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Theravada Buddhism, Identity, and Cultural Continuity in Jinghong, Xishuangbanna

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Abstract

This ethnographic field study focuses 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 Theravada Buddhism and Dai ethnic culture are continued through the monastic system and the lay community that supports that system. I also observed how individuals balance living modern and urban lifestyles while also incorporating Theravada Buddhism into their daily lives. Both of these involved observing 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 four week study period in the prefectural capital of Jinghong and its surrounding rural areas, wherein I engaged in participant observation and interviews. Specifically, I interviewed (semi-structured and structured) 19 individuals throughout the study period.

Keywords

Buddhism, China, Dai, Culture, Ethnicity

Disciplines

Asian Studies | Buddhist Studies | Chinese Studies | Community-Based Research | Comparative Methodologies and Theories | East Asian Languages and Societies | Ethnic Studies | International and Area Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Regional Sociology | Religion | Sociology | Sociology of Culture

Comments

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Theravada Buddhism, Identity, and Cultural Continuity in Jinghong, Xishuangbanna

James Granderson, December 2015

Introduction

The Dai ethnic minority, located in the Dai Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, China, has a distinct relationship with Theravada Buddhism. In fact, the Dai are the only ethnic group in China that practice Theravada, which is the oldest form of Buddhism, today commonly practiced throughout Southeast Asia. Theravada means “way of the elders” and gradually travelled from northern India and into Xishuangbanna, and became the dominant religion in the region between the years 1000CE and 1300CE. Society was greatly impacted by the introduction of Theravada, and even written Dai language was heavily influenced by Theravada scripture, which was predominantly written in Pali (Borchert 2008: 109). The Dai, and, by extension, Theravada Buddhism have been the dominant cultural forces in Xishuangbanna for centuries. The region, known as Sipsongpanna in Dai language, was once a tributary state to both the Ming and Qing dynasties, and has a centuries-long historical connection to the rest of China (Borchert 2008: 115). Later, during the early Communist era, the region was controlled by a prefectural government under the leadership of the Chinese state and Yunnan’s provincial government. Today the Dai are the largest ethnic group in the region and make up one third of the population (Li 2004: 2). The practice and infrastructure of Theravada Buddhism in the region was severely impacted by the Cultural Revolution of the sixties and seventies, which resulted in the banning of religious practice and the destruction of the vast majority of temples in the region. However, in the post-Cultural Revolution era, Theravada Buddhism has undergone a major rebirth in Xishuangbanna thanks to the efforts of domestic Dai monastics, lay individuals, as well as their supporters across the border in other Southeast Asian countries (Borchert 2008: 118).

Recent scholars have made commonly shared observations that the Dai ethnic and religious community faces new threats with the onset of modernity and the ever-present influence of Han society and state doctrine. My research focus was on whether or not Theravada Buddhism and Dai cultural continuity can or will persevere in the face of modern threats such as state schooling, tourism, ethnic relations, and the transition from rural to urban lifestyles. My research was in the theoretical framework of religion and modernity and involved directly observing the forces of cultural continuity in the Dai community, such as the Theravada monastic system and Dai individuals, the relationship between Dai personal identity and Theravada Buddhism, and how each of these forces specifically contributed to cultural/religious continuity of the Dai in the modern context.

My ethnographic field work 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 Theravada Buddhism and Dai ethnic culture are continued through the monastic system and the lay community that supports that system. I also observed how individuals balance living modern and urban lifestyles while also incorporating Theravada Buddhism into their daily lives. Both of these involved observing 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 four week study period in the prefectural capital of Jinghong and its surrounding rural areas, wherein I engaged in participant observation and interviews. Specifically, I interviewed (semi-structured and structured) 19 individuals throughout the study period.

The ultimate findings resulting from this study period were that Theravada Buddhism, which is the core of the Dai ethnic identity, is transmitted and secured by the Theravada monastic system, which includes the monastic community and the lay people that support them. I also discovered that Dai individuals have found a multitude of ways to balance religion and modernity, and as such have allowed for new avenues of growth and religious expression as Theravada Buddhists, as well as a reinterpretation of tradition, that are unique to this period in time.

Methodology

My study was conducted in a variety of locations in Xishuangbanna, but was principally focused in the urban center of Jinghong and some of its neighboring cities and villages, such as the county 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 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, who are the ones dominantly practicing Theravada Buddhism, though my research community also included mixed Dai-Han individuals as well as members of other ethnic minorities, such as Hani and Han. 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. Coming from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, lifestyles, and age groups, 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. All of them stated that they were strongly influenced or impacted by Theravada Buddhism in some way. 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. It would require at least a year, if not more, to really become deeply familiar with informants and the environment to better 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 19 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.

Literature Review

The topic of religion and modernity is one that has sparked considerable academic interest in recent decades, and the Dai and Theravada Buddhism, are no exception. In particular, the Dai population of Xishuangbanna was of considerable interest to the anthropological and journalistic community of the 1990s and early 2000s. The majority of these ethnographies and case studies detailed how Theravada Buddhism and the Dai ethnic minority exist in the modern Chinese context. The major themes touched upon were the relationship between Dai temple elites and the state, the Dai temple/village economy, tourism, and the nature of the ethno-regional character of Xishuangbanna.

As the driving force of the Dai community, monastics and their leaders have often been the focus of research on the Dai. Anthropologist Thomas Borchert primarily focused his research on the relationship between Dai temple elites and the Chinese state. Foremost, Borchert posited that the attempted revival of Theravada Buddhism and Dai culture in Xishuangbanna by Dai elites is characterized by a strategic embracing and negotiation of Chinese state doctrine regarding ethnic minorities. Specifically, monastic elites have embraced modern Chinese state rhetoric regarding development and community outreach (Borchert 2008: 108). This involves a growing cooperation with the local state government and an acceptance and, indeed, support by monastic elites for things such as mandatory state schooling separate from temple education (Borchert 2008: 121). In the realm of temple education, this has led to educating young men about Buddhist doctrine along with the goals of the local state government; “*defend the law, love the country, and love the religion*” (Borchert 2005: 247). Essentially, Theravada Buddhism in Xishuangbanna and its relationship with modernity, according to Borchert, is characterized by a growing relationship with the state. This trend observed by Borchert is contrasted when

observing other minority Theravada populations in other regions. Specifically, in Nepal, ethnographer Lauren Leve observed that the practice of Theravada there is not characterized by state doctrine, but rather is being practiced in some ways that defy state doctrine. This manifests itself as lay people engaging in a more personalized form of Theravada that emphasized equality, encourages women's roles in the community, and incorporated esoteric Buddhist practice into lay life. In particular, the Theravada community's outright dismissal of the caste system in Nepal places them directly against the societal expectations for Hindus and Vajrayana Buddhists in the country, and thus has drawn resentment and political damnation from both (Leve 2002: 845-846).

Within the same vein as the aforementioned research, others have looked at how the state/structural powers influence the Dai community and the ethno-regional community of Xishuangbanna, especially in regards to the forces that have been perceived as threatening to the cultural and religious continuity of the Dai. In general, many have come to similar conclusions about the relationship between the state and the Dai community characterizing Theravada practice and the concept of their ethnic identity. Specifically, as Anouska Komlosy would put it, the historical and political nature of the Xishuangbanna region, especially given its long history as a client state of former Chinese dynasties, and its relatively recent status as a prefecture, has automatically placed in a position of deference to the Chinese state and, on the smaller scale, to Han individuals and interest groups located in the region (Komlosy 2004: 356).

In keeping with these observations, McCarthy argues that the controlled promotion of local ethnic minority cultures, including the Dai, is of importance to the state for a multitude of reasons: as a strategy for local infrastructure development, a creation of a dependence of minorities on the Han state, the strengthening of the tourist industry, and the creation of local ethnic cultural climates that do not foster secessionist ideologies (McCarthy 2009: 7-8). For the

Dai, this has manifested itself as the creation of temple communities and villages and ethnic tourist sites and the appropriation of ritual performance art as entertainment for domestic tourists. In the end, as Cohen observes, this results in “a growing gap between their (ethnic minorities) touristic image and their reality emerges” (Cohen 2005: 31). Sara Davis, another ethnographer, also noted the power play between the state, Theravada practice, and the larger ethno-regional community of Xishuangbanna. Again, focusing on temple and societal elites, Davis illustrates how certain segments of the Dai community feel that, with state and modern pressures, such as tourism, Dai culture and Theravada Buddhism is in jeopardy of becoming a superficial version of its former self. This extends to the decline in linguistic ability among the youth, the construction of ethnic theme park temples, and the appropriation by the tourist industry of traditional and contemporary Dai performance art (Davis 2005: 71, 130).

Previous scholarship has also noted on the resistance of some elements of the Dai community to state doctrine as well as the strategic use of internal appropriation. Komlosy, for instance, observed that the maintenance of and continual revival in the post-Cultural Revolution era of Theravada Buddhism and specific ethnic traditions, such as the Water Splashing Festival, have served to move beyond the state and bring into being a more cohesive, multiethnic, ethno-regional community in Xishuangbanna (Komlosy 2004: 370). However, most of these studies have focused primarily on religious or societal elites. Specifically, Davis illustrated how Dai folksingers and performing artists used pop music in Dai language as a means to educate Dai youth and to combat the state-sanctioned portrayals of Dai culture, ethnic performances and touristic versions of Dai performance art (Davis 2005: 71). These movements, she discovers, had their roots in the Dai communities of surrounding Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Burma, and Thailand (Davis 2005: 75). It should be noted that these individuals Davis

interviewed were privileged members of society themselves; often times they were monks who had access to temple education, both domestic and abroad, as well as instruction in Dai language and musical training.

In a word, previous ethnographies and literature on the topic of Dai Theravada Buddhism and its impact on Dai identity examine the relationship between religious elites and the state, and moreover how these are affected by the power plays between state doctrine and religion, and they greatly overlook 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 risk ignoring the more mundane, individual 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 are incomplete. In addition, while observing structural forces is important for contextual reasons, and although the perspective of temple elites 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, it is also necessary to observe the urban post-monastic life of men as well as the role Buddhism plays for Dai women, both of which have been paid much less attention in the literature of the two previous decades.

Among ethnographies and scholarship of the Dai in recent history, Leshan Tan's dissertational research, conducted in 1995, has provided the theoretical basis for my fieldwork in Jinghong. Tan's observation of the temple and village economy, and the intricacies of the relationship between lay people and the monastic community illuminated the integral nature of

Theravada Buddhism in Dai communities and the heavy impact it has on family and societal dynamics. While still placing heavy emphasis on large structural forces and politics (Tan 1995: 129-135), Tan manages to bring some focus onto the individual Dai in the field. Tan details how vastly important to the Dai in Xishuangbanna is the reliance upon the monastic community for education and ritual services. The lay support for this community allows the continuation of the temple community and the Theravada culture in general. Tan shows that participation in and support of this reciprocal relationship is carried for both societal and personal benefit (Tan 1995: 69-70). Overall, Tan's dissertation brings to the table some of the perspectives of individuals in the field, though they are often generalized and applied to the whole of the Dai population, rather than being stated as the individual opinion or gnosis of unique individuals (Tan 1995: 141). Thus, this paper aims to bring to the front the lived reality of common, non-elite individuals in both urban and rural settings.

Last but not least, there is a general consensus in previous scholarship about the decline and crisis of Theravada Buddhism and Dai cultural continuity. 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 "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 the role of monastics as carriers of culture,

not how structural forces shape Buddhist practice. My research shows how the gap in time since previous literature, and the previous overemphasis on structural forces, has led to the overlooking of the individual agency that now, in the modern climate of Jinghong and its surroundings, very much characterizes Dai Theravada life, practice, and expansion. With a focus on participant observation and interviews with a varied base of research subjects, both lay and monastic, my observations of the reality on the ground among everyday Dai people in a far more modern environment certainly does not reveal large-scale cultural decay, or a purely state-defined interpretation of Buddhism, but rather a blossoming of Theravada that has adapted to the modern climate in ways that could not have been foreseen at the turn of the century.

Theravada Monastic System and Cultural Continuity

The Theravada Buddhist monastic system has been a chief force of cultural continuity within the Dai ethno-regional community for centuries, and now in the modern era continues to serve that function in spite of modern threats. What has made this possible is the interconnectedness of the Dai ethno-regional community, particularly between the lay people, monks, and temples. This system serves as a bridge between various segments of the Dai population, including rural and urban, and lay and monastic. Temple education is one facet of this relationship, and serves to educate Dai youths about morality, ritual, language, and traditional culture and values, which enables the spreading and maintaining of Dai religious culture. Another force that allows the monastic system to function is the temple economy, or the system of lay people donating to the temple in exchange for spiritual, ritual, and educational purposes. In the present, monks and lay people have managed to evolve in interesting and unforeseen ways in order to be relevant in the modern world and yet still hold true to Dai Theravada culture.

Temple Education and Cultural Continuity: Perhaps the most important relationship that contributes to the maintenance and revival of the Dai religious culture is that between monastics and lay people. The most obvious example of this relationship is the temple education system. Monastic life is inseparable from the daily lives of Dai people, both rural and urban, and the temple education system reinforces Theravada Buddhism's influence in Dai life. Temples and monasteries also function as schoolhouses for Dai youths, 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 itself, and this fact permeates Dai society. Monks do not only serve as masters of ritual

ceremonies, but also as educators and preservers of traditional culture. In fact, it is the perpetual communication between monks and lay people through education that allows this to occur.

Role of Temple Education: Temple education, which for centuries was the main form of education for Dai in Xishuangbanna, still serves as the main resource for Dai youths to be instilled with traditional Buddhist values, learn Dai language, and carry on traditional cultural knowledge. In particular, Theravada temples serve as bastions of Dai language and script, as young boys are exposed to scripture and sermons in Old Dai from a very young age when language is absorbed quickly. Invariably, this system faces threats that have arisen from the modern climate. One of these issues 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. In traditional society, it was possible for young men to become monks for life, or for an extended period, and their non-material contributions to society would make up for their absence from family life.

In the modern age it is becoming more and more necessary for young people to support their families with income from urban jobs as even working in the fields alone is sometimes not enough to make it by. It was becoming a major concern to some if there would be a way for temple education to persevere with all of the pressures. This was confirmed by two of my contacts, Hugin and Munin, who are monks at Da Fo Si (Big Buddha Temple). Noting the overall lack of elderly monks in the vicinity, something which I discovered was common at many temple sites, I inquired as to the reason why they were not present. Hugin and Munin told

me 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. While this may be seen as a decay of the temple community, it is simply an adaptation to the modern climate. In reality, these monks, because of their temple education, have been able to fulfill themselves and learn about their culture, carrying it into their secular lives, thus providing a rationale for their descendants to attend temple schooling as well.

Another contact in Manzhong, senior monk Bodhi, also confirmed the existence of threats to temple education. In keeping with what I gathered from Hugin and Munin, the largest threat to temple education 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 the duty of educating novices.

Temple Education and Cultural Continuity: Temple education throughout the various Theravada sites functions as the means allow the continuation of Dai religious culture. 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. With it being one of the largest complexes in Jinghong, much about the current state of Theravada in Jinghong could be garnered from this site. 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 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 larger community. In a sense, the opening and welcoming nature of the site allowed lay people to enter the temple grounds and engage with monastics in a neutral space whereas many people would probably not have considered going to a Theravada temple complex if it were solely a religious site. 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. This is just one strategy used by monastics in collaboration with lay people to ensure the survival of Theravada and its normalization within the modern context. This normalization, in turn, actually fuels the interest in temple education as it is seen as something that is relevant and useful in modern and secular society.

While communication with the Dai community and other temples was certainly a focus, Hugin and Munin's 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 Buddhist religious

culture. 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. Rather than being seen as a demoralizing matter, in fact this is seen as encouragement to the monks. While it is certainly harder in the modern age for Dai boys to attend temple schooling, the fact that so many still do and are eager to do so from ages as young as 7 proves that, despite the pressures of modernity and urban life, Theravada is seen as so important to maturation within Dai society that they will make the effort and sacrifice to attend temple schooling alongside state schooling. This is evidence that Dai individuals are willing to go far to preserve Theravada culture and adapt to the modern cultural climate, especially the Dai language. 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. These courses provide Dai youths with the information that is expected of them to know in order to become responsible family men, guardians of traditional Dai culture, and positive role models in their community. Theravada scripture has much to say regarding the life of lay people, and lessons for incorporating Buddhist values into secular life. 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. However, the religious education in the temple provides these young men with tools to navigate their secular lives with the Buddhist values learned in the temple.

Temple education has also made progress in that education is opening itself up to young women for the first time. In the village of Manzhang, I was able to have an interview with a

senior monk carrying out ritual services. Bodhi was of considerably high monastic rank, which was indicated by his more elaborate and darker colored robes. Once introduced to him by Michael, I was able to inquire about the current situation regarding temple education, the revival of rural temples and monastic relations with the common people. Despite some threats to the system, Bodhi informed me that at some temple schools, including his, attendance is healthy and young Dai villagers are attending monastery as early as 4 years old. He said, “At temples near the border areas, including my own, we are introducing young novices and girls to Dai scripture and culture. It is easier to teach the language and Buddhist principles to students at this early age.” 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. Also, Bodhi commented upon the proliferation of modern technology and how it has actually made a lot of things easier. Specifically, the use of smartphone technology and communication applications has made it far easier to connect the monastic community of Xishuangbanna and reach out to the lay community as well. Bodhi, himself from a fair distance away near the China-Myanmar border, had a smartphone with applications like WeChat and was able to connect with local monks and was well acquainted with Manzhang and Jinghong locals. 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, as well as embracing modern technology that can actually make the revival of Theravada culture easier than ever before.

One of my contacts, a highly educated Dai government/newspaper worker whom I have named Dr. Manhattan, has studied in temples and also studied Dai culture and Old Dai script in

Thailand, and has such been able to observe the current rebirth and evolution of Theravada temple education in Xishuangbanna both from within and outside of China. He corroborated with what Bodhi had told me, and added on to that with his insights into the influence of cross-border relationships. From him I learned that much of what exists currently in and around Jinghong of Theravada Buddhism, especially in regards to education, has a strong relationship with foreign connections in Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. The border regions of those countries have a high concentration of Dai people, and many of the new temples in Xishuangbanna were made possible by patrons and donators from across the border, as many of the old temples had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. In particular, many Dai monks travel to Thailand to learn scripture and Old Dai script, bringing the knowledge back so it can be transferred to new novices. 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.

Temple Economy and Ritual: Another driving force that allows the Theravada monastic system to thrive is the temple economy. The existence of the monastic community itself depends upon the continuing support of the lay community in the form of donations and other works of labor and support, and in return the monastic community offers spiritual guidance, ritual knowledge, cultural preservation, and education. The interdependence of these distinct communities is what allows the continuity of Dai Theravada Buddhist culture to occur. It is self-evident in Dai society the influence that this relationship has on daily interactions and events, as almost everywhere the communication and actions of these two communities and their impacts on the surrounding environment can be seen, heard, and participated in. Monks oversee every

major event in a Dai person's life. Without the lay community, the temples and monks would not be able to exist, and on the other hand the lay community would lose its sense of culture and ethnic identity.

In Menghai, the hometown of my contact Michael and a smaller city located about an hour outside of Jinghong, I was able to observe the tight-knit relationship between lay people and monastics and the various roles they play in each other's lives. The city of Menghai was surrounded by a large number of satellite villages that have their own unique character as well as their own Theravada temples which are maintained by the temple economy. 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. It was obvious that a funeral had just been held at that spot perhaps a couple of days before. 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. The fact that the method of cremation was not only considered for religious reasons, but for environmental reasons as well, was an indication that the Dai Theravada community is maintaining traditional practices and beliefs and placing them within the context of modernity and modern ideology, such as environmentalism. I was informed that monks always 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. This funeral site, which was in a plainly visible area next to the village road, was a clear visual indication of the monastic role in the lay community's life.

Monks oversee not only funerals but many other life events both great and small. I was informed by my contacts Jade and Crystal 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. Monks often serve as counselors for secular affairs as well, and because of the lifelong connection to the temples that started from childhood, Dai men often have deep and complex relationships with the monastic community, and in many life decisions seek guidance from that community. During these times and circumstances, regardless of gender, everyone interacts with monastics and relies upon their religious knowledge and wisdom to ensure harmonious and prosperous proceedings, seek advice and guidance for secular affairs, or to keep misfortune and illness at bay. Also, 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. Unsurprisingly, with the multiethnic nature of Jinghong and the surrounding area, many Han Chinese will also visit local temples on both Dai and Han holidays.

The temple economy is also a prominent aspect of life in Menghai and other Dai communities. Commonly at the Dai temples in Menghai there are boards in both Dai language and Mandarin showing all of the donations made to the temple. Other gifts from the lay community to the temple, such as food, were also present. The fact that these temples could be

walked into at any time, and were not locked or gated, showed that the monastic community was open to lay people coming at any time. Later during our journey into the satellite villages, we were able to walk into a recently constructed temple (2008) and view the main hall. Directly outside the temple doors, as with the previous temple we visited, was a list of all of the individuals that have donated money for the construction or upkeep of the temple. 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. In fact, Jade and Crystal were preparing food donations for the monks in the temple during our interview. In return for these donations, monastics are able to continue their pursuit of cultural education and enlightenment and will serve as ritual leaders, community leaders, and educators.

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. However, the system of the temple economy is designed so that it fully relies upon both men and women to contribute equally. Especially in the case of women, the temple economy relies upon their support and contribution in the form of food and other goods to exist. In this, women dominate the material aspect of the temple economy.

It is typically the case that men are the ones to be educated in temples in order to become good community members, while women are the ones that preserve secular culture and support the men in their religious education. 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, unlike the countries across the border, there are no Theravada nunneries, and thus for much of recent history young girls almost never did 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. With this in mind, it is important to note that, with the influx of tourists and the general softening of traditional gender roles, women and girls are beginning to play more active roles in the Theravada community of Xishuangbanna, especially in regards to education.

Special Events, A Case Study: On May 15 I had the opportunity to travel with my advisors to a village called Manzhang, which was about 45 minutes outside of Jinghong. Manzhang was an example of a very well preserved Dai village, with many old and new structures built in the traditional Dai style of architecture and the common people dressed in traditional clothes made by the local tailor. 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 of a village community, the new building festival is equally important to *poshuijie* or the Water Splashing Festival. The purpose of the 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. An important aspect of this particular event was that there were many Dai from the urban and rural areas, as well as from the border areas near Myanmar. I learned that in this festival, both monks and lay people play an important and necessary role.

The first thing that occurred at the festival was the arrival of monks and fellow village members. As the monks arrived, they were received with great respect and reverence, with many of the lay people bowing and greeting them as they arrived. Since Manzhang's temple was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, all of the monks came from temples outside of the village, many from quite far away. The eventual reconstruction of the temple was on the lips of most of the people in the village once I asked them about it, and there was a lot of hope that the new restaurant, which was constructed by a village elder, would bring in funds for the project. 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, and that it would be considered a great blessing if there could be village monks conducting traditional temple schooling for local children in the village. The planning of this event was facilitated by the newly constructed or improved roads in the area as well as the ubiquitous ownership of smartphones and free communication applications, such as WeChat, even amongst monastics. The onset of modernity, in this instance, allowed for this festival to be as successful as it was because of the ease of transportation to the village and the planning of the event using modern communication technology. The formation and maintenance of a strong relationship between monks and lay people has actually been made easier with the onset of modernity because of the new ways that technology has allowed for ease of communication. Foremost, the smartphone application WeChat was nearly universally used by both young and old in and around Jinghong. Monks were

no exception to this, and throughout the interview with Hugin and Munin, the use of smartphone technology to acquire information, solidify relationships, reach out to new contacts, and make plans with friends and family outside of the temple was a clear sign that the monastic community had embraced the utility of modern communication technology and is using it to maintain and increase their influence in the community. This is a factor that previous researchers could not have predicted because such technology was simply unavailable at the time of their study. Now, it seems, monastics have a truly simple and effective way to reach out to not only the immediate community in Jinghong, but also the entirety of China and the international community as well. If anything, this is a sign that Theravada is certainly more resilient to forces of modernity than previously speculated, and rather it should be said that modernity, in this instance, is strengthening the religious community of the Dai.

Even as early as ten years ago, the success and attendance of the new building event would have been severely hampered because of the difficulty it would take to make the commute to the village and make contact with guests. With modern amenities has come new ways for the greater Dai community to be connected and be in perpetual communication with one another. With this in mind, it seems likely that the interest in Theravada revival and traditional culture, along with the ease of communication, will bring investors into Manzhang that will be eager to see the reconstruction of the temple and monks that will fill the roles needed in the temple.

In regards to the festival, before any of the festivities could begin, or any of the main courses consumed, the monks and the owner and his relatives had to make sure all of the ritual activities were completed first. The completion of the restaurant was a huge endeavor, as it was of no small size, and required a great deal of wealth and resources to complete. As the most prominent structure in the village, as well as a natural community gathering place, it was seen as

absolutely necessary that all of this hard work would be honored and protected by observing the proper rituals and ensuring that the restaurant patrons were individuals of good karmic merit. The owner of the new building, a clearly influential and wealthy Dai man, was dressed in full traditional regalia and placed small rectangular offering containers made from banana leaves and sticks at every corner of the property, and in the center of the village on a large circular platform. These offering boxes were filled with food, including cooked items and raw fruits, and had incense sticks placed in them. While this was occurring, the elderly women of the village made other offering containers from leaves and tied them to the fence of the property, and then filled them with food and other valuables. The women were also singing and chanting while they were preparing these offering containers. These offerings were intended to ensure prosperity for the future. After the offering boxes were placed, the owner of the restaurant, wearing traditional costume, knelt before each one while the entire assembly of monks recited scripture over him for several minutes. The symbolic placement of the offering containers at every corner and in the center of the property was to ensure that the property was protected and has blessings coming from every direction. This ritual ensured that the new business was spiritually protected and that future business will be successful. In this instance, whether male or female, urban or rural, lay or monastic, everyone was taking part in the ritual in some way either by preparing the food to be consumed later, making the offerings, or being the possessors of spiritual and ritual knowledge necessary for carrying out the proceedings. This was a clear example that the role of the monastic community and Theravada Buddhism in general are quite apparent in Dai society; the importance of monks to this particular celebration and the respect and devotion shown in the proceedings were obvious signs that the religious aspects of the festival took precedence over the

secular celebration, as no other celebration could begin until the religious aspect of the festival was completed satisfactorily.

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. Many of the folk songs were in Dai language, and the audience would actively engage the singer with cheers and playful quips. While not particularly Buddhist in nature on the surface, it is important to remember that the maintenance and spread of Dai language is primarily the realm of monastics, and in turn elders who have had a temple education, thus the fact that all of the villagers, young and old, were able to participate using Dai language was a sign that the language was successfully being transmitted through temple education and was being actively used in community settings. 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. The monks were provided a table, without alcohol, and were given an honored position on the second floor of the restaurant. More and more people were filtering in, hundreds total, 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. The dances were a mix of contemporary and traditional forms, and were often paired with Dai songs. Many of the dances contained Buddhist imagery, such as *mudras*, which are special hand gestures that carry strong symbolic meaning. Singing was also a large part of the evening festivities, and 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, and in particular how Theravada Buddhism plays a strong role in that expression. The collaborative effort of lay people and monastics, along with the use of modern technology and a genuine pride in the ethno-regional character of the area, made the festival a possibility and a huge success.

Conclusion: Theravada Buddhism and Dai culture are very closely linked with one another, and it would be accurate to say that the two require one another to exist as a recognizable entity in Xishuangbanna. Modernity, I discovered, is not bringing about the demise of this relationship, but is in fact strengthening it in many ways. The Theravada monastic system, which is fueled by the temple economy and the temple education system, strengthens the relationship between lay people and the monastic community. The interconnectedness of the Dai ethno-regional community is what makes this possible and it characterizes many aspects of daily life. For one, temple education is still common and, in the modern social climate, is actually expanding to include individuals that never had the opportunity to attend, such as women and young girls. Events in daily life, great and small, are still observed according to Theravada tradition and monks interact with lay people on a daily basis to help one another and instill Buddhist values in the community. In addition to education, the temple economy is the heart and soul of many Dai communities, and allows for the monastic community to carry out their role of cultural continuity. The lay community forms the foundation from which Theravada culture can grow and thrive and be maintained by the monastic community. Monks, lay people, men and

women all play distinct and important roles in the temple economy, allowing the cycle to continue. While modern threats and pressures exist that threaten the traditional structure of the temple, monks and lay people alike have embraced new means of coming together and working within the context of modern and urban environments. Things like tourism, modern technology, state schooling, and ethnic pluralism have been responded to in ways that are a testament to the resilience of the Theravada monastic system and the temple economy and its ability to find relevance in the modern era. The use of modern communication technology and the improved infrastructure brought about by modernization has made the union between the lay and monastic community simpler and more efficient. Finally, the organization of large community events such as the New Building Festival are testament to the fact that the Dai ethno-regional community is well integrated and has benefitted from modernity, that monastics and lay people have a necessary and close symbiotic relationship, and also that large-scale events still place the religious aspects above everything else in importance and meaning. In the modern world, Dai Theravada Buddhism has proven to be a resilient and prominent force, carried and proliferated by the Theravada monastic system, in Xishuangbanna that is far from decay, but is indeed evolving and growing in different directions.

Expressing Personal Identity through Theravada Buddhism

The Theravada Monastic system is just one piece of the puzzle that contributes to the entire picture of Dai cultural continuity and ethno-regional character. Dai individuals that are separate from monastic life also construct and maintain their identities through Theravada religious and cultural practice. This is done through the practice and observance of traditional and contemporary Buddhist culture in private and public life, as well as the individualized practice of Buddhist doctrine. Dai and mixed-ethnic individuals have managed to balance urban and modern life with traditional ethnic culture by interpreting it in a way that has made them not mutually exclusive.

Personalized Practice: In today's Jinghong, modernization and urbanization are coming rapidly. Society, as a result, is becoming more secularly focused and Dai individuals have had to take on the roles and responsibilities of a Chinese urban citizen. In the modern era, the pressures of the current age make it difficult for everyone to pursue and devote their lives to monasticism. However, at the same time, post-cultural revolution religious revival is occurring, and temples and monastic communities are being rebuilt and revitalized in urban and rural areas. Lay people, regardless of their relationship with temples, are being exposed to and taking an interest in religious and traditional Dai ethnic culture. Lay Dai people have found new ways, however, through art, individualized Buddhist study and reinterpretations of Buddhist doctrine, as well as the maintenance of traditional relationships to construct their identities as Dai. Dai people have learned how to embrace the modern climate and yet retain aspects of traditional ethnic culture and familiar obligations. One of my chief contacts, Michael, demonstrated throughout my time in Jinghong how he as a half-Dai-half-Han man managed to balance his responsibilities as a teacher of mainly Han students at an English language school in the heart of the city and those that he

had to his hometown and Theravada culture. Along with his wife, Julia, Michael lives and works in the heart of Jinghong and reaches out to the community at large to promote their English language school and teach students. Running the school is a huge responsibility, and requires a great deal of knowledge and experience to manage. Having the ability to connect to and maintain relationships with families that would be interested in this private education takes a special ability to know and understand the urban and secular landscape and the priorities of modern, mostly Han families. Successful in this endeavor, Michael has certainly benefitted from the entrepreneurial opportunities of modern Han society, and as such is reasonably affluent, speaks both English and Mandarin fluently, drives a foreign German car, and is able to invest his funds as he sees fit.

However, despite his modern lifestyle and the huge responsibility of running the school along with his wife, Michael thinks that it is equally important to connect with his Dai roots and build up and support the ethnic community. This is why Michael is also a huge proponent of Dai culture, and has deep connections with the monastic community, artists, and performers in and around Jinghong. Growing up in a mixed ethnic household in the mostly Dai town of Menghai, Michael has been immersed in both Han and Dai communities and has a balanced relationship with both. This involves maintaining a great relationship with his parents who were themselves government workers and educators in their younger years, while also visiting the new temples springing up in his hometown and showing his support with continual face to face communication with monastics and the surrounding lay communities. Michael visits his hometown and the surrounding Dai villages and communities, such as Manzhang, in the area regularly and supports temples and knows many of the village elders and senior monks, is adept at Dai language, and is also familiar with Theravada Buddhist customs, religious beliefs, and

scripture. In the urban center of Jinghong, Michael often reaches out to Dai artists and performers and is overall a patron of traditional and contemporary Dai art forms. What is unique about Michael is that, as a wealthy individual, he has sought to invest what he has gained from modern Han society back into the Dai community. Specifically, Michael has invested in the growth of temple communities and has help to fund and participate in Dai festivals and other cultural events. The main thing to draw from this individual is that there are indeed many Dai people like him in and around Jinghong; men and women that are entrepreneurial in spirit and are learning how to navigate the secular, Han urban society while at the same time honoring their ethnic roots that are heavily steeped in Theravada Buddhist tradition. The way they do this is by familiarizing themselves with modern and urban Han society, and after accruing wealth and new cultural knowledge, they invest their resources into the growth and revitalization of the Dai and Theravada community.

Expression of ethnic identity is not limited to common people, and even can be found among government workers and party members. Once upon a return journey to Jinghong, Michael and I stopped in the outskirts of Jinghong to meet a friend of his, Brock, who was actually a Dai Communist Party member and owns a traditional tailor shop and Dai painting studio/gallery. The tailor shop and gallery were located in a building constructed as a traditional Dai style stilt house with two floors. One the first floor the tailor, a young Dai woman, was working while on the second floor, reached by heading up a flight of wooden stairs, was where the gallery and studio was located. The gallery and the studio were separated by a threshold, and I was given a tour of the works within the gallery while a young Dai man was painting in the studio. The art featured in Brock's gallery only contained works that featured Buddhist subject matter, such as depictions of the historical Buddha in contemporary style, depictions of temples

and monks, as well as more traditional works that featured Theravada symbols and Dai iconographic depictions of temples. After the tour of the gallery, I joined Brock for an interview in the studio. 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. He was quite personally invested in this issue, being an owner of a traditional tailor shop and a gallery that featured local traditional and contemporary Buddhist art, as he saw the revival of certain traditional arts and the development of contemporary Buddhist art as signs that Theravada was adapting to the modern cultural landscape and was still maintaining its relevancy. The production of this artwork implied that there is a market for contemporary religious art in the Jinghong area, as well as the interest for artists to unite contemporary methods with traditional subject matter in order to express their faith as well as create a market around religious artwork.

Ananda, who was present during the time of the interview, confirmed this assertion. A young Dai man in his early twenties, Ananda was actively working on some pieces in the studio. The paintings he had worked on featured Buddhist subject matter, but were done in contemporary style, with many Western influences in technique and composition. For example, one painting that depicted the Buddha was done in a Western style of portraiture. Ananda, as a Buddhist and Dai, felt that his paintings were a way for him to express and connect with his ethnic culture and his religion while at the same time allowing him to expand himself as a painter and artist by experimenting with modern and foreign methods. He told me, “I am Dai and I identify as a Buddhist. This method of painting, which I also think is beautiful, is a way for me to show that.” Though Ananda was not a monk, art has always been used by Theravada Buddhists to convey the meanings of Buddhist teachings, and through his contemporary art he has fulfilled

this role in a modern context. In this realm modernity has strengthened Theravada, as artwork that would have once been kept within the temple walls has evolved to suit modern tastes and is now being distributed to individual households and galleries. With the popularity of this new art rising, more and more Dai and non-Dai individuals are exposed to religious art within secular areas, thus prompting further individual study into Theravada and more forays by artists into representing Theravada subject matter. Art, as Brock described, “is a method of communication” by which the images and symbols shown in a particular piece transmit meaning to the viewer. In this instance, Dai artwork would show viewers the special significance behind certain Buddhist images, symbols, or locations and how they manifest themselves in the Dai/Xishuangbanna context.

Art is just one way that Dai individuals explore their Theravada identity. Brock informed me that, due to the inability to live the monastic life in the temple, there is a rising trend among lay people to practice meditation and the other more esoteric facets of Theravada on their own, absent from monastic life. Beforehand, this sort of practice and knowledge would be almost solely in possession by monastics, but the information technology of the modern world has allowed for the transmission of this knowledge to a wider audience and has provided an incentive for curious individuals to pursue such interests. Also, with the inability of many individuals to dedicate their lives to monasticism, the private study and practice of Theravada allows them to live a lifestyle that is similar to the monastic life in many ways but is more flexible and able to be balanced with modern life and responsibilities. As a result, new opportunities have arisen in and around Jinghong for individual interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. For example, particularly devout individuals will observe strict Buddhist precepts, practice meditation daily, and live in a generally ascetic manner while also interacting with the

urban environment. One of my contacts, a lay person named Jimmy, is a good example of this trend. Though not a monk himself, Jimmy adheres strictly to his interpretation of Buddhist scripture. He commonly goes to meet with monks at temple and makes donations while also practicing meditation and even adhering to a strictly vegetarian diet. It should be noted that monks are not required to maintain a vegetarian diet as they must eat whatever is donated to them, but Jimmy believed that, since he has the power of choice, consuming flesh would go against the precept of non-violence. When dining with Jimmy outside of the Manting temple complex, he told me, “Because I identify as a Buddhist, I feel that it is wrong to do harm unto animals or consume their flesh, though it is fine if other people choose to do so.” This is a clear example of a new interpretation of Theravada Buddhism that is evidence of a more flexible and adaptive religious practice that is compatible with modernity.

Along with the rise in people that practice Theravada in this modern way is the formation of the belief among the Dai that the average Dai lay person can even attain enlightenment, though this is very difficult and the number of people doing this sort of practice is quite small. This is in great contrast to the prior belief for centuries that, although the Buddha never explicitly stated so, the only individuals that could become *arahants* (enlightened) were monastics. This is because it was held that, even in ancient times, the lives of common people were not conducive to the physical, mental, and emotional/spiritual purity that would need to be maintained in order to practice meditation and achieve enlightenment. However, now it seems that more and more people are beginning to accept the belief that one need not be a monk in order to live up to the highest Buddhist virtues and attain enlightenment. Brock, Jimmy, Dr. Manhattan, and several other Dai individuals personally believed that this in itself was possible for lay people to achieve.

Dai individuals work every day to adapt to the demands of modern and urban life, yet are continuing to express their identities as Dai Buddhists. Individuals do this in a variety of ways, from patronizing and creating Buddhist art, studying and interpreting Theravada scripture in ways to suit the modern world and their personal lifestyle, as well as working from a personal desire to forward and promote the Dai ethnic and religious community while also seeking to advance their position in secular Han society.

Expressions in Ink: Tattooing has long been a part of Dai culture and even predates the introduction of Buddhism in the region of Xishuangbanna. Today, tattooing is common amongst all Dai people in and around Jinghong, and has become a clearly visible expression of Dai and Theravada identity. Nowadays, 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, 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.

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 traditional tattooing is as 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. The traditional method of tattooing, which

would be done by a village elder with the knowledge and expertise to do so, is time consuming and painful, thus making the experience that much more meaningful. 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 many men holds special meaning as a large portion of Dai men have studied scripture in temples as boys and adolescents.

Another 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 Manzhong, many of the older men were pointing to the Old Dai script and figures on their body and saying that their purpose was to "*baohu shenti*," protect the body/health. Many of the men had undergone the tattooing process when they were young, and confirmed that this was something that was expected for nearly all of them to go through at some point in their young adulthood.

Dai youth, both male and female, have a different interpretation of tattoos than the elderly, though this does not imply a loss in significance. On the contrary, tattoos are just as integral a part of Dai adult life for the youth as their older counterparts. 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. Many tattoo parlors, such as the one I visited, are located down alleys off of main roads and are advertised with large signs to direct people to them. It just so happened that as I walked in the parlor, a young man was being tattooed with a Buddhist figure on his back, which I was later informed was a guardian figure from scripture. 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. One of them showed me their design book which had various Old Dai phrases to choose from. However, despite the fact that they can write in Dai script, they cannot speak Dai nor do they understand much of the script. While this may imply a commodification of tattoos or a trend towards superficiality, this is not the case. For many Dai youth, they find it necessary and essential to spend the money in order to be tattooed with strictly Dai and Buddhist themed pieces. The artist that was finishing up the tattoo on the client told me, “We are Hani, and because of this we do not practice Theravada Buddhism. However, for many Dai people it is important to be tattooed in order to show that they are Dai and practice Buddhism. We have a great relationship with Dai in Jinghong because we have the ability to do the traditional tattoos, even though we personally do not know the meaning behind the Old Dai 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 young Dai.

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 inquiring, 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. However, when I questioned Tea-Leaf about the meaning of the tattoo she told me, “I do not know how to read the passage, so I do not know its meaning. I identify as a Dai Buddhist, so it is something that many of us do to show that.” For the youth, tattooing is not so much a rite of passage, but rather a visual marker of their ethnic identity and a unifying force that brings others bearing similar markings together. She continued to explain to me that having the tattoo as an indicator of her ethnic and religious identity was more important than understanding its exact meaning. This is often the case for young Dai women, many of whom have not had the opportunity to study in-depth Dai language or Theravada scripture. Dai women that are tattooed more often than not have small, scripture based tattoos, similar to Tea-Leaf’s, as opposed to full sleeves or entire body covering tattoos. This directed me to pay more attention, and indeed, I noticed on many occasions even much older Dai women to have smaller, scripture-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. My informant Brock confirmed this in our 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 and common.

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, and the deep meaning ascribed to these tattoos by Dai individuals is another source of proof that Theravada Buddhism and its subject matter are important aspects of their personal identity. For the elderly, especially men, tattooing is seen as a rite of passage into adulthood in Theravada Dai society, whereas for the youth tattooing is used as an indicator of ethnic and religious identity that is compatible with modern and urban aesthetic trends.

Conclusion

Theravada Buddhism and Dai ethnic identity and culture are inextricably linked to one another, especially in today's modern world. Contrary to the conclusions of some previous scholars, many Dai individuals and Dai society as a whole have managed to adapt to the pressures of modernity and in some ways have discovered entirely new opportunities for the expansion and transmission of Theravada and Dai culture, as well as new means of self-expression as Theravada Buddhists. Although the threats to Dai religious culture that come along with modernity are very real and impactful in Xishuangbanna, the response to these threats has strengthened the cultural continuity of the Dai. The Theravada monastic system, which is the core of Dai society, has managed to exist and grow in the region because of the enduring nature of the temple economy. Adaptations to modern and urban life, such as the embracing of new technologies and the increasing prevalence of women in temple education and Buddhist practice are also trends that indicate that Theravada Buddhism is very capable of finding its place in the modern environment, and as a result diminish some of the threats to temple education and Dai linguistic preservation. On the individual level, the ability and drive to find new avenues for personal expression as Buddhists, such as tattooing, contemporary art, or esoteric practice, Dai individuals have arisen that can navigate urban and Han-influenced society while also staying true to their traditional Dai identity. In essence, Dai religious culture is flourishing in today's modern climate, though it is balanced with the new responsibilities and societal demands that result from modernity.

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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. *James Granderson*