



## The Diviner and the Billionaire:

Wealth as Mystery in  
Buddhist Thailand

Bangkok Lights. PC: Anton Stroganoff.

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*A Bangkok roadside diviner examines two luxurious skyscrapers along the river. He believes that they were erected by Thailand's largest corporation, the CP Group (Zheng Da in Chinese), on the instructions of their formidable in-house diviners. The master replicates a Buddhist discourse, according to which wealth flows naturally to those who can unlock the secrets of the cosmos.*

**T**he roadside diviner (*mo du*) raises his eyes from the scribble of astrological calculations. He stares into the night sky: beyond the pointy roof of a shrine, beyond the slow dance of traffic lights suffused in exhaust, beyond the confusing smile of a young woman on the backlit sign of a massage parlour. He conjures up two elegant skyscrapers erected a few kilometres away on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River. One contains full-service apartments reminiscent of suites of luxury hotels; the other, condominiums for sale. Both buildings are very 'hi-so', the diviner reassures me, with state-of-the-art fitness facilities and swimming pools overlooking the river. Topped by golden spires that light up at night, they glitter brighter and higher than any other building on the same skyline.

The property, among the most luxurious in Bangkok, is not only a masterpiece of engineering, stresses the master. Inaugurated on an auspicious day and time, it is also the result of brilliant divination. In fact, in his narrative, good architecture and good divination are two sides of the same coin. Working in tandem, they direct the flow of wealth into the pockets of landlords and tenants alike.

‘Have you ever seen the towers?’ he asks. They are not straight like ordinary skyscrapers. Instead, they are round, slightly pointed. The shape, he argues, is a clever innovation designed to keep all ‘bad things’ (*sing mai di*) away, leaving those who own or live in the buildings unscathed. I ask if this logic replicates the round mirrors that people hang outside houses and shops facing three-way junctions (*sam yaek*)—notorious crossroads of evil spirits (*phi*). The mirrors, with their round surfaces, bounce the spirits back on to the streets, preventing them from entering. The master nods. All of this, he declares, is good ‘*huang jui*’ (*fengshui*), a divinatory technique imported by Teochew Chinese immigrants (Wasana 2019).

Keeping bad influences away is not enough, however. Good divination must also generate wealth. Thus, the skyscrapers were built on a tiny piece of land, referred to by those in the know as the ‘belly of the dragon’ (*thong mangkon*). In that precise spot, the Chao Phraya River darts like the unruly dragons of Chinese mythology, creating the belly, evocative of abundance. Promotions feature images of the Chao Phraya River as a flow of golden lava, swelling to the base of the complex, streaming upwards to inundate the towers. This is a paradise of wealth—a far cry from the muddy riverbanks below, where tourists snap selfies against a backdrop of wooden shanties.

## Corporate Divination

‘Some people say divination (*kan du duang*) is not true,’ states the master, smiling. ‘They say it’s superstition (*gnom gnai*)! But look at the

owner of the towers: the CP tycoon (*jao sua si pi*). He is the richest man in Thailand, and he uses the services of diviners all the time!’ The man continues, his speech getting more heated. ‘He is not stupid (*mai go*). All of the richest men in Thailand use the services of diviners. And they are not stupid.’



Dhanin Chearavanont, Senior Chairman of Charoen Pokphand Group Co. Ltd. PC: [cpgroupglobal.com](http://cpgroupglobal.com).

The tycoon’s name, too powerful for a roadside diviner to utter in full (Gray 1992), is Dhanin Chearavanont. Of Chinese descent, Dhanin does not precisely own the skyscrapers as the master would have it. Senior chairman of the Charoen Pokphand Group (CP), a corporate conglomerate of truly unimaginable wealth (see Backman 1999, 65–79; Handley 2003), he remains, however, the wealthiest businessman in Thailand (Forbes 2020). CP, the country’s largest private corporation (The Business Times 2018), is a household name. It dominates the market of primary goods from poultry to pork, operates more than 10,000 7-Eleven stores (Bangkok Post 2017), controls the telecommunications giant True Group, and much, much more (Handley 2003). A top world conglomerate, CP has investments in 21 countries, including China. Known locally as

‘Zheng Da’ (正大), it proudly holds the Chinese corporate registration number ‘0001’ (Charoen Pokphand Group, n.d.).

In Thailand, rumours of CP’s extraordinary use of divination abound. As would be expected of a Thai firm doing business of such magnitude, astrologers (*nak horasat*) clearly set the most auspicious dates and times for the corporation’s calendar of events. CP’s hires, it is said—including those at managerial levels—are decided by human resource officers paired with a select team of diviners. Astrologers check candidates’ birthdates, compiling profiles on their true character, abilities, and future potential. Specialists in *ngo heng*, a Chinese divinatory discipline based on the reading of physiognomy, sit in on job interviews so as to observe the candidates’ facial features, a master’s score above 80 percent being necessary to make it to the next stage of recruitment.

## Fortune-Telling and the Quest for Money

Confirmed in part by Thananurak Jarusakul, a diviner who claimed to work for CP (Sutthikhun 2008), these rumours may not be entirely true. That said, they are credible enough to be repeated. Unstated but taken for granted, Thailand’s wealthiest consult obsessively with diviners. Newspapers routinely feature stories of notable businesspeople, politicians, and media personalities following the often deliciously eccentric advice of some trusted master. The intent of these articles is to elicit surprise—hilarity, even—at the extent to which the powerful believe in divination. Yet, the same reports also spark interest in what the practice seems to achieve in the realm of accumulation, reinforcing its appeal to people from all walks of life.

Scholars argue that, as neoliberal policies exacerbate precarity worldwide, the accumulation of wealth becomes a mystery (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Puzzled by an

unpredictable economy, apparently governed by obscure laws and entities, people resort to the familiar occult to achieve stability. Operating in new realms of the unknown, religious practitioners in turn respond by marketing ad-hoc ritual services. Invoking special powers, secret knowledge, and privileged access to divinity, they promise to fulfil the financial ambitions of the truly faithful in exchange for a fee.

The Thai market of the occult has been visibly on the rise since the end of the Cold War (Jackson 2014). Still known to tourists by the eyebrow-raising catchphrase the ‘land of smiles’, the kingdom, after all, is plagued by the biggest income gap in the world, with 1 percent of the population controlling 66.9 percent of the country’s wealth (Macan-Markar 2019). In Buddhist temples, saffron-clad monks, the assumed epitome of religious orthodoxy, specialise in the production of amulets (*phra khruang*) that attract cash to their lucky owners. In slums, spirit mediums (*rang song*) become possessed in order to reveal winning lottery numbers to fervent disciples (*luk sit*). Along roadsides, diviners proliferate at night, aspiring to make their way to the marbled hallways of companies like CP. A thriving economic sector in its own right, divination boasts astronomic figures: according to a study conducted by Kasikorn Bank, in 2005, Thai people spent 4,000 million baht (roughly 132 million USD) on fortune-telling, excluding related ritual services (Kasikorn Research Center 2005). The same amount was spent, earlier in 2020, to move all overhead electricity cables underground in some areas of Bangkok: a public project hailed as the fifth most expensive of the year (Thailand Government Spending 2020).

## Buddhist Wealth

International discourse generally depicts the accumulation of wealth as being in opposition to Buddhist morality. Yet this is a gross



A Thai fortune-teller's table. PC: Thaths.

simplification if not outright Orientalism. Dominant Thai discourse is that wealth, along with all other good things, flows naturally to moral people (see Lotus Happiness 2017), those whose actions (*kan kratham*) align with the Dharma (*thamma*). Particularly since Thailand's entry into the war against communism in Indochina, success in capitalist domains—very much like the Protestantism of Max Weber (1958)—has crystallised as a sign of elevated moral standing, the 'fruit' (*phon*) of meritorious past action (*bun barami*) (Gray 1986). The late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946–2016), worshipped as '*thammaracha*' (a monarch who rules in accordance with the Dharma) and regarded as the most meritorious being in the kingdom, thus became, as it turned out, the world's richest royal (Puangchon 2018). Enormous wealth flowed to him from obscure sources indeed, as if by magic (Handley 2006, 363–93).

In Theravada Buddhism, the Dharma, i.e. the Buddha's teachings and the reality they describe, is the ultimate cosmic law. Because the cosmos is believed to be subject to impermanence (*anijja*), the rules that govern it are in a state of flux, requiring constant study to identify new formations (Siani 2018). It is here that diviners come into play. As morally suspect figures, with their abstruse calculations, they seek to unlock the secrets of a fluctuating

cosmic-cum-economic order, the prescriptions they offer up to clients (*luk kha*) addressing the most efficacious ways to 'make merit' (*tham bun*) under always uncertain circumstances: specific prayers, say, rather than exotic rituals. The Dharma constituting at once a moral and natural law, these prescriptions align action with the natural/supernatural, identified as the course of celestial bodies and auspicious moments.

## A Roadside Master Learns, Then Teaches

Roadside practitioners view more distinguished colleagues with a mix of admiration and envy, analysing their work in the hopes of gaining insight into distinct tricks and techniques. Diviners who help billionaires make money, it is reasoned, must necessarily know more of the perfect alignment of action and cosmos than those who advise mere labourers and white-collar workers. Hence, for an ambitious roadside master, two skyscrapers on the Chao Phraya River become the ultimate case study. A former monk, he is always on the lookout for new ways to satisfy his customers.

Some might think that what he does—advising others on how to make money—is quite lowly; improper, even, for one who used to don the saffron robes. From his perspective, however, things look quite different. 'People assume diviners are only here to tell people's fortunes,' he concludes, referencing a discourse common among his colleagues. 'In fact, what we teach is the Dharma.' ■

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 5, Issue 2, 2020*,  
edited by Ivan Franceschinim and Nicholas Loubere, published 2020 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.16](https://doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.16)