

# From Tea to Temples and Texts: Transformation of the Interfaces of Upland-Lowland Interaction on the China-Myanmar Border

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The nature of upland-lowland relations has been a productive preoccupation for students of Southeast Asia. This paper looks at relations between the Ta'aang and Tay Maaw people of Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, in southwestern China, re-examining the upland-lowland interaction through the lens of Buddhist practice. The role of lay ritual specialists in maintaining daily religious life and the use of upland minority language in ritual practice are central to the analysis. Special attention is given to the Ta'aang, as the changes underway in their society present us with an opportunity to reassess some of the basic assumptions about upland-lowland relations, in both present and past contexts, from the lesser-known upland point of view.

**Keywords:** Ta'aang (Palaung), Tay (Shan), upland-lowland interaction, Buddhist practice, China-Myanmar border

## I Introduction

In 2006, Aay Kham began reciting Buddhist texts at a temple in Maan Faai village, located in Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, near the Chinese border with Myanmar.<sup>1)</sup> In this locality of the Theravada Buddhist world, most temples are not inhabited by monks, and lay practitioners play many of the roles that are usually played by ordained clergy. So it is nothing unusual for a lay ritual specialist like him to give the teachings of the Buddha and read Buddhist texts to the village lay people. What was remarkable about his preaching is that it was done in Ta'aang, his native language, rather than Tay, the common language of Buddhism in Dehong, to the Ta'aang lay people

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1) As a rule, we use "Burma/Burmese" when referring to a language and an ethnic group in Myanmar, and "Myanmar" when referring to the country.



**Fig. 1** Yunnan, China

assembled in the temple.

The Ta'aang generally live in the mountains and speak a Mon-Khmer language, but have practiced Buddhism for generations. They have a long and close relationship with the Tay Maaw, who are the traditional rulers of the valley bottoms of this area. The Buddhism practiced by the Ta'aang is Dehong Buddhism, and the language used in their ritual practice has typically been a mix of Tay, the language of the Tay Maaw, and Pali, the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism. Texts are written in the Tay language, while chanting and other rituals are performed in Tay Maaw style. Not only did Aay Kham switch to Ta'aang for his sermons using texts created on the Myanmar side, but he also started translating the Buddhist texts used in the daily rituals from Tay into the Ta'aang language, using a Burmese-based script developed on the Myanmar side of the border. Since then the use of spoken and written Ta'aang in Ta'aang Buddhist practice has gained popularity. What should we make of Aay Kham's choice to use Ta'aang? What can we learn of Ta'aang thinking regarding their historically close relationship with the Tay? What do these developments tell us about how upland-lowland relations are evolving in the present, and what are the implications for a rethinking of these relationships in the past?

Although he has become a ritual practitioner in this village on the Chinese side of the border, Aay Kham himself was born in Myanmar, where he learned the Ta'aang script. His residence on the Chinese side and the innovations he has introduced into the local Buddhist practice are just one part of a larger set of dynamics in the long relationship between the Ta'aang and Tay Maaw people. This interethnic relationship is multifaceted, demonstrating elements of symbiosis, dependence, and contestation. The presence of the border is also key to the contemporary developments in the relationship. Ta'aang and Tay Maaw live on both sides of this border, and although both maintain fluid interactions across the border, the line drawn on the map does represent significant disconnects between and among the groups.

Like others in Dehong, the temple in the village where Aay Kham lives was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, as part of the larger crisis that affected Buddhist communities throughout China. In 1983, the temple was rebuilt, as the central control of religious life was relaxed and people moved to reconstruct their spiritual and ritual lives. The daily activities of the temple were restarted, with sermons, chanting, and other rituals being carried out in both Pali and Tay, using texts written in Tay. This was a return to the previous style of Buddhist practice, but socio-economic change in the region has since then introduced a new set of forces driving people's choices and preferences, bringing a new set of nuances to the ways in which upland and lowland people interact.

In this paper we examine the relationship between the Ta'aang and Tay Maaw people along this area of the China-Myanmar border, taking the role of Buddhism as an interface between the two as the main analytical angle. We believe this is justified given the central position that Buddhism typically has been given in defining the differences between uplanders and lowlanders. First, the historical Ta'aang-Tay Maaw relationship is introduced briefly, drawing selectively on theoretical material that has shaped the understanding of upland-lowland interactions in Southeast Asia. Next, the paper moves to a discussion of the unique Buddhist practices of Dehong, particularly the role of lay people in sustaining the religious life of the community. This section highlights the movement of people, between villages of different ethnicities and across the border, as an important social mechanism. From there the analysis moves on to explore recent developments in Ta'aang literacy. These are relevant here because they have sprung from Ta'aang efforts to establish their own religious practices as separate from, yet still closely related to, those of the Tay Maaw. These efforts are further reinforced by a perceived crisis in Ta'aang identity as young people are taking on influence from Han Chinese culture at a rapid pace. The last analytical section discusses these developments, placing the ethnographic description back into the theoretical frameworks of upland-lowland

relations. This discussion also attempts to describe some of the dynamics involved in the exercise of Ta'aang agency and their articulation of cultural adaptation in a rapidly changing world.

The ethnographic data presented was collected during several stages of fieldwork. The first author conducted intensive and extended fieldwork in a Tay village outside Ruili city in Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture between 2006 and 2007. He made five supplementary trips to Ruili over the period of 2009–12, when interviews and surveys were carried out in 118 Buddhist institutions (temples, stupas, and other facilities housing Buddha relics), including both Ta'aang and Tay Maaw temples (Kojima 2010; 2011). In-depth interviews were conducted in the Ta'aang village of Maan Faai, and more detailed surveys were administered in seven temples. Interviews with Ta'aang monks and women lay practitioners resident at Tay Maaw temples were also carried out. Finally, interviews were held in four Ta'aang temples in Mu Ce (Burmese: Mu Hse) and Nam Kham (Burmese: Nan Hkan) on the Myanmar side, as well as discussions with Ta'aang in Yangon. Drawing on this ethnographic material, the paper makes use of the narratives of the local people to highlight the perspectives on interethnic relations in the study area. This research is the first intensive, long-term field-based examination of Buddhist practice in Ruili of its kind.

As introduced above, the main actors in this story are the Ta'aang and Tay Maaw. The Ta'aang are known as uplanders, while the Tay Maaw are lowlanders. Both are transboundary ethnic groups, with sizable populations located in Myanmar as well as China. Because of political and other historical and linguistic reasons, the Ta'aang are known as Palaung in Myanmar, while the Tay Maaw are called Shan. The Shan and Tay Maaw spoken languages are very close. Traditionally they use different scripts, although in Ruili both scripts are used, often together. Local Palaung and Ta'aang speak the Rumi language, with only slight dialect differences. In the following analysis, all four of these ethnonyms are used. Although this may cause some initial confusion, these ethnonyms are used to specify not only ethnicity but also geographic location of the people.

## **II An Exception to the Model of Upland-Lowland Relations**

Academic interest in the relationship between upland and lowland peoples in Southeast Asia has produced structural models that have been debated widely. While generally regarded as uplanders, the Ta'aang, known as Palaung in Myanmar, where they were first studied, have been noted as not conforming to some of the norms ascribed to upland society. This section provides a brief introduction to the theoretical discussion that has

developed to explain upland-lowland relations. The historical background of the Ta'aang people is presented, followed by an introduction to the local context of the study site. Much of the contextual material presented in this section is from accounts in the early twentieth century in Myanmar.

### *Leach Typology and the Palaung Exception*

The Palaung derive their economic prosperity from tea cultivation instead of wet paddy; they are Buddhists and have a Shan type of social system, but they live in the mountains. (Leach [1954] 1964, 30)

Our frameworks for understanding upland-lowland relations have been colored by the influential works of Leach (*ibid.*; 1960). His typology of Southeast Asian social organization constructs two model systems in mutual opposition. The lowland model is characterized as governed by hierarchical political structures, supported by high-productivity wet-rice cultivation, organized by non-unitary descent, dedicated to Buddhism, and displaying a modest level of bilingualism. The contrasting upland model has egalitarian governance, shifting cultivation, unitary descent, animism, and high levels of multilingualism as its defining characteristics. Regardless of the rigid, dichotomous framework he conceived, Leach's greatest contribution is his conclusion that in reality ethnicity is a fluid and changing social phenomenon. His fieldwork with the Kachin showed that people could and did switch between upland and lowland systems—Kachin became Shan, and Shan became Kachin, depending upon the circumstances of the times. Leach's contributions have been discussed thoroughly throughout the academic literature, and there is no need to rehash the arguments in detail here.

Although he does not provide much detail, Leach felt that the Palaung people of the northern Shan States (known as Ta'aang across the border in our study area in China), uplanders in most senses, showed some rather different traits that made them stick out within his typology of opposing systems. The fact that the Palaung were Buddhists, and the related point that their economy was strong enough to support the necessary physical infrastructure and social institutions in the uplands, put the Palaung outside his framework. J. G. Scott observes that "thanks to their very pronounced hills, they have formed a distinct tribe with a chief of their own for very many years," stressing their upland setting, and perhaps a sense of isolation, as the facilitating factor for their social organization (1932, 136). Leach went as far as to say that the Palaung were organized "in exact imitation of the political model provided by their Shan neighbors" (1960, 53). Milne recognized the presence of strong influence from the Shan in the cultural, linguistic, and political life of the Palaung, but she does not equate this situation of cultural exchange as

“becoming Shan” ([1924] 2004). Rather than engaging in the historical patterns of social oscillation between hierarchical and egalitarian social structures, it seems that the Palaung and Shan had established a more stable relationship of mutual dependence.

If, as Leach (1960) asserts, “only the true Valley People” were able to become “civilized and Buddhist,” what can we make of Palaung social organization? According to his way of thinking, a hill person who converts to Buddhism has entered a world of civilization that will result in assimilation to a valley person. More importantly, we argue in this paper, how can we interpret the relationship between the Palaung and the Shan in order to understand the flows of influence and adaptation that seem to have existed between these people? The ecology-economy explanation provided by Leach leaves us asking for more detail from the daily interactions. Here, we leave aside the approach of assessing cultural instability based on idealized models, choosing rather to examine the dynamics of interaction between the two in daily life.

*Palaung Tea and Shan Rice: Bridging the Upland-Lowland Divide*

Since the time of colonial records, the Palaung have been known for their relative economic prosperity among the mountain people of northern Myanmar and southwestern China. The source of their wealth has been tea, and this has been documented in some detail (e.g. Milne [1924] 2004). The agriculture of the Palaung has consisted mainly of tea and upland rice. Palaung pick and cure their tea before sending it to sellers through networks that reach from Nam San (Burmese: Nam Hsan) to Mandalay and Yangon, and from Nam Kham into China, demonstrating two different economic orientations of the Palaung in the northern Shan States. Buyers include Shan, Chinese, and Burmese. At times livestock were sold to lowlanders, but this was typically done in conjunction with the shipment of tea. Income derived from tea was used to purchase rice and manufactured goods such as textiles from the Shan (Leach [1954] 1964). Some tea planters even placed advance orders for manufactured goods from Mandalay on credit, and payment was made directly in tea at harvest time. Milne cites this as an example of the high levels of trust that existed between the Palaung and their lowland neighbors.

Milne ([1924] 2004), writing about the situation in 1907 Burma, conjectured that tea was a relatively recent adaptation, partly because there were not many rituals involved with tea planting or harvesting. Unlike the cultivation of upland rice, which involved rituals mediating between the human and natural worlds, and is an integral part of the Palaung worldview, tea has always been a commercial undertaking. However, tea planting and curing were so deeply inscribed in the Palaung way of life that they created a legend to explain its importance, and tea is still the mainstay of rural Palaung livelihoods in Myanmar. Within Chinese territory, there are many areas that are believed to be old

Ta'aang tea plantations even though there are no Ta'aang living there presently (Sang 1999). On both sides of the border, it seems safe to say, the Palaung/Ta'aang's access to cash from tea sales enabled them to invest in other areas of life, including social and physical facilities to support Buddhism. Moreover, they were able to attain a level of economic standing that differentiated them from the other upland groups and put them on more of an equal footing with the lowlanders living around them. Leach (1960) went as far as to declare the economic success of Palaung tea to be the conditioning factor that enabled their conversion to Buddhism and active support of monastic structures.

*Mountain Temples: Palaung Buddhism and Its Ties to the Shan*

While the Palaung's deep integration into regional commercial markets is noteworthy, the aspect of Palaung society that has been given the most attention is probably the fact that they are Buddhists. *Races of Burma* says comparatively little about the Palaung, but does mention that they are "peaceable Buddhists, and . . . better Buddhists than their neighbors, the Shans" (Enriquez 1933, 38). Milne ([1924] 2004) states that King Bodawpaya of Burma sent a monk to the Palaung to teach them about Buddhism in 1782, but suspects that there was already significant Buddhist influence among the Palaung since the sixteenth or seventeenth century, as this is the time that Buddhism was introduced into the surrounding Shan society.

In fact this might not have been so strange. According to the Pa Daeng Chronicle, many hill people came down to take the Sasana back to every hill and mountain. Some of them came down to study and learn correctly and thoroughly the Dhamma, its meaning, the letters of the alphabet, the canon and the grammar and returned home to teach pupils and disciples. (Veidlinger 2006, 80)

This record, describing the Tai of Kengtung in the fifteenth century, portrays uplanders actively seeking out knowledge and technology, exercising substantial agency in acquiring and spreading Buddhist teachings during this early period of literate culture. In fact, some Palaung intellectuals deny that Palaung Buddhism was received from the Shan. They refer to a folk story in which the Palaung receive Buddhist teachings directly from India, from a disciple of the Buddha who was one of the original Palaung ancestors. This shows the strong feeling among Palaung that their Buddhism is more legitimate than that of the lowland Buddhist around them.

Nevertheless, a scenario put forward by scholars is the introduction of Buddhism to the Palaung from the Shan kingdom of Sēn Wī (Burmese: Thein Ni). Shan rulers used Buddhism as one way to increase their influence over the Palaung, who resisted tax and corvée requirements ("De'angzu Jianshi" Xiudingben Bianxiezu 2008), and it spread as

a result of the Burmese kingdom's effort to introduce Buddhism among the Palaung (Milne [1924] 2004).

Palaung temples, built on the highest part of the mountain ridge on which a village is situated, are reported to have had image-houses and a school (Milne [1924] 2004). Monks gave discourses in the morning, and stories of the Buddha's life were frequently read aloud by anyone who was literate. In the Nam San area of Myanmar, it used to be the tradition that parents encouraged all boys to enter the temple for some periods of time. In the early twentieth century, it seems that each temple had a head monk, but the ordained clergy consisted mainly of novices and nuns. The Chinese literature has also made reference to a tradition of ordination in Dehong (Dang and Zhou 2010), but the fieldwork upon which this paper is based found that this was in fact not the case (Kojima 2011; 2010).

Palaung Buddhism has been heavily influenced by Shan Buddhism, and to a lesser, yet still important, degree, Burmese Buddhism (Ashley 2005). The teachings, texts, institutions, and ritual practices are basically the same as those of their Shan neighbors (Yang 1987a; 1987b). In Dehong, there are clear influences from Shan sects, particularly the Yon (Thai/Lao: Yuan) sect from northern Thailand and the Pöy Cöng (Burmese: Pwe Kyaung) sect from Myanmar, as well as others from Myanmar such as To Le (Burmese: Taw Nei) and Co Ti (Burmese: Zaw Ti) ("De'angzu Jianshi" Xiudingben Bianxiezu 2008). The close relation between Shan/Tay and Palaung/Ta'aang Buddhism is seen at many levels of practice, and the depth of this influence is clear from the detail of sect differences found within the local Buddhist communities.

The literature has focused on the Shan/Tay Buddhism of the region, and hardly any detailed treatment has been given to Palaung/Ta'aang Buddhist practices, or to how ritual is transmitted from lowland to upland peoples more broadly (Ashley 2005).

#### *Tawngpeng: The Palaung Shan State*

It is not well known that one of the Shan States was in fact a Palaung principality within the larger Shan system of regional governance. Tawngpeng, centered around the Nam San plateau, is a fine example of an upland kingdom, suggesting that the Palaung have not thought like Zomians (J. C. Scott 2009) for some time. In form it resembled very closely its Shan model, but its predominantly Palaung population was ruled by a Palaung *sawbwa*. The *sawbwa* of Tawngpeng styled themselves as Shan rulers, adopting much of the apparatus of governance used by the Shan. Fig. 2 shows Hkun Pan Tsing, the last of the Palaung *sawbwa* in Myanmar, and his consort in formal attire.

But the Palaung *sawbwa* made a point of maintaining relations with sources of power outside of the Shan political world. At one point, rather than submitting to the head of





**Fig. 2** Hkun Pan Tsing, Last Palaung *Sawbwa* in Myanmar, and His Consort  
Source: Palaung calendar for 2009.

the Shan States, the Palaung insisted on paying tribute directly to the Burmese king in Ava (Milne [1924] 2004). In this way, the Palaung were integrated into the Shan polity, but they used their status—not to mention their Buddhist beliefs and literacy in the Shan language—in refusing to submit fully to the Shan. While the Tawngpeng Palaung were able to continue a flexible policy of avoiding the conflicts of their more powerful and ambitious lowland neighbors, they also isolated themselves from other Palaung communities across the Shan States and into China. The other Palaung, living in smaller, more dispersed groups, accepted more direct Shan/Tay control. This situation continued until 1947, when Aung San called the ethnic groups to Pin Lon (Tay: Pang Long) to discuss the details of a post-colonial Burmese federation. Hkun Pan Tsing was the head of the Executive Committee of the First Frontier Areas Conference in 1946, and represented the Shan states at the Second Pin Lon meeting in 1947 (Sai Aung Tun 2009). Although it may seem remarkable that the Palaung head of one of the more remote Shan States would be their representative at this momentous gathering, this in fact reflects that important role that Hkun Pan Tsing played in interethnic regional politics of the time. The political strategies of the Tawngpeng *sawbwa* have not been analyzed in his-

torical detail, but what we know of the Palaung's relations with the Shan suggests a complex set of nuanced interactions involving both demonstrations of conformity and also acts of resistance to the larger Shan political structures.

### *Uplanders in the Tay Polity*

The Palaung state is a surprising development that shines light on another angle of upland-lowland relations. As part of the larger Tay cultural complex, the Shan/Tay Maaw world is colored by their style of governance centered on *muang* polities (e.g. Condominas 1990). The creation of a *muang* usually starts with a Tay group migrating to an intermontane valley, displacing the autochthonous, usually Mon-Khmer-speaking people, and then incorporating them into the *muang* through symbolic relations that recognize the original people's relationship with the land and the spirits inhabiting it (Liew-Herres *et al.* 2012). Economic and social relationships are formed in a way that reinforces an imbalance in social status and political power in favor of the Tay.

This interaction probably had several possible outcomes, most of which are not well understood. One is a process of "becoming," in which one group assimilates to the other. Historically it would seem that the main model would be Mon-Khmer assimilating to Tay. Leach (1960) proposed this as the main mechanism for the growth of the Tay *muang* across the region, rather than Tay migration. Davis (1984) proposed a more nuanced view, in which the period before the Tay groups began to document their history was characterized by intense and sustained cultural interaction resulting in the gradual assimilation of many Mon-Khmer groups together with a significant level of cultural transfer from Mon-Khmer to Tay. One main area of transfer seems to have been the world of rituals related to the local spirits.

Another outcome of cultural contact in the *muang* system involves transmission of Tay cultural material to non-Tay groups. Across mainland Southeast Asia, there are many such *muang*-based relationships between Tay and Mon-Khmer, such as Muang (Yuan)-Lawa (Davis 1984), Lao-Khmu (Archaimbault 1964), Tay Dam-K'sing Mul (Evans 2000), Lue-Plang (Hasegawa and Kojima 2011), and Phou Thay-Brou (Chamberlain 2011). These often developed into feudal systems in which the Mon-Khmer assumed a position of subjugation to the Tay. Academics tend to try to fit these relationships into frameworks, more often than not inspired by Leachesque structuralism, rather than examining the daily micro-level interactions between them (*ibid.*). Re-examination of the historical dynamics may be constrained by the biases inscribed in written records, but local oral traditions may provide hints as to how these relationships really unfolded (e.g. Badenoch and Tomita; Kataoka, this issue). It has been proposed recently that the relationships between the Tay and the Mon-Khmer groups attached to the Tay *muang* can be under-

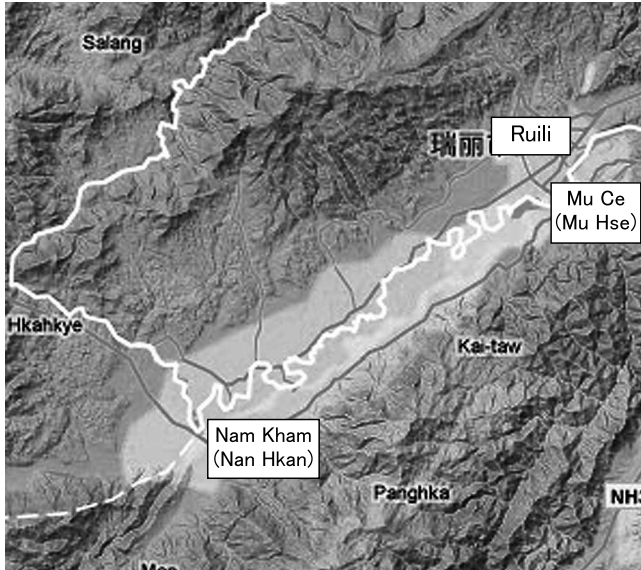
stood as a form of “social symbiosis” (Liew-Herres *et al.* 2012), where the Mon-Khmer come under Tay patronage. Chamberlain makes the case for an even more flexible view, an “interethnic symbiosis” (2011) in which the unequal relationships are manipulated and used by each group for their own benefit. The trade of high-value forest products is one familiar example. Symbiosis entails complementary relationships, located somewhere between hierarchy and equality.

The Tay Maaw-Ta’aang relationship examined in this paper, within the larger geographic and socio-historical context of the Shan-Palaung relationship, suggests that the symbiosis perspective, where unequal relations provide space for complementary interactions of mutual benefit, is a useful framework.

### III Mäng Maaw: The Multiple Dimensions of a Borderland

The geographic setting for this paper is an area known locally as Mäng Maaw (Chinese: Meng Mao), an inter-montane river valley through which the China-Myanmar border runs. The Tay word *mäng* is cognate with *muang*, the unit of socio-political and economic relations introduced above. Historically, the *muang* would have functioned as one social unit interwoven with different threads of interethnic relations. Now, Mäng Maaw is bisected by the border, and Ruili forms the center of economic gravity on the Chinese side. On the Myanmar side, the southwestern end of the valley is oriented towards Nam Kham, while the northeastern region gravitates towards Mu Ce. The lowland valley area has typically been inhabited by Tay Maaw/Shan, while upland groups such as Ta’aang/Palaung, Jinghpaw, and Han Chinese have lived in the surrounding foothills and highland areas. Burmese and Chinese presence has been a factor, but before the 1960s this was less so (Fig. 3).

The border between China and Myanmar only started to be consolidated in the modern sense after the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, although the last Tay Maaw *cawfaa* (Burmese: *sawbwa*) remained in office until 1955. With the establishment of the authority of the nation-state, the Palaung/Ta’aang experienced different socio-economic and political settings as they were split by the border. Two main historical threads are relevant to the consideration of local society in the Ruili border area. The first is the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. These mega-policies caused disruption to the economic, social, and spiritual life of the local people. The second is the long history of insurgency in Myanmar, pitting ethnic minority militias against the army of the military regime. Both of these have been treated in detail elsewhere, and the discussion here will be limited to the important milestones affecting the com-



**Fig. 3** Map of Mäng Maaw

Source: Adaptation of image downloaded from Google Maps.

munities in the research site. The Great Leap Forward was initiated in 1958, and many people opted to take refuge in Myanmar, including lay people, monks, and others involved in temple ritual practices. This outflow continued until 1960. In 1966, the Cultural Revolution occurred, and another wave of people crossed the border into Myanmar. The Red Guards destroyed stupas and temples. Land that was abandoned by fleeing lowlanders was reallocated to Ta'aang, and movement of Ta'aang from the mountains to the valley basin increased through the 1970s. During this period on the Myanmar side, the economic situation of the Shan was deteriorating because the Chinese border trade had been stopped. Many Shan migrated to Hpa Hkan in Kachin State to work in jade mines. The Palaung, on the other hand, were still making money from their tea production. In fact, they were in a better economic position than the Shan, and during the tea-picking seasons, they would hire Shan as wage laborers. In the 1980s, Shan stopped going to Palaung villages to pick tea as improvements in rice productivity stimulated agriculture in the lowland areas. Tea prices began to drop, and the Palaung ended up in a worse economic position than the Shan. On the Chinese side, the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, and reconstruction of temples began in the 1980s. From the 1990s, border trade began to pick up again, and the Mäng Maaw area has become an area of economic prosperity, increasing the importance of transboundary networks and pulling more and more Burmese and Han influence into the social landscape of the local people.

**Table 1** The Population Growth in Ruili, 1951–2000

Ethnic Group	1951	1958	1978	1988	1990	1996	2000
Dai (Tay)	17,668 (61.45)*	9,228 (49.56)	25,886 (41.66)	35,161 (45.25)	37,005 (45.33)	41,493 (45.51)	47,343 (43.19)
Han Chinese	2,406 (8.37)	4,660 (25.03)	27,027 (43.50)	30,527 (39.28)	31,797 (38.95)	36,169 (39.67)	46,135 (42.09)
Jingpo (Jinghpaw)	8,250 (28.69)	4,368 (23.46)	7,656 (12.32)	9,764 (12.56)	10,272 (12.58)	10,761 (11.80)	12,010 (10.96)
De'ang (Ta'aang)	391 (1.36)	300 (1.61)	646 (1.04)	950 (1.22)	1,039 (1.27)	1,080 (1.18)	1,499 (1.37)
Lisu	36 (0.13)	62 (0.33)	139 (0.22)	268 (0.35)	378 (0.46)	329 (0.36)	438 (0.40)
Others			779 (1.25)	1,041 (1.34)	1,148 (1.41)	1,344 (1.47)	2,195 (2.00)
Total	28,751	18,618	62,133	77,711	81,639	91,176	109,620

Source: Zheng *et al.* (2006, 9); Ruili Shizhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui (1996, 101), with adjustments by Kojima Takahiro.

Note: \* Figure shows the population of the ethnic group as a proportion of the total population (%).

This area on the China-Myanmar border has long been an area of complex, multi-directional cultural forces, and the trends have intensified with rapid growth (Kojima 2011). Table 1 shows population growth in Ruili city between 1951 and 2000, disaggregated by ethnicity.

Most ethnic groups living in the area are found on both sides of the border. There are close linguistic ties among the Palaung and Ta'aang in this area—the Rumai language is shared by most of them—although the valley area is dominated linguistically by Tay. Since the 1960s, the influence of the policies of national language has begun to make its presence felt among communities on both sides of the border. On the China side, the Cultural Revolution marked the first institutionalized introduction of the Chinese language into local society. This came with the increased attention of government policy towards the governance of the border area, but was also driven by the influx of Han settlers. In Myanmar, Ne Win's policy of Burmanization had a similar effect of dramatically increasing the influence of the Burmese language locally, despite a tradition of minority language education that had flourished previously.

The Palaung-Shan/Ta'aang-Tay relationship in the Mäng Maaw basin, often characterized as upland-lowland, is situated in this paper within other frameworks of cross-boundary and interethnic relations. Each of these is relevant to the research and is mentioned in the following analysis.

#### IV Lay People in the Temple: Dehong Buddhist Practice

Dehong Buddhist practices differ from the well-known Southeast Asian Theravada norms, particularly with regard to the low number of ordained clergy found. In Dehong Lay ritual specialists play the main role in mediating the exchange of offerings and merit that form the core of daily Buddhist life for the communities. These ritual specialists are highly mobile and represent an important mechanism for interaction between Ta'aang and Tay people.

##### *Theravada Buddhism: Local Variation on the Model*

In the Theravada tradition of Southeast Asia, the norm is for ordained clergy (monks and novices) to lead the community in individual pursuit of enlightenment (Ishii 1975; 1991). For monks, this involves strict following of the 227 Precepts, and for novices, the 10 Precepts. Ideally lay people will observe the Five or Eight Precepts. Thus the distinction between lay and ordained is clearly maintained, with the social and religious roles clearly defined. The practice is guided by the Pali Canon, scriptures in the Pali language. These scriptures are written in different local scripts, and pronunciation in recital is heavily influenced by the phonology of the local language, but the content is fairly constant across the region.

While the practical distinction between lay and clergy is clearly maintained in daily practice, as social categories, the two are not fixed. That is to say, moving between lay and clergy status is relatively easy. This means that it is common for people to be ordained and then return to lay life. In addition, an individual may be ordained for life or choose to practice as a lay person. The relationship between lay and clergy is key to the Buddhist community. As monks are prohibited by their precepts from working, the lay community must support the Sangha, the community of ordained clergy. The lay people gain merit through their acts of charity. The accumulation of merit will ensure they are reborn into a better life, as a result of their support of the clergy's more intense pursuit of enlightenment. Lay people and ordained clergy participate together in rituals. The first concern of the lay people is that accumulated merit will bring improvements in this life.

As a part of the Southeast Asian Theravada tradition, the Buddhism of Dehong shares many common elements with this generalized model. For example, the Pali Canon is the central source of knowledge and norms for practitioners, and the Dehong Tay and Shan scripts are used for ritual texts. Many of the rituals are performed in similar style as well. However, there are several fundamental and important variations that set it apart. The most striking difference in Dehong Buddhism is the small number of ordained

**Table 2** The Number of Clergy and Temples in Theravada Buddhist Societies

	Temples	Monks	Monks per Temple	Novices	Novices per Temple	Year
Myanmar	56,839	242,891	4.3	305,875	5.4	2007
Thailand	35,244	258,163	7.3	70,081	2.0	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: (Kojima 2012, 399). The data for Myanmar was collected by Kuramoto Ryosuke, Thailand by Hayashi Yukio, Laos by Yoshida Kayoko, and Cambodia by Kobayashi Satoru. Data for Xishuangbanna and Dehong is from Kojima Takahiro's interviews with the Buddhist association in each prefecture.

clergy (Kojima 2011). The average number of monks and novices resident at temples in Dehong is significantly lower than in other parts of Southeast Asia (Table 2).

Of the 118 Buddhist facilities surveyed in Ruili, only 29 had people resident, meaning that 75 percent of the facilities were “empty.” There were seven Ta’aang temples, and none of them had ordained clergy resident. Of the people residing at the inhabited facilities (including monks, novices, women lay practitioners, and temple boys), only 25 percent were from China, with the rest originating from Myanmar, as shown in Table 3.

The Cultural Revolution had deleterious impacts on local Buddhist infrastructure and practice, but even compared with Xishuangbanna (Sipsong Panna), where Buddhism is practiced by people speaking the Tay language related to Tay Maaw, the number of ordained clergy is low. In Xishuangbanna, the number of monks and novices has returned to levels similar to pre-Cultural Revolution days. In contrast to other areas of Southeast Asia, in Dehong it is not standard practice for a young man to be ordained as a monk or novice as part of the normal coming of age. These factors suggest low levels of ordination are the norm in Dehong Buddhism, and this was confirmed by local people:

In Xishuangbanna, there is a belief that every boy should be ordained once in his lifetime. That means that there are many novices. However, that type of belief does not exist in Dehong. Because we believe that only men who have the desire to be ordained should do so, the number of monks and novices has been comparatively small even before the Cultural Revolution. (Tay local historian, aged 68)

In Dehong, ordained clergy are required at several types of ritual. For example, in villages where there are monks or novices resident, they will travel to the homes of lay people to perform funeral rites or preside over house-construction celebrations. Monks and novices will also perform village-wide rituals to exorcise evil spirits.

**Table 3** Buddhist Facilities Inhabited by Monks, Novices, Temple Boys, and *Laay Khaaw* in Ruili City (August 2010)

Village	Type	Sect	Monks Total	From China	From Myanmar	Novices Total	From China	From Myanmar	Temple Boys Total	From China	From Myanmar	<i>Laay Khaaw</i> Total	From China	From Myanmar
VO	Temple	Pöy Cöng	2	0	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
VT	Temple	Pöy Cöng	2	1	1	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
PT	Temple	To Le	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
ML	Lay house	Pöy Cöng	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
TL	Temple	To Le	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	4
TL	Stupa		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
VM	Temple	To Le	1	0	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
TK	Temple	To Le	4	1	3	5	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
TN	Temple	To Le	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LA	Temple	To Le	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
LN	Temple	To Le	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
LH	Temple	To Le	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
LH	Stupa		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
TH	Temple	Pöy Cöng	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
VL	Temple		5	4	1	30	5	25	33	13	20	0	0	0
HS	Temple	To Le	6	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TT	Temple	Pöy Cöng	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LS	Temple	To Le	5	0	5	5	2	3	0	0	0	1	0	1
TX	Temple	To Le	2	2	0	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
TO	Temple	To Le	1	0	1	4	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
OL	Temple	To Le	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
LX	Temple	To Le	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
TS	Temple	Pöy Cöng	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
NT	Temple	To Le	3	0	3	15	0	15	0	0	0	0	0	0
MA	Temple	To Le	1	0	1	4	1	3	0	0	0	1	0	1
LT	Temple	Pöy Cöng	2	1	1	6	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
TS	Temple	To Le	1	0	1	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
LM	Temple	To Le	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TT	Footprint of the Buddha		1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total			42	12	30	83	16	67	35	13	22	18	4	14

Source: Surveys conducted by Kojima Takahiro.

Notes: 1) The encircled cells indicate Palaung residents.

2) The temple of VT village was formerly affiliated with the Yon sect. Now the abbot belongs to the Pöy Cöng sect.

3) The *laay khaaw* of ML village doesn't live in the temple but in her son's house.

4) The stupas and footprint of the Buddha don't belong to any sect. The temple of VL village doesn't belong to a sect because it was built by the Buddhist association.

In villages where no monks or novices are resident, they may be invited from another village to come perform the necessary rituals, such as large-scale offerings. Other rituals are performed by lay ritual specialists, allowing the community to function with very few monks and novices.

With rising levels of prosperity, many Tay and Ta'aang villagers in Dehong express



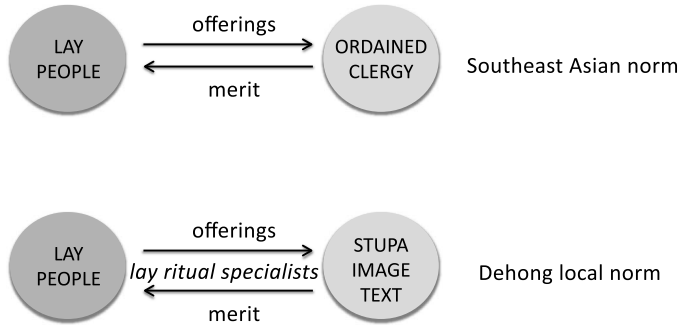


Fig. 4 Characteristics of Buddhism in Dehong

a general desire to build temples, particularly in rebuilding those lost in the Cultural Revolution. But in subsequent discussion, they often say that it is too much of a burden to support the monks. Thus, the traditionally low levels of ordination and the cost of maintaining resident clergy explain why so many temples are “empty” in Dehong. In other words, we see a mix of cultural preferences and economic realities that are seemingly contradictory. But the standard practices centered on “empty temples” are interesting in light of Leach’s economic explanation of Palaung Buddhism. While we do see a good economic situation contributing to the growth of Buddhism, the relative affluence has not meant a major shift in the patterns of residence in temples. The general schematics of the common Southeast Asia norm and the Dehong norm are compared in Fig. 4.

The absence of monks and novices has implications for the accumulation of merit within the local community. Whereas the norm for Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism is a direct relationship of exchange of offerings and merit between the lay community and the ordained clergy, the offering-merit transaction is mediated by lay ritual specialists who interact with symbols of the Buddha such as stupas, Buddha images, and Buddhist texts.

#### *Roles Played by Lay Ritual Specialists*

As introduced above, lay ritual specialists make up for the lack of ordained clergy resident at temples in Dehong. None of the seven Ta’aang villages have ordained clergy resident at their temple. The most important of these specialists are responsible for reciting and reading texts during rituals. These individuals are known as *ta’cong* in Ta’aang (*ta’*, “old man, grandfather,” and *cong*, “temple,” originally from Burmese *kyaung*) and *ho lu* in Tay (*ho*, “head,” and *lu*, “donation,” from Burmese *hlu*, “donation”). The *ho lu* is central to all the functions of the temple, and every village in Ruili has at least one *ho lu*. It is interesting to note that 86 percent of the Tay *ho lu* are not from the villages where their



**Fig. 5** Text Altar in Tay House

Source: Photo by Kojima Takahiro.

temples are located, while all but one of the seven Ta'aang *ta'cong* are also from other villages.

The *ta'cong/ho lu* provides access to Buddhist texts through his role in reciting at rituals. As the Tay name indicates, he manages offerings from the lay community, thereby facilitating access to merit. His duties cover rituals at several levels, including:

- Reciting scriptures and making offerings in front of the “text altar” (Fig. 5) of each household at weddings, celebrations of house construction, and funerals;
- Making offerings and leading the community in reciting scriptures in front of the Buddha image at village-wide rituals; and
- Reciting the Buddhist texts (*taa laa*) at the temple during large rituals such as the annual rainy season retreat (*wa*), water festival (*sang tsen*), and donation of robes (*kan thin*) festival.

In each, the lay participants gain merit through the *ta'cong/ho lu*'s recitals, and in the case of the *taa laa* recital the lay community receives Buddhist teachings for application in daily life.

In addition to the *ta'cong/ho lu*, Dehong Buddhist practices are supported by female lay renunciants (referred to in this paper as “women lay practitioners”) known as *yaa khaaw* or *laay khaaw* (*yaa*, “grandmother,” *laay*, “elderly woman,” and *khaaw*, “white,



**Fig. 6** Ta'aang *Yaa Khaaw* Reciting Scriptures at a Funeral

Source: Photo by Kojima Takahiro.

pure”) in Tay. *Yaa khaaw* are not considered to be Buddhist nuns in this analysis. They do shave their heads, wear pink robes, and take part in the “ordained” realm of Buddhist practice, but generally speaking their role is much less than that of the *ta’cong/ho lu* with regard to actual ritual practice. Therefore, a *yaa khaaw* has two main duties. The first is to take care of the temple or stupa facilities and grounds, including cleaning and making daily offerings to the Buddha image. The second duty involves participation in funerals, and reciting scriptures in the daytime (Fig. 6), while the *ta’cong/ho lu* recites at night.

For the broader community, groups of lay people participate in certain rituals, particularly during the three-month *wa* period. These people are known as *ta’ sin yaa sin* (elderly men and women of the precepts) in Ta’aang, and *khing laay* (elderly men, elderly women) in Tay. During the *wa*, they are in the temple on holy days (*wan sin*) to observe the Five and Eight Precepts. They are also invited to participate at the many rituals held throughout the year. The *khing laay* activities during the *wa* period demonstrate the relationship between lay practitioners, specialist practitioners, and symbols of the Buddha. There are 13 *wan sin* during this period. For each *wan sin*, the Tay *khing laay* stay two nights at the temple, while the Ta’aang *ta’ sin yaa sin* do not. On the evening before a holy day, the Tay *ho lu* leads the *khing laay* in taking the Five Precepts, which are received in front of the Buddha image, not from a monk, which is the more common Theravada practice. After offering flowers to the image, the people go to sleep. The next morning, the Tay *khing laay* receive the Eight Precepts, and the Ta’aang *ta’ sin yaa sin* receive the Five Precepts. They then offer a meal to the Buddha image and do meditation. In the afternoon, both the Ta’aang and Tay listen to the *ta’cong/ho lu*’s recitation of

Buddhist texts and make another offering to the Buddha image. The next morning, the Tay *khing laay* take the Five Precepts and then return to their homes.

While there are slight differences between the Tay and Ta'aang in the roles and practices of the elderly lay people, in general the Dehong Buddhist community accumulates merit through the intermediary role of the *ta'cong/ho lu*. Recitation of Buddhist texts accompanies offerings in this fundamental core practice led by laymen. This situation is the norm throughout the broader Ta'aang community, and much of the Tay community as well.

### *Movement of People*

As suggested above, individual mobility is important to the functioning of Buddhist practice in Dehong, as witnessed by the accounts of *ho lu* and *ta'cong* originating from outside their village of current residence. Results of a survey in 2010 of people residing at 29 Buddhist facilities in Ruili city confirm this observation.

The majority of clergy resident at the Ruili temples surveyed are from Myanmar, as shown in Table 3 presented above. For example, 71 percent of the monks were from Myanmar, including both Shan and Palaung, while 81 percent of novices had crossed the border to take up residence on the Chinese side. Women also have high mobility, with 78 percent of women lay practitioners originating from Myanmar. The total number of people from Myanmar in these temples is 75 percent.

The relationship between the villages of Ten Long (lowland, Tay, China) and Maan Om (upland, Palaung, Myanmar) illustrates some of the important dynamics behind the movement of people. Ten Long is a large village, comprised of approximately 250 households. Between funerals, house-construction celebrations, and other regular rituals, there is a large demand for a resident monk. The normal practice in the village had been to invite a monk from another village temple to perform the rituals. Eventually, in 1997, the lay community decided that it would be better to invite a monk to reside permanently at the temple. The temple of this village belongs to the Minzo sect, and there are other Tay Minzo temples in the vicinity, but the community expressed concern about the morality of Tay monks. There was a general sense that some Tay monks reflected an unacceptable laxity in adherence to the precepts. The conclusion was that it would be better to invite a Palaung monk because they observe the precepts more strictly and in general have good practice. Furthermore, the Palaung monks speak fluent Tay, and there is no problem with giving sermons. For these reasons, the community decided to make a request to the elders of the Minzo sect in Maan Om that a monk be sent to their village as the abbot.

Maan Om is located in the mountains in Myanmar, where the economic situation

has deteriorated over the past years. The village used to be prosperous enough to support four temples, but the community is having a hard time providing for them now. The birth rate is high, while at the same time divorce and death have created many single-parent situations. Poor families often send their boys to the temple to become a novice, and many girls decide to become *yaa khaaw*. There is not enough rice or oil to support the high population at the Maan Om temples. Ten Long, however, is a prosperous village with only one temple. Because of the one-child policy, children are not so numerous, and the parents do not want their children to be ordained. Moreover, because the village is wealthy, there are many donations, making the conditions for residence attractive to monks from Myanmar, where the security situation has been threatened by sustained armed conflict.

This case shows the push-pull forces working in the relationship between the Palaung and Tay temples. From the Palaung point of view, there are economic factors that make it more sensible to send monks down to take up residence in the Tay temple. From the Tay point of view, the option of inviting a Palaung monk from an upland village provides a solution to social problems that are affecting the local Buddhist practices. For both, the shared language and script, not to mention the fact that they belong to the same sect, make it possible for this exchange to take place.

Another type of movement that has special value for the Buddhists of Dehong is traveling to pay respects and offering a meal to the monks during the rainy season retreat (*wa*). In Tay this is called *song pen*. In fact, lay people visit the temples to pay respects even if there are no monks resident. The *wa* period is a time of meditation, intensified practice, and strict adherence to the precepts, for both the ordained clergy and the lay community. Members of the lay community make special trips to other villages with offerings during the *wa* period in order to make merit. Two cases of interest are presented below, illustrating the merit-making relations and social interactions between temple communities.

The first case involves an upland Ta'aang village (Loi Mon) and a lowland Tay village (Taa Pe), both on the Chinese side of the border (Fig. 7). When the Cultural Revolution began, the Tay villagers were concerned about the safety of the Buddha images in their temple. In order to avoid the risk of them being destroyed by the Red Guards, the villagers smuggled the images across the border and hid them at a Shan temple on the Myanmar side. After the Cultural Revolution, the images were returned to Taa Pe. The villagers agreed to give one of the images to the temple at the Ta'aang village of Loi Mon. In appreciation of the sharing of Buddha images, the Loi Mon temple community performed *song pen* at Taa Pe. This case can be considered as an exchange of merit-making opportunities, the Buddha image representing a long-term source of merit, and the *song*

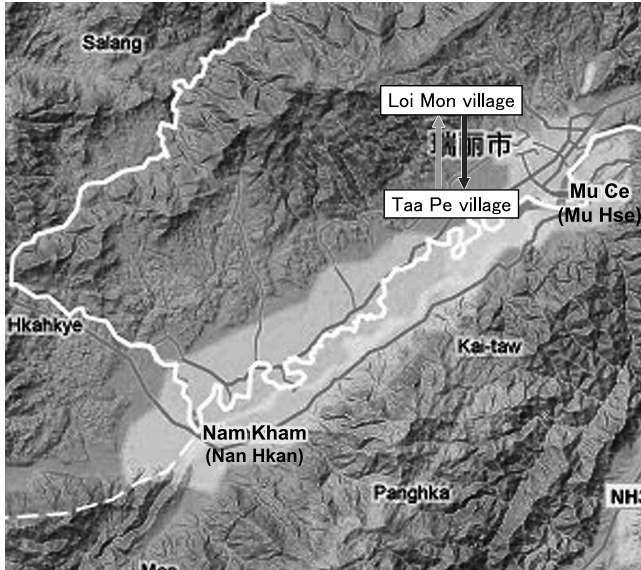


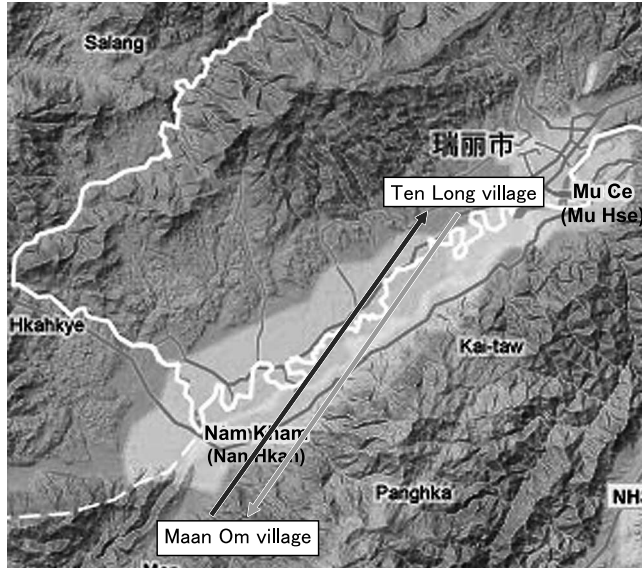
Fig. 7 *Song Pen* between Loi Mon Village and Taa Pe Village  
Source: Adaptation of image downloaded from Google Maps.

*pen* an immediate source of merit. Loi Mon also allows people from a neighboring Tay village to collect firewood from the village forest, and in return the other village performs *song pen* at Loi Mon.

In the second case, involving Ten Long and Maan Om (Fig. 8), the temple community of Ten Long performs *song pen* to the Maan Om temple. The relationship between these two temples, introduced above, is slightly more involved than the first case. Before the Cultural Revolution, the Tay community of Ten Long had invited a Palaung monk from Maan Om, in Myanmar. During the tumult of the Cultural Revolution years, the abbot of Ten Long took refuge at Maan Om. Then in 1997, as mentioned, Maan Om sent a Palaung monk to reside at Ten Long. Tay villagers from Ten Long in China travel to perform *song pen* at the Palaung temple in Maan Om on the Myanmar side to express their appreciation. This case also illustrates one strategy used by the Buddhist clergy to deal with the disruptions caused by the Cultural Revolution. This phenomenon is part of the larger relationship between the two groups.

As Table 3 shows, the cross-border movement of *yaa khaaw* is significant. Of the 14 women from Myanmar staying in Tay temples, 11 are Palaung. One of these women, aged 49, explained the situation as follows:

On the Myanmar side there are too many *yaa khaaw*. Since there are not enough donations to



**Fig. 8** *Song Pen* between Ten Long Village and Maan Om Village  
Source: Adaptation of image downloaded from Google Maps.

support them, they have to go to Tay villages on the Chinese side to get rice. This is called *khaam khaw* and is done between November and December each year. One year I traveled on a *khaam khaw* and the people asked me to stay, so I did.

Another woman, aged 54, says:

I traveled to Mu Ce from Nam San, collecting donations. I also took the opportunity to buy some Chinese-made goods. In Mu Ce, I became acquainted with a lay person from Ton Hong Village on the Chinese side, and they invited me to stay at their temple. The lay people provide me with anything I need. They are very thoughtful, and it is a good place to live.

With the women, it is clear that their minds are open to opportunities to improve their living standards, first increasing their mobility to secure needed food. From there, personal relationships developed during the *khaam khaw* often lead to invitations to stay at temples in China. The reasons for this development are discussed in the following section.

## V Reclaiming Buddhist Texts: Changes in Ta'aang Literacy

The Ta'aang community's relation to their Buddhist texts is especially important given the absence of ordained clergy to provide teachings directly and receive offerings. For these reasons, literacy has long been important for the Ta'aang Buddhist practices led by the lay people. This section describes the social setting for Ta'aang literacy, highlighting how written language is part of a Ta'aang effort to redefine their Buddhist practices in Ta'aang terms, thereby differentiating themselves from the Tay, while at the same time responding to a perceived cultural crisis arising from the influence of Han Chinese.

### *Interacting with Texts: Reading and Recitation*

One of the central aspects of Buddhism linking Ta'aang and Tay practice is language use, and it can be said that use of the Tay/Shan language has been an important foundation in this interethnic relationship. As a rule, the Tay language and Tay writing (*lik Tay*) are used for scriptures recited in the annual rituals. Scriptures in the Pali language are usually written in the Shan script, connecting it with a Buddhist canonical tradition that spans an area wider than the Shan States. It is probable that the Ta'aang have been using the Tay script since they adopted Buddhism, although it is possible that some Ta'aang were familiar with the script before then. Milne ([1924] 2004) mentions that an elite Palaung literati would have used the Shan script for commercial transactions and other communications with their Shan neighbors for many generations. This would not be surprising, given the wide use beyond the world of Buddhist texts that the Tay script had in Tay Maaw society (Daniels 2012). Sang sums up the situation:

The Ta'aang have no writing to represent their native language, but they have been using the Tay script for a long time. They and the Tay are followers of Theravada Buddhism, and use ritual texts written in Tay in the temple. Ta'aang novices get instruction in the Tay script, which means that some of the boys are able to learn the script from a young age. Because of this, Ta'aang intellectuals (lay people who have the experience of being ordained as a monk or novice) have for hundreds of years used the Tay script for reciting Buddhist texts, keeping public records, and exchange of correspondence. (1999, 41–42)

The importance of reciting ritual texts in Dehong has already been mentioned. However, in Southeast Asia the style of recitation differs by locality, and the Ta'aang recite their texts using Tay intonation, rhythm, and stylistics. The style of recitation is a marker of identification, and even within Dehong there are slight variations according to locality. But within the Ta'aang community, the main distinction made is between Ruili (Tay: *seng thung maaw*, “sound of Mäng Maaw region”) and Mu Ce/Nam Kham on



the Myanmar side (Tay: *seng kalong pen*, “sound of the Garuda flying”). According to local informants, the difference between these recitation styles is enough to cause problems in intelligibility. Accordingly, when *ho lu* or *ta’cong* from Myanmar are invited to perform rituals in Ruili, they usually make the effort to learn the local style of recitation.

With the increase in *ho lu* and *ta’cong* coming to Ruili from Myanmar, some texts (*taa laa*) have traveled across the border. As mentioned earlier, the Shan use a different script from the Tay Maaw, but texts written in Shan have become increasingly common in Ruili as well. Historically, the Dehong Tay script was also used widely on the Myanmar side of Mǎng Maaw, but with the movement to unite Shan scripts led by Shan elites after the 1960s, the influence of the Shan script grew in Myanmar, while the Dehong Tay script continued to dominate on the Chinese side. Now, with the increased cross-border interaction and influx of Shan from Myanmar, the Shan script enjoys some popularity in Ruili alongside the Dehong script.

### *Importing a New Literacy*

Aay Kham’s decision to recite texts in the Ta’aang language was followed by a personal commitment to translate Tay language texts into Ta’aang. Ta’aang informants in Ruili report that their overall level of fluency in the Tay language has dropped in recent years with the growth in Han Chinese influence. One direct implication of this development is that Ta’aang lay people’s understanding of sermons and recitations in Tay is decreasing, and comprehension of the material used in rituals is falling as well. The head of the Committee for Research on the Ta’aang People, Ruili Branch, summed up the issue:

On the Chinese side, the number of Ta’aang is rather small, so if we do not protect our linguistic culture, we will be assimilated into the Tay or Han. It is also embarrassing when someone of another ethnic group asks us if we Ta’aang have our own writing system. (Ta Seng, aged 47)

This statement links the issue of language use in Buddhism to larger trends within Ta’aang society in Dehong. For people like Ta Seng, the initiative to translate Buddhist texts into Ta’aang and write them in a Ta’aang script is an opportunity to address the challenges of maintaining their cultural integrity. On Aay Kham’s part, the motivation for starting to speak and write in Ta’aang derives from the difficulty he initially faced in reciting the local Tay texts in a way that was intelligible to the Dehong Ta’aang lay people. The local people initially preferred recitation using the *seng thung maaw* style, but his thinking was that it would be better to shift to Ta’aang rather than to try to adopt the local style of recitation. The narratives of the local people show that aesthetic preferences and real issues of comprehension intertwined are behind Aay Kham’s decision to start using Ta’aang language and script.

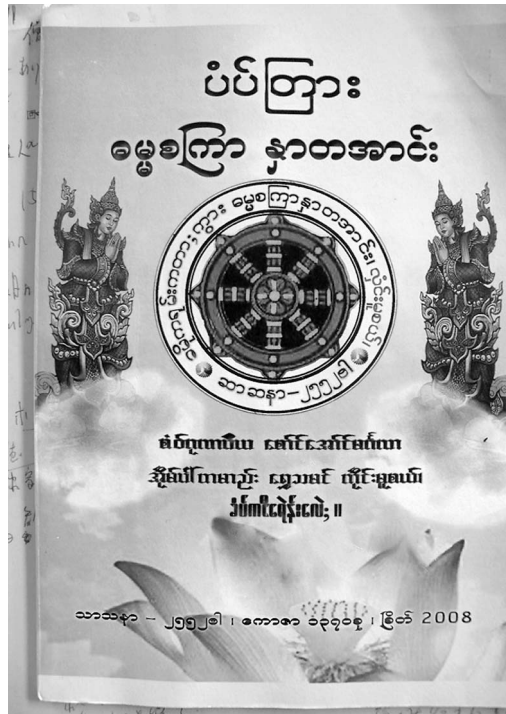


Fig. 9 Palaung/Ta'aang Buddhist Text from Myanmar  
 Source: Photo by Kojima Takahiro.

The Palaung script was first created during the English colonial period, based on adaptations of the Burmese, Shan, and Yuan (Yon) scripts. The Palaung script currently in use was developed in 1955 by U Paw San, a highly educated Palaung from Nam San. U Paw San was sent to study in Sri Lanka during his primary school days by his father, who financed his son's travels with income from tea sales. Revisions to the orthography were made in 1972 at a nationwide Palaung conference. Standards for spelling were also decided at this meeting. The Palaung script is based on Burmese, with one additional consonant and three additional vowels. Fig. 9 shows a Buddhist text written in Palaung/Ta'aang, brought from the Myanmar side.

In 2010 and 2011, courses in Ta'aang/Palaung literacy were given in Ruili. In the first year, 10 students joined the 16-day course. In the second year, the number of students jumped to 55, and the course lasted for 19 days. The courses were held during the summer vacation in elementary schools near Ta'aang villages. The instructors used a textbook developed in 2006 by the Palaung Literacy and Culture Association, which is based in Nam Kham on the Myanmar side. Ta'aang people interviewed about the literacy



Fig. 10 Palaung/Ta'aang Primer Text from Myanmar  
Source: Photo by Kojima Takahiro.

classes mentioned that it was quite difficult for the Chinese Ta'aang to learn the script quickly because it is based on Burmese script. For Palaung on the Myanmar side only small adjustments are necessary to learn the script, as most people are literate in Burmese already. Moreover, the Chinese government has not offered to provide support for the Ta'aang literacy efforts, meaning that the community must generate its own support internally. The promotion of Ta'aang literacy has just begun, and although the results to date are modest, it is unclear how popular the Burmese-based script will become. From the policy perspective, in China it is standard for Roman (Pinyin)-based orthographies to be developed for minority languages without their own written tradition (Shoji 2003). Fig. 10 shows a primer developed in Myanmar and used in Ta'aang language instruction in Ruili.

In the meantime, texts are being translated in Nam Kham on the Myanmar side, and some of these make their way to Dehong. The standard Palaung texts for use in rituals were completed in 1991, after a process of consultation among senior monks. Previously they were written in Shan or Burmese script. The ongoing work of translation is carried out by *ta'cong* and monks.

*Institutionalization of a Nascent Literacy Movement*

The Yunnan Province Ethnic Groups Academic Association Committee for Research on the Ta'aang People (Yunnansheng Minzu Xuehui De'angzu Yanjiu Weiyuanhui) was established in 1998 as a non-governmental organization with the objective of preserving and developing Ta'aang culture. Although the committee is not a governmental organization, most of the approximately 200 members are civil servants or village headmen. The establishment of the committee mirrors similar organizations, for example, the Tay Research Committee (Daixue Yanjiu Weiyuanhui). Early inspiration for the Ta'aang committee probably came from the example of the Tay group. The government provides no financial support for these committees, and the organization is run with contributions made by Ta'aang people. The headquarters are located in Mangshi in the administrative center of Dehong, and branch field offices are maintained in cities and counties of Dehong, in addition to Kunming, Baoshan, and Lancang. At the annual meeting in 2010, the committee decided to begin instruction in Ta'aang literacy. Interestingly, the first person to introduce Ta'aang literacy was an individual from Myanmar who happened to be a ritual specialist (*ta'cong*), and the committee decided to start more organized activities afterwards.

The institutionalization of concern for Ta'aang culture in China followed a similar development on the Myanmar side. In 1972 the Palaung Literature and Culture Association was established with offices in 19 districts. Once a year in August, the association holds courses in Palaung literacy in many places, including Yangon, Mandalay, and Nam San as well as smaller towns around the northern Shan States after the 1990s. Courses for primary school students run for one month, while those for secondary school students last for 20 days. The courses are taught by monks, school teachers, and other volunteers and are financed by donations from the students and the public. An annual meeting is held every August at the district level. Once every four years a nationwide meeting is convened, the venue rotating each time. Chinese Ta'aang delegations also attend this general meeting. The representatives typically report the situation of education for literacy. The Chinese Ta'aang also attend the award ceremony for the examinations following the literacy course at Nam Kham.

The Myanmar Palaung's motivation for initiating their literacy program was described by one of the previous secretaries of the association's Nam Kham branch:

During the British colonial period, the Palaung were the seventh largest ethnic group in Myanmar, in terms of population. But now our numbers are falling and we are only ninth. Because Palaung do not live together all concentrated in one place, the Palaung scattered over a wide area tend to assimilate to the other ethnic groups around them. If a village headman gets married to a woman from another ethnic group, the entire village is likely to assimilate to that group. What's more, we

didn't have our own writing, which means that we need education to make sure that our ethnic group does not disappear.

In his narrative, there is a clear link between assimilation, cultural integrity, and writing. This man, 49 years old, was born in Nam Kham, but educated in Lashio and Mandalay University. At the age of 21, he became a middle-school teacher in Nam Kham, but then joined the Palaung State Revolutionary Army, an armed insurgency group operating as part of the ethnic minorities' struggle against the oppressive policies of the Myanmar military regime. He retired from the army in 2005, at the age of 43, and became involved with the association. As an educated elite leader of the Palaung, he is looking to use his experience and knowledge to raise awareness of the Palaung cultural predicament.

Thus, despite policy constraints on both sides of the border, a local literacy movement has been born and has started to spread. With the new script, the Palaung/Ta'aang have seen an opportunity to open a new chapter in their own Buddhist practice.

## VI Discussion

Following the narration of some of the changes underway among the Mäng Maaw Buddhist community, this section expands upon three themes—changes in multilingualism, mobility, and the question of identity—that are relevant for the consideration of Tay-Ta'aang relations. The analysis supplements synthesis of the data already presented with some additional ethnographic material.

### *Shift in Multilingualism*

Bilingualism, and often multilingualism, has been one of the defining cultural traits of the Ta'aang people. The basic pattern of multilingualism has shifted significantly in the past decades.

There has been a change in the second language of Ta'aang people in China. In the older generation, Tay was the primary second language. Other languages that might be learned depending upon the individual's upbringing were primarily Jinghpaw, followed by other more minor languages spoken in the locality. Tay was the lingua franca, as the Tay Maaw made up the majority of people in the lowland area. Formal education was not widespread. The younger generations have undergone a shift in second language from Tay to Chinese. From the 1950s, Chinese-medium education spread in the area, and there was a rapid influx of Han Chinese after the Cultural Revolution, tipping the lingua franca towards Chinese. Since this period, all official meetings are held in Chinese, and

most Ta'aang are now conversant with Chinese. In the Ta'aang lexicon, the predominant source of loan words used to be Tay, but now the strongest influence on Ta'aang comes from Chinese (Sang 1999).

A similar phenomenon has occurred in Myanmar, where speakers over 60 years old are usually fluent in Tay/Shan as their second language but the younger generation speaks Burmese as their second language. For some teenagers, knowledge of Tay/Shan has been reduced to very basic words and simple phrases. For others, Tay/Shan is still spoken, but the levels of proficiency are not as high as their parents'. The situation is still very context driven. The introduction of the national Burmese-language education curriculum is the major driver of this change. Change in lifestyle, particularly in the urban areas, is a secondary factor in both Myanmar and China.

### *Social Mobility within Buddhist Society*

From the narratives presented regarding choices to settle in temples on the China side, it would appear that the Palaung see China as an area of opportunity. There is a perception that economic life in China is better. At the same time, Palaung are generally welcomed warmly into Tay temples, as the Tay generally perceive the Palaung role as being valuable to the local community. This is especially the case with women lay practitioners. Thus, the gaps in socio-economic wellbeing, taken together with the large number of vacant temples, create push-pull forces drawing Palaung across the border. This movement can be considered a path to upward social mobility for Palaung on the Myanmar side.

Supporting this trend further is a set of perceptions about Palaung ordained clergy among the Tay. When considering perceptions, at the basic level there is still an undercurrent of old stereotypes concerning the differences between upland and lowland communities, and more specifically between Tay and Palaung. First, there is a perception that the Palaung monks are much more conscientious and honest than Tay monks. In general, the Palaung are recognized for their competence in the Tay language and recitation. A similar good reputation precedes the women lay practitioners as well. Palaung *yaa khaaw* are perceived as being organized and thorough in the upkeep of temples. In addition, they handle money and other valuables, including donations, with care and honesty, and there are few cases of improprieties involving possessions at the temples. At the same time, there are also comments that reflect stereotypic views of the uplanders—for example, that Palaung women are used to living on the mountains and therefore do not get bored with the manual labor needed to maintain the temples.

In most cases, the change in place of residence has resulted in improved economic standing for individuals who move across the border to China. For Palaung *yaa khaaw* it

seems that their shift in residence is the by-product of their social networks rather than driven by a desire to search for a better economic life. Concurrent to this is the reality that there is a shortage of suitable people in Tay communities, and the Palaung's ability to perform in rituals in a way that is acceptable to the Tay means that they are recognized as skilled practitioners.

*Becoming Tay? Becoming Chinese? Becoming Ta'aang?*

Today, the local people describe Ta'aang-Tay relations to be limited to certain areas of social life. The networks observed are interesting in what they tell us about interethnic relations, but at the same time it should be recognized that the Ta'aang and Tay retain their own spheres of cultural life. The most intense areas of interaction are defined by specific needs, primarily within the realm of Buddhist practice. The cases presented above exemplify these dynamics. Thus, when there was a shortage of Buddha images after the Cultural Revolution, lack of individuals to manage the upkeep of uninhabited temples, or shortages in donations, the two groups formed bonds of exchange that were formalized to varying degrees within the institutions of Buddhism.

The types of cultural influence the Ta'aang presently receive from their Tay neighbors are somewhat different from those in the past. However, the implications are fundamentally the same for the Ta'aang—they are concerned for the cultural integrity of the coming generations. There are examples of the classic pattern of Ta'aang "becoming Tay" (*pien pen tay*) in Ruili. These villages are recognized by both Tay and Ta'aang as having become Tay: Phaa Sä village and Maan Lim village (1960s); Maan Kham village (1970s); and Paang Yaang village (1980s).

A case in point is Paang Yaang village, which used to be a Ta'aang village. Now there is only one Ta'aang person left. The rest have either become Tay, or are Tay who have married into the village. The prevalence of intermarriage is a major contributor to loss of Ta'aang-ness. The "last Ta'aang" of this village is Ta Mang, aged 82. Ta Mang is married to a Tay woman, and has seven children. His wife speaks only Tay, and the children speak Chinese and Tay. He is the only one who still speaks Ta'aang. According to Ta Mang, "if the children do not speak Ta'aang, they are not Ta'aang." Looking further back into the history of the village, we can see a process of assimilation that must not be uncommon. In the 1940s, there were about 10 Ta'aang households living together with approximately 30 Tay households. Intermarriage became common, and in the 1990s, the Ta'aang had for the most part stopped wearing Ta'aang clothes, choosing to dress like Tay instead. In 2000 a government school was built, and Ta'aang, Tay, and Jinghpaw children attend the school together. In recent years, intermarriage between the three ethnic groups has increased rapidly. These changes have influenced their interaction

with outside villages as well. In the pre-Cultural Revolution days, there were many more Ta'aang. In the area, there were three Tay villages and two Ta'aang villages, and all participated in *song pen* together, visiting all of the other neighboring villages. Now, since there is only one Ta'aang left, the people in Paang Yaang only visit the Tay villages for *song pen*, and they have completely stopped visiting the Ta'aang villages.

Another strong trend is the increase of influence from the Han Chinese on the Ta'aang. Ta Men, 60 years old, from Nam San village, relates that becoming Tay is not a concern in his village. The nearest Tay villages are more than two kilometers away, and even though there is some intermarriage, the children speak Ta'aang. The village has already abandoned Ta'aang clothing, but the language is solid. "People who speak Ta'aang are Ta'aang," he insists. What they are concerned with is that many village girls are marrying men from other provinces in China, including places as far away as Shandong, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hunan. Intermarriage is the first step towards loss of Ta'aang culture, as seen in the historical process of "becoming Tay," and is already evident in the increase in marriage with Han Chinese.

Nonetheless, the recent efforts of the Ta'aang to use their own language in Buddhist rituals, including both spoken Ta'aang and the orthography brought by Myanmar Palaung, take on special meaning given the pressure felt from intermarriage with Han Chinese. The Buddhist texts and recitals show that the Tay influence over Ta'aang culture may be waning, just as the Han Chinese influence over secular life is waxing. The loosening of Tay influence in Ta'aang life has opened up a window to strengthening the contemporary articulation of being Ta'aang. Although the Chinese side is economically more dynamic, the Myanmar side has made important advances in promoting literacy in the Palaung/Ta'aang language, and it is likely that the future of Ta'aang culture will be increasingly intertwined with that of the Palaung.

Administratively, the official ethnicity of a child born to parents of different ethnicities is chosen by the parents. At the age of 18, the child can make a final decision about which of the parents' ethnicities will be taken (Wakabayashi 1991). Thus, even if a village has "become Tay," if one's parents are both Ta'aang, one remains administratively Ta'aang. However, in these villages it is very common to find mixed Tay-Ta'aang marriages. It is often the case that a Tay-Ta'aang couple with more than one child will initially register one child as Ta'aang and one as Tay. It is noteworthy that with Ta'aang-Han couples, the children are almost always registered as Ta'aang. Although the child may grow up speaking only Chinese, living in Han style, the special benefits available to minority groups are attractive to the parents. The administrative angle on "becoming Tay" provides a view on how daily practices and official ethnicity often do not coincide.



## VII Conclusions

This paper has examined the relationship between the Tay Maaw and Ta'aang of Mäng Maaw, highlighting how Buddhism mediates a complementary relationship between the two. The analysis has tried to avoid the dominant fascination with setting up structural categories in favor of concern for the dynamics of local practice and the insights to be gained from local narratives. Focus on the Ta'aang has highlighted important detail regarding local practices otherwise hidden by the assumption that an upland group is simply mimicking the Buddhism of a lowland group. Furthermore, close investigation reveals that there is significant variation, not to mention contestation, within the politically dominant lowland majority as well.

The role of specialist ritual performers in Dehong Buddhism has provided an avenue of cultural reconfirmation for the Ta'aang. The Ta'aang have established a role in maintaining two aspects of local Buddhist practice. First, the specialist ritual performers contribute to the mechanisms of merit-making that drive the practice of Buddhism by lay people. Second, women lay practitioners contribute to the upkeep of "empty" temples of Tay. Part of this confirmation is the Tay recognition of Ta'aang performance, contributing to the Ta'aang search for a legitimacy in the role they are redefining.

At the same time, the Ta'aang have begun to assert some control over the cultural aspects of Buddhist practice. The use of the Ta'aang language in ritual texts and recitals has been met with enthusiasm from the local Ta'aang community, even as Ta'aang practitioners' traditional fluency in the Tay language has made it possible for them to provide services to the local Tay community. Networks of mobility are critical to their ability to do this. Ta'aang networks bridge the rural-urban divide and cross international boundaries. Moreover, they strengthen their own cultural networks, at the same time cementing relations with the Tay in times of need within the realm of Buddhist practice.

These multi-directional dynamic interactions demonstrate that the Ta'aang-Tay Maaw relationship is much more than an upland-lowland relationship defined by clear-cut social categories. Leach ([1954] 1964) asserted that the tea economy enabled the Palaung to achieve and maintain Shan standards of life, noting that the Palaung-Shan relationship was something different from the Kachin-Shan relationship he was trying to describe. Looking at the contemporary situation, we see a relationship that resembles a situation of symbiosis, where "becoming Tay" is not an inevitable outcome of the unequal power relations, where the Ta'aang contribute to the continuity of Tay Buddhism, and where the Ta'aang language may be undergoing an expansion of the social domains in which it is used. Symbiosis in this sense entails an unequal relationship, mutual dependence, and benefit, as proposed by Chamberlain (2011). Importantly, interethnic symbiosis also

opens up the possibility of multiple flows of cultural material and influence.

The Palaung-Shan relationship has been considered an anomaly, an exception to the convenient categories that have been constructed. But there are examples of “upland people” becoming Buddhists—particularly within Mon-Khmer groups such as the Plang, Lawa, Khmu, and Wa—that have not received sufficient attention. On one hand, each of these groups has distinct historical, cultural, and linguistic characteristics, suggesting the need for more detailed examination of their specific relationships with neighboring Tai groups. On the other hand, as Mon-Khmer groups, they share elements of an ethno-linguistic heritage and local regional history, which signals the potential for refining our knowledge of cultural contact on a broader scale. More detailed studies of the “upland” Buddhism of the region, focusing on the transfer of knowledge, practices, and institutions, could offer valuable insight into the socio-economic and political aspects of inter-ethnic relations in the region, from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

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