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NARRATIVES AND RITUALS: THE INHERITANCE CONTEXT OF DAI EPICS

Abstract. The Dai ethnic group in China boasts a rich tradition of poetry and folk narratives, often closely intertwined with folk ritual activities. Behind these folk events, there are usually the associated explanatory text. This paper is based on field research data collected from 2008 to 2016, including interviews with the local people, tracking folk events, and understanding narrative texts. Three cases were selected from the data to elaborate on the relationship between rituals and narratives. The first case is wedding, the pickled fish jars in the betrothal ceremony could be explained in the narrative poem “A-Luang Basom” and the ritual of Crossing-the-Bridge during weddings simulates the typical scene of a hero’s return and marriage as portrayed in the A-Luang story. The second case is funeral, where people often transcribe and recite the scripture “Ga Po” to express gratitude for the mother’s childbirth. The third case involves the dedication of narratives “Ya Huanhao” or “Bu Huanhao” in Buddhist temples, narrating the story of the struggle between the rice sprite and the Buddha. The ritual of summoning “Ya Huanhao” or “Bu Huanhao” reflects deep respect for the rice sprite. Through these analyses, it becomes evident that folk narratives serve as interpretations of folk rituals. Different rituals, in turn, provide the context for the practice and transmission of narratives. Narratives and rituals complement each other, reflecting the Dai people’s profound understanding of traditional poetry.

Keywords: Dai epic; Dai ethnic group; oral tradition; Theravada Buddhism; Buddhist scripture; narrative poetry; ritual activities; traditional narratives; A-Luang story; presentation.

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Нарративы и ритуалы: преемственность эпосов Дай

Аннотация. Этническая группа дай в Китае может похвастаться богатой традицией поэзии и народных повествований, часто тесно переплетающихся с народной ритуальной деятельностью. За этими народными событиями обычно стоит сопутствующий пояснительный текст. Эта статья основана на данных полевых исследований, собранных с 2008 по 2016 гг., включая интервью с местными жителями, отслеживание народных событий и понимание повествовательных текстов. Из данных были выбраны три случая, чтобы уточнить взаимосвязь между ритуалами и повествованиями. Первый случай – свадьба, банки с маринованной рыбой на церемонии обручения можно объяснить в повествовательной поэме «А-Луанг Басом», а ритуал перехода через мост во время свадьбы имитирует типичную сцену возвращения героя и женитьбы, как это изображается в истории А-Луанга. Второй случай – похороны, где люди часто записывают и читают священное писание «Га По», чтобы выразить благодарность матери за рождение ребенка.

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Третий случай предполагает посвящение в буддийских храмах повествований «Я Хуанхао» или «Бу Хуанхао», повествующих историю борьбы духа риса с Буддой. Ритуал призыва «Я Хуанхао» или «Бу Хуанхао» отражает глубокое уважение к духу риса. Благодаря этому анализу становится очевидным, что народные повествования служат интерпретацией народных ритуалов. Различные ритуалы, в свою очередь, создают контекст для практики и передачи повествований. Повествования и ритуалы дополняют друг друга, отражая глубокое понимание традиционной поэзии народом дай.

Ключевые слова: эпос дай; этническая группа дай; устная традиция; Тхеравада-буддизм; буддийское писание; повествовательная поэзия; ритуальные действия; традиционные повествования; А-Луанг строй; презентация.

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Introduction

The Dai ethnic group is one of the minorities in southwestern China, with an official population of 1.32 million in the 2020 census. Starting from the 1950s (around the establishment of the People's Republic of China), various cultural departments across China, with government funding, formed investigation teams to conduct surveys of folk literary works of ethnic minorities. Many Dai epics and narrative poems became known to the public through these efforts. Despite being a relatively small population, the Dai people have created hundreds of epics and narrative poems throughout their history, showcasing a remarkable and astonishing culture. Early collected materials gradually got published, some comprehensive works like “History of Dai Literature” (1995) and data-driven compilations like “The Story Collection of A-Luang” (1980) “Catalog of Ancient Dai Manuscripts in Dehong Prefecture Yunnan Province” (2002) and “The Complete Collection of Chinese Pattra-Leaf” (2006) were published, and some cross-cultural comparative research such as “On the Rice Cultivation Rituals and Rice Sprite Myths of Dai and Bulang People” (2000) and “Selected Translations of Thai Folktales” (2007) were also published. These early achievements serve as precious materials frequently cited in this paper.

The author has been conducting research on ethnic literature, particularly focusing on Dai epics, since 2008. Influenced by Western research methodologies, especially the Ethnopoetics, the Oral Formulaic Theory, and the Morphology of Folktale, the author has employed these methods multiple times to analyze Dai epic texts, the performers of the epics, the narrative performance and the inheritance context. This paper is one of the outcomes of these analyses.

This paper contains many first-hand materials from field investigations, draws on analyses from predecessors, and references relevant materials from Southeast Asia, so that the viewpoints presented in this paper have a certain representative. However, the majority of the data in the paper come from the Dai community in Dehong Prefecture, so there is a limitation in its geographical scope. Apart from Dehong, there are also significant Dai populations in places like Xishuangbanna Prefecture, Lincang City, and so on, each with its unique characteristics in poetry inheritance context. Especially in Xishuangbanna, the Dai Lue sub-group features professional singers called Zhanghap, who sing epics orally in various ceremonies, it is another way to inherit the epics.

The objective of this paper is to study the ways in which the Dai people inherit poetry traditions. The influence of Theravada Buddhism is crucial issue for the Dai as it brought writing system which is helpful to keep the poetry texts in written tradition. However, more importantly, this paper aims to understand how the Dai people narrate these poetry in their daily lives. Poetic texts are associated with various ritual activities, giving poetry functional and vibrant life.

The Dai society features various ritual activities, including significant life ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, regular festivals held in villages, irregular religion events. From these ritual

activities, three cases, namely wedding, funeral, and summoning ritual for rice sprite, have been selected for in-depth analysis of their ritual details and associated narratives. These cases are representative and persuasive in illustrating the poetry inheritance context.

1. The narratives in wedding custom

1.1. Betrothal presents and “A-Luang Basom”

The Dai ethnic group has a series of customs and rituals for weddings, including proposal, presenting betrothal gifts, welcoming the bride, and the wedding ceremony. Among the many gifts sent to the bride’s family, there are two jars of pickled sour fish which are quite unique. During my field works on the Dai region in Dehong in 2009, I attended a local wedding and found that there was indeed sour fish present. Through interviews with several local people, I learned that giving pickled sour fish as a gift at weddings is a traditional custom. Represented by the elderly Yin Zongde¹, who is known as the leader reciter (known as Huolu in the Dai language), the Dai people believe that the tradition of presenting pickled fish at weddings is related to the narrative poem “A-Luang Basom”, which contains auspicious content and considers pickled fish as a lucky stuff for matchmaking. A-Luang is a heroic title for those who are full of blessings, luck, and courage, they are usually the reincarnations of Shakyamuni Buddha. In addition to weddings, the Dai people also copy and offer this scripture for other joyous events.

“A-Luang Basom” [ʔa³³lɔŋ⁵⁵pa³³som³¹] means A-Luang who made sour fish. The versions circulating in different places may vary, but the content is generally similar, and the plot of “A-Luang Basom” is intricate and fascinating [1, p. 237–238]:

A-Luang was born into poverty, some fishermen often provided him with relief giving him some fish, of which he would eat half and save the rest. One day, a celestial being disguised as a ragged old man to test the goodness or evilness of human nature. Everyone rejected him, except for the kind A-Luang, who offered him a half fish. The celestial being instructed A-Luang to pickle the fish and sell it in other places through boat merchants. The pickled fish jar eventually reached a royal palace after 7 years’ unsold, where the queen, upon eating it, immediately regained her youth. In gratitude, she placed a ruby in the jar and sent it back to A-Luang. Misunderstanding the fish hadn’t been sold, A-Luang entrusted it to other merchants again, and it ended up in another palace after the second 7 years, where the king was choosing a suitor for the princess. Mistakenly believing the jar to be an engagement gift, the king opened the jar and discovered a dazzling ruby. After a serious divination, the king deemed it an auspicious match and decided to marry the princess to the owner of the ruby. Using magic, the princess, her warriors, a white elephant, and valuable treasures were shrunk and placed into an ivory, which was sent back to A-Luang. Unaware of the secret inside, A-Luang put the ivory outside his house. Every day, the princess emerged from the ivory and cooked for him, it wasn’t until A-Luang deliberately observed the situation that he discovered the secret. The princess explained everything, and they got married, living happily ever after.

It is necessary to make the story above clear, because from the story we can see that A-Luang’s good fortune originated from his pickled fish, which also served as the medium for his marriage to the princess. Knowing this story, it makes sense to see pickled fish as a gift at the wedding.

In another version, it is said that story happened in Meng Guoliya (the kingdom named Guoliya), and A-Luang has his name Gong Mana. He sold the pickled fish to a minister, whose wife became young again after eating it. She also gave some fish to the king and queen of Dagasuo, who also became younger. Other parts of the narrative have similar content [2, p. 513].

It is obvious that many names are loanwords from Pali language, as they are from Buddhist scriptures. However, “A-Luang Basom” contains many folk mythological stories, especially the story

¹ With the funding of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2008), a field investigation was conducted in the Dehong Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province. Audio Recording no. was 08013000. Title: Interview with Huolu Yin Zongde. Date: January 30, 2008. Location: a corner of the Bodhi Temple in Mangshi, Dehong Prefecture. Interview language is Dai, and translated by the author.

plot that the princess hidden in the ivory comes out to cook for him when he goes out to work, which belongs to the River Snail Maiden folktale type, while the narrative of the hero A-Luang's expedition to search for treasure conforms to the Magic Tale type².

Did the custom of presenting pickled fish at weddings precede the story of "A-Luang Basom", or did the tradition of giving pickled fish come about after the narrative? To approach this question from a perspective of social and cultural history, the Dai people have been engaged in rice production for a long time and have a tradition of breeding and consuming fish. The Dong, Zhuang, and Dai ethnic groups are the same rice-growing peoples, all have a long history of using glutinous rice juice to pickle sour fish. They split open the fish belly, clean it, and stuff it with glutinous rice porridge, or cut the fish into chunks and marinate it with fermented glutinous rice wine before sealing it in a jar for more than a year to ferment. When the fish turns red and the bones become tender, it is ready to be consumed. In Dong ethnic areas, "whenever there is a spring festival or wedding, a gift of five or six pounds of pickled fish is considered a great gift. If an elderly person passes away, offering pickled sour fish that has been preserved for one or two decades is seen as a great act of filial piety. Pickled big carp or big grass fish is a delicacy for sacrifices" [3, p. 689]. The Dai people, who live in subtropical regions, are particularly fond of sour and spicy flavors. The taste of pickled sour fish not only helps to increase appetite but also ensures rich nutrition, making it a top choice for entertaining guests. Since Buddhism was only introduced to the Dai area, the Dong and Zhuang ethnic areas, have not been influenced by Theravada Buddhism. It can be said that the traditional customs of pickling sour fish and using it as a wedding gift have existed for longtime, after the spread of Theravada Buddhism, it was merged with A-Luang narrative which is considered derived from the Jataka Tales.

1.2. The crossing-the-bridge ritual and the A-Luang narative

Dai ethnic people unconsciously simulate the scenes of folk narratives in their ritual life, hoping to achieve the similar result of those in storytelling. In Dehong Prefecture, the Crossing-the-bridge ritual is usually held during a wedding ceremony, which is called [tai¹¹xo³⁵] in Dai language. This ritual can be held on an auspicious day before, on the very day of wedding, or after the wedding. Some couples even need to make up for this ritual when they come back from other foreign or distant place after getting married and having children, which clearly demonstrates the importance of this ritual.

The Crossing-the-bridge ritual is somehow related to the Buddhism narrative, especially of A-Luang theme. In general, A-Luang is the reincarnation of the Buddha, also is a folk hero who embodies good fortune. Kinds of A-Luang narratives usually transmit in the form of Buddhist scriptures and are recited during Buddhist activities. Meanwhile, various A-Luang stories are popular among the Dai communities. These A-Luang narratives usually contain a series of motifs, including challenge, expedition, battle, return, and marriage. A-Luang triumphantly returns and marries with one princess is one of the typical scenes. Taking the "Head-only A-Luang" for example as follows [4, p. 23]:

When A-Luang Gong Mana was born, he only had a head without body. He earned his life by herding for the landlord, looking after the cattle and horses, which multiplied quickly. Once, he joined a sea voyage with the landlord, tasked with guarding the bow of the ship. The large vessel obeyed him like cattle and horse, sailing steadily forward. One day, he saw the Naga King and his daughters sunbathing on the beach, while a large roc bird swooped down, trying to seize the Naga King. Gong Mana roared immediately to scare way the roc bird and rescue the Naka King. In gratitude, the Naga King gifted him a precious pearl. Upon returning from the oversee journey, Gong Mana had grown into an adult. He dreams of heavenly gods who informed him of his destined marriage to the seventh princess. However, when he proposed marriage, the king presented several challenges: within 7 days, he had to pave a road with silver, build a bridge with gold, decorate the path with jade banana leaves and green jade sugarcane, hang silks as decorations, and arrange a drum and dance troupes to welcome the bride. Gong Mana sought the help

² Magic Tale type is defined by Vladimir Propp. As we know, he analyzed 100 Russian folktales mostly falling into categories 300-749 of the Aarne-Thompson classification and derived narrative rules for analyzing such stories. He proposed two sets of analytical methods: 31 functions of dramatics personae and character action spheres.

of the heavenly gods, and 500 divine craftsmen were sent by the gods to help swiftly fulfilling all these tasks, and Gong Mana successfully married the princess. On the wedding day, the heavenly gods, the roc bird, and the Naga King transformed into human form and presented precious gifts. There were young men played drums, and maidens danced. On their wedding night, the only-head A-Luang Gong Mana grew evenly hands and feet, transforming into a handsome young human.

As a member of the Dai ethnic group, I grew up in a Dai village and witnessed several Crossing-the-bridge ceremony during weddings. The structure of the so called “bridge” is roughly like this:

Dig a shallow pit on the roadside or alleyway and embed a new wooden board into it. This wooden board is specially cut from the mountain and symbolizes auspiciousness and holiness. Two wooden strips are placed on both sides of the board, which are referred to as the “bridge”. The surface of the “bridge” is covered with a hand-woven cotton cloth about 3 meters long, on which many candies and CNY (Chinese yuan) bills are scattered. Several colorful silk threads are tied to both ends, which symbolizes “colored silk”. Miniature bamboo fences are inserted on both sides of the “bridge”, and fresh green sugar cane and banana tree trunks of various colors of paper-cut flags are planted at both ends of the “bridge”. Red and white threads are wrapped around the sugar cane and banana leaves.

There are approximately 2 parties involved in the Crossing-the-bridge ritual. On one end of the “bridge”, there is a mat laid out, and the newlyweds kneel on it with their hands together in the shape of a ladle while prostrating themselves on the mat. In front of them, a black square cloth is spread out. The chanting process lasts for about half an hour, during which time the newlyweds remain in the kneeling position, while two aunts hold umbrellas on either side of the couple. On the other end of the “bridge” was a square table, on which were placed rice, candies, cooked meat, rice wine, bananas, candles, firecrackers, and a large bowl of rice mixed with minced meat. Behind the table was a mat for the monks to sit and chant. Since there were few monks in the Dehong, a Huolu (the leader chanter) replaced the monk. The Huolu held a small round bamboo table, on which were popcorn, small flowers, and CNY bills. Next to the chanter were the assistant in charge of striking a bronze bell. All the participators squatting behind them listening devoutly with hands clasped together. As Huolu finished a chant section, his assistant strikes the bell once, and others echoed “satu... satu...”.

As the chanting is finished, people begin crossing the bridge one by one. The leader chanter Huolu stood up and walked from the end of the “bridge” to the other, orally recited blessing words, handed some candies and CNY bills to the newlyweds. He completed his crossing the bridge, giving gifts and blessing. Other people followed suit, starting with male elders and then female elders. Only the elderly relatives were eligible to practise the ritual. After that, the two aunties who held the umbrella on the side would slowly roll up the woven cloth with people’s footprint, candy, money that sprinkled on the cloth. They were ultimately gathered and wrapped into the black square scarf, creating a bundle that the newlyweds would carry back to their own room. These gifts wrapped in the black scarf represents people’s precious blessings for the newlyweds.

Based on the story of “Head-only A-Luang”, it is not difficult to see that Crossing-the-bridge ritual simulates the scene of A-Luang’s marriage in the narrative. when A-Luang proposed to the princess, the king presented him several challenges: to build a bridge with gold, to pave the road with silver, decorate them with jade bananas and green jade sugarcane, to welcome the bride with drum and dance. While in a real wedding, the purified wood board selected from the forest formed the “golden bridge”, the woven cloth with scattered candies, CNY bills and silk threads formed the “silver road”, both sides of the bridge were inserted green sugarcane and banana stems, similar to the emerald and green jade mentioned in “Head-only A-Luang”. In the story, during the wedding of A-Luang, the heavenly gods, the roc bird, and the Naga king all transformed into human shapes to present precious gifts. While in the real wedding when people crossing the bridge, the elders lined up and walked from one end of the bridge to the other, presenting the newlyweds with gifts.

In short, the Crossing-the-bridge ritual imitates the scene of A-Luang's triumphant return and marry the princess after overcoming difficult challenges, imbuing real-life weddings with auspicious symbolism and reflecting people's good wishes for the newlyweds' married life.

Through the analysis above, the Dai people unconsciously perform folk narrative in traditional ceremonies, and the narrative has become an integral part of their real life. "Through the ritual, the world of existence and the world of imagination are merged into one world through a set of symbolic forms, and they constitute the spiritual significance of a nation" [5, p. 91].

2. The narratives in funeral custom

There are two types of funeral practices in the Dai ethnic group, each with different belief and corresponding narratives. If the deceased was a Buddhist fellow before his death, a Wu Dala [wu⁵⁵ta:⁵⁵la:⁵⁵] (means Buddhist way) ceremony should be held. If the deceased had never been Buddhist, the Wu Yamo [wu⁵⁵ja:³³mot⁵³] (means traditional religion way) ceremony is the preferred option. It is believed that if the deceased had been once Buddhist follower and had performed some "Lu" [lu¹¹] (accumulation of merit) during his lifetime, he would enjoy the rewards of his "Lu" after death. Just as people save for the future while alive, they also prepare for their afterlife by practise "Lu". Conversely, if the deceased had not performed any "Lu", people believe that he cannot ascend to the Buddhist Pure Land, so that it is better to choose the primitive way funeral.

There are some Buddhist scriptures that involved in funeral ceremony, these scriptures are called as "lik" [lik⁵³] or "tham" [tham⁵⁵], and are written in traditional Dai script, most of them conform to the Dai poetry rhythm, although the content consists of Buddhist narratives.

2.1. Copying and reciting the "Ga Po" for the deceased

During the summer retreat period in Theravada Buddhism, people will copy and recite scriptures with specific themes for the deceased, then people gather in the temple, complete kinds of rituals, and listen to Huolu the chanting of these newly copied scriptures. Among them, the scripture "Ga Po" (means white crow) is widely spread, another version "Hai Ga Ham" (means the Eggs of golden crow), it is about the origin of A-Luang, with the theme of the most common and touching gratitude for mother in the world.

In fact, the narrative "Ga Po" is also widely circulated in Southeast Asia among the ethnic groups who hold Theravada Buddhist culture. People often copy and recite this scripture for their mothers and light a special "Pati Dingga" (crow's foot shape) lamp in public places, all of which are related to the narrative "Ga Po".

Regarding "Ga Po", Ga means crow and Po means white, which is considered a sacred color in Buddhism, so that "Ga Po" can be understood as white and sacred crow. While another version "Hai Ga Ham", Hai means egg, Ga means crow, and Ham means golden and shining, also implying a sense of sanctity. So, "Hai Ga Ham" can be understood as these eggs of the golden crow. Whether it is white crow or golden crow, both emphasize its sacred image. Although the different versions circulated in various regions the content is generally the same as following in short [6, p. 405–406]:

In the primeval forest, there was a large banyan tree with a crow's nest on it. Inside the nest were five eggs emitting the radiant gleam of gemstones. One day, a fierce storm blew the bird eggs off the tree, and each of the five eggs fell into a different place. The first egg landed in the chicken kingdom, hatched by a hen the egg was born a person. He was named Zhua Gasha, the reincarnation of the first Buddha. The second egg fell into the buffaloes' kingdom, hatched by a cow the egg was born a person, he was named Gula Gong, was the reincarnation of the second Buddha. The third egg fell into the Naga kingdom, hatched by the Naga and was born a person, his name was Gasa Ba, was the reincarnation of the third Buddha. The fourth egg fell into a river, picked up by an elephant, and he became the fourth Buddha, namely the present Buddha Gautama. The last fifth egg fell into the garden of a human kingdom, and he would be born the future Buddha Arimittaya.

The variations in different versions mainly regarding the foster mothers. For instance, in the version from Thailand the eggs were picked up and nurtured by hen, cow, Naga, woman, and lioness [7].

In another version of Dehong, the foster mothers were hen, cow, Naga, Mi Zhang, and king. From a phonetic perspective, the third one named MiZhang can be translated literally as either a female who is the mother of Zhang or a female elephant, because their pronounce is the same, which also makes sense as elephants often play in the river.

It is believed that “Ga Po” or “Hai Ga Ham” are the product of the integration of ancient Dai mythology and Buddhist narrative. The belief in the successive births of five Buddhas comes from the Buddhist scripture “Sita” [7]:

When the five of them were around 10 years old, they each asked their foster mothers about their origins. Their foster mothers explained that they were hatched from eggs that were found and brought back, and they did not know who their birth mothers were. The five boys farewell to their foster mothers and went to the forest for embarking on a monastic life.

According to the Dai tradition, every ten-years old boy should enter a temple to be a novice monk. In Xishuangbanna Prefecture, people would invite the folk singer Zhanghap to sing the “Ga Po” for the ordination ceremony. The narrative above continues as following:

The five boys had diligent spiritual practice, and their actions moved the bird mother in the heavenly palace who served as the Brahma Heaven. She then descended and told them that she was their biological mother [7]. When she returned to heaven, she left a crow’s foot lamps for them. They devoted themselves to their spiritual practices and worshiped the lamps with great reverence.

This is why Dai people today light the crow’s foot shaped lamp while they recite the scripture “Ga Po”. It is said that “if anyone wants to attain blessings and merits, no matter how far the journey, as long as they continuously pray in their heart, or copy Buddhist scripture ‘Ga Po’, preserve worshiping and offering, or narrate the story of this scripture to adults or children, all of the above acts will generate immeasurable merits, as if seeing the five Buddhas. By worshiping and offering at the footsteps of the crow, it will guide everyone to reach the ultimate Nirvana” [8, p. 379]. It is the belief that drive people continuously to transcribe and recite this Buddhist scripture, and so that there are so many handwritten copies of “Ga Po” in Buddhist temples.

2.2. The Buddhist scriptures during funeral ceremony

Dai people who reside adjacent to Southeast Asia have been influenced by Theravada Buddhism, and their traditional funeral customs has also undergone corresponding changes. It is common to recite Buddhist scriptures, such as “Song Da” (exorcism scripture), “Da Xiaoji” (filial piety scripture), “Pi Ji” (deliverance scripture) and other scriptures during funeral ceremony, people believe that these Buddhist scriptures have some certain sacred function, so reciting it is a kind of interpretation of their stories and plots, with the hope of obtaining the same blessings.

In 2008, when I went to Dehong Prefecture for a field work with my supervisor Dr. Yin Hubin, we recorded a Wu Dala (Buddhist way) funeral ceremony³ of an elderly woman who had passed away in her 86 years old. Because she had already made merits to Buddha during her lifetime, conditions for holding a Buddhist way funeral was already in place. Her family invited a Huolu to preside over the ceremony and chant several scriptures.

The coffin was placed in the center of the main hall, a mini Buddhist altar had already been set up in front of the coffin, it is necessary to describe as following:

³ With the funding of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2008), a field investigation was conducted in the Dehong Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province. Video title: Wu Dala (Buddhist-style) funeral. Camera model: Sony, model no: DCR-TRV900. Video tape model: SONY Mini DV Digital. Video cassette duration: 60 minutes. Video record date: February 20, 2008. Location: Man Xiangpa Village, Mangzhang Town, Yingjiang County, Dehong Prefecture. Record by: Dr. Yin Hubin (male, 1960–2020).

A small fence made of bamboo was woven around the left, right, and back of a square table, with only an opening in the front. Paper flowers and colored flags were inserted into the bamboo fence. On both sides of the table were planted sugarcane and banana stalks, and the purple lanterns hung above them. In the center of the table was an arms bowl, a cassock, and a wish-full tree. Eight little bowls were arranged in front of them, each filled with candies and cooked meat. Red candles were lit next to these bowls. A long wooden stool was placed in front of the table, with several small sand pagodas piled on it. A candle was lit next to each pagoda, and four small bowls of sugar were placed nearby.

People set up the mini Buddhist altar in front of the mourning hall to get a purified and sacred space, which indicates the Buddha was already present, so that the Buddhist way funeral is reasonable and compliant. Huolu would chant scripture in front of the temporary Buddhist altar and performed the dripping-water ritual for the deceased. Some of his chant were verbal expressions, and some were written in scripture.

On the first night of the funeral, Huolu should orally recited “Gao Matham”, it was to inform the deceased that her family was holding a funeral ceremony for her liberation; then Huolu recited “Bang Pala”, it was to invite Buddha to be present. The next morning, he intermittently chanted several other scriptures, such as “Tham Lidang”, “Songda”, “Da Xiaoji”, etc. Many people who attend the funeral are Buddhism followers, and they would sit and listen behind the Huolu with their hands folded, praying together for the deceased.

These scriptures chanted at the funeral ceremony are mainly about the theme of Buddhist thought, such as the cycle of life and death, the cause and effect, filial piety, etc. All these manuscripts presented were new copies that family asked someone to hand write, some of which would be burned after the funeral, and some were sent to the temple for later worship and recite again. This is why almost every temple has many copies of these scriptures, people always copy them for the passed members. Reciting these Buddhist scriptures during funeral ceremonies also serve a certain educational function. For example, the scripture “Tham Lidang” which was to guide the soul of the deceased to reach heaven, its content goes as follows:

Mengpi (means the world of the deceased) and Menggun (the human world) are interchanging with each other, life and death interchange endlessly. People usually undergo multiple reincarnations and births. Sometimes they may have good death, while other times they may die in pain, some may die in wild mountains, some may drown in water, some may be eaten by tigers, leopards, jackals, and wolves in the forest, some may die from snake bites, some may die from swords and guns, and so on. Therefore, it is important to listen to the teachings from elders and parents. Don't do evil things, don't break the law, don't harm others, don't do things that are inconsistent with etiquette and morality and that are inconsistent with Buddhist rituals. Whatever who you are, you should live and work in peace, respect the elderly and love the young. After death, one should rest in peace and his soul would attain liberation [2, p. 638].

Another scripture “Songda” is usually recited to wash away the sins of the deceased. The story mainly about the “The kindness of parents in raising and teaching their children is very important, so that people should not forget this gratitude” [2, p. 622]. During my field work, I often find some text of “Songda”, and one tells a story as following:

There once was a wealthy man who had two daughters during his lifetime, they were very filial and kind, and often practiced charity and did offerings to the temple. However, after their father passed away, he often reappeared in their dreams to complain that he had not received any offerings in the underworld, as result he was suffering of various torment no matter the daughters had did so much offerings or burnt so many gold or silver ingots (made of gold and silver foil). Why their father still had not received these offerings underworld? They had consulted a monk and find the answer that their father had destroyed many swallow nests during his lifetime, had quarreled with family over trivial matters, and had even stolen treasures from a friend during a business deal. Due to various sins, he was now suffering underworld. In order to wash away his sins and obtain soul liberation, it is needed to transcribe a copy of the text “Songda”, and only then would he be able to enter the Meng Liban (Pure Land) [9, p. 121].

3.1. The narratives in Buddhist activities

The Dai people refer to various festive activities as Boi. For example, Boi Pala is a celebration for welcoming a new Buddha statue, Boi Dunhong is a celebration for planting a Bodhi banyan tree, and so on. People usually write a corresponding text to record the ceremony, which can be understood as a merit record, people call it as “Lik Ran”, Lik means scripture, and Ran means drop water, which means record of meritorious deeds complete. Every “Lik Ran” records the detailed process of each event, including the time, place, participants, the background of the host, and so on. For example, the Lang’s family once held a Boi Dunhong in August 1997, and they had asked Jin Dading⁶, who was good at writing, to write a related “Lik Ran”, which has been preserved to now. Another case, in February 2008, the Xiangpa village of Mangzhang Town held a Boi Pala to welcome a new Buddha statue, they also had asked Shaobu Maiying to write a related “Lik Ran” for this ritual, and the text have been kept in the temple.

Every “Lik Ran” differ in its length and complexity depend on the scale of the ceremony and the writing skill of the author himself. However, these “Lik Ran” has specific textual patterns and narrative paradigms, presenting a formula characteristic. If one family host a ceremony, the corresponding “Lik Ran” usually firstly describes the social background, secondary introduce the host family’s situation, thirdly provides a detailed description of the ceremony process, the final section is blessings for the host.

Taking the Boi Dunhong ceremony performed by the Lang’s family for example, the corresponding “Lik Ran” includes four aspects: first, it describes the society development in Zhanxi town during the past few decades, contrasting the past poor time with the current better life, and describing the common phenomenon of people converting to Buddhism nowadays. Second, it describes the Lang’s family history migrating from the northern region. Thirdly it explains the purpose and process of the ceremony, focusing on various of preparations. The final content offer blessing for the family.

If the host of one ceremony is one single village or even a large community composed of several villages, the corresponding “Lik Ran” also has a similar textual structure. It would firstly describe the main social background, secondly introduces the situation of the village or community, thirdly introduce the entire process of the ceremony, and at the end give best wishes for all of the residents and livestock in the entire village.

Taking the “Lik Ran” of the Xiangpa Village as an example, which is a welcoming ceremony of a new Buddha statue. The text “Lik Ran” has totally 22 pages (printed in folio-sized xuan-paper, with 18 lines per page), its content also includes four parts: first, the Background of the local Buddhism, that is, the prosperity of Buddhism in the Dai area; second, a simple introduction of the local history and society situation; and third, some blessings words, wishing the residents to live in healthy, to enjoy peaceful lives, to have good harvest. At the last page of the text, there are information of creation time and the author: in the Buddhist year of 2551 (February 14, 2008 in the Gregorian calendar), and the writer is Shaobu Maiying.

Besides the structural form, there is also certain formulaic in content. For example, while people practise the Dripping-water ritual, they would recite the corresponding song which is called “Ham Lik Ran” (means the song for dropping water). When one writer composes a “Lik Ran”, he probably directly absorbs and transcribes the entire “Ham Lik Ran” into this text.

The “Lik Ran” is always written in the form of poetry, and sung or recited in certain melody. “Lik Ran” can be considered as a personal work of folk writer, and judging from its content and form, “Lik Ran” can be considered as a type of “oral tradition-oriented” written poetry, which is an established text with oral tradition sources and oral poetry features, whose textual attributes must be determined

⁶ Jin Dading, male, lived in Zhanxi Town, passed away in 2005. He was a writer and his poetry were once published in magazine *Yong Ham* (in Dai language). With the funding of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2008), a field investigation was conducted in the Dehong Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province. Based on these interviews with the villagers, during his lifetime he had created many “Lik Ran”, and he was a Huolu too, he recited the corresponding “Lik Ran” in various rituals.

among Dai communities in Xishuangbanna Prefecture, people call her Lang Tuolani. According to the narrative, the Buddha and the heavenly god Hunsong were fighting for the throne in the human world. The Buddha said “this is my throne, I sit here every day and recite scripture for human”. However, Hunsong also clarified that “this is my territory, I have governed the world since ancient time” and they argued endlessly. Because the Buddha always practise the Dripping-water ritual, and Lang Muli record for him. When the Buddha stamped on the ground three times, then Lang Muli appeared in front of them she pulled her long hair and the water flowed out continuously like a river. She said, “this is the water dripped by the Buddha, his immeasurable merit has accumulated into a river, so this should be the Buddha’s throne”⁷. Therefore, Dai people always practise the Dripping-water ritual after various activities, it can be seen as a simulation and interpretation of this narrative.

In the history of the Dai ethnic group, there have been various ceremonies, ranging from small-scale ones held by family to large-scale ones held by community or even entire Meng⁸. As a result, countless corresponding “Lìk Ràn” have been created, most of which are kept in temples. These texts contain both Buddhist narrative and local folk narrative, in the Dai poetic form. From the analysis, it can be inferred that this is one of the avenues through which Dai ethnic literati create poetry, representing a way in which Dai poetry is born. It can be said that traditional activities are the context for narrative, and serve as the foundation for the emergence and survival of Dai poetry.

3.2. The sacrifice of rice sprite and the related narrative

The Dai people have a strong tradition of ancestor worship and the belief in the spirituality of all things, and almost every village worship their own ancestor deities regularly during the planting or harvesting seasons, which are called Ling Sheman (worship the village deities) and Ling Shemeng (worship the Meng deities). Meanwhile the Dai people’s belief in the spirituality of all things is also extensive, with a particular emphasis on the rice spirit. The purpose of these worshipping is to ask all of these deities (sprite) to bless the good harvest and the prosperity.

As known to all, the worship of the rice sprite belongs to the category of primitive belief, the Buddhism and primitive religions generally are in competitive relationship, however, in the Dai region, Theravada Buddhism does not exclude the worship of the rice spirit. There is a narrative “Ya Huanhao” that could explain this phenomenon.

Ya Huanhao is the goddess of rice deity (sprite), Ya means grandmother, and Huanhao is the rice sprite. The narrative “Ya Huanhao” has been recorded in the Buddhist scripture form, and people often recite this texts in temple during some rituals. Different versions of the texts are circulated in various places, but the content is mainly similar. For example, the version “Ya Huanhao” circulated in Xishuangbanna Prefecture tells as following:

All beings in the three realms bow and respect to the Buddha, except for an old goddess who refused to bow down or kowtow, and even refused to bend her waist. She stood in front of the Buddha and all other heavenly deities with her head held high, with a proud and angry gaze at them. One heavenly deity scolded her, “Who are you, old woman? How dare you behave so insolently in front of us? Kneel down and confess your sins!”. She replied “I am the rice goddess in the world, you could call me Ya Huanhao. Without rice, both human being and animal cannot survive. The human ancestor long ago declared that rice spirit is supreme, sacred, and come first avant everything else. Since I am the rice goddess, of course I cannot bow down to you” [12, p. 127].

⁷ With the funding of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2008), a field investigation was conducted in the Dehong Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province. Title: Interview with the nun Gong Yulan (female, 58 years old). Location: Duogu village temple, Jiucheng Town, Yingjiang County. Date: February 1, 2008.

⁸ Meng is a geographical concept and an administrative concept, with a smaller scale referring to a locality and a larger scale referring to a kingdom. For example, Mengzhanxi means the Zhanxi town nowadays, but Meng Guozhanbi was an ancient Dai Kingdom.

Because she couldn't argue with the Buddha successfully, Ya Huanhao left in anger and hid in a place called Menglong Bagan⁹, which was said to be a dark world beyond the Earth without any light. After Ya Huanhao left, all of grain crops couldn't grow anymore, and all living beings suffered from famine. People went to the Buddha complaining day and night, so that he had to admit that Ya Huanhao was more important for everything, so he decided to personally go to the dark world to welcome Ya Huanhao back. Only after Ya Huanhao returned did grain crops in the world grow again and bear fruit.

The similar version in Dehong Prefecture is called "Bu Huanhao" which means literally the grandpa rice spirit. The text "Bu Huanhao" is relatively short, consisting of only 16 sheets of xuan-paper, written on both sides, with totally 32 pages [13]. The storytelling is very similar to that of "Ya Huanhao", but the gender of the rice sprite is changed to male, which may reflect a social phenomenon, namely, in the Dehong Dai community, males have achieved a higher social status. There is a short song called "Hamlu Bu Huanhao", its content is roughly as follows:

People hold small bamboo trays with both hands respectfully, they bow their heads and offer sacrifices to the rice sprite Bu Huanhao. He brought all of grain seeds that provide sustenance for humans and animals in the world, and he is the most important one on the world. So that we should offer sacrifice to Bu Huanhao, please enjoy these offerings, and then bless us with health and peace, prevent any disasters, make the world free of pain [2, p. 65].

There is an inter-textual relationship between the narratives about rice sprite and the rituals on rice agriculture. For instance, in Lianghe County of Dehong Prefecture, while practising the summoning ritual for rice sprite, people usually carry a bamboo basket containing 3 bundles of thatch, 3 stones, and 3 blocks of soil. The host would call out the name of Bu-Huanhao or Ya-Huanhao on the way back home from field or riverside²⁰. According to the narrative, the rice sprite left for the dark world, and later Buddha personally went to find her back, but she refused and gave three ladles of rice seeds, the Buddha wrapped the seeds in his kasaya. On his way back, he heard the sound of flowing water in a cave, as he was so thirsty that he put the kasaya on the ground and went to look for the water source. He found all rice seeds had flown away when he came back, because in ancient times, rice had little wings. Some rice seeds flew into the grass, some flew into the forest, and some drilled into the water. Therefore, the ritual performer prepares some props in the basket: 3 bundles of thatch are used to call back the rice sprite which was hidden in the grass, the 3 stones can help the rice sprite climbing up from the bottom of water, and the 3 clods of earth can summon the rice sprite which was hidden in the soil.

Besides, the narrative of the rice seeds blending into the grass, flying into the woods, and diving into the water also reflects the phenomenons of rice losing or damaging in the process of planting and processing. For example, when farmer weed, they may accidentally pull out some rice seedlings; some rice grains may fall on the ground during harvesting, and some rice may be crushed during threshing; some rice may be spilled while cooking, and it is also common for the bottom of the pot to burn. By understanding the narratives of the rice spirit "Ya Huanhao" or "Bu Huanhao", we can better grasp the significance of the summoning ritual.

The narrative about the struggle between rice sprite and the Buddha undoubtedly reflects the conflict between Buddhism and the local belief. The local belief especially worship of the rice sprite which was closely related to the livelihood of human being, so that the Buddhism had to compromise and make some concessions. The Dai intellectual not only created text such as "Ya Huanhao" or "Bu Huanhao", but also recorded and recite these narratives in Buddhist place. According to the scripture,

⁹ Menglong refers to a large place, and Bagan refers to dark mountain. Menglong Bagan can be understood as a large place located in dark mountain.

²⁰ With the funding of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2016), a field investigation was conducted in the Dehong Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province. Audio recording title: Interview with a farmer Qian Youliang, male (he was 68 years old then). Location: Luogang village, Mangdong Town, Lianghe County, Dehong Prefecture. Date: October 9, 2016.

when the Buddha came back from the dark world, “the sentient beings gathered at the Golden Buddha Temple, noisy and crowded, all celebrating the Buddha’s return with the grain seeds. Everyone wanted to listen to the Buddha’s chanting, and they listened attentively as the Buddha narrated the story, the Buddha distributed the grain seeds to the sentient beings. Since then, people have been spreading the story of the Buddha bringing back the grain seeds to the human world”. According to the Dai folklore in Dehong, the heavenly god set a rule for the sentient beings: “If there are delicious foods, you should offer to the Buddha, and then the Ya Huanhao (or Bu Huanhao) should be invited to enjoy the offerings in the temple as the same” [13, p. 202]. This is a direct manifestation of the compromise made by Buddhism towards the traditional belief.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis in the article, the folk narratives of the Dai people are closely related to traditional activities. Not only the ones handed down through generations, but also the newly created “Lik Ran”, are mainly recited during various rituals, they have certain function. People expect to achieve good visions by retelling these narratives or simulating the plots of the narratives. “For the people who hold primitive thinking, mythology and ritual form a unity. Ritual activity is performed in a dramatic form, echoing the related mythical narrative. Priest recite narrative in poetic form, which is essentially a performative act with ritualistic qualities” [14, p. 98]. In brief, narrative interpret ritual, while ritual embody narrative. Narrative and ritual complement each other, reflecting the Dai people’s profound understanding of traditional culture.

However, narrative and ritual do not always coexist simultaneously, but in somehow disjointed state. Some time, the narrative has been passed down without corresponding ritual, and vice versa, where traditional ritual persists, but the associated narrative has vanished or transformed into cultural context (background knowledge) or cognitive context (mental cognition) [15, p. 7]. Narrative help people understand ritual, and ritual serve as the context for the transmission of narrative.

In the case of the Dai ethnic group, whether Buddhist narratives or local narratives, they predominantly exist in the form of Dai poetry. They take both oral and written forms, and during ceremonies, people sing these poems or recite the corresponding texts. As shown in this article, Dai narrative poetry sustain folk activities and traditional custom, while folk ritual, in turn, enable these poetry to be performed, transmitted, and developed.

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