

Acting Out: Thai American Buddhists Encounters with White Privilege and White Supremacy

Jonathan H. X. Lee, Ph.D.¹
San Francisco State University
Department of Asian American Studies

This article examines Thai American Buddhist communities and their expressions in the United States. Anchored in ethnographic data, it takes a socio-historical approach. Asian Buddhist communities have encountered xenophobia, American white ethnocentrism, Orientalism, and cultural imperialism, which have directly and indirectly transformed the shapes and contours of Buddhist communities and their practices in America. The expressions of Buddhism by Asian American Buddhists are unlike those found in Asia. This is not to suggest that there is a loss or a gain; rather, it highlights the flexibility and adaptability of Buddhism to conform to American society. This is not new in the history of Buddhism. New forms of Buddhism, new ways of passing, transmitting, and teaching the dhamma develop over time and in different locations. Examining these locations, both historically and in contemporary life, reveals the complexity of social relationships among various Asian, Buddhist, and non-Asian, non-Buddhist communities. Due to historical, political, economic, and social conditions, Asian Buddhist communities have encountered and have resolved different forms of racial discrimination in different ways — for better or worse, successfully or unsuccessfully. Two interlocking questions are examined in this article: How can Thai American Buddhist communities in the United States teach, live, and practice the dhamma harmoniously with neighboring communities of different ethnic backgrounds and faith traditions? How have Thai American Buddhists negotiated their encounters with expressions of white privilege — subtle and unambiguous — that sustains the ideology of white supremacy?

Introduction

Melvin Urofsky counters the popular common understanding that the freedom of religion is a Constitutional guarantee that began with the birth of the United States. Urofsky argues that the pilgrims came to America to practice their religion freely, “*not to allow other groups, which they believed to be in error, to worship as well.*”² Religious tolerance, Urofsky asserts, is an epiphenomenon. “The colonies and later the country first developed religious toleration and then freedom not because particular sects stopped believing they alone knew the true word of God, but because so many different groups came in search of a better life.”³ As such, the new frontier became more diverse and it became necessary for people to learn to live with one another peacefully; thus, they “learned tolerance as a necessity, and then turned it into a virtue.”⁴ The necessity and virtue of tolerance requires constant work to sustain it. Americans by-and-large subscribe to the idea that the individual has the right to choose his/her beliefs and practices, and that

¹ Jonathan H. X. Lee is Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University. Lee’s research interests are in contemporary Chinese religions in ‘cultural China,’ material and visual religion, postcolonial studies, Asian American religious studies, and Asian and Asian American folklore. Lee is co-editor of Greenwood/ABC-CLIO’s *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife* (2011); and author of Kendall & Hunt’s *Cambodian American Experiences: Histories, Communities, Cultures, and Identities* (2010).

² Melvin L. Urofsky, *Religious Freedom: Rights and Liberties under the Law* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

government has no business interfering with religious matters. A cursory examination of the interplay between religion and politics in the United States would indicate that it is not absolute. An underlying assumption of the freedom of religion clause is that individuals can practice their religion — as long as it is a Judeo-Christian variant. The religious landscape in America privileges Christianity; the racial landscape privileges white individuals. The intersection of race and religion here creates what Peggy McIntosh describes as the socio-cultural phenomenon of “white privilege.”⁵ White privilege includes mundane quotidian effects, for example: the accessibility of being around other white people, the ability to rent or buy a house in any neighborhood that one can afford, and the freedom to go shopping at any time and be assured that one will not be followed or harassed.⁶ McIntosh directs our attention to a subtle aspect of racism as being not mere individual acts of “meanness” but rather, as “invisible systems of conferring dominance on my [white] group.”⁷ Since racial order is nested in a socio-political hierarchy that privileges white, Christian, male individuals and social groups, white privilege is inherently religious. Joseph Cheah describes white privilege in terms of an ideology of white supremacy, which he defines as “a hegemonic understanding, on the part of both whites and non-whites, that white Euro-American culture, values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices are the norm according to which other cultures and social practices are judged.”⁸ Cheah’s insights are useful for how we understand race relations in the United States. White privilege does not replicate itself, but rather, is in a dialectical relationship with non-whites who also play a part in replicating white privilege, albeit implicitly and, perhaps, unconsciously. White privilege and the ideology of white supremacy are expressively written in movements that oppose the building of Asian religious temples in America. There are many cases of white majority neighbors that mobilize in an effort to stop the building of Asian religious temples in “their” communities. This article seeks to unpack their coded messages and reveal their underlying expressions of white privilege embedded in, and informed by, an ideology of white supremacy.

Building Asian Religious Temples in America

There is a plethora of cases of white majority residents who mobilize against the construction of an Asian religious temple in “their” neighborhoods. The largest Chinese Buddhist monastery in North America, the Hsi Lai Si (西來寺 Coming West Temple) began construction in 1986, although the land had been purchased in 1978. The temple was completed in 1988. White Euro-American residents opposed the construction of the temple, citing that it would not fit in with the landscape of residential single-family homes, would increase traffic and noise, and would be a “jarringly inappropriate cultural presence.”⁹ Residents opposing the construction of the temple cited traffic as their greatest concern.¹⁰ Opponents problematically acted out of ignorance as illustrated by their erroneous fear of animal sacrifices. Their list of complaints illustrates that they knew nothing about Buddhist beliefs and practices.¹¹ Irene Lin notes:

⁵ Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, 1988.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Joseph Cheah, *Negotiating Race and Religion in American Buddhism: Burmese Buddhism in California*. Unpublished dissertation (Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, 2004), 1.

⁹ Irene Lin, *Journey to the Far West: Chinese Buddhism in America*. *Amerasia Journal* 22:1 (1996): 110.

¹⁰ Mayerene Baker, *Buddhist Vision of Temple Complex Clashes with Real World*. *Los Angeles Times* (February 21, 1982).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Other concerns resulted from the community's misunderstanding of Buddhism and Chinese culture, including noise from chanting of sutras, gongs, and firecrackers; the "adverse influence" on the youth resulting from the unfamiliar clothing of Buddhist monks and nuns; the unfounded fear of animal sacrifices on the temple site (and thus the fear for neighborhood dogs because "the Chinese all eat dog meat"); and the worry that the children might be entrapped by the new "religious cult."¹²

After six public hearings and more than one hundred meetings, the Hacienda Heights City council granted Hsi Lai Temple a construction permit. In the process, Hsi Lai Temple made several concessions, agreeing to: eliminate the pagoda and Buddha statue; restrict building height to only two stories; reduce the number of buildings (15 buildings were eliminated); and to reduce the overall size by 15,000 square feet.¹³ Additionally, Hsi Lai Temple agreed to change the color of the roof and the buildings, taking extra measures to decrease fire risk from incense, and limiting its parking spaces to prevent too many people from attending the temple at once.¹⁴ Today, the Hsi Lai Temple encompasses 15 acres and a floor area of 102,432 square feet. The temple's Ming Dynasty (1268–1644 C.E.) and Ching Dynasty (1644–1911 C.E.) architecture is faithful to the traditional style of buildings, gardens, and statuary of traditional ancient Chinese monasteries, but not as brightly colored or opulent.

A little more than a decade later, the Sikh community of San Jose, California faced similar racially-charged objections against their efforts to build a new *gurdwara*, Sikh temple, on a 40-acre apricot orchard it had purchased. Similar to Hsi Lai Temple's experience, the Sikh community purchased land in an affluent rural community (i.e., San Jose's Evergreen foothills). The predominantly white neighborhood perceived the *gurdwara* as a "threat."¹⁵ The opponents dubbed the temple the "Taj Mahal of the West" and cited concerns about increased traffic and the size of the giant onion-domed temple as their primary reasons for opposing the construction.¹⁶ Flyers with inflammatory statements such as, "A church the size of K-Mart is coming to the neighborhood, and it will create major traffic problems!" appeared throughout the community during the days leading up to the hearing.¹⁷ Opponents cited five reasons for objecting to the *gurdwara*: increase in traffic, noise from the temple, the architecture would not fit into the neighborhood landscape, the temple would be too large and would obstruct the view of the natural surroundings, and tourists would flood the area because of the novelty of the new *gurdwara*.¹⁸ "In order to accommodate their neighbors, the Sikhs had already agreed to putting a cap of 1500 people in the facility at any one time, as well as accepting restrictions on the operating hours of the *gurdwara*. In fact, no other site of worship in San Jose has any such strictures on time of services or size of congregation applied to it."¹⁹

Opponents claimed their opposition was not on the basis of race or religious intolerance. But, the Sikh community experienced it differently and viewed it as a "subtle" form of racism. "This constant shifting of grievances and proffering of new

¹² Lin, 110.

¹³ Jack Birkinshaw, Buddhist Temple Gets OK to Build. *Los Angeles Times* (June 2, 1983); and Baker.

¹⁴ Lin, 110.

¹⁵ Jaideep Singh, The Racialization of Minoritized Religious Identity: Constructing Sacred Sites at the Intersection of White and Christian Supremacy. Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard, eds. *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 90.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 91.

¹⁸ Ibid, 92.

¹⁹ Ibid.

complaints once previous claims had been assuaged, manifests a powerful indictment of some members of the opposition. Their true dissatisfaction obviously lay in areas other than the ostensible objections they mouthed — and repeatedly changed.”²⁰ During the city’s final approval meeting some opponents outwardly declared, “We don’t want it in *our* neighborhood.”²¹ “Nevertheless, the progressive political atmosphere in the region, as well as the general emphasis on supporting diversity by city officials and numerous faith-based community leaders, became a tremendous boon to the Sikh community as they sought support for the *gurdwara* project from non-Sikh members of the community.”²² Since the 1960s, other Asian American communities have experienced and encountered similar expressions of white privilege that maintains an ideology of white supremacy.

The growth of Theravada Buddhist temples throughout the United States centered along the east and west coasts during the early 1970s. Sri Lankan and Thai Buddhist temples were the first to be established, with a concentration in California. “By the end of the 1970s, Theravada Buddhist centers had been established or initiated by Sri Lankans, Thais, Burmese, Cambodians, Laotians, and native-born Americans in the United States, and a native-born American had received higher Buddhist ordination on American soil.”²³ This growth was punctuated by encounters with racism as witnessed by Cambodians and Laotians, as well as by subtler expressions of racism and white privilege anchored in an ideology of white supremacy.

Building Theravada Buddhist Temple in America

The 1970s have been described as a decade of *stagflation*, an unprecedented mixture of double-digit unemployment and inflation rates.²⁴ These economic conditions impacted how Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees were received in the wake of the Fall of Saigon in April 1975. Theravadian Buddhist temple building comes with a backlash from xenophobic neighbors who — under the guise of zoning laws and regulations — invoke their privilege supported by the ideology of white supremacy in attempts to stop the building of temples in their neighborhoods, as evidenced by an example in Silver Spring, Maryland, where, in 2008, neighbors counted cars and kept detailed records and photos of people visiting the temple during festival celebrations. The Maryland State Supreme Court denied the group, then known as the Khmer Buddhist Society, a permit to build a temple on Newtown Hilltop. Afterwards, the Newtown Zoning Board presented the Khmer Buddhist Society with an order to “cease all religious services and festivals permanently.”²⁵ In the late 1980s Laotian refugees in Rockford, Illinois, a rural blue-collar town, faced extreme violence in their attempt to build a temple on a small farmstead on the outskirts of town. The Laotian temple was the target of a firebomb and drive-by rifle fire. Although Burmese Buddhist communities have not received the level of opposition with respects to their establishment of religious temples, the Alohtaw Pyayt Dhamma Yeiktha (APDY) in the City of El Sobrante, California, received complaints from its predominantly white neighbors soon after the home temple was established on November 1998.²⁶ Joseph Cheah notes that members of the Burmese Buddhist community “received complaints from the city that there were ‘weird’

²⁰ Ibid, 94.

²¹ Ibid, 92, emphasis added.

²² Ibid, 90.

²³ Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 32.

²⁴ Michael C. LeMay, *U.S. Immigration: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), xv.

²⁵ Elizabeth Hamilton, A Battle Over Rites and Rights. *Hartford Courant* (July 19, 2008).

²⁶ Cheah, 181.

gatherings of people there and they were cultish.”²⁷ Here again, neighbors complained about noise, traffic, and parking. “Because most residents would declaim that they possess any discriminatory sentiment or religious bias against the presence of a non-Christian place of worship in their neighborhood, the words ‘traffic’ and ‘noise’ have, at times, become *code words for covert racism*.”²⁸

Unlike their Cambodian and Laotian neighbors, Thai Americans did not come to the United States as refugees. The first settlements of Thai immigrants did not appear until the late 1960s, immigrating to America for many different reasons. Thai migration to the United States was fueled in the 1960s and 1970s by Thailand’s social and political upheaval in combination with changes in U.S. immigration policy that lifted the ban on immigration from Asia. The *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965* also established a preference for skilled labor. Therefore, the first wave of Thai immigrants primarily consisted of doctors, nurses, and other white-collar professionals.²⁹ In particular, a shortage of nurses in the United States drew large numbers of Thai immigrants. In the late 1960s the American government began to give a warm welcome to Thai nurses by offering green cards to them right upon their landing on American soil. Additionally, an increased number of Thai students immigrated for educational purposes, although that goal was not achieved as easily as expected. Thai exchange students faced financial hardships and unexpected scholastic demands were compounded by language problems that made successful completion of a degree impossible. Those who dropped out did not return to Thailand, but instead, found unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. Later, when their student visas expired, many petitioned for a change of status to permanent resident. Since the passage of the *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1984*, a change in status became nearly impossible. Further, another group of Thai immigrants came as wives of U.S. service personnel stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam War. Similar to immigrants from other parts of the world, Thai immigrants brought their religion and religious institutions with them. The growing number of Thai temples throughout the United States attests to the growing presence of Thai Americans. “Today 105 *wats* can be found scattered throughout North America in 32 states, including six temples in Canada.”³⁰ Nearly 30 percent of the temples are located in California.³¹

The formation of Thai Buddhism in America unfolded in two phases. Initially it was a top-down formation that was spearheaded by royal, ecclesial, and civil authorities in Thailand, who in the mid 1950s and 1960s sought to expand Thai Buddhism beyond its geographical and national borders.³² During this period, Thailand envisioned itself as a “world center of Buddhism.” As such, it funded the development of the first transnational Thai temples under royal patronage in India in 1959, with the construction of Wat Thai Buddha-Gaya, then in the United Kingdom in 1965, with Wat Buddhapadipa. There were also plans to construct a Thai temple in New York’s Staten Island, but the plan was aborted due to complications, while simultaneously a group of Thai immigrants and American-born Buddhists successfully formed the Buddhist Study Center in New York as a legal entity in 1965.³³ This event, followed by the 1972 establishment of the first and largest Thai temple in Los Angeles, foreshadowed a new bottom-up, lay-centered

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, emphasis added.

²⁹ Susan Aurebach, 1994, cited in Jenjira Yahirun, Thai Immigrants. Ronald H. Bayor, ed. *Multicultural America: An Encyclopedia of the Newest Americans* Volume 4 (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 2105.

³⁰ Todd LeRoy Perreria, Thai Americans: Religion. Jonathan H. X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau, eds. *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 1110.

³¹ Thai Temples in North America <http://www.dharmnet.org/Dir/thai-wat.html> (last accessed September 9, 2011).

³² Perreria, 2011, 1110.

³³ Ibid.

approach in the institutionalization of Thai Buddhism in the United States. “In June 1971 a mission of Thai monks led by Ven. Phra Dharmakosajarn arrived in Los Angeles, and lay people began to raise funds to purchase land. In 1972, land was donated and construction began on a main hall, a two-story Thai-style building that was completed and dedicated in 1979.”³⁴ The bottom-up approach maintained close links with Thai royalty and high-ranking civil servants, but was financed and led by the growing Thai immigrant population in America. Wendy Cadge notes, “Buddha images for the shrine hall and two sets of scriptures were carried to the United States by monks and lay people from Thailand, and in 1979 His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen of Thailand presided over the casting of the principal Buddha image for the temple at Wat Po (officially called Wat Phra Chetuphon, or the Monastery of the Reclining Buddha) in Thailand.”³⁵ Throughout the 1970s Thai immigrants established Thai temples in several metropolitan areas: Washington D.C., Chicago, Denver, and San Francisco. This growth in the United States necessitated the formation of the Council of Thai Bhikkhus to act as liaison for the missionary monks that were coming from Thailand to serve the growing community; the Council was established in 1977.³⁶ Cadge describes the general process of Thai temple building from the bottom-up approach:

Most Thai temples followed similar patterns in their development. A group of lay people in a given city who were interested in building a temple first formed a committee to consider the issues involved. They often sought advice from the monks at Wat Thai L.A. or Wat Thai Washington, D.C., or from monks that they knew in Thailand. Often a monk came to the area to visit and meet with people, and then the committee started to collect donations from Thai people in the area. An apartment or single-family house would be rented or purchased and monks would take up residence, normally from Thailand rather than from another temple in the United States. Many temples remain in these original buildings now, while others, particularly those that continued to accumulate financial resources, purchased new buildings or land and often began to build Thai-style buildings.... Some temples, like Wat Phrasriratanaram Buddhist Temple of St. Louis, moved into existing buildings, in this case a former Assemblies of God church. In many cases, the traditional rules regarding the construction of temples were amended slightly, for example, when portions of temples normally housed in separate buildings in Thailand were combined for reasons of cost or practicality. The distinctions between commercial and residential zoning were particularly challenging for many Thai and other Asian temples, and many had to relocate to areas zoned for religious gatherings.³⁷

Because the majority of Thais in Thailand, America, and within the Thai diaspora are mainly Buddhist, Buddhist rituals and beliefs are key to being Thai in America. In Buddhist custom, people can go to a temple any day to offer food to the monk(s), as a part of religious practice called *thumbun*, literally meaning making merit. Buddhist monks (and nuns) are the most serious Buddhist learners and practitioners, providing a role model of Buddhism for the common people. In addition to conducting Buddhist rituals, monks are supposed to lead and teach the way of Buddhism. Although there are some Thai-American-born monks, the majority of monks in the United States are invited from

³⁴ Cadge, 27

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 33.

Thailand. Currently, there are more than 482 Thai monks in 105 temples across America. The greater the number of monks at the temple, the larger the community; and the larger the community, the greater the likelihood they will be a target of white supremacy and coded expressions of racism.

Berkeley's Wat Mongkolratanaram

Wat Mongkolratanaram, locally referred to as the Berkeley Thai Temple, was established in 1978,³⁸ when a group of volunteers formed a small temple committee and invited two visiting monks from Thailand to serve as spiritual leaders and assist with building the temple. In 1981 the temple received non-profit status as a religious organization, and established the Thai Buddhist temple and cultural center at its current Russell Street location in the City of Berkeley. By 2001 the temple was recognized as an official Thai Buddhist *ubosoth*, or place of worship, in full accordance with Theravada Buddhist doctrines. For nearly three decades the Berkeley Thai Temple held a Sunday Food Offering — locally called the Thai Temple Sunday brunch — where members of the temple prepared and served food to visitors — Buddhist, non-Buddhist, Thais, non-Thais. Thai and Thai American Buddhists who volunteer at the Sunday brunch understand their work as an expression of *thambun*, or merit-making. Merit, is the counter of *karma*, which Buddhists believe chains all living creatures in the endless cycles of reincarnation and suffering, known as *samsara*. Merit, as the counterweight of *karma*, may be gained primarily by supporting the community of monks and nuns, by assisting the needy, or through Buddhist meditation. Merit is also transferable. Hence, the living may perform rituals and offerings to earn merit, which may then be transferred to their beloved to assist them in the afterlife and in being reborn into the human realm. From a Thai American perspective, volunteers at the Berkeley Thai Temple engage in the religio-cultural practice of *thambun*, which in turn, sustains the temple for the community, and the livelihood of the Thai monks who reside there. In addition, the temple offers Thai language and cultural classes and programs.

³⁸ Wat Mongkolratanaram's Application for a Broader Land Use Permit.



Wat Mongkolratanaram, September 13, 2011
(Photo by Jonathan H. X. Lee)

The popular Sunday Food Offering came under attack in 2008 when the Berkeley Thai Temple applied to the City of Berkeley's Zoning Adjustments Board to build a Buddha Hall (*bood*) larger than the size allowed by the municipal code. The Buddha Hall would be 16 feet wide, 24 feet long, and 44 feet high (including a 14-foot spire), the proposed sanctuary would include three Buddha statues on a raised platform.³⁹ Nineteen neighbors who reside on Oregon Street gathered to protest the proposed expansion of the temple, citing that the "architecture" would change the character of the residential neighborhood.⁴⁰ Additionally, upon discovering that the temple's 1993 zoning permit only allowed for food to be served three times a year, Oregon Street residents used this opportunity to voice their concern about the Sunday Food Offering. They cited it as "detrimental" to the health of the neighborhood, and suggested that the food service be moved to a different site because it created noise, parking and traffic problems, litter in the neighborhood, and was the source of "offensive odors."⁴¹ The Berkeley Zoning Adjustments Board investigated the allegations, and ". . . announced in June that the Berkeley Thai Temple had repeatedly exceeded the number of events allowed by its use permit. Although no one was able to ascertain just how long the temple had been violating its permit, the board agreed to give the temple a chance to modify the original permit and address neighborhood concerns."⁴² Further, the board urged mediation to resolve the

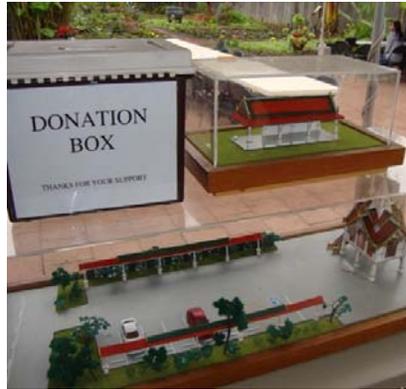
³⁹ Rachel Swan, Food-Free Zone? Berkeley City Planners May Finally Resolve the Beef over Sunday Thai Breakfasts. *East Bay Express* (January 21, 2009).

⁴⁰ Letter to Greg Powell, City of Berkeley Zoning Adjustments Board Land Use Planning Division, from opposing residents on Oregon Street (April 17, 2008).

⁴¹ Pahole Sookkasikon, *Fragrant Rice Queen: The Hungry Ghost of Anna Leonowens and Thai/America*. Unpublished MA thesis (San Francisco State University, 2010), 122–124

⁴² Riya Bhattacharjee, Berkeley Thai Temple to Ask ZAB to Allow Year-Round Sunday Brunch. *The Berkeley Daily Planet: The East Bay's Independent Newspaper* (September 18, 2008).

conflict. A *Save the Thai Temple* press release notes that “The Temple immediately responded to these concerns by undertaking extensive measures to participate in three mediation sessions with the complainants, cut its Sunday service hours in half, implement a neighborhood litter patrol, relocate the preparation of its food items, secure an exclusive parking lot from a nearby retailer, and actively reach out to its neighbors.”⁴³ Christina Jirachachawalwong, organizer of the SavetheThaiTemple.com website notes, “We’ve reduced our early morning preparation hours, we’ve put up signs all over the neighborhood, reminding people not to park in driveways, not to litter, we’ve sent a trash patrol around the neighborhood . . . These concessions have ‘severely impacted our financial situation’ but have not satisfied the complainants.”⁴⁴



Model of proposed new construction and Buddha Hall, September 25, 2011
(Photo by Jonathan H. X. Lee)

The temple’s weekly Sunday Food Offering is well attended by upwards of 600 visitors. Some Oregon Street residents said, “We believe we have a right to reside in peace, to enjoy our residential neighborhood without a large commercial restaurant in our midst.”⁴⁵ After the initial hearing about the zoning problem, the Berkeley Thai Temple was granted a zoning adjustment. While this was good news for the temple and its supporters, at the hearing there had been accusations that the foods served at the temple were drugged. Some opponents of the temple’s food service complained that they were forced to live with odors. Other complaints were more focused. As recorded in *The Wall Street Journal*:

“We have no opposition to Buddhism,” says Ms. Shoulders, the neighbor.
“We have no problem with Thai culture. We even actually like Thai food.”
All she is seeking, she says, is changes in the temple’s operations.⁴⁶

Other neighbors expressed their support of the temple’s Sunday Food Offering. As noted in a *Save the Thai Temple* press release:

Since spring 2008, the steady outpouring of community support to preserve the Temple has attested to its 27 years of spiritual and cultural contributions to the Bay Area. Immediate neighbors from Russell and Otis Streets circulated a petition in favor of Sundays at the Temple and received more than 2,300 signatures,

⁴³ *Save the Thai Temple* Press Release, November 7, 2008.

⁴⁴ Andrew Lee, Under Attack: Community Rallies Around Berkeley Thai Temple. *AsianWeek* (December 29, 2008).

⁴⁵ Geoffrey A. Flower, Brunch as a Religious Experience Is Disturbing Berkeley’s Karma. *The Wall Street Journal* (February 10, 2009).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

including 800 Berkeley residents and 106 neighbors residing in the immediate vicinity of the Temple grounds. Students from UC Berkeley have voiced their support through the student government, the Associated Students of the University of California [at Berkeley] (ASUC), which passed a Senate Bill in support of the Temple. Additionally, Asian Pacific Islander American community organizations like the Asian Law Caucus have rallied support for the Temple. Debbie Sheen, Housing and Community Development staff attorney at the Caucus said, “*The weekly event is an important space for the Thai community in the Bay Area, and ending the Sunday Food Offering tradition is a detriment not only to the Thai community but also to the cultural diversity of Berkeley.*”⁴⁷

Martha Chazanoff voiced her support in a letter to the City Planner, saying, “As a homeowner on Otis Street, I would like to express my support for Wat Mongkolratanaram on Russell Street The brunch that is held weekly brings a wonderful element of community-minded, conscientious, and peaceful people to the neighborhood — both old and young. I will admit that parking is a little tight on Sunday, but I would attribute at least part of that to the Asbhy Flea Market”⁴⁸ Chazanoff goes on to say that the Thai temple is “[a] wonderful, wonderful element of our neighborhood. Anyone that is upset by the hustle and bustle of the Sunday Brunch should consider that other 163 hours of the week when it is quiet at the temple and few people are noticeably congregating [sic] there. Their property is well maintained; their landscaping is better than most in the neighborhood.”⁴⁹

Some may argue that the Berkeley Thai Temple has become a victim of its own success and popularity.⁵⁰ Those who supported the Berkeley Thai Temple and wanted to save the food service argued that there is a direct connection between saving the food service and saving the temple because 80 percent of the temple’s total revenue was raised by the weekly food service. Chinda Blaszczyk, long time volunteer at the Berkeley Thai Temple, states, “We are not a business; we rely on the donations we receive If we are not able to serve food on Sundays, I truly believe the temple will be shut down completely.”⁵¹ In addition, the revenue was used to support Thai language and cultural classes offered by the temple, as Komson Thong, president of the Thai Association of Northern California, told the Planning Board, “[the] proceeds from the weekend fund raisers went towards subsidizing costs for students who came to the Thai temple to learn Thai, meditate and dabble in other cultural programs.”⁵² Siwaraya Rochanahusdin, who teaches intermediate and advanced Thai to children and adults at the temple, said a large number of Thai Americans from the East Bay sent their children to the temple school to learn Thai and traditional music and dance.⁵³

⁴⁷ *Save the Thai Temple* Press Release, November 7, 2008.

⁴⁸ Martha S. Chazanoff’s email to Greg Powell (July 12, 2008).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ As a resident, homeowner, and supporter of the *Save the Thai Temple*, this author supports his neighbors’ rights to challenge the loud early morning noise and excessive traffic that they feel adversely impacts the quality of life of the neighborhood.

⁵¹ Lee, Under Attack: Community Rallies around Berkeley Thai Temple.

⁵² Riya Bhattacharjee, City Tells Thai Temple, Angry Neighbors to Reach Middle Ground. *The Berkeley Daily Planet: The East Bay’s Independent Newspaper* (September 25, 2008).

⁵³ Bhattacharjee, Berkeley Thai Temple to Ask ZAB to Allow Year-Round Sunday Brunch.



Thai American youth learning Thai music, July 20, 2009
(Photo courtesy of Siwaraya Rochanahusdin)

Unlike the challenges to the Hsi Lai Temple and the Sikh *gurdwara*, the Berkeley Thai Temple had enjoyed relative peace in the neighborhood before the plans to build a large Buddha Hall sparked the community conflict. As Thai American youth activist, Christina Jirachachawalwong, says, “I’ve been coming here for over 11 years . . . and we’ve never had a complaint.”⁵⁴ Similar to opponents objecting to the construction of the Hsi Lai Temple and the Sikh *gurdwara*, residents on Oregon Street cited parking, traffic, noise, and crowds as their primary reasons for wanting a reduction on the food services as well as to block the construction of the Buddha Hall. The underlying racial privilege informed by an ideology of white supremacy is thinly masked as traffic and noise control, but nonetheless is revealed in comments concerning food odors or comparison of the food service to a commercial restaurant. While speaking at the public hearing, an Oregon Street resident who described herself as a medical doctor compared the temple’s proposed Buddha Hall to McDonald’s golden arches and said the Sunday food was “addictive,” similar to McDonald’s fast food as seen in the documentary *Supersize Me*.⁵⁵ By disregarding, either willfully or out of ignorance, the religious dimension of the Sunday food offering, opponents secularize the Thai temple community and vulgarize their activity. A Thai American youth asked, “How many people would sign a petition to save a McDonald’s in your neighborhood?”⁵⁶

Another opponent, Thomas Rough, writes in his letter of protest to a senior planner in the City of Berkeley:

The neighbors said the weekend cooking odors were *overwhelming* and *unacceptable*, and the *ingress of hundreds* each weekend *overwhelmed* their quiet streets and their expected lives. They insisted the *feeding* be very sharply reduced in numbers and frequency — *or find another place to do this feeding*.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Lee, Under Attack: Community Rallies around Berkeley Thai Temple.

⁵⁵ Save the Berkeley Thai Temple Youtube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS_Wev54XSE (last accessed September 12, 2011).

⁵⁶ *Save the Thai Temple*, http://savethethaitemple.com/?page_id=2 (last accessed September 12, 2011).

⁵⁷ Cited in Sookkasikon, 124.

Pahole Sookkasikon notes that the use of the word “feeding” connotes the religio-cultural activities at the Thai Temple and the Thai Americans themselves as akin to livestock and, thus, “belittles” them as subhuman.⁵⁸ I concur with Sookkasikon for noting that the rhetoric transgresses Thai American subjectivity and humanity. In addition, it highlights the necessity for tolerance that is susceptible to the forces of intolerance for religious pluralism that envelops contemporary American society in the post-9/11 era.



Thai American youth at Berkeley Zoning Adjustments Board hearing,
February 12, 2009
(Photo courtesy of Pahole Yotin Sookkasikon)

Thai American Youth Acting Out



⁵⁸ Sookkasikon, 125.

Save the Thai Temple flyer (Photo courtesy of Pahole Yotin Sookkasikon)

In order to address the complaints lodged against their temple and their community, which Thai American youth activists viewed as a subtle expression of racism, they formed the Save the Thai Temple Campaign.⁵⁹ Thai American youth acted as advocates for their parents, grandparents, and community elders who did not have a strong command of English and local codes and politics. Members of the campaign were youths who had grown up with the Berkeley Thai Temple. “They launched an awareness campaign to educate the general public on Thai Buddhist practices and the religious significance of merit-making (*thumboon*).”⁶⁰ They distributed Action Alerts, utilizing social media such as Facebook, Youtube, and MySpace to garner support and mobilize their supporters.⁶¹ The Action Alerts encouraged supporters of the Berkeley Thai Temple to call all nine members of the Berkeley City Council and leave the following message:

Hello, my name is [*your name*], and I’m calling to urge the Berkeley’s City Council to re-affirm the Zoning Board’s approval of the weekly Sunday Food Offering activities at the Thai Buddhist Temple. The Temple should be allowed to continue its religious practice of food-sharing and merit-making. I urge you to support this Berkeley tradition because it is vital to our community.⁶²

In addition, they encouraged supporters to write emails to all members of the Berkeley City Council with the following message:

Dear Councilmember:

I am writing to express my concern at the possible appeal of the Zoning Adjustments Board’s decision of the weekly Sunday Food Offering at the Thai Buddhist Temple in Berkeley. I strongly urge you to support the ZAB’s judgment as well as this beloved 28-year-old Berkeley tradition because citizens like me have benefited from the Temple’s longstanding presence in Berkeley.

1. The Sunday Food Offering activities are an important religious practice for Buddhists. Food-sharing is an essential aspect of contributing to and receiving Buddhist merit. The practice of creating a space where monks, volunteers, neighbors, and patrons alike can engage in food sharing is part of merit-earning. The Food Offering activities have become the center of the Temple’s spiritual activities.

2. The Temple has been and continues to be a good Berkeley neighbor. In the past 27 years, no complaints have been filed against the Temple until the recent months. In light of the recent complaints, the Temple has not only addressed the specific concerns of the complainants, but it also has undertaken efforts to continue to be a considerate community partner through surveys and land use impact studies.

3. The Temple is a critical community institution for the Thai community. Shutting down the Sunday Food Offering activities would have devastating effects on the Thai community that relies on the Temple as a support network and the center of Thai culture. The Thai community urgently needs places like the Temple to allow the community to grow.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 113–117.

⁶⁰ Virada Chatikul, Wat Mongkolratanaram and the Thai Cultural Center: A Model for Intergenerational Collaboration and Thai American Leadership Development. Jonathan H. X. Lee and Roger Viet Chung, eds. *Contemporary Issues in Southeast Asian American Studies* (San Diego, CA: Cognella Academic Publishing, 2011), 70.

⁶¹ *Save the Thai Temple*, <http://savethethaitemple.com/?p=158> (last accessed September 12, 2011).

⁶² *Save the Thai Temple* Action Alert.

Berkeley is counting on you to save this important and dynamic part of the Berkeley community.⁶³



Save the Thai Temple supporters at the Berkeley Zoning Adjustments Board hearing wearing gold and green “I support the Thai Temple” stickers, September 25, 2008
(Photo courtesy of Siwaraya Rochanahusdin)

On September 22, 2009, the Berkeley City Council voted unanimously (9–0) in favor of the broader land use permits granted by the Zoning Adjustments Board in a decision favoring the Berkeley Thai Temple, Wat Mongkolratanaram. In a *Save the Thai Temple* press release, Siwaraya Rochanahusdin, a Thai American who had grown up at the Temple, said, “The Temple offers an invaluable range of services to an otherwise underserved population. Discontinuing the weekly food offering would deny this community access to spiritual and educational opportunities not readily found elsewhere.”⁶⁴ Youth leaders and activists of *Save the Thai Temple* posted congratulatory comments on Facebook thanking all their supporters. One post called the unanimous vote “a stunner.” However, an over the top remark was posted by a Euro-American man who writes:

You people, leave the neighbors alone. Your clanging and monotonous chanting are annoying [sic] enough, and you want more? Go back to your trees because its [sic] not welcome here at berkeley [sic]. BTW haven’t you heard of Jesus [?]

This young man’s comments bespeak the continuation of a struggle to undo the legacy of white privilege and ideologies of white supremacy wrapped in Christian-centrism. This Christian-centrism subsumes Judaism “. . . under its doctrinal premises. . .”

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ *Save the Thai Temple* Press Release, November 7, 2008.

and rejects other cultures, religions, and ways of life as “. . . incompatible with Christianity.”⁶⁵

Abbot Tahn Manas, who has lived at the Berkeley Thai Temple for 24 years, makes it clear that the food service is a religious activity because it is a means of merit-making, which is central to Theravada Buddhist practice. “Our Sunday activity is pretty much like Christians going to church every Sunday,” says Abbot Manas. “Without it, it would be very difficult for us to continue merit-making.”⁶⁶ Thai American youth *act* Thai in their efforts to save their temple because they express *bun khun*. *Bun khun* is akin to the Chinese-Confucian virtue of *xiao* 孝, filial piety, the belief that one possesses an obligation and indebtedness to one’s parents. In the vernacular it is known as the “milk-debt.” Thai males are expected to be ordained as novice monks as a means of ensuring merit for their parents. While daughters are unable to become nuns in Thailand, they are expected to care for their parents in their old age. In America, both sons and daughters repay their milk-debt by fulfilling the virtues of *bun khun*. They become caregivers of their parents’ and grandparents’ lifeways, and defenders of the American virtue of religious tolerance.

Conclusion

Shortly after the Berkeley Thai Temple community conflict was settled, controversy erupted around the expansion of an existing Hindu temple in the nearby City of Livermore, southeast of Berkeley.⁶⁷ Similar to other conflicts, residents in Livermore cited traffic, noise, and parking in opposition to the expansion of a Hindu temple. The Shiva Vishnu Temple community had proposed a plan to expand its 63,000-square-foot temple. “But temple officials said they scaled the project down after multiple meetings with neighbors who expressed concern about the noise, odor, parking, dust, and traffic. Addressing the neighbors’ concerns has added an additional \$5 million to construction costs”⁶⁸ This was followed by a national debate about the rights of Muslim Americans to build a mosque and community center near ground zero.⁶⁹ Critics dubbed the project a “monster mosque” and argued that it is part of the agenda to Islamicize America.⁷⁰ Conservative political and religious leaders all joined the national debate, insisting that Muslim Americans are insulting America by building their mosque at Ground Zero (despite its being two blocks away). Moreover, they reiterated that America was a Christian country. The anti-mosque sentiment was so strong, that President Obama had to dial back “. . . saying that he supported the Muslim community’s right to build the mosque, but was not sure it was a good idea to build so close to Ground Zero.”⁷¹

The forces that opposed the establishment of Asian religious sacred sites on American soil that unfolded in Berkeley, Fremont, Livermore, New York, and other communities across the United States reveal a dominant ideology of Judeo-Christian-centrism and white supremacy. Singh rightly notes:

⁶⁵ Choan-Seng Song, Asia. John F. A. Sawyer, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 159.

⁶⁶ Geoffrey A. Flower, Brunch as a Religious Experience Is Disturbing Berkeley’s Karma.

⁶⁷ Sunita Sohrabji, Livermore City Council to Decide on Temple Expansion. *India West* (April 23, 2010).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Margot Adler, Developer: Plans for N.Y. Mosque Moving Forward. National Public Radio (May 5, 2011).

⁷⁰ Andrea Peyser, Mosque Madness at Ground Zero. *New York Post* (May 13, 2010).

⁷¹ Reshma Kirpalani, “Ground Zero Mosque” Clears Legal Hurdle to Build. *abcNews/u.s.* (July 13, 2011) <http://abcnews.go.com/US/ground-mosque-wins-legal-battle-build/story?id=14062701> (last accessed September 9, 2011).

As the country continues to diversify racially and religiously in the coming years, it remains clear that the issues of racial and religious bigotry towards minority religions — in a nation in which Christianity is the dominant, unofficial state religion — will continue to be a sore spot in non-Christian communities of color across the nation. In order to avoid increasingly rancorous conflict in the coming years, the centuries of Judeo-Christian tradition, morality, and dominance must allow space for the culturally distinct religions that accompany the increasingly racially diverse population of the United States. In addition, members of the dominant community must join with their fellow non-white Americans to battle the vicious combination of white and Christian supremacy which has plagued our nation since its birth.⁷²

The community conflicts are not only about temple building in itself — not merely about buildings or spaces — but rather, reveals the contours and politics within social relations that are configured by racial and religious hierarchies underwritten by white privilege and ideologies of white supremacy. Religious freedom, therefore, is not just about the free expression of Asian religious traditions, or about any non-Judaic-Christian traditions in the United States, but rather, it is a continual battle to exert the right to be fully American.



Berkeley Thai Temple Sunday brunch tradition continues, September 25, 2011
(Photo by Jonathan H. X. Lee)

⁷² Singh, 104.

Works Cited

- Adler, Margot. 2011. Developer: Plans for N.Y. Mosque Moving Forward, National Public Radio (May 5) <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/05/135951856/developer-plans-for-n-y-mosque-moving-forward> (last accessed September 9, 2011).
- Andrea Peyser, 2010. Mosque Madness at Ground Zero. *New York Post* (May 13).
- Arax, Mark. 1987. San Gabriel Valley; Asian Influx Alters Life in Suburbia. *Los Angeles Times* (April 5).
- Baker, Mayerene. 1982. Buddhist Vision of Temple Complex Clashes With Real World. *Los Angeles Times* (February 21).
- Bao, Jiemin. 2005. Merit-Making Capitalism: Re-territorializing Thai Buddhism in Silicon Valley, California. *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8.2: 115–142.
- Bao, Jiemin. 2009. Thai American middle-classness: Forging alliances with Whites and cultivating patronage from Thailand's elite. *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12.2: 163–190.
- Bhattacharjee, Riya. 2008. Berkeley Thai Temple to Ask ZAB to Allow Year-Round Sunday Brunch. *The Berkeley Daily Planet: The East Bay's Independent Newspaper* (September 18).
- Bhattacharjee, Riya. 2008. City Tells Thai Temple, Angry Neighbors to Reach Middle Ground. *The Berkeley Daily Planet: The East Bay's Independent Newspaper* (September 25).
- Birkinshaw, Jack. 1983. Buddhist Temple Gets OK to Build. *Los Angeles Times* (June 2).
- Cadge, Wendy and Sidhorn Sangdhanoo. 2005. Thai Buddhism in America: An Historical and Contemporary Overview. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 6.1 (May): 7–35.
- Cadge, Wendy. 2005. *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chatikul, Virada. 2011. Wat Mongkolratanaram and the Thai Cultural Center: A Model for Intergenerational Collaboration and Thai American Leadership Development. Jonathan H. X. Lee and Roger Viet Chung, eds. *Contemporary Issues in Southeast Asian American Studies*. San Diego: Cognella Academic Publishing.
- Cheah, Joseph. 2004. Negotiating Race and Religion in American Buddhism: Burmese Buddhism in California. Unpublished dissertation. Graduate Theological Union. Berkeley, California.
- Desbarats, Jacqueline. 1970. Thai Migration to Los Angeles. *Geographical Review* 69.3: 302–308
- Flower, Geoffrey A. 2009. Brunch as a Religious Experience Is Disturbing Berkeley's Karma. *The Wall Street Journal* (February 10).
- Hamilton, Elizabeth. 2008. A Battle over Rites and Rights. *Hartford Courant* (July 19).
- Handley, Paul M. 2006. *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hsi Lai Temple <http://www.hsilai.org/en/index.html> (last accessed September 9, 2011).

- Kangvalert, Wasana. 1986. Thai Physicians in the United States: Causes and Consequences of the Brain Drain. Unpublished Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo.
- Kirpalani, Reshma. 2011. "Ground Zero Mosque" Clears Legal Hurdle to Build. *abcNews/u.s.* (July 13) <http://abcnews.go.com/US/ground-mosque-wins-legal-battle-build/story?id=14062701> (last accessed September 9, 2011).
- Lee, Andrew. 2008. Under Attack: Community Rallies Around Berkeley Thai Temple. *AsianWeek* (December 29).
- LeMay, Michael C. 2003. *U.S. Immigration: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Lin, Irene. 1996. Journey to the Far West: Chinese Buddhism in America. *Amerasia Journal* 22.1: 107–132.
- London, Ellen. 2008. *Thailand Condensed: 2000 Years of History and Culture*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editors.
- McIntosh, Peggy. 1988. White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.
- Nanongkam, Priwan. 2011. Thai American Cultural Performance and Thai Identity in America. Jonathan H. X. Lee and Roger Viet Chung, eds. *Contemporary Issues in Southeast Asian American Studies*. San Diego: Cognella Academic Publishing.
- Numrich, Paul David. 1996. *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Perreria, Todd LeRoy. 2004. Sasana Sakon and the New Asian American: Intermarriage and Identity at a Thai Buddhist Temple in Silicon Valley. Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds. *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*. New York: New York University Press, 313–337.
- Perreria, Todd LeRoy. 2008. The Gender of Practice: Some Findings among Thai Buddhist Women in Northern California. Huping Ling, ed. *Emerging Voices: Experiences of Underrepresented Asian Americans*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 160–182.
- Perreria, Todd LeRoy. 2011. Thai Americans: Religion. Jonathan H. X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau, eds. *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1109–1112.
- Sawn, Rachel. 2009. Food-Free Zone? Berkeley City Planners May Finally Resolve the Beef Over Sunday Thai Breakfasts. *East Bay Express* (January 21).
- Singh, Jaideep. 2003. The Racialization of Minoritized Religious Identity: Constructing Sacred Sites at the Intersection of White and Christian Supremacy. Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard, eds. *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*. New York: Routledge.
- Sohrabji, Sunita. 2010. Livermore City Council to Decide on Temple Expansion. *India West* (April 23).
- Song, Choan-Seng. 2006. Asia. John F. A. Sawyer, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 158-175.
- Sookkasikon, Pahole. 2010. Fragrant Rice Queen: The Hungry Ghost of Anna Leonowens and Thai/America. Unpublished MA thesis. San Francisco State University.

Urofsky, Melvin L. 2002. *Religious Freedom: Rights and Liberties under the Law*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

Worawongs, Worapron Thina. 2005. Thai Americans and the Mass Media: A Reconstruction of Cultural Identity. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Faculty of Communication, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA.

Wyatt, David K. 1984. *Thailand: A Short History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Yahirun, Jenjira. 2011. Thai Immigrants. Ronald H. Bayor, ed. *Multicultural America: An Encyclopedia of the Newest Americans*. Volume 4. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2097–2133.