

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE “CHANGING PRAYER” PROPOSED TO  
CHAW PHO SRINAKHON TAO OF THUNG KULA RONGHAI  
AFTER 1957-PRESENT\*

ความเปลี่ยนแปลง “คำขอ” ต่อเจ้าพ่อศรีนครเตา ในอาณาบริเวณพื้นที่ทุ่งกุลาร้องไห้  
ในช่วงหลังปี 2500–ปัจจุบัน

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## Abstract

The article aimed to reveal the changing representation of the “prayer” the local community people in “Thung Kula Ronghai” proposed to the ritual ghost of “Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao” from the periods of 1957 to 2017.C.E. Therefore, the prayer represented the submission of the sacred power of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao and revealed the people’s hidden complex hope. Hopes and wishes of the people and community were reflected through the prayer they pronounced in front of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao. Those were prayers made before 1957 that emphasized the success in agricultural products. Some aspects of prayers, such as prayer on sufficient rain in the rainy season that will bring prosperity in agriculture and the ecosystem as a whole, and the prayer for peace, safety and happiness of the community. The individual prayer mostly focused on the wellness of health, family, pet, and the lost belongings. However, after 1957, when a government has developed a social-economy structure such as transportation, education, healthcare, and infrastructures, the prayers proposing to the ritual ghost of “Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao have been changed due to the improvement of those changing social-economy structures.

**Keywords:** Prayer; Thung Kula Ronghai; Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao

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## บทคัดย่อ

หมุดหมายของบทความต้องการนำเสนอความเปลี่ยนแปลงของ “คำขอ” ที่ชุมชนท้องถิ่นในอาณาบริเวณพื้นที่ “ทุ่งกุลาร้องไห้” ปฏิบัติต่อ “เจ้าพ่อศรีนครเตา” ตั้งแต่ปี 2500-2560 “คำขอ” จึงมิใช่เพียง คำกล่าวที่แสดงถึงความผูกพันและการสยบยอมต่ออำนาจศักดิ์สิทธิ์ของเจ้าพ่อศรีนครเตาเท่านั้น ทว่ายังมีความซับซ้อนที่ฝังแฝงไปด้วยความหวัง ความปรารถนาของชุมชนและผู้คนในอาณาบริเวณทุ่งกุลาร้องไห้ขณะที่เปล่งวาจาออกไป ผลการศึกษาพบว่าคำขอก่อนปี 2500 เกี่ยวข้องกับระบบการผลิตของสังคมชาวนาเป็นสำคัญ เช่น ขอให้ฝนตกตามฤดูกาลซึ่งนำมาสู่ความอุดมสมบูรณ์ของผลผลิตทางการเกษตรและห่วงโซ่อาหารในระบบนิเวศวิทยาทางเศรษฐกิจ ขอความปลอดภัยและความสงบสุขให้เกิดแก่ชุมชนขณะเดียวกันคำขอในระดับปัจเจกบุคคลให้ความสำคัญกับระบบสุขภาพตนเอง ครอบครัวและสัตว์เลี้ยงรวมทั้งเรื่องทรัพย์สินที่สูญหาย เป็นต้น อย่างไรก็ตามหลังปี 2500 เมื่อรัฐส่วนกลางเข้ามาดำเนินการพัฒนาโครงสร้างทางเศรษฐกิจสังคม โดยเฉพาะเส้นทางคมนาคม การศึกษา การสาธารณสุขและสาธารณูปโภคอื่นๆ ทำให้ “คำขอ” ต่อเจ้าพ่อ ศรีนครเตาแปรเปลี่ยนไปตามความเปลี่ยนแปลงทางเศรษฐกิจสังคมอย่างซับซ้อน

**คำสำคัญ:** คำขอ; ทุ่งกุลาร้องไห้; เจ้าพ่อศรีนครเตา

## Introduction

*“just pronounce the “prayer”, you have half success.”*

(Swameechai, 2018).

“Prayer” is considered a superstitious belief which agricultural communities of Isan people have been practiced in a region. This practice is to propose the prayer to the ritual ghosts and superstitious power to rescue the prayers in specific ways. The traditional practice has been reflected respect and the submissive role of the prayers. On the other hand, it shows the power of negotiation between human and ritual ghosts and superstitious power. After their prayer became true, the prayers would hold the ritual ceremony paying respect to them in return. (Eowsriwong, 2015).

Like other agricultural communities in Isan, Thung Kula Ronghai is where the belief and respect of a ritual ghost of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao has been embedded. It can be seen from the existing pieces of evidence such as a shrine, a monument built near the community’s reservoir, and a ritual ceremony of offering Budphree in every the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> months of a lunar year. Besides the ceremony, some communities like Ban Muang Tao, Ban Muang Suae, Ban Nong

Kok-Nong Yao, Phayakaphoompisai District, Mahasarakham Province would hold an annual ceremony to celebrate and pay respect to Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao.

## Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study employed the frame thought of Kitiarsa (2014) in “New Isan Way” as an analytical framework. The analytical is divided into two phases: Old Isan and New Isan. Old Isan refers to the period before 1957, the socio-economic aspect of Isan is portrayed as sufficiency economic (Natsupha, 1998) The study also adopted the study of Attachak Satayanuruk, “The changing remote area in the context of Thai democracy” as a part of the analysis. The study has mentioned the analysis of the changing prayer within the concept of “hope and preference” of the farmer society and the changing representation of Isan’s socio-economic. (Satayanuruk, 2015).

## The Dynamic Description of Knowledge and a Myth of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao in Thung Kula Ronghai

Before 1975, the story of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao was recorded in a “The chronicle of Surin Province” in the study of Sawannatat (2010) and “The Isan history” in the study of Wiphakphotchanakit (2014). and “The Isan history from 1779-1945” in the study of Theerasasawat (2014). The significance of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao was described as a Kui ethnic group (Suay) who moved and settled down in Khamen Phadong (the area of Surin and Sri Saket Province). Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao was an ordinary man who had a special ability in catching the King’s white elephant that escaped from Ayuthaya, and returned it to the King Ekathat. From this incident, he was appointed as a high official ranking.

In 1971, amulet coins of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao were produced for those who believed in his ritual power. The first selection of coins was named as “Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao Thao ther Chaw Muang Rathanaburi”. After 17 years, the coins of “Phuta Srinakhon Tao Tho Ter” were found again in Phayakaphoomisai District, Mahasarakham Province. (The Culture Council of Rathanaburi district, Surin province). After 1975, the story of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao has been extensively acknowledged, especially in Ratanaburi District and Surin Province. The publication was a token for guests who attended the funeral of monk Mongkhonratanachai.

A study of Amawasri Thianthaworn on Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao: Role and significance of ritual ghost belief in the northeast (a case study of Mung Tao village, Phayakaphoomisai district, Mahasarakham province) of Thailand, the study presented a belief system of the ritual ghosts and Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao was considered the highest-ranked among 16 ritual ghosts in the area. Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao also played another role as a ritual ghost who was a protector of a community, (Thianthaworn, 1989). According to the dissertation of Prasopsuk Lithidej, “The adaptation of farmer community in **Thung Kula Ronghai**,” the role of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao has been upgrade from ancestor’s ritual spirit to the respectful ritual spirit of the communities where covered Ban Non Bo, Ban Nong Hee, Ban Phachat, and Ban Kawnoi, however, his central secrete role was in Ban Mung Tao. Those communities will hold yearly ceremony to feed and pay respect to the ritual ghost in every February, March, and May (Litthidej, 2007).

After 2007, most studies have related to the belief in Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao were given a new meaning of cultural capital. It acts as a tool to reunite the community for development. “Culture community” is an approach which emphasizes on community. The approach is being used among developers (NGO) e.g. Priest Niphon Thainwihan, Bumrung Bunbanya, Apichat Thingyu, Dr. Seree Phongphit, including academia like Yot Sombat, Anan Kanchanphan, etc.(see more in Natsupha, 1998; Mukdawijitra, 2005).

The approach of “Culture community” used in the studies of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao started in 2007 in the project of “Local history of Thung Kula Ronghai.” The belief of the ritual ghost is employed as a conceptual tool in community development. The belief is used to recall a collective memory of the whole community. In addition, myths as well as the ritual ceremonies help to reunite a relationship of people within the community. These ritual ceremonies held by the community have become an invented tradition which represents the particular community (Hobsbawm, Eric, & Terence Ranger, 1983). Therefore, the invented tradition has become the leading platform to drive the tourism industry in the community. (Wasantasenanon et al., 2009; Kamon et al., 2009; Kenyotha et al., 2008)

The studies of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao were reproduced in a study of “The cultural hero” (Songsiri, 2014). The study presented a definition of the ritual

ghost as the cultural hero. A study of Duangwiset has employed the approach of knowledge and power to explain the relationship between human society and a superstitious power in Thung Kula Ronghai (Duangwiset, 2017). Additionally, a study of “Myth of Thung Kula Ronghai: ecological narrative and socio-cultural power negotiation” revealed an analysis of the use of myth as a tool for changing socio-cultural power negotiation in Thung Kula Ronghai; the negotiation in terms of Buddhism, capitalism, tourism industry, a flux of development and a government authority (Munmanee, 2017).

Although the studies related to Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao were seen as static work and reproduction. In the study, myth and knowledge on prayer and Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao have been narrated through the text, attempting to present something different from the previous studies by proposing the new meaning of the prayer, which is dynamic, influenced by the changing socio-economic situation.

### **The Reflection of the Socio-economic Situation through the Prayer of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao (before 1975)**

Thung Kula Ronghai covers some parts of 5 provinces of the northeast Thailand (2.1 million rai or 830,274.0817 acres) i.e., Mahasarakham, Roi-Et, Surin, Srisaket, and Yasothon. Trackback in history about 300 years, this area was a settlement of a group of Loa people from Champasak. The first settlement was placed in Rio-Et province in Ban Thung, Suwanaphum district. Later on, more groups of people moved in, which expanded the community. The groups had blended well and shared a common belief in superstition i.e., ritual ghost and Hindu Brahman.

As mentioned earlier, the belief in ritual ghosts as a superstitious power has a crucial role in determining the community’s characteristics. Suriya Samutthakup argued that due to a failure of a living (agriculture and healthcare), the belief in ritual ghost seems to be the last hope of people as it is reflected through their prayer (Samutthakup, 1997). Prayer is also seen as a form of relationship between human and a superstitious power, in which they strongly believe that this power could overcome every humans’ problems. Therefore, the

prayer has been played a significant impact to the socio-cultural context of human society (Ramittanon, 2002).

### 1. The “Prayer” to Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao in the Individual Level

Naturally, the locals faced various problems in their daily lives. The crisis emerged daily e.g., agriculture, cattle, sickness, and other businesses, physically and mentally impacted the individuals. Srisak Vallipodom concluded that the belief in ritual ghosts and superstition has long been practiced in Thai culture. It has become a socio-psychology impact in the individuals (Vallipodom, 2014). Therefore, the prayer in the individual levels can be divided into the following explanation.

**1.1 Sickness and accident** strongly impacted a metal stage of people in the family. The fear of losing beloved ones as well as laborers in farming is a major concern. Primary care relies on herbs and local healers, spiritual healers and spiritual dancing, and later on, the modern medication in the hospital is also applied. If the patient is not getting better, then the prayer to Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao will be made respectively. For example, in a case of Thongda Phongnongphok, a patient with chronic disease who received treatment at Phayakaphoomisai hospital, a doctor diagnosed that he had Valvular Heart Disease. He received medicine but his symptom still worse, and could not work in a farm. After that, his family bought him to the shrine of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao to make a prayer. Fortunately, later on he got better from the sickness and was back to work on a farm. The locals believed this incident was sacred power of the ritual ghost (Thianthawon, 1992).

**1.2 The journey of cattle trading** could take many days and the major concern was about a robbery and business success. The prayer was held in order to avoid harmful incidents that may occur during the traveling. Ken Phonsena, a cattle merchant at Ban Muang Tao, traveled with a group of 5-10 people and his cattle to Surin Province. Before starting the journey, he prayed to Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao to protect him and his group from harmful incidents like robbery and evil spirit; *“May you (the ritual ghost) be with us the whole trip and blessed us for business success”*, which Ken and his group were successful. (Phonsena, 2018).

**1.3 Household production** is one proposing in the prayer. Before planning season starts, the prayer will be made to the ritual ghost. The ritual ceremony to Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao and Phi Ta Hayek (a ghost who protect rice field) is an essential practice in the community. People believe these ritual ghosts would help protect their rice fields and agricultural products. The prayer also includes the fertility of their agricultural products as it is explained in the statement *“Too much agricultural production could be a hard work, so modest production was good enough”* (Kenyotha, 2008). But soon after the arrival of a railway building in Surin Province in 1926 and Khon Kaeon Province in 1932, respectively, hence, agricultural society was replaced by to trading, and this impacted to the changing prayer from the sufficient production for a household to an actual business focusing the increasing production and profit. *“...May this year brings us fertile cultivation and without damage from animals. After making a wish, they pour water to the ground to pay respect to Earth spirit”* (Phusongchan, 2003).

**1.4 Robbery** was a common incident in Thung Kula Rongai. In the old day, this area was considered a trading route of Isan where people from different provinces used to commute. The robbers brought cattle to sell to Nai Hoy (cattle trader) (Sawaderum Interview, 5 September 2020). Due to limited police staff and frequent robbery occurred, the prayer was made to the ritual ghost *“... Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao, please help us to find our lost cattle from the robbery, if we could find them, we would offer the feeding ceremony to you”* (Triwiset, 2020). On the other hand, this similar prayer was made by the robbers as well. They prayed to the ritual ghost to help them a successful robbery. Such as in the case of Suae Phan, he and his gang were planning to rob Ban Ta Yok. By accident, the locals saw him prayer to the ritual ghost in a ceremony for a successful robbery. Then, the locals informed the village head to be prepared for the incident. There was a fight by shooting, but finally, the robbers had escaped into the wood. (Phosongchan, 2003).

## The Changing Social-economy Context in Thung Kula Ronghai (after 1957-2017)

The development in Isan was an emphasis on the government of Sarit Thanarat. The five-year plan (1962-1966) stressed the infrastructure development-commutating routes, irrigation, dam, electricity and agricultural research center, etc. The budget of 19.4 billion baht was spent on the development in Isans' Provinces, especially Khon Kaen Province.

The Thai government started develop Thung Kula Ronghai in 1954. The area was surveyed by a group of the house of representatives of Roi-Et, Niwat Phoonsri Srisuworanun and administrator, Khun Prachinburi (Chalut Singpraset). This survey had led to an agreement to allocate empty land to the citizen and a number of the budget for the surveying of Thung Kula Ronghai from the government was employed. (Srisuvoranan,1969).

The development of Thung Kula Ronghai under the project of "Allocate budget to the rural area" during the government of MR Kukrit Pramoj in 1975 helped improve the economy of the area because it enhanced the employment of local laborers. It also changed the way of thinking of the locals who used to be generous to money minded, and where the money came to change the relationship of the community's behavior.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> National economic and social development plan (1997-2001), Thung Kula Ronghai was set as the new economy area of southern Isan. A particular type of rice "Mali 105" was introduced to the site as it claimed that that the rice suited well with a specific soil in Thung Kula Ronghai (Lao An, 2010). This led to a government project of "Big rice farming demonstration" (Wongthet, 2003). in which aiming to enhance local farmers to grow this particular type of rice instead of local rice.

During 1980-1982, the government had enhanced the Jusmin rice plantation in Thung Kula Ronghai. Thus, many locals attempted to occupy the area of the wetland forest, which belonged to the public, and changed it into the rice field. (Khangkhai in Lao-an,2010). This change had destroyed the ecosystem of the area *"The deforestation in the community was a result of the increasing need of more land for rice plantation. It consequently decreased the number of natural food in the forest.* (Saenggnam, 2019)



In 1997, the government had enhanced the Eucalyptus plantation in the area as it was claimed as an economic plant. The first plantation of Eucalyptus was in Kaset Wisai and Suwannaphum District of Roi-Et province. Then the plantation was expanded all over Thung Kula Rongai. Many farmers stopped doing rice plantation and do Eucalyptus instead (Kenyotha, 2008). In the old days, Thung Kula Ronghai was known as one of the driest areas in Thailand, but the area had changed due to the plantation projects in producing the best quality of Jasmin rice.

The development supported by the government through the national economic and social development plan has changed the area of Thung Kula Rongai. More technology in the production, such as dams, cannals, irrigation, and commutation routes, was employed. The knowledge concerning rice and Eucalyptus growing earned from the government had changed farmer society to the new system- capitalism. Suriya Smutthakup explained that the farmers had no longer relied on natural resources, and they were utterly pushed into the capitalist regime by government reinforcement. (Smutthakup, 1995). The communities of Thung Kula Ronghai are facing the changing socio-political economy setting. It can be desperate for them to need moral support from what they believed in Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao. However, the prayer proposing to the ritual ghost has been changing due to the changing socio-political economy setting.

### **The Changing Prayer to Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao (after 1975-2017)**

**Firstly**, the farmer society was seen as inferior, lacking good opportunity in life, and no economic security. Thus, Isan people have a solid passion for escaping from farmer society and poverty. There was a reflection in wording *“life will be good if your children can get a job as civil servant (working for government).* Working for the government, they and their family can access

many social welfares. (Wasantasenanon,2018). From 1950s there were a lot of educational institutes for higher-level certificates and bachelor’s degrees, such as Technical College (1950), Agriculture College, and Vocational College (1992). Additionally, Eight Teacher colleges were established in many provinces.

The emerging of educational institutions was a significant inspiration for Isan people to upgrade their quality of life. Therefore, the prayer was changing

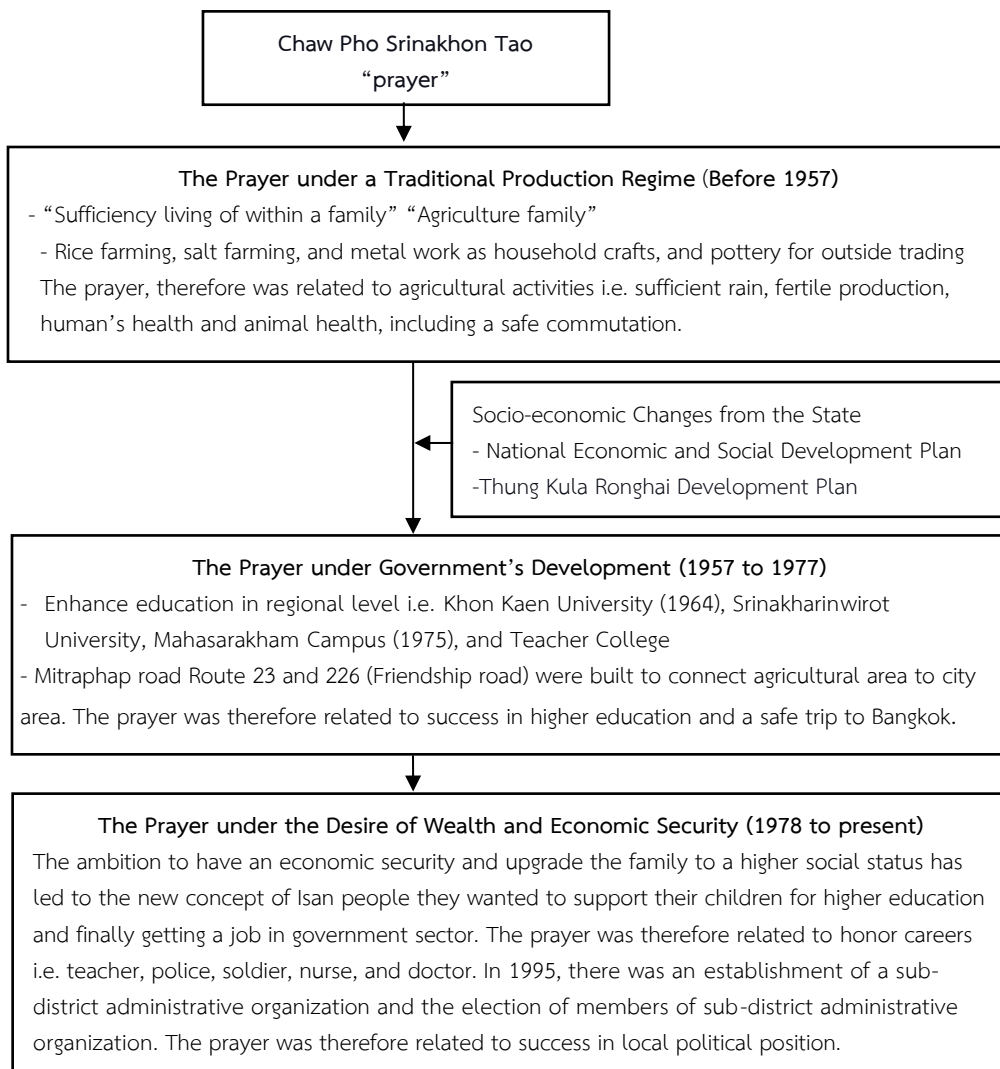
concerning the success of education at a higher level. At that time, a career as a teacher was competitive and given high recognition. There was a word *“It is bloody hard to be able to become a teacher”* Therefore, the prayer was modified to connect the need at the time- all parents wanted their children to pass the test and acquire a teacher position. Charoensri Chinnarat proposed a prayer to the ritual ghost that *“I pray to Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao to help my child to pass the test and acquire a teacher position so that I would offer you a pig’s head and fruits”* (Chinnarat, 2017). The Darawan also proposed to the ritual ghost for their daughter’s success in the test, so that they would offer food, fruits, and sweets to express their thankfulness (Darawan, 2017).

**Secondly,** since new communication routes built in Isan, especially the Mitraphap road from Nakhon Ratchasima to Nongkhai, supported economic activity, i.e., transportation of agricultural products. There was more convenient traveling across Thung Kula Ronghai, so that laborers from paddy farm could transform themselves as labor in downtown. (see more in Theerasasawat and Wayuphak, 1995, p.112-119). In the case of Ban Muang Tao, Phayakaphoomisai District, Maharakham Province, since 1975, the laborers from paddy farm had become labors in other places, sometimes, they could travel far down south to Chumphon province (Patsirimongkhon,2018). Phaijit Wasantasenanon said that *“the locals began to work in Bangkok in 1962, they earned money from working in Bangkok, and they looked handsome and beautiful. They came back home and persuaded their relatives to work in Bangkok like them. Another group who traveled to Bangkok was kids from rich families. They went to study in Bangkok. In 1967, more locals traveled to Bangkok”* (Wasantasenanon, 2018).

**Thirdly, since** 1995 there were elections for members of the Local Administration to work for the community. Consequently, “the prayer” to the ritual ghost at that time related to success in the election. For example, there was a group that won the local election in Ban Muang Suae, Phayakaphoomisai district, Maharakham province, so they had built the monument of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao in 2021 in the public park of the community so-called “Non Tama”, and holding anal celebration (Yothachan, 2018). Another example of in 2000, Somphong Asakit proposed prayer to a ritual ghost and promised to offer pig’s head and deserts if they could win the local election. When he won the election,

he offered what he had promised to the ritual ghost at the Monument of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao (Asakit, 2018).

**Lastly**, in 1927 the arrival of the community’s sanitarium supported by the government had upgraded life’s quality of locals residing in Thung Kula Ronghai (see more in Phueksom, 2009). This incident had been reflected through the prayer, in which there were fever prays related to a health concern. So there was a statement, “After 1929, the community’s sanitarium could help improve the health condition of the community. Therefore, most prayer focused on three main issues: 1) fertility in agriculture, 2) no sickness and robbery and 3) happiness and good luck charm” (Wasantasenanon, 2018).



## Conclusion

The existence of Chaw Pho Srinakhon Tao as mentioned earlier has varied characteristics in different communities. The prayer purposed to the ritual ghost is a significant representation of its superstitious power. Prayer in the old days was related to the fertility of agricultural products, peace, and happiness of the community. And later on, in 1957, the prayer was involved in success in an individual level- security in wealth, education, career, and luck to upgrade one's socio-economy status. *Pokpong Chanwith* mentioned that "Animism in Thailand has unclear orthodox and definition, it can be varied by a changing social context. Some ritual ghosts have no role and finally became extinct, on the other hand, some ritual ghosts have become in power again, or some are back with their changing role, for example, its role has been changed from social lever to individuals" (*Chanwith*, 2011).

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