

# Tai Buddhist Practices in Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan, China

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This paper will explore the religious practices of Theravada Buddhists in Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province. The data presented were gathered by the author during a year of fieldwork in a village outside the city of Ruili. Dehong Prefecture is located on the China-Myanmar border. One of the main groups in this area is the Dai (Tāi), who follow Theravada Buddhism. Buddhism was brought into Dehong mainly from Myanmar. Local religious practices have much in common with Buddhist practices in Southeast Asia, sharing the same Pali canon. However, this area differs from other Theravada Buddhist societies in that it has a relatively low number of monks and novices. Although all the villages in Dehong have a monastery, just as in the rest of Southeast Asia, most of the monasteries are uninhabited. One reason for this is the oppression of religion during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. But more important, the custom of ordaining is significantly less widespread in Dehong than in other Theravada Buddhist societies. Therefore, without resident monks, Buddhist rituals in Dehong are performed by virtue of the direct relationship between the lay community and their Buddhist texts, Buddha images, and pagodas. In particular, *holu* (experts in reciting Buddhist texts) and *xij lai* (elderly people who go to the monastery during the rainy season retreat to keep eight precepts on special holy days) play important roles as mediators in this relationship.<sup>1)</sup> It is laypeople, not monks, who play the central role in the practice of Buddhism in Dehong. In this situation, knowledge of Buddhism is transmitted mainly from laypeople to laypeople. Furthermore, a diversity of practices has been produced and reproduced by local Buddhists. These features of Buddhist practices in Dehong are in striking contrast to practices in other Theravada Buddhist societies, and suggest that there is a need to re-examine the models to understand the Theravada Buddhist societies that were developed upon the case of Central Thailand.

**Keywords:** Tāi people, Shan, Theravada Buddhism, Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province, religious practice, lay Buddhists

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1) As a rule, the romanization of the Tai script follows Meng (2007). However, some words have been modified to make them more familiar to the reader.

## I Introduction

This paper will explore the religious practices of Tāi Theravada Buddhists in Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. Dehong Prefecture is located in the border area between China and Myanmar. Ruili, the research site for this study, is located in close proximity to the border. One of the main ethnic groups in Dehong is Tāi, who are called Dai by the Han Chinese and are known as Shan in Myanmar. Tāi people typically live in the basin valley areas, called *məŋ* in the Tāi language. The Chinese side of Məŋ Mau belongs to Ruili city, and the Myanmar side consists of Muhse (Tāi: Mutse) and Nanhkan (Tāi: Lāmxām) Districts. Most of the Tāi people are Theravada Buddhist.

Theravada Buddhists are distributed widely across mainland Southeast Asia—Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam. In these countries, a large number of the ethnic group are Buddhist and most of the men have had the experience of being monks or novices. There are monks inhabiting every monastery, with some monasteries having as many as tens or hundreds of monks.

Local religious practices in Dehong have many features in common with Buddhist practices in Southeast Asia, sharing the same Pali canon. However, Dehong differs from other Theravada Buddhist societies in its relatively low number of monks and novices. Although all the villages in the area have a monastery, as in other parts of Southeast Asia, most of the monasteries are uninhabited.

Furthermore, the basic context of Buddhism in Dehong is different from other Theravada Buddhist societies, where the majority of the population are Buddhist and governments provide support to Buddhism. In contrast, the percentage of Theravada Buddhists in China is less than 0.1 percent. Moreover, China is a socialist country, and the government has been more likely to suppress the religion than support it. When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, freedom of religion was secured by the government. But when religion was oppressed during the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1960, many laypeople and monks escaped to the Myanmar side or disobeyed. When the Cultural Revolution started in 1966, many laypeople and monks escaped to the Myanmar side again. The Red Guards destroyed monasteries and pagodas, and all religious practice was discontinued. After the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, Buddhist practices began to recover, more strongly from 1978 onward.

In this paper, the following questions are explored. First, why are there so few monks and novices in Dehong? Second, given this situation, how do Buddhists in Dehong practice their religion?

*Previous Studies on Theravada Buddhist Societies*

As mentioned above, in Theravada Buddhist societies Buddhists share the same Pali canon. According to the doctrine, an individual's goal is to attain self-salvation by becoming a member of the Sangha, the assembly of monks. Monks—above the age of 20—must obey 227 precepts; while novices—under the age of 20—strictly obey 10 precepts. Laypeople are required to keep five precepts in their everyday lives, and eight precepts on special Buddhist days.

The study of Theravada Buddhist texts had already started during the colonial period, but it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the study of Theravada Buddhist societies started in earnest. During this period, anthropologists started fieldwork in the villages of Thailand and Myanmar. One of the main topics was the relation between Buddhism and the cult of spirits (ex. Spiro 1967; 1970; Tambiah 1970).

Another topic of study has been the relationship between the Sangha and laypeople. Ishii's explanation (1986 [1975]) has been influential. Ishii argues that members of the Sangha and laypeople are separated by the number of precepts they keep. At the same time, the Sangha and laypeople are linked in a dimension of continuity. First, joining the Sangha does not reflect an absolute commitment. An individual can ordain whenever he wishes, and can also go back to secular life when he wants to disrobe. Furthermore, the Sangha and laypeople depend on each other. The Sangha needs donations from laypeople to enable monks' and novices' ascetic life, and laypeople donate to the Sangha to make merit. Almost all men become members of the Sangha at least once in their lives to get merit for themselves or their parents. Merit is believed to have good effects in this life or the next. Monks and novices are usually invited by laypeople who make donations in rituals. Historically, among lay Buddhists it was the kings—being the greatest donors and benefactors—who protected Buddhism. However, the kings also drove out monks, who were regarded as heretics. These practices legitimated the Buddhist kings. In the process of nation building, the Sangha was institutionalized in each country, resulting in the standardization of Buddhist practices.

During the Cold War period, it was very difficult to carry out research in Theravada Buddhist societies except for Thailand. The influence of these studies on Thailand persists to this day in the models of Theravada Buddhist society, and the "Thai model" has been adapted to other social settings in the region.

After the Cold War finished in the 1990s, fieldworkers found that despite the increasing efforts of the nation-state to standardize Buddhist practices, there was still a rich diversity of local practices (ex. Tanabe 1993; Tannenbaum 1995; Hayashi 2003). With the opening of societies around the region and increased access to the field in recent years, scholars have started working in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Yunnan (Hayashi



**Map 1** Yunnan, China

2009). Their studies focus on the relationship between local practices and the institution of Buddhism in each nation-state and suggest that there is a need to re-examine the central Thai models based on a wider social range of local practices.

This paper follows in the analytical vein of these studies, but the focus is on the local practices of Tāi people in Dehong, Yunnan. Although their number is much smaller than in Southeast Asia, Theravada Buddhists exist in Yunnan as well. Almost all of the Theravada Buddhists in Yunnan are Tāi people who live in the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture and Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture (Map 1). During the period of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the religion was discontinued in both areas. Now the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission and the Buddhist Association manage Buddhism in Yunnan under the guidance of the Communist Party (Zhang 1992).

The practices of Buddhism are different between Dehong and Xishuangbanna. The first point of difference is that the number of monks and novices is quite low in Dehong, in contrast to their increasing number in Xishuangbanna, where Buddhists also experienced the Cultural Revolution's impacts on their religion. Even compared with Cambodia, where Buddhist monks were murdered by the Pol Pot regime, the number of monks and novices in Dehong is much lower (Table 1).

**Table 1** Number of Priests and Monasteries

	Monasteries	Monks	Monks per Monastery	Novices	Novices per Monastery	Year
Myanmar	56,839	242,891	4.3	305,875	5.4	2007
Thailand	35,244	258,163	7.3	70,081	1.9	2007
Laos	4,140	8,055	1.9	11,740	2.8	2007
Cambodia	4,237	24,929	5.9	32,421	7.7	2007
Xishuangbanna	577	828	1.4	3,998	6.9	2005
Dehong	602	90	0.1	101	0.2	2007

Source: The data were collected for Myanmar by Ryusuke Kuramoto, Thailand by Yukio Hayashi, Laos by Kayoko Yoshida, and Cambodia by Satoru Kobayashi. Xishuangbanna and Dehong data are from the author's interviews with the Buddhist association in each prefecture.

The second point of difference is the “sect.” As explained above, Theravada Buddhists in Southeast Asia share a relatively homogeneous Pali canon. But the intonation used in their recital of texts, the practice of precepts, and the manner of rituals are a little different. These practices are passed down from master to disciple (Mendelson 1975).

In the case of Xishuangbanna, there is only the Yon sect, which entered via north Thailand from the end of the fifteenth century to the sixteenth century (Baba 1994).<sup>2)</sup> In the process of religious revival after the Cultural Revolution, the sect's practices were restored due to the Yon's relationship with the Sangha in Northern Thailand (Hasegawa 1995). Because of this historical process, we find characteristics of Northern Thai Buddhism in Xishuangbanna as well.

Chinese scholars have pointed out that there are four sects, or *kəŋ* (Burmese: *gaing*), in Dehong (Jiang 1983; Yan 1986; Liu 1990; Zhang 1992). They presume that the *Poitsəŋ*, *Tsoti*, and *Tole* sects came from Burma between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries and the Yon sect came from Northern Thailand in the fifteenth century.<sup>3)</sup> Their studies also point out that while the *Poitsəŋ* and Yon sects are relatively loose in keeping precepts, the *Tole* sect is stricter and the *Tsoti* sect is the strictest of all.

Any sect of Buddhism has the potential to split into an unlimited number of sects. Within these practices, the royal authority or nation-states have decided on the orthodoxy of the practice. For example, the *Poitsəŋ* and *Tsoti* sects were originally based in the center of Myanmar, but after the Burmese king judged them as being heterodoxy they moved to Dehong (Yan 1986; Than Tun 1990). On the other hand, the traditional lords

2) The Yon sect mentioned here is known as Yuan in Thailand.

3) The period in which each sect spread into Dehong is indicated by Chinese scholars. Zhang (1992) presumes that the *Poitsəŋ* sect entered during the eleventh century. But Japanese and Western scholars argue that Theravada Buddhism entered into Dehong in the sixteenth century (Daniels 1998; Iijima 1999).

of each basin in Dehong, *tsǎu fa*, did not exclude any specific sect but rather protected each sect (Hasegawa 2009). This situation allowed various sects to develop their own practices. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the institution of *tsǎu fa* was abolished and the Buddhist Association of Dehong started to manage Buddhism in 1957. But just one year later, the Great Leap Forward started and the Buddhist Association stopped functioning. After the Cultural Revolution, the Buddhism of Dehong was revived through connections with Shan Buddhists on the Myanmar side. As will be described later in this paper, Buddhist practices in Dehong show a strong influence from Shan and Burmese Buddhism.

In contrast to previous studies that assume monks play the main role in Theravada Buddhism, this study describes practices in which laypeople play the central role. Furthermore, while previous studies have tended to describe the practice of Buddhism as unique to each nation-state, this study investigates the dynamics of practice between nation-states by concentrating on the migration of local Buddhists who play a central role in religious practices.

Although there are some interesting aspects of Buddhist practices, not many field surveys were carried out in Dehong because of the difficult conditions. Research on Buddhist practices in Dehong was started by Chinese anthropologists. Jiang Yingliang started field surveys in the late 1930s (Jiang 2003; 2009 [1950]), and then Tian Rukang carried out fieldwork at the beginning of the 1940s. Tian researched the Tǎi village of Mangshi and wrote a monograph dealing with the relationship between rituals and the integration of the village (Tian 2008 [1946]; T'ien 1986). Although this is a representative work of the practice of Buddhism in Dehong, the influence from functionalism is too strong. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the government conducted "social and historical research" in the process of formulating a new national policy (Minzu Wenti Wuzhong Congshu Yunnansheng Bianji Weiyuanhui 1984a; 1984b; Yunnansheng Bianjizu 1987). But later, during the period of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, research on Buddhism in Dehong completely stopped for around 20 years. After the 1990s, studies on religious institutions reappeared (Zhang 1992; Hasegawa 1996; 2009). Some foreign and Chinese scholars also started anthropological fieldwork in the late 1990s (Yos 2001; Chu 2005; Nagatani 2007), focusing mainly on the relationship between Theravada Buddhism and racial consciousness or social classes.

Some of these studies include data of value, but there are problems, too. First, there are few studies based on long-term field research using the local language. Second, the research area is limited to Luxi (Mangshi) city or Yingjiang County despite the multiplicity of practices in each area. Third, the studies analyze these practices from only a Chinese viewpoint.

*Research Methodology*

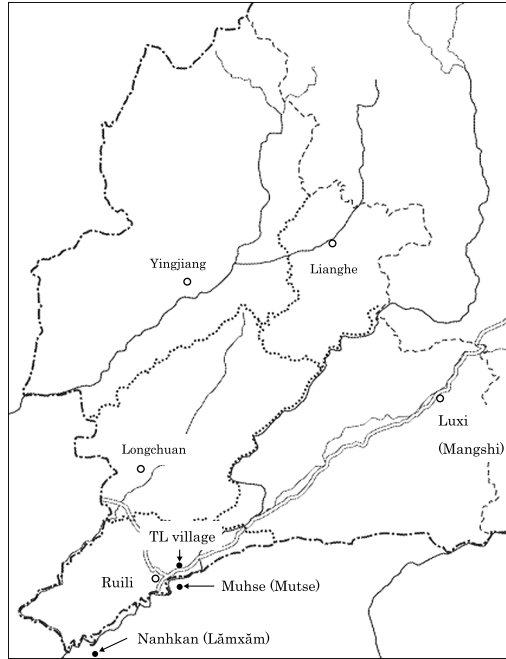
The data presented in this paper were gathered by the author during a yearlong period of fieldwork in a village outside the city of Ruili. The reason for choosing Ruili was that the city is situated on the border with Myanmar and is suitable for a comparative study with the Myanmar side.

The main research was conducted between October 2006 and November 2007, with some preliminary trips in 2005 and supplementary work from 2009 to 2012. The author stayed in the house of a farmer in TL village, in a suburb of Ruili. This is the first field research to be carried out in Ruili. Dehong T'ai was the primary language used in the fieldwork, in an effort to understand Buddhism from the locals' point of view; but the Burmese and Chinese languages were also used at times, depending on the situation.

**II Research Field and Buddhism**

This paper begins with an overview of the research site, Dehong and TL village in Ruili city. The main ethnic groups in Dehong are Han Chinese, T'ai, and Jingpo. T'ai people in Dehong are roughly divided into two groups: T'ai lə, which means "upper T'ai" or "northern T'ai"; and T'ai Mau, whose name is derived from the name of the basin they live in, Məŋ Mau. The former live in the northern part of Dehong, Luxi, Yingjiang, Longchuan, and Lianghe (Map 2). The culture in these areas bears a strong Chinese influence. T'ai lə call the latter group T'ai tau, which means "lower T'ai" or "southern T'ai." But the T'ai Mau do not call themselves T'ai tau, because they do not want to place themselves "lower." They live in Ruili, which faces the border with Myanmar and has a strong Shan or Burmese influence. The inhabitants of Ruili city include T'ai lə, who are immigrants from Luxi, Yingjiang, Longchuan, and Lianghe; but their numbers are less than the T'ai Mau.

There are several differences between the T'ai lə and T'ai Mau. For instance, the females dress differently: T'ai lə females traditionally wear a piece of cloth on the head, and a black skirt; T'ai Mau females do not wear a cloth on the head, and they wear brightly colored skirts made in Myanmar. The houses of T'ai lə are similar to Chinese houses—single-story buildings roofed with tiles and surrounded by walls. The houses of T'ai Mau in Ruili are similar to Shan houses—two-story buildings with tin roofs, and not surrounded by walls. The monasteries of T'ai lə are built in the style of Chinese temples—tile-roofed, with a circular entrance. The monasteries of T'ai Mau in Ruili show Burmese and Shan influences—tin-roofed, without a circular entrance. The above T'ai lə features were seen in the villages of T'ai lə in Ruili until the 1990s, but now the T'ai Mau style is more often observed.



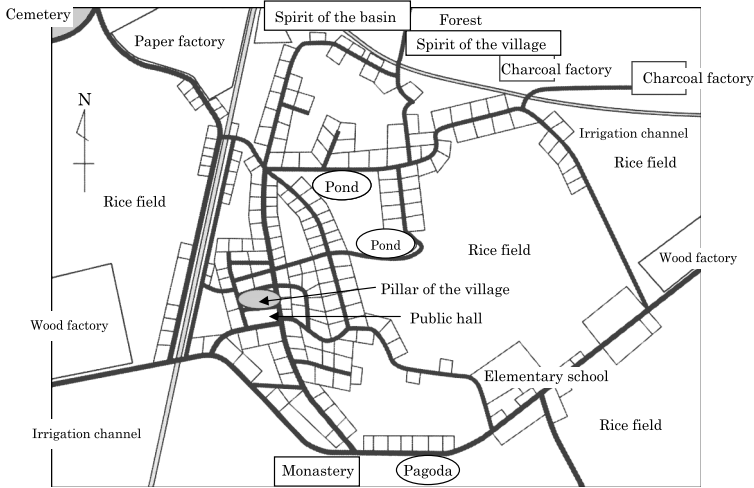
Map 2 Dehong

As explained above, the culture in Dehong has been influenced by Chinese, Shan, and Burmese cultures. One factor in the development of Dehong's unique culture is the existence of the trade route from China to Burma and India. Another factor is that *tsāu fa* were under the influence of Chinese and Burmese dynasties. After the end of the nineteenth century, the Chin dynasty and British colonial rulers started the process of boundary demarcation. As a result, Məṅ Mau was divided and found itself between two countries: China and Myanmar.

The institution of *tsāu fa* was abolished in 1955, after the founding of the People's Republic of China. The Great Leap Forward started in 1958, followed by the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Many villagers who disliked the agricultural collectivization policy fled to Myanmar. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, most of them returned from Myanmar. The growth in border trade between China and Myanmar after the 1990s and the political confusion in Myanmar accelerated the flow of immigrants from Myanmar to China.

TL village is 6 km from the center of Ruiji and 1.5 km from the border, which is basically along the Lām Mau River. There were 970 villagers living in 218 households in 2007. Almost all the villagers were farmers, while some worked in factories near the





Map 3 TL Village

village. The ethnic composition of the village was Tai 92 percent (890 persons), Han Chinese 8 percent (75 persons), and others (1 Jingpo, 1 De'ang, 1 Burmese, and 2 others).<sup>4)</sup>

There is a monastery (*tsɔŋ*) in TL village, as in other villages, except that one of the largest pagodas in Dehong is also located near the monastery. Village rituals are held in the shrine of the village spirit, *məŋ* spirit, and there is a shelf for Buddhist texts in every house (Map 3).

No monks or novices inhabit the monastery in TL village. There used to be monks and novices in the monastery, but the chief monk fled to Myanmar in 1958, the year the Great Leap Forward started. The monastery was destroyed by the Red Guards in 1966, at the start of the Cultural Revolution, and villagers rebuilt it in 1984. At first, villagers stayed in the monastery and took turns managing it. In 1996 two De'ang nuns (*lai xau*) moved from Nanhkan, Shan State, to a building on the premises, and they continue to manage the monastery.

The case of TL village is not unique in Dehong. According to this author's field survey in 2009, of the 118 religious buildings in Ruili—112 monasteries, three pagodas, and three footprints of Buddha—29 (25 percent) were inhabited by monks, novices, or nuns; and 89 (75 percent) were uninhabited.<sup>5)</sup> Of the 160 monks, novices, temple boys,

4) In Myanmar, Jingpo is called Kachin and De'ang is called Palaung.

5) This number excludes the monasteries in Wanding town.

**Table 2** Buildings Inhabited by Monks, Novices, Temple Boys, and Nuns in Ruili City (August 2009)

Village	Type	Sect	Monks Total	From China	From Myanmar	Novices Total	From China	From Myanmar	Temple Boys Total	From China	From Myanmar	Nuns Total	From China	From Myanmar
VO	Monastery	Pòitsəŋ	1	0	1	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
VT	Monastery	Pòitsəŋ	3	1	2	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
PT	Monastery	Tole	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
ML	Lay house	Pòitsəŋ	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
TL	Monastery	Tole	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	4
TL	Pagoda		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
VM	Monastery	Tole	1	0	1	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
TK	Monastery	Tole	4	0	4	5	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
TN	Monastery	Tole	2	0	2	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
LA	Monastery	Tole	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
LN	Monastery	Tole	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
LH	Monastery	Tole	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
LH	Pagoda		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
TH	Monastery	Pòitsəŋ	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
VL	Monastery		1	0	1	24	2	22	19	9	10	0	0	0
HS	Monastery	Tole	5	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TT	Monastery	Pòitsəŋ	4	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LS	Monastery	Tole	4	0	4	5	1	4	0	0	0	3	0	3
TX	Monastery	Tole	2	2	0	5	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
TO	Monastery	Tole	1	1	0	6	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
OL	Monastery	Tole	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
LX	Monastery	Tole	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
TS	Monastery	Pòitsəŋ	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
NT	Monastery	Tole	3	0	3	12	1	11	0	0	0	0	0	0
MA	Monastery	Tole	1	0	1	3	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	1
LT	Monastery	Pòitsəŋ	1	1	0	2	1	1	3	2	1	0	0	0
TS	Monastery	Tole	1	0	1	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
LM	Monastery	Tole	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
TT	Footprint of the Buddha		1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total			38	8	30	78	11	67	24	12	12	20	4	16

Notes: The monastery of VT village used to be affiliated with the Yon sect. Now the abbot belongs to the Pòitsəŋ sect.

The nun of ML village does not live in the monastery but lives in the house of her son.

Pagodas and footprints of the Buddha do not belong to a sect. VL monastery does not belong to a sect because it was built by the Buddhist Association.

and nuns in Ruili, 35 (22 percent) were from China and 125 (78 percent) from Myanmar (Table 2). These figures raise the question of why the number of monks and novices is so much lower in Dehong than in other Theravada Buddhist societies. To answer this question we must look at men who are ordained as well as the villagers who accept them.

### III Explaining the Small Number of Monks and Novices in Dehong

#### *Who Is Ordained in Dehong?*

The Chinese government in Dehong prefecture provides several reasons for the small number of novices and monks, largely related to policy impacts—the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the one-child policy in 1979, and the compulsory education law in 1986. After the institution of the one-child policy in 1979, Tāi people have been allowed to have only two children. The law of compulsory education for nine years was enacted in 1986. These policies may have had some influence in reducing the number of young people ordained as novices. But some questions remain. If this explanation is correct, is it safe to conclude that the number of monks and novices is greater now than prior to the Great Leap Forward? Furthermore, why is the number of monks and novices in Xishuangbanna so much greater than in Dehong despite the application of the same policies?

To answer the first question, the data in Table 3 is helpful. This table shows the change in the number of monks and novices in Dehong. The number of monks and novices prior to the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution was higher than it is now, but it was still much lower than in other Theravada Buddhist societies. Jiang Yingliang, who carried out fieldwork at the end of the 1930s, described the reasons given by novices for their decision to ordain. First, in many cases the parents had died and there was no one to look after the boys. Second, the parents were poor and did not have enough money to bring up their sons. Finally, a fortune-teller had told the young men to become novices (Jiang 2003, 368). This author's interviews with elderly villagers confirmed the historical validity of these explanations.

Nowadays there are monks and novices in Dehong. Why were these men ordained? One novice (13 years old) who was born in Muhse, Shan State, but became a novice in

**Table 3** Number of Monasteries and Priests in Dehong

	Monasteries	Monks	Monks per Monastery	Novices	Novices per Monastery	Nuns	Nuns per Monastery
1956 (Before the Great Leap Forward)	632	236	0.4	139	0.2	137	0.2
1966 (Before the Cultural Revolution)	644	171	0.3	120	0.2	47	0.1
1985 (After the Cultural Revolution)	445	42	0.1	44	0.1	41	0.1
1989	551	54	0.1	143	0.3	39	0.1
2007	602	90	0.1	101	0.2	41	0.1

Source: Data from 1956 to 1989 are from Zhang (1992, 125–130).

The data for 2007 are based on a survey of the Buddhist Association in Dehong.

Ruili said he wanted “to study Chinese language in a monastery on the Chinese side.” His reason for wanting to study Chinese was that China’s economy was improving and he would be able to use his Chinese language ability after disrobing. Another novice (15 years old) who was born in Lashio and became a novice in Ruili spoke of his intention “to evade conscription by the Myanmar Army or the Shan State Army.” Because the wars between the Myanmar Army, the Shan State Army, and the Kachin Independence Army have continued, each army conscripts young men into service. Becoming a novice makes it possible for young men to escape that fate. Another monk (20 years old) who was born on the Chinese side explained, “Because I am physically handicapped.” The precepts do not permit a handicapped person to become a monk, but this restriction is not applied to monks in Dehong. Other novices (12 years old) explained their family problems, for instance, “After my father died, my mother had to work and couldn’t bring me up.” According to this author’s interviews, the main factor in ordination was difficulties in secular life.

The above reasons for becoming novices are common in other Buddhist societies. But the difference is that almost every man has the experience of becoming a monk or novice in other Theravada Buddhist societies. A historian (68 years old) who was familiar with the cultures of both Ruili and Xishuangbanna explained that the reason the number of monks and novices in Xishuangbanna increased again after the Cultural Revolution was that “they [people in Xishuangbanna] have the idea that every boy should become a novice. However, this idea didn’t exist in Dehong, even before the Cultural Revolution.” Previous studies state that it is believed in Xishuangbanna that boys should become novices in order to be considered adults (Zhongyang Dangxiao Minzu Zongjiao Lilunshi 1999, 453–454). From this evidence, we see that to become a novice is a kind of rite of passage in Xishuangbanna, as in other Buddhist societies. In Myanmar, for example, it is normal for parents to have their sons ordained as novices so that they acquire an understanding of moral standards in addition to making merit. Parents also make merit from having their sons ordained as novices.

In Dehong, however, one hardly hears of parents having their sons ordained in order to gain merit for the child or themselves. By no means does this signal that Buddhists of Dehong are not enthusiastic about making merit. For example, people actively maintain the cleanliness of monasteries even if there are no ordained clergy resident. They also participate enthusiastically in Buddhist rituals in order to accumulate merit. The basic thinking in Dehong regarding the accumulation of merit is quite different from other Theravada societies.

### *The Villagers' Reasons*

Though there are few monks in Dehong, if the villagers require the services of a monk they can invite one from the Myanmar side. But why didn't the TL villagers invite monks after the Cultural Revolution? When TL villagers were asked this question, they gave responses such as the following: "To donate food to the monk every day is troublesome, *jap tsau*. It is an additional expense to donate things for the monk's everyday use as well. Nuns, *laixau*, are better than monks because they don't cost so much money and they cook by themselves." Because there is no custom in Dehong to ask for alms, the villagers must take turns bringing food for monks or share the food expenses. This makes the TL villagers view monks as a burden. Furthermore, some head monks of the monastery in Ruili have disrobed and married: "Even if we invite young monks to the monastery, they disrobe and marry using the donations of the villagers," said one villager. Another villager said, "Monks over 50 years old don't disrobe because their minds become calm. But monks over 50 years old are difficult to invite. Therefore, we had better not invite monks." Because of these reasons, TL villagers do not invite monks to live permanently in the monastery. This means that merit is made in different ways from other Theravada Buddhist societies.

The next question is whether or not the Dehong practices described above were the same before the Cultural Revolution. As will be explained later, practices vary by village; thus, this question will be explored focusing on the case of TL village.

Mr. J (75 years old), who was a novice from 1939 to 1949 in the TL village monastery, related his story. The abbot of TL village was from KL village in Nanhkan, because both villages belong to the Tole sect. But a few years later he went back to KL village due to disease, and he subsequently died there. Then one monk was invited from HS village in Ruili city, but he also died in TL village. After that, five novices—three of whom were invited from HS village and two of whom were natives of TL village—lived in the monastery.

Mr. Y (64 years old), who was a novice from 1950 to 1958 in the TL village monastery, recalled that when he became a novice there was no abbot in TL village. Therefore, TL villagers asked the abbot of TT village to send an abbot, since he had the longest experience as a monk. The abbot granted the villagers' request, and he sent Rev. S from TT to TL village. Rev. S had migrated from Məŋ Kəŋ in Shan State to TT village, where he had become a teacher in the monastery. In addition, there were four novices from TL village and two novices from other villages.

This evidence shows that there were monks and novices in TL village before the Great Leap Forward, but the number of novices was low. Because most novices disrobe before they can become abbots, it was difficult to find another abbot. The villagers asked

the most senior monk of the same sect (*kəŋ*) when an abbot was absent.

However, as has been noted, TL villagers do not want to invite abbots nowadays. Why have they changed their minds? An elderly villager (75 years old) explained, “Many villagers hoped to invite a monk before the Cultural Revolution, but the young generation born during or after the Cultural Revolution prefer not to invite monks.”

This indicates that before the Great Leap Forward, TL village had practices similar to those of other Theravada Buddhist societies in that it needed monks and novices. The point of difference is that few boys in TL village became novices even before the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, TL villagers had to invite an abbot from another monastery of the same sect if the abbot was absent. But the interruption of the practice for around 20 years took away TL villagers’ enthusiasm to invite abbots.

#### IV Theravada Buddhism Led by Laypeople

How, then, do Tai Buddhists in TL village practice their religion? This section deals with the places where village rituals are performed and the people who play an important role in village rituals.

##### *The Places*

Every house in TL village has a shelf for Buddhist texts (*seŋ tala*). Unlike in other Buddhist societies, there is no Buddha statue on the shelf. In its stead are three or five flowers, the Buddhist texts (*tala*), and paintings of the Buddha. It is believed that Buddha statues should be kept in the monastery, because deeds that are inappropriate in front of the Buddha—such as sexual intercourse—are carried out in laypeople’s homes. The *tala* guard the family if they are kept in the *seŋ tala*. When there is a wedding, housewarming ceremony, funeral, or other auspicious event, family members offer *xău sɔm* (food offerings) to the *seŋ tala*. They offer *xău voi* (food distribution) to the spirits of ancestors as well. Through these good deeds, they make merit (*kuso*) and seek good results (*atso*). During the period of the Cultural Revolution, all the *talas* were burned. Because they were transcribed again after the Cultural Revolution, there is now at least one *tala* in every house.

The monastery is at the end of the village. The Tai word for monastery, *tsɔŋ*, is derived from the Burmese *kyaung*. The Buddha statue in the monastery was donated by TL villagers and built by a sculptor of Buddhist images in Nanhkan. The monastery is the most important place where most collective rituals are held. The main purpose of village rituals is to make offerings to the Buddha statue, *phala*, in the monastery in order

to make merit for the whole village.

There is a pagoda (*kəŋmu*) on the hill next to the monastery. The derivation of the word *kəŋmu* is from the Burmese *kaung hmu*, which means “good deed.” It is not clear in which year the pagoda was built, but it was destroyed by the Red Guards in 1967—during the period of the Cultural Revolution—and rebuilt with funds from the Chinese government and the attendance of Shan monks from the Myanmar side in 1983. One nun from Mangshi moved to the pagoda premises in 1991 and has lived there since. The committee of the pagoda in Mengmao town also manages the TL village pagoda. On important Buddhist occasions—the festival of the fourth month (*pəi lən si*), the Water Festival (*pəi sən lām*), the end of the Buddhist holy three months (*ək va*), and so on—people from other villages come to the pagoda and make offerings, because this pagoda is related to the whole Məŋ Mau.

Below the hill outside TL village there is a shrine for the guardian spirit of the village (*tsǎu man*) and spirit of the basin (*tsǎu məŋ*). The spirit of TL village is that of a De’ang woman who first came to this village. The shrine existed before the Cultural Revolution, but the Red Guards destroyed it. The villagers rebuilt it in 1982. The spirit of the basin was a Yaŋ (Karen) soldier who lived in TL village but died in the early 1950s. Like most other villages, TL village did not have a *tsǎu məŋ*—but the shrine was built nonetheless in 1982.

Spirits are divided into two types: good spirits (*phi li phi ŋam*) and bad spirits (*phi hai*). The good spirits are the spirits of the village, basin, and ancestors. They are addressed with the honorific title *tsǎu*. By making offerings to the good spirits, people can ensure that the spirits will guard (*kum*) them. On the other hand, bad spirits are the spirits of bad death. It is believed that if they enter the body, they will bring disease or some other misfortune.

### *The People*

Table 4 shows the attendees of rituals in TL village during the year the current research was conducted. As this table shows, the *holu* is indispensable in village rituals. The *holu* is the lay expert who recites Buddhist texts when rituals are held. *Ho* means “leader,” and *lu* means “donation.” In Ruili every monastery has one *holu*, and all of them are men.<sup>6)</sup> In 2009, the *holu* of TL village lived in another village but came to TL village when rituals were held. Eighty-six percent of *holu* in Ruili were from other villages. The main role of the *holu* is to recite Buddhist texts when the villagers make an offering. When there is a ceremony, *holu* lead the villagers in reciting the five or eight precepts to the

6) Some villages in other areas of Dehong have multiple *holu*.

**Table 4** Rituals Carried Out in TL Village (October 2006–November 2007)

&lt;Annual Rituals&gt;

Rituals participated in by the whole village

Name of Ritual	Dates		Place	Attendees								
	Date of Observation	Tai Calendar in Ruili		Monk, Novice	<i>Laixau</i>	<i>Holu</i>	<i>Sämmathi</i>	<i>Xiy lai</i>	<i>Polum</i>	<i>Melum</i>	<i>Mau</i>	<i>Sau</i>
<i>Sot sum lo</i>												
Making a pagoda of wood and burning it	Jan. 31, 2007	3/14	Open space near pagoda			○	○	○	○			
<i>Poi lan si</i>												
Festival of fourth month	Feb. 28, 2007–Mar. 2, 2007	4/13–4/15	Pagoda	○		○	○	○				
<i>Poi son läm</i>												
Water Festival	Apr. 13, 2007–Apr. 17, 2007	5/27–6/2	Monastery, pagoda, and park			○	○	○	○	○	○	○
<i>Jaþ man</i>												
	May 22, 2007	7/7	Pillar of the village	○		○	○	○	○	○		
<i>Me man</i>									○			
<i>Xäu va</i>												
Entering the period of Buddhist Lent	July 29, 2007	8/15	Monastery and pagoda		○	○	○	○				
<i>Løn tsɔŋ</i>												
Old people stay in the monastery		Buddhist days during Lent period (13 times)	Monastery and pagoda		○	○	○	○				
<i>Soŋ pen</i>												
Sending food to other monasteries		One day during Buddhist Lent	Monasteries in other villages			○	○	○	○	○		
<i>Kaŋ va tsa le</i>												
Middle of Buddhist Lent	Sept. 26, 2007	10/15	Monastery and pagoda		○	○	○	○				
<i>ɔk va</i>												
End of Buddhist Lent period	Oct. 26, 2007	11/15	Monastery and pagoda		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
<i>Poi sau sam</i>												
Festival of 23 <sup>rd</sup> day	Nov. 3, 2007	11/23	Pagodas			○	○	○	○	○		
<i>Poi kan thin</i>												
Donation of <i>kathina</i> robes to Buddha statue	Nov. 4, 2006	12/15	Monastery and pagoda			○	○	○				



Table 4-Continued

<Annual Rituals>  
Rituals participated in by the whole village

Name of Ritual	Dates		Place	Attendees								
	Date of Observation	Tai Calendar in Ruili		Monk, Novice	Laixau	Holu	Sāmmathi	Xiy lai	Polum	Melum	Mau	Sau
Rituals carried out separately												
<i>Lən si</i>	Feb. 18, 2007	4/3	Lay house				○	○	○	○	○	○
Chinese New Year												
<i>Xun loj</i>	Apr. 5, 2007	5/19	Cemetery				○	○	○	○	○	○
Visiting ancestors' graves												

<Irregular Rituals>  
Rituals participated in by the whole village

<i>Xun koj faj mau</i>	Nov. 6, 2007	11/26	Public hall	○			○	○	○	○	○	○
Ceremony of new public hall												

Rituals carried out separately

<i>Xun hən mau</i>	One day	Lay house			○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ceremony of new house												
<i>Xək</i>	One day	Lay house and public hall			○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Wedding ceremony												
<i>Ma sa</i>	3-7 days after death	Lay house, cemetery, monastery			○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Funeral												
<i>Hen lu taj to</i>	One day during the period of Buddhist Lent	Lay house, monastery			○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Setting up a streamer for a dead person												
<i>Xāu a sak</i>	One day	Lay house or monastery			△	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Number of items donated depends on age												
<i>Tso pak pet</i>	One day	Lay house or monastery			○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Donation of 108 things												
<i>Səm mu tsa</i>	One day	Lay house or monastery			○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Donation when misfortune has occurred												
<i>Jap hən</i>	One day	Lay house	○		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Exorcism of evil spirits from the house												

Source: Author's surveys from 2006 to 2007.

Buddha statue in the monastery. In the case of a wedding ceremony, housewarming ceremony, funeral, or incident of misfortune, *holu* recite in front of the *sey tala* in each house. In the afternoon on the days of important ceremonies—such as the Water Festival, the festival to donate kathina robes (*p̄ci kan thin*), and the special holy days (*van sin*) during the rainy season retreat (*va*)—*holu* recite *tala* for laypeople. The content of *tala* recited by the *holu* consists of stories of the Buddha's past lives (*tsat to*), precepts that should be upheld by Buddhists, the proper ways of making offerings, and the proper ways to live as *xij lai*. These are recited first in short Pali verses, followed by Tai translation delivered in storytelling style, so as to make the content easily accessible to the people. People get an understanding of the Dhamma (*dānma*) and also gain merit from listening to these recitations. The recitation of texts is not done to exorcise evil spirits. When there are no rituals, *holu* copy the *tala* as requested by villagers. After *holu* recite the *tala* in the monastery, the villagers keep the actual texts in the *sey tala*. Most *holu* are farmers, but some of them have another job, for example, typing invitation letters in Tai.

*Xij lai* are the elderly people who stay in the monastery during the rainy season retreat to keep the eight precepts on special holy days. *Xij* are old men, and *lai* are old women. There were 102 *xij lai* (16 *xij* and 86 *lai*) who went to the TL village monastery in 2007. The purpose was to make merit (*kuso*) and prevent suffering (*tuk xa*) in the next life. After the youngest son or daughter has married and parents no longer need to worry about housework, at around the age of 50, these people go to the monastery. The villagers invite *xij lai* when they carry out rituals.

The representative of the old people is the *sāmmathi*. The derivation of *sāmmathi* is the Pali *samādhī* or Burmese *thamadi*. Each village has one or two *sāmmathi*, all of whom are men. In the case of TL village, two *sāmmathi* are elected by village elders and approved at a village meeting. They manage the equipment and money of the monastery. When they are invited to rituals in other villages, they go and make donations as representatives of the village.

Women lay practitioners who live on the premises of a monastery or pagoda are called *laixau*—or *lukxau* if they are young. The name *xau*, meaning “white,” has its origin in the white clothing nuns wore in the past. Nowadays nuns in TL village wear pink clothing, which is the same as the style in Myanmar. During the time of the study, four women living as nuns in the monastery of TL village were from Myanmar. They shaved their heads and stayed on the monastery premises, but they were institutionally laypeople. They cleaned the monastery, and donated food in the morning and flowers in the afternoon to the Buddha statue. In addition, they recited Buddhist texts at villagers' funerals.

As Table 4 shows, during this author's year of fieldwork monks and novices were

invited only four times. Monks are invited every year at the time of *yap man*, the ritual to exorcise bad spirits, or *phi*. Two other times were to exorcise bad spirits from a house where a family member was sick, and from the public hall in the village. Monks and novices do exorcise evil spirits by reciting texts of protection (*palit*) and other chants like *kāmpava* in Pali, but the people listening to the recitations do not understand the meaning. This is one of the major differences between *holu* recitations and monks' recitation of texts. The fourth occasion of monks and novices being invited was during the festival of the fourth month, *pōi lən si*, when monks attend the pagoda to receive donations. They are not invited by the villagers, but by the committee managing the pagoda. Some villagers go to the monastery of other villages to see monks who do fortune-telling, exorcise bad spirits, give advice about business, and heal disease. Villagers can invite them from other villages as needed. Thus, it is not necessary for monks to live in the monastery.

Even for funerals, it is enough for the villagers if *holu* recite the Buddhist texts. Like in other local Theravada Buddhist societies, the kathina robe festival (*pōi kan thin*) does exist, but the main purpose of the festival in Dehong is to put robes on the Buddha images in the temples on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the Tāi calendar (about November of the Gregorian calendar). This is done because from this time on the weather in Dehong gets very cold, particularly in the mornings and evenings. The robes are left on until the April Water Festival (*pōi sən lām*). In some villages kathina robes are presented to monks, but this is rather rare. During the author's fieldwork at the end of the rainy season retreat in 2006, only 6 monasteries of the 118 in Ruili invited monks for the donation of kathina robes.

An old man (75 years old) told me, "The most important thing for the Buddhist is *phala*, the Buddha, because monks are also disciples of *phala*." He said that the Buddha relics in pagodas and the words of the Buddha written in the Buddhist texts were more important than monks. Therefore, the absence of the Buddha's disciples, the monks comprising the Sangha, is not problematic. This means that it is laypeople, not monks, who play the central role in the practice of Buddhism in Dehong.

There are certain places and persons that are important in the rituals of TL village. People pray before the texts (*tala*), recording the Buddha's teachings in their everyday practice. The main purpose of village rituals is to make offerings to the Buddha images in the monastery, which are direct symbols of the Buddha (*phala*). When important rituals are held, the villagers also go to pagoda (*kəŋmu*) housing Buddhist relics to make offerings. In these practices, *holu* and *xij lai* play an important role as mediators between the lay community and the sacred objects related to *phala*.

The common understanding of Buddhism is that the Triple Gem, consisting of the *buddha*, *dhamma*, and *sangha*, is the central object of people's respect. However, in

Dehong it can be said that the people place most importance on a “Double Gem” consisting of *buddha* and *dhamma*.

## V *Holu* and Knowledge of Buddhism

As described above, *holu*—lay experts in reciting Buddhist texts—play an important role in village rituals. Previous studies have found lay experts in other Theravada Buddhist societies that resemble *holu*, for example, *phram* and *mo tham* in Northeastern Thailand, and *pho khru* in Northern Thailand (Tambiah 1970; Swearer 1976; Hayashi 2003). Tambiah (1970), in his research on Northeastern Thailand, pointed out how lay brahmans (*phram*) participated in ceremonies to strengthen people’s spirit. On the other hand, Hayashi (2003) has mentioned *mo tham*, who exorcise evil spirits. The main difference between these individuals and *holu* is that most of the *holu* do not take part in exorcisms or spirit-calling ceremonies. There are some cases of *holu* who also perform the function of *sala*, lay practitioners specializing in spirit exorcism. But *holu* are basically specialists in the recitation of texts, with their main function being to represent the lay community in their merit-making activities.

Tambiah (1970) also pointed out that *phram* acquire literacy and knowledge of Buddhism in the monastery as novices or monks. After they have disrobed, they play an important role in Buddhist practices. How do the *holu* in Dehong acquire and transmit their knowledge of Buddhism? This question will be explored by comparing three cases of *holu* in TL village and pointing out the elements of change and continuity in their practice.

### *Three Cases of Holu in TL Village*

The previous *holu* of TL village, Mr. J (75 years old), recalled: “Before the Great Leap Forward, more people in the village could become *holu* than now, because more people had the knowledge of reciting Buddhist texts compared to now. If there was not a suitable person to become a *holu* in the village, the villagers invited someone from another village.” As will be explained later, even if a man has been a novice or monk, he cannot become a *holu* if he does not have a good voice for reciting Buddhist texts.

After the Cultural Revolution, Mr. J became a *holu* in TL village. Following is his personal story, focusing on his career as a ritual practitioner. Mr. J was born in TL village in 1932. When he was seven years old, he became a novice in TL monastery to study the Burmese scriptures, old Dehong Tai scriptures (*lik tho ηɔk*), and new Dehong Tai scriptures (*lik to jau*). When he was 17 years old, he disrobed and got married in TL

village. After the Cultural Revolution, TL monastery was rebuilt in 1984. At the time, Mr. J was 52 years old. Because he had the experience of being a novice and his recitation voice was good, the villagers let him become a *holu*. He quit the practice in 1995 because his eyesight deteriorated.

The *holu* of TL village during the period of fieldwork was Mr. S (40 years old). Mr. S was born in 1967 in LX village in Muhse District, Shan State. He was the sixth of 13 children. The parents could not afford to bring him up because they had so many children. Therefore, he was sent to the monastery as a monastery boy (*kappi*) when he was nine years old. He studied the Shan scriptures and basic Buddhist scriptures, but his family did not have enough money to hold a novice initiation ceremony for him. After he went back to his home at the age of 13, he helped his family as a farmer. When he was 21 years old, he became the *holu* of LX village at the suggestion of the villagers. Because he did not know how to recite *tala*, he listened to the recitations of other *holu* and learned from them. In 1990 he was invited to KL village, on the Chinese side, as the previous *holu* had retired. In 1992 he married a woman who lived in KL village and took Chinese nationality. But he quit being the *holu* of KL village in 1995 because his relationship with the villagers had soured. At that time, the TL villagers invited him as a *holu* because the previous *holu* had retired. During the period of fieldwork, he lived in KL village and came to TL village when there was a Buddhist ritual.

TL village is an especially common case after the Great Leap Forward. This author's research in 2009 shows that out of the 112 *holu* in Ruili city, 80 (71 percent) were natives of the Myanmar side; there were only 32 (29 percent) *holu* from the Chinese side. Of the 112 *holu*, 96 (86 percent) were from other villages. Old people who have the ability to recite Buddhist texts were not able to continue as *holu* because of their advanced age. Replacing the old generation were young men who had had the experience of being monks and novices in Myanmar and then moved to the Chinese side. Especially after the 1990s, the economy has grown on the Chinese side, but conflict has continued and the economy is poor on the Myanmar side. Therefore, there has been an increase in the number of *holu* wanting to move to the Chinese side. The movement of *holu* is influenced by the dynamics of this area.

### *Change and Continuity of Practices*

The migration of *holu* from the Myanmar side has changed the practices that involve Buddhist texts. Firstly, the Tāi phrases recited in rituals have been changed to Shan style. The phrases recited in the Pali language are basically the same in every Theravada Buddhist society, but the phrases in the local language are different in each area. Shan phrases were standardized in 1993 at the Shan monks' conference in Muhse. New *holu*

such as Mr. S learned the standardized forms; Mr. S brought them to TL village when he became *holu* in 1995. Moreover, the script of *tala* also changed from the old Dehong script to the Shan script because Mr. S was used to transcribing and reciting the Shan script.

On the other hand, the way of reciting Buddhist texts did not change. When Mr. S became *holu* of TL village, he recited Buddhist texts using Shan intonation (*sey kalon pen*).<sup>7</sup> But later he learned the intonation of TL village (*sey Thuṅ Mau*)<sup>8</sup> and still uses this for his recitations. Why did the script of *tala* change, while the way of reciting did not?

To analyze these phenomena, we must understand the practices in which they occur. For the villagers, *tala* is not something to read but something to listen to or to recite in prayer. Moreover, most of the villagers cannot read the Shan script themselves, but they believe that if there is a *tala* in the *sey tala* of each house, the household will be safe and sound. Similar practices are seen with regard to the tattoo. Many Tāi men tattoo Buddhist scriptures (*gatha* and *añ*) on their legs or arms to protect themselves from bad spirits (*phi*). Monks also use Buddhist scriptures when they exorcise evil spirits. These scripts are unintelligible to villagers, but the latter believe that scripts they cannot understand have more sacred power.

On the other hand, why did Mr. S have to change his way of reciting? When asked about his reasons, he replied, “TL villagers were not used to the *sey kalon pen* and requested me to recite using *sey Thuṅ Mau*.” Listening to the recitation of *tala* by *holu* is an important practice in making merit for TL villagers. The Buddhism of TL villagers is woven into the story and recited melodiously by *holu*. Except for Mr. J, only three men have had the experience of being novices in TL village. They know the Shan scripts and how to recite them, but they cannot become *holu* because their voices are not good enough. This implies that the voice for reciting Buddhist texts is very important for the practices in Dehong. And important knowledge about Buddhism, such as the way of reciting Buddhist texts is not transmitted from monks to laypeople, but rather from laypeople to laypeople.

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7) *Seṅ* means “sound,” *kalon* means “phoenix,” and *pen* means “fly.” *Seṅ kalon pen* means a sound resembling that of a phoenix flying, with large rises and falls in tone.

8) *Thuṅ Mau* refers to the basin, including both the Chinese side and the Myanmar side. The Myanmar side also used *sey Thuṅ Mau* before, but they changed to *sey kalon pen*.

## VI Diversity in Buddhist Practices

Can the case of TL village, described above, be applied to other villages in Ruili city? What differences are there with the Myanmar side of Məṅ Mau? These questions will be explored in this section.

### *Diversity in Relationships with Monks*

As stated above, the most important practice for making merit in TL village is to make offerings to the Buddha statue, pagoda, and *sey tala*, things that are directly related to the Buddha. If the other villages had the same practices as TL village, one would not expect to find monks and novices in Ruili. But, as noted above, 19 of the 118 monasteries in Ruili have needed the services of monks and novices. Why do these villages invite monks and novices?

A 52-year-old man in MA village explained, “When there are funerals or rituals for building new houses, we need to invite a monk. It is better to have a monk in our own monastery than to invite one from other monasteries when there is a ritual.” A man (67 years old) from TX village said, “To donate food to the monks is a duty of laypeople. We don’t mind taking turns to donate food one time every one or two months.” In LP village, a monk (25 years old) explained the reason he was invited: “When many villagers and domestic animals died one after the other in the village, the villagers were very afraid and invited a monk from the Myanmar side. After he recited the Buddhist texts and exorcised the evil spirits, *phi hai*, the village became peaceful and quiet. Therefore, the villagers asked the monk to reside in the village and the monk agreed to it.” In the case of VT village, a man (67 years old) explained, “If our village has some monks, we can show the wealth of the village and save face (*mi la ta*).”

As these examples show, there are various reasons for inviting monks to the village monastery. After villagers reach the decision to invite a monk, they get permission from the Buddhist Association, the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission in Ruili city, and then invite the monk from the monastery in Myanmar. The TL villagers did not report this unanimously, but some of them went to the monastery where the monks lived and donated many times. This shows that there is a large diversity of practices, depending on each village or individual.

### *Diversity of Practices of Precepts*

Diversity can be seen in the practice of the precepts (*sin*), and there are some special practices in Dehong.

Buddhists in Myanmar generally keep precepts as detailed below. Laypeople keep

five precepts (Burmese: *thila*) every day and eight precepts on Buddhist days (Burmese: *upoknei*). Novices keep 10 precepts, and monks keep 227 precepts (Burmese: *wini*) (Iikuni 2010, 12). This is almost the same as in other Theravada Buddhist societies. Temple boys (Burmese: *kyauingtha*) do not wear robes until after the ceremony to become novices (Burmese: *shinpyu pwe*). They cannot take off the robes before they return to secular life, because the robes indicate their status as monks and novices.

In Dehong, however, something very different is observed. Sometimes novices (*san*) take off their robes and temple boys (*kappi*) wear robes. At first, the boys who enter a monastery become temple boys. Temple boys do not wear robes, and they keep five or eight precepts at ordinary times. But during village rituals, they wear robes and keep 10 precepts. After they attend the ceremony (*pai xam san*), they become novices. But because this ceremony is held only once every few years, many boys join in. As mentioned earlier, because there are so few boys who want to become novices, some novices must wait a few years until the next ceremony. After they become novices, they wear robes and keep 10 precepts during normal times. But when they go to buy something in the city, attend a festival (*pai*), or return to their hometown, they are allowed to take off their robes if they obtain permission from the abbot. When they take off the robes they keep the five precepts, like temple boys. After they have undergone the ordination ceremony to become monks (*pai xam mon*), they cannot take off their robes at any time.

In short, the common practice in Myanmar and Dehong is that temple boys keep 5 or 8 precepts as laypeople, and novices keep 10 precepts. But novices in Myanmar cannot take off their robes before they return to secular life, because the boundary between novices and temple boys is clear. On the other hand, in Dehong the boundary between temple boys and novices is obscure. Novices are not very clearly distinguished from laypeople but come and go, in the space between the laypeople and the Sangha. After becoming a monk, an individual is a regular member of the Sangha and distinguished from laypeople. Except for Dehong, this type of practice is not seen in Theravada Buddhist societies.

In Ruili we also find instances where the number of precepts kept is different. Four cases are briefly presented below.

Rev. N of HS monastery (33 years old, Tole sect) explained, “Laypeople keep 5 or 8 precepts, novices keep 10 precepts, and monks keep 227 precepts.” This is almost the same as other Theravada Buddhist societies.

But Rev. V of LT monastery (39 years old, Poitsṅ sect) said, “Novices keep 10 precepts, but there were 108 precepts originally. Monks also keep 10 precepts, but there were 528 precepts originally.” The number of precepts is more than Rev. N specified.



On the other hand, Rev. V mentioned, “Before, monks were allowed to drink, smoke opium, and have dinner, though these practices are reduced now.”

Mr. S (43 years old), the *holu* of TP village, Tsoti sect, said, “Laypeople keep 5 or 8 precepts, novices keep 10 precepts, and monks keep 4 precepts.” The reason laypeople keep more precepts than monks is that “laypeople need many precepts because they live in the secular world. The monks need fewer precepts because they can’t go outside the monastery.”

Mr. J (75 years old), the former *holu* of TL village, Tole sect, also explained that the monks kept four precepts but that “The precepts of monks are more than those of laypeople and novices because 227 details are included in the four precepts.” That is, the number of precepts is the same as in the case of Mr. S, but the interpretation is different.

### *Religious Policies and Practices of the Myanmar Government*

The diversity of practices in Ruili becomes clearer if we make a comparison with the situation in Məṅ Mau, on the Myanmar side.

Almost all the monasteries in Muhse and Nanhkan Districts are inhabited by monks. When villagers were asked about the number of precepts kept by Buddhists living in Muhse and Nanhkan Districts, the response was the same as those obtained in the center of Myanmar: “Laypeople keep 5 or 8 precepts, novices keep 10 precepts, and monks keep 227 precepts.” Why are there differences within the Məṅ Mau basin, despite the shared historical and cultural heritage of Buddhists there?

The first reason is related to the religious policies of Myanmar and China. In Myanmar, the Sangha organization was established in 1980 on the initiative of the government and the Sangha committee. Because the Sangha organization recognized only nine major sects, the local sects in Məṅ Mau, Tsoti, Pòitsəṅ, and Yon were not recognized as official sects (Burmese: *gaing*) and were absorbed into the largest sect, Thudanma. Furthermore, the Sangha organization issued ID cards to monks and novices, opened a Sangha court, and reformed Sangha education. The government aimed to standardize local Buddhist practices through these efforts toward the institutionalization of religion. Especially after the 1990s, political authority could be exerted upon monks and novices if they violated their precepts (Kojima 2009). These policies affected the practice of the precepts in Myanmar.

According to a monk (58 years old) who was on the Nayaka committee in Muhse District, it was common to have monasteries uninhabited by monks in the 1980s. After the democracy movement in 1988, the Myanmar government took the stance that differences in religion was a factor obstructing the unity of the country. In 1991 the Ministry of Religious Affairs established the Department of Propagation of Buddhism, which tried

to unite the country by converting minority people to Buddhism. The Department of Propagation of Buddhism issued an order that all monasteries in Muhse and Nanhkan Districts were required to have abbots. The government further said that it would send Burmese abbots to take up residence in empty monasteries. Local villagers were not fond of Burmese monks and invited Tai (Shan) monks instead. For this reason, almost all monasteries on the Myanmar side are inhabited by monks.

### *Factors Producing Diversity in Practice*

As discussed above, many sects (*kəŋ*) flowed into Dehong from the center of Myanmar or Northern Thailand. Existing studies explain that the Poitsəŋ, Tsoti, and Tole sects are from the center of Myanmar and the Yon sect is from Northern Thailand. But as Jiang (2003, 376) has pointed out, the Tole sect has many subgroups, such as Məntso, Takoktaŋ, Tonphila, and Ovata.

The Chinese government and the Buddhist Association of Dehong Prefecture tried to unite the various sects after 1982. According to Zhang (1992, 132), “because the prejudices between sects disappeared gradually, all sects were united and now respect each other.” Rev. W (35 years old), the chief monk of the Buddhist Association in Ruili city, said that sects ceased to exist in Dehong after the sects were united in 1982. Furthermore, the Chinese government and the Buddhist Association of Dehong started registration in 1996 and requested monks to obey the laws of the government and contribute to the unity of the nation-state, as was the case in Myanmar. How does this translate into reality?

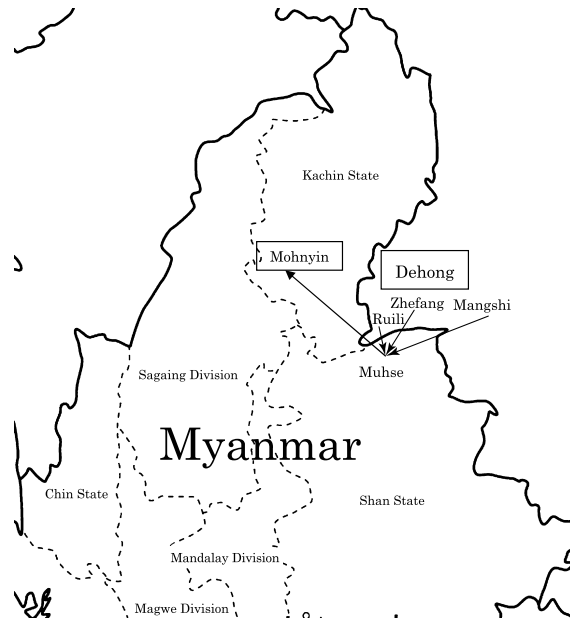
The pagoda of TL village was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, and a ceremony for its reconstruction was held in 1984. The leader of the reconstruction committee, Mr. K (71 years old), recalled, “It was troublesome because monks of different sects didn’t want to sit together at that time. Now monks of different sects attend the ceremony together, because the sects have been united by the Buddhist Association.” Thus, we can see that reconciliation has been achieved to a certain degree.

But this does not mean that sects have disappeared completely. The sects with which any monastery is associated have not fundamentally changed.<sup>9)</sup> Each sect has its own practices, and thus the continuation of the sects has been a major force in producing diversity within local Buddhist society. This is illustrated with examples of two sects below.

The first example is the Tsoti sect. Zhang (1992) describes the features of the Tsoti

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9) Because there are no monks from the Yon sect in Ruili city, the monastery of VT village, a former Yon sect monastery, invited the abbot of the Poitsəŋ sect and subsequently became a monastery of the Poitsəŋ sect. However, this is not a typical case.



**Map 4** Movement of Laypeople and Donations in the Tsoti Sect between Dehong and Mohnyin

sect as follows. First, monks and novices are led by one abbot and live together in one monastery. The monastery where they live is not fixed. The most senior monk of the Tsoti sect at the time of the 2009 research lived in Mohnyin (Tāi: Məŋ Jaŋ). In fact, the monastery of the Tsoti sect in Dehong had not had a resident monk since 1915, when the most senior monk moved to Shan State. Second, monks and novices are required to obey the precepts very strictly. For example, they are not allowed to ride in cars but have to walk when they go out. Not only monks and novices, but also laypeople are requested to obey the precepts. For example, followers are not allowed to raise livestock, and they cannot eat meat if they have seen the slaughter of the animals. Furthermore, laypeople are prohibited from drinking alcohol.

According to this author's field surveys, villagers still adhered to these practices, except that some now raised livestock. There was no Tsoti monk in Dehong, but followers made donations to Mohnyin three times per year—during the Water Festival (*pɔi sɔn lām*), the beginning of the rainy season retreat (*xǎu va*), and the end of the rainy season retreat (*ɔk va*). Donations from Dehong were collected at the Tsoti monastery in Muhse, and representatives took them to Mohnyin (Map 4). When the ordination ceremony is held in the central monastery of Mohnyin every three years, many villagers attend and some boys become novices as well.

In contrast to the Tsoti sect's strict following of the precepts, the practices of the Pòitsəŋ sect are relatively loose. *Pɔi* is derived from the Burmese word *pwe*, which means "festival," and *tsəŋ* is derived from the Burmese *kyaung*, which means "monastery." Zhang (1992, 146) describes how the monasteries of the Pòitsəŋ sect are built in lively places in the village and hold many festivals. Jiang (2003, 373) recorded the situation in the 1930s thus: "The monks drink, smoke opium, and eat dinner. Their robes are made from wool, and they can ride in cars and on horseback. They can leave the monastery to talk freely with laypeople at their homes." According to Zhang (1992, 147), the reason the Pòitsəŋ sect became the major sect in Dehong is "because the precepts for the laypeople are loose and do not interfere in the laypeople's life so much. They can keep pigs and chickens in captivity."

To the best of this author's knowledge, even Pòitsəŋ monks are not allowed to smoke opium now, because it is prohibited by the Chinese government. In any case, the villagers would not permit it. Except opium, the way of keeping precepts is relatively loose until now. However, monks are not criticized by the villagers of Pòitsəŋ sect for these practices. On the contrary, the chief monk of the Pòitsəŋ sect, Rev. K, who stays in the monastery in Muhse township, is famous for his exorcism and fortune-telling skills and is worshipped not only by the villagers of the Pòitsəŋ sect but also by laypeople of the whole Məŋ Mau. All the monks of the Pòitsəŋ sect go to see Rev. K once a year.

From these facts, it is clear that although the Chinese government insists that it "united" the sects after 1982, in fact the government has not used its political power to standardize the practices of each sect. This may be because the Chinese government is not interested in the standardization of Buddhist practices. Since the government takes no special position on Buddhism, the policy of the Chinese government is significantly different from that in Theravada Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia. If Buddhists obey the authority and control of the government and are seen to be supportive of the policy, nothing more is required. This policy is one of the factors that have allowed the continuation of diversity in local practices.

As explained above, the existence of many sects produces diversity in religious practices. However, both Rev. N and Mr. J were ordained in the Tole monastery. This indicates that there are differences within sects that depend on the practices of each individual. To explain these differences one must take a closer look at the monks' personal stories.

Mr. J did not go to central Myanmar for his studies; he became a novice in the monastery of TL village and studied Buddhism with an abbot from Nanhkan township. One monk (77 years old) who became a novice before the Great Leap Forward recalled, "The monks who went to Mandalay were very few at that time, because the road conditions



Map 5 Route Taken by Rev. N

were bad and it took a long time to get there.” *Ruili Shizhi*, the historical record of Ruili city, describes the system before the Great Leap Forward as follows: Novices are educated in the village monastery. After they become monks, they move to the monastery where the most senior monk lives and become educated as abbot candidates. If the monastery of the same sect lacks an abbot, the most senior monk dispatches a monk from among his disciples to the monastery (*Ruili Shizhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui* 1996, 698). Judging from this evidence, one can conclude that almost all the monks were educated in Məṅ Mau and that there were a limited number of monks who studied in central Myanmar. Moreover, it is likely that the level of differentiation in practice between sects was higher than it is now.

After the Cultural Revolution, many monks and novices of Dehong were educated in the central area of Myanmar. For example, Rev. N was born in Tangyan and became a novice in the monastery of his native village. Then he lived in Taunggyi for three years, Bago for two years, and Amarapura for four years (Map 5).

This author’s interviews conducted with all the monks, novices, and nuns living in Ruili city show the same basic pattern as the case of Rev. N. Around 80 percent of monks, novices, and nuns were from Shan State. They became novices in the monastery of their native village, and then they went to central Myanmar to study Buddhist doctrines. After

finishing their studies, they moved to Ruili through personal connections with monks or laypeople.

One factor in this phenomenon has been the improvement of road conditions between Shan State and the central region of Myanmar. Another factor is the increase in the number of monks and novices who went to central Myanmar to study orthodox Buddhism. They brought back knowledge of Buddhism from the central part of Myanmar. This movement also produced diversity among local sects.

But this does not mean that the everyday practices of villagers simply are assimilated into those of central Myanmar, as has already been discussed. Monks and nuns sometimes advise villagers regarding their practices, but the practice is decided by the *xij lai* (elders) who keep precepts. The *xij lai* also discuss and decide themselves how the precepts will be kept and how merit will be made.

As described in Sections V and VI, influences of Burmese and Shan Buddhism on local practices have been stronger after the 1990s than before the Cultural Revolution. The immigration of *holu*, monks, and novices has contributed to this change. But this does not mean that the practices of Dehong are assimilated into Shan or Burmese practices. Rather, lay Buddhists in Dehong choose and establish their practices independently. The government does not interfere in this area of local autonomy, in contrast to the approach of the government in Myanmar. For these reasons, a rich diversity in Buddhist practices can be seen in Dehong.

## VII Conclusion

### *Characteristics of Buddhism in Dehong*

Previous studies on Theravada Buddhist society have pointed out that the ideal path for a Buddhist is to become a monk and attain salvation. Laypeople gain merit by making donations to the Sangha. In Dehong, however, the custom of ordaining is significantly less widespread than in other Theravada Buddhist societies, and most men have not experienced life as a monk or novice. For this reason, the number of monks and novices is very low. In fact, many monasteries do not have an abbot, but laypeople make merit and ask for protection by praying and making offerings to sacred objects related with the Buddha, including Buddhist texts, Buddha statues, and pagodas. Laypeople, particularly *holu* and *xij lai*, play important roles as mediators in these prayers and offerings. Of course, this does not mean that the lay community does not need monks at all. During the period before the Cultural Revolution, monks were invited to reside in monasteries in more villages than we now find. However, the number of men who became monks

and novices was very small before the Cultural Revolution, too. This means that the way people in Dehong make merit is different from other Theravada Buddhist societies.

For practices led by laypeople, *holu* play the most important role. For more than 10 years during the Cultural Revolution, the activities of *holu* were stopped. After the Cultural Revolution, *holu* migrated from Shan State in Myanmar and played an important role in the revival of Buddhism in Dehong. As a result, the script used in the Buddhist texts (*tala*) changed to that of Shan State. On the other hand, the intonation used in reciting the *tala* was not allowed to change. This is because listening to the recital of *tala* is an important practice for lay Buddhists in Dehong. And important knowledge about Buddhism, such as the way of reciting *tala*, is transmitted from laypeople to laypeople.

Another characteristic of Buddhism in Dehong is that the practices are diverse depending on each village and individual. One factor in this diversity is that over time various sects flowed into Dehong from Myanmar and Northern Thailand. Even within the same sect, differences in education contribute to this diversity. Furthermore, because the Chinese government has not standardized Buddhist practice, various kinds of practice exist in Dehong. Thus, lay Buddhists independently establish the style of local practice.

#### *Differences between Dehong Buddhism and Burmese and Shan Buddhism*

Following is a summary of the differences between Dehong Buddhism, on the one hand, and Burmese and Shan Buddhism on the other. The most significant difference is that the number of ordained clergy in Dehong is dramatically lower, while the presence of “empty” monasteries is prevalent, as discussed in Section III. This is not a historical anomaly. In Muhse and Nanhkan Districts, on the Burmese side of the border, the situation was similar to that in Dehong until the 1980s. Here also, boys did not necessarily ordain as novices, and it was not rare to find empty monasteries. Since 1990, the government has required that all monasteries have ordained clergy resident, in order to achieve the target of converting ethnic minorities to Buddhism in the name of national integration. As a result, the number of empty monasteries in Muhse and Nanhkan Districts has been reduced. So, although a Dehong-type pattern of practice was observable until recent years, the current patterns of practice increasingly resemble those of central Myanmar.

When compared to Burmese and Shan Buddhism, Dehong Buddhism has one further distinct characteristic worthy of note. As shown in Section IV, lay *holu* play a much more important role than monks in village rituals. However, looking back in history, we see that before 1990 the situation in Muhse and Nanhkan Districts of Shan State was similar to Dehong, in that *holu* would recite Buddhist texts (*tala*) in story format and give sermons in the afternoons during the annual rainy season retreat. After 1990, it became increasingly common for monks to give sermons in the afternoon. Presently, in more

than half of the monasteries, *holu* have stopped giving sermons. Moreover, the material delivered in the monks' sermons now reflects what the monks have learned in central Myanmar educational monasteries, focusing mainly on the Tripitaka. Similar trends can be observed in other areas of Shan State, but *holu* do not exist in central Myanmar.

Nonetheless, the script used for copying texts (*tala*) and the language used in Buddhist rituals are the same in both Dehong and Shan State. Thus, although there has been a significant degree of standardization of practices in accordance with the Myanmar Sangha institution, as demonstrated above, the distinct practices of local ethnic groups have not been totally lost. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, there are some differences between the recitation styles in Dehong and Shan State, which still persist. Thus, while Dehong Buddhism has been influenced by both Burmese and Shan Buddhism, it continues to produce its own distinct practices.

One important reason for this is Dehong's location on the Shan plateau, far from the center of Burmese Buddhism. During the period of royal dynasties, the lack of transport infrastructure emphasized the Shan plateau's position on the periphery, separating it from the Burmese royalty (Mendelson 1975, 233). After the 1980s, government-directed Sangha institutions were established, while the national road network was improved. This has meant that the wave of standardized Buddhist practice emanating from central Myanmar is reaching Shan State. In Dehong, while the Chinese government does manage monasteries and ordained clergy, it does not try to manage the details of actual Buddhist practice. This means that local practices that differ from those of central Myanmar and Shan State can be observed.

### *Further Study*

The preceding discussion has highlighted some of the local Buddhist practices in Dehong. The implication of this analysis is that some of our basic understandings and assumptions about Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia should be revisited. Some important questions remain.

First, why is there traditionally no custom of ordination in Dehong? One possible reason is that the relationship between the king of the basin, *ts'au fa*, and the Sangha was different from relationships in other Theravada Buddhist societies; but further historical study is necessary to verify this.

The second question is whether the same creation and maintenance of diversity in practice explored here is found in other Buddhist societies. For example, the number of monks and novices in the Muhse and Nanhkan areas, on the Myanmar side of Ruili city, was also very low before the implementation of the Myanmar government's policy to spread Buddhism. One informant said, "The way in Məŋ Mau is a 'democratic' one. We



should not compel people to ordain. If they wish, they can ordain; if they don't wish to, they should not ordain. In the past, the custom across Myanmar was the same as in Məṅ Mau. It is in Thailand where everyone ordains." This potentially important assertion should be explored further in different areas.

The third question concerns the process of Buddhist reform in Cambodia and Xishuangbanna. Studies have been carried out in both of these societies, but there is a need for more comparative studies of these practices.

Finally, after the Congress of All Sects of Myanmar in 1980, how have local sects reconciled their practices with the centralized religious institutions in Myanmar? The Sangha organization was established in Myanmar in 1980, but it has approved only nine sects. The Tsoti, Pəitsəṅ, and Yon sects have been incorporated into the Thudanma sect. The Sangha organization issues ID cards to monks and novices, has established a Sangha court, and has reformed the examination system for Sangha education. All these measures were undertaken to standardize the Buddhist practice recognized by the Sangha nayaka committee (Kojima 2009). Nevertheless, as shown in this paper, these sects are still alive and should be examined further, particularly in places like Shan State and Kachin State.

As has been shown in this work, the practice of Buddhism in Dehong is different from what has been commonly understood from previous studies. Are these different practices exceptional or are they representative of more yet undescribed diversity across the region? As the case of Muhse and Nanhkan shows, the Buddhism practiced in Dehong may have been closer to the norm before the institutionalization of Buddhism by the nation-state. The models that underpin our basic understanding of Theravada Buddhist societies were developed upon the case of central Thailand, but the current study suggests that there is a need to re-examine these models based on a wider social range of local practices.

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