
19

The World's Largest Water Fight, or the Battle for the Soul of a Festival: *Songkran* in Thailand and South East Asia

Chris Newbold

Introduction

The *Songkran Festival* in Thailand, although not an indigenous festival, has become the most popular one in the region with tourists, which is why people around the world have assumed that it was originally from Thailand. Traditionally it is a time for reunions, house cleaning and Buddhist rituals and observances, however, it is water that is at the heart of *Songkran*. Water is celebrated as a blessing and is given as a sign of respect; festival participants sprinkle, splash or douse each other with water as an act of cleansing and good wishes. Traditionally in Thailand *Din Sor Pong* (white powder) or coloured powders are smeared on the celebrants' faces, representing the sins of the past which can then be washed away by the water pitched at them by close relatives, friends or other revellers. This traditional lunar new year festival is celebrated by many of the bordering countries including Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Yunnan Province China where the new year festival is variously known as *Chaul Chnam Thumey* in Cambodia, *Thingyuan* in Myanmar, and *Pbee Mai Lao* in Laos. For the Dai people in the Dehong area of southern Yunnan Province of China it is called *Shangkran* or *Shangjian*, pointing to its common Buddhist roots with *Songkran* in Thailand. As we shall see, the festival has become an important tourist attraction for these countries, but nowhere is it more exuberantly celebrated and enthusiastically marketed than in Thailand.

This chapter¹ will explore the origins and meanings of the *Songkran Festival* itself; it will look at the development of the festival and discuss how its adherence has changed over the decades particularly as tourism has become a major industry for Thailand and other countries in the region. We consider the role of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) in promoting and developing this festival in order to attract mass tourism. As with many 'cultural' festivals, we shall see how *Songkran* has gone through a process of secularisation, with the 'main event' now being characterised as a 'water fight'. We will also examine the issues that this