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WHEN SACREDNESS REQUIRES CERTIFICATION: GENDER, POWER, AND THE CRISIS OF FAITH ON THAILAND'S AMULET INDUSTRY THROUGH THAI FILM "THE STONE"

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how sacredness, gender, and market value intersect in the Thai film The Stone (2025), which dramatizes the cutthroat world of amulet trading. By analyzing the film alongside media narratives about miraculous survivals linked to amulets, this research explores how authenticity is no longer derived from theological meaning or ritual practice, but from processes of certification, spectacle, and masculine authority. Drawing on Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum, Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Bourdieu's framework of cultural capital, this paper investigates three key dynamics: (1) how female figures challenge patriarchal structures of religious expertise; (2) how faith is mediated through spectacle and expert endorsement; and (3) how commodified sacredness blurs the boundary between belief and branding. Through close reading of The Stone and selected media cases, the study argues that sacred legitimacy is no longer anchored in spiritual essence but is contingent on performative validation within a capitalist cultural economy. The result is a reconfiguration of faith itself where belief must be certified to be believed.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Economy, Gender Performativity, Hyperreality, Sacred Authenticity, Symbolic Capital, Simulacrum, Thai Amulets, The Stone.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Thai society, *phra khru* (Buddhist amulets) function not only as objects of religious devotion but also as pivotal nodes in an intricate web of belief, status, economy, and gendered power (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2013; Kitiarsa, 2012; Phayaphrom et al., 2025; Stengs, 1998). Traditionally believed to embody *buddhakun* (spiritual potency) protective and spiritual energy amulets have long held central importance in Thai Buddhist practice. However, in recent decades, these objects have become increasingly commodified, circulating within expansive informal markets that mirror the speculative logic of financial capitalism (Jalearnwong, 2020; Kitiarsa, 2007; Stengs, 1998). Today, they are as likely to be scrutinized under microscopes as they are to be worshipped at altars, with value often determined less by spiritual essence than by provenance documentation, expert endorsement, and narrative framing. At the center of this system stands the *sian phra* (amulet expert) predominantly male amulet experts who function as gatekeepers of legitimacy, arbitrating the sacred and the profane, the authentic and the fake. As Suebsantiwongse (2024, p. 42) notes, *sian phra*, loosely translated as “immortal amulet trader,” derives from the Teochew term *sian* (仙), meaning “immortal” or “transcendent.” In contemporary Thailand, these figures wield significant symbolic and economic power, their opinions capable of transforming a mundane object into a sacred artifact of high value.

The rise of Thailand’s Buddhist amulet industry can be traced back to the post-World War II era, when social unrest, political instability, and rising crime rates intensified the popular demand for protective spiritual artifacts (Soontravanich, 2013). In this context, amulets became not only religious objects but also talismans of safety, prosperity, and masculine prestige. Over time, this demand fostered a speculative market, driven by collectors, inflated pricing, and an expanding ecosystem of authentication led by *sian phra* (Suebsantiwongse, 2024). Miraculous tales of invulnerability and divine protection were repeatedly attached to specific amulets, enhancing both their symbolic cachet and market value (Tambiah, 1984). This speculative turn also precipitated the emergence of counterfeit amulets (*phra kae*), further consolidating the role of *sian phra* as experts whose authority determines legitimacy and price. Although recent years have seen innovations in amulet materials such as recycled plastics and hybrid composites (Johnston & Phayakhrut, 2024) these objects remain embedded in

traditional frameworks of consecration, myth-making, and evaluation through *buddhakun*. The result is a complex marketplace where sacred rituals and speculative investment co-exist, illustrating the resilience and adaptability of Thai popular Buddhism under contemporary capitalist pressures (Kitiarsa, 2012).

The centrality of *sian phra* in Thailand’s amulet economy cannot be understood without considering the performative and persuasive dimensions of their role. Predominantly male, these figures operate as both traders and narrators curating not only objects but the stories that elevate their value. While *buddhakun* or spiritual potency is often invoked as the source of an amulet’s worth, it is rarely the core determinant in actual transactions. Instead, value is actively constructed through negotiations, rhetorical strategies, and market-savvy storytelling. Amulets are framed as “first editions,” “rare finds,” or “certified originals” often linked to legendary monks or miracle-bearing events. These narratives are reinforced with vivid claims of supernatural protection bullets that failed to pierce, knives that could not be harmed, accidents survived without a scratch turning religious objects into commodities infused with hyperbolic significance.

Modern *Sian Phra*, in collaboration with amulet entrepreneurs, have further professionalized these practices by adopting commercial media strategies. As Nasee (2018, p. 222) observes, televised and online programs like *Khui Fueang Rueang Phra Khruba Ariyachat* promote specific batches of amulets, while social media platforms especially Facebook are used to control and dramatize product release. One *khru* in Lamphun Province reportedly initiated reservations for a new series of amulets at precisely 9:00 a.m., a time chosen for its auspicious Buddhist numerology. Within less than a minute, over 5,000 reservations were recorded mostly from Chinese and Singaporean buyers illustrating how sacred objects are distributed through mechanisms more akin to luxury product launches than religious rituals. Through such tactics, *sian phra* and associated monks transform spiritual charisma into monetized hype, revealing how sacredness is engineered, staged, and sold under late-capitalist conditions.

These entanglements between belief, commerce, and charismatic authority find a compelling dramatization in *The Stone: Phra Tae Khon Ke* (2025), a Thai action-drama centered on the pursuit of a legendary amulet *Phra Somdej Hia Rat* that was believed to possess miraculous powers. According to lore, this amulet once saved its wearer from fatal accidents and near-death experiences before

mysteriously vanishing for over two decades. The film follows multiple factions vying for possession of this sacred object, each driven by different motivations greed, faith, legacy, or survival. At the center is Ek, an ordinary man whose ailing father was the last known custodian of the amulet. His path crosses with Muay, a young female sian phra and daughter of the renowned expert Sunthorn. Despite her expertise, Muay is marginalized in the hypermasculine world of amulet authentication, where authority is deeply gendered.

As the plot unfolds, characters including rival sian phra like Sunthorn, Seng, law enforcement officers with concealed desires, and heirs of Hia Rat himself, all compete through manipulation, coercion, and narrative fabrication to claim the amulet. These portrayals expose the elaborate techniques used in the commodification of sacred objects storytelling, provenance disputes, symbolic inflation, and threats all deployed to elevate the value of an amulet regardless of its inherent buddhakun. The climax arrives when multiple replicas of Phra Somdej Hia Rat circulate simultaneously, rendering even the experts unable to discern authenticity. Only in a moment of mortal danger when Ek instinctively places the amulet in his mouth and survives a hail of gunfire does belief override verification. The film's final irony lies in how communal faith is restored not by certification or expert endorsement, but by narrative spectacle and survival itself. In this way, *The Stone* interrogates the unstable boundaries between the sacred and the commercial, inviting viewers to question whether authenticity is a matter of essence, evidence, or simply the power of belief performed at the right moment.

This article critically examines how *The Stone* stages the contemporary crisis of faith, authenticity, and gendered authority within Thailand's amulet industry. It argues that the film not only reflects but also refracts the commodification of sacredness, portraying how phra khrueng are enmeshed in economic speculation, narrative manipulation, and patriarchal power structures. By analyzing the film's narrative arcs, character dynamics, and visual representations, the study investigates how the sacred is constructed, contested, and ultimately destabilized within a capitalist Buddhist economy. Specifically, it asks: How does *The Stone* represent the role of sian phra in shaping the meanings and market value of amulets? In what ways does the film interrogate or reproduce gendered hierarchies in the sphere of sacred expertise? And how does narrative itself function as a form of spiritual certification, superseding institutional forms of validation?

Drawing on theoretical insights from Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic capital and field (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993), Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990), and Jean Baudrillard's notions of simulacra and hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994), this paper analyzes *The Stone* as a cultural text that dramatizes the intersection of faith, commerce, and representation. In doing so, it aims to contribute to broader discussions on Thai popular Buddhism, the politics of sacred commodities, and the narrative mechanics through which authenticity is claimed, challenged, and believed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The status of religious objects as sacred is not an intrinsic property but the outcome of complex social, cultural, and symbolic processes. In contemporary Southeast Asia, amulets, shrines, and ritual artifacts do not merely embody metaphysical significance; they operate within overlapping spheres of belief, commerce, and media. The sacredness of these objects is co-produced by institutional recognition, economic exchange, and public discourse. This literature review draws on religious studies, anthropology, and media theory to explore three interrelated aspects of sacred objects in circulation: the construction of authenticity, the role of economic exchange, and the mediating function of media and popular culture.

2.1. *Constructing Authenticity: Ritual, Recognition, and Power*

Authenticity in religious objects is not static but culturally constructed through ritual practice, institutional authority, and communal consensus. In Islam, for example, the Qur'an's authenticity lies in its meticulous textual preservation, maintained by a transgenerational network of scholars and practitioners (Yanti et al., 2024). This model presumes that sacred truth is materially embodied and resistant to change yet it also raises questions about whether textual fixity can ensure spiritual legitimacy in dynamic interpretive contexts.

By contrast, Christian relics in early modern Europe demonstrate that authenticity can be a contested domain. Jean Calvin's critique of relics in 17th-century France forced the Catholic Church to reposition legitimacy in terms of devotional affect and institutional endorsement (Guyard, 2022). This tension between archival verifiability and sacred experience suggests that authenticity functions along multiple, and often conflicting, logics. Anthropological scholarship adds further

complexity. Theodossopoulos (2013) conceptualizes authenticity as a discursive construct, always under negotiation and bound up with power. This is echoed in global heritage frameworks: the Nara Document (Kono, 2014) proposes that authenticity should reflect cultural context, lived experience, and community values. Yet Thoor (2020) warns that such relativism can be strategically instrumentalized, turning authenticity into a flexible label used for institutional or political gain.

In Southeast Asia, authenticity emerges through interwoven systems of animist belief and Buddhist cosmology. Sacred objects such as sak yant tattoos and Thai amulets derive legitimacy from monastic blessing, communal recognition, and narratives of efficacy (Vater & Thaewchatturat, 2011; Armer, 2014). However, their status is not uniformly accepted, revealing tensions within Buddhist orthodoxy regarding valid sacred authority. Ritual festivals and ecological cosmologies further reinforce sacred legitimacy offerings to deities like Mae Phosop are not mere traditions but expressions of cultural memory and spiritual vitality (Lertpiboon, 2025). Even in secular spaces such as museums, sacred objects remain sites of negotiation. Kreps (2024) describes how processes of “naturalization” and “denaturalization” mediate between local epistemologies and Western curatorial frameworks, sometimes preserving aura, other times displacing it.

2.2. Sacred Commodities: Exchange, Power, and Transnational Circuits

While authenticity underscores symbolic power, economic exchange reveals how the sacred is also embedded in material flows. In Theravāda Buddhist traditions, monastic codes (Vinaya) historically prohibited monks from engaging in commerce, leaving the Sangha reliant on royal and lay patronage (Reynolds, 1979). However, contemporary religious economies show a marked shift. Thai amulets, once tied to cosmological doctrine, have become highly commodified, circulating across national and transnational markets.

Naepimai and Chaisingkananont (2023) examine how Chinese-Singaporean intermediaries have strategically branded and marketed Thai amulets to wider Asian audiences. These circuits reflect Appadurai's (1986) idea of “things-in-motion,” in which value accrues not from intrinsic features but through mobility, storytelling, and exchange. The amulet becomes less a symbol of merit and more a commodity of prestige, luck, or masculinity as seen in the case of the Phra Khun Phaen amulet (Suebsantiwongse, 2024).

Commodification extends beyond portable objects. Bangkok's Erawan Shrine exemplifies how sacred sites function simultaneously as spiritual spaces and economic hubs. Askew (2007) describes how its supernatural reputation sustains a micro-economy of vendors, performers, and tourists. Here, the economy of belief overlaps with the infrastructure of commerce, blurring the boundary between faith and finance. Scholars such as Kitiarsa (2007) and Borup (2019) argue that commodification does not dilute sacredness but produces it anew. In this view, religious meaning is not undermined by exchange but refracted through it economic value becomes a mode of sacralization. Still, this raises critical questions: does commodification sustain belief, or does it transform the sacred into performative capital? In Southeast Asia, sacred commodities often straddle a liminal space part ritual object, part speculative good.

2.3. Mediating the Sacred: Media, Representation, and Recontextualization

If economic circulation mobilizes sacred objects, media gives them meaning in the public sphere. In Thailand and across the region, sacred objects are shaped not only through ritual or exchange, but through images, narratives, and spectacle. The destruction and restoration of the Thao Maha Phrom statue in 2006, widely publicized in local and international media, exemplified how media spectacle can reaffirm a site's spiritual potency (Askew, 2007). The event did not erode faith it intensified it by converting crisis into symbolic reaffirmation.

Popular culture plays a crucial role in recontextualizing religious practice. According to Kitiarsa (2007, 2014), Thai popular Buddhism reflects a hybrid religiosity where amulets, talismans, and rituals circulate through celebrity culture, advertising, and digital platforms. These sacred symbols are not fossilized traditions they are dynamic icons of a mediated faith, responsive to the affective rhythms of modern consumption.

The materiality of sacred objects also enables their embodiment in everyday life. Statues, tattoos, and charms are not inert they are sensorial and performative, allowing believers to touch, wear, or display faith. As Bautista (2010) and Vater & Thaewchatturat (2011) observe, this sensory engagement anchors religious identity in pluralistic societies. Yet it also opens sacred objects to resignification especially in contexts such as museums or exhibitions, where curatorial practices may desacralize or aestheticize formerly powerful

artifacts (Kreps, 2024). In this mediated landscape, the sacred becomes a site of negotiation not merely between religion and secularism, but between tradition and spectacle, cosmology and consumer culture. Media does not merely report on sacredness it co-produces it, rendering religious objects legible, desirable, and tradable in the circuits of public attention.

Together, these perspectives reveal that sacred objects in Southeast Asia are not passive containers of religious meaning. Their authenticity, value, and power are produced through processes of ritual legitimation, economic exchange, and media representation. Rather than diminishing the sacred, commodification and mediation reconfigure it transforming sacred objects into dynamic sites of social, economic, and symbolic negotiation. Understanding these processes requires an interdisciplinary lens one attentive to both historical patterns and contemporary practices in the entangled worlds of faith, capital, and cultural production.

Yet, while existing scholarship has richly theorized sacred objects through anthropological, economic, and media perspectives, less attention has been paid to how these dynamics are dramatized and contested in Thai visual culture particularly through the lens of gender, spectacle, and symbolic capital. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how the film *The Stone* (2025) stages the reconfiguration of sacred legitimacy in the realm of popular media. Drawing on Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum, Butler's notion of gender performativity, and Bourdieu's framework of cultural capital, the analysis explores how sacredness becomes a performative construct mediated through masculine authority, institutional endorsement, and narrative visibility. In doing so, this research contributes to a growing body of work that interrogates the shifting logics of belief in an era where faith must be certified to be believed.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in cultural and media studies. The primary text is *The Stone: Phra Tae Khon Ke* (2025), a Thai film that dramatizes conflicts surrounding amulet authentication, gendered authority, and commodification. The film was chosen because it directly addresses one of the most sensitive topics in Thai Buddhist society the crisis of faith surrounding phra khrueng while framing it within a narrative that interrogates both Buddhism and Buddhist commercialism (phutthaphanit) without provoking conflict among Buddhist audiences. In

this sense, the film functions as a socially sanctioned space for exploring contested religious and commercial practices, offering a rare opportunity to analyze how sacredness and commodification are publicly negotiated in contemporary Thailand.

The choice of film analysis over ethnographic fieldwork, audience reception study, or archival research is deliberate. While ethnography and interviews could yield first-hand accounts of belief and commodification, film analysis enables a focused examination of how these dynamics are narratively, visually, and symbolically constructed and circulated through popular culture. Cinema, as a mediated cultural form, can distill complex ideological debates into accessible narratives, allowing for a close reading of plot structure, character arcs, *mise-en-scène*, and symbolic motifs. This approach is especially suited to applying the theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic capital, Judith Butler's gender performativity, and Jean Baudrillard's simulacra, all of which require attention to representation, performance, and the circulation of signs.

The film is treated as a cultural text that mediates ideological struggles over sacredness, legitimacy, and value. Through close reading of narrative structure, character dynamics, and symbolic motifs, the analysis explores how religious authenticity is represented and contested in visual media. Contextual media materials, including news reports, livestreams, and viral stories about miraculous amulet powers, are also examined to understand how sacredness is constructed and circulated in public discourse. Together, these texts form a mediated archive through which belief, legitimacy, and market logic converge.

The analysis draws on Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra to interpret how sacredness is produced through signs and certifications; Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital to examine the cultural authority of *sian phra*; and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to analyze how gendered power operates within the amulet industry. These frameworks enable an interrogation of the sociocultural logics embedded in the representation of sacred objects. This study does not involve empirical data collection. Instead, it uses interpretive textual and visual analysis to understand how faith, commerce, and gender are intertwined in the mediated life of religious objects. This approach aligns with the epistemology of cultural studies, foregrounding meaning-making and discursive construction as central to understanding contemporary cultural phenomena such as

commodified sacredness.

3.1. Limitations and Future Research

This study's reliance on a single film as the primary cultural text necessarily limits the scope of its conclusions. While the analysis provides in-depth insight into mediated representations of the Thai amulet economy, it does not capture the full range of lived practices, consumer perspectives, or historical variations in sacred commodification. Future research could triangulate these findings with ethnographic observation of amulet markets, in-depth interviews with traders and collectors, and discourse analysis of social media platforms where amulet narratives circulate. Such an integrated approach would enrich the understanding of how sacredness is constructed, contested, and commercialized in both mediated and lived contexts.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the core findings from the analysis of *The Stone* (2025), focusing on how gender, authenticity, and commodification intersect within Thailand's amulet culture. The discussion is organized around three thematic strands. First, it examines the gendered myth of the "amulet expert," analyzing how female participation in this male-dominated space disrupts and negotiates entrenched hierarchies. Second, it interrogates the construction of "authenticity" through storytelling, expert validation, and collective belief, positioning the amulet as a simulacrum within Baudrillard's framework of hyperreality. Third, it explores the commodification of sacred objects, drawing on Marx's concept of commodity fetishism and Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to reveal how amulets are transformed into objects of speculative economic value. Together, these findings illustrate how belief, power, and value are continuously negotiated through intersecting social, economic, and gendered dynamics, as follows:

4.1. Deconstructing the Myth of the "Amulet Expert": When Power is gendered in the World of Sacred Collectibles

In *The Stone* (2025), the figure of sian phra is deeply entangled with hegemonic masculinity. Within Thai Buddhist society, spiritual authority and ritual expertise have long been constructed as predominantly male domains. Women (sīkā) have historically been excluded from full participation in sacred spaces and religious hierarchies, reflecting broader cultural norms that reserve religious legitimacy and authoritative knowledge for men

(Seeger, 2006; Kabilsingh, 1991). This gendered exclusion is embedded not only in formal monastic institutions but also in the informal economies of sacred objects, where male figures overwhelmingly occupy positions of expertise, public trust, and symbolic capital. The cultural construction of the sian phra rests not merely on religious knowledge but on a repertoire of performative traits associated with social dominance: charisma, rhetorical agility, calculated manipulation, and privileged access to male-centric networks. These characteristics align with what Connell (2005) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) define as "hegemonic masculinity" a culturally idealized form of manhood sustained through confidence, control, and stylized performance. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 832) explain, hegemonic masculinity is not statistically dominant but is "the most honored way of being a man," requiring other men to position themselves in relation to it while ideologically legitimating the subordination of women. In this context, the authority of the amulet expert emerges not from spiritual insight alone, but from the ability to embody and perform masculine-coded power within a system that naturalizes male dominance.

Building on this masculine-coded framework of authority, *The Stone* (2025) introduces Mhuay as a character who directly disrupts the gendered norms of the amulet world. As the biological daughter of Sunthorn a legendary sian phra widely revered as the most authoritative expert in the field Mhuay would seem to possess both the lineage and the expertise necessary to claim legitimacy. Yet, she struggles to gain recognition within the male-dominated ecosystem of sacred commerce. Her father refuses to acknowledge her as a true expert, citing concerns for her safety in a world riddled with deception and risk. However, the film gradually reveals that this "concern" is less about protection and more about exclusion a thin veil concealing an entrenched belief that sacred authority and market credibility are domains reserved for masculinity. This tension is not merely familial but structural. The world Mhuay seeks to enter is both visually and socially coded as male an economy of belief governed by men, sustained through male validation, and performed in masculinized public spaces. This is clearly depicted in a scene set in a bustling sian phra market where nearly all participants are men, highlighting how physical and symbolic space in the amulet economy is overwhelmingly male (see Figure 1). Mhuay's struggle, therefore, is not simply personal; it reflects a deeper cultural logic in which spiritual and economic legitimacy remain tethered to hegemonic masculinity.



Figure 1: A Bustling Sian Phra Market Dominated by Male Participants, Visually Reinforcing the Gendered Structure of Sacred Commerce and the Exclusionary Dynamics that Tether Legitimacy to Hegemonic Masculinity.

[Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].

In response to the structural exclusion she faces, Mhuay navigates the amulet world by adopting a masculine-coded performance in order to gain legitimacy. She speaks with conviction, engages in calculated bluffing, and deploys psychological tactics commonly employed by male experts in the trade strategies that underscore her fluency in a gendered language of authority (see figure 2). Most strikingly, she dons a palad khik a penis-shaped amulet widely recognized in Thai culture as a symbol of phallic power and protection. When worn by a woman, this object becomes more than a talisman; it operates as a visual and symbolic transgression of gender norms, signaling her appropriation of male-coded sacred authority (see figure 3).



Figure 2: Mhuay Deploys Bluffing and Tactical Deception Rhetorical Strategies Emblematic of Male Sian Phra as a Performative Appropriation of Masculine-Coded Authority, Illustrating How Gendered Legitimacy in the Amulet Trade Can Be Negotiated Through the Stylized Enactment of Hegemonic Masculinity. [Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].



Figure 3: The Palad Khik, Worn Conspicuously by Mhuay, Operates as a Transgressive Visual Metaphor, Appropriating Masculine-Coded Spiritual Legitimacy and Destabilizing the Assumed Alignment Between Biological Sex and Sacred Authority Within the Patriarchal Economy of the Amulet Trade. [Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].

Mhuay's performance of masculine-coded authority reveals the fluid and constructed nature of gender identity. She does not merely imitate male behavior she enacts it with rhetorical skill, bold gestures, and calculated emotional control. This moment powerfully visualizes what Judith Butler (1990) theorizes as gender performativity: a concept in which gender is not an innate quality but a continuous performance. As Butler writes, "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does" a "doing" rather than a "being" (p. 25). Through strategic acts and stylized repetition, Mhuay becomes legible as a credible actor within a masculinized spiritual economy, not by essential nature but by performative practice.

These stylized acts, Butler continues, are not mere expressions of a pre-existing identity but rather the very means through which identity is constituted. "Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance... Such acts, gestures, enactments... are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (p. 136). In this sense, Mhuay's embodiment of masculine authority her speech patterns, trading tactics, and symbolic props exposes the artificial boundaries of gender and disrupts the assumed coherence between biological sex and power.

Mhuay's case reveals that the role of the amulet expert is not merely a matter of spiritual insight or religious knowledge. Instead, it is a social performance one that demands fluency in masculine-coded behaviors to gain credibility within a gendered economy of value. Despite her lineage and demonstrable skill, her father's persistent refusal to formally recognize her expertise exemplifies

patriarchal gatekeeping: a mechanism that polices who is permitted to possess and perform sacred authority. In this way, the figure of the sian phra becomes a cultural archetype that naturalizes the exclusion of women under the guise of protection, tradition, and spiritual hierarchy. This marginalization is made visible early in *The Stone* (2025). In one scene, Mhuay is forced to postpone her live-streamed amulet session until Seng a male expert has finished broadcasting. The moment is brief but revealing, visually enacting the gendered hierarchy that privileges male voices in both sacred and public spheres (see figure 4). Despite possessing the pedigree, knowledge, and technical mastery expected of a true expert, she remains symbolically secondary within the male-dominated economy of sacred legitimacy.

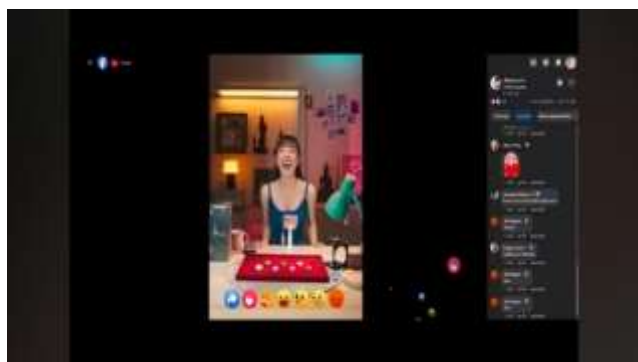


Figure 4: Mhuay Is Compelled to Wait Until Seng's Livestream Concludes a Moment That Visually Enacts the Gendered Hierarchy of Sacred Discourse, Underscoring How Male Voices Are Privileged in Both Physical and Digital Spaces of the Amulet Economy and How Female Authority Remains Contingent Upon Male-Dominated Structures of Visibility. [Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a crucial lens for understanding this dynamic. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed identity but "a stylized repetition of acts" that produce the appearance of naturalness over time (Butler, 1990, p. 191). These acts accrue meaning socially and historically, reinforcing certain norms while excluding others. Within this framework, Mhuay's adoption of masculine-coded behaviors is not mere mimicry it is a strategic, iterative enactment that renders her legible within a symbolic order that otherwise refuses to recognize female authority. Her struggle thus reflects not only personal exclusion but a larger structural logic through which gendered performances regulate access to power.

Mhuay's performance of hegemonic masculinity

is multifaceted. She demonstrates verbal dexterity, strategic manipulation, and commanding charisma traits that align closely with the dominant masculine ideal valorized in the cultural imagination of the sian phra. Her most striking act of alignment with this ideal occurs in a moment of bold theatricality: she throws a rare amulet into the water, an audacious gesture that channels the bravado and risk-taking commonly associated with high-ranking male amulet experts (see figure 5). Rather than challenge the structure directly, Mhuay's strategy is to inhabit its codes to access power not by dismantling the gendered norms that define expertise, but by embodying them convincingly enough to compel recognition. This gesture illustrates a deep paradox: her success in breaking into the male-dominated sphere of sacred commerce is achieved not through the assertion of an alternative femininity, but through her appropriation of masculine-coded traits. It is a calculated enactment that mirrors what Judith Butler (1990) describes as the performative construction of gender, in which acts "that otherwise purport to express an inner truth or identity are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (p. 136). In this context, Mhuay's public display of audacity does not simply signal courage; it serves as a gendered citation of authority, performed in a field where credibility is indexed through stylized displays of control, risk, and confidence.



Figure 5: In a Moment of Bold Posturing, Mhuay Throws a High-Value Amulet Into the Water an Audacious Performance That Cites the Bravado Expected of Male Sian Phra, Exemplifying How Female Actors Can Inhabit and Reproduce Hegemonic Masculine Codes to Negotiate Authority Within a Gender-Exclusive Sacred Economy. [Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].

Beyond her gendered performance, Mhuay's embrace of digital media marks a significant shift in the sacred economy. By live-streaming her sales and cultivating a visible presence on Facebook, she

effectively circumvents traditional institutions of male-dominated validation, such as the Pantip Store an iconic marketplace where trust and credibility are largely governed by senior male experts. Through digital platforms, she constructs a parallel infrastructure of visibility, credibility, and community one that operates independently of the patriarchal logics embedded in physical marketplaces. This digital turn can be interpreted as a form of feminist resistance not through direct confrontation, but by rerouting authority through alternative circuits. By building her own audience and asserting her expertise in virtual space, Mhuay reclaims a degree of autonomy that would otherwise remain inaccessible within conventional paths of sacred commerce. While these platforms still function within broader capitalist and gendered systems, they nonetheless open up space for women to renegotiate the terms of their participation in the sacred economy.

Ultimately, Mhuay's trajectory reveals the double bind that women face when entering masculinized domains of spiritual and economic power. Her inclusion is conditional granted only when she convincingly performs masculinity in a manner legible to the existing power structure. Even then, her position remains fragile, bounded by norms that resist her full recognition. Her case thus raises a provocative question: does the sacred economy of amulets truly accommodate alternative forms of expertise, or does it merely tolerate performances that mimic normative masculinity? Mhuay's experience suggests the latter. Even when gender boundaries are stretched, they are rarely broken. Recognition remains tethered to the very scripts that have historically ensured women's exclusion from authoritative roles in both sacred and commercial spheres.

Mhuay's gendered journey in *The Stone* underscores how spiritual legitimacy in the Thai amulet world is not simply a matter of knowledge or inheritance, but a performance tethered to hegemonic masculinity. Her experience reveals the entrenched gender hierarchies that govern access to sacred authority and market credibility structures that both exclude and conditionally admit women only through masculine-coded enactments. While her engagement with digital platforms opens a new space for female participation, it remains circumscribed by performative demands that uphold existing power relations. This tension between inclusion and exclusion, performance and authenticity, is not limited to gender alone; it is symptomatic of a deeper crisis at the heart of the

sacred economy.

The next section turns to this broader crisis of faith by interrogating how *The Stone* represents the instability of authenticity itself. In a world where sacredness is increasingly mediated through signs, certifications, and market speculation, the film dramatizes the collapse of clear boundaries between the real and the fake, the sacred and the profane. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality, this section explores how the Thai amulet trade becomes a contested site where belief is manufactured, commodified, and circulated not through institutional validation, but through narrative persuasion and performative legitimacy.

4.2. Crisis of Faith: Simulacrum, Authenticity, and the Sacred Economy of Phra Khrueang

In contemporary Thai society, the amulet industry operates at the intersection of spiritual belief, cultural tradition, and market logic. Phra khrueang are no longer merely religious objects; they have become symbolic commodities that circulate within a complex economy of value, prestige, and performative credibility. *The Stone* (2025) dramatizes this convergence by exposing how sacredness itself is subject to manipulation, replication, and market speculation. Rather than posing the simple question of whether an amulet is "real," the film provocatively asks: How has the meaning of faith been reconstituted in a world saturated with signs, simulations, and commercial desire? This section explores how *The Stone* articulates a crisis of faith rooted not in the absence of belief, but in the hyperproduction of authenticity a condition that aligns closely with Jean Baudrillard's (1994) theory of simulacra and the hyperreal.

To analyze this transformation, this section draws on Jean Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum, suggesting that the authenticity of sacred objects in *The Stone* is not anchored in metaphysical essence or intrinsic buddhakun, but instead emerges from a network of signs, expert validations, and narrative constructions. As Baudrillard (1994, p.81) argues, in a regime of simulation, representations can become "more real than the real" a hyperreality where signs refer only to other signs, severed from any original referent. The film illustrates that amulets possess no empirically verifiable power. Their perceived "realness" is constructed through three interdependent mechanisms.

First, authenticity is indexed through material and formal characteristics surface texture, color, size, weight, and visual resemblance to canonical molds associated with revered temples or monks (see figure

6). A male expert's use of a loupe in such inspection visually reinforces ocular authority and empirical appraisal. Second, these material traits are animated through miracle narratives accounts of supernatural protection, near-death experiences, and divine intervention (see figure 7). These stories, transmitted via oral tradition and viral media alike, invest the object with affective resonance and cultural capital (see also [Tambiah, 1984] on Buddhist magical narratives). Third, authenticity is institutionally ratified via expert certification. Once endorsed by a credible sian phra through signed documents, digital watermarks, or approval from Pantip marketplaces the amulet acquires sacred legitimacy (see figure 8).



Figure 6: A Male Expert Inspects an Amulet Using a Loupe, Visually Enacting Ocular Authority as a Legitimizing Performance in the Amulet Economy, Reinforcing How Empirical Appraisal Functions as a Key Mechanism in Constructing Simulated Authenticity Within a Hyperreal Market. [Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].



Figure 7: A Miracle Story in Which a Local Businessman Claims Survival From a Shooting Due to His Sacred Amulet, Illustrating How Narrative Spectacle Operates as a Potent Form of Evidence in the Amulet Trade, Transforming Personal Testimony Into a Collective Marker of Authenticity Within a Hyperreal Economy. [Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].



Figure 8: Certificate of Authenticity a Signed Document That Institutionalizes and Legitimizes the Sacred Value of a Mass-Produced Object, Exemplifying How Bureaucratic Endorsement Transforms Material Commodities Into Recognized Sacred Artifacts Within a System of Simulated Authenticity. [Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].

Together, these three elements material features, miracle stories, and expert endorsement combine to create what might be called simulated authenticity. In this system, the sacredness of an amulet no longer depends on its spiritual origin but is built through a shared agreement of signs and meanings. Jean Baudrillard (1994) calls this state hyperreality a condition where the line between the real and the representation disappears, and what we believe to be real is, in fact, just a copy of a copy. In such a world, the act of declaring something “real” holds more weight than any inherent qualities it may have. The sacred is not something we discover it is something that is officially recognized and socially accepted.

This idea plays out clearly in one of the film's key scenes. A tray of Somdej amulets each looking exactly the same becomes the center of a deadly conflict (see figure 9). Only one is said to be genuine, but no one knows which. In the chaos, Ek, a newcomer to the amulet world, quickly hides one in his mouth (see figure 10). After a violent shootout, he is the only one who survives. People then interpret his survival as proof that the amulet he took was “real.” But this belief only forms after the event it's the story that makes the amulet sacred, not the other way around. The object's meaning is shaped by what happens, not by what it originally is.

In this way, sacredness becomes performative. It is not based on religious truth, but on outcomes, emotions, and how well the story spreads. Scholars like Orsi (2005) and Meyer (2011) have shown how

belief often works this way where what matters is not doctrine, but the impact of the ritual or story itself. In today's amulet trade, value no longer depends on Buddhist teachings alone. Instead, it depends on how well an amulet fits into systems of trust and visibility: expert certificates, social media, or televised sales. Even a "fake" item can gain real value if people believe in the story around it. In Ek's case, his survival turns the unknown amulet into something powerful. If he had died, it would have meant nothing. The meaning comes after the fact. This circular logic drives the whole system. Miracle stories create authenticity, and authenticated amulets inspire more miracle stories. It's a feedback loop, where meaning is made through symbols rather than spiritual essence an endless chain of signs that refer only to each other (Barthes, 1972; Baudrillard, 1994).



Figure 9: The "Sacred Hoard" a Tray of Somdej Amulets That Becomes the Focal Point of a Violent Dispute Over Contested Authenticity, Dramatizing How Uncertainty and Scarcity Fuel Market-Driven Conflict and Underscore the Fragility of Truth Claims in the Commodified Sacred Economy. [Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].



Figure 10: "Last Man Standing" Ek Survives by Randomly Choosing an Amulet, Which Becomes Retroactively Sacred, Exemplifying How Belief Is Often Constructed After the Fact, With Narrative Outcome Transforming an Arbitrary Object Into a Recognized Source of Spiritual Power Within a Hyperreal Economy. [Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].

This moment perfectly encapsulates the dynamics of the simulacrum. The amulet becomes "real" not

through proof or provenance but through its narrative effect its role in a story of survival. In this new symbolic economy, the miracle is not a consequence of the sacred object; rather, the miracle constructs the sacred object. Sacredness becomes performative: tied to outcome and meaning-making, not to a fixed spiritual ontology. This aligns with Robert Orsi's (2005) notion of "lived religion", where belief is enacted through everyday practices, emotional investments, and socially mediated rituals rather than grounded in doctrinal truths. Similarly, Birgit Meyer (2011) highlights how religious efficacy often emerges through mediation and embodiment, rather than metaphysical origins.

This tension is further amplified in the portrayal of expert systems and public discourse. The value of an amulet is not anchored in theological criteria but in its ability to circulate within legitimating structures certificates of authenticity, social media broadcasts, and televised auctions. Even a "fake" amulet may gain legitimacy once integrated into a credible and emotionally resonant narrative. When Ek survives, his act of concealment becomes retroactively interpreted as evidence of the amulet's power. Had he died, the same object would have been dismissed as inauthentic. In this hyper-symbolic world, belief is contingent, opportunistic, and retroactive. The system of valuation is circular: miracle stories reinforce claims of authenticity, and authenticated objects generate new miracle stories. This dynamic reflects a semiotic economy of religion, where sacred value is not inherent but produced through chains of signification what Roland Barthes (1972) might describe as "second-order signification", and what Baudrillard (1994) terms hyperreality, where symbols refer only to other symbols, detaching entirely from an original referent.

Thus, *The Stone* (2025) offers a biting critique of a sacred economy shaped by the logics of late capitalism. Spirituality is not erased but restructured: amulet experts, online influencers, and collectors now operate as priests within a market-driven theology. In this system, faith is no longer a precondition for authenticity; it is the effect. As the film suggests, belief does not disappear in the face of uncertainty it adapts. But this adaptation carries new risks: violence, fraud, and existential confusion. Through its portrayal of counterfeit amulets, corrupt validators, and manufactured miracles, the film underscores the instability of belief in an era governed by signs and simulations. Borrowing from Baudrillard, we might conclude that sacredness today requires certification. Paperwork replaces prayer. This inversion prompts unsettling questions:

What becomes of the sacred when its legitimacy depends on third-party ratification? When miracles must be documented to be believed? The Stone refuses to answer directly. Instead, it dramatizes a haunting truth: in a world of simulacra, it is no longer faith that generates proof but proof that manufactures faith.

4.3. *Phra Khrueang for Sale: Sacred Objects in the Market of Belief*

In today's Thailand, sacred amulets especially *phra khrueang* are no longer confined to monastic rituals or devotional practices; they have entered the circuits of commerce, prestige, and speculation. What were once ritual objects blessed by monks and imbued with *buddhakun* through lineage and faith have now become high-end collectible objects whose value lies as much in their market appeal as in their spiritual origins? This shift reflects broader global patterns of "religious commodification," where sacred symbols are transformed into cultural goods (Einstein, 2008; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). In *The Stone* (2025), this transformation is vividly dramatized. The film presents a society where the line between faith and finance is increasingly porous, and where the worth of a sacred item hinges more on expert certification, social media narratives, and collectible prestige than on metaphysical legitimacy. The sacred object becomes a speculative commodity invested not just with spiritual hope, but with economic risk and reward.

This transformation is anchored in the figure of the *sian phra* the amulet expert who occupies a pivotal position in the contemporary sacred economy. Much like a financial broker or art dealer, the *sian phra* possesses the authority to declare what is "real," valuable, and worth collecting. Their judgment hinges not solely on physical criteria such as texture, mold, and material but also on origin stories, connections to revered monks, and miraculous narratives. These narratives, amplified through forums, televised auctions, and online platforms, confer symbolic power and elevate specific amulets to the status of high-stakes collectibles (see figure 11). In *The Stone* (2025), this dynamic is dramatized through the reappearance of a long-lost *Somdej* amulet once owned by Hia Rat (เฮียรัตน์). Its value skyrockets not because of renewed spiritual significance, but due to its backstory, perceived rarity, and speculative allure. The film critiques a system where sacred power no longer stems from cosmology, but is assembled through spectacle and storytelling.



Figure 11: An Amulet Competition That Elevates the Market Value of Sacred Objects Through Ranking and Awards, Illustrating How Symbolic Capital Is Formally Conferred and How Ritual Artifacts Are Transformed Into Marketable Commodities Within the Intertwined Economies of Faith and Commerce.

[Source: Amornsupasiri, A., & Sukhanintr, V. (Directors), 2025].

To theorize how sacred value becomes detached from religious meaning and reassembled within circuits of commerce, Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism proves illuminating. In capitalist systems, Marx argues, commodities acquire an aura of value that conceals the labor and social relations embedded in their production (Marx, 1990, p. 163). "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing," he notes, "but its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." Likewise, Thai *phra khrueang* once rooted in the ritual labor of monks and the cosmological order of *buddhakun* have become fetishized as autonomous objects of prestige. Their sacredness is no longer determined by spiritual lineage, but by logics of branding, scarcity, and third-party validation. This aura of sanctity, once cosmically grounded, is now assembled through speculation, storytelling, and spectacle. As such, the amulet no longer simply symbolizes faith it functions as a sanctified commodity, whose value is contingent, performative, and eminently tradable.

Arjun Appadurai's concept of the "thing-in-motion" further clarifies this transformation. According to Appadurai (1986), objects gain meaning not solely through intrinsic qualities but through their circulation across cultural, economic, and social networks. In this sense, amulets are not static religious artifacts but dynamic entities whose significance mutates as they move through collectors, auctions, certification channels, and social media. Their *buddhakun* becomes a mobile and contingent attribute, shaped not by sacred origins but by market trends, narrative affect, and institutional endorsement.

The film also highlights the uneasy alliance

between temples and marketplaces. In one scene, the name of a revered monk is invoked not for spiritual counsel, but to elevate the price of an amulet in a livestream sale. This moment reflects a broader concern: has spiritual legitimacy been outsourced to market mechanisms? Are monks still the arbiters of sacred value, or have they been replaced by influencers and credentialed experts? The Stone suggests that belief is not vanishing it is being rerouted. Authority now resides in a networked ensemble of actors: monks, collectors, media personalities, and auctioneers. Each performs roles in a theatrical economy of sacred validation, where consensus and circulation supersede metaphysical depth echoing Marx's aura, Appadurai's mobility, and Baudrillard's simulation. This reconfiguration invites unsettling questions. When sacred value is indexed by certificates, Instagram followers, or market price, can the spiritual essence of buddhakun survive? Or does it risk being fully absorbed into a symbolic economy where meaning is manufactured rather than revealed? The Stone leaves these questions unresolved. But in exposing the commodification of faith, it reveals a society where sacredness is not eradicated, but redefined no longer an internal truth, but a performative status negotiated through commerce, narrative, and public display. What emerges is not a loss of the sacred, but its strategic repackaging where legitimacy no longer emanates from cosmology, but is brokered through the visible, the viral, and the verifiable.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal how the sacred economy of Thai *phra khru*ang, as dramatized in *The Stone* (2025), is structured not by theological essence or ritual sanctity, but by performative systems of validation rooted in gender, symbolic capital, and media-driven spectacle. The film operates as a cultural text that renders visible the shifting dynamics of belief in late-capitalist Thai Buddhism, where legitimacy is not inherited but produced narrated, endorsed, performed.

First, the gendered structure of sacred expertise is laid bare through the figure of Mhuay, whose exclusion from male-dominated networks of amulet authentication exemplifies the continued marginalization of women in both religious and economic authority. Her strategic appropriation of masculine-coded behaviors and sacred symbols (e.g., the *palad khik*) reflects Judith Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, whereby gendered authority is not essential but enacted. Mhuay's trajectory underscores how access to sacred

legitimacy is contingent on performing within the stylistic codes of hegemonic masculinity, revealing the gendered scripts that regulate credibility within Thai popular Buddhism.

Second, the instability of authenticity is rendered visible through *The Stone's* dramatization of simulated sacredness. The amulet's value is not derived from metaphysical properties, but from narrative circulation, expert certification, and market perception. As Jean Baudrillard (1994) theorizes, in a regime of simulacra, authenticity becomes a hyperreal construct generated not from origin but from signs that refer only to other signs. In this context, belief is retroactive: it follows survival, spectacle, and emotional resonance. Faith becomes a narrative effect, not a doctrinal truth.

Third, the commodification of sacred objects is no longer an external corruption of the sacred but a constitutive force in its contemporary production. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital, the film illustrates how amulets accrue value through visibility, endorsement, and institutional recognition. Meanwhile, Marx's notion of commodity fetishism and Appadurai's theory of "things-in-motion" help frame the transformation of sacred artifacts into speculative assets. Amulets no longer circulate in purely devotional economies they move through auction houses, social media, and influencer networks, accumulating not only monetary value but symbolic prestige.

Together, these dynamics point to a broader reconfiguration of faith itself. In *The Stone*, sacredness is not dismissed or debunked it is strategically repackaged. Monks, influencers, collectors, and traders form a "networked ensemble" of actors who collectively manufacture religious authority through visible performance. Certification replaces consecration; documentation displaces doctrine. This shift does not signal the end of belief but its mutation within a system governed by market logics, visual culture, and gendered power.

This study's reliance on a single film as its primary cultural text necessarily limits the generalizability of its conclusions. While the analysis provides rich insight into mediated representations of the Thai amulet economy, it does not capture the full range of lived practices, consumer perspectives, or historical variations in sacred commodification. Future research could triangulate these findings with ethnographic observation of amulet markets, in-depth interviews with traders and collectors, and discourse analysis of social media platforms where amulet narratives circulate, thereby extending the analysis beyond cinematic representation.

This study contributes to the emerging literature on popular Buddhism, sacred economies, and media religiosity in Southeast Asia by foregrounding how cinematic representation functions as a critical space for interrogating the politics of faith and value. By bringing together cultural theory and Thai visual culture, the analysis highlights the need to rethink sacredness not as an essence to be recovered, but as a process to be understood constructed through performance, contested through representation, and negotiated within the shifting circuits of capital, media, and belief. Furthermore, the findings hold relevance for understanding global patterns of

religious commodification, from Catholic relic markets in Europe to spiritual tourism economies in South Asia, suggesting that the “certification of faith” is an increasingly transnational phenomenon shaped by intersecting forces of capitalism, media, and cultural authority. In an age where sacredness must be certified to be believed, The Stone poses a sobering question: when proof becomes the precondition of faith, what remains of the sacred? The answer, perhaps, lies not in reclaiming lost authenticity, but in understanding how belief survives through forms of negotiation, repetition, and performance even in a world saturated with signs.

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