardians) are elaborated. Isan people believe that ancestral guardians will look after their descendants and that these guardian spirits can be found living in all places. The ritual of paying respect is very simple, occurring through oral prayer and the use of candles and incense. Most homes will possess an ancestral spirit shrine (typically a shelf located on an internal wall). Although this Individual daily ritual is visible in all 4 communities, it is noticeable that in Community A, ancestral shelves have transformed when compared to the other 3 communities, taking on a more Buddhist influence. Here, the overall purpose of belief remains the same but the form of expression has changed from an offering for worship, to a convenient raising of the hands. In the "Making a Vow and Wish" ritual, a community's spiritual communicator or "Jaojum" is required to communicate a wish or a vow to a "Pu Ta", an ancestor's community guardian. If the wish comes true, the ancestral spirit must be given honour for having granted that wish. Today, members of all 4 communities are still highly-attached to this ritual and it can be seen performed by every age level at their respective Pu Ta shrines. In the Tao Ngoi sub-district, two Pu Ta shrines can be found, one at a tourist location and the other at the community forest. When comparing rituals performed at both shrines, the Pu Ta shrine in the tourist area appears to have evolved. It has been transformed into an urban-like ritual, where the position of local Jaojum (ghost communicator) offers an income-generating career secured from tourists. A jaojum is now on daily standby at this Pu Ta shrine, blessing tourists and communicating personal vows to ancestral guardians for a fee. Clearly, when comparing the Pu Ta shrine located in the tourist area to the shrine found at the community forest, the ritual has lost its sacred sense. The "Yao Healing Ritual" is another ritual conducted by locals who still maintain belief in more traditional alternative health treatments. These locals believe that their sicknesses are due to evil spirits residing in their bodies. The ritual itself is conducted from within the home of the person taken-ill. A "Phee Mor" (spirit communicator) is called to connect to ghosts through traditional song, asking to know the cause of sickness. In an research interview Thanchanok, a local previously healed from a serious fever explains that becoming a Phee Mor is dependent on personality. Those healed by Phee Mor give serious consideration to becoming Phee Mor themselves. From observation, each Phee Mor's house will have a ghost shrine in front as a symbol of their belief. Presently, Community D has the highest number of Phee Mor.



The current Yao healing ritual retains a strong similarity to the ritual from the past in both process and equipment. The "Ritual of Offering Sacrifice to the Rice-field Spirits or Ta Hak" is a ritual paying respect to ghosts who take care of rice fields and bless crops to grow well. In their rice fields, local people arrange a ceremony called "Hak Na" conducted at the "Ta Hak" (spirit shrine) located in the centre of a rice crop. Auyporn, a member from Community D explained that farmers need to make merit for Phee Ta Hak before transplanting rice seedlings, typically in June after the harvesting period. This ritual still exists within all 4 communities but happens less frequently (and is often abbreviated). In the past, the Jaojum would conduct the ritual with prayer, offerings, and a vocal 'blessing' to induce the rice to grow well. Over time, this ritual has evolved and is now conducted by rice field owners instead of a ghost communicator. Local "Ta Hak" shrines are informal in form, made from cheap and easy-to-find material such as the zinc of an old bucket. The images in Figure 3 show various Ta Hak shrines with offerings. From research observations, this ritual is performed informally by individuals, at shrines that are informal in form, material, and shape, differentiated by local material and budget.











Figure 3 The Ghost Institution and Symbol of Ghost Belief in Individual Level; Ancestral Shelf, Ghost Shrine, Rice Field Sprit Institution and Local Offering, Respective Symbol of Rice Field Sprit in Rice Barn.

1.2 Community Level

Expression of belief at a Community level is a social norm and collectively arranged by local people with a common purpose. Rituals can be divided into two types namely; a) Ghost rituals related to belief in ghosts, but unrelated to religion, and b) Religious/ghost-related rituals.

Community Level: Ghost Ritual (Non-religious Related)

The Ritual of Offering Sacrifice to a Community's Ancestral Guardian or Lieng Phee Pu Ta

In Thai, "Phee" means ghost. "Pu Ta" means grandpa "Phee Pu Ta" is the name given to community's ancestral spirit acting as guardian for local people in the community. Each year around April, local people will arrange their "Lieng Phee Pu Ta" ritual together. This ritual is a symbol of gratitude from the present generation to their community's ancestral spirits. The ritual is led by "Jaojums". "Don Pu Ta" is the name given to an ancestral spirit's architectural shrine, usually located in the community's forest. The Don Pu Ta shrines found in tourist locations are increasingly evolving and being replaced by urban-style variations. The traditional ritual that once-included the killing of animals have been abolished and transformed to suit a more urban context. In contrast, Don Pu Ta found in community forests still retain a sense of originality through their material, ritual purpose, and environment (surrounded by big trees and close to a swamp). Local people still believe that a sacred community forest is under the protection of Pu Ta. Community forest Don Pu Ta exude a feeling of authenticity. They appear more dilapidated as a surrounding community's daily interaction with them is lessened due to its hard-to-access location. In contrast, field research shows that Don Pu Ta found at tourist locations show many local visitors come to pray daily. A community Pu Ta (grandpa) frequently acts as a medium to communicate the local story to tourists. When placed in tourist locations, the Don Pu Ta – with their standby ghost communicator



hosts – have the advantage of being kept clean and well organised. The cost of this is a loss in sacred disposition and local identity. In this sense, Community D emerges as the most devout community, arranging rituals at both tourist and rural locations.



Figure 4 The Location and Ritual of Offering Sacrifice to Ancestral Community's Guardian or "Lieng Phee Pu Ta".

The Ritual of Offering Sacrifice to Evil Spirits or Lieng Phee Mor Ritual

The 'Lieng Phee Mor' ritual is offered to ghosts causing illness. The ritual is arranged over a two-day period, typically around February and is held annually. Here, people seek blessings for lives without sickness, and for their farming efforts to yield splendid harvests. Field research shows that local people still believe in this alternative remedy. The "Lieng Phee Mor" ceremony is organized by local people in public outdoor areas such as community halls or unoccupied open-air courtyards. From recent observation, the purpose of this ritual remains aligned with the past but its form has changed. Whereas previously the "Phee Mor" invited the collective singing of traditional songs, now stereo players are instead used. This process is similar for all 4 communities. Elders now provide the highest ratio of participants, with few adults and even less teenagers. The ritual's form is informal with no traditional performance patterns. Research shows Community D has the highest number of "Phee Mor" and the highest number of local participants. Amongst all 4 communities, the "Lieng Phee Mor" ritual has no guaranteed location, which differs from the Pu Ta ritual which predominantly has a dedicated place for this annual ritual.



Figure 5 Atmosphere of the Biggest "Lieng Phee Mor Ritual" at Community.

Religious-related Ritual: Heat Sibsong; Twelve Annual Ritual of Isan People

"Heat Sibsong" consists of twelve well-established annual rituals for Isan people to practice and follow. These rituals are normally performed by communities more-connected to Buddhism. Beliefs related to ghosts now remain few in the community (Natsupa & Lertwicha, 1998). Heat Sibsong rituals related to ghost belief include Boon Kun Lan (January); Boon Khao Jee, and Boon Kong Khao (February); Boon Khao Pradubdin



(August) and; Boon Kao Sak (September). This tradition is an opportunity to encourage community members and families to make merit together. Heat Sibsong rituals are typically arranged in temples with monks as ritual leaders (although in some instances Brahmins are used). To participate, locals will dress-up in traditional formal-style clothing. In a recent research interview, Auyporn, a local community member explained "In the past, locals in all four communities arranged Heat Sibsong rituals for every month of the year. Now, rituals are grouped together in substantial monthly enactments for greater convenience". In a consecutive interview, Grandma Khum explains how the "Boon Kun Lan" was a ritual enacted at a Community level. The ritual was the first ceremony occurring after harvest and was arranged in the threshing area adjacent to a personal house or in rice fields. On the day of the ritual, she would invite a monk to bless the first rice yield after being placed in the rice barn. Where previously this community ritual proved popular, now only few families in the community undertake it. The "Boon Khao Jee and Boon Kong Khao" rituals involve paying respect to rice-field guardians. Taking two days to arrange, the interesting point of this rituals are the harmonious intersection of beliefs involved. Buddhism, Brahmins and ghost belief is coordinated to execute different parts of a singular ritual. On the day of The Boon Khao Jee ritual, earlyon in the morning, local men begin hitting zinc buckets loudly, walking and wailing in the 4 cardinal directions to symbolically drive away evil spirits from their community. Brahmins initiate a ritual blessing of the rice sack mountain, brought to the temple the night before by locals, and monks bless local community members in the chapel before going to bless the four entrance and exit points of the community. The ritual further engenders the cooperation of local men and women, using men to drive-out ghosts, and women to cook sticky rice coated with egg to bring to monks as an offering. From research observation, this ritual continues to be strictly adhered to by all four communities, exemplifying the historic connections between a local community's ghost belief with Buddhist religious principles. This is different from the "Boon Khaopradubdin and Boon Khaosak" rituals enacted for ancestral spirits. Ordinarily, "Boon Khaopradubdin" is organized 15 days prior to "Boon Khaosak". On the day of the ritual day, locals make small rice containers and place them around a temple fence, in essence making an offering of food to their spiritual relatives. For Boon Khaosak, respect is bestowed upon ancestral spirits by writing their names bits of paper and giving it to a monk for blessing. These rituals are arranged in the temple hall with a monk designated as ritual leader. Again, all four communities follow these rituals.



Figure 6 Boon Khun Lan, Boon Khao Jee, Boon Khao Pradubdin Ritual.

From the field research community, A, B, & C each have their own community temple while Community D instead possesses a house for priests used for religious purposes. The community temples are not only considered places in which to hold religious ceremonies, but also as locations for major social activities. According to a research interview with local community Uncle Boonyoung "the temple is the centre of important rituals such as Heat Sibsong, but also a major place for other community social activities". Normally, ghost and



religious rituals are arranged apart (ghost rituals are not typically allowed to occur in temples). Only the Heat Sibsong rituals, through their relation to a family's ancestral spirit, are allowed to take place in temple areas. Although many Isan communities were originally defined by ghost belief, in due course, Buddhism has begun to play a greater role in local communities. Today, some ghost beliefs remain embedded within Buddhist ceremonies. Local ghost rituals have thus been transformed and embedded as part of more formal religious rituals.

1.3 Regional Level

Regional level rituals are communally-arranged between community with fixed dates and duration. From field research only one regional level ritual is found among 4 communities.

Illuminated-boat Procession, the Biggest Festival in the Tao Ngoi Sub District

This festival has been upheld by local communities for over 100 years. In the past, its objective was to express forgiveness to the spiritual water guardian. However, it has now spiralled into a regional festival, and the purpose and form of its rituals no longer carry the same meaning. During the festival, two kinds of illuminated-boat procession are celebrated; firstly a 'land-route' boat, and secondly a more traditional 'water-route' boat. To build the boats for these routes, the traditional wisdom and skill of Isan locals is needed. Pasinee, a member of a nearby community told researchers that prior to the festival, local people will begin preparing their own illuminated boat. They divide the many tasks according to the expertise available and together decorate their illuminated boat in preparation for the event competition. On festival day, the procession offers a way for people to show their different community identities to others through traditional dance and music. The festival is very well-known at the Regional level with up to ten communities combining to arrange the festival and all its land and water routes. The event has gradually evolved to include more social and business activities, allowing local people to both meet-up and generate income between themselves. Regrettably, field research shows that the younger generation know relatively little about the background and history of this festival and its rituals. For this current generation, the festival simply serves as entertainment, a chance to enjoy a temple fair and sounds of modern music.

2. Summarizing the Level of Belief, Rituals, and Ritual Details within the 4 Communities

The figure below provides a summary of field research, demonstrating the level of belief, rituals and ritual details within each community. This figure can be used as a tool to help classify communities and contribute to a direction for the utilisation of Isan ghost belief as community cultural capital.

			w		X	. /	Current of a	ghost belief	ritual appea	r in 4 com	munities			//		
							-64	Community level					/ /	Regional		
Ritual			Individual level							Ghost ritual (Non-religious related ritual)			Religious-related ritual (Heat Sibsong)			level
Commun		Community	New born ritual	Wedding ritual	Making merit ritual	Make a vow and make a wish	Yao for healing	Hak Na	Boon Kun Lan	Liang Pu Ta Kudnasang	Liang Pu Ta Nong Bua	Liang Phee Mor	Boon Khao Jee and Boon Kong Khao	Boon Khao Pradubdin	Boon Khao Sak	Illuminated boat procession
Appearance of ghost in	community	Community A	x	х	x	x	x	х		X		x	x	x	х	x
		Community B	x	x	x	x	x	х			x	x	x	x	х	x
		Community C	x	x	x	x	x	х	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
		Community D	x	x	x	x	X	x	x	x	x	X	x	x	x	x
		Ritual Location	House	House	House	Don	House	Rice	House	Don	Don	Outdoor area,	Temple	Temple	Temple	Sub-
Ghost ritual detail						Pu Ta		field	Rice	Pu Ta	Pu Ta	City hall	Junction			district
									field			(community)	Road			space
ritua		Ritual Duration	←	No fixed dat	e and durati	on/ daily	→	Jun.	Dec	Apr.	Apr.	Feb.	Feb.	Aug.	Sep.	Sep.
ost 1									Jan.							
g		Ritual Host	Personal	Personal	Personal	Personal	Personal	Personal	Personal	Comn	nunity	Community	Community	Community	Community	Regional

Figure 7 Summarization of Current Community Rituals from Field Research.



2.1 Community Classification: "Untransformed Community, Transforming Community and Transformed Community"

"Community D: Untransformed Community" is the community with the highest level of ghost belief. This community still conveys ghost rituals at all levels (Individual, Community and Regional) and follows the original purposes of the rituals. Community D is the only community that still arranges a "Lieng Phee Pu Ta" ritual in more than one location. Furthermore, this community has the highest number of "Phee Mor", the largest scale of "Lieng Phee Mor" rituals and highest number of personal ghost shrine within houses. From an analysis of its physical environment, Community D has a lower level of urban connection due to keeping its social and business enterprises internal to the community. By demonstrating the highest intensity of ghost belief and fidelity to original rituals (than all other communities) community D is representative of an "Untransformed' community".

"Community B & Community C: Transforming Community" both possess an intermediate level of ghost belief. They still convey ghost rituals at all levels but not at large scales as with Community D. These two communities have a similar number of Phee Mor and the scale of their Lieng Phee Mor ritual does not significantly differ. Their Lieng Phee Pu Ta ritual at the community forest still convey some sense of originality in both ritual and process. An analysis of their proximity to the urban does however reveal they are undergoing transition from a dynamic influx and outflow of people due to the presence of KMUTT learning centre and DoiKam factory.

"Community A: Transformed Community" contains a regional tourist location and has a sub-district temple where regional religious events are set-up. This community is the only one to arrange a "Lieng Phee Pu Ta" ritual at a Don Pu Ta within a tourist location. Such exposure has influenced significant and more rapid transformation in all its rituals giving rise to the main theme of research.

2.2 "Form and Purpose" of Ritual as an Indicator of Ghost Belief Evolvement and Transformation

Research reveals two ghost belief components; "purpose" and "form". The 'form' of ghost belief is shown to evolve according to social changes, and modernization. 'Form' is considered unfixed, changeable and informal. It is because of these characteristics that ghost belief still remains today. It is manifested in both tangible (i.e. shrine) and intangible (i.e. ritual) forms. Regarding 'purpose' of belief, research results show that of the 3 levels (Individual, Community, Regional) the Regional level is the only one in which purpose of belief has changed. Typically, the purpose of ritual at the first two levels (Individual & Community) was to express local gratitude and respect to ghosts and ancestral spirits. This is mentally entrenched in Isan locals and can be understood as valuable local cultural capital. Regional level rituals were developed later, taking the form of festivals; the purpose of which has changed to focus on tourism, and not local living at all.

Clearly, the use of ghost belief as cultural capital in community development cannot be the same for all communities, but will depend on community type for a customized solution. From the analysis of belief and community type, it is possible to conclude directions for the application of ghost belief as shown in figure below

_												
Localization		Community type Level of belief	Individual level	Community level	Regional level		Culture					
_		Untransformed community										
rbanization		Transforming community					mic					
Urban	ļ	Transformed community	-			1	Econo					

Figure 8 The Possibility of Using Ghost Belief as Cultural Capital for the Development of Different Community Types.



2.3 The Direction of Using Ghost Belief for Community Development

The diagram above shows the possibility of using ghost belief as cultural capital for economy community development within different community types. Its use for community development is as follows:

- Untransformed community should reflect on increasing awareness of its authentic ghost belief culture to its younger generation and upcoming generations at Individual and Community level for gradually cultural evolvement and the succession of the ghost belief within the community.
- Transforming community should reflect on developing greater continuity between the authentic local past and modern future i.e. preserving local culture but shaping it to facilitate future urban development. Ghost ritual could potentially be matured at both Individual and Community level to deliver local experience to outsiders and possibly develop for Regional level that can contribute cultural and economic value for community.
- Transformed community should primarily think about increasing the cultural utilisation of ghost belief for Regional level festivals to understand and appreciate the local community history in addition to enjoyment.

Discussion

Cultural capital has an evolving relationship with people, land, and the cosmos and contributes a uniqueness to ways-of-living. Bourdieu (1986) refers to embodied cultural capital as a state of mind/body such as thought and belief. Research shows that Isan's own embodied cultural capital can be found in its ghost and spirit belief. This is reflected in both tangible and intangible forms as seen in Throsby (2001) and Pongsaphit (2004) as cited in Muenjanchoey (2013). Embodied cultural capital requires time to accumulate, be transmitted, and reproduced. Research however indicates that ghost belief is currently in decline. This is evident in the diminution in ritualparticipant numbers, and the overall abolishment of some rituals. The penetration of Buddhism into local communities continues to prompt social change. Still other external influences on communities lend a modernizing sense, a new 'urban' way-of-living that is arguably positive. Ray (2001) as cited in George (2004), shows that enacted at 3 levels namely Individual, Community and Regional. Research shows that ghost belief is comprised of two components, "Purpose" and "Form". From analysis of the components of belief, Regional level rituals show the highest level of transformation in both purpose and form. Transformation has tended toward a formality of ritual, less-faithfully communicating the significance of ghost belief during their enactment as shown in the Illumination Boat Procession festival. George (2004) states that rural communities turn cultural events into tourist attractions. In addition, the religious-related Community level rituals - such as Heat Sibsong - have also undergone high amounts of change from the expansion of Buddhism religion. This differs from Community level rituals which are organised by locals and remain original and faithful to reflecting a community history. This condition was exemplified by the Lieng Phee Pu Ta and Lieng Phee Mor rituals in Community D, which when performed without any tourists or outsiders, retained greater authenticity. The community simply performed this traditional ritual for their own purpose, not for show. Such rituals, arranged in a local style, place emphasis on local participation. Furthermore, the Lieng Phee Pu Ta has a dedicated place for its staging, but there is no such specific location for the Lieng Phee Mor ritual. Identifying a permanent ghost belief location especially for Community level ritual, one wholly separate from temple and religious places could provide a community ghost-belief landmark which can increasingly added local ghost belief value in community. With the analysis of belief components (form and purpose) it is possible to categorize local communities into 3 types: Untransformed community (Community D) - with the highest cultural capital value; Transforming community (Community B & C) - with an intermediate



cultural capital value; and Transformed community (Community A) - with the lowest cultural capital value. Kaewkamon, Thaotong, Rosruen, Pechchan, Ratanasupa, & Phutiariyawat (2021) referring to (Munkong, 2017) demonstrates that many communities are presently evolving their own cultural capital within their communities, transforming it into various economic, social and environmental assets. If cultural capital can be fully-utilized, it will create value for the economy and society, which will lead to sustainable community development. Chopyot (2019) refers to the potential for Isan to use local history for community development considering it through 4 aspects namely: 1) contribution to local awareness, 2) the fight against state power and external capital, 3) expansion of local tourism, and 4) elevation of local education. These topics can be used as a scaffold to frame a direction for ghost belief as cultural capital in relation to 3 types of communities: 1) "Untransformed community" where the use of ghost belief as cultural capital should be concerned with its potential to cultivate value through local awareness, especially at Individual and Community levels. This could engage a new generation of local people such as local schools at Ban Had, Khon Kaen Province, an example where creating an awareness in locality was achieved by giving students a chance to learn and become aware of where they come from (Chopyot, 2019). At the same time, the community should aim to engage specific groups of people interested in cultural study. They could support intimate and authentic experiences of ghost culture (experienced from within the local people's way of life) through activities and services such as life shadowing or deep cultural study with local hosts, 2) "Transforming community" focus should be on ritual at the Individual and Community level with a strategy to turn any contact with the urban to its advantage. In this sense, it would use ghost belief as capital to raise income for locals. With Community level rituals set-up by local people, a potential to create activities for outsiders as ritual participants exists. In this way, such outsiders could come into direct contact with local people such as at "Lieng Phee Mor" and "Lieng Phee Puta" rituals. These can be celebrated as larger-scale rituals in the community. Local ghost belief and accompanying rituals could be presented in ways that preserve authenticity, yet are sufficiently-simplified to be transformed into cultural capital like 'homestays', where tourists might experience spirits and ghosts in an entirely more intimate and personal way, 3) "Transformed community" has changed to the extent that almost no original ghost-belief structures remain. Regional level has the highest potential for development as cultural capital. However, it is being used primarily for economic development, rather than cultural development (as seen with the illuminating boat procession festival). It appears that ghost rituals are being transformed into festivals, and in doing so lose almost all sense of local history. These artificial versions simply do not convey the value of essential cultural capital, available from within a community. The direction of development for this community type should thus aim to deepen an understanding of its local cultural value, whilst maintaining economic value through its festivals aimed at intensifying tourism.

At present, ghost belief is in decline and is soon-likely to disappear. This assertion can be corroborated by the overall fewer numbers of community rituals being arranged and the decreasing number of participants present in community B and C. To counteract this trajectory, the installation of a ghost belief landmark could provide a symbol to highlight the importance of ghost belief in local communities. In addition, research shows no specific place dedicated to the set-up of local ghost rituals. A dedicated location would create a separation of ghost ritual from religious ritual, highlighting its importance as a community core asset. A location for ghost ritual performance – possibly the local sacred space of a Don Pu Ta near a community forest – could collect scattered ghost-belief rituals, centralizing them at a singular location. Such actions will elevate the value of ghost belief in local communities and retain a more faithful representation of authentic Isan culture.



Conclusion

Ghost belief is a valuable cultural capital at the core of the Isan way-of-life. Field research into the current status of ghost belief in 4 communities concluded that ghost belief still appears within small local communities of the Isan region at 3 levels specifically; Individual, Community and Regional. The appearance of Isan ghost belief ritual in 4 aspects 1) ritual function, 2) location and duration, 3) symbol of belief, and 4) ritual transformation lead to potentially study to develop the cultural capital within local communities in different scale. However, utilising ghost belief as cultural capital and evolving it for use within small local communities cannot be done in a blanket manner but requires customization according to 3 types of community; Untransformed, Transforming and Transformed community. Further investigation is required and should include: 1) The development of assessment tools to evaluate the community type and methodology for choosing current ghost belief rituals with potential for development as cultural capital within communities, 2) The study of other criteria related to the use of ghost belief for local community development. Particular attention should be placed on the community readiness of local people, the community environment, accessibility, the community supportive system etc. Such studies could be applied as part of a community assessment process, 3) The contribution of local community development guidelines from ghost belief cultural capital. With the appropriate strategy, local communities could present their local ghost belief and accompanying rituals in ways that preserve a strong sense of authenticity, yet are sufficientlysimplified to be transformed into cultural capital.

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