Religious Affinities and Secular Compulsions: Monastic Mobility among the Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna

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There was a time when scholars of Buddhism looked at local, contemporary traditions and practices as degenerations or corruptions of an alleged pristine core of knowledge, located in an idealized past. But the situation has changed now, and in contrast to such interpretations in terms of a core-periphery model of “great” and “little” traditions, in the last decades several studies have emphasized the need to study the actual dynamics between local and trans-local Buddhist traditions, looking in particular at “meanings and values for forms of Buddhism – even translocal Buddhisms – emerging at local levels” (Braun 2009:936).

According to Braun, it was anthropologists such as Stanley Tambiah, Melford Spiro and Richard Gombrich who started this “turn to the local” in studies of Buddhism. In spite of their now apparent shortcomings, “the presentist cast of anthropology” and the attention paid by the discipline to practice (2009:940), succeeded in shifting the paradigm from one dominated by the study of texts, to another which paid more attention to Buddhism as a “vital reality.” More recently, however, it has been historical and religious studies approaches which have taken further the exploration of the connections between the local and the trans-local in Buddhism, demonstrating that idiosyncratic understandings of religious doctrine and practice are not an exclusive privilege of modern and contemporary “interpretive communities.”

This article intends to contribute to the ongoing examination of the connections between local and trans-local manifestations of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia. It will do so by focusing on a case study of Tai Lue monastics, members of a minority group in southwest China, who move temporarily to Thailand for educational purposes. The Tai Lue are usually identified as Theravada Buddhists; more significantly, they are customarily portrayed in the academic literature as members of a trans-national community characterized in terms of shared sacred texts, and of a shared script, the To Tham, or Tai Tham, in particular.

While it is not my intention to discuss the identification of the Lue as Theravada Buddhists, or the existence of a Tai cultural region, I would like here to problematize such adscriptions, looking at the connections between the trans-local and the local in Buddhism from a perspective which highlights aspects of monastic practice not necessarily related to “Buddhism” or even to “religion”, and emphasizing the importance of other, non-textual aspects in the emergence and development of such communities. In particular, I will look here at how the position of Lue monastics within a regional cultural hierarchy is shaped by their continued adherence to a set of disciplines considered in other contexts inappropriate and even unacceptable for monastics, such as having food in the afternoons, gambling, drinking alcohol, having girlfriends, or competing in sports. Within a context of increased connectivity and visibility as a result of the gradual integration of Sipsong Panna into national, regional, and ultimately global “moral orders” in the reform period in China, such

1 Braun 2009:238; see also Pattana 2009.
2 See McDaniel 2009. Among the studies mentioned by Braun are those of Anne Blackburn on the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism, and those of Anne Hansen on Cambodia.
4 On the “cultural region of Tham script manuscripts”, see Jijma 2009. See also Davis 2003 and Wasan 2013; on Tai Lue identity, Hsieh 1995. This cultural region has been in turn deemed by Charles Keyes an invention of western missionaries and Thai scholars, akin to one of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” (Keyes 1995).
5 The term “Theravada”, however, conveys little significance for locals. See Bizot 2000 for a discussion of the pre-modern religious diversity in this area of mainland Southeast Asia.
6 For an exploration of monasticism in Sipsong Panna from the perspective of religious studies, see Borchert 2007, 2008.
disciplines, seen by many locals as a fundamental part of male and monastic sociality, have been called into question by both insiders (particularly those with experience in monastic contexts outside of Sipsong Panna) and outsiders to the region, and identified as proof of ignorance or defectiveness on the part of this minority religious community.

It is my contention that conceptual tools developed by anthropological research may be useful in order to understand the workings of both “imagined” and “imagining” communities (see Tanabe 2008) hierarchically articulated by particular and local understandings (even if presented as universal) of what is appropriate and what is not in respect of the behavior of monastics. One such concept is that of “cultural intimacy”, developed by Michael Herzfeld in order to give account of “those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (Herzfeld 2005:3). In a similar vein, the community of Lue monks studying abroad could be seen as forming what Hans Steinmüller in relation to his work in rural areas of central China (2010, 2011) has deemed a “community of complicity”. Closer to the notion of face-to-face communities, such groups are composed of “those who understand what is meant based on their shared experiential horizon in an intimate local space and a shared knowledge of the contradictory outside representations of this space”, the boundaries of which are negotiated by cynicism, embarrassment and irony (Steinmüller 2011:25).

This paper examines commonalities and divergences within the Theravada worlds, through an exploration of the experiences of Tai Lue monks spending time in Thailand in order to obtain an academic degree. Apart from helping us grasp the diversity within culturally heterogeneous communities sharing a related corpus of religious texts and practices, the ethnographic inquiry into the tensions informing trans-local mobility among Lue monastics can help us obtain a more nuanced and comprehensive notion of what are the fundamental tenets of monastic practice in this particular locality, as well as of the workings of regional-level cultural and religious hierarchies of value.

Sipsong Panna, the Lue, and Buddhism

An ancient polity tributary of both Chinese and Burmese empires, Sipsong Panna formally became part of the nascent geo-body of the Chinese nation-state with the territorial distribution and fixation of borders in the Upper Mekong region agreed between the Qing empire, France and Great Britain, at the end of the nineteenth century. After the fall of the Republic and the final military triumph of the Communist Party over the Nationalists in the civil war in 1953 the centuries-old socio-political system of Sipsong Panna, dominated by the Tai chao, the ruling minority of landowners, was abolished, and the region integrated in newly-created national administrative structures through the establishment of the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture (Chinese: 西雙版納傣族自治州 Xishuangbanna Daizu Zizhizhou).

Map 1 Sipsong Panna in-between East and Southeast Asia

Map 2 A map of Sipsong Panna. Names of places within China are written in Chinese pinyin, then in Tai (between parentheses)

As every other autonomous administrative area in China, the Xishuangbanna Prefecture was nominally linked to the historically dominant ethnic group in the region, in this case the Tai Lue, a Tai-speaking group culturally related to the majority population of present-day Thailand and Laos, as well as to other groups inhabiting the eastern areas of Burma-Myanmar (Shan State). Together with other Tai-speaking populations mainly inhabiting Yunnan province, the Lue were integrated in the official ethnic classification of the PRC within the “Dai” category (Chinese: 傣族 Daizu). As Stevan Harrell has put it, at that point the Lue “were forced to move from a consciousness of themselves as a nation, a people who ran their own state, to an idea of themselves as an ethnic group within a larger political system” (1995:32).

Identified by Chinese researchers and administrators as one of the major ideological supports of the “feudal regime” of the chao, successive political campaigns implemented in the region from the 1950s to the 1970s targeted Buddhism as an obstacle
to the consolidation of Communist Party power in the area. During the most repressive periods, temples and shrines were destroyed or put to other, more earthly uses, while most monks and novices were forced to disrobe. By the time of Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, Buddhist practice had all but stopped in the area, and the number of monastics had dropped to a minimum.

The opening-up reform in China changed all this. Since 1980, the systematic exploitation of the area’s resources, mainly rubber (planted in the area replacing the original rain forest within the framework of reinforcing border security during the Maoist period), and, more recently, tea and tourism, has caused an acceleration in the processes of integration of Sipsong Panna into national and regional economic circuits. On the other hand, legislation and policies regulating practice among members of the five creeds officially recognised by the Communist Party state (Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism and Daoism) were restored, and Article 36 of the 1982 Constitution of the People’s Republic of China guaranteed “freedom of religious belief”. From around 1980 the Lue started ordaining their boys again, and by the mid-1980s, temples and monastics had reached pre-1950 figures. Sipsong Panna had transformed, as a Lue former monk has put it, “from a non-Buddhist to a Buddhist society”.

Old and new mobilities

The recovery of monasticism in Sipsong Panna implied the recovery of the old cross-border mobility, even if somehow modified. Lue inhabiting the regions close to the present-day Yunnan borders with Burma/Myanmar and Laos maintain close cultural and linguistic ties with groups living in areas on the other side of the borders, such as the Tai Kheun of the old principality of Kengtung (Shan State), the Tai Long (Tai Yai) living along the Thai-Burmese border, or the Tai Neua scattered across this region (see Keyes 1995 and Ijima 2009). Traditionally, Lue monks and novices travelled regularly outside Sipsong Panna and into other Tai areas in today eastern Burma-Myanmar (Shan State), northern Laos, and Thailand. As Lue scholar Khanan Sam Sao has shown, the walking paths between Kengtung and western Sipsong Panna were frequented by lay and monastic Tai from both sides of the border in the times prior to the establishment of the current frontiers at the end of the nineteenth century, and have continued to be used until today (Kang 2009).

Several studies have called attention towards how the revitalization of the old routes of monastic exchange helped the recovery of religious practice among the Lue in Sipsong Panna, particularly allowing foreign monks to travel to Sipsong Panna to act as abbots in local temples and participate directly in the reconstruction of monastic lineages. The transportation and exchange of “cultural items” by both monks and laymen, or the pilgrimage to shared sacred sites, mediate the continuous renewing of ties of kin and friendship between communities on both sides of the borders (Davis 2003, Wasan 2005).

This cross-border mobility is not restricted to monks, or to men, for that matter, but monasticism plays a very important role in it, since temples guarantee free accommodation for travelling monastics. In fact, many of the Lue laymen involved in cross-border trade in the area today are former monks. These traders travel to Thailand to purchase Buddhist paraphernalia or everyday commodities to be sold in Sipsong Panna, and their business connections with that country are often established during the time they spent in the monkhood. Some of these former monks have settled down on the other side

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8 Buddhism in Sipsong Panna was affected particularly, but not exclusively, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). On the implementation of the so-called “socialist movements” in Sipsong Panna, see Hsieh 1989:186-235 and Peters 1990:344. On the implementation of Land Reform in the region, see Hsieh 1989:211.


12 See also Wasan 2010 and 2013 for stories of contemporary senior monks who used these paths when travelling to northern Thailand. See also below.
of the border, in towns such as Tachilek (in Shan State) or Mae Sai in Thailand (see Wasan 2007).

However, current and former monastics moving across national borders in the region must nowadays take account of new regimes of regulation (Walker 1999). Both monks and laymen have been forced to adapt to new understandings of territorial boundaries determined by a regulated framework characterized in turn by the establishment of official links between temples and monastic schools, and the regimen of invitation letters, passports, and student visas. The presence of several Tai Lue monks in Wat¹³ Phra Buddha Bat Tak Pha (Lamphun Province, northern Thailand) at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s may be taken as an example of the confluence of new and old types of mobility. In 1991 the Yunnan Buddhist Association sent ten Lue monks to this temple with passports and, after all due formal procedures were completed in Beijing, several others arrived from Sipsong Panna of their own will, even on foot (Wasan 2010).

The first group of official graduates of the Buddhist College at Wat Pajie, Jinghong City (January 2008). Five of these would soon become students at a temple in Phayao Province, Thailand

The first post-revival attempt to provide Lue monks with a standard, modern type of education would therefore look towards Thailand as a model – and toward the north of the country in particular, a region with which the Lue maintain strong cultural links. Upon their return to Sipsong Panna, members of this first group of traveling monk students were instrumental in the setting up of a monastic school at Wat Pajie in 1995, the central temple of Sipsong Panna, in Jinghong City, seat of the prefectural government. The school, modelled after the Thai system of Buddhist temple-schools (Borchert 2007), would provide instruction on contemporary subjects such as Chinese language and mathematics, rewarding monk students with academic degrees recognized within China, as well as in educational institutions in other countries. This has made available new opportunities for the educational and working mobility of Lue monks and novices at the national and regional level.

¹³ “Wat” is the term used in Thailand and Tai areas to refer to the temple or monastery where monks reside and where ceremonies involving laity are performed.
While Thailand has remained an important destination for Lue monastic students, it is by no means the only one, and the last two decades have seen an important development of the links between the Sipsong Panna Sangha and Buddhist educational institutions both within China, and in other countries. Since the establishment of the Buddhist College (Chinese: 佛学院 Foxueyuan) at Wat Pajie, and even before the degree was officially recognized by the Chinese government in the mid-2000s, dozens of Lue monks have travelled from Sipsong Panna to study in various locations within China, and reached as far as Sri Lanka. Apart from benefiting from this experience as individuals, these men have become the main link between Lue localities and Theravada and Buddhist worlds beyond their locality.

Monastic misbehaviour

The motivations of novices and monks engaged in this cross-border and transnational mobility are multiple and complex. At the individual level, an important reason for leaving one’s village and “travel the world”, as the Buddha did in the legend, is the will to experience that world outside the village context to which most Lue monastics belong. Male identities among the Tai (as among other groups in the area) are articulated by life narratives in which the desire to be freed from household constraints so as to enjoy the opportunities for entertainment and pleasant experiences, before getting married and establishing one’s own family, plays a very important role. When asked about getting married, young Lue men, including monastics, will often reply “Eo bo pho”, indicating that they have not had “enough fun” yet.

Importantly, spending time outside the village will also have an effect on the monk’s reputation, investing him with a prestige derived from the understanding that he has been to places of power and knowledge, and that this contact has made him stronger and wiser. This prestige also varies according to the position that a specific destination occupies in the local imagination – a position mainly determined by the degree of economic development of a certain place. According to this perspective, powerful and developed countries such as China or Thailand are preferred to others less so, such as Laos or Burma/Myanmar. Within each of these nation-states, urban contexts are generally preferable to rural ones.

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14 “Sangha” refers to the community of Buddhist monks and novices living in monasteries, and fed by the laity.
The modernity embodied by Sipsong Panna as a part of modern China, nowadays the dominant economic and cultural power in the whole region, strongly appeals to Tai monks of Lao and Burmese nationality who decide to spend time in temples on the Chinese side of the border. Villagers in rural Sipsong Panna make more money now than their counterparts in Shan State or in northern Laos, and are thus able (at least in theory) to contribute more generously to temple activities. In addition to this, discipline among Lue monastics in Sipsong Panna is more relaxed (see below), and so life is much more comfortable for monastics in temples within China. Lue monks from China, however, are less interested in spending time in those poorer areas, which offer less freedom and fewer chances for accumulating different kinds of capital than does Sipsong Panna (see Diana 2009). In connection with this, hardly any Lue monks have studied in temples in Laos or Burma/Myanmar.

However, Sipsong Panna itself occupies a subordinate position within the monastic imagination of the Theravada region. This is clearly seen in the patterns of international religious exchange. Since the 1980s, both national and international religious delegations consisting of monks and laymen have regularly visited Sipsong Panna during important events, such as the coronation of Khuba Long Jom as Khuba Moeng, the highest Buddhist authority in the region, in 2004 (see Casas 2008), or the inauguration of the new, massive vihan (ordination and prayer hall) at Wat Pajie, in December 2012. In 2007 a venerable monk from Sri Lanka visited this temple, bringing with him a couple of Bodhi-tree shoots that were planted in Wat Pajie and Wat Long Moeng Lue. Members of the Thai royal family have regularly visited Sipsong Panna, and the construction of Wat Pajie itself was partly funded by donations from Thailand (Wasan 2010). However, apart from a few novices coming from Lue and Tai areas in northern Laos, no monks from other Buddhist areas in Southeast Asia come to study in Sipsong Panna temples. This points to the hierarchical nature of the structure of Buddhist networks in the region, with centres of learning in Thailand, Burma/Myanmar, or in Sri Lanka, attracting monastics from deprived areas located sometimes in those same countries, areas which at the same time absorb lay donations from the more powerful centres.

The hierarchical nature of these networks is reflected in the paternalistic attitude of Thai monks and laity concerning the Lue in China. The words of the late abbot of Wat Phra Buddha Bat Tak Pha, Maha Kheun, recollected by a Lue former monk and member of an early group of students in Lamphun, are very illustrative of this attitude:

You are the first generation of monks from Sipsong Panna who have come to study in Thailand [...] I have been to your country, and have seen traditions and customs, particularly of the monks and novices over there. They were sadly poor. They were uneducated, lacking in Buddhist knowledge and traditions. The reforms and development of Theravada Buddhism in Sipsong Panna to be as civilised and enlightened as it has been in Thailand, are in your hands. It is your generation that has to make this happen when you return to your home country (quoted in Wasan 2005:158)

As victims of the violence of the Communist Party, the Tai Lue were represented by their Thai pinong (Tai, Thai: "brothers") as in need of help. Still today, and in the same way that they are represented as subaltern members of the Chinese Nation (Chinese: 中华民族 Zhonghua minzu),¹⁵ the Lue also appear as defective members of the transnational Buddhist community they strive to join. In spite of the significant economic development of Sipsong Panna over the last 35 years, stereotypes of Lue monastics as

¹⁵ Wat Long is a new temple-school cum-tourist site built with funding provided by a commercial company from Liaoning Province, in north-eastern China. The Buddhist College of Sipsong Panna moved there from Wat Pajie in the first half of 2008. See Casas 2011.
¹⁶ The most recent such visit saw a Thai royal delegations travelling to Sipsong Panna in October 2014, after the end of the Lent season. These representatives of the Thai monarchy travelled to the relatively remote area of Moeng Jie, in the West of Sipsong Panna, to perform a Kathin ceremony.
backward and ignorant of even the basics tenets of Buddhism are maintained and reinforced by the idiosyncrasy of Sipsong Panna monasticism, where practices such as textual studies and meditation, usually associated with monasticism in other territories in the region, are practically absent of everyday monastic practice. Concerning meditation in particular, although there are some examples of interest in this practice among Lue monks, this interest is limited to a small group of men with a background in meditation centres in Thailand or Burma/Myanmar. Monks and novices residing at the two main temples in Jinghong City practice a few minutes of meditation during the daily morning and evening prayers (Tai: sut phachao) in the vihan. But apart from this, and with the exception of a few examples of forest monks living on the Sino-Burmese border, interest in meditation is generally scarce among Lue monastics and laity.

Furthermore, discipline among Tai monastics is generally seen as lax. It is not hard when in Sipsong Panna to come across novices and monks engaged in activities usually considered (at least in other Theravada countries) as deviations incompatible with what is understood as acceptable monastic practice, such as eating solids in the afternoon, practicing sport, drinking alcohol, or flirting with girls, activities Lue monks and novices often engage in the company of lay peers. While this does not mean that it is necessary for monastics to engage such heterodox practices to be considered a proper monk, or that it goes uncontested by locals, the fact that such engagement is, to different degrees, tolerated by most lay people in Sipsong Panna, casts a shadow over the overall nature of local monastic practice. Even within Sipsong Panna, this alleged indiscipline on the part of Lue monastics is often signalled as symptom of degeneration and defectiveness, and explained in terms of the political violence suffered by local populations in the past, or of the negative influence that modernity and Han culture has at present upon Tai traditions. This sensitivity among locals, usually individuals with experience outside the region, may be linked to national discourses of “human quality” (Chinese: 素質 suzhi) as well, and was (and still is) very apparent in my own interactions with Lue in and outside Sipsong Panna.

But taking part in practices of commensality is a fundamental part of the process of becoming a man among Tai Lue, both for those boys and young men outside the monastery, and for those inside. Such practices have come to constitute a meaningful feature of local monastic life, in which young monastics partake enthusiastically, and which they would find hard to renounce. If the participation of Lue monastics in practices related to (and tainted by) “the secular” may become a cause of embarrassment, or a pretext for the implementation of civilizing and educational projects on the part of local and non-local monastic elites, it is also brought up by Lue monastics themselves as a positive marker of the peculiar idiosyncrasy of Tai Lue monasticism and culture, even as a token of identity pride. For those of them aware of the differences between monastic lifestyles in diverse localities, those practices become a sign of the freedom they enjoy in comparison to less fortunate monks living in other countries. As monastic friends in Sipsong Panna proudly (and half-jokingly) exclaimed when I mentioned the negative light in which others may see their behaviour, “This is not Thailand!” This reaction expresses a sheer aspiration to independence, as well as the will of the Lue monks not to be dominated by alien conceptions of monasticism. As markers of both embarrassment and pride, the perceived malpractices truly form the core itself of Lue monastic “cultural intimacy”.20

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18 These monks have generally spent periods of time in meditation centres in Burma-Myanmar or in Thailand. In January, 2010 one of them opened a meditation centre in his home village in Moeng Ham (Chinese: 敖梅壘, Garlanba). The centre consists of a compound of individual huts made of bamboo and thatch, where practitioners can retire for different periods of time and practice meditation in isolation. Local villagers are arguably indifferent to this movement, and the activity remains basically oriented towards outsiders, mainly Han Chinese from the coastal areas. On the lack of interest in meditation among Lue villagers, see also Kang Nanshan 2009:45-6. According to this former monk, the practice of meditation was not common in the past.

19 On this very significant discourse in the Chinese context, see Kipnis 2006.

20 See the introduction to this paper.
Secular compulsions abroad

So what happens when Lue monastics leave Sipsong Panna to study abroad? I will look at this issue through the case of Lue monks studying in Thailand, since this country has absorbed the larger part of monastics leaving Sipsong Panna to further their education since the 1990s.  

Discipline in monastic institutions outside Bangkok is generally considered to be more lax than in the temples of the national capital. In northern Thailand, in particular, and due to the closer interaction between lay and monastic communities in particular, Lue monks are supposed to encounter a more familiar environment – in the sense of a more relaxed discipline. However, the influence of national values regarding monastic discipline is also felt in the north.

Apart from cases of individual mobility, since 2008 one of the main destinations for Sipsong Panna monks in Thailand is a wat located in Phayao Province, around three hours by bus from the northern city of Chiang Mai. This temple hosts a branch of the largest monastic educational institution in the country. As it is the custom in the broader Tai region, the contact between the central temple of Sipsong Panna and the Thai monastery was established through a personal connection, in this case one the senior monks at the latter temple, whom I will simply call “Ajarn.” A first group of five Lue monks arrived in this temple in the spring of 2008, after graduating from the so-called “bilingual education class” at Wat Pajie a few months earlier. During the following years, some of these monks have returned to Sipsong Panna, while others have remained in Thailand, and yet other, new students have joined them there.

Most of the Lue monks at the Phayao temple stay close to each other, in the same compound where Ajarn himself resides, which demonstrates the special concern of the Thai monk for them. Lue monastics therefore spend a lot of time together, interacting with Thai and students of other nationalities mostly during lessons at the temple school. Their contact with the local Thai lay community is generally limited to followers of their master, a locally popular monk, himself an MA graduated in India, currently a PhD student and personally involved in the development of monastic tertiary education in the area. Ajarn often demands that the Lue monks act as his assistants, particularly one of them whose language skills and interest in Thai culture have helped him adapt perfectly well to life in Thailand.

Lue monastics studying in Thailand will attempt to reproduce the patterns of male commensality they enjoy in Sipsong Panna. However, important differences concerning local understandings of monastic behaviour make this problematic. For one, going out of the temple is more problematic in the Thai context. For those Lue monks in Thai temples, and apart from the occasional leisure trip to visit some famous spots in the company of other monks, opportunities to leave the monastery compound are restricted to rituals and ceremonies in which they usually accompany senior monks. This is particularly true for those monks staying at temples in the capital, Bangkok, where, particularly at those monasteries famous for their scholarly or meditation disciplines, monastics are expected to remain within the compund most of the time. Leaving the temple after the evening prayer (Thai: thamwat yeun) is seen as particularly inappropriate in Thailand.

Contrary to what happens in Sipsong Panna, where monastics receive food from villagers in the temple, or money to purchase it themselves, in Thailand it common for monks and novices to collect alms in the first hours of the morning (Thai: binthabat). The food collected during alms, which in northern Thailand includes both glutinous (Tai: khaọ

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21 I have not been able to visit the Lue monks studying at present in Sri Lanka, although I met most of them before they left for that country, and communicate regularly with them.

22 It is assumed today that Buddhist rituals and practices, as well as the script still used in Sipsong Panna temples, were brought into Sipsong Panna by monastic sects originating in northern Thailand, via Kengtung, in Shan State. See Kang 2009.

23 Actually a hybrid curriculum combining secular and Buddhist subjects, taught in Chinese and Tai language, respectively.

24 The Lue monks arrived at the temple at the same time that the group of around 25 monks travelled to the main campus of Mahachulalongkorn in Ayutthaya (see below).
no) and white boiled rice (Tai: khao an), is brought to the temple and eaten collectively for breakfast, and then lunch, although monks can also choose to eat in the privacy of their rooms (Tai, Thai: kuti). Lue monks in Phayao and in other locations across Thailand may thus partake of breakfast and lunch together with the other members of the temple community.

Two Lue monks in a Bangkok temple, August 2012.

Monks who want to eat food in the evening, however, cannot do so in public, as in Thailand it is considered improper that monks consume solids after midday. Lue monastics staying in Thai temples may save some of the food collected in the morning alms (either by themselves or by other monks) to be consumed later on. Sticky rice as well as vegetables, meat or fish collected in the early morning can be eaten in the evening of the same day without any preparation. If there are extra vegetables or meat available, the monks will cook rice and make a larger meal.

During the first few years of their stay at the Phayao temple, for instance, the Lue monks would cook dinner in a small, makeshift kitchen located in the ground floor of their Ajarn’s residence, next to the hall where lay guests are received by the monk. At that time they would just use a single hotplate for heating water or oil to cook. According to one of the Lue monks, since Ajarn’s dormitory was located just above this small space, he complained to them about the smoke of fried chillies reaching his room, so ultimately he allowed them to have a small room annexed to the kuti building. The new space was to contain a more elaborate kitchen, a table and several chairs, and a sink (previously dishes were washed under a tap outside the building). The Lue monks built this new space by themselves, with the help of some of the lay residents of the temple, and a small concrete mixer. This space is not easy to spot for outsiders visiting the temple, and remains locked during daytime. After remaining separated for most of the day while taking part in diverse educational and religious activities, however, Lue monks get together in the late afternoon to cook and eat, to chat and gossip in their mother tongue. This is an opportunity to engage in the production of locality (Appadurai 1996), re-enacting rituals of commensality common among men in Sipsong Panna. Occasionally, this commensality may involve the ingestion of alcohol, an essential part of male gatherings in that region, in Thailand.

25 Northern Thai custom concerning the ingestion of food in the afternoons on the part of monastics is more relaxed than the now-dominant in the rest of the country.
consumed most commonly in the form of Thai beer.\textsuperscript{26} However, while the Lue can rely on the laymen working at the temple to purchase food for the evening meal, alcohol is harder to obtain, as, contrary to what happens in Sipsong Panna, in Thailand it is generally agreed that monks should never engage in the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

In Bangkok, where at least in theory monastic discipline is stricter, opportunities for monks to purchase food and alcohol to be consumed in privacy are even more limited than in temples of the north. However, Lue monks studying in Bangkok temples still strive to maintain the patterns of commensality of Sipsong Panna. If a group of Lue monks are staying together in a temple, one of them will generally keep a rice-cooker, and the others will gather to dine in his room. In the night time, and once the laymen delivering the food have become part of the monks’ “community of complicity”,\textsuperscript{27} it is possible for them to have dinner brought to their rooms in take-away boxes.

But in the national capital this “community of complicity” becomes even narrower and more limited than in the temples of the north, and so monks intending to eat outside prescribed times must be more careful not to be noticed by other temple residents, and particularly by the senior monks. They will thus try to hide the meal not only by eating in the privacy of their dormitories, but, in case they are cooking rice, preventing the smell of food from coming out of the room – for instance by placing a fan near the room door and facing the window. I was told by one young Lue staying at a strict temple in Bangkok about the embarrassment suffered when an old Thai senior monk occupying the room next door found out, because of the smell, he was cooking in the evening. The senior monk scolded the younger one and severely reminded him of the inappropriateness of doing this. The embarrassment caused by these instances make the individual aware of the divergences between monastic traditions, as well as of the subaltern position of the Lue in the transnational Buddhist community.

\textbf{Coming home}

Although eating in the afternoon and occasional drinking can be seen as a common practice among Lue monks studying abroad, not all Sipsong Panna monastics residing in Thai temples partake in these unorthodox rituals of commensality, or with the same intensity. As we have seen, different temple routines, and a generally stricter monastic discipline, may make life in Thai monasteries hard for Lue monks. However, while offering a refuge against the unfamiliarity and the hazards of life outside Sipsong Panna, constant interaction with other Lue monastics may hinder efforts at adaptation to a foreign context and educational progress, sometimes even provoking the failure of individual projects of mobility. Those monks who attempt to adapt to mainstream models of monastic life and to the discipline of their host institution and to public understandings of monastic behaviour, will thus go as far as staying away from their fellow Lue. A young Lue monk studying in Bangkok, for instance, told me that when staying together with other Lue monastics he did not feel himself to be a “real monk”, and that he considered it was necessary to avoid commensality with them in order to make the most of the monastic experience outside Sipsong Panna. Nevertheless this avoidance exposed him to criticism on the part of those monks willing to continue participating in their Lue lifestyle.

Apart from the stricter monastic discipline, other factors may make adaptation to life in Thailand for Lue monks harder than expected. One of these is the emphasis traditionally put on textual learning in Thai temples. Although the learning of texts is an important part of monasticism in Sipsong Panna, this is basically oriented towards ritual practice. The introduction of a modality of monastic education with a formal system of examinations and degrees, such as that operating in the Buddhist College currently in Wat Long Moeng Lue, is a fairly recent phenomenon, and while erudite textual knowledge is

\textsuperscript{26} Chinese-produced beer is nowadays the most popular beverage in Sipsong Panna, although consumption of stronger rice liquor or \textit{lao} is common among middle-aged and old Tai Lue men.

\textsuperscript{27} See the introduction.
valued among village communities (particularly by elders), the systematic study of ritual
texts is practically non-existent in Sipsong Panna. After learning the Tham script for a few
years in the temple, most former Lue novices will easily forget it, since at present there is
not much use for the script outside monasteries. Novices and young monks may put more
value in the dexterity in communicating with lay peers or girls through contemporary
mediums such as mobile phones or the internet. Although there are of course exceptions,
these monastics are also in general uninterested in pursuing the kind of textual learning
dominant in monastic institutions in other Buddhist localities. 28

Apart from this general lack of interest in textual study and formal education, the
utility of monastic degrees is another important concern for Lue monastics studying in
Thailand. The monks contend that degrees obtained at monastic institutions are not very
relevant for finding a good job in the contemporary Chinese context, and that the post-
monastic status of former monks with an experience in Thailand relies basically on the
informal skills acquired while in this country – particularly linguistic, but also artistic skills or
even business connections. For instance, several former monks who spent time in temples
in Thailand work nowadays as tour guides for Thai tourists visiting Sipsong Panna; some
make a living as temple artisans and designers, while yet others have put together the
capital necessary to start a trans-national trade business. In short, what is really useful for
former monks in terms of finding work in the modern economy after disrobing, rather than
formal degrees, are the various informal skills acquired while abroad. In this sense, even
studying in a culturally familiar context may be problematic. One of the monks staying at
the temple in Phayao complained about the fact that teachers in their school used the
local northern Thai dialect while in the classroom. Apparently this was a handicap
concerning the learning of central Thai among Lue monks, as the northern Thai dialect is
very close to Tai Lue language.

Awareness regarding the lack of relevance in the Chinese context of degrees
obtained in Thailand is presented by monastics themselves as one of the main reasons to
return prematurely to Sipsong Panna, and even to quit monastic education altogether. The
most controversial example of this concerns the group of monks who travelled to the
campus of Mahachulalongkorn University near Ayutthaya, in central Thailand, in 2008.
Twenty five graduates from the Yunnan Provincial Buddhist College in Anning, near
Kunming (mostly young monks in their early twenties) were to stay four years at this
temple-school, one of the largest monastic campuses in Thailand. Within ten months of
their arrival, however, more than half the members of the group had left the campus and
returned to Sipsong Panna without the approval of the senior monks in Jinghong.

According to one of the young monastics part of this group, now disrobed, whom I
interviewed in his village in early 2014, the monks decided to return home prematurely
following their disappointment with the education offered by the Ayutthaya temple-school.
He adduced specifically the above-mentioned incompatibility of degrees obtained in
Thailand with the Chinese labour market, while justifying his own sudden departure in
terms of health issues. It is my contention, however, that this collective disciplinary
breakdown was at least partly caused by the realisation on the part of the Lue monks of
the different understandings of monasticism dominant in Sipsong Panna and central
Thailand, and in particular of the strictures of monastic life in religious educational
institutions in this country, as described in this article. In any case, the incident became a
source of embarrassment not only for those Lue senior monks in Jinghong who had
organized the sojourn, but also for the young monk students involved, many of whom
disrobed shortly after returning to Sipsong Panna, or maintained a low profile with

28 This phenomenon can be seen in the context of the ongoing disinterest, common among the Tai Lue males
living in the rural areas of Sipsong Panna (see Hansen 1999), in progressing through the Chinese public
education system. This problem is in turn connected to a dominant scepticism toward the education system as a
provider of social mobility, and particularly to the perceived difficulty of entering the business networks (Chinese:

関系, guanxi) established among Han entrepreneurs, and which dominate at present the market economy in
Sipsong Panna. As a senior novice (Tai: pha long) who had just quit education and returned to his village put it,
“even with an education, we Tai cannot do anything; we have no guanxi.”
networks of monks and former monks in the region. Although a few from that first group remained at the monastic university in Ayutthaya and completed their education there, and other Lue monks have joined the school since then (often while staying in other temples in central Bangkok), no other large group of monks has been sent to that particular school.

While the movement of Lue monastic students toward Thailand continues, the trend is for most of the monks who study in that country to spend a relatively short amount of time there, returning to Sipsong Panna once they are granted the title of Maha, a title that will be added to their personal names and maintained even after they leave the monkhood as a token of prestige.

Conclusions: Monastic mobility and patterns of subordination

Successful experiences of Lue monks who have managed to exploit the potential benefits of studying abroad are not uncommon. Upon returning to Sipsong Panna, these monks are considered by their fellow Tai to have been subject, however momentarily, to the larger demands of a global modernity reaching beyond the limited world of the village, and to embody a broad sophistication which positions them at the top of the local socio-cultural hierarchy. Furthermore, while studying abroad, a monk may acquire different sets of skills which will help him develop a post-monastic career within the structure of the local Buddhist Association, or in the market economy of contemporary Sipsong Panna.

But expectations on the part of individual monks travelling outside Sipsong Panna are not always fulfilled, and very often divergences concerning monastic life in different locations have provoked a sudden return to Sipsong Panna and the termination of the monastic experience on the part of the monks. In such cases, the project of connecting Lue monasticism with the broader Buddhist trans-national community backfires, and the results, as well as the reputation of the individuals involved, become mired in controversy.

While monks in Sipsong Panna spend much of their time engaging in practices of competitive masculinity, drinking with lay peers or flirting with girls, interactions between monastic and lay communities in other Theravada societies in the region are much more limited and strictly regulated. The expansive and bodily flavour of Lue monasticism cannot be easily reproduced in temples outside Sipsong Panna, even in an environment in principle as favourable as that of northern Thailand. This is very different from Sipsong Panna, where spaces and occasions abound in both rural and urban contexts for monastics to interact with lay peers.

Through their experience abroad and in Thailand in particular, Lue monks become aware of the fact that understandings of monasticism in Sipsong Panna differ from those dominant in other countries, and that those individuals who cannot adapt to the standards of “culture” and “civilized behaviour” are looked down upon by their more cultivated hosts. Instead of an expected uncritical acceptance of trans-national values concerning monasticism, monastic mobilities can bring not only affinity between Buddhist communities to the surface, but also difference and tension, and, importantly, an awareness of one’s own symbolically subordinated position within these networks. This awareness may lead in turn to a reinforcement of local identities and of that “community of complicity” constituted by Sipsong Panna monastics.

In relation to this, and in spite of the religious and linguistic proximity, the strictness of monastic discipline and the isolation experienced in Thailand have produced among many current and former monastics a critical stereotype of this country, directed towards Thai self-assumed moral and cultural superiority in relation to their neighbours and toward what are ironically perceived as inferior and defective modes of monastic life –

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20 Monastics studying in Thai temples are granted the title Maha, “Great”, after completing the three grades of Nak Tham examinations. On the Nak Tham (in Thai, “student of Dhamma” or Buddhist doctrine), see McDaniel 2009:103 (“nak dham”).
as reflected in the proud exclamation “This is not Thailand!” While this critical attitude may help the further reproduction or affirmation of local monastic identities and of the value of locality, at the same time it hinders attempts at reforming and developing local monasticism on the part of Lue senior monks, and ultimately helps reproduce long-standing stereotypes on the incapacity of certain groups to adapt to and to absorb “superior” cultural forms. Displays of awareness and agency on the part of Lue monks may thus paradoxically serve to reproduce their structural position as backward and unworthy of modernity, asserting their defectiveness in relation to the modernizing and civilizing project of trans-local Buddhism.

Meanwhile, the allure of a place where monastics do not have to refrain from displaying their manhood continues pulling these men back to their homeland, and hardly any among those Lue monastics who spend time in Thailand and other locations decide to stay there permanently.

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30 As I have often witnessed among Lue monks, the ambivalence towards their experience in Thailand may in fact reinforce their identity not only as Sipsong Panna Tai, but also as members of the Chinese nation (Chinese: 中华民族, Zhonghua minzu).
31 This argument echoes that developed by Paul Willis in his seminal work (1977) on the situation of working-class schoolboys in the UK.
References


