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Sarassawadee Ongsakul and Volker Grabowsky

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Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 11, No. 1, April 2022, pp. 137-158.

How to Cite:

Sarassawadee Ongsakul; and Grabowsky, Volker. The New Year Festival in the Cultural History of Chiang Mai: Importance and Changes. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, April 2022, pp. 137-158.

DOI: 10.20495/seas.11.1_137

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The New Year Festival in the Cultural History of Chiang Mai: Importance and Changes

Sarassawadee Ongsakul* and Volker Grabowsky**

The New Year festival, or Songkran, is considered the most prominent festival in Chiang Mai, the former capital of the kingdom of Lan Na in Thailand's Upper North. The festival, held over three days in mid-April, marks the earth's entry into a new solar year. The authors seek to reconstruct the origins of the Songkran festival in Chiang Mai and its historical evolution by analyzing a variety of Northern Thai sources as well as missionary reports from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Special attention is given to the transformation of the state-sponsored *dam hua* ritual of the Lan Na kings into a ceremony under the auspices of the Thai state.

Keywords: Lan Na, Songkran festival, missionary reports

The city of Chiang Mai was founded more than seven centuries ago, in 1296, when it was made the capital of the kingdom of Lan Na. The kingdom existed as an independent polity in the Upper North of present-day Thailand until the Burmese conquest in 1558. When Burmese overlordship ended in the late eighteenth century, the Northern Thai elites recognized Siamese suzerainty over Lan Na, which was not restored as a unitary kingdom but split into five separate political entities, each of which maintained tributary relations with Bangkok. In reality, however, Chiang Mai was the political center of the western part of Lan Na, exercising supremacy over the smaller kingdoms of Lamphun and Lampang, while the kingdom of Nan dominated eastern Lan Na (see Sarassawadee 2005). Even after the gradual integration of Lan Na into the Siamese state from the late nineteenth century, numerous customs and traditions of Lan Na culture were preserved, as reflected in the 12-month tradition of organizing religious festivals and ceremonies according to the agricultural lunar year.

* ศรัทธา อึ้งสกุล, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University, 239 Huay Kaew Rd, Tambon Su Thep, Mueang Chiang Mai District, Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand

** Asien-Afrika-Institut, Universität Hamburg, Abteilung für Sprachen und Kulturen Südasiens, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, Flügel Ost, 20146 Hamburg, Germany
Corresponding author's e-mail: volker.grabowsky@uni-hamburg.de

The most important of these traditions is the New Year festival (Thai: *prapheni songkran*), celebrated in mid-April; it has the most significant value and importance in the region's cultural history. The Songkran festival in Lan Na, celebrated over three full days, has been studied mainly by social and cultural anthropologists. In *Muang Metaphysics*, a seminal study of Northern Thai myths and rituals, Richard Davis has devoted a lengthy chapter to the Lan Na New Year festival (Davis 1984, 99–147). Based on extensive fieldwork carried out in rural Nan during the 1970s, Davis provides the most detailed description and analysis of the various rites performed during Songkran. In *The Lan Na Twelve-Month Traditions*, Sommai Premchit and Amphay Doré give further insights into the Northern Thai New Year festival by focusing on Chiang Mai, where they conducted fieldwork in 1990, and comparing their findings with Songkran traditions in neighboring regions, such as Northeastern Thailand and Laos (Sommai and Doré 1992, 175–192). They were able to build upon a previous study in Thai (of the same title) by Mani Phayomyong (1986). This valuable anthropological and ethnographic research notwithstanding, it is astonishing that the Songkran festival in Lan Na has received very little attention from historians. In particular, the role of Chiang Mai kings and other members of the royal family in the festival has been largely ignored. This article thus intends to study the Songkran festival in Chiang Mai from a cultural-historical approach. Special attention is paid to the changes and adaptations of the festival over time until the present age. After a brief survey of the scanty evidence of the Songkran festival in Northern Thai chronicles and other historical sources, we discuss the origins and special characteristics of the Lan Na calendrical system. This is followed by an analysis of the Songkran festival in conjunction with other religious activities carried out during that time. Finally, we investigate the state-sponsored water-pouring ceremony at Songkran for the kings of Chiang Mai during the nineteenth century and the transformation of this water-bathing ritual during the twentieth century.

Historical Background of Songkran and the Lan Na Calendrical System

The New Year festival is an ancient tradition among Tai ethnic groups. The activities, rites, and customs associated with it reflect the importance of the new year as well as the role of the kings of Chiang Mai. The term “New Year tradition” (*prapheni songkran*) pertains to the customs celebrating the beginning of a new year according to the Thai solar calendar. This is a common cultural characteristic of all Theravada Buddhists in mainland Southeast Asia, including Lan Na, the Lao kingdom of Lan Sang, Siam, Myanmar (Burma), and Cambodia, as well as the Tai Lue principality of Sipsong Panna and the Tai

Noe polity of Dehong in Yunnan Province. The Theravada Buddhist New Year festival is known as Thingyan in Myanmar, Pi Mai in Laos, and Choul Chhnam Thmey in Cambodia (Agarwal 2009–10). The basic principle of the tradition consists of merit making and the use of water with its symbolic value. However, the way the New Year tradition has been performed and transmitted over the generations varies from region to region (see Songsak 1996).

The name of the festival comes from the Sanskrit word *saṃkrānti*, which means “going from one place to another” or “a passage or entry into” (Monier-Williams 1993, 1127). Sathian Koset (1973) has authored a book on the festivals that are performed to mark the end of a lunar year (*trut*) and the transition from the rainy to the dry season (*sat*). He explains the meaning of *songkran* as the passing of the sun from one house of the zodiac (*rasi*) to another, and from one zodiac month to another, which is called *songkran duean*.¹⁾ In the course of one (lunar) year, the sun passes through the 12 signs of the zodiac: it moves through one zodiac sign every month. When the sun shifts from Pisces to Aries, one speaks of the “great passing” or *maha Songkran*, as that day marks the beginning of a new year (Sathian 1973, 6–8; Davis 1984, 99). This is in accordance with Northern Thai chronicles, which count the time when a new year starts. The *Chiang Mai Chronicle (Tamnan phueng mueang chiang mai)* states that King Mangrai moved to his palace, built on an auspicious site,

on the eighth waxing day of the seventh month, a Thursday, a Thai *kot cai* day . . . in the new-year period on the Phraya Wan day as the era was increasing by one year to be 654, a *tao si* year [corresponding to Thursday, March 27, 1292]. (Wyatt and Aroonrut 1995, 42)²⁾

The timing of the Songkran tradition in Chiang Mai falls in the seventh, or in some years the eighth, lunar month, according to the Lan Na calendar. This is testified to in the following historical sources:

[C]S 1127, a *dap lao* year, in the fourth waning day of the seventh lunar month, two days after Songkran, a *poek si* day [as the] Tai [say] . . . (Friday, April 12, 1765). (Sarassawadee 2016, 30)

[C]S 1146, on the Phaya Wan day, on the seventh waning day of the seventh lunar month, the first

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- 1) As the earth orbits the sun, it appears as if the sun passes in front of different constellations. It is, however, not the sun which is moving. Its move is an illusion caused by the rotation of our earth around the sun.
 - 2) (ในวันเดือน๗ ออก๘ ที่วันพรหส ๓ทกคใจ . . . ขามสกราชขึ้นวันพระญาวัน สกราชขึ้นแถมตัว ๑ เปน ๖๕๔ ปี่แต่สี่แล) As David Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeeo (1995, 42n48) point out, “[t]hose who would insist that the New Year always falls on 15 April need to be reminded that the Western (Gregorian) calendar only took its present form from October of 1582. In this period, the New Year (the Phraya Wan Day) usually fell around the 27th of March.”

day [of the week], a *moeng met* day [as the] Tai [say] . . . (Sunday, April 11, 1784). (Sarassawadee 2016, 34)

[C]S 1147, a *dap sai* year, on the Phaya Wan day, on the fifth waxing day of the eighth lunar month, the third day [of the week], a *ka pao* day [as the] Tai [say] . . . (Tuesday, April 12, 1785). (Sarassawadee 2016, 34)

As for the start of the new year in the Songkran tradition, the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* confirms that it coincides with the seventh or eighth lunar month of the Lan Na (agricultural) calendar, as it states that a ceremony to worship four sacred relics at Wat Bupphā-ārāma (Wat Suan Dok), where the newly ordained King Kham Fan had moved, was held “in the season at the beginning of the year in the eighth month, the *ka met* year [C]S 1185 (April 1823).”³⁾

Why does the beginning of the new year, or Songkran, fall in the seventh lunar month and not the first lunar month (*duean ai*), as one might be tempted to assume? Sathian argues that the Maha Songkran day was not part of the original Tai calendrical system but adopted from northern India, a region with a cooler and less subtropical climate. The Maha Songkran day marks the end of the cold season and the start of spring, when the flowers are blossoming and the weather is getting warmer, so this time was considered appropriate for the start of a new year. The Indian solar calendar was adopted in the subtropical countries of Southeast Asia, where the beginning of the lunar year coincided with the end of the harvest season and took place before the start of the new rice-planting at the beginning of the rainy season. Thus, people were free to make merit and enjoy themselves (Sathian 1973, 8–11; Agarwal 2009–10, 9–10). The fact that Songkran is determined by the position of the sun and not by that of the moon is observed by Holt S. Hallett in his insightful book on Northern Thailand—which he calls the “Siamese Shan states”—during the reign of King Inthawichayanon. He notes the following:

Amongst the Ping Shans (i.e., the Khon Mueang of Chiang Mai), New Year’s Day is the same as in Burmah, and is fixed by the position of the sun and not by that of the moon. It is the time of the great Water Festival, when for three days Phya In, or Indra—the rain-god and king of the Dewahs—is supposed to descend at mid-night to the earth to stay for three or four days. On the signal of his arrival being given, a formal prayer is made, and jars full of water, which have been placed at the door of each house, their mouths stoppered with green leaves, have their contents poured on the ground as a libation to the god, in order to ensure the prosperity of the household; every one who has a gun hastens to fire it off as a salute to the rain-god. (Hallett 1988, 261)

Prani Wongthet (2005) argues that the Songkran festival is not part of the genuine cultural

3) . . . ในฤดูหัวปีลี (ต้นปี) เดือน 8 ปี่ลีกำเม็ค สกราช 1185 ตัว (ค.ศ.1823) นั้นแล (Wyatt and Aroonrut 1995, 198).

heritage of Southeast Asia. On the contrary, it is a tradition that the royal elites of Southeast Asian polities received from India, where it is known as the Holika festival (Agarwal 2009–10, 11). This originally Hindu custom might first have been practiced in the states bordering the shores of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Siam before spreading farther inland and becoming “Buddhicized.” While the Indian calendars are based on the solar year, the original calendars of the Tai and other Southeast Asian peoples followed the lunar year cycle and the Chinese zodiac by letting the new (lunar) year start with the beginning of the first lunar month (*duean ai* or *duean ciang*), shortly after the Loi Krathong festival of the 12th lunar month. Therefore, Songkran marks the original solar new year of India, not the new year of the Tai people (Prani 2005, 64–68; Phiphat 2016, 13). In any case, historical evidence shows that Lan Na adopted the Indian solar calendar system a long time ago and integrated it into the traditional Tai lunar calendar, at least since the reign of King Mangrai, as the above-mentioned quotation from the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* indicates.

As for the new year in the original Tai system, Sathian notes:

The new year of the Tai might originally have started at the beginning of the first lunar month. The month’s name tells us that this was the first month of the year . . . and the names of the lunar months were called according to their numbers 1, 2, 3 etc. (Sathian 1973, 162)

The first lunar month in Lan Na was thus named *duean kiang* or *duean ciang* (Sathian 1973, 162; Udom 2004, 56). The first month of the Lan Na lunar calendar starts two months before the first month of the Siamese calendar. In Central Thailand the Loi Krathong festival is held in the 12th lunar month. After that the first lunar month (of the Siamese calendar) starts, and rainfall is expected to reduce. In the second lunar month (*duean yi*), people start reaping the harvest. In the fourth month the husked rice is stored in granaries. In the fifth month (seventh month of the Chiang Mai calendar), people can relax and perform rituals to offer sacrifices to their ancestor spirits and to repair agricultural equipment to be used in the rice-planting season the following year (Phiphat 2016, 32). Thus, counting *duean ai* as the first month of the year makes sense as it corresponds to the way of life of rice farmers in Central Thailand.

In Lan Na the lunar year starts two months earlier than in Central Thailand and Laos, likely reflecting the specific climatic conditions of Northern Thailand and the way of life of the people in that region. The first lunar month of Lan Na starts roughly between mid-September and mid-October. Thus, it corresponds to the rainy season and the start of the cold season, in which cloudy skies are transformed into clear skies, marking the start of the cold season. The method of reckoning the beginning of the new year thus was originally based on climatic conditions. Ancient customs celebrating the transition

from the old year to the new include sacrifices to ancestral spirits. The *kuai* (*khuai*) *salak* ceremony (Thai: *salak phat*), where food is presented to Buddhist monks by drawing lots in dedication to all deceased ancestors, might be considered a custom dating back to pre-Buddhist times that was later modified to conform to the Buddhist teachings of the new religion of the Tai.

The names of the years in the original system of the region were coined according to the zodiac cycle. This method is clearly of Chinese origin and corresponds to the lunar calendar, according to which a year is made up of 12 months. Twelve years form one zodiac cycle. Their names in Lan Na and Siam differ, as listed in the following table, which records the Lan Na year name followed by the corresponding Siamese and the English translation (Thawi 1989, 12):

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. <i>Cai</i> (ไฉ้) / <i>Chuat</i> (ชวด) = rat | 7. <i>Sanga</i> (สงง้า) / <i>Mamia</i> (มะเมีย) = horse |
| 2. <i>Pao</i> (เป้า) / <i>Chalu</i> (จล) = cow | 8. <i>Met</i> (เม็ด) / <i>Mamae</i> (มะแม) = goat |
| 3. <i>Yi</i> (ยี่) / <i>Khan</i> (ขาน) = tiger | 9. <i>San</i> (สัน) / <i>Wok</i> (วอก) = monkey |
| 4. <i>Mao</i> (หม่า) / <i>Tho</i> (เถาะ) = rabbit | 10. <i>Lao</i> (เล้า) / <i>Raka</i> (ระกา) = rooster |
| 5. <i>Si</i> (สี่) / <i>Marong</i> (มะโรง) = dragon | 11. <i>Set</i> (เส็ด) / <i>Co</i> (จอ) = dog |
| 6. <i>Sai</i> (ไส้) / <i>Maseng</i> (มะเส็ง) = small snake | 12. <i>Kai</i> (ไค้) / <i>Kun</i> (กุน) = pig / elephant |

This 12-year zodiac cycle is still widely used. In Lan Na chronicles, both the year of an era (usually the Minor Era or Cunlasakkarat) and the year of the zodiac cycle combined with a ten-year cycle (forming a sexagesimal cycle) are used together, such as the date of the founding of the city of Chiang Mai “in [C]S 658, a *rawai san* year” (AD 1294, the year of the monkey, the eighth year of the decade) (Udom 2004, 36). Such dual dating of events in manuscripts and inscriptions—referring to both the new solar and the old lunar calendrical systems—was common until recent times (for further details, see Eade 1995).

In conclusion, the ancient Tai new year starts with the month of *duan ai* or *duan kiang* of the Lan Na lunar calendar. The years are named after the zodiac. After the adoption of Indian culture, Songkran was defined as the first day of the new year. Thus, the solar year started in the seventh lunar month (in some years the eighth lunar month), with the first six lunar months still falling in the old (solar) year. This dual system has been in use since at least the era of King Mangrai, i.e., for more than seven hundred years. In 1889, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, it was stipulated that the first day of the new (solar) year was April 1. The government of Marshal Phibun Songkhram proclaimed that the new year should start on January 1. Since January 1, 1941, the start of the new year in Thailand has followed international conventions. However, the cel-

celebration of the Buddhist New Year, the Songkran festival, still followed the traditional calendar, with April 13, 14, and 15 as the three auspicious days. In 1989 the government of Chatichai Choonhavan proclaimed April 12, 13, and 14 as public holidays in Thailand, but in 1997 the government of Chawalit Yongchaiyuth changed the official dates back to April 13, 14, and 15 (Sommai and Doré 1992, 175–176; Agarwal 2009–10, 16–17).

The Importance of the Songkran Festival in Conjunction with Other Religious Activities

The first day of the New Year festival is called Wan Maha Songkran, or “Great Songkran Day.” Though Northern Thai chronicles spell it as *sangkran* (สังกรานต์), the word is pronounced *sangkhan* (สังขานต์). It refers to the sun’s movement into the next zodiac sign on New Year’s Day. Later, the spelling changed to the homophone *sangkhan* (สังขาร), which means “body,” “conditioned things,” or “mental dispositions” (Pali: *saṅkhāra*; Skt: *samskāra*).⁴ The term Wan Sangkhan (วันสังขาร) or, in full, Wan Sangkhan Long (วันสังขาร ล่อง), came to mean “the day when [the human’s] bodily and mental dispositions float [to another year].” People believe that the early morning of that day is especially dark, and that the sky can be cleared only by a pair of ancestral spirits: Pu (paternal grandfather) Sangkhan and Ya (paternal grandmother) Sangkhan. It is believed that these spirits put all of the waste (including all bad experiences) from the towns and villages into a huge basket, thus causing the sky to clear. Adults teach children to wake up early in the morning so that they might catch a glimpse of the ancestral spirit couple. Later, the couple is chased away by firing gunshots or igniting firecrackers. The main activity that day is house cleaning. In former times mosquito nets would be washed and people would wash their hair. In the afternoon, Phra Sihing and other Buddha statues would be bathed in a procession going around the city of Chiang Mai (Mani 1986, 56–58).

The second day of the New Year festival is called Wan Nao (วันเนา or วันเนาวัน). The word *nao* (pronounced in Thai with a mid-even tone) derives from the Khmer word នៅ, which means “to live” or “to reside.” The Northern Thai, however, have altered the pronunciation of the Khmer word and changed its etymology. Pronounced with a falling

4) According to T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede (1989, 664), *saṅkhāra* is “one of the most difficult terms in Buddhist metaphysics, in which the blending of the subjective-objective view of the world and of happening, peculiar to the East, is so complete, that it is almost impossible for Occidental terminology to get at the root of its meaning in a translation. We can only convey an idea of its import by representing several sides of its application, without attempting to give a ‘word’ as a definite translation.”

tone, *nao* (เนา) means “rotten” or “decayed”; thus, the second day of the festival is considered the “Day of Putrefaction” (Davis 1984, 119). In any case, Wan Nao is considered to be the day between the last day of the old year and the first day of the new year. People are admonished to pay utmost attention to what they say on this day. They are only allowed to say things that bring good luck. The activities carried out on Wan Nao are preparatory works for the following day. In the afternoon of Wan Nao, sand is carried to the temple compound. There is a belief, as explained in the homiletic text *Anisong Cedi Sai* (Benefits [derived from the construction] of sand stupas), that the building of stupas or *cetiya*s with sand will bring tremendous karmic benefits to the donor (see Sommai and Doré 1992, 183–184; Mani 1986, 59). Though the sand may not necessarily be used for such a purpose, it is considered a meritorious deed to carry sand to the temple, as it will compensate for the sand that laypeople who visited the temple during the previous year took away under their shoes; the latter would be regarded as a demeritorious act (*pāpa*) (Mani 1986; Rangsana 2005, 1–2). However, Ploysri Porananond (2015, 168) points out that “the idea behind this practice has hitherto gone unexplained.” Furthermore, she convincingly shows how, since the late 1990s, the making of sand stupas has been transformed into a contest among representatives of various temples in the city of Chiang Mai (Ploysri 2015, 170–172). Due to changes in the socioeconomic structure of urban areas, the carrying of sand is nowadays only “marginally performed” in the Songkran festival in Chiang Mai (Sommai and Doré 1992, 184).

The third day is called Wan Thaloeng Sok or Wan Phaya Wan; this is the day when the sun has already entered Aries (Thai: *meṣa* เมษ). On this day, the (solar) year of the era moves forward. Early in the morning, laypeople go to the temple to make merit by *than khan khao* (ทานขันข้าว)—literally, “offering the rice bowl”—which is a dedication of merit to dead relatives. Afterward, food is prepared to be offered to the elderly, who give blessings to the donors. This custom is called *than khan khao khon thao* (ทานขันข้าวคนเฒ่า/เฒ่า), or “offering the rice bowl to elderly people.” It is briefly referred to by Carl Bock in his description of the New Year festival when he mentions that “people were busily engaged in making cakes of rice and sugar” (Bock 1986, 347). In the afternoon, the water-pouring ritual called *rot nam dam hua* (รดน้ำดำหัว), asking for blessings from respected elders, is performed. The elders forgive the younger people for all infractions. Wan Phaya Wan is considered the best and most auspicious day of the year for people to move to a new house, start learning magic spells, ask for amulets, and tattoo their bodies with mystic symbols and letters (*yanta* ยันต์). Nowadays, the Chiang Mai municipality organizes a *dam hua* ritual presided over by the provincial governor. This ritual, which has been carried out for more than fifty years, will be discussed in further detail below. Sommai and Doré (1992, 176) argue that the myth of Dhammapāla decap-

itating the god Brahma, having won a strange gamble,⁵⁾ might explain the origin of the ritual bathing of heads.

On the fourth day, called Wan Pak Pi—literally, “Day of the Year’s Mouth”—the *dam hua* ritual is performed to honor parents and senior personalities. It is believed that eating jackfruit curry will make one prosper and be supported by powerful patrons. Finally, the fifth day is the “Day of the Month’s Mouth” (Wan Pak Duean). On that day white magic rituals, such as a ritual to exorcise bad luck or karma (*sado khro* or *song khro*)—literally, “releasing misfortune”—and a candle-worshipping ritual (*bucha thian*), are performed to drive away bad things, extend one’s lifespan, and win over enemies. Candles are lit to venerate a Buddha statue (Sanan 2005; see also Sommai and Doré 1992, 178).

The Songkran festival takes place in the hot season after the rice harvest, so it is a time when people relax before starting the new planting season. As the weather around the New Year is hot and dry, it is an appropriate time for rest and relaxation. Water is used for refreshment and various rituals, such as the bathing of Buddha statues and the water-pouring ceremony described above. During these days people engage in various local performances, and the Buddhist lay community celebrates the new year by offering alms to the monks, dedicating their meritorious donations to deceased relatives, bathing Buddha statues with consecrated perfume water, carrying sand into the monastery compound, and carrying a Bodhi tree (Northern Thai: *mai kham sali* ไม้คำสาหรือ *Ficus religiosa*) in a procession around the village or town quarter.

The activities carried out to celebrate the arrival of a new year have great significance for the local population. At the individual level, people are forced to review their actions over the past year. This is also the time for a major clean-up of houses, increased personal hygiene, and the wearing of new clothing. All this is believed to contribute to making one’s mind joyful and delighted. Together with the auspicious and merit-making activities mentioned above, people prepare to greet the new year. In private households the *dam hua* ritual creates closer emotional bonds between children, grandchildren, parents, and grandparents, including relatives who have already passed away. The ritual also encourages people to enter the new year with optimism and a sense of gratitude toward others. At the level of community, rural or urban, the New Year festival is a big event marking a joint large-scale activity. The *dam hua* ritual is carried out to pay

5) Dhammapāla, who was able to understand the language of birds, listened to a bird couple solving the riddle “Where is the glory of a man in the morning, afternoon and evening?” The answer was that “in the morning, the glory of man was on his face, because one has to wash one’s face every morning. In the afternoon, the glory would be on the body or chest, since one bathes. In the evening it’s on the feet, as one has to wash the feet before going to bed” (Agarwal 2009–10, 14–15).

respects to one's boss, teachers, and high-ranking officials. The collective efforts invested in such merit-making activities associated with pleasure and amusement foster a sense of belonging within the community; they also provide opportunities for various kinds of joint endeavors expressing mutual trust and confidence.

State-Sponsored Water-Pouring Ceremony at Songkran in Chiang Mai

The *dam hua* ritual, which plays a central role in the Songkran festival, is considered an ancient tradition in Lan Na. Its origins are unclear, but there is evidence that the ritual was performed for Burmese kings during the Thingyan festival in nineteenth-century Myanmar (Dhida 1995, 146). During the period when Lan Na was an independent kingdom or split into various smaller kingdoms, each of which was a semi-independent vassal state of Siam, this ritual was performed as a state ritual.⁶⁾ The king of Chiang Mai, also called *cao huang*, presided over it to demonstrate the stability of his kingdom. The yearly ritual is intended to re-enact the close bonds between the king and his subjects.

The term *dam hua* (ดำหัว) might be rendered as “to wash one's hair.” *Dam* (ดำ) is a verb referring to a senior person bowing their head in order to wash their hair. Those who are invited to wash their hair in the *dam hua* ritual are respected elders. The gifts to be brought to such a *dam hua* ritual are turmeric juice (*nam khamin* น้ำขมิ้น), a *som poi* (ส้มป่อย) creeper or *Acacia concinna* (used instead of soap), flowers, fruit, and other consumer goods as a token of apologizing to the senior person for any offenses and insults. The senior person responds with a blessing by dipping their hand into the turmeric juice and *som poi* to wash their own head. In general, the people paying their respects to senior persons in such a *dam hua* ritual line up in a procession. Though the ceremony has its origins in Lan Na, it later spread to other regions of Thailand and became a central part of the New Year festival.

Dam Hua Ritual for Kings of Chiang Mai

Historical evidence of the *dam hua* ritual in Chiang Mai has been found during the reign of only two rulers: King Kawilorot Suriyawong (r. 1856–70) and King Inthawichayanon (r. 1870–97). It seems that later, when the kings of Chiang Mai and the other kingdoms of Lan Na had lost much of their power to the government in Bangkok, local rulers were

6) Rituals can be perceived as extraordinary practices. D. D. Gilmore (1998, 26), for example, defines ritual as “a repetitive sequence of activity, culturally sanctioned and regularized, but always involving an appeal to the supernatural: spirits, gods.” Ritual is “social action; its performance requires the organized cooperation of individuals.”

no longer involved in such state-sponsored rituals, though the ceremony was still practiced in private.

A *dam hua* ritual performed during the reign of King Kawilorot has been vividly described by Daniel McGilvary (1828–1911), an American Presbyterian missionary who founded the “Laos Mission” in Chiang Mai in 1870. McGilvary attended a *dam hua* ritual overseen by King Kawilorot (whom the author refers to as “Prince”) around AD 1868, which he describes in considerable detail in his famous autobiography, *A Half Century among the Siamese and the Lāo*:

At the Lāo New Year it is customary for all persons of princely rank, all officers and people of influence, to present their compliments to the Prince in person, and to take part in the ceremony of “Dam Hūa,” by way of wishing him a Happy New Year. Because of the Prince’s absence in the field, this ceremony could not be observed at the regular time; but it was nonetheless brilliantly carried out a few days after his return. The name, Dam Hūa, means “bathing the head” or “head-bath,” and it is really a ceremonial bathing or baptism of the Prince’s head with water poured upon it, first by princes and officials in the order of their rank, and so on down to his humblest subjects.

The first and more exclusive part of the ceremony took place in the palace, where I also was privileged to offer my New Year’s greetings with the rest. The great reception-hall was crowded with the Prince’s family and with officials of all degrees. The air was heavy with the fragrance of flowers which loaded every table and stand. All were in readiness with their silver vessels filled with water, awaiting His Highness’ appearance. At length an officer with a long silver-handled spear announced his coming. The whole company received him with lowest prostration after the old-time fashion. Seeing me standing, he sent for a chair, saying that the ceremony was long, and I would be tired. The Court Orator, or Scribe, then read a long address of welcome to the Prince on his return from his brilliant expedition, with high-sounding compliments on its success. Then there was a long invocation of all the powers above or beneath, real or imaginary, not to molest, but instead to protect, guide, and bless His Highness’ person, kingdom and people, with corresponding curses invoked on all his enemies and theirs. Then came the ceremonial bath, administered first by his own family, his relatives, and high officials—he is standing while vase after vase of water was poured on his head, drenching him completely and flooding all the floor. It is a ceremony not at all unpleasant in a hot climate, however unendurable it might be in colder regions.

This was the beginning. According to immemorial custom, a booth was prepared on a sand-bar in the river. To this, after the ceremony in the palace, the Prince went in full state, riding on an elephant richly caparisoned with trappings of solid gold, to receive a like bath at the hands of his loyal subjects—beginning, as before, with some high nobles, and then passing on to the common people, who might all take part in this closing scene of the strange ceremony. (McGilvary 1912, 84–86)

The extract above shows that the royal *dam hua* ritual was held in two spaces: the private and the public. In the private space the head of the dynasty would perform the “bathing of the head” with members of the royal family and close high-ranking officials (*khun nang*), the order being arranged according to seniority and rank. The ceremony in the public space was organized on the banks of the Ping River, with the king representing

the lord of all of his kingdom's inhabitants. In the *dam hua* ritual that took place in the ruler's palace (*khum luang*), the king stood while water was poured from a gutter or water trough on his head, similar to the use of gutters to bathe stupas, Buddha statues, or monks.

As for the *dam hua* ritual in the Ping River, it is suggested that during the reign of King Kawilorot the ruler rode on the back of an elephant from his palace in the center of the city toward the Ping River until he reached an island in the middle of the river. There a pavilion had been erected, where the ruler could receive the water pouring.

The royal *dam hua* ritual during the reign of King Inthawichayanon was documented by the high-ranking official Phraya Anuban Phayapkit, whose research was posthumously published in the funeral book *Anuban Ramluek* (Phraya Anuban Phayapkit recollects, 1969). He reveals some interesting details about Phracao Inthawichayanon's *dam hua* ritual:

From the royal palace in the center of the walled city (*wiang*), with the king sitting on a palanquin, the procession proceeded with gongs and drums, accompanied by members of the royal family and high-ranking aristocrats as well as court officials. The procession left the Chang Phueak Gate and proceeded along the city moat until it arrived at the beautiful stupa (Cedi Kio เสดีย์คิ่ว). When the procession arrived there, King Inthawichayanon climbed down and entered his resting place that had been prepared in the middle of the Ping River. The provisional bridge [crossing the Ping River] was made of Maduea (*Ficus moraceae*) wood, and his resting place there was called Pong Duea (shelter made of Maduea wood). Having reached there, he descended into the Ping River and bathed his head in the water. Upon leaving the water [the king] got dressed, and the aristocrats and members of the royal family came to be blessed by him by pouring water [on his hands].

On this occasion the Lua and Karen came and offered orchid flowers (*dok ueang sae*) and tobacco with a tobacco box for the king to smoke. Another gift presented to the king was ginger, which Phracao Inthawichayanon liked to chew. After chewing the ginger, the king spat on the Lua and Karen who had been waiting. They believed that they would thereby escape from calamities and dangers and have a good harvest. After the end of the ceremony, the king ascended to his palanquin and [the procession] moved along Wichayanon Road, passing the market and proceeding in the direction of Tha Phae Road. The merchants, wealthy persons, and elderly people as well as all other people intending to pour water were received by Phracao Inthawichayanon with joy. The procession proceeded along Tha Phae Road until it reached the city center and then turned right, toward the royal palace, where the ceremony ended.

The elderly people add information about the place where Phracao Inthawichayanon performed the ritual in the water of the Ping River: the procession crossed the wooden bridge in front of Wat Ket monastery, then turned right until it reached Wat Si Khong monastery. There the *dam hua* ritual took place in the Ping River near the pier at Wat Si Khong. (Anuban 1969, 329)

The Chiang Mai king's bathing ritual in the river is well known. King Chulalongkorn himself recognized this tradition in his royal treatise on the royal 12-month ceremonies. In one chapter the king discussed the ritual performed in the fifth lunar month of the Siamese calendar (Caitra) as follows:

[This ritual] is most probably an ancient ritual that has been transmitted by the Lao Phung Dam (“Black-bellied Lao,” i.e., the Tai-speaking people of Lan Na) because until the present the rulers of the Lao Phung Dam provinces—such as Chiang Mai, Lampang, and Lamphun—still have to descend into the river to perform the rituals of the fifth lunar month, which they schedule during the New Year festival. (Chulachomklao Chaoyuhua 1973, 134)

The king also expressed the following opinion:

Since ancient times, kings bathed on Wan Thaloeng Sok (วันเทโวโลก) without any interruption. There were no exceptions. . . . The royal consecration at the Songkran festival is as if the king had to bathe for the sake of the well-being of his country, unlike the bathing of Buddha statues or the water pouring for elderly people. It seems strange that according to the (Lan Na) Songkran tradition, children, grandchildren and siblings pour water for the respected senior persons in their families; but for the ruler, regardless of how old he is, there is no member of the royal family offering water to him as they do for other elderly members of the royal family. For the king there is only this bathing of royal consecration. (Chulachomklao Chaoyuhua 1973, 364)

The Songkran tradition uses water as a symbol. The king played a crucial role in the performance of the water-bathing ritual. How lavishly the ceremony was organized depended on the status of the ruler. The water-bathing ceremony in the river was an important ritual in Lan Na as it was carried out by the king himself. It symbolized the prosperity and flourishing of Lan Na, which consisted of five smaller vassal states of Siam. The *dam hua* ritual was relatively simple and reflected the close relationship between the king and his subjects. The king was the father-lord of his commoners; he was not arrogant but allowed his subjects to approach him closely.

The New Year festival of the Tai Khuen in Chiang Tung was organized as a state ritual in the throne hall of the ruler’s palace. The *cao fa* of Chiang Tung invited his officials and the population at large to gather there to perform the ceremony of asking forgiveness. The *cao fa* wore his royal insignia and a Burmese-style headdress. The attendants paid obeisance to the ruler in a clearly arranged order. The *cao fa* blessed the attendants in return. Afterward, the *cao fa* gave special blessings and invited the inhabitants of the whole town to have lunch with him. Thus, the day was called Wan Kin Pang (Day of eating at a temporary shelter). That afternoon, a boat race was held at the Nong Tung Lake in the town center of Chiang Tung to conclude the Songkran festival (Sathian 1973, 197; Khun Suek Mangrai 1995, 8, 45, 61, 147). Klemens Karlsson argues that the Songkran festival in Chiang Tung “was certainly celebrated as a fertility ritual in the late nineteenth century,” as observed by J. George Scott (Karlsson 2020, 197). The *Chiang Tung Chronicle* indeed states that the Songkran festival had its origins in a serious drought more than six centuries ago; thus, astrologers advised that “sand *cetiya* are to be constructed on the Sangkhan’s day of departure, and then men, elephants, and horses



Fig. 1 The *kanto* (กันตอ) ritual as photographically documented by Max and Bertha Ferrars in the 1890s. *Kanto* is a Burmese word with three meanings: (1) to apologize, (2) to express respect by raising one's hands to a *wai* (traditional form of salutation), and (3) gifts to be given for expressing gratitude. In this image one probably sees gifts presented by village headmen to the ruler (*cao fa*) of Chiang Tung. The gifts are placed on a mat. The four men sitting on the right and left and holding rifles are likely the ruler's bodyguards. This ritual was performed after the end of the Buddhist Lent and during the New Year festival.

Source: Collis (2017, 96)

are to be readied to go in procession to pay reverence on the bank of the Khuen River” (Säimöng Mangräi 1981, 237–238).

The New Year festival of the ruler (or *cao phaendin*) of Sipsong Panna encompassed merit-making activities, the ritual bathing of Buddha statues, and the asking of forgiveness from the Triple Gems (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha) and teachers. An important state ceremony was the water pouring of the *cao phaendin* of Sipsong Panna in a big gathering at the *ho sanam luang* (council of nobles). The *cao phaendin* was asked for forgiveness by washing his head with perfumed water. This ritual washing was accompanied by igniting long-tail skyrockets and water splashing in the royal courtyard. These are unique features of the original New Year festival among the Tai Lue in southwestern Yunnan (Phra Khamchang 2018).

Songkran and Royal Politics

We see that in the traditional Tai polities, such as Lan Na, Sipsong Panna, and Chiang Tung, the king or *cao luang* in his capacity as the supreme ruler of the country presided over the state-sponsored rituals of the New Year festival marking the advent of a new solar year of the era. In the case of Chiang Mai, the rituals performed during the Songkran

festival were embedded in the concept of a Buddhist state where the king was considered the main body of support in a deeply Buddhist culture. The merit making, the bathing of Buddha statues, the building of sand stupas, and the worship of ancestors were blessings that created spiritual well-being in an agricultural society and ensured a rich harvest in the next rice-planting season. In some years the king organized special activities on the occasion. For example, in 1846, during the reign of Phraya Phutthawong, a procession of Buddha relics to be enshrined at the great stupa of Com Thong entered the city of Chiang Mai on Phaya Wan day (Sarassawadee 2016, 50).

In an agricultural society, it is believed that the king is the person who guarantees wet-rice cultivation; during the New Year festival the ruler informs and advises the people by predicting the rainfall for the year, proclaiming whether the rainfall will be abundant or scanty. Such predictions are documented in historical records (*cotmai het*) of Lan Na, for example in that of Wat Phumin in the province of Nan:

In [C]S 1184, a *tao sang* year, a Phaya Wan day, on the ninth waning day of the seventh lunar month, two *naga* (dragons) arose from the water. (Monday, April 15, 1822)

In [C]S 1185, a *ka met* year, a Phaya Wan day, on the seventh waxing day of the eighth lunar month, staying for two days, one *naga* (dragon) rose from the water. (Wednesday, April 16, 1823)

In [C]S 1186, a *kap san* year, a Phaya Wan day, on the second waning day of the seventh lunar month, staying for one day only, five *naga* (dragons) arose from the water. (Thursday, April 15, 1824) (Sarassawadee 2016, 44–45)

It is likely that the author of the *cotmai het* was an astrologer who recorded important events that occurred in the course of the year. He paid special attention to the beginning of the year, because Songkran and the activities surrounding it mark the very first event of a year and are followed by other events. Such records were perhaps noted at least once a year.

The local political thinking of *kasem mueang* (เกษมเมือง), or “happiness of the domain,” comprises four aspects that are part of the royal duties (*phra ratchakoraniyakit พระราชกรณียกิจ*) to ensure that the people live in peace and happiness (Patcharee 1985, 35). The organizing of festivals, which provide the king’s subjects with relaxation from the hardships of daily life, serves this objective. The festival, which does not go beyond Songkran when the weather is very hot and dry, is most appropriate for taking a rest from tedious work in the rice fields. Thus, people can relax before resuming their work with the beginning of the next planting season. The water splashing during the Songkran festival, the merit making and the dedication of merit to deceased relatives, as well as the worship of ancestors and the *dam hua* ritual constitute elements of individual and

collective happiness during that time of refreshment. The water-splashing activities are a source of great enjoyment, notably for young people who play along the streets and roads. This joyful event has occurred for more than a century, based on the vivid recollection of Emelie McGilvary, whose husband was the head of the Laos Mission:

The holiday which most interests Lao children is the New Year, when all, and especially the young, give themselves up to a peculiar form of merry-making consisting in giving everyone a shower. Armed with buckets of water and bamboo reeds, by which they can squirt the water some distance, these people place themselves at the doors and gates and on the streets, ready to give any passer-by a drenching, marking out as special victims those who are foolish enough to wear good clothes on such a day. It is most amusing to watch them, after exhausting their supply of water, hasten to the river or well and run back, fearing the loss of one opportunity. Sometimes several torrents are directed on one poor individual; then, after the drenching, shouts of laughter fill the air. Elites and royal officials joyfully played in the river. (McGilvary 1884, 487–488)

Sathian provides an interesting hypothesis about the meaning of the water splashing:

The splashing and sprinkling of water and the joyful playing on Songkran Day are not intended solely for amusement during the New Year festival; they are also a way of praying for abundant rainfall for the wet-rice cultivation that starts soon after Songkran. (Sathian 1973, 127)

Sathian quotes from Luang Phadung Khwaen Pracan's (1937) book about "Lao" (here: Lan Na) customs as follows:

This water splashing is an ancient custom based on the belief that if elderly people and youths do not throw water, there will not be sufficient rainfall that year. People compare water splashing with the behavior of the Naga king in Lake Anodat. Due to this, people have a preference for water splashing, as they believe that this will bring abundant rainfall, depending on the season or month. (Sathian 1973, 127)

Thus, the water splashing is a symbol of humid fertility amidst dry heat.

Transformation of the Songkran Festival

The integration of Lan Na into the Siamese state entailed a reduction of state power at the local level for the sake of national unity. As a consequence, the Songkran festival, which used to be a state ritual under the auspices of the king (*cao luang*) of Chiang Mai, was transformed after 1961. The social changes also influenced the form and essence of the old-style Songkran festival.

The Siamese government gradually curbed the power of the *cao luang*. From the

1940s, the *dam hua* ritual was no longer presided over by the king of Chiang Mai but by the provincial governor. In 1939 the last *cao luang* of Chiang Mai, Prince Kaeo Nawarat, passed away. The government in Bangkok had decided 13 years earlier not to appoint a new, already powerless local ruler any longer but to fill this position with a governor directly supervised by the Ministry of the Interior. Without a *cao luang* representing the traditional local power, the *dam hua* ritual faded into oblivion. Phra-cao Inthawichayanon was thus probably the last *cao luang* who performed the *dam hua* ritual in the precincts of the royal court of Chiang Mai. As discussed above, the *dam hua* ritual took place in a public space: it was a state ritual in which all strata of society in Chiang Mai could participate. Even the Lua and Karen living in the mountainous areas descended to the city to pay obeisance to the *cao luang*.⁷⁾

During the Songkran festival high-ranking provincial officials came to perform the *dam hua* ritual with the *cao luang*. In 1927 the *ammat ek* (chief court official), Phraya Anuban Phayapkit, when receiving his appointment to the position of under-secretary of the office of the administrative circle (*palat monthon*) in Nan Province, participated in the *dam hua* ritual for the *cao luang* of Nan (Anuban 1969, 274). When he was later transferred to a new position in Chiang Mai, Phraya Anuban Phayapkit led his family to join the *dam hua* ritual organized for Prince Kaeo Nawarat at his residence on the banks of the Ping River. After the prince's death, it was the provincial governor who presided over the *dam hua* ritual for members of the former royal family. Wisit Chaiyaphon, the governor of Chiang Mai, sponsored, for example, the *dam hua* ritual for Major General Cao Ratchabut Wongtawan na Chiang Mai at his Lai Na residence (*khum lai na*). Another governor of Chiang Mai, Chaiya Phunsiriwong, headed the *dam hua* ritual for Cao Phong In na Chiang Mai. In contrast to the older tradition under the kings of Chiang Mai, the performance of the *dam hua* ritual had a predominantly private character and was no longer associated with a state ritual performed in public.

The records of the chief court official Phraya Anuban Phayapkit are historical documents showing that in 1929 government service had not yet come to a halt during the Songkran festival, as is the case nowadays. Moreover, the water splashing at that time was carried out in a rather polite and refined manner, unlike later. Phraya Anuban notes that when he returned from the provincial city hall (today the building is the seat of the Office of Art and Culture of Chiang Mai) to his residence on the banks of the Ping River, he had to struggle to evade rude water splashing and reached Charoen Phrathet Road on

7) Sommai and Doré point out that in Luang Prabang the Kassak, a subgroup of the Mon-Khmer speaking Khmu, participated in the Basi ceremony for the Lao king and queen until the mid-1970s. Thus, they deduce that "the Lawa (Lua) had also participated in the *dam hua* ceremony at the Chiang Mai Court in early times" (Sommai and Doré 1992, 187).

the side of Ban Ho (Chinese community). There he saw a group of well-dressed Chinese waiting next to his vehicle. When the Chinese asked the governor if they could splash water on him, he let them pour water on his hands and gave them his blessings. Not far away, he saw a crowd of young women and men throwing water near the Nawarat Bridge in a rather polite manner. However, after the political changes following the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the Songkran water festival became a more exuberant affair, with water being thrown from one car to another, from passenger to passenger. People no longer needed to ask for permission to throw water; thus, the original festival in Chiang Mai underwent drastic changes (Anuban 1969, 330–331). Whether these changes began in the early 1930s or earlier is unknown. The Presbyterian missionary Rev. L. S. Hanna from Lampang complained in 1924 that Songkran was “a time of rioting and drunkenness for four or five days” and sometimes even “Christian young men” were “under severe temptation” and got “into trouble because of the violence of neighbors” (Hanna 1924, 26).

After the demise of the local state authority, the Songkran festival lost its character as a state ritual and became a tradition for the population at large where people could engage in merit making and perform the *dam hua* ritual in their communities, in temples, or within their families, depending on how modest and simple their lifestyle was. When Thai state power spread to Lan Na at all levels, the provincial governor became the highest representative of the Thai state who supervised and controlled all district chiefs and other segments of the provincial administration. Thus, the *dam hua* custom came under the control of the governor, whereas subordinate government officials were forced to perform the ritual with the governor to emulate the now-defunct royal ceremony at the ruler’s palace.

The *dam hua* ritual of the provincial governor took place on the Phaya Wan day corresponding to April 15. This tradition began more than fifty years ago, around 1965–66. A procession made up of various groups departed from the center of the city and proceeded to the governor’s residence on the banks of the Ping River (Anuson Chaiya Phunsiriwong 1991, 120). This was an invented tradition, created when tourism began to play a major role in Thai society and economy. There was no doubt that this newly created tradition would also attract tourists, which was why the first state socioeconomic development plan of 1961–65 supported the promotion of the Songkran festival as a tradition of the North. This aspect has been continuously emphasized until the present.

The *dam hua* ritual for *cao luang* has been replaced with a *dam hua* ritual for provincial governors. It is interesting to note that there was also a custom to perform the *dam hua* ritual for the deceased *cao luang* or rulers of Chiang Mai at the graveyard of Wat Suan Dok monastery. In the past, it was the incumbent *cao luang* who headed the

ritual *dam hua ku* or *song nam ku* (ritually washing the stupa containing remains), as was the case in 1937 when Prince Kaeo Nawarat hosted the annual ritual (Anuson Phon-ek Phunphon Atsanachinda 1992, 247–248). It seems that during the period of Prince Kaeo Nawarat, this ritual was performed only within the small circle of members of the (former) royal family and high-ranking courtiers in a private rather than public space. Upon gaining a more profound understanding of the past, inhabitants of Chiang Mai began to promote the *dam hua ku* ritual on a much larger scale by extending it to a wider public space where various government units and the population at large could also participate. Thus, the *dam hua ku* ritual became part of a public ceremony in which the people of Chiang Mai commemorated the *cao luang* by venerating their bones enshrined in a stupa (*ku*).

The policies of the Thai state to promote capitalist development and link Thailand to a world of globalization impacted traditional customs such as the Songkran festival, whose cultural significance is characterized by the ritual bathing of Buddha statues, the *dam hua* ritual for high-ranking personalities, the asking for forgiveness, and the joyful water-splashing activities that later became fashionable. The water splashing, along with tourists joining in the building of sand stupas through donations, became more and more widespread with the promotion of tourism, while traditional customs and rituals declined (see Ploysri 2015, 170).

Conclusion

Songkran, or the Buddhist New Year festival, has a long tradition in the Upper North of present-day Thailand, which was the core of the former kingdom of Lan Na and whose culture spread to neighboring Tai-inhabited regions farther north. The Songkran tradition has been passed down over many generations. However, it is not a static tradition. It has changed according to the needs of an agricultural society that has long relied on nature, and it reflects strong and intimate bonds between the people of rural communities at various levels, who have created customs with local characteristics. As Thailand became more industrialized, the mode of production was transformed to capitalism, forcing the people to adapt the Songkran festival according to new social and economic conditions. Water splashing along the streets—a custom practiced by the masses of people, young and old—became dominant and “democratized,” while the original ideas of merit making and the *dam hua* ritual and their association with the traditional elites gradually faded. It remains to be seen whether the endeavors of local historians and concerned people to restore the original Songkran tradition of Lan Na—or at least

elements of it—will prove to be successful.

Accepted: June 24, 2021

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Dr. Silpsupa Jaengsawang for her critical comments and advice.

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