

Theravada Buddhism—the Most Important Element of the Tai Traditional Culture in Sipsong Panna, China

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Background of Theravada Buddhism in Sipsong Panna

Present Situation of Theravada Buddhism in Sipsong Panna

The name Sipsong Panna is related to the former political organization of the territory. The word ‘Sipsong’ means twelve in the Tai language, while ‘Panna’ means ‘a thousand rice fields’. Sipsong Panna thus means ‘twelve thousand rice fields’ or ‘twelve rice-growing districts’. The term is transcribed into Mandarin as ‘Xishuangbanna’¹. Xishuangbanna is a Tai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province, PRC, bordering both Myanmar and Laos. The Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Region was established on January 23 1953. In June 1955, this official denomination was changed to Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture (XDAP). The XDAP was then comprised of three autonomous counties: Jinghong (Jenghong, Chiang Rung), Menghai (Muang Hai) and Mengla (Muang La)².

The Tai Lue are still the dominant ethnic group in Sipsong Panna numerically, having a population of 320,000. The Bulang, locally known as the *Tai Doi* (Mountain Tai) and with a population of 36,000, are also practitioners of Theravada Buddhism. There are 601 religious sites in the whole of the XDAP, and of them 577 are Buddhist temples, nineteen are churches, and five of them are mosques. As mentioned, there are around 290,000 Theravada Buddhist followers in the region, including 4538 Bhikkhus (monks) and Samaneras (novices). There is a Buddhist School: Xishuangbanna Branch of Yunnan Buddhist College in Wat Luang Muang Lue in Jinghong City. There are 120 monks and novices students in the Buddhist school.

History

Theravada Buddhism in Sipsong Panna spread from Chiang Mai, the capital of the Lanna Kingdom, during the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. In the past, the dominant Buddhist sects in Sipsong Panna were the Padaeng and the Suondok sects, which were originally established in Wat Padaeng and Wat Suondok, both in Chiang Mai, during the tenth century. These two sects spread north through Muang Yong into Sipsong Panna and Chiang Tung, and through Muang Yang Long into Sipsong Panna respectively³.

The Buddhist Tipitaka, Jataka and other Buddhist texts, as well as the Lanna script, were all taken into Sipsong Panna by the Padaeng and Suondok sects⁴. Buddhist rituals and

¹ The region is known in Lanna Thai as “*muang sipsong panna*”; the transcription of the name in Chinese characters is 西双版纳.

² Names in brackets refer to the Tai toponyms of the three places.

³ According to Khanan Sai Nue, a former monk in Manlei Village, this information was recorded in a certain “Muang Cae Chronicle” to which he had access while he was a member of an organization responsible for collecting and researching old Buddhist manuscripts, an organization created in Jinghong after the founding of the ‘New China’ and headed by Cao Bo-diao. Khanan Sai Nue was the only Muang Cae native to take part in this activity, which was interrupted by the start of the Cultural Revolution. He only received a few months salary, totaling 700 Yuan. He said that The Chronicle of Maung Cae should have been kept in the archives of the XDAP. The information contained in the materials that Khanan Sai Nue read, match with what is known about the history of Theravada Buddhism in northern Thailand. In particular, the time period of 600 to 700 years ago matches with the time of the establishment of the Suondok and Padaeng sects.

⁴ The Lanna script was developed by the Mon of Lamphun during the Mangrai dynasty. Later it was named Yuan (Yonok or

customs in Sipsong Panna also spread in from northern Thailand. While many of these customs have almost disappeared in the host region, they have continued to be preserved in Sipsong Panna right up to the present day.

Great Cultural Revolution & Great Leap Forward Movement

During the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, Buddhist practice was interrupted in the PRC. As the country remained isolated from the rest of the world, the Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna could not communicate with culturally-related peoples in Burma, Thailand and Laos. The exchanges between Sipsong Panna and northern Thailand also stopped.

The PRC was established on October 1st 1949, and Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Region was then established on January 23rd 1953. In June 1957, the official denomination of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Region was changed into Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. Following this, the Chinese Government maintained a policy of freedom of beliefs until 1957. However in 1958, with the start of the Great Leap Forward Movement, local Buddhist traditions began to be suppressed. Subsequently, many Lue monks, novices and laymen fled to neighboring countries.

The Cultural Revolution lasted from May 1966 to October 1976. During that time, religious practice in China was banned. "During the Great Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, Buddhist activities were forbidden. Buddhist educational and cultural organizations were closed. Many temples were used by other related organizations. Many Buddhist artistic works were destroyed. The work of the Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna and every other Buddhist association in China stopped."⁵

The Awareness of Promoting Theravada Buddhism in Sipsong Panna

Traditional Monk Education

The traditional methods of the monk's and novice's education revolved around the teachings of elders, and did not require any classrooms, desks, tables or blackboards. Novices

Yonaka) script¹⁹. The Lanna script was adopted as script to be used in religious scriptures by the Padaeng and Suondok sects and later was also adopted by those people who spoke similar Tai languages to that of the Tai Yuan of Lanna, such as the Tai Khuen of Chiang Tung, the Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna and the Tai Yai. The Lanna script developed together with the Suondok and Padaeng sects in the Lanna Kingdom, and then spread into Chiang Tung and Sipsong Panna. In Chiang Tung and Sipsong Panna, the Lanna script was known as 'Buddhist [Dhamma] script' (*to tham*) or 'Yuan script' (*to yuan*). Later, it also became known as *to khuen* ('Khuen script') in Chiang Tung. Today, the Lanna script is known in Sipsong Panna as *to tai kao* ('old style script'), since there has been a new script officially in use in the XDAP since its inception in the 1950.

⁵ The Great Leap Forward started in 1958 and ended in 1962. With the support of Chairman Mao, the Great Leap Forward swept across the whole of China in 1958 (Chu and Tien 1974: 6-7). People worked and ate together, and the form of this organization was named *Renmin Gongshe* (the people's commune). Land reformation started in Sipsong Panna in January 1956 (Zheng Peng: 293). People in Sipsong Panna were classified into six classes: big landlords, middle landlords, small landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants and poor peasants. The rich peasant class and upper classes were attacked as class enemies of the lower classes. They were not only forced to accept labor reform, but were also beaten and tortured by the public, the Red Guard and the people's militia. Most of them were brought to work in factories far away from their home. Seeing this kind of persecution, many Tai Lue, including monks, fled to Laos and Burma. Within the People's Commune, people worked and ate together, but they did not have enough food. The Chinese Government called on people to donate their cooking pots, even though they really needed these pots to cook themselves. The Government advocated that the people produce vast quantities of steel, pursuing the output levels of Western countries. The slogan for the economy was "Surpassing United Kingdom, catching up with USA." The starvation caused by these policies was one reason why the Tai Lue fled China. During the Great Leap Forward, monks and novices were forced to disrobe and then to work in factories. A former Secretary-General of the Buddhist Association of Sipsong Panna told me that Soom Dect Aa Kaa Mooni, the highest monk in Sipsong Panna, was forced to disrobe and to feed water buffaloes in a village. Later, he committed suicide because he was forced to fish in a pond, believing that this deed broke the Buddhist precepts.

learned in the temple from senior novices and monks, as well as from old laymen who had been monks and therefore had a good knowledge of Buddhism and Tai culture.

For sutras, or scriptures which needed to be chanted at ceremonies, trainees would memorize them usually by repeating sentence after sentence with the teacher. For reading texts, and instead of first learning the alphabet, most novices took one specific Buddhist text and followed the teacher's reading word by word and sentence by sentence. When the learner was able to read by himself, the teacher allowed him to read aloud and alone, listening and correcting the novice when he read incorrectly.

Some Buddhist activities at the temple involved the reading of Buddhist texts by the monks and novices. When one of these ceremonies took place, apprentices would also be invited to read texts in the *phasat* (a small pavilion) inside the vihara. The village elders then sat around the phasat, listening to the recitation and, when they were sure that a mistake had been made, interrupting and correcting the novice.

Traditionally, some monks and novices also learned other kinds of knowledge in the temple, usually related to astronomical yearbooks, mathematics, poems and folk songs, medicine and Buddhist arts. Local Buddhist arts and crafts included the production of wall paintings, the carving of Buddha and other images, architecture of temples and pagodas, gilded decorations, silver work, as well as the making of palm leaf and paper books.

Lue Monks and Novices Studying in Thailand

In the early 1980s Sipsong Panna monks and novices usually went to study in Muang Yong, Chiang Tung and Muang Yang, but in the late 1980s monks and novices in Sipsong Panna were dissatisfied with the state of Buddhist education in these areas. Many of them thus tried to go to study in temples in Thailand instead. At the time it was difficult for monks to obtain Chinese passports, so many of these monks traveled to Thailand without passports or any other valid travel documents. Most of them took the land road through Shan State in Burma, crossing into Thailand through Tachilek and Mae Sai. One temple where most of them stayed before entering (or when returning from) Thailand was Wat Sai Muang. Wat Sai Muang is a temple in Tachilek, Shan State, Myanmar. Kruba Seng⁶, the abbot of the temple, is a Tai Lue who was born in Ban Nakham in Muang Hoon, Sipsong Panna.

During the 1990s, some monks and novices went to study in Thailand with the support of the Buddhist Associations of Xishuangbanna and Yunnan. However, most of them went to Thailand by themselves. The following is a list of some of the monks and novices who spent some time studying in Thailand during that period:

- Apart from these two monks, Chao Seng Muang (Dao Shuren), the President of the Buddhist Association of Yunnan Province, sent ten monks and novices from Sipsong Panna to study at Wat Phra Phutthabat Tak Pha from June 1991 to January 1994. These monks and novices were sent to Thailand through the Buddhist Association of Yunnan Province, after getting official permission from the Chinese government.⁷

⁶ He was ordained as a Samanera in Ban Nakham Temple, only to flee to Chiang Tung during the Great Leap Forward. He then lived in Wat Horhong, Chiang Tung. Kruba Seng and Wat Sai Muang are very famous among Lue and Khun Buddhists. Using computer technology, Kruba has published many Buddhist texts from the Tipitaka, using Lanna script fonts.

⁷ Before leaving for Thailand, a short course on Thai language was arranged for them at the old office of the Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna in Manting Park, Jinghong. They eventually flew from Kunming in Yunnan, to Chiang Mai. These ten monks and novices could thus be regarded as formal overseas students. The ten monks and novices were Du Kham Tin, Du Khong, Du Kiao, Du York, Pha Kham Peng, Pha Kham Nuon, Du Kham Noun, Du Boon Lue, Du Phuom Ban and Du Kham Oon. Among them, only Du Kiao attained a Maha degree in Thailand.

- In April 1998, two more groups of graduate monks and novices numbering 10 from Wat Pajie were individually sent to study in Wat Phra Phutthabat Tak Pha in Lamphun and Wat Siri Sola in Chiang Mai. In May 1998, one novice went to study in Wat Bhupparam in Chiang Mai, and then changed to Wat Bangnanay in Bangkok. In 2000, 4 novices again from Wat Pajie went to study at Wat Amuan Kiri in Bangkok, and 2 novices went to study at one branch of Wat Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai. In the early 2003, one novice went to study in Wat Takaratat in Chiang Mai, and later he moved to Wat Bangnanay in Bangkok. Many monks and novices from Sipsong Panna attained “Mahā” status in Thailand.
- In late 2003, the Thai Government did not allow any foreign monks and novices to stay in Thailand without valid passports, and so many monks and novices from Sipsong Panna were forced to return to the PRC. On the other hand, until 2003 it was very difficult for monks and novices to obtain Chinese passports unless they were sent abroad on official visits.

On the other hand, most of the monks and novices who have been sent to study in Mahayana Buddhist temples within the PRC have not provided direct help to Wat Pajie or the local Buddhist association. There is still a shortage of monks and novices who can master the Han language.

Problems of Theravada Buddhism in Sipsong Panna:

The Theravada Buddhism got recovery in Sipsong Panna in early 1980s, however, in 1990s, problems for Buddhism in Sipsong Panna emerged more and more obviously. Buddhist traditions in Sipsong Panna were facing many problems at that time, problems determined by the historical and current political conditions. These problems need to be resolved if Buddhism is to survive as a cultural marker for Lue identity. The main problems are as follows:

Two Tai Scripts

At present there are two different scripts being used by the Tai Lue in Sipsong Panna: the Lanna script, also known as the ‘Old Tai Script’, and a script known as the ‘New Dai Script’. Therefore, locals actually need to learn three different scripts: Mandarin Chinese, Lanna and the New Dai scripts.⁸ In spite of its convenience, the use of the New Dai script has proved to be an obstacle to the development of the traditional script. The preservation and development of both Buddhism and Tai traditional culture will not be able to succeed if both scripts continue to be used simultaneously in Sipsong Panna. Many local senior monks and scholars have realized this and often request that the local government stop using the New Dai script, but to no avail.

Boys Unwilling to Become Novices or Monks

The number of local boys ordaining as novices has decreased over time. Local boys and their families want them to study in local government schools rather than become novices and monks in the temple, even if novices and monks are now welcomed in local public schools.

⁸ In the spring of 1952, the Chinese Academy of Sciences appointed Fu Maoji to lead a work team to Sipsong Panna in order to help improve the Tai Lue script. The team produced materials such as *The Phonetic System of Jinghong Dai*, *Useful Xishuangbanna Dai Vocabulary*, and *The Proposal for Improving Xishuangbanna Dai Literature*. In 1954, the task was finished, and the ‘improved’ script was named New Dai Script. The new script was more convenient for writing and publishing purposes: In the new script, only one letter is used to represent a consonant or a vowel sound. Different signs representing one sound have been eliminated. The new script is written in a single line, unlike the old style which builds a word adding vowel signs above and below, as well as before and behind the consonant.

It is said that if a boy lives in the temple, he will not be able to get good grades in government schools; because, apart from the state curriculum, he will have to learn Buddhism. The boys must try their best to perform well in government schools in order to a good job in government offices or at local commercial companies.

Fewer Boys

The PRC is currently implementing its Family Planning Policy. This policy states that Han families are allowed to have only one child, while minority groups such as the Tai can have two children at most. Because nowadays there are normally fewer boys in any given household, these boys cannot become novices or monks and stay in the temple for a long time so easily, especially not for a lifetime.

Weaker Traditional Culture

The problems affecting local traditional culture, the Tai language, and the old Dai script, are also a threat for the survival of Buddhism in Sipsong Panna. I can say that Theravada Buddhism in Sipsong Panna is the traditional culture of the Tai Lue, but that traditional practices and customs are becoming less and less important for locals in the contemporary world.

Buddhism in Sipsong Panna is mixed with complex, pre-Buddhist rituals, as well as traditional rituals from northern Thailand. However, all these practices are in decline because of the lack of interest in them on the part of the local young people. There are fewer and fewer monks and novices in the temples. They usually stay there for only a short time; this is especially true in the cities, where the children of well-off families are not interested in ordaining or staying at the temple for a long period.

Facing the above problems, the senior monks at Wat Pajie are trying to promote Theravada Buddhism and preserve Tai Traditional culture.

Wat Pajie and Its Organizations

Wat Pajie

Most of the monks and novices who study abroad come back to Wat Pajie, where they teach Buddhism and Thai language at the temple. Many of them have disrobed, but most of them are the members of the laity around Wat Pajie.

The full name of Wat Pajie is Wat Pajie Maha Raja Tan Sipsong Panna, which means “the Central Temple of Sipsong Panna”. The name *Pa Jie Ta* in Pāli is similar to *Ba Jie Ta Vanna Aram* from the Buddha’s time in India. There is no clear record of the first building of Wat Pajie in Jinghong (Chiang Rung). Later, the temple was rebuilt and enlarged many times. Wat Pajie was subsequently supported by the successive rulers of Chiang Rung and became the central temple in Sipsong Panna. The temple was completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

The reconstruction of Wat Pajie started in 1988, and was supported by the Buddhist Association of Yunnan Province. During the reconstruction several monks and novices lived in huts within the temple complex. The *vihara* of the temple and a small residence for the monks with one kitchen, had been rebuilt by 1993. At the time of the reconstruction of Wat Pajie there were about ten monks and novices living in the temple quarters. Du Jorm was the Abbot of Wat Pajie from 1988 to 1992, when he disrobed. These monks and novices had never been to Thailand. Maha Liang and Du Longjorm (later Khruba Longjorm Muang Sipsong Panna), two monks who had been studying in Thailand, moved to Wat Pajie in 1992. Afterwards, more

monks and novices gradually returned from Thailand and settled at Wat Pajie, especially after January 1994 when the ten monks and novices who had studied at Wat Phra Phutthabat Tak Pha in Lamphun from 1991 to 1994, came back to Sipsong Panna. As mentioned, these monks helped to spread Thai Buddhist ways throughout the region.

The Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna Prefecture

As soon as the reconstruction of Wat Pajie began, the Temple became the central temple of Sipsong Panna, and several important local organizations set up their offices there.

The Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna, administered by senior monks of Wat Pajie, set up its office at the temple. The Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna was established on March 31st 1963. In 1966, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the Association was abolished. It was re-established in 1980.⁴⁰ Wat Pajie has been the seat of the main office of the Association since the 1990s. The Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna Prefecture has three lower-level branches, the Buddhist Association of Jinghong City, the Buddhist Association of Menghai County and the Buddhist Association of Mengla County. There are two higher level Buddhist Associations. The Buddhist Association of Yunnan Province and The Buddhist Association of the PRC are the high-level Buddhist associations to which the Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna Prefecture is subordinated. The tasks of the two higher-level associations are: to receive monks coming from Sipsong Panna for meetings in Kunming or Beijing; to inform of national and provincial-level policies to Wat Pajie and the Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna; to assist Sipsong Panna monks with the preparation of reports sent to related provincial and national organizations, and to occasionally provide financial assistance to Wat Pajie and the local Buddhist Associations. The Association helps raise awareness among locals about HIV-AIDS prevention and environmental protection, and at times has donated money to people affected by natural disasters. Since its establishment, Wat Pajie has played an important role in developing tourism in Sipsong Panna; preserving Dai traditional culture and keeping local society stable. This role, recognized by the local government, relies mostly on the contributions of Thai Buddhism.

Yunnan Pāli Academy

With the permission of the National Bureau for Religious Affairs, the Yunnan Pāli Institute for Theravada Buddhism was set up in Wat Pajie in 1993. Between 1993 and 1995 the main building for the Institute school was built with funds from Wat Pak Nam in Bangkok. During the construction of the building, one training class was held at the temple. After the Pāli school was built, more and more Samaneras came to Wat Pajie to study. After graduation, some of them were sent to study in Thailand and also in Mahayana temples within the PRC. Wat Pajie is now the center of Buddhist education in Sipsong Panna. In 1993, the temple became the first modern Buddhist school in Sipsong Panna. Many novices and monks from other temples in Sipsong Panna have since come to study in Wat Pajie.

The Traditional Buddhist Management System

Central Temples

I cannot state for certain when the religious structure based on the figure of the *Khruba Muang* was established in Sipsong Panna. Traditionally, temples in Sipsong Panna were divided into four levels. The first and highest level was occupied by the main temple in the area, the Wat

Maha Rajatan Muang Sipsong Panna – the general or central temple in Sipsong Panna. The Wat Maha Rajatan Muang Sipsong Panna was Wat Pajie, as it was linked to the family of the Chao Phaendin, the ruler of Sipsong Panna.

The second level was formed by the Wat Maha Rajatan of each of the domains (*muang*) of Sipsong Panna. These temples were known as Wat Maha Rajatan Muang or Wat Long Muang. The Wat Long Muang managed religious affairs of the whole *muang*, and were also linked to the families of the ruler of the domain, the *chao muang*.

The third level was formed by temples at the head of a small group of several village temples, usually consisting of about ten villages. The Wat Maha Rajatan within this group was also called *ho vuosok*, which means the head of the *ubot* temple. In the fourth level were all village temples in Sipsong Panna. In this hierarchical system every village temple was subordinated to the *huo vuosok* of its group, every *huo vuosok* to the Maha Rajatan Muang or Wat Long Muang, and every Wat Long Muang to the Wat Maha Rajatan Sipsong Panna.

In the past, every monk would meet at their *huo vuosok* to recite Patimokha Sutta and discuss matters related to their own temple; every month on the day of the full moon and the fifth day of the waxing moon. Nowadays, however, many Bhikkhus ignore this traditional custom. On entering and ending the Lent Retreat (*khao vasaa* and *ok vasaa*), some monks and novices from each village temple visit the **huo vuosok** temple, as well as the Wat Long Muang, and make an offering on behalf of their wat. Some temples also send a small delegation to the Wat Maha Rajatan Sipsong Panna. At this time, many lay followers also donate money or food to their *huo vuosok*, Wat Long Muang, and to the Wat Maha Rajatan Sipsong Panna.

Khruba Muang

There are two types of Khruba Muang. Traditionally, the Khruba Muang of the whole of Sipsong Panna occupies the top religious position in the region, while the Khruba Muang of each *muang* is subordinated to his authority. The former Khruba Muang of Sipsong Panna was ordained as Sangha Raja of Sipsong Panna before the establishment of the PRC and the XDAP. He passed away in 1968, being 85 years old at the time. Suomdek Muang Hoon (Menghun) was appointed as Vice-Khruba Muang of Sipsong Panna and sent to live in the same temple as the Sangha Raja of Sipsong Panna. Suomdek Muang Hoon was arrested and imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution. Fearing being forced to fish in a pond and therefore to kill living beings, he committed suicide in 1969. He was about 67 years old. At present there are two Khruba Muangs in Sipsong Panna: the Khruba Muang of Sipsong Panna and the Khruba Muang of Muang Long.

2.3.5 The Former Monks Association

When I was a monk I talked to many monks at Wat Pajie that I would like to establish a former monks association in Sipsong Panna after I disrobe. When I disrobed I still studied grade four of undergraduate in Yunnan Nationalities University. After I graduated from the university I worked in the Buddhist Association of Yunnan Province in Kunming, about 500 kilometers from Sipsong Panna. It is not convenient for me to make my dream become reality - even though my job is to contact the monks and lay people in Sipsong Panna and many former monks are my friends.

The Former Monks Association was established in 2004 under the leader of the senior monks at Wat Pajie. And it was an unregistered organization. Its main responsibilities are to help the activities of Wat Pajie, to protect Tai Lue traditional culture, and to help its members if he needs. The member of the Former Monks Association is 43 in early 2011. Most of them were

former monks of Wat Pajie. When Wat Pajie organizes activities the members of the association would be volunteer to help. Many of the former monks work on Buddhist craft and arts. The former monks play a very important role in the promotion of Theravada Buddhism and Tai Lue craft and arts in Sipsong Panna.

The Efforts of Wat Pajie for Promoting Theravada Buddhism

The Role of Wat Pajie for Buddhism

As mentioned, Wat Pajie is central temple of Sipsong Panna and sets up offices for the Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna Prefecture, Yunnan Pāli Academy, and the Former Monks Association. Khruba Muang is the abbot of Wat Pajie and also the highest position among monks in Sipsong Panna. The number of monks and novices at Wat Pajie is the most among temples in Sipsong Panna. The monks and novices at Wat Pajie get high education and most of them had been to study in Thailand. Wat Pajie is leading the transformation of traditional local Buddhist practices into contemporary ones similar to those of Thai Buddhism. Many traditional Buddhist customs in Sipsong Panna proved difficult to adapt to the needs of devotees and contemporary society; discipline among monks and novices was not strict. Monks and novices who have studied and attained high status in Thailand are now doing their best to lead local devotees and the Sangha to the reformed ways of Theravada Buddhism they have learned in Thailand. In Sipsong Panna, as in Thailand, monks have been traditionally responsible for spreading the Buddha's teachings to locals, as well as for preserving local culture. The monks who went to study in Thailand and came back to Wat Pajie tried to help local society, not only by spreading Buddhism, but also by preserving traditional Tai Lue culture. Since the 1990s, Wat Pajie has played a most important role in the preservation and promotion of Buddhism in Sipsong Panna. As many among the senior monks in Wat Pajie have been educated in Thailand, the influence of Wat Pajie upon local Buddhist traditions has been determined by the introduction of elements from Thai Buddhism into these traditions.

More recently, the monks in Wat Pajie have also carried out social relief activities. For example, members of an HIV/AIDS prevention program funded by UNICEF have made periodic visits to villages, organizing activities with the locals in order to raise awareness on HIV-AIDS prevention. Wat Pajie also produces Buddhist texts using the traditional Lanna script. These texts are very popular among the Lue devotees in Sipsong Panna. From October 2004 to December 2007, the Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna was part of the regional project "Cultural Survival and Revival in the Buddhist Sangha", which was implemented with the financial and technical assistance of UNESCO. The project, whose main office was also located in Wat Pajie, aimed to revitalize local Buddhist artistic traditions through cooperation with the local Sangha.

As mentioned, Wat Pajie has organized many activities to promote Theravada Buddhism and preserve Tai Lue traditional culture. Of the activities, the Parade for Tai New Year, Morning Alms on the End of Lent Retreat, and Meditation Trainings have made a great deal of people to aware that Theravada Buddhism is the most important element of Tai Lue traditional culture.

3.2 Parade for Songkhan Festival--Tai New Year

Known in Tai Lue as *sangkhan pee mai* or *leun hok sangkhan pee mai* ('new year' or

‘the new year of the sixth month’), at this time the Sangha and devotees will bathe Buddha images. During the New Year, female devotees will make sand pagodas at the local temple yard; this ritual is known as *tan kuong sai* (‘offering of sand pagodas’).

The time of the Tai New Year is calculated according to the lunar Culasakaraja calendar, and thus, according to the solar calendar, the beginning day of the celebration is usually different from one year to the next. During the New Year, *wan nao* or *wan mooe* (a vacant or empty day), and *phaya wan* or *phaya wan ma*, must be observed. Traditionally, people are not supposed to do any important tasks during a *wan nao*; sometimes there are only two *wan nao* days in a year. *Phaya wan ma* means ‘the day that the Day God comes’. In a *phaya wan*, traditionally all fireworks are put in the Vihara of the temple in the morning, together with the offerings; village devotees listen to the monks and novices recite the *Mangala Sutta* before lunch, and fireworks are then fired in the afternoon. The entertainment activities usually took place in the afternoon and the evening, and sometimes fireworks are fired in the evening as well. Many temples in Sipsong Panna still stick to this tradition.

During the New Year, a festival is organized at every village. Villages nearby hold celebrations on different days, and so locals can join the celebrations held in different places, at different times. New Year celebrations in Sipsong Panna may last up to half a month.

As mentioned are traditional activities for the Tai Lue New Year. However, the monks at Wat Pajie are developing the festival. They organize many activities for celebrating the New Year in order to attract tourists and make local government be interested in. In Jinghong City, usually there are three days of ceremony for the New Year: first day is dragon boat race on Mekong River; second day is a parade in Jinghong main street; and the third day is to hold many kinds of entertainments in the Manting Garden. All the three days’ ceremonies were held by local government.

The Tai New Year in 1999, the monks at Wat Pajie tried once to do a Buddha image parade from the center of the Jinghong City district to Wat Pajie. They organized the monks of the temple and from other temples, and lay people from near villages in Jinghong City. They did the parade in the second morning of the new year’s ceremonies. The monks made a lot of decorations for the parade. Some decorated cars and several walking groups in new and colorful clothes were arranged for the parade. A car carried the Buddha image, driving at first; second team were monks and novices, walking and carrying the animal weapons; the third was a car in which the abbot sat with two novices, and the abbot recited Sutra and spread holy water to the people standing on the both sides of the road; the fourth was a car carrying the animal of the year. The fifth was a car carrying seven girls who acted as seven queens, and some of them carried the head of monster.⁹ The sixth was a car carrying some big drums with several drummers. Latter teams were different groups of processions. They would wear in traditional clothes and carrying many kinds of Buddhist products. When the parade arrived in Wat Pajie the monks organized a ceremony of bathing a Buddha image and a Tai entertainment show. Some local government leaders were welcomed to participate in the ceremony and the entertainment.

The parade was so wonderful that local people and tourists encourage these monks to do

⁹ This is a story of the original Tai new year, which is popular story among the Tai Lue. Long time ago, there was a monster named Phaya (king) Phuom. He was so powerful that he was able to make the Tai area very drought or very flood. The residents of the kingdom got serious starvation. And the monster even took the seven queens of the Kingdom Palace as his wives. The youngest queen was the smartest and the monster loved her most. One day the monster told her a secretary that only one thing could kill him which use his hair to cut his neck. One night when the monster got drunk the youngest use his hair to cut his neck. After she did that, the head dropped to ground and became a fire ball. Everywhere got fire when the fire ball ran to. When a queen picked it up and the fire got out. So the seven queens took the head up in turn, and many people splash water to the head and the queens. After that, the Tai New Year and the Water Sprinkling Festival was handed down up to now.

next year. For the first two years, local government tried to stop these monks to do the parade. Late, local government changed their realization on the parade. The parade is to display the Lue traditional and Theravada Buddhist culture to tourists and outside of Sipsong Panna. The government of Xishuangbanna (Sipsong Panna) Prefecture funded Wat Pajie for the parade two thousand Yuan (about 200US\$) for encouragement. And late, local government let Wat Pajie do the parade, displacing government parade, and invite a group of monks from Wat Pajie to recited Metta Sutra praying for the new year as the first ceremony in the afternoon of the first day activities.

Up to this year, Wat Pajie has organized parades for twelve times. The temple does the parades better and better. The parade is special culture in China and improves the reputation of Sipsong Panna. More and more local people and government have to admit that Theravada Buddhism is very important for the Tai Lue traditional culture and Sipsong Panna's society, and plays a very important role in local tourism.

3.3 Morning Alms on the End of Lent Retreat

Ok Pansaa (*Ok vasaa* in the Tai Lue language) refers to the end of the Lent Retreat. It takes place on the 14th and 15th days of the 12th month (*leun sipsong ping*) of the Lue calendar. A public criticism (*sooma*) among the monks in one temple takes place. Devotees also confess their wrongdoings and ask the Buddha and the Sangha for forgiveness. Novices confess their mistakes and wrongs to the monks in their temple, and all Sangha members in a temple in turn confess to the Abbot. Several novices and monks in a temple are then chosen to go and confess to the Abbot of the local Wat Raja Than (the central temple within a group of temples), and the Abbot of the Wat Maha Raja Than Siri Jorm Muang (the central temple of a domain, also known as Wat Long Muang). Some monks and devotees may even go to confess their mistakes and wrongs to the Abbot of the highest temple in Sipsong Panna, Wat Pajay Maha Raja Than.

In Sipsong Panna, traditionally, it was not often that monks and novices have gone on morning alms walks; local lay followers volunteer to send food to the temples instead. If a village temple is short of food or is hosting monks visiting from other temples, local novices are sent to ask for food in nearby villages, or to call villagers to send food to the temple. Since the late 1980s, all village households have been divided into several groups, and each group is assigned to send money, rice and vegetables to the village temple on certain days. If there are only a few monks and novices in the temple, one or two families will be responsible for providing these items to the temple on a daily basis. The monks at Wat Pajie thought it was necessary to promote morning alms in Sipsong Panna. They encouraged some monks to go morning alms. Sometimes, the abbot of Wat Pajie did that. Later, they arranged the monk students who studied in Wat Pajie to do morning alms (This idea is similar to the monks in Luang Pra Bang, P.R. Laos). At first, local people did not use to it, but later, more and more people would like to offer morning alms to the monks and novices, especially, tourists were very interested in watching the ritual and some of them would like to offer morning alms too.

The monks at Wat Pajie did more promotion on the morning alms in Jinghong City. They started to do morning alms as a group in the morning of the day of *Ok Pansaa* in 2004. After that they did morning alms as a group in the early morning of the end of Lent Retreat each year. First several times, there were not many monks and novices from other temples to participate in the morning alms and not so many local people offered the morning alms. However, there are more and more local Tai Lue remembering the ceremony and come to offer the morning alms.

The morning of October 23, 2010, was the time of Wat Pajie's morning alms for the end of the Lent Retreat. There were 189 monks and novices, half of the number were the monks and novices at Wat Pajie, and half of it came from many other temples in Sipsong Panna. At 6:00 am, these monks gathered in the Ubott Hall of Wat Pajie. Every monk and novice must take off his shoes. At 6:30 am, the monks took cars to the new bridgehead of Mekong River in Jinghong City, about 3 kilometers from the temple, where was the start location of the morning alms. The morning alms started at 7:30. These monks walked on line from the new bridgehead back to the temple. However, when they walked to the Water Sprinkling Square a great deal of Buddhist devotees were standing at the square and taking a long queue around at the square for offering the morning alms. The monks and novices had to follow the queue of the devotees. They walked slowly and slowly up to 11:30 and were able to leave the square for the temple. The offering morning alms queue was extended to the gate of the temple. When the bowls of the monks and novices at Wat Pajie were full the member of the Former Monks Association who followed them would take the offering from their bowls and put into the sacks and then let cars carried back to the temple. For those who from other temples would let their relatives or lay men collect the offerings from their bowls. When these monks entered to the temple it was 1:20 pm. Every monk and novice was very tired. There were about 25,000 people offering the morning alms. They came from all over Sipsong Panna. A few were tourists from China and some were from the western countries.

The monks and a lot of Tai Lue were very pleased to see so many people came to offer morning alms and raised awareness that Theravada Buddhism was very important for preserving Tai Lue traditional culture.

Meditation Trainings

Only a few Tai Lue novices used to take meditation in the past. When I was a samanera in 1980s, I seldom saw novices practicing meditation. Some local elders told me they had practiced meditation when they were samaneras, although it seems that only senior Bhikkhus or old laymen who followed the Eight *Sila* (precepts) undertook meditation. I saw the Abbot of our temple (who was more than 50 years old and a dozen of eight-preceptors from our village practicing meditation in our temple when I was a samanera. Since the beginning of the 1990s, monks who have studied in Thailand often practice meditation in the temple when returning to Sipsong Panna. The monks at Wat Pajie usually practice meditation in front of Buddha images for about five to 30 minutes during morning and evening prayers.

Since 2000, more senior monks at Wat Pajie thought meditation would be most important element of Theravada Buddhism, comparing to Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism, and it should be developed in China. Ven. Phra Hamtin (Du Hanting in Mandarin) is the first monk who tried to develop Theravada meditation. He said in China: only meditation could save Theravada Buddhism.

Ven. Phra Hamtin named Du Hamtin in Tai Lue language, and Du Hanting in Mandarin. His original name was Ai Kham Muan (Yan Hanman in Mandarin). He was born in Bantin Village in 1968 and ordained as a Samanera in 1981 and as a Bhikkhu in 1989. He went to study at Wat Phra Phutthabat Tak Pha with other 9 monks and novices sent by the Buddhist Associations of Xishuangbanna Prefecture and of Yunnan Province from June 1991 to January 1994. He was selected as a vice secretary-general of the Buddhist Association of China in January 2010. He also is a vice secretary-general of the Buddhist Association of Yunnan Province, vice president of the Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna Prefecture, vice rector of Yunnan Buddhist College,

President of the Buddhist Association of Jinghong City, vice-abbot of Wat Pajie, Wat Ban Suonmuan and Wat Bantin in Muangham Township.

With the support of and funded by some lay people, Ven. Phra Hamtin built a meditation hall and several monk dorms in Wat Ban Tin Temple in Muang Ham (Menghan Township), Jinghong, Sipsong Panna in 2003. He started to accept several laymen to ordain as monks and Samaneras for short time in Spring 2004. The ordination and meditation practice absorbed a lot of people, especially those who had usually ignored Theravada Buddhism before. More and more people in the country wide asked to come to participate in the program. Ven. Phra Hamtin built Bantin Temple as a Meditation Center in Sipsong Panna in 2009.

Wat Bantin

The land of Wat Bantin and the Meditation Center is 41292 square meters. The main buildings of the temple are Buddha Hall (Dhamma Vihan), Ubott, monk dorm (Kuti), and a white stupa. The main buildings of the Meditation Center are a Dhamma Sala, a Female Meditation Hall, a Male Meditation Hall, 30 small buildings with 60 rooms for female, 34 small buildings with 34 rooms for male, and a supervisor dorm in 2010.

In February, the temple formally organized a month's meditation training. There were 60 Mahayana monks and lay people participating in. Ven. Phra Kru Pavana-virat, abbot of Wat Rampeom, Chiang Mai, was invited to be supervisor.

In February 2010, there were 75 Mahayana monks and lay people getting training. 32 of them ordained as monks for a short time. Ven. Phra Kru Pavana-virat was again invited to be supervisor.

The meditation training and short time monk ordination in 2010 got improvement. It held from January 1st to 28, 2010. There were 320 persons joining in the training. They were divided into four classes and each class got 7 days' training. There were 15 Theravada monks and novices arranged as one class. 40 persons ordained as Samaneras for short time divided into two classes and 10 days training each class. There were 15 Mahayana *Bhiksu* and *Bhiksuni* class. All of them were from China national wide, only one was foreigner. Of the trainees, the oldest was 65 years old, and youngest was 13 years old. The adult were 80 percent, young people were 5 percent, and the elder were 15 percent. Most of the trainees have higher education in schools: 15 percent got M.A. degrees or Doctor degrees; 60 percent got B.A. degrees, and 25 percent gained diplomas or have lesser levels of education. 60 percent of the trainees follow Theravada Buddhism; 30 percent devote Mahayana Buddhism; and 10 percent believe in Tibetan Buddhism. The trainees came from the Chinese government, schools, public institutions, the justice department, and enterprise units.

The second term of training in 2010 was held from December 8, 2010 to January 8, 2011. This term training was also divided into four classes. There were 360 persons joining in the training. 25 persons ordained as novices for short time. 50 Theravada lay people ordained as novices for short time and were divided into two classes and each class got 10 days training. There were 15 Mahayana Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis getting meditation trainings. Of the trainees, the oldest was 65 years old. The young and adult were 80 percent, the elders were 20 percent, and the elder were 15 percent. Most of the trainees got high education in schools. 10 percent got M.A. or Doctor degrees; 65 percent got B.A. degrees; and 25 percent gained diplomas or have lesser education. 60 percent of the trainees follow Theravada Buddhism; 30 percent devote Mahayana Buddhism; and 10 percent believe in Tibetan Buddhism. The trainees came from the Chinese government, schools, public institutions, justice department, and enterprise units. Most of the trainees had gotten previous training, last time.

The trainings of the Meditation Center promotes Theravada Buddhist meditation. The training is very strict and well organized. The schedule of the training is very detailed. The organizers published a handbook in Mandarin with 106 pages including the regulations for the training. Not only do the Theravada Buddhist monks and Tai Lue lay people like this course, but also Mahayana Buddhist monks, nuns, and lay people are interested in the meditation trainings.

Summary, Conclusion & Recommendation

Summary

Even though Theravada Buddhism in Sipsong Panna spread from Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand in between 11th and 13th Century, it became the most important element of Tai Lue culture in Sipsong Panna. During the Great Leap Forward Movement and the Great Culture Revolution, the vitality of Theravada Buddhism was interrupted for 20 years, as result, it was very weak when it recovered in the early 1980s. It needed support from Theravada Buddhism abroad. Many monks and novices have to go to study Buddhism abroad. Because the Theravada Buddhism in Sipsong Panna spread from Northern Thailand monks and novices of Sipsong Panna would like to study Theravada Buddhism in Thailand instead of Myanmar. With the requirement of local society monks and novices who had been to study and got rich experience of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand did a lot of contribution to preserve Theravada Buddhism and Tai Lue traditional culture in Sipsong Panna. However, they have to promote the Theravada Buddhist rituals such as Songkhan Festival (Tai Lue New Year), Morning Alms, meditation, and so on, which are very special in China in order to preserve Theravada Buddhism and Tai Lue traditional culture.

Conclusion

As a minority nationality in China, Tai Lue culture and Theravada Buddhism are subcultures. With the globalization, Sinozation, and the force of China's economic market – these greatly impact Tai Lue culture and Theravada Buddhism. Foreign cultures are so powerful that Tai traditional culture and Theravada Buddhism are getting weaker and weaker. The young generation of Tai Lue would like to learn and follow the popular cultures and have to work for economic lives under the China's economic market and ignore preserving their own culture. Facing the crisis, Tai Lue senior monks and Tai scholars raise awareness that Theravada Buddhism is the most important element of Tai Lue traditional culture, and some senior Tai Lue monks know clearly that, however, it is necessary to promote and improve Theravada Buddhism for surviving in China.

Recommendation

Tai Lue traditional culture and Theravada Buddhism (a central part of Tai Lue traditional culture) should be really regarded by the different levels of Chinese Government as ethnic indigenous culture which should be protected specially. The local government of Sipsong Panna should therefore take effective measures to preserve Buddhism and Tai Lue culture. Buddhist education in Sipsong Panna should also be supported by the central Chinese Government. Lanna script should be taught to Tai Lue students in elementary and primary schools and, with the help of modern technologies, it should also be used for official purposes. Tai scholars should be employed by the administration, and public officials who can master Lanna-Thai writing should receive extra allowances. The old and senior monks in Sipsong Panna

should be funded by local government for their living expenses.

Monks and novices in Sipsong Panna should try to develop Buddhist education and adapt Buddhism to the needs of a modern society. They should remove traditional habits that have a negative influence on local Buddhism and try to learn the positive ways of Thai Buddhism. They should carry out more social services for the locals and poor people who need help. With respect to the Tai devotees, they should be aware of the fact that Theravada Buddhism is their own traditional culture and so they should contribute in every possible way to preserve and develop it. Theravada Buddhists of Southeastern and Southern Asia, especially Thai Buddhists and Mahayana Buddhists in China should also support Buddhist education in Sipsong Panna. Finally, NGOs need to help preserve and develop Theravada Buddhism and Tai traditional culture in Sipsong Panna.

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