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Champassak royal sacred Buddha images, power and political geography

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Abstract
What is the relationship between Buddha images and the legitimization of political power over space? What understandings exist amongst royals concerning regaining spatial power associated with Buddha images? This article considers these questions with a particular focus on the Champassak Royal House, a royal family that was originally spatially constituted through the territorial control it had over present-day southern Laos and some neighbouring areas. To do this, the article draws upon two case studies, one centred on an important Buddha image in the 18th century, the other more contemporary and linked to Buddha images and exiled members of the Champassak Royal House. Buddha images have long played an important role in constituting and defining sacred geographies, and thus political power, in Champassak, as has similarly been the case in other parts of mainland Southeast Asia.

Keywords
Buddha image, Laos, political power, royalty, space, territory

Introduction

The Champassak Royal House has long been closely associated with Pali (Theravada) Buddhism, from when Champassak was first established in 1713 in present-day southern Laos, under the guidance of the famous Buddhist monk, *Phra Khou Phonsamek*, or *Phra Khou Khi Home*. Even up to now, Buddhist beliefs and practices remain important to the lives of many Champassak royals, even though most now live in exile in France, the United States and Thailand, where they immigrated following the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) in 1975 (Evans, 2002). Considering the importance of Buddhism to Champassak royals and many other royal houses in mainland Southeast Asia, it is not surprising that Buddha images are often integral to ritual practices and associated imaginaries. Indeed, they frequently occupy positions that

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go well beyond simply religious ritual or devotional purposes, including playing integral roles in the governance of society (Holt, 2009; Swearer, 2004; Tambiah, 1984).

In this article, I contend that the Champassak Royal House has used and is using Buddha images to constitute sacred spaces, and that these sacred spaces represent not just religious, homiletic or liturgical space, but also political power and power with important geographical dimensions, a point also made by scholars who have considered Buddha images and ideas about power in mainland Southeast Asia (Holt, 2009; Reynolds, 1978; Stuart-Fox, 1998; Swearer, 2004; Tambiah, 1984; Terwiel, 1979). As John Holt (2009: 2) emphasizes, in relation to Laos in particular, Buddhist and religious culture is "within the vicissitudes of political history". But really, it is more about historically informed political geography; indeed, there is much to consider in relation to the geographies of Buddha images and political power. In particular, I argue that in Champassak, as elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia, important Buddha images have been constitutive of royal power, including protective metaphysical power, and thus are frequently closely associated with the legitimization of political power and the maintenance or restoration of particular political geographies (Holt, 2009; Stuart-Fox, 1998). This is linked to the belief that Buddha images store power and are protective, which Holt (2009) argues comes from spirit-cult traditions but is nevertheless frequently employed to legitimize royal power and particularly royal power over certain spaces or territories.

I draw upon two case studies that link important Pali Buddha images with sacred or metaphysically powerful spaces and political geographies associated with Champassak royals. The first relates to a particular crystal Buddha image, *Phra Phoutharoup Keo Phaleuk Met Nam Khang Bai Bone*, *Phaleuk*[1] or simply *Phra Keo Phaleuk* or *Phra Ong Khao*, which proceeded from its previous residence, the Buddhist temple in present-day Phonthong District, Champassak Province, to Bangkok in 1812. The second case study relates to a set of either three or seven Buddha images that were once in the possession of the King of Champassak, Chao Youthithamathone (Chao Khamsouk) of Champassak (reigned 1863–1899). In relaying these case studies, I consider the political geographies associated with these Buddha images, comparing to related observations elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia. The purpose of this article is to provide some new examples of the links between Buddha images and political and royal power in mainland Southeast Asia, and to illustrate some of the ways that Buddha images are linked to sacred spaces, political power, particular people and certain landscapes associated with the Champassak Royal House.

In Southeast Asian Pali Buddhism, there is a particular conceptual ontology for understanding how Buddha images gain power. First, during the casting of new Buddha images, particular chants are believed to energize them (Tambiah, 1984), as does the burning of the oldest and most sacred texts of monasteries in order to produce metal ore needed to cast the new Buddha images (Terwiel, 1979). There are also "life-giving processes" that are believed to transfer miraculous powers from older Buddha images into newer ones (Tambiah, 1984). In addition, some monks are known to sacrilege Buddha images and amulets through various ritual processes including blowing on them (Holt, 2009; Swearer, 2004; Terwiel, 1979). A certain amount of power is also believed to be transferred to Buddha images through being in the vicinity of powerful monks (Holt, 2009; Swearer, 2004; Tambiah, 1984). Finally, Buddha images are believed to inherit some fraction of the *teja*, or fiery energy, that the Buddha himself possessed (Tambiah, 1984).

1. Phra Keo Phaleuk can be defined as a crystal or crystal-like, or quartz or quartz-like Buddha image. The term can be used generally, or as a "personal" name for particular images.

Thus, we can see how Buddha images are believed to gradually and variously accumulate power and, in the particular context of Laos, Buddha images have become associated with protectiveness of royal political power for centuries including in Luang Phrabang and Vientiane (Holt, 2009; Stuart-Fox, 1998).

Since the history of Champassak and the Champassak Royal House is not generally well-known, even in Southeast Asia, for reasons that will become evident as the article progresses, the next section briefly outlines the history of the Kingdom of Champassak from before its establishment in 1713 to after Laos became a communist country in 1975 when most of the Champassak Royal House was forced into exile. I then turn to the two case studies and finally, in the article's conclusion, I reflect on how political geography is important for understanding sacred spaces and political power associated with Buddha images.

In conducting this research, I have relied on interviews, photos and other documentation provided by members of the Champassak Royal House in France, Thailand and the United States. However, I have independently evaluated these materials and maintained intellectual separation from the Champassak Royal House so as to be able to draw upon all sources available.

A brief history of Champassak

In 1713 the Champassak Royal House was established in Champassak on the west bank of the Mekong River in what is now Champassak Province in southern Laos. Chao Soisysamouth (Chao Nokasat) (reigned 1713–1737) became the first king of Champassak after *Phra Khou Phonsamek* (also known as *Phra Khou Khi Home*) negotiated with the previous queen of the area, Nang Phao (Archaimbault, 1961; Na Champassak, 1995, 2016; Stuart-Fox, 1998).

However, the real story of Champassak starts in 1695 when the famous king of Lan Xang, Chao Soulignavongsa (reigned 1638–1695), passed away in Vientiane, the capital of Lan Xang since Chao Setthathirath (lived from 1534–1571), another famous Lao king, had moved the capital there from Luang Phrabang to the north in 1560 in order to make it less vulnerable to Burmese attacks (Evans, 2002; Holt, 2009; Stuart-Fox, 1998).

When Chao Soulignavongsa died, there was no obvious heir to the throne. Chao Soulignavongsa had two sons but one had been executed for adultery and the other had fled to Ayutthaya (in present-day Central Thailand) in 1686 after he fell out of favour with his father due to allegedly having had sexual relations with his half-sister. Therefore, when Chao Soulignvongsa died and there was no obvious heir, a power struggle ensued (Evans, 2002; Holt, 2009; Stuart-Fox, 1998). However, there are somewhat different understandings with regard to how this was resolved, including amongst members of the Champassak Royal House.

One version of the story that came from an account written by Chao Youthithamathone (Khamsouk), and recounted by Chao Pangkeo Na Champassak (2016), states that after Chao Soulignavongsa died, Phaya Muang Sene took the inheritance of Chao Soulignavongsa and declared himself the king of Lan Xang. According to this version, Phaya Muang Sene wanted Chao Soulignavongsa's daughter, Chao Nang Soumangkhala, to become his wife in order to legitimize his power. However, she refused and fled to stay with the important Buddhist monk Phra Khou Phonsamek, being pregnant from Chao Ong Lo at the time. Phra Khou Phonsamek took pity on Chao Nang Soumangkhala and sent her far away to the Sangaw-Haw Kham Mountains in the Sepon area in southern Laos. Chao Ong Lo also apparently fled to Muang Phanphouxoun. Eventually Chao Nang Soumangkhala's child was born and Phra Khrou Phonsamek gave the child the name "Chao Nokasat".

According to this version, after Chao Nang Soumangkhala and Chao Nokasat returned to Vientiane, Phaya Muang Sene saw Phra Khou Phonsamek as a potentially dangerous future threat to his power because of his immense popularity with the people of Lan Xang, and planned to kill the monk. However, Phra Khou Phonsamek is reported to have learned of the plan before it was launched and decided to flee Vientiane with Chao Nang Soumangkhala, Chao Nokasat and 3000 followers. They initially travelled to Ngieu Phanh Lam-Somsan Village where Phra Khou Phonsamek decided to leave Chao Nang Soumangkhala and Chao Nokasat while he looked for an appropriate place to settle, not wanting to put them through the ordeal of a difficult journey, at least until he knew exactly where they would settle (Na Champassak, 2016).

The monk then continued south with his followers to That Phanom where he organized the rehabilitation of the famous stupa and then continued down the Chee and Mun Rivers, spending some time at Muang Phanom Phrai on his way. The group finally reached the Mekong River and then travelled further south as far as Phnom Penh in Cambodia where the monk organized the construction of the now famous Wat Phnom temple. However, the Khmer wanted to collect heavy taxes from his followers, so Phra Khou Phonsamek decided to flee back north along the Mekong River to Kratie and then eventually on to Hang Kho which is across the mouth of the Sekong River from present-day Stung Treng Town. The group then continued up the Mekong River to the Khone Falls and finally arrived at the present site of Champassak (Na Champassak, 2016). By then Chao Nokasat was a young man and so after he rejoined Phra Khou Phonsamek and his followers, the young grandson of Chao Soulignavongsa was elevated to become the first King of Champassak in 1713. He took the title of Chao Soisysamouth Phouthangkoun, or simply Chao Soisysamouth, and ruled the independent Kingdom of Champassak until his death in 1737. He was succeeded by his son, Chao Sayakoummane (reigned 1738–1791) (Archaimbault, 1961; Evans, 2009; Na Champassak, 1995, 2016).

However, during the reign of Chao Sayakoummane, Champassak lost its independence when in 1778, King Taksin of the Thonburi dynasty sent an army from Cambodia up the Mekong to take control of Champassak, Nakhorn Phanom, Nong Khai and several other small towns. This was apparently done on the pretext that the King of Champassak, Chao Sayakoummane, had failed to aid Taksin's ally, Phra Voradet (Phra Vo), a former Minister in Vientiane, when he was attacked and killed by forces loyal to Vientiane. In fact, it is likely that this was just an excuse for actually wanting to expand Siamese control in the region (Wyatt, 1963).

In any case, in 1779, as a continuation of the above campaign, Taksin's army laid siege to Vientiane and, with the help of forces provided by the royal court of Luang Phrabang, Taksin's troops were finally able to force Vientiane to surrender and thus it also became a vassal of Siam (Stuart-Fox, 2008; Wyatt, 1963). Through supporting Siam's campaign against Vientiane, Luang Phrabang also became increasingly dependent on Siam (Wyatt, 1963).

The Emerald Buddha (*Phra Keo Morakot*), which was previously held in Chiang Rai by the Lanna Royal House (Holt, 2009; Stuart-Fox, 1998; Swearer, 2004), is but one of the many Buddha images that once helped constitute sacred space and thus political power in Lanna (McDaniel, 2002; Swearer, 2004; Tambiah, 1984). This, along with the Sihing or Lion Buddha image and the Stone Buddha images, helped distribute the charisma in the Kingdom (Tambiah, 1984: 236), with the Emerald Buddha serving as the palladium, or main protective image, for many Tai monarchs (Holt, 2009; Reynolds, 1978; Stuart-Fox, 1998; Swearer, 2004; Tambiah, 1984). It is believed, however, that the Emerald Buddha abandoned Lanna and accepted the invitation of Chao Setthathirath to be moved to Luang Phrabang in 1548 because of infighting and injustices involving Lanna Royals (Holt, 2009; Tambiah, 1984). This was seemingly evidenced by an earthquake in

1545 that caused the top of Chedi Luang where the Emerald Buddha was held to fall off (see Penth, 2006), and the Lanna Kingdom itself fell to the Burmese just five years after the Emerald Buddha had left for Luang Phrabang (Grabowsky, 2005). It was then moved to Vientiane in 1563 (Holt, 2009; Rod-ari, 2010; Stuart-Fox, 1998). Similarly, due to the bad behaviour of the Vientiane Royal House, some believe that the Emerald Buddha withdrew its protective powers from Vientiane, thus giving it the sort of "supernatural agency" (Swearer, 1984) that many believe allowed it to be taken to Bangkok where it subsequently presided over the establishment of the Chakri Dynasty of Siam (Tambiah, 1984). However, the Phra Bang, another important Buddha image which also came from Lanna to Luang Phrabang (Rod-ari, 2010), allegedly did not agree to go to Bangkok and thus, when it was taken there, it allegedly caused all kinds of mental and political problems for Taksin. Peace is said to have not been restored until the Phra Bang was returned to its preferred residence. Indeed, it was taken and returned a second time in the 19th century even though the Emerald Buddha is believed to have continued to have hope for Bangkok.[2]

Although in 1778 Champassak had become a vassal of Siam, it had to deal with aggressive French behaviour aimed at gaining control of the territory during the second half of the 19th century. In 1893, the French sent troops up the Mekong from Cambodia and were successful in effectively gaining control of all the territory to the east of the river. The Siamese were also forced by a naval blockade of the mouth of the Chao Phaya River to sign away all their territories east of the Mekong including much of the territory previously under the control of Champassak (Evans, 2002; Stuart-Fox, 1998). The French were crucial in forcing the Siamese to pay much attention to establishing and securing their borders and creating what Thongchai Winichakul (1994) referred to as the "geobody" of Siam. In 1905, Champassak itself, which is on the west side of the Mekong, was also absorbed into French Laos along with what is now Xayaboury Province in northern Laos (Breazeale, 2002).

The French continued to control Champassak until 1941 when Thailand was able to take advantage of the Second World War, the support of the Japanese and a weakened French State and invade and take control of the region. This occupation continued until the end of the Second World War when, in 1947, the Thais were forced by the returning French to return to them Champassak and surrounding territories (Evans, 2002).

The new constitution that made Laos an Associated State of the French Union was promulgated in 1949 but it was not until 1953 that independence was formally obtained, and the French colonial forces finally abandoned Indochina after they were defeated at Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam in 1954 (Evans, 2002).

In 1946, Chao Boun Oum, the Prince of Champassak (served in that position 1945–1975, and died in France in 1980), signed an agreement that basically stipulated that he would recognize the Luang Phrabang Royal House as the only full royal house in Laos in exchange for being appointed Inspector Generale (*phou trouat ratchakan phen din* in Lao) of the Kingdom of Laos, a position considered number three behind the King, Chao Sisavang Vong and his Ouparat, Chao Phetsarath Ratanavongsa. Once the French were forced to give up power in the country, an independent Laos emerged with Chao Sisavang Vong as King and Chao Boun Oum as Inspector Generale (Evans, 2002, 2009).

A constitutional monarchy in Laos continued until 1975, including after a United States and Vietnamese brokered peace agreement was signed by communist and non-communist politicians in

2. Rebecca Weldon, pers. comm., October 11, 2016.

the country in early 1973. But in mid-1975 the Pathet Lao communists were able to gain control of the government and a few months later the king of Laos in Luang Phrabang, Chao Sisavang Vatthana (lived 1907–1978), was forced to abdicate (Evans, 2009). Even before then, Chao Boun Oum had fled to Thailand in mid-1975 and finally arrived in France with his family as a political refugee in 1976. The Champassak Royal House's position and recognition in Laos had effectively ended (Na Champassak, 1995, 2016).

Phra Keo Phaleuk or *Phra Ong Khao* and links with space

One of the most famous Champassak stories, undoubtedly heavily endowed with myth linked to political power and space, relates to two expert hunters and brothers named Theung and Theuang. There are various versions of the tale (see Khambone, 2014) but, according to Na Champassak (2016), in 1736 (or 1724 according to Archaimbault, 1961), during the reign of Chao Soisysa-mouth (Chao Nokasat), a hunter (possibly named Phong) reported to Phaya Senabodi, an official of the still independent kingdom of Champassak, that Theung and Theuang, who were ethnic minorities (ethnic Katang according to Khambone, 2014; called Brou by themselves) from Sompoi-Nayone Village in Muang Saphat (and Muang Vapi), had brought a very special crystal Buddha image to their village.[3] The hunter informant also explained that initially, when the brothers were out hunting on a high mountain, they felt thirsty and so sat next to a large water body near a cave. When Theung was scooping up some water he saw a glistening sparkle in the pool and put his hand into the water to try to grab what he thought was a gem, but the light emitting object went deeper and evaded him. When he took his hand out of the water the object came closer to the surface but evaded him again when he tried to grab it. This went on for some time without any success until the younger brother Theuang had an idea. He used a piece of wood with a hook at the end of it and used his newly crafted tool to successfully catch the object. When he brought it up he realized that it was in the image of a small person, so he placed it on top of a rock. The brothers slept the night there and the next day Theung tied the "small person" to a stick and carried it back to his village.[4] His wife asked where the "small person" had come from and he explained that he obtained it from the water near a cave on the mountain. Initially, the couple did not realize that the "small person" was a Buddha image as they were not Buddhists but were animists, as were most Austroasiatic language-speaking minority groups at the time, and thought it was just something that would bestow them with luck. Before Theung and Theuang went hunting, they would pray to the "small person" and when they were successful, as they always were after praying to it, they would offer some blood from the wild animals they killed and would spread it onto the mouth of the "small person". In addition, they noticed that after the "small person" came to their house their chickens no longer dared to enter and that if they dried rice with the "small person" nearby, no chickens or any other animals would come to eat the rice. They deemed it a miracle and when other villagers realized what the "small person" was capable of they brought their own rice to dry

3. Indigenous ethnic minorities, including the Lawa (Lua), have often played important roles in the mediation of animist and Buddhist beliefs in relation to the establishment and maintenance of ruling royal states (see Rhum, 1987).
4. Another version relates that one of the brothers hit an eagle with a crossbow arrow, and that the eagle flew off and perched near a cave that was emitting an intense light. The Buddha image was inside the cave (Khambone, 2014).

in the sun near the small person.[5] Later it was learned that it was actually a small crystal Buddha image (Na Champassak, 2016).

Once rumours about this miracle reached Phaya Senabodi,[6] he in turn informed the first King of Champassak, Chao Soisysamouth, who was intrigued and ordered an elder lord (*phaya* in Lao) to find the Buddha image and invite it to come to Champassak. The Buddha image came as invited and was initially accompanied by villagers from Sompoi-Nayone Village. However, when they arrived at the mouth of the Bangliang Stream, the Phaya from Champassak told the villagers that they could return to their village and that his group would continue by themselves via boat. The Phaya and his men put the Buddha image onto a boat and prepared to return to Champassak; however, soon after they started travelling along the Sedone River (which enters the Mekong River at Pakse),[7] something incredible is said to have happened. A big storm with heavy winds and huge waves suddenly came out of nowhere and tilted the boat, causing the Buddha image to slide into the water and disappear.[8] The Phaya ordered his men to search for the Buddha image for many days but nobody could find it (Khambone, 2014; Na Champassak, 2016).[9] These kinds of events seem to indicate that important Buddha images have certain degrees of agency in deciding where they want or don't want to go. In this case, the image sunk to the bottom of the river but there have also been legends about the Sihing or Lion Buddha image being able to float and drift so that someone with great merit could find it, even after the ship that was carrying it hit rocks during a bad storm (Tambiah, 1984).

When Chao Soisysamouth heard what had happened he was devastated and conducted a ritual to ask that the Buddha image come to him. Then, according to legend, suddenly something flew overhead which was believed to have been an angel. It indicated to him that he should impel the ethnic minorities from Sompoi-Nayone Village to search for the Buddha image. He was also told that if the Buddha image made it to Champassak everything would be peaceful and good for the Kingdom. This story has an important parallel with the legend of Nagara Sri Dharmaraja being guided by a dream to travel by ship to look for and eventually rescue the Sihing Buddha image, as already discussed above (Tambiah, 1984).[10] It is the accumulated merit of royals that allegedly allows them to find important Buddha images, which are in turn important for legitimating their power. In any case, Chao Soisysamouth ordered that the people from Sompoi-Nayone Village be brought to the river led by Theung and Theuang where, soon after the minorities began searching

5. According to Khambone (2014: 14), he was called the "guardian spirit of the crossbow", to protect the food and the house.
6. Some versions state that a secretary of Chao Soisysamouth named Phong received the information from his friends Theung and Theuang (Khambone, 2014).
7. According to Khamla Thiraphout's version, the Buddha image fell into the water near Saphay Village off Kho Island in the Mekong River (Khambone, 2014), while Archaimbault (1961) puts the location at the mouth of the Bangliang Stream.
8. Similar stories have been told in other parts of Laos (see Saignasith, 1990).
9. Another version of the story states that the Buddha image twice became miraculously covered with earth, thus preventing it from leaving with the King's men until Theung and Theuang were brought with the Buddha image (Khambone, 2014).
10. Khambone (2014: 15) reports that the knowledge of how to get the Buddha image back came through a dream, after Soisysamouth prayed, "If the merit I have obtained has any power, may I obtain the statue of the Buddha!".

for the Buddha image, it was found. The minorities took the Buddha image with them and continued on to Champassak (Na Champassak, 2016).

Chao Soisysamouth was overjoyed when the group arrived and was very impressed with the beauty of the Buddha image. He questioned Theung and Theuang and realized that they had inadvertently damaged the Buddha image when carrying it to their village. In particular, the right ear which was broken. He solicited craftspeople to fix it but to no avail (Na Champassak, 2016).

Chao Soisysamouth was extremely happy to have the Buddha image in Champassak. Coming across an important Buddha image like this at the beginning of his reign and at the beginning of the establishment of the Champassak Royal House was extremely fortuitous and important for political legitimation as the image became the recognized palladium of Champassak (Archaimbault, 1961, 1972; Khambone, 2014). Chao Soisysamouth organized a party to celebrate the image's arrival and the event was huge and apparently continued for seven days and seven nights, the same period of time that it took for the Buddha's enlightenment awakening to occur (Tambiah, 1984). Chao Soisysamouth also named the Buddha image *Phra Phoutharoup Keo Phaleuk Met Nam Khang Bai Bone* (see Figure 1), although it is more commonly referred to by Lao people as *Phra Keo Phaleuk* or *Phra Ong Khao*.[11] The Buddha image had indicated that it wanted to be near the ethnic minorities who originally found it, so Chao Soisysamouth ordered that they move to near where the image was to be held in what is now known as Muang Kao or Muang Phonthong, where a village named Kham Meung Village was established which also came to be known as Kha Phra Keo Village.[12] Moreover, Theung and Theuang were made the "*Nai Kong*" leader and deputy leader of the area (Na Champassak, 2016).[13]

However, Phra Keo Phaleuk only stayed in Champassak a little over 70 years. In 1811, when Phaya Kalahom informed Rama II, the King of Siam, of the image, he ordered it to be transferred to Bangkok. This occurred a year later, the reason given was that the image was sacred and should therefore not be kept in a border principality. A major religious ceremony was organized, as were many others along the path on which the Phra Keo Phaleuk was brought to the royal palace in Bangkok. Once it arrived, another seven-day and seven-night ceremony was organized to welcome the auspicious Buddha image to Bangkok (Na Champassak, 2016).[14] In addition, according to some members of the Champassak Royal House, some of the ethnic minorities who lived near where the Buddha image had been kept in Champassak were apparently obliged to accompany Phra Keo Phaleuk to Bangkok and take up residence. A number of prominent people in Laos have confirmed that Phra Keo Phaleuk is presently being kept in the Dusit Palace in Bangkok (Khambone, 2014), and have expressed their opinion that it should be returned to Laos.[15]

11. In Thailand, this same Buddha image is presently known as Phra Phutthabutrat Jakphanphimlomnimai (**พระพุทธบุษยรัตน์จักรพรรดิพิมลมณีมัย**). The name changed during King Rama IV of Siam's reign (Chao Pangkeo Na Champassak, pers. comm., October 14, 2016). It is also known as Phra Keo Phaleuk Mok or the "the crystal Buddha that pierces the mist" (Khambone, 2014: 16).
12. According to another version, only four Katang families, led by Theung, Theuang, Sene Kom and Sene Kang, initially agreed to move with the Buddha image to Phonthong, where they established Sompoi-Nayone Village (Khambone, 2014).
13. The Kingdom of Champassak developed important ritual relations with the ethnic minorities, especially in relation to its boat races (Archaimbault, 1972).
14. Later, the King Rama II of Siam ordered a number of improvements to the Buddha image, including casting a base for it, and King Rama IV conducted a special rite for it (Khambone, 2014).
15. Sisaliao Svengsuksa, pers. comm., Vientiane, December 7, 2006.

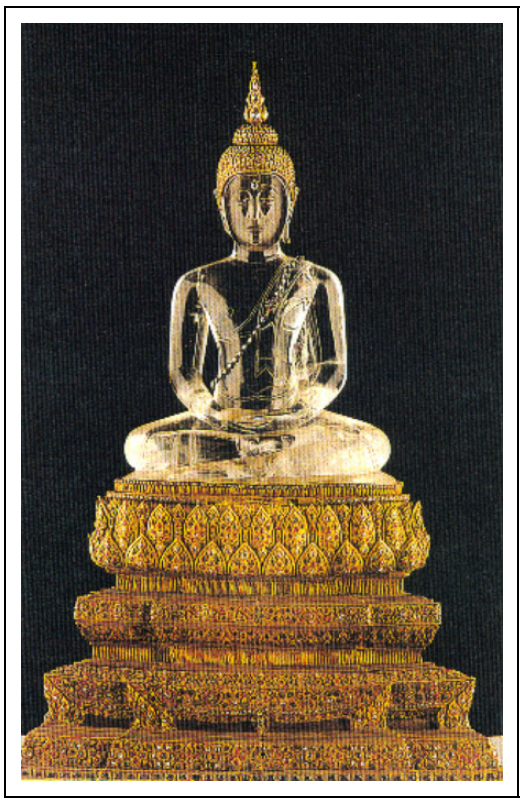


Figure 1. Phra Phoutharoup Keo Phaleuk Met Nam Khang Bai Bone or Phra Keo Phaleuk or Phra Ong Khao (date unknown; photo taken in Bangkok, Thailand).

Later, Prince Damrong Rachuanuphap of Siam believed that the Crystal Buddha was the same as that mentioned in the Yonok Chronicles. According to legend, an Arahand had obtained a large piece of pure crystal from Chanthevabouth and had ordered the Buddha image commissioned by Phra Vissanoukam. When the statue had been completely finished, four Buddha relics were embedded in it: one each in the forehead, the sternum, the mouth and the hair. This statue was reportedly in Lavo for a long time until the moment when Kasisuthep founded the city of Haripunchay in Lanna and asked Chammathevi, the daughter of Lavo, to reign over the city. Queen Chammathevi requested the Crystal Buddha image and invited it to reside in the city of Haripunchay, where it stayed until 1467 when it was believed to have been invited to Chiang Mai along with the Emerald Buddha. It allegedly resided there for 84 years until King Setthathirath invited it to Luang Phrabang in the year 1551, again along with the Emerald Buddha. Some years later when King Setthathirath moved his capital to Vientiane he ordered that only the Emerald Buddha be invited. It was also proposed that since the city was already under threat, someone may have fled with the image and hid it in a cave in the mountain of Sompoi-Nayone, where it resided for less than 100 years (Khambone, 2014). However, Khambone (2014) is sceptical of this story, stating that there is no record of this Buddha image ever having been moved to Luang Phrabang from Chiang Mai, and implying that Prince Damrong linked the Crystal Buddha to this story in order to justify its presence in Bangkok.

Whatever the origins of the Crystal Buddha might be, the key to this story is that initially Chao Soisysamouth desired to expand his royal power in Champassak by moving the important Crystal Buddha image, Phra Keo Phaleuk or Phra Ong Khao, to the centre of his kingdom. This was no easy matter, but eventually it became possible due to the divine assistance that he received from angels (or a dream), and only then could he effectively "invite" the Buddha image to be near him. Another aspect was that only through bringing the ethnic minorities with it was the powerful Buddha image able to come to stay in Champassak. Once there, the special Crystal Buddha image constituted Champassak with sacred power, which was crucial for increasing the political power of the Kingdom because crystal Buddha images are considered to be the most sacred Buddha images, the palladiums of kingdoms. Here we can see how Phra Keo Phaleuk was important for the political geography of Champassak, as has been the case for other important Buddha images in the region (Holt, 2009; Reynolds, 1978; Swearer, 2004; Tambiah, 1984).

However, in 1811, Bangkok wanted to increase its own political power through having this important Buddha image at its political apex in the city, and so an excuse was made to "invite" it from the margins of Siamese space to stay in its centre (Khambone, 2014). This was a crucial time for power relations in the region, as Siam was competing with Vietnam for control over Cambodia at the time and the political geography was clearly crucial.

This was not the first time that Siam had moved an important Buddha image from Laos to Bangkok in order to help constitute the sacred space that was crucial for the Chakri Dynasty's political power. The Emerald Buddha had also been moved to Bangkok, apparently for the same reason, and the temple Wat Phra Kaew, or more properly a Royal Pantheon, was built in the palace in 1783 specially to house the Buddha image after it was brought from Vientiane to Bangkok. This Royal Pantheon and the Emerald Buddha created a sacred space for the absolute monarchy of the Chakri kings (Holt, 2009; Rod-ari, 2010; Stuart-Fox, 1998; Swearer, 2004; Tambiah, 1984). Phra Keo Phaleuk, although not nearly as well-known as the Emerald Buddha, was moved to Bangkok for the same reason, where the Buddha image was expected to increase the sanctity of royal space and thus increase the authority that came from Buddhism for advancing royal power, something unlike the role of Pali Buddha images in Sri Lanka. That could not be done without having the Buddha image close to the centre of power, because it was intended that the sanctity of royal power was linked to particular spaces under royal control.

Bringing Champassak Buddha images together

The second case study also brings together Buddha images, sacred space and political power in relation to Champassak, but is more contemporary than the first story presented. Moreover, it is even more effective in demonstrating the importance of Buddha images in constituting sacred spaces essential for gaining political royal power over space or territory.

According to some, Chao Youthithamathone (or Chao Khamsouk), the King of Champassak at the time that French Laos was created in 1893 (see Figure 2), had three[16] small crystal Buddha images in his house at the time of his death in 1899 (Baird, 2013a; Na Champassak, 1995, 2016). Some members of the Champassak Royal House believed that there were actually seven important

16. Chao Thavone Na Champassak, pers. comm., Concord, North Carolina, January 4, 2016; Chao Pangkeo Na Champassak, pers. comm., September 19, 2016; Chao Heuan Bounnyom Khamsy, pers. comm., Vientiane, July 9, 2012.



Figure 2. Chao Youthithamathone (Chao Khamsouk) (date unknown).

Buddha images and not just three.[17] Indeed, the numbers three, seven and nine are frequently included in stories related to sacred Buddha images or amulets (Tambiah, 1984). Upon the King's death, one of his children of his first wife apparently came to Champassak and took his inheritance back with her to Ubon Ratchathani (except for his clothes, since she was a woman); however, his three main Buddha images were not part of the inheritance, Chao Youthithamathone having hidden them in various locations in his house (palace, or *Khoum* in Lao). The Buddha images, known as *Phra Keo Nam Yat* or *Phra Keo Nam Kham*, were eventually found and each of the three were given to one of his children, Chao Raxadanai (Chao Nyouy) (reigned 1903–1945), Chao Sakpraseuth (Chao Ouy) and Chao Heuan Nying Sangvankham (Na Champassak, 2016) (see Figures 3 and 4).[18]

When Laos became communist in 1975, the Buddha images and their owners became dispersed around the world (Evans, 2009) and some members of the Champassak Royal House have come to believe, since 1975 and particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, that if all these sacred Buddha images could be brought together in a single space the Royal House would regain its former power and glory over the territory of Champassak. This is where the link between Buddha images, sacred

17. Chao Sakda Na Champassak, pers. comm., Paris, August 3, 2013.
18. Confirmed by Chao Nang Bounchom Phraxixiengmay, pers. comm., Paris, August 11, 2013.

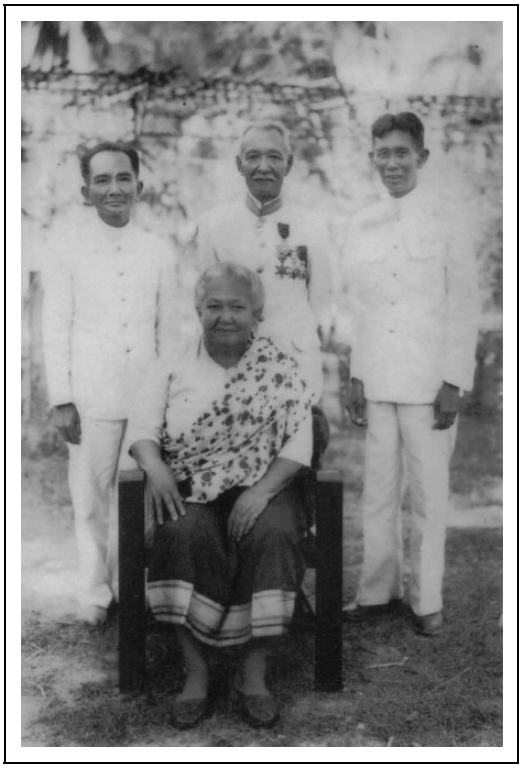


Figure 3. Chao Chouy, Chao Nyouy (Chao Raxadanai), Chao Boua (left to right) and Chao Heuan Nying Sangvankham (sitting) (date unknown).

space and political power becomes most obvious and where the Champassak belief aligns with similar ideas from other parts of mainland Southeast Asia. For example, Tambiah (1984) explained how various kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia claimed legitimacy through the possession of important Buddha images, thus constituting an important aspect of political geography. For example, in Lan Xang in Luang Phrabang, the Emerald Buddha and the Sinhala Buddha, two other important Buddha images, were initially put in close proximity to each other in order to increase the political legitimacy and power of the monarch. In many ways these images were "repositories of power" (Tambiah, 1984: 203), and in northern Thailand and Laos their presence at different locations ritually legitimated and allowed for loose hegemony to occur (Holt, 2009; Stuart-Fox, 1998; Swearer, 2004).

The prophecy of the three or seven Champassak Buddha images needing to come together is not well-known outside the Champassak Royal House, but many of those within the inner circle of the family are aware of this prophecy and it has become particularly important recently as the Champassak Royal House no longer has control of territory to legitimate itself. As such, one could argue that the bringing together of Buddha images to reconstitute power is a sort of messianic way of reconstituting state space. Although nobody has been able to unify the family enough to bring all the Buddha images together, at least not all seven, it appears that nobody even knows where they are all located. However, three of the key Buddha images were gathered together temporarily in France some years ago (see Figure 5).



Figure 4. Chao Sakpraseuth (Chao Ouy) in northern Thailand when he was the Inspector General of Monthon Phayap (the province of northern Thailand) (after 1905; provided by anonymous granddaughter).



Figure 5. Three key Buddha images that were formerly owned by the King of Champasak, Chao Youthithamathone. Chao Heuan Nying Sangvankham's image is on the left, Chao Raxadanai's image is in the middle and Chao Sakpraseuth's image is on the right (mid-2000s, provided by Chao Keuakhoun Na Champassak).

Although the Buddha images in question are relatively small in size, they are considered sacred and priceless and, because they are so valuable and important to those who control them, their present location is unknown to all but a few people. The images themselves are believed to be powerful in a protective way and those in possession of them fear that if this information became widely known they might be stolen. Moreover, the present possessors also believe that the communist Lao government is searching for them in order to tap the power of these sacred Buddha images for their own political purposes. As one man iterated, "The Lao government has been looking hard for them [the Buddha images], they really want to get them".[19]

The first of the Buddha images was kept by Chao Raxadanai (Chao Nyouy), the successor of Chao Youthithamathone although with much less power than his father, until he died in 1946. This image was previously used in the "*heu bouang souang*" ritual in order to attract rain at the beginning of the monsoon season. His son, Chao Bounhom Na Champassak, obtained this Buddha image upon Chao Raxadanai's death and kept it secret in his father's house or palace for many years, but in 1975, when the communists gained control of the country, he was afraid that the Pathet Lao might find the Buddha image. Consequently, he gave it to a relative who lived a simple life as a farmer, and many years later that relative passed on the sacred Buddha image to other family members.

The second of the Buddha images was transferred from Chao Youthithamathone to his influential daughter, Chao Heuan Nying Sangvankham, who later transferred it to General Phasouk Soratchaphak (Samly) for protection when he went to battle against Pathet Lao and Vietnamese communists. It is alleged that General Phasouk gave the Princess 20,000 kip in return, a sizeable sum at the time, although it would have been inappropriate for him to have been considered to have "purchased" the Buddha image. Instead, he provided money to help her but not in direct exchange for the Buddha image. However, when one of Chao Heuan Nying Sangvankham's sons, Chao Iang Na Champassak, a man notorious for being a "*nak leng*" or a gangster-like figure, learned that General Phasouk had been given the image, he became enraged and said that he would kill anyone who took possession of the Buddha image, on the grounds that it was his by right. Two months after he obtained the Buddha image, General Phasouk returned it to Chao Heuan Nying Sangvankham on the recommendation of his mother, who passed it on to Chao Iang.[20] After the communists took control of Laos, Chao Iang fled with the Buddha image to Ubon Ratchathani in Thailand where he became a well-known mafia figure.

Some drama occurred in Ubon in the 1980s when Chao Iang was sick and needed an operation in Bangkok and left the valuable Buddha image in his house where it was vulnerable to theft. Chao Iang asked his nephew Chao Pangkeo to get the Buddha image from his house and look after it for him because his son, Chao Sinsamouth (Chao Ke), was in France. However, Chao Pangkeo was worried that he might be blamed for stealing the Buddha image so asked someone to make a video of him breaking into Chao Iang's house to obtain it. It was easy to take the window off and enter the house to get the Buddha image; however, despite his good intentions and the precautions he took to avoid being accused of wrongdoing, misunderstandings still emerged in France when Chao Sinsamouth saw the video. He even wrote an angry three-page letter to Chao Pangkeo accusing him of trying to gain control of the Buddha image so he could increase his own political power.

19. Anonymous interview with member of Champassak Royal House, July 2013.
20. Chao Heuan Nying Bounlonh Na Champassak, pers. comm., Paris, August 15, 2013.

Chao Pangkeo responded that Chao Sinsamouth need not worry because he planned to give it to him later but only in front of Chao Iang, which resolved the matter.[21]

Chao Sinsamouth suffered financial problems in the 1990s, so after Chao Iang had died he gave the Buddha image to another relative who gave him some money, although officially the two transactions were separate,[22] the buying and selling of powerful Buddha images being prohibited.[23]

Years later, after Chao Sinsamouth had moved back to Ubon Ratchathani, he was assassinated for unclear reasons. He was apparently not wearing his protective Buddha image[24] when he was shot, being said to be resistant to bullets when he wore his Buddha image, something that was also said to be the case for Chao Iang when he was alive.[25]

The third Buddha image was controlled by Chao Sakpraseuth (Chao Ouy), Chao Raxadanai's brother, after his father Chao Youthithamathone died in 1899 (see Figure 6). Chao Sakpraseuth took the Buddha image to Siam (Thailand), and after retiring many years later brought it back with him to Champassak. Upon his death, his daughter Chao Heuan Opsonevady found the Buddha image on his body. It was recognized to be a very powerful Buddha image and she dared not keep it in her possession, so gave it to a trusted Buddhist monk at Vat Pa Thammanimit in Houay Nam Sai Village, about 10 km from Pakse on the way to Paksong, to look after. This temple was established with the support of Chao Sakpraseuth.[26]

However, when the Pathet Lao communists were in the process of taking over the country in 1975, Chao Heuan Opsonevady went to Vat Pa Thammanimit, retrieved the Buddha image and gave it to her 12-year-old son, who took it out of Laos when the family fled to Thailand. She gave it to him to carry because it was believed that only males could keep such powerful Buddha images in their possession. He eventually made it to France, although the Buddha image is no longer in his possession.[27]

Although the three main Buddha images of Chao Youthithamathone have already been discussed above, some members of the Champassak Royal House believe that there are seven special Buddha images, not three, and that all seven need to come together in order for power in Laos to be returned to the Champassak Royal House. According to one member of the Royal House, the seven Buddha images will come together when the time is right and he believes that it is not necessary to know in advance when that time will come. According to this apocalyptic or eschatological view, the Buddha images are in themselves not crucial. Instead, it is the behaviour of the people who control them that is important. In other words, the Buddha images will be made sacred through the behaviour of the people who control them.[28]

21. Chao Pangkeo Na Champassak, pers. comm., February 2017.
22. Chong Lak, pers. comm., Paris, August 9, 2013; Soutsakhone Na Champassak, pers. comm., Rockford, Illinois, September 28, 2014.
23. At present, the disrespect associated with buying and selling Buddha images is often avoided through "renting" Buddha images.
24. This was a different Buddha amulet, not associated with the Buddha image of Chao Youthithamathone he received from Chao Iang.
25. Orain Pheuiphat, pers. comm., Ubon Ratchathani, July 2, 2013.
26. Chao Nang Bounchom Phraxixiengmay, pers. comm., Paris, August 11, 2013. The image was kept by Achan Deng.
27. Chao Nang Bounchom Phraxixiengmay, pers. comm., Paris, August 11, 2013.
28. Chao Sakda Na Champassak, pers. comm., Paris, August 3, 2013.

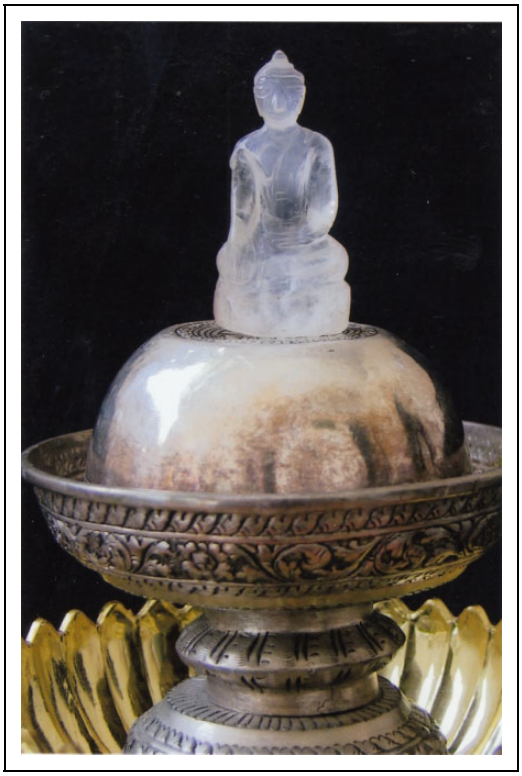


Figure 6. One of the three Buddha images formerly owned by Chao Youthithamathone and later owned by his son Chao Sakpraseuth. It is also known as Phra Keo Phaleuk, although it is not the same Buddha image that was brought to Champassak during the time of Chao Soisysamouth (photo provided by anonymous owner).

The fourth small emerald Buddha image is believed to have originally belonged to Chanhpheng and is now thought to be with a member of the Champassak Royal House in the United States, although its exact location is not known. It was also rumoured that there were once two important Buddha images in the palace in Champassak, and that both were given to a member of the family for safekeeping. Some think that while one of those was eventually given to one of the children of Chao Raxadanai, the other, or fifth Buddha image, is with Chao Singto Na Champassak in France, although he strongly denies that he possesses it. He claims that Chao Phetphoumy, the son of Chao Boun Ome Na Champassak,[29] had become a monk after his father was killed when a grenade was tossed into the car he was in in Vientiane in May 1975, not long before the communists began taking control of the country. As the political situation continued to deteriorate, Chao Phetphoumy apparently went to the palace in Champassak before fleeing to Thailand where he met Chao Bounhom, who is alleged to have given him one of the Buddha images to take with him. Once he arrived in Ubon Ratchathani in Thailand he wanted many people in his family to know that he had

29. Chao Boun Ome was Chao Boun Oum's brother.



Figure 7. Chao Sakprasith (Chao Beng Kham) in northern Thailand (sometime after 1905, source unknown).

the Buddha image. Chao Heuan Nying Sodachanh, a daughter of Chao Raxadanai, desired it so he passed it on to her and later, after Chao Sanhprasith (Sith) Na Champassak fled from reeducation camp in 1981, she gave it to him (her brother), as he wanted to use it as protection when he led the anti-communist Lao resistance in Ubon (see Baird, 2012; Na Champassak, 2010).[30] However, some also believe that Chao Heuan Nying Sodachanh could not control the power of the Buddha image, and so gave it to someone else who could.[31] According to Chao Singto, the remaining Buddha image was given to his father who later told Singto that whomever held the *3 phra xieng*, or three special Buddha images, would rule Champassak. He also told his son that the communist Pathet Lao were looking for the Buddha image because they allegedly wanted to induce rainfall at the beginning of the monsoon season. Later, he gave it to Chao Heuan Nying Sodachanh who has since passed away after which time it fell into the hands of another relative. It then became unclear as to where the Buddha image was. Some thought it was with relatives of Chao Iang based in Ubon Ratchathani, and the partner of one Champassak royal in France, who is himself a *Mo Dou*, or soothsayer, even came to Ubon to search for the Buddha image.[32]

Some believe that Chao Sakprasith (Chao Beng Kham) (see Figure 7) must have had his own important Buddha image, but it is unclear what happened to it. However, in the 1990s Chao Nang

30. Chao Singto Na Champassak, pers. comm., Metz, August 22, 2013.
31. Chao Pangkeo Na Champassak, pers. comm., September 19, 2016.
32. Chao Prasobsak Na Champassak, pers. comm., Ubon Ratchathani, June 20, 2014.

Bounchom Phraxixiengmay, the granddaughter of Chao Sakpraseuth, was visiting the National Museum in Kamphaeng Phet Province in Thailand and saw a small Buddha image on display that was recorded as having originated in Champassak.[33] This could possibly have been Chao Sakprasith's Buddha image, but this has not been confirmed. Efforts in October 2016 to find records of Buddha images originating from Champassak at the Kamphaeng Phet National Museum were unsuccessful; no records could be found that fit the description in the database of the museum.[34]

There is also one more powerful Buddha image that another member of the Na Champassak family supposedly has in France, but it is apparently not a "Champassak Buddha image". The image used to belong to Chao Iang, who gave it to a relative to protect him during armed insurgent resistance activities in Laos after 1975,[35] although it is unclear where it is now.

The idea that spatially converging Buddha images can return power to Champassak royals is important. There is a belief that if the conditions existed that brought them materially together, that would indicate that members of the royal house had been able to cooperate sufficiently to achieve this goal. Conversely, it is deemed important to have the sacred Buddha images physically together in order to metaphysically restore spatial power to the Champassak Royal House. In many ways the politics and spatiality of exile politics and religion have intersected, which somewhat parallels what McConnell (2013) has written about in relation to the politics of reincarnation amongst exiled Tibetans in India, but also circumstances in other countries in mainland Southeast Asia (Holt, 2009; Stuart-Fox, 1998; Swearer, 2004).

Eventually, three of the key Buddha images from Chao Youthithamathone were temporarily brought together in France (see Figure 5). Chao Sith Na Champassak, the leader of the Champassak Royal House in the 1990s and also someone strongly hostile to the communist government in Laos, was apparently especially interested in bringing the sacred Buddha images together as he wanted to use them to regain political power in Laos. He hoped that doing this might lead to the Champassak Royal House regaining power over Champassak. At the time, beeswax was actually used to physically connect the Buddha images.[36] However, communist control over Laos has not declined since then, bringing the efficacy of the plan into question. This may have resulted in the second theory that seven and not three images need to come together to lead to the desired political result. In any case, many in the Royal House of Champassak who live outside of Laos continue to believe that these sacred Buddha images are politically important for regaining control of the territory.

This belief can also be assessed based on other Buddha ideas. For example, the belief included in the *Anagatavamsa* is important, that at the end of this Buddha era all of the relics of the Buddha would reassemble magically at Buddha Gaya (in India where the Buddha gained enlightenment) and form the new body of the future Buddha Maitreya (Minayeff, 1886). Thus, the Champassak belief can appear to be linked to a broader apocalyptic or eschatological view, rather than simply the private hopes of displaced royals. Thus, the Champassak belief would appear to be another important example of the political appropriation of a popular mythic belief.

33. Chao Nang Bounchom Phraxixiengmay, pers. comm., Paris, August 11, 2013.
34. Charly Mehl, pers. comm., Bangkok, October 3, 2016.
35. Chong Lak, pers. comm., Paris, August 9, 2013.
36. Chao Pangkeo Na Champassak, pers. comm., September 19, 2016.

Conclusions

Buddha images from Champassak, as with other important Buddha images in mainland Southeast Asia, have long been considered to have important links to political power. In the case of Phra Keo Phaleuk, having the Buddha image spatially near the royal power, either in Champassak or later in Bangkok, and situated on the territory that was associated with that royal power, was deemed very important for the political success of both the Champassak and later the Chakri Houses.

The second study especially helps us to realize the importance of geography in relation to Buddha images in that various members of the Champassak Royal House who live in France, Thailand and the United States believe that bringing together either three or seven important Buddha images could potentially result in the Champassak Royal House regaining political power in Champassak and Laos. The links between Buddha images, sacred space and political power and geography are important as with elsewhere in the region, even if this issue has never been explicitly considered in relation to Champassak (except for Baird, 2013b). It has long been considered that Buddha images are crucial for constituting sacred spaces, including royal ones (Holt, 2009; Reynolds, 1978; Stuart-Fox, 1998; Swearer, 2004; Tambiah, 1984), and thus that they constitute fields of power associated with particular landscapes and political power over those landscapes, including ones linked to Champassak. This study shows how similar ideas persist to the present day, and we can see how Buddha images and their power are ultimately closely associated with political power and geography.

Crucially, because of the continued belief in spirit-cults amongst many Lao people (see Holt, 2009), there are crucial links between Buddha images and political power over space, ones that extend to present-day beliefs and political spaces, including in relation to the political geography of the House of Champassak and links between royal power and the legitimisation of political space. This is partially why Buddha images are taken so seriously in mainland Southeast Asia; they do not only represent power but also collect and disperse this power as well as legitimising rule and control.

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