

**BELIEFS AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH
LOCAL COMMUNITY REGARDING
THE CREATION MYTH OF THE TAI LUE IN
XISHUANGBANNA, YUNNAN ¹**

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ABSTRACT

The Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province, China and other Tai ethnic groups residing in the Mekong and Salween river basins share myths, beliefs, and practices concerning the creation of the world. Their origin myth is one of the most popular and well-known Tai legends.³ For countless generations it has had a strong influence on their attitudes and their worldview, as reflected in their traditional faith and rituals. This project focuses on the study and analysis of the meaning, role, and existence of the creation myth from a palm leaf manuscript written in

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³ Peltier, A. -R. *PAṬHAMAMŪLAMŪLĪ* (Chiang Mai: Amarin, 1991) 6.

old Tai Lue characters and translated into Chinese. The research, based on documentary and field research, found that the myth has influenced Tai Lue society regarding beliefs about ethnic identity and awareness of the social values embedded in their traditions and rituals. The myth has also served as a tool for social discourse as it has been reproduced and passed on from generation to generation.

Keywords: *origin myth, manuscript, Tai Lue-Chinese, beliefs, Mekong and Salween river basin region, Xishuangbanna.*

Introduction

The Tai Lue ethnic group is located mainly on the alluvial plain of the Mekong and Salween River basins in the area officially known as Xixuangbanna (Sibsongpanna) Tai (Dai) Autonomous Prefecture⁴ of Yunnan province in the southernmost part of China. In addition to the Xishuangbanna Tai Lue, other Tai Lue groups share the two river basins extending from the Shan State of

⁴ The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council. *Common Knowledge about Chinese Geography*. (Hong Kong, China: Hong Kong Tourism of China, 2001)

Myanmar to northern Thailand and the northwestern part of Laos PDR. The Tai Lue are closely related to other Tai ethnic groups living in this area and in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Regions of China and the northern part of Vietnam because of their similar language, culture, religion, and the beliefs. These areas are geographically connected and are considered a borderless Tai state because of their complex relationships over a long period of time.

Together with their beliefs in Theravada Buddhism, the origin myth is one of the dominant legacies of a joint cultural identity and a cultural tool that enables the Tai ethnic groups to maintain their society and their Tai way of life. The “origin of the world” myth is known in Tai Lue as *Pathom kap phuen lok Thai Lue*, and in Thai as *Tamnan kan sang lok Tai Lue*. It is the foremost work of ancient literature that reflects Tai beliefs and culture, and its lessons are studied and widely practiced within the society of Tai ethnic groups.

The story reflects the deep-rooted way of thinking of the Tai people about the creation of nature, humans, and animals. It has shaped the character and way of life of

people in various cultures. The beliefs and rituals embedded in this traditional work of Tai literature have long played a major role in forming the attitudes and characteristics of the Tai people as a whole.

In Xishuangbanna, the Tai Lue live in close-knit communities the area of Jing Hong City (Chiang Rung) and nearby cities on the great Lanchang Jiang or Mekong River⁵ basin of the Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna) Dai (Tai) Autonomous Prefecture.^{6 7} This area was the kingdom of Sipsongpanna with Chiang Rung as the center of a glorious culture and civilization for several hundred years. While their original homeland was primarily in Sipsongpanna, the Tai Lue also spread into other parts of southern China, the upper part of Myanmar, northern Laos, and northern Thailand.⁸

⁵ Zheng, L. *Travels Through Xishuangbanna*. (Beijing, China: Foreign Languages, 1981)

⁶ The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council. *Common Knowledge about Chinese Geography*. (Hong Kong, China: Hong Kong Tourism of China, 2001)

⁷ Tourism Bureau of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. *Travel around Xishuangbanna*. (Jing Hong: China, 2011)

⁸ Gordon RG Jr. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Fifteenth edition. (SIL International, January 1, 2005)

Because of increased interest by the Thai, Chinese, and other governments in preserving the Tai cultural legacy, old palm leaf and paper manuscripts have become crucial resources in studying old traditions and cultures. These are the main existing pieces of visual media which contain information about local Buddhist teachings and literature. These rare and valuable materials are well protected locally. They are waiting to be studied and will yield increased understanding of Tai culture. However, the lack of Tai experts to transliterate, translate, and analyze the language and content of the literature is a great barrier to progress in Tai studies.

In recognition of the value of this literature for the conservation of Tai culture, this research project was part of an attempt to develop sustainable and peaceful Tai societies in the Mekong and Salween river basin region. The project focused on the study and analysis of the meaning, role, and existence of the origin myth from the 10th volume of the hundred-volume Chinese Buddhist scripture series known as “The Complete Chinese Pattra Buddhist Scripture.” Manuscripts written in Xishuangbanna Tai Lue were translated into Chinese with the support of

the CPC Xishuangbanna Prefectural Party committee and government.

Document and field studies were conducted in the research process while the analysis of literature content was based on folklore as well as sociological and anthropological theories to investigate the meaning of existence in the social context of the literary work. Field data was collected in the period 2008-2011 (2551-2555 B.E.) through observation and interviews with four major Xishuangbanna Tai Lue communities in the cities of Jinghong, Muang Ham, Muang Lha, and Muang Hai in central Yunnan.

The Tai Lue-Chinese literary text

The Tai Lue literary text and Chinese translation of the Tai Lue text, “The Origin of the World”, *Batama gab phun lok*, from the 10th volume of the “100-volume Chinese Buddhist scripture” series named “The Complete Chinese Pattra Buddhist Scripture”, was selected as the literary resource for the research project. These literary texts were translated from original Xishuangbanna Tai Lue manuscripts with the support of CPC Xishuangbanna

Prefectural Party committee and government. In the Tai Lue language it is divided into two sections: *Batama kab mueng lue* and *Batamakap hua chang*.

The first section describes the evolution of the world. In ancient times there was no land or creatures. Brahma sent his avatars, Pu Sangkasi (male) and Ya Sangkasai (female) to create heaven, earth, plants, and animals before he created humans. He then used sawdust to form two human figures, one male and one female. This couple married, produced children, built a house, village, and city, and created family and kinship systems. They also created an administrative system for the city, as well as a society based on rice culture. Subsequently, however, the whole world was destroyed by fire, floods, and storms.

The second part of the text, the *Batamakap kabhuochang* contains the story of Yin Thra (Indra) and Mha Brahma who came down from heaven to rebuild the world. They created everything on the earth and utilized the twelve-month Zodiac system to introduce the calculation of seasons, years, months, and days. Thereafter, the legend tells the story of A San Yi Brahma whose head was cut off by his princesses after a trick played by a deity. Consequently,

a day devoted to worshipping Brahma's head is celebrated every year. It has evolved into the Tai New Year's day, or the Songkran Festival. The ceremony of worshipping Brahma's head was later replaced by the ritual of worshipping *Ratanatrai* (the Three Jewels, i.e. the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) of Buddhism.

The story of a god bringing the world into existence in the origin myth is one of the most important legends recorded in Tai Lue palm leaf manuscripts. The history is divided into three periods: 1) the creation of Pu Sangkasi and Ya Sangkasai, 2) the creation of the human race, and 3) the development of human society and human activities. The story was designed for two purposes: 1) to give an account of the origin of the world and 2) to teach lessons about human behavior through the story's characters.

The story depicts the path of the human way of life based on good and bad practices according to the three characteristics of existence (Pali: *tilakkhaṇa*; Sanskrit: *trilakṣaṇa*): impermanence (*anicca*), suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). The story has a single plot, allowing the characters to reveal some related Buddhist teachings that provide a structure

for society, practice rituals to gain merit, and lead a good life.

The Wisdom of the Beliefs and its Relationship with Local Communities of the Origin Myth

The origin myth can be considered the key work of literature that guides the society of the Tai Lue of Xishuangbanna, since aspects of it are directly and indirectly connected to people, communities, locality, and society. The study of mythology reveals that in ancient times the content of myths was transmitted in the form of religious, moral and social terms.⁹

The creation myth has influenced Tai Lue beliefs and cultural identity as reflected in eight aspects of life:

1. Chao Fah kingdom and the way of politics

The legend describes the way in which the traditional Tai Lue kingdom was governed by the Chao Fah, (lord of the sky) or Chao Phaendin (lord of the land), the highest king of the kingdom or the highest head of the

⁹ Malinowski, B. *Myth in Primitive Psychology*. "Magic, Science and Religion." (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954) 95-100.

Tai Lue Kingdom. The Chao Fah has the merit of Bun Ya Ti Kan as a representative of heaven and is an ideal king in every way, since he is always recognized as the people's leader. He will be appointed to the throne and will marry a queen to help him rule the kingdom justly and later a successor to the throne will be appointed. The Tai Lue political system dominated by the Chao Fah system not only authorizes the king's relatives to rule his cities but also provides that the loyal lords and officers rule the territory's communities and villages. These ideas encouraged Tai Lue people's to respect and remain loyal to the Chao Fah family.

At the present time the position of the Chao Fah family has changed and its members have become the leaders and representatives of Tai Lue people as a whole. The faith and confidence in traditional culture and the Buddhism of leaders from Tai Lue society in Xishuangbanna are significant motivating forces that propel the implementation of policies and activity projects related to Tai Lue communities. These leaders have the duty of directly integrating and coordinating the policies of the Tai Lue with those of the Chinese government, particularly

those that promote the importance of arts and culture in Xishuangbanna. Some important leaders, such as Chao Mom Kam Lue or Dao Shixin, the last king of the Tai Lue kingdom, have supported the development of cultural projects in Xishuangbanna. Dao Aimin, the former governor of the Autonomous Region Xishuangbanna and the chairman of the Association of the State of Tai, and Dao Linyin, the governor of the Autonomous Region in Xishuangbanna, have also made significant efforts to maintain and support Tai Lue culture following the traditional practices derived from the origin of the world myth.



Figure 1: Chao Mom Kam Lue



Figure 2: Dao Aimin



Figure 3: Dao Linyin

2. Rice culture

The agricultural society of the Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna concentrated on producing rice by the transplanting system following the idea in the legend that rice is the most crucial product given by nature for human life, or “rice is for life.” The droppings of mice and birds were used as fertilizer for the growing rice, which was harvested through the cooperative efforts of the villages. All gods, humans, and animals related to the process of rice production, from planting until harvesting rice for consumption, are mentioned and paid respect in the rituals and traditions. The practicing of the rituals is a combination of beliefs and the Buddhist way of life according to the view that rice is the most important food for life. The Tai Lue rice culture reflects their knowledge of quality and technology in the rice production process, including their advanced knowledge of breeding several varieties of sticky rice. These new rice species, such as *Khao Mun* or *Khao Kham*, *Khao Lai Daeng* (red rice) and *Khao Leb Chang* (large grained rice), were used for specific events in different seasons.

In addition, water is an important factor for sustaining the lives of people in rice cultures, as in all other cultures. The Tai Lue show respect for water as nourishment for their lifeblood, and the village wells are preserved and maintained by Tai Lue people. Because of the belief that water is what has helped to protect and preserve, it is the common property of the nation. This idea is mentioned in the legend of the earth goddess Nang Thorani, who is the preserver of the city and is respected in the Tai Lue society of Xishuangbanna even now. Nang Thorani can usually be found as a symbol of the protector of the temple and the symbol of the consecration of Buddhist worship on a painting on canvas or on a *Tung* (woven vertical banner).



Figures 4-5: *Nang Thorani* at Fei Long temple and on the *Tung* in *Wat Luang*



Figure 6: Tai Lue well of Muang Luang

3. Language and communication

The story in *Batama gab phun lok* of the development of languages among the ethnic groups living on the earth reflects the relationship among the Tai Lue and other ethnic groups in Xishuangbanna with other tribes and kingdoms in various continents. The legend mentions the use of 101 languages on four continents, which means the ability and power of the Tai Lue Kingdom to be involved with a variety of ethnic groups with different languages.

The creation myth has encouraged many kinds of activities and at all levels. It has influenced not only people's attitudes toward making merit and their hope for better conditions in the present and future lives, but also their rituals and traditions. This cultural feature, which is also present in other Tai ethnic groups, was a significant

tool for the creation of a network among the Tai communities.

4. Tai Lue-style Buddhism

The Tai Lue in Jing Hong and other cities practice their rituals and traditions with the idea of worshipping previous kings, leaders, ancestors, as well as the gods and spirits living in their houses, villages, cities, temples, tombs, and in the natural environment. Along with their beliefs in Buddhism, the belief in animism has been integrated into daily practice, as reflected in the story of Pu Sangkasi and Ya Sangkasai.

Buddhist doctrine reflected in the legend is regarded as an important structure and guide to cultivating personal morals and ethics. This doctrine was used to direct the lives of the Tai Lue people in Xishuangbanna through the principles of the three characteristics of existence (*Tilakkhaṇa*) and the Four Noble Truths (*Ariyasacca*), as well as rules about good and bad practices. The role of cultivating moral practice is usually undertaken by the elderly, monks and local scholars.

The integration of animism and Buddhism in the Tai Lue social context is reflected in traditions, rituals, and

legends.¹⁰ This can be explained by the hierarchy of relationships in Tai Lue beliefs and rituals under the power of the supernatural or spirits, which have been integrated into the Buddhist belief system and come to be the content of religious belief and rituals through the creation myth and the influence of folk Buddhism. This is reflected in the idea that indicated the nature of the relationship between man, religion, and belief as a conservative practice under the motto of Buddhism which appeared in the Tai Lue local community. For this reason Buddhism and the monks in Xishuangbanna are regarded as a form of cultural negotiation. Monks as masters and spiritual leaders of the nation¹¹ are highly respected by Tai Lue people. Therefore, monks have a significant role in promoting the vitality of arts and culture as well as in transmitting and sustaining the creation myth and rituals through the beliefs of the Tai Lue Buddhist society. Kruba Lhuang Jom Muang Wanna

¹⁰ Jiranakorn, Y., & Settakul, R. *History of Xishuangbanna* [ประวัติศาสตร์สิบสองปันนา] (Bangkok: Amarin, 2544) 216.

¹¹ Swearer, D. K., *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asia* (Bangkok: O.S. Printing House, 2009)

Siri, the president of the Buddhist association of China, is respected by Tai Lue people in Xishuangbanna and has an important role in Tai Lue society.



Figure 7: *Pra Kru Ba Lhuang
Jom Muang Wanna Siri*



Figure 8: *Dhatu Nhor,
(Thai: That)
Ban Fei Long*



Figure 9: *That Lhuang,
Muang Luang*



Figure 10: The altar shrines of
Phi Ban Phi Ruan
house spirits

5. Five Buddha eons of belief

The Tai Lue believe in the birth of many Buddhas in the Pat-Ta-Ra-Kab (one of the eons or *kalpas* in Buddhist teaching). There are five Buddhas in the Pat-Ta-Ra-Kab:

Ka-Ku-San-Tha, Ko-Na-Kom, Kas-Sa-Pa, Ko-Ta-Ma, and Ari-Ya-Met-Trai.



Figure 13: The altar of five Buddhas in Wat Muang Lha



Figure 14: The Buddha in Wat Muang Lha

The Tai Lue worship by paying respect reverently to the Buddha, Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha) and the Sangha (order of monks). In worshipping, people will bow down, sprinkle water on the Buddha image, and offer popped rice, flowers, and perfume. The practice originates from their beliefs reflected in the myth that a human was born as a result of the accumulation of good practices. Therefore, they will pray for a prosperous life with good morals not only for their current life but also in their next life. They wish for a better life filled with health and wealth. Moreover, the Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna also worship the Chedi That, which contains relics of the

Buddha. The worship ceremony includes fireworks and traditional dancing.



Figure 15: The dance for worship



Figure 16: Discharging lamps of worship



Figure 17: Fireworks of worship at Chedi That

6. The creating of merit from good practice

The legend's content reflects several concepts that encourage the Tai Lue people to realize the importance of attempting to earn merit, or *punna*, from good practices, or *kusala*. Besides the daily good practices in their way of life, this attitude is also reflected through a variety of

rituals, including the dedication and donation of long banners known as *cho tung* or *tan tung*, along with *tan dharma* or palm leaf manuscripts, tributes, and sand pagodas. Buddhism encourages people to practice generosity to gain merit for a better life in the future.



Figure 18: worship set: napkin
flower, incense and
candle *Tan*



Figure 19: *Cho Tung* or
Tung

7. Happiness and the abundance

The Tai Lue ritual practices are directly related to the idea of wishing for a happy life and an abundance of natural resources for the community's use. The remaining aspects of Tai Lue cultural heritage derived from the myth consist of persuading the people to continue preserving and practicing their traditions and rituals such as those described above.



Figure 20-21: pouring water
on Buddha images



Figure 22: Brahma head
parade

8. The relationship with the universe

The way of life of the Tai Lue people in Xishuangbanna is associated with the relationship of the universe, particularly in relation to their beliefs in the direction and position of the stars and moon, which influence their practices in daily life. The relationship with the movement of the universe is reflected in the myth in the story of establishing the fates, the Zodiac, seasons, months, days, occasions, and auspicious times, and is related to defining characteristics and also as a guide to the Tai Lue people's way of life.

That relationship is concluded at the auspicious time which is derived from the calendar in the origin of the world and calculates the power of the day or the planet for

eight stars including Phra Athit (the Sun), Phra Chan (the Moon), Phra Angan (Mars), Phra Phut (Mercury), Phra Paruehat (Jupiter), Phra Suk (Venus), Phra Sao (Saturn) and Phra Rahu (the deity who can eat the moon or the sun). The Tai Lue planet system does not include Phra Ket (the ninth planet) in their system because the total of auspicious numbers is 108 and if the Phra Ket planet were included in the system, the total number would exceed 108. Auspicious times are very important to the setting of various auspicious activities and ceremonies.

In addition to the Fate and Zodiac systems which can be classified into two characteristics in the *Atta Sok* or *Ra Vai* (title name of Zodiac) and the *Rasi* has twelve zodiac signs, which consist of the *Jai* (Rat), *Bao* (Cow), *Yi* (Tiger), *Mao* (Rabbit), *See* (Naga or Dragon), *Sai* (Snake), *Sa-Nga* (Horse), *Met* (Goat), *San* (Monkey), *Rao* (Cock), *Set* (Dog), *Kai* (Elephant). The twelve-fold zodiac system is associated with the system of 27 constellations and the 8 stars of *Dao Chang Lhuang* as well.

The factors mentioned above are the result of the day, month, year and occasion in the Tai Lue calendar system which are the patterns calculated from the power of

the day and the influence of the rotation of the sun and moon eclipses. Therefore, a year has twelve months, a month has thirty days (one year has 360 days), and each year has three seasons, consisting of summer, the rainy season, and winter. There is also a belief about how people are affected by the days on which they are born. Therefore the relationships between days and sacred animals for seven days are as follows: Sunday – the cow or *garuda*; Monday - the falcon or tiger; Tuesday - the lion or cat; Wednesday - the pig or donkey or lion; Thursday – the mice or bird; Friday – the elephant; Saturday in the daytime – the tiger; and Saturday in the nighttime – the elephant or mouse. These sacred animals are believed to give people good fortune and to protect them from all dangers.

Conclusion

Deciphering the mythic code reveals not only the significance and role of the creation myth as a legend that has influenced the way of life and beliefs of Tai Lue communities, but also their social value and identity as symbols of power and wisdom in their culture. The Tai

Lue have incorporated the creation myth divination into their cultural and traditional forms of practice by reproducing it continually.

The creation myth also serves as a tool for social discourse through its reproduction and propagation by the state government, monks, and leaders. Thus, it defines their identities and their ethnic existence under the rule of the Chinese government. The intellectual power of their beliefs defines their relationship with local communities in the Tai Lue tradition.

The research project also was concerned with understanding Tai societies¹² and developing relationships and sustainable peace among the Tai and other ethnic groups in the Mekong and Salween river basin regions. The origin myth and other stories in their literature, which are embedded deeply in their way of living, have stimulated Tai Lue consciousness about ethnicity, sacred space, and cultural tourism through their format, content, and context. Through religious activities, the myth has

¹² Na Talang, S. *Tai People as Reflected in Tai Folktales and Folk Literature* [ชนชาติไทในนิทาน] (Bangkok: Maticchon, 2002) 269 – 270.

been transformed into a local tradition and has been adapted to be a part of the increasing new role dynamics.

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Figure 1: Chao Mom Kam Lue. (21 March 2555) from http://www.chiangmai-thailand.net/Chan_State/Kunsuk_Mengrai/Kumlua.html

Figure 2: Dao Aimin. (14 February 2555) from http://www.daizuwang.com/Article_Show.asp?ArticleID=3773

Figure 3: Dao Linyin. (14 February 2555) from <http://www.xsbneti.gov.cn/newshow.asp?id=120>