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Theravada Buddhism and Dai Identity in Jinghong, Xishuangbanna

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Theravada Buddhism and Dai Identity in Jinghong, Xishuangbanna

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Abstract

This ethnographic field project focused upon the relationship between the urban Jinghong and surrounding rural Dai population of lay people, as well as a few individuals from other ethnic groups, and Theravada Buddhism. Specifically, I observed how Buddhism manifests itself in daily urban life, the relationship between Theravada monastics in city and rural temples and common people in daily life, as well as important events where lay people and monastics interacted with one another. This research was intended to fulfill a need to observe how Theravada Buddhism influences Dai lives on the mundane level. This involved a several week study period in Jinghong and its surrounding rural areas, wherein I engaged in participant observation and interviews. Specifically, I interviewed (semi-structured and structured) 17 individuals throughout the study period, whose pseudonyms and positions are listed in the Methods section of this paper.

The ultimate findings resulting from this study period were that Theravada Buddhism plays a pivotal role in the daily lives of Dai people in both urban and rural settings and is a key component of Dai ethnic identity. The assertion of Dai Buddhist identity through traditional tattooing, in particular, is very widespread in the urban setting of Jinghong and its surrounding communities. The relationship between lay people and monks is also of great importance, as monks have influence over every stage of a Dai individual's life and youth education. Finally, I discovered special events and festivals are occasions where Dai people celebrate their identity as Theravada Buddhists and the union between Buddhism and other aspects of their culture.

Home Institution Honor Code: I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

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Figures

Note: There are no figures in this ISP, as there was no need for tables, graphs, or other visual media in order to collect data in the field. In other words, this was very much a qualitative study. Rich description is provided in order to establish the authenticity of the fieldwork setting and experience.

1. Introduction

The main goal of my project was to observe and identify how Theravada Buddhism, in this unique time of religious and cultural revival and evolution, manifests itself among the Dai in the urban center of Jinghong, Xishuangbanna and its surrounding areas, such as Menghai and Manzhang. Principally, this included observing how common people incorporated Buddhism into their daily lives and also the relationship between monastics and common people both within and outside of Buddhist temples. In addition, observing how Theravada Buddhism is currently shaping Dai perceptions of ethnic identity was pivotal to this project.

Theravada Buddhism is the oldest form of Buddhism and means “way of the elders.” This form of Buddhism arose in India during the time of the historical Buddha and eventually spread throughout Southeast Asia. Unlike the majority of Chinese ethnic groups, including the Han, that practice Mahayana or Tibetan Buddhism, the Dai minority is the only ethnic group that practices Theravada Buddhism in China, and thus shares many cultural and religious similarities with peoples from Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. Dai scripture is written in Old Dai language, which is a combination of the Dai ancient pictographic language and Pali. Dai people today and historically have closely linked their ethnic identity to Theravada Buddhism and this reveals itself in many ways to the outside observer.

Previous ethnographies and literature on the topic of Dai Theravada Buddhism and its impact on Dai identity have primarily focused on the very narrow realm of temple life and monastic education, and moreover how these are affected by the power plays between state doctrine and religion, and not much on the impact of Buddhism in the lives of common Dai

people, particularly those living and working in the busy streets of Xishuangbanna's growing urban centers. These macroscopic analyses ignore the more mundane, human aspects of Dai Buddhist life and in doing so readers are presented with large, conflicting structures that are absent of human faces and stories. While these sorts of studies are essential, they also lack the practical knowledge of the current cultural situation of Dai people that can be ascertained by living and interacting with Dai people in everyday venues, such as bars, restaurants, and tattoo parlors, and thus some information is bound to be inaccurate or myopic. While observing structural forces is important for contextual reasons, and although temple life is indeed an important aspect of Dai life, as a large portion of young Dai boys all go through Buddhist temple education and monastics are a part of daily Dai life, the lack of follow up into urban post-monastic life of men as well as the absence of research into the role Buddhism plays for Dai women is quite apparent in recent literature. One of my focuses during my research was to observe monastic and temple life as well as inquire into the lives of those who had long since finished their temple education, and the ongoing relationship between these two forces.

In regards to literature on the subject, the anthropologist Thomas Borchert's primary focus during his fieldwork in Xishuangbanna in 2001 was the temple education system as well as Theravada's shift, or lack thereof, in regards to the dynamics of state power and modernity. One of Borchert's primary conclusions in *Worry for the Dai Nation* is that Dai Buddhism has been noticeably altered by the Chinese government and that the general consensus is that "there is a keen awareness on the part of the Dai-Lue laity and monks that Dai-Lue identity and Dai Lue culture, including Theravada Buddhism, are fragile and at risk" (Borchert 2008, 136). Quite to the contrary, I would say that, as all things related to culture do, Dai Buddhism and culture has evolved in many different directions, and in my informed opinion that have made it grow

stronger, not weaker, despite its apparent difference from the pre-Communist era. Certainly the fourteen year gap between Borchert's fieldwork and mine would explain a difference in field data, but overall my focus was squarely upon how common Dai people view Buddhism and its role in their lives, and not how structural forces shape Buddhist practice, and what I found is certainly not an example of cultural decay, but rather a blossoming of Theravada in ways that could not have been foreseen at the turn of the century.

Primarily, my research focused on several key factors: the manifestation of Buddhism in daily urban life (separate from temple interactions), the relationship between monastics, temples, and lay people, and finally the nature of special events and festivals where all of these factors come together into a grand expression of Dai identity.

2. Methods

My study was conducted in a variety of locations, but was principally focused in the urban center of Jinghong and some of its neighboring cities and villages, such as the city of Menghai and Manzhang village. Locations where research was conducted included schools, restaurants and bars, shops, tea houses, performance halls, tourist parks, temples and monasteries, tattoo parlors, as well as the streets. The main purpose of conducting this study in and around Jinghong was because I felt that, being the capital of Xishuangbanna, it would be a strong center of Dai culture where I could observe Dai people living a variety of lifestyles and interacting with one another as well as with other ethnic groups. Jinghong is also a rapidly developing urban environment, one that I feel has been somewhat neglected in former studies on Dai and Dai Buddhism. The reality of the current situation is that many Dai people live or at least have a connection to an urban life, and I felt that this environment was a perfect location to seek out how Buddhism affects the life of the average, modern Dai individual. I chose a wide variety of locations to do my study because it naturally led to me forming connections with a wide variety of individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. This was to ensure that my data was not one sided and that I could reinforce any findings I made with other people, as well as to procure entirely unique information and perspectives.

Specifically, I worked mostly with individuals of the Dai ethnic minority, though my research community also included mixed Dai-Han individuals as well as members of other ethnic minorities, such as Hani and pure Han. Naturally, I chose to work mostly with Dai individuals because the Dai are the ones predominantly practicing Theravada Buddhism and are the

dominant minority ethnic culture in the Jinghong area, though my inclusion of non-Dai perspectives is because I believe inter-ethnic interaction is too important and influential, especially on Dai Buddhist life, to ignore outright. As far as the research community goes, I chose to work with individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and lifestyles. These individuals consisted of teachers and professors, Communist Party members, novice and senior monks, tattoo artists, shop owners, tea connoisseurs, village laborers, dancers, tailors, and typical, everyday people. Many of these individuals live completely different lifestyles from one another, come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and vary in age, but all of them were strongly influenced or impacted by Theravada Buddhism in some way. I feel that having such a varied research community allowed me to obtain rich field data that would otherwise be limited to one group's perspective. I made connections with these people either through a third party or by pure chance and kept up continual contact with certain individuals.

The main shortcomings of my data is the fact that my research period of about three weeks is simply too short of a time to produce a truly in-depth ethnography. In truth, one would require at least a year, if not more, to really become deeply familiar with informants and the environment to truly understand how Buddhism affects daily life. This is especially true given the fact that over the course of the year various important Buddhist holidays occur and the duties and expectations of both monks and lay people vary. Time is also a fundamental requirement for getting to know a particular location or research community well enough and to see its evolution and response to various internal and external factors. Though lasting connections were made with valuable informants, the depth of these relationships suffered because of an inability to consistently engage with each other over a considerable period of time, and only a few were able to be contacted on a daily basis.

My data collection occurred between the period of May 3, 2015 and May 26, 2015. Fieldwork was conducted daily and was done primarily in the form of participant observation, distant observation, and structured and unstructured interviews. Participant observation is the best method for acquiring data as it not only granted me the ability to experience first-hand the same things as my research subjects, but also it creates rapport between the researcher and subjects. Participant observation is the key forming reciprocal and valuable relationships with the research community. Distant observation refers to instances where I did not engage in the same activities as my research subjects but observed from afar and took notes, such as at a performance or religious ceremony where I was not permitted to participate. Interviews allowed me to establish personal relationships with informants and gain knowledge about their personal insights regarding my research topic. Structured interviews refer to instances where I had preplanned some of the questions I would ask an individual and when we were speaking one-on-one, whereas unstructured interviews were akin to organic conversation that revolved around my research topic and sometimes involved more than two people. I interviewed a total of 17 individuals. Data collected from this fieldwork was amalgamated into written and digital field logs where I would record what informants were telling me as well as my personal reactions and insights I had regarding my collected data. I did not conduct any form of survey during my research because I did not feel that the impersonal nature of a survey was appropriate given that my research topic focused upon the personal perceptions of Dai people on their traditional religion.

In accordance with the American Anthropological Association's statement of ethics, I will not list the real names of any of the individuals whom I interviewed with the exception of my two advisors, Michael and Julia. This is to ensure the confidentiality, personal safety, and

peace of mind of my research subjects. From this point throughout the paper, I shall refer to individuals whom I interviewed with pseudonyms, which are listed as follows (NOTE: this list does not include individuals whom I had brief interactions with, but actual interviews): Michael Fu Tao and Julia Liu Shuang: two bilingual-school teachers, Dr. Manhattan: A Dai professor, newspaper worker, and expert in Dai language, Moli: A young native Jinghong contact, Peacock: A Dai dancer, Hugin and Munin: Two monks from Da Fo Si temple, Tea-leaf: A Dai teahouse worker, Brad and Stacey: Two elderly government/education workers, Jade and Crystal: Two elderly women from Menghai, Brock: A Dai Communist Party member, The Three Musketeers: Three tattoo parlor workers in Jinghong, Bodhi: A senior monk from the border area of Yunnan and Burma.

3. Findings and Discussion

Buddhism in Daily UrbanLife: Expressions in Ink: As mentioned before, one of the primary goals of my research was to determine how Theravada Buddhism manifests in everyday urban Dai life (separate from temple interactions) and what sort of implications that carries. During the first week of my time in Jinghong, I primarily focused upon building connections with local Dai people of varying backgrounds, as well as observing the immediate environment for elements of Theravada Buddhism.

Perhaps the most obvious example of Theravada Buddhism in Dai life is the general aesthetic of Jinghong and its architecture. Many new buildings are constructed to look like temples, with heavily ornamented sloping roofs and Buddhist motifs (lotus flowers, elephants, etc.) depicted on the sides of walls, pillars, and doorways. Even on Jinghong's Bar Street, directly adjacent to the Mekong River, bars and teahouses have wooden carvings of arahants and Buddhas along with other Buddhist motifs. Performance halls, such as the centrally located Mengbalanaxi, are frequently decorated within and without with Buddhist structures and motifs. Shops and markets contain innumerable Buddhist trinkets and décor, and in many household and public interiors Buddhist drawings with old Dai script written upon them is a common sight. Walkways and parks also feature Buddhist statues and structures.

To any outsider, the influence of Theravada Buddhism on the aesthetic of Jinghong is quite obvious and cannot be ignored. One may insist that the tourism industry has something to do with this, and this would be an accurate statement. However, the fact that the native religion of the region is being used to attract commerce is certainly unique given that in the recent past

any sort of religious expression was not permitted, and it should be noted that the development of the tourism industry and religious revival independent of it are occurring simultaneously, which is evident in Jinghong and its surrounding communities. It is not in the infrastructure of the city itself, but in the people of the city, where the true influence of Theravada Buddhism can be found.

Theravada Buddhism and its huge influence on the local culture can literally be seen written on the skin of Dai people. When walking the streets of Jinghong, or even the quieter village environment of Manzhang, the sheer number of people, regardless of socioeconomic status, young and old, male and female, with traditional tattoos is immense. It was not uncommon for me to see elderly men that were tattooed from the neck all the way down. This immediately became a point of interest in my study because I know from personal experience that tattoos often hold a close, personal significance to an individual, especially if they are religious in nature. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to interview many tattooed Dai individuals and even non-Dai tattoo artists that had much to say about the meaning and importance behind these tattoos.

If you ask any Dai person, they will almost always say their religion is *fojiao*, Buddhism. One of my earliest informants, whom I have given the pseudonym of Tea-Leaf, was a Dai female that worked at a teahouse by the Mekong. She had a tattoo on the interior of her left forearm that was in Old Dai script and was a passage from Theravada scripture. All traditional Dai scripture is written in the Old Dai script and is understood both by monastics in Xishuangbanna and across the border in Thailand and Myanmar. After enquiring, I was informed by her that these sorts of tattoos were especially common among young Dai women because they are both traditional and considered aesthetically appealing, as well as being imbued with religious significance. Dai

women that are tattooed more often than not have these small, scripture based tattoos as opposed to full sleeves or entire body covering tattoos. My future observations were colored by this newly learned information, and indeed, I noticed on many occasions even much older Dai women to have smaller, script-based tattoos on their upper arms or forearms. One of the techniques I used to observe this was to go to restaurants and night stalls where women would be cooking, and since this required them to roll up their sleeves, tattoos would be clearly visible. Brock, a Dai Communist Party member, confirmed this in an interview and stated that for Dai women to have these sorts of scripture-based tattoos located on the forearms or upper arms is very traditional.

Men, in contrast to women, typically have larger, more intricate tattoos that are not limited to just script. What I most commonly observed in Jinghong, Menghai, and Manzhang was that the most traditional men would have Buddhist figures, Old Dai script, and dragon tattoos that encompassed their arms and most of their upper bodies. During my interview with Brock, I learned that men traditionally have gotten tattoos for a variety of reasons. One important function of tattooing is a rite of passage, as the pain associated with being tattooed is considered an ordeal proving strength and fortitude, and masculine tattoo subjects such as dragons are seen to imbue power to the individual. Other functions of tattoos are clearly religious in nature, as many of men's tattoos include images of the Buddha and Old Dai passages from Theravada scripture. I learned from Brock that these sorts of tattoos, for both men and women, are a way to express ethnic identity as Dai, which is inextricably linked to Theravada Buddhism, and for many men holds special meaning as a large portion of Dai men have studied scripture in temples as boys and adolescents. The third purpose of tattoos is to imbue the tattooed individual with some degree of potency depending upon the nature of the tattoo. When I was in Manzhang, many

of the older men were pointing to the Old Dai script on their body and saying that its purpose was to “*baohu shenti*,” protect the body/health.

Tattoo parlors and street-side tattoo tents are a common site in Jinghong and many young people can be seen going in and out of these locales daily. Figuring that I would be able to witness tattooing firsthand at one of these parlors, I decided one day to walk in and introduce myself to some of the artists and interview them. It just so happened that as I walked in, a young man was being tattooed with a Buddhist figure on his back. I introduced myself and explained that I was studying the relationship between urban Dai life and Theravada Buddhism, and in particular that I learned tattooing was one important aspect of this relationship. To my surprise, the tattoo artists turned out to be of the Hani ethnic minority, but had quite a lot to say about Dai Buddhism. All of three of them, whom I have named “The Three Musketeers,” said that they have taught themselves how to write both New and Old Dai script. They said that this is because so many Dai people ask to get passages from Theravada scripture tattooed on them that they needed to become familiar with how to write the script, especially Old script because it is considerably harder to write and is what Dai Theravada scripture is written in. However, despite the fact that they can write in Dai script, they cannot speak Dai nor do they understand much of the script. Essentially, they told me, they learned to tattoo the script to reach out to Dai clients. I was informed that the majority of the tattoos that they do in their parlor are Buddhist themed and that a large portion of their clients are Dai.

Tattooing, it seems, is one area where Theravada has a huge impact on the daily lives of Dai people, as well as other ethnic groups that interact with them. The fact that this tradition is alive and well is an indicator that the understanding of Theravada Buddhism as being inseparable from Dai identity, to the point where it is permanently marked into the skin, is something agreed

upon by many of my sources and the average Dai individual. This trend is a very visual indicator of Theravada's strong influence on both the old and young and urban culture in general.

Monks, Lay People, and Temples: Monastic life is inseparable from the daily lives of Dai people, both rural and urban, and monks and lay people have a very important relationship that reinforces Theravada Buddhism's influence in Dai life. The most obvious place where Dai monks and lay people interact is at Theravada temples, of which there are several in Jinghong and Menghai, though it is not uncommon at all to see monks outside of temples interacting with people on the streets. The important thing to note is that for some Dai people, monastic life *is* life, and this fact permeates Dai society.

The second day I was in Jinghong, I decided to go to the temple closest to my guesthouse, which was Manting Temple. Admission into the temple and its grounds was free of charge. The most obvious feature about this temple was the sheer number of people there, both Dai and Han. The center temple structure has numerous Buddha statues that were regularly being knelt before by visitors, most of whom also made monetary donations. Inside the main hall was also a long table that could seat at least thirty, and non-monastic temple contributors would often congregate at this area. On the opposite side of the hall was a vendor selling Buddhist handicrafts and jewelry. Directly behind the main temple was the monastery, or monk dorms, and monks were regularly walking back and forth between the monastery and the temple. Senior monks were holding conferences on the lower floors while younger monks were running errands and doing practical tasks. I noticed, however, that there was a huge age discrepancy between the monks, most being very young and very few being advanced in years, and not many in between. Another aspect of this temple is that it is directly adjacent to Manting Park, which is a tourist park that has a considerably expensive entry fee. It became clear to me that, despite being a sacred site with a

reasonably active monastic community, the temple was being exploited as some sort of tourist attraction. Noting the nature of the monastic population, the makeup of the lay visitors, as well as the proximity of the temple to the tourist park, I decided that I would bring these topics up in future interviews.

Fortunately, the wait was not long before I was able to interview Julia, one of my advisors, as well as a highly educated Dai government/newspaper worker whom I have named Dr. Manhattan. Manhattan has studied in temples and also studied Dai culture and Old Dai script in Thailand. I learned a lot of valuable information from Manhattan that allowed me to guide my future forays into Dai religious life. From him I learned that much of what exists currently in and around Jinghong of Theravada Buddhism has a strong relationship with foreign connections in Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. In particular, many Dai monks travel to Thailand to learn scripture and Old Dai script. It is also very common for more experienced monks from these countries to move to temples in Xishuangbanna, particularly ones that need knowledgeable monastics to guide the temple community. This has been made easier, I learned, by the government's allowance of Theravada monastics to cross these borders with fewer restrictions. However, Manhattan informed me that there are several issues plaguing Dai temples, ones that I later found from other sources and personal experience to be true, though overall Manhattan claimed the current situation is certainly not terrible. One of these issues, he told me, was the fact that fewer and fewer Dai youths are taking an interest in temple life because the strain and responsibilities of modern life make it difficult to pursue this path, even for novices. In particular, compulsory education in public schools demands that students, regardless of ethnic identity, learn Mandarin. Many Dai people believe, and rightly so, that public education is necessary to achieve future success and obtain a decent job.

Following this interview, I immediately understood that temple life is something that I needed to investigate further in order to verify if Manhattan's observations held true in the temples in and around Jinghong. Luckily, one of my contacts, Peacock, had connections with several monks in *Da Fo Si*, which means "Big Buddha Temple" and is named after the golden statue of the Buddha there that is visible from many areas of city. Upon arrival, it was clear to see that this was just as much a tourist trap as it was a sacred religious site, and the price for entry was considerable, though Peacock's connections rendered this a non-issue. Ticket booths, armed guards, numerous trinket stalls, and loudspeakers blaring popular music over the courtyard gave me the impression that this place was hardly a bastion of genuine Theravada culture. Thankfully, I was incorrect, and I realized that the way of life in the monastery, far removed from the tourist center, was just the place I was looking for. When we arrived at the monastery, I was introduced to two monks, whom I have named Hugin and Munin, who were sitting in a pavilion outside, drinking tea with some of their lay friends and relations. From these two monks, my view of lay and monk relations, and the role of temples in urban Dai society, was illuminated.

Both Hugin and Munin were quite young, about 26 years old, but their knowledge was considerable since they had been monks since age 11. Both monks had mastery of Mandarin, Old and New Dai script, as well as Thai. Essentially, they informed me that the tourist center of *Da Fo Si* and the monastery are not too strongly connected to one another, though proceeds do help fund temple/monastery/school upkeep. The tourist attractions, they said, served as a sort of way to branch out to the large community. Also, due to the fact that many temples and religious sites were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, tourism acts as a catalyst that brings Theravada back into the public consciousness and funds to the individuals reconstructing certain sites. I was told that many individuals, both Han and Dai, often come to *Da Fo Si* to make donations and that

the overall relationship with common people is very good. This is also because many of the young men who are monks maintain their relationships with people outside of the temples, so friends and family visit often. Relationships with other temples in the city and nearby villages are also healthy, and monks from the vicinity will travel to various temples from time to time to fulfill monastic duties. However, their main duties at the temple involved being teachers for novice monks, as the most important service offered at Da Fo Si is schooling in Dai language and Buddhism. Both Hugin and Munin agreed that many young Dai boys are still showing an active interest in donning robes and attending monastic schools, though this is a considerable commitment as these individuals must also attend public, government operated schools. Currently, Da Fo Si's education program is thriving, with over 90 students, over 10 teachers, and over 100 resident monks. The education process starts with learning Theravada scripture and how to write Dai script, and then following mastery of the scripture meditation practice is introduced. The average age of students is around 13, but most do not decide to continue their monastic life after age 17 as this is when preparation for higher education or a career begins. Noting the overall lack of elderly monks in the vicinity, I inquired as to the reason why they were not present. Hugin and Munin told me that, and this is a common trend in many temples, that because of duties to family it is sometimes simply not possible for a monk to live the monastic life forever, thus why many of the oldest monks around were only in their late 20s or early 30s. I remembered this to see if I could observe this trend in some of the other temples outside of the city.

After our interview, I had the opportunity to walk with the monks and their friends around Da Fo Si. In general, I noticed that tourists and other common people were happily donating to the temple, lighting incense, and kneeling before Buddha images. Interactions with

monks were respectful and, overall, lighthearted. Monks to the common people, it seemed, were more like role models, guides, and counselors than overbearing authority figures. This is largely due to the fact that many monks have been and will again become lay people, and are not far removed from lay life at all. I would later learn in other interviews what functions monks carry out in lay people's lives outside of temples.

One evening, my advisor Michael told me that we could take a trip to Menghai, a smaller city and his hometown, located about an hour outside of Jinghong. Little did I know, the city of Menghai is surrounded by a large number of satellite villages that have their own unique character, as well as their own Theravada temple. Michael informed me that, traditionally, every Dai village has one temple that is typically the center of the community and is where things like festivals, education, and community gatherings take place. Along with Michael, I travelled to a good number of these temples and small communities. Alongside the road, we discovered a Dai funeral site, which had charred vegetation around it. Michael informed me that, unlike Han Chinese that practice burials, Dai strictly practice cremation because of their Theravada beliefs. One reason is to protect the environment, as burial sites take up huge sections of land, as well as the belief that after death, an individual has already moved on to his or her next life, and there is no special significance assigned to the body. Monks oversee funerals and say mantras from scripture before those gathered, though it is not a sad affair, as the belief is that the person has already moved on to another life and has left the old body behind.

Later during our journey into the satellite villages, we were able to walk into a recently constructed temple (2008) and view the main hall. Listed directly outside the door, as is common in most Dai temples, is a list of all of the individuals that have donated money for the construction or upkeep of the temple, no matter how large or small the donation is. I was told by

Michael and two women that lived adjacent to the temple, Jade and Crystal, that donation to the temple and in turn the services the monks provide the community is the system of reciprocity that provides the basis for much of Dai life. In Dai language, a donation is called *dang*, and can be anything from money to food. Food is an especially important thing to donate as monks lack the time and resources to procure food for themselves, and Jade and Crystal make regular food donations to the temple, as is common for many Dai women. The most important thing I learned from Jade and Crystal was the relationship between Dai women and monastics, and how Buddhism impacts their lives. From our interview, I gathered that temple life in Dai society is very much a male driven thing, and much of the time women play a supportive, rather than active, role in temple life. In general, elderly Dai people, men and women alike, will go to temples regularly and during festival times to hear monks give sermons about Theravada scripture, but this is far more common for men, and when meditation practice is being held at a temple women almost never attend. This is because, as I was told, most men have had experience since they were young boys in studying the scripture and meditation. In Xishuangbanna there are no Theravada nunneries, and thus young girls almost never do any form of study in temples. Also, the precepts that monks adhere to, particularly regarding celibacy and modesty in relationships with the opposite sex, make it so women are often not permitted to enter temples outside of larger community events. However, women have many interactions with monks outside of temples during important life events, and in fact, monks have a good number of duties to fulfill outside of the temple. For example, I was told that monks oversee everything from funerals and weddings, child births, and building construction, to important annual festivals such as those marking the stages of the historical Buddha's enlightenment, as well as the Water Splashing Festival and the Open and Closed Door Festivals. I was also informed that, if a person

is physically ill or feeling spiritually unwell, monks will offer counseling to these individuals as well as make them bracelets that are imbued with spiritual power, and also say prayers and mantras for them. During these times and circumstances, regardless of gender, everyone interacts with monastics and relies upon their religious knowledge to ensure harmonious and prosperous proceedings, or to keep misfortune and illness at bay. I shall discuss one such festival later in this paper.

On the return journey to Jinghong, Michael and I stopped in the outskirts of Jinghong to meet a friend of his who was actually a Dai Communist Party member and owns a traditional tailor shop and Dai painting studio. Quite the accomplished individual, I had the opportunity to have an interview with this individual, whom I have given the name Brock. Brock insisted that Theravada Buddhism and Dai culture and life are inseparable entities for a multitude of reasons, and that essentially being ethnically Dai and Theravada Buddhist are one in the same. Brock told me that monks serve an important role in forwarding Dai ethnic identity by keeping Dai language and Theravada scripture alive and also by being prominent in the lay community. Like my other informants before, Brock also confirmed that monks play an essential role in almost every major life event in Dai people's lives from birth until the next life. The education of young men, and as I learned from him, more and more females that are permitted to study at temples, serves to instill Dai Buddhist ideals into people entering into society. I felt that the recent admittance of females to study in temples, especially alongside males, is a step towards more progressive Theravada Buddhist practice. However, the general trend of youths leaving temple life earlier, or never going at all, is growing because of societal pressures and the need for the people to support their families. Brock also told me that there is a trend among lay people to practice meditation on their own, absent from monastic life, and that generally people do believe

that the average Dai person can even attain enlightenment, though this is very difficult and the number of people doing this sort of practice is quite small. Perhaps the most intriguing thing that Brock informed me about was that common Dai people actually practice a syncretic religion that blends Theravada Buddhist belief with traditional, animistic belief. To my surprise, Brock told me that a good number of shamans and witches that practice the old ways live around Jinghong and on the outskirts of many cities and villages. Typically, Dai people will go to visit these individuals in the case of illness, personal counseling, or to enlist their services to drive away ghosts or evil spirits. These shamans and witches, *wuyi* and *wupo* respectively, have their own pantheon of deities and spirits separate from Theravada that exists alongside Buddhist figures. In fact, I learned that these witch doctors, rather than relying upon mantras and prayers, manage to extract illness and evil spirits from people using supernatural methods. It would appear that, and from what Brock told me, common Dai people rely upon both systems to find spiritual guidance and ensure protection from maleficent forces. What this religious syncretization reveals to me is a potential larger trend of religious revival in the Jinghong Dai community wherein both Theravada Buddhism and traditional animistic belief both play large, practical roles in everyday life and contribute to what it means to be Dai.

The relationship between lay Dai people and Dai monastics and temples is certainly a complex one. This relationship, from what can be gathered from all of my sources and experiences, is inseparable from being Dai itself, and in this way Theravada Buddhism plays a huge role in establishing what it means to be Dai. Any sort of evolution of temple life will ultimately affect the larger lay Dai population as a whole. Also, as is evident, monks and other religious figures are inseparable from the daily lives of lay Dai people, who in turn make up a part of a monk's daily existence. Monks and lay Dai people have a symbiotic relationship where

monks provide religious services, serve as role models for the community, educate youths, and oversee festivals while lay people attend events, make donations to temples, and ensure the continuation of Theravada teaching and values by investing in temples and schools. Truly, this relationship is indicative of Theravada's primary importance in Dai life, both urban and rural.

Theravada Buddhism in Dai Festivals: A Case Study: I had the opportunity to travel with my advisors to a village called Manzhang, which was about 45 minutes outside of Jinghong. The day we went the village was holding a very important festival called *sanxinfangjie* or "new building festival." I was informed by Michael and Julia that for Dai people, the new building festival is equally important to *poshuijie* or the Water Splashing Festival. This festival is to celebrate the completed construction of a new building in a town or village and many Dai people from within and outside of the village arrive to participate. In this particular instance, the celebration was for the completion of a new restaurant. I learned that in this festival, both monks and lay people play an important role.

The first thing that occurred at the festival was the arrival of monks and fellow village members. Since Manzhang's temple was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, all of the monks came from temples outside of the village. Everyone seemed to be looking forward to the future construction, as they made it clear that their Theravada identity was an important aspect of their village life. The owner of the new building then places small offering containers made from leaves and sticks at every corner of the property, and in the center of the village. These offering boxes are filled with food and have incense sticks placed in them. While this is occurring, the elderly women of the village make other offering containers from leaves and tie them to the fence of the property, and then fill them with food and other valuables. These offerings are intended to ensure prosperity for the future. After the offering boxes are placed, the owner of the

restaurant, wearing traditional costume, knelt before each one while the entire assembly of monks recited scripture over him. The symbolic placement of the offering containers at every corner and in the center of the property is to ensure that the property is protected and has blessings coming from every direction. This ritual ensures that the new business is spiritually protected and that future business will be successful. This was a clear example that the role of monks and Theravada is quite apparent in Dai society, as no other celebration could begin until the religious aspect of the festival was completed.

Following the offering, I was able to have an interview with one of the senior monks carrying out the rituals. This monk, whom I have named Bodhi, was of considerably high monastic rank, which was indicated by his more elaborate and darker colored robes. I was able to inquire about the current situation in rural temples and monastic relations with the common people. Overall, I was informed, things are going well but there are a few issues. The largest issue, and one that has been shared with me before, is that fewer and fewer youths have the time to make the commitment to monastic life. In rural areas, this usually manifests itself as the need for youths to return to their family homes in order to help them do farm work or look after elderly members of the family. In turn, there are also a shortage of teachers and older, more experienced monks to take on this duty. However, Bodhi informed me that at some temple schools, including his, attendance is healthy and young Dai villagers are attended monastery as early as 4 years old. Better yet, according to him, more and more temples are allowing girls to also study at monastery schools so that Dai language and culture can also be transmitted through them. This confirmed my suspicion that, despite some difficulties arising due to the requirements of living in modern society, Dai Theravada monks and lay people have made efforts to continue

their relationship and temple education, even moving in progressive directions such as increasing the role of women in Buddhist life.

Soon after the interview, the celebration began. There was a huge feast, and everyone, including myself, was expected to take part in singing some folk songs. There was also a lot of homemade alcohol floating around the room, and many toasts of good fortune and friendship were made between those attending. More and more people were filtering in, and many of them arrived in matching costume to represent their village character. I learned that most of the women in attendance were also members of dance troupes that were going to be performing later in the night. Once the early evening arrived, the center of the village became the focal point of everyone's attention, as this was where all of the dance troupes were going to be performing. I was even asked to sing a song for everyone, and chose "Don't Stop Believing" by Journey. Apparently, singing and dancing are a huge source of pride for the Dai villagers in and around Manzhang, as everyone was expected to participate in some way. It was almost 10:00pm when we had to leave, and still more people were arriving to take part in the festivities. Overall, it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience that showed me the more vibrant aspects of Dai culture and was a way to gain insight into how Dai express and solidify their ethnic identity.

4. Conclusion

My research was conducted to determine how Theravada Buddhism manifests itself in the daily life of Dai individuals and what sort of relationship exists between monks and lay people. I learned that Theravada Buddhism is an integral part of Dai life and plays a key role in many aspects of that life. In urban life, being a Buddhist is part of expressing Dai identity, which is primarily done by getting Theravada scripture and images tattooed onto the skin. This bold expression of Dai identity is demonstrative of Theravada's impact on Dai people, regardless of their age or status. Through studying the relationship between monks and lay people, as well as Dai temples, I learned that the relationship between Dai monks and lay people is one of the foremost ways that Theravada Buddhism is promoted and forwarded in Dai society. This is done through education and the fact that monks play a key role in almost every major event in Dai individuals' lives. While there are conflicting factors putting some aspects of this relationship at risk, such as the need for youths to attend public schools and find modern jobs, overall this relationship is still very strong and is inseparable from Dai life, and in fact temples are finding new ways to keep up with the times, such as allowing more and more girls to attend temple schools and interacting with the tourist industry. Finally, through my case study of the New Building Festival, I discovered that Theravada Buddhism and other aspects of Dai culture come together to form a comprehensive expression of Dai identity.

In regards to future study, I would recommend doing a longer study period so one could observe how the relationship between monastics and lay people manifests itself in different ways over the course of the year. It is also essential to have a lot of time in order to form meaningful,

lasting connections and rapport with local people. Overall, however, I believe that for such a short period of time this fieldwork was successful. Participant observation, interviewing, and taking ample amounts of field notes are time tested methods that can reap a large amount of data regardless of time constraints. Living on-site with the research community is essential for building trust with locals and familiarity with the environment. Lastly, having connections with informants that are more familiar with the local culture and location of study are an indispensable resource that should be utilized and appreciated. In my case, my advisors proved to be extremely helpful for easing my way into the research community, and I would recommend any student in the future to build a healthy relationship with his or her advisors.

5. References

NOTE: With the exception of Thomas Borchert's work, cited above, the rest of these sources were used only for preliminary research to gain familiarity with the field and research community. All information in this paper and conclusions presented to the reader are taken directly from my experience, personal gnosis, information from contacts, and data analysis during my fieldwork period, and are NOT taken from any of the following sources.

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6. Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Michael and Julia: Throughout the entire study period

Dr. Manhattan: May 4th

Moli: Throughout study period, May 4th longest interview

Tea-Leaf: May 6th

Peacock: May 8th, May 9th

Hugin and Munin: May 9th

The Three Musketeers: May 10th

Brock: May 12th

Brad and Stacey: May 12th

Jade and Crystal: May 12th

Bodhi: May 15th

