

The Influence of Creation Myth on Tai Lue Community



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Abstract

The creation myth about the origin of the world is one of the most popular and well known legends among the Tai Lue ethnic group in Xishuangbanna and the Tai ethnic groups in the Mekong and Salween river basin regions. It appears in many forms and has been continually taught over time. The creation myth of the Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna seems to be highly acclaimed among the people, reflecting their united attempt and intention to make this literature widespread throughout their community.

This article aimed to study and analyze the role and existence of the origin of the world story from original Xishuangbanna Tai Lue-Chinese manuscripts. The study found that the origin of the world legend has influenced the Tai Lue society and serves as a tool for social discourse by propagating and passing it from generation to generation. Therefore, the study of other Tai pieces of ethnic literature from their ancient palm leaf manuscripts can be assessed for understanding, and for the development of sustainable peace in Tai societies.

Keywords: The Creation Myth; Tai Lue; Palm Leaf Manuscript





Introduction

In Xishuangbanna, the Tai Lue live in the area of Jing Hong city (Chiang Rung) and other nearby cities on the great “Lanchang Jiang” or “Mekong river” (Zheng, 1981) basin of the Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna) Dai (Tai) Autonomous Prefecture (The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, 2001) in the Southwestern Province of Yunnan, China (Tourism Bureau of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, 2011). The area was the Kingdom of Sipsongpanna, and Chiang Rung was the center of the Tai Lue’s glorious culture and civilization for hundreds of years. Although the original homeland of the Tai Lue was mainly in Sipsongpanna, they also dispersed to some parts of southern China, the upper part of Myanmar, the northern part of Laos and the northern part of Thailand. (Gordon, 2005)

The story of the origin of the world reflects the strong

imagination of the Tai people about the creation of nature, humans, and animals, as well as the characteristics and life style of people in different cultures representing a widespread and popular legend. It can be considered that faith and ritual embedded in traditional Tai literature plays an important role and function in influencing the attitude and characteristics of Tai people as a whole.

The Tai Lue people have their worldview about the origin of the world, reflecting their beliefs and the practicing of their rituals in the way of life of the community, its traditions and culture, and is an important influence on Tai Lue society

This article aims to study and analyze the role and the origins of the world story from the 10th volume of the one hundred volume Chinese Buddhist scripture series named “The Complete Chinese Pattra Buddhist Scripture” which was translated from original Xishuangbanna Tai Lue

manuscripts supported by the CPC Xishuangbanna Prefectural Party committee and government.

Document and field study techniques were used in this process by to investigate the meaning of existence in the social context of the literary works. The factors creating the social discourse through the use of the story of the creation myth will be emphasized. Thus, it can be said that the origin of the world story is a source of faith, tradition and culture for the Tai Lue people who continue to believe in Buddhism and the existence of the social community.

Content

Literary Text

This article uses the Chinese-Tai Lue literary text “*The Origin of the World*”. The world creation was called *Ba-ta-ma-gab-phun-lok* in the Tai Lue language and has been separated into two sections: *Ba-*

ta-ma-kab-mueng-lue and *Ba-ta-ma-kab-huo-chang*.

The *Ba-ta-ma-kab-mueng-lue*, the first part of the world creation myth, describes the evolution of the world; that there was no land nor creatures in the ancient time. Then the Brahma sent his avatars of *Pu-sang-ka-si* (male) and *Ya-sang-ka-sai* (female) to create heaven and earth, and the plants and animals. They then created humans by sculpting male and female figures from sawdust. This couple of created humans married together and also produced children, built their house, village and city. They then created the family and kin relative systems including the administration system for the city as well as a society of rice culture. However, after that the whole world was destroyed by fire, floods and storms.

The *Ba-ta-ma-kab-huo-chang*, the second part of *Ba-ta-ma-gab-phun-lok*, contains the story of *Yin Thra* or *Mha Brahma* who came down from



heaven to rebuild the new world. He created all things on the earth and utilized the twelve months of the Zodiac system to introduce the calculation of seasons, years, months and days. Thereafter, the legend mentioned *A-San-Yi Brahma* whose head was cut off by his princesses after an angel deity's trick. Every year there is the day of Brahma's head worship which has become the Tai New Year's day or Songkran Festival. The Brahma's head worship ceremony was later substituted by the ritual of worshipping *Ratanatrai* in Buddhism, which is to behave well, make merit, and to practice karma and charity.

An analysis of the content shows that the theme depicts the direction of the human way of life that is based on human beings' good and bad practices following the three characteristics of *Trilakkhana* which describes the impermanence, the oppression, and the soullessness of human

life. The story has a single plot which depicts the characters revealing some related Dharma in order to control the structure of society which requires good practices to gain merit and also to lead a good life.

Creating Social Discourse through the Story of the Origin of the World

According to history, the Tai Lue of Xishuangbanna lost their territory to China and came under Chinese rule due to the cultural revolution in China in 1835. The Tai Lue, with their long tradition of ruling by Chaofa's or Chao Maha Chivit's and their observation of Buddhism with their ancient unique art, culture and tradition, have kept their identity that has been handed down for generations.

The main mechanism for creating social discourse through the story of the origin of the world has been through the local leaders of the Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna and can be

classified into three groups as follows: Clergy, artisans and civic leaders

1. Buddhist Monks

During the more than a hundred years under the Chinese military government which in the past was very strict on Tai Lue art and cultural treasures, such as religious activities, many customs were destroyed. Despite the destruction of the religion and rituals, Tai Lue monks, who became the source for people's moral support, continued to preach to the people to practice good deeds and restrain themselves from doing evil. As such, the origin of the world became one of the stories for monks to use to remind people and teach them about ethics and household principles and the way of life, which is passed on through the example of the creation myth to the people in the Tai Lue community by teaching and in the rituals.

For this reason Buddhism and the monks in

Xishuangbanna are regarded as a form of cultural negotiation: monks as the masters and spiritual leaders of the nation to succeed (Swearer, 2009) to the great respect of Tai Lue people. Therefore, the monk has his great role in the promotion of the strength of arts and culture as well as a role in the transmission and sustenance of the creation myth on the practice rituals via the belief and faith of the Buddhist society of the Tai Lue.

Kru-Ba-Lhuang-Jom-

Muang Wanna-Siri who is the president of the Buddhist association of China, is the person who gets the respect of the Tai Lue people in Xishuangbanna and also has an important role in Tai Lue society. His influence helps unite the soul of the Tai Lue people and the advocating of Buddhism to remain a part of Tai Lue society.

2. Tai Lue Artists

Tai Lue artists have taken part in creating the discourse of



the creation myth and have made it popular throughout the Tai Lue society. It has been presented by two groups – the singers and those who use printing technology.

Tai Lue people love to sing and dance like other ethnic Tais. Tai Lue folk songs are called “*Kab Lue*” and the singers are called “*Chang kab*”. These artists have taken part in the origin of the world in a well known song version and have increased its popularity for teaching ethics, cultural awareness and for general entertainment. One of the most popular folk singers in Xishuangbanna is *Nang-Tao* who is a folk singer at a radio station in Xishuangbanna.

In addition, not only have the folk singers created the discourse of the creation myth but printing technology is also used instead of the local literary works on *sa* paper or palm leaves. However, the strategies of the cultural base have been to publish the Tai Lue literature

under the Chinese government to support the strengthening of the society with a cartoon version and “The Complete Chinese Pattrā Buddhist Scripture” as academic books. Another point of interest in the use of language is that the Tai Lue language is still being used to present this discourse.

Ethnic identity, or the identity of the group of people joined together by race and nationality might appear in their beliefs, traditions, and rituals, as well as the story of their migrating to settle in a new area. In addition to the historical oppression from other ethnic groups, the identities also count on music, legend, several shows and games and so on. (Charles, 1997: 53) Thus, the society of Xishuangbanna was transmitted from generation to generation through the guidance of the local literature structures. The origin of the world myth has maintained and enabled the structure of Tai Lue arts and culture to survive until the

present. Nowadays, the existence of the creation myth has been published in the folk narratives and literary writing, including the practice of folk dance and the traditional song “*Kab-Lue*”. The phenomenon is included in the activities of a variety of popular entertainment media which came to be the main support for Tai cultural identity (Dao, 1997: 1) and also for the Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna.

3. The Leaders of Tai Lue Community

The long history of the Tai Lue since their establishment in Xishuangbanna or Sipsongpanna during the leadership of King “*Phra-Ya-Juang*” whose *Juang* dynasty ruled the Xishuangbanna for 790 years until the last king in episode 45 of the Tai Lue kingdom is *Chao Mom Kam Lue* or Dao Shixin. Therefore, currently Tai people in China who have the last name “*Dao*” or “*Chao*” show that they are descended from the king.

At the present time the Chao-Fah family have changed their position to be leaders and representatives of the Tai Lue people as a whole. These leaders have a duty to integrate and coordinate directly between the Tai Lue and the Chinese Government in particular in promoting the importance of arts and culture in Xishuangbanna. Some dominant leaders such as *Chao-Mom-Kam-Lue* or Dao Shixin, have supported the development of cultural projects in Xishuangbanna. While, Dao Aimin, the former governor of the Autonomous Region Xishuangbanna and the chairman of the Association of the State of Tai as well as Dao Linyin, the governor of the Autonomous Region in Xishuangbanna have also made great attempts to maintain and support Tai Lue culture following traditional practices derived from the origin of the world myth. These also include the local philosophers

who preserve the Tai Lue literary work and palm leaf manuscript as well as continue the traditions and rituals at the local level.

From the examples above, the leaders of the Tai Lue community have shown their perseverance and support and have also impelled the belief about their creation myth that is reflected in Tai Lue tradition and worship for the acceptance by the people and the government under the state policies of China Western Development of Yunnan and China's National Development Plan from No.7 to No. 12 (Tuwicharanon, 2004) which have been mainly created for the selling of Tai culture in Xishuangbanna. The goal is to focus on tourism as a mainstay industry in the national economy by promoting useful culture and creating a new cultural identity based on the old tradition by promoting "Culture products". Therefore the myth has turned out to be a

valuable product to be preserved, protected and promoted. In the meantime, the native arts and songs have been revived and introduced into the new media, such as *Kab-Lue*, the comic books telling the old story for children, animation movies broadcast on television or distributed in VCD format, as well as the revival of rituals and traditions to be used in events and in daily life.



Figure 1: Pra-Kru-Ba-Lhuang
Jom-Muang Wanna-Siri



Figure 2: Chao-Mom-Kam-Lue



Figure 3: Dao Aimin



Figure 4: Dao Linyin



Figure 6: Nang-Tao is a Folk Singer of Xishuangbanna



Figure 7: The Origin of the World of Tai Lue in the Cartoon Version

The Origin of the World: Literature of Tai Lue Way of Life

The origin of the world or “*Ba-ta-ma-kab-mueng-lue*” of the world creation myth can be considered as a key piece of literature to understand the society of the Tai Lue of Xishuangbanna since dimensions of the myth always have a direct or indirect link among people, communities, localities and society. Mythology describes the fact that in ancient times the content of the myth was transmitted in religious, moral and social terms. (Malinowski, 1954: 95-100)

The role of the “origin of the world” creation myth has influenced the Tai Lue’s belief and identity in their culture which is reflected in two aspects of the Tai Lue’s way of life including Buddhism and traditional beliefs.

1. Buddhism

The Tai Lue people carried out their rituals and traditions by practicing animism



along with their beliefs in Theravada Buddhism. Animism has been integrated into the daily practice process as reflected in the story of the creation myth as well.

Buddhist doctrine reflected in the legend has been regarded as the important structure and guideline in cultivating personal morals and ethics. This doctrine was used to dictate the living of the Tai Lue people in Xishuangbanna with the belief in the principles of the Three Characteristics of *Tilakkhaṇa* and the *Ariyasacca* or the Four Noble Truths, as well as good and bad practice rules. The role in cultivating moral practices is usually taken by the elderly, the monks, and local scholars.

The relation of the integration between animism and Buddhism in the Tai Lue social context has been reflected in the traditions, rituals and legends of the people. (Jiranakorn & Settakul, 2544: 216) That can be explained by

the hierarchy of relationship in the Tai Lue's beliefs and the practice of rituals under the power of supernatural beings or spirits which have become intermingled in the belief system of Buddhism. This came to be the content of religious belief and rituals through the description of the creation myth influenced by "Folk Buddhism".

The Tai Lue's belief in the Five Buddhas was to encourage the people to realize the importance and the acceptance of Buddhism. The Tai Lue worship the Buddha image by paying their humble homage to the three aspects including Lord Buddha, Dharma – the teachings of Buddha, and the monks who have devoted themselves to the monkhood to teach the people about Buddha. During their worship, people will pay respect, splash water on the Buddha image, and offer popped rice, flowers and perfume. The prayers are from their beliefs reflected in the myth that humans were born as

a result of the accumulation of good practices. Therefore, they pray for a prosperous life with morality not only for their current life but in their next life. They wish for a better life with plenty of health and wealth. Moreover, the Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna have also worshipped and paid respect in “*Je-Dee-Dhatu*” pagoda which contains the Buddha’s body parts. The Tai Lue people arrange their ceremony for worshipping at this event by the lighting of fireworks and by dancing.

The content in the legend reflected several aspects that encourage Tai Lue people to realize the importance of attempting to get merit or Punna from good practices, or Kusala. Besides their daily way of life of good practice, this attitude is also reflected through a variety of rituals including the dedication and donation of the worship napkin, *Cho-Tung*, Palm leaves, manuscripts, tributes and a sand pagoda.



Figure 8: The Altar of Five Buddha in Wat Muang Lha



Figure 9: DhaTu Nhor, Ban Fei Long



Figure 10: Tan Cho-Tung



Figure 11: The Splashing of Water to the Buddha Image



Figure 12: The Dance for Worship



Figure 13: Discharging Lamps of Worship

2. Traditional beliefs

The origin of the world has not only influenced Tai Lue identities but also the cultural context that is reflected in the way of life, traditions and the practicing of rituals as a cultural heritage. This is reflected in the relationship between man, religion and belief as a conservative practice under the motto of Buddhism which appeared in the Tai Lue local community.

The agricultural society of the Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna is concentrated on producing rice by the transplanting system following the idea from the legend that rice is the most crucial product given by nature for human life, or “rice is for life”. The processes of the rice production from planting until taking rice for consuming will be acknowledged and paid respect to in rituals and traditions. The practicing of rituals was a combination of their beliefs and the Buddhist way of practice, together according to the attitude that rice is the most important food for living. The traditional belief in rice culture of the Tai Lue people is the *Kuan Kaw* philosophy of respect for the rice and the mother goddess of grain.

The way of life of the Tai Lue people in Xishuangbanna is associated with a relationship to the universe, particularly in relation to their beliefs in the directions and positions of the star lunar eclipses which

influence their activities and practices in daily life. The relationship with the movement of the universe is reflected by the myth in the story of the setting of Fate, the Zodiac, the seasons, months, days, occasions and auspicious times. The setting of seasons, months, days and occasions in the Tai Lue calendar system is the pattern calculated from the power of the day and the influence of the rotation of the sun and moon eclipses. Therefore Fate, the Zodiac and auspicious times are very important to the setting of various auspicious activities and ceremonies. These will let the people have good fortune and protect them from all dangers.

The attitude of ritual practices has a direct relationship with the attitude of wishing for a happy life for Tai Lue people and the abundance of the community's useful natural resources. The important rituals include the festival of Brahma parade, splashing water

on Buddha on New Year's Day, the *Bang Fai Phaya* or rocket festival, and the marriage ceremony.



Figure 14: Brahma Parade on Tai Lue New Year's Day



Figure 15: Fireworks on Tai Lue New Year's Day



Figure 16: Benefaction and Consecration of Craw-tan

Conclusion

The origin of the world not only influenced the significance and their roles in the way of life and beliefs of Tai Lue communities, but also brought the realization of their social value and identity as a symbol of power and wisdom in their culture. The Tai Lue have adapted the creation myth divination into their cultural and traditional practicing forms by reproducing it over a long period of time.

This literary work also serves as a tool for social discourse by the reproduction and passing on by the state government, monks, and leaders in order to define their identities and their ethnic existence. That reproducing has spread widely in the forms of story-telling, printed media and local songs, and has taken deep root in the soul of the all Tai Lue in Xishuangbanna. It also shows that although the Tai Lue are under Chinese government control, they are bound

together by this reproducing which confirms that their community is sustainable.

The remaining Tai Lue cultural heritage derived from the myth has the role of convincing the people to continue holding and practicing their traditions and rituals. This literary work has shown the infinite value of Shan literature which can appropriately serve the community in its present social context. This literature provides an aesthetic appreciation to the audience while stimulating their ethical and ethnic awareness. All in all, this can be considered the holistic value of literature that is created by a group of people and is truly for the benefit of the group.

Along with the study of Tai Lue literature on the origin of the world, the research on the creation myth or legend in other Tai ethnic groups in the transborder, social context from ancient Tai palm leaf manuscripts also led to the

understanding of Tai societies (Na Talang, 2002: 269– 270) and the development of relationships and sustainable

peace among the Tai and other ethnic groups in the Mekong and Salween river basins region.

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