

Chaomae Song Nang Worship Ceremony: The Rite that Unites the Vietnamese and Thai Peoples of Mukdahan Province¹

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the process of social adaptation through participation in the Chaomae Song Nang worship ceremony that unites the Vietnamese and Thai people in Muang Mukdahan District of Mukdahan Province.

It was found that the Vietnamese refugees in Mukdahan Province who become Chaomae Song Nang disciples and participated in the annual worship ceremony are accepted by the people of Muang Mukdahan community to a greater degree than the refugees who did not participate in the ceremony. This worship ceremony, therefore, has had a significant role in unifying people of various ethnic groups who participate in this sacred communal rite.

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Introduction

Muang Mukdahan is home to a variety of ethnic groups: Isan Thai, Phu Thai, Kha, Kha Soe, Kha Lerng, Chinese Thais and Vietnamese. The first group of people who settled in Muang Mukdahan were Isan Thais who came from the village of Luang Phonsim in Muang Khantaburi of Savannakhet Province of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. They were the descendants and followers of a ruler of Muang Mukdahan who migrated to the area during the Thonburi period.³

The Phu Thai, Kha, Kha Soe and Kha Lerng are descendants of the people from the towns on the left bank of the Mekong River, who were captured and relocated to the area in 1832 when a ruler of Mukdahan led an expedition in which his army captured 1,057 people from the towns of Mahachai, Chumporn, Phong and Plarn. In 1840, the ruler of Mukdahan was again ordered to round up the Phu Thai, Kha, Ka Soe and Kha Lerng groups in the towns of Wang, Pin, Nong and Sepon with the goal of preventing them from joining with the Laotian army of Vientiane. These peoples were relocated to the area of Muang Mukdahan community.⁴ The majority of the Isan Thais and other ethnic groups of Mukdahan who resided here were engaged in agriculture.

Chinese Thais initially settled in Muang Mukdahan in the Rattanakosin period. An official document dated 14 November 1879 during the reign of King Rama V advised the rulers of Mukdahan and Nong Soong to uphold Buddhism and look well after the townspeople, traders and Chinese people.⁵

The strong economic foundation of Mukdahan came from the Chinese traders and middlemen who have been engaging in agricultural produce trading on both banks of the Mekong River for many decades. Isan and Chinese Thais have maintained peaceful and harmonious

³ Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, and the Fine Arts Department, *Culture Historical Development Identity and Wisdom Mukdahan Province* (Bangkok: The Teachers Council of Thailand (Ladprao), 1999) 70 (in Thai).

⁴ Ministry of Interior 74-75.

⁵ Ministry of Interior 112.

relations; the Chinese are amiable, courteous traders who always try to please customers, while the Thais are humble and peace loving people. The supportive and reciprocal relationship between these two groups has enabled them to maintain a peaceful coexistence and mutual trade benefits.

The Vietnamese were latecomers who moved to the area as the ‘Yuan refugees’ who will be referred to as “the Vietnamese” in this article. The Vietnamese refugees migrated to Mukdahan Province in 1920 during King Rama VI’s reign and after the end of the Second World War between 1945-1946.⁶ Vietnamese refugees were allowed to stay in Thailand on a temporary basis. They were a minority group whose personality and dispositions differed from Chinese and Isan Thais. Perceiving the Vietnamese as shrewd and scheming people who usually took advantage of the Isan Thais, the Thai people harbor prejudicial attitudes toward the Vietnamese to the point of loathing them. It is, therefore, interesting to examine how the Vietnamese relate with other ethnic groups in Muang Mukdahan.

Phon Attanark’s research titled “The Vietnamese Thais’ ways of life in Muang Mukdahan Municipality, Mukdahan Province”, conducted in 2000, looked at their housing, economic, educational and cultural backgrounds in general. There was no mention of the Chaomae Song Nang worship ceremony. The author’s field research revealed that the majority of Vietnamese people worship and join Isan Thais and other ethnic groups in the Chaomae Song Nang worship ceremony on a yearly basis. The author intends to investigate the significance of this ceremony to the Vietnamese people in Mukdahan.

Data for the present study came from the author’s field studies, interviews and participant observation of the Chaomae Song Nang worship ceremony over a period of four years from 2007-2010. The ceremony is held on the 11th day of the waxing moon of the sixth lunar month of each year.

In studying the roles and functions of the Chaomae Song Nang worship ceremony on the Vietnamese people’s social adjustment to

⁶ Khajatapai Burutpat, *The Vietnamese Refugees* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol Publishing House, 1978) 8-10 (in Thai).

Thai and other ethnic groups in Mukdahan, the author has adopted Durkheim's notion that religion partly contributes to the maintenance of social control and social integrity.⁷

Definitions

Chaomae Song Nang are the spirits of the daughters of a warrior ruler of Lanchang Kingdom. The villagers consider these significant and sacred spirits to be capable of protecting them and their community from danger.

Chaomae Wen Siew is the spirit of one of Chaomae Song Nang's disciples who followed her from Vientiane. Residents of Wat Sri Mongkhon Nuea community believe Chaomae Wen Siew to be their ancestor who can protect them and their community from danger.

Chaopho is the ancestral spirit who was a king, governor, or warrior in the past. The villagers revere him and believe him to be sacred and capable of protecting them and their society from danger.

The Vietnamese's Migration to Thailand

The Vietnamese who settled in Muang Mukdahan District took refuge in Thailand in 1920, during the reign of King Rama VI, after France occupied all of Vietnam and ruled with brutal force. The Vietnamese resented France and its treatment of Vietnam as a colony. This event coincided with a period of serious food shortage which forced some Vietnamese groups to seek refuge in Laos and the northeastern region of Thailand, particularly in the provinces of Ubon Ratchathani, Nakhon Panom, Sakon Nakhon, Udon Thani, and Nong Khai. Since that time, there were more migrations out of Vietnam with the majority of them settled in Laos.⁸

⁷ Durkheim, cited in Siriluck Supakul, "Ancestral Worshipping Ritual and Social Organization in Lampang" (Master Thesis, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Chulalongkorn University, 1990) 5 (in Thai.).

⁸ Khajatpai 1978, 8-9.

After WWII, France resumed its occupation of Laos and faced strong resistance from the independent Laotian government. A French army was sent to suppress and reclaim the southern cities of Savannakhet and Thakhek. France gained control of Savannakhet on 10 March 1946.⁹ It was during this period of serious military campaigns that the Vietnamese in Laos escaped to Thailand. 46,700 Vietnamese relocated to the Mekong riverine from 1945-1946. The Vietnamese from Vientiane settled in many districts of Nong Khai Province, while those from Thakhek settled in Nakhon Panom Province and those from Savannakhet settled in That Panom and Mukdahan Districts.¹⁰



Figure 1: Sri Mongkhon Nuea Buddhist Temple

The Vietnamese who settled in Mukdahan District were quite small in number compared to those who went to Nong Khai and

⁹ Suwit Teerasatsawat, *History of Laos 1779-1975* (Bangkok: Sangsan Publishing House, 2000) 293-296 (in Thai).

¹⁰ Khajatpai 1978, 8-10.

Nakhon Panom. Mukdahan Vietnamese generally resided near Wat Sri Mongkhon Nuea or Ban Napo communities in the vicinity of the Chaomae Song Nang Shrine, which were the communities of Thai and Kha ethnic groups.

Some of the newly-arrived Vietnamese groups had no place to stay and had to take up residence in the pavilions of Sri Mongkhon Nuea Buddhist Temple. They lived on the food that local residents offered to the monks. The anti-communist sentiment among the local Thais, Chinese and other ethnic groups made them distrust the Vietnamese newcomers. They were afraid that Vietnamese refugees would spread Communism and bring down democracy in Thailand. For this reason, anti-Vietnamese Thais tried to put pressure on the Thai government to extradite these people back to Vietnam.

Vietnamese refugees came to Thailand as temporary residents. Those who came to Thailand in 1945-1946 and 1953 were given a 'refugee' not 'alien' status. This made the Vietnamese feel that they were not Thai citizens, but illegal residents.¹¹ As refugees, their offspring could not claim Thai citizenship, no matter how long they had stayed in Thailand or even if they were born in Thailand. This was one of the reasons why most Vietnamese in Thailand taught their children that Thailand was merely a temporary residence, not their homeland. This kind of nationalistic sentiment sometimes made the new generation confused about their real status. Although the Vietnamese lived in close contact with the Thais, they still harbored feelings of alienation and hostility against the locals. Such feelings were the source of many of the conflicts in the communities. By and large, the Vietnamese had originally led a deprived existence among the hostile Thais.

¹¹ Amara Pongsapit, Polasak Jirakraisri and Thanet Wongyannawa, *Findings of a comparative study of land refugees in the camps of Laotian, Khmer and Vietnamese refugees* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 1982) 25 (in Thai).

Causes and Problems of the Thai-Vietnamese Conflicts

The ongoing conflicts between the Thai and Vietnamese groups were increasingly intense and extended over a long period. Certain problems could be attributed to the Vietnamese's personality and the nationalistic tendency. It was only natural for the Vietnamese to be patriotic and loyal to their homeland. This sentiment allowed them to form a close-knit nature and alienate themselves from the majority Thai population. It was under these circumstances that both groups' mistrust and misunderstanding against one another finally developed into serious conflicts.

The Communists exploited the Vietnamese refugees' patriotism for their own cause by entering Thailand illegally with the help of these refugees. Some posed security threats to Thailand's political stability. Such practices only heightened the Thais' prejudice against the Vietnamese.¹² In practice, Vietnamese refugees had established a secret Viet Minh association in Thailand with the main purpose of raising funds to assist Ho Chi Minh's cause to send young men to be trained as Viet Minh soldiers to procure clothing, medication, food supplies and military supplies to Ho Chi Minh's army.¹³

Another source of serious conflict between the Thai and Vietnamese groups came from economic factors. The Thai government at the time granted support while encouraging the Vietnamese to make their own living rather than living on the government's refugee budget. The Vietnamese were allowed to engage in twenty-seven occupations: bicycle repair, car seat assembling and repair, car frame assembling and repair, car exhaust pipe assembling and repair, manual metal soldering, wood sawing, furniture making, house building and carpentry, brick laying, house painting, door/window assembling and repair, tailoring, dressmaking, cloth laundering, fruit orchard and gardening, animal husbandry (except silkworm), retailing (except chemical medicines, radios,

¹² Phon Attanak, "The Vietnamese Thai's Way of Life in Muang Mukdahan Municipality, Mukdahan Province" (Master Thesis, Department of Thai Studies (Social Science), Mahasarakham University, 2000) 21 (in Thai).

¹³ Khajatapai Burutpai, 1978: 24.

televisions, still cameras, motion picture cameras, guns/explosives and accessories/related products), food and drink sale, food and drink making, shoe assembling and repair, watch/pen/glasses repair, knife and other sharp tool honing, picture framing, goldsmith, silversmith and crafting of other precious metals, wool and cloth weaving by hand (except silk weaving and silk products), and menial laborers.¹⁴

The Thai government imposed clear job restriction policies on the Vietnamese, forcing them to earn their own living and not depend on the government's refugee budget alone. Such policies were conceived on the Thai government's understanding that returning Vietnamese refugees to their homeland would be a slow process and would take a long time. Job restriction policy was introduced to avert employment conflicts between the Thais and the Vietnamese. However, it was felt that Vietnamese traders always tried to take advantage of the local Thais. The Vietnamese were perceived as being extremely hard-working, persistent, frugal, cunning and exploitative.¹⁵ Most Thais were prejudiced against the Vietnamese, seeing them as coming to Thailand to take over their habitats and jobs, while taking advantage of the locals. Some Thais really detested the Vietnamese and tried to drive them out of the country.

On their part, the Vietnamese sometimes failed to comply with the Thai laws and regulations, which sometimes led to political and administrative unrest in the form of resistance or confrontation with law enforcers, administrative officials and policemen. The Vietnamese filed complaints and staged political rallies to demand the rights for their elderly, children and women. They also obstructed local officials' performance by flaunting their suffering to attract public sympathy. The Vietnamese went to make merit at Buddhist temples to ask for assistance from the monks and the general public. These attempts caused a lot of unrest and conflict among the local residents.¹⁶ In 1976, a large group of Thais staged a rally to demand expulsion of the Vietnamese from Muang Mukdahan. The rally developed into a serious case of civil unrest.

¹⁴ Phon 14-15.

¹⁵ Phon 17.

¹⁶ Phon 22.

On 17 August 1976, the people of Mukdahan District staged another rally to expel the Vietnamese, throwing rocks at and wrecking the Vietnamese people's houses along the rally path. The protestors handed their letter of demand to the District Head Officer of Mukdahan who, upon receiving the letter, reported the matter to the governor, after which the rally broke up around 4.00 p.m. on the same day. However, on the same evening approximately 4,000 people from the districts of Na Kae, Don Tarn, Kham Cha-ee, and the sub-district of Nikhom Khamsoi came to Mukdahan District market by bus. From there, they marched along Sukhapiban Road and wrecked approximately 700 Vietnamese houses along the way. Government officials tried to stop them and arrested a total of 26 armed culprits. They were charged and put in jail on charges of peace disruption and internal riot.¹⁷

Although both the Thai and Vietnamese people in the Northeastern region, particularly in Nakhon Panom, Sakhon Nakhon, Udon Thani and Nong Khai Provinces, were governed by anti-riot laws, Isan Thai groups continued to press for an extradition of the Vietnamese from Thailand. Their demand for a 7.00 p.m.-6.00 a.m. curfew for the Vietnamese was not approved by the Cabinet. The Vietnamese were allowed to travel at will. However, the Vietnamese who went out for nighttime activities were often attacked by Thai youth. Mukdahan locals referred to this type of attack as "Tessakarn Tee Kaew" meaning "Vietnamese bashing festival".¹⁸ During the "Tet" or Vietnamese New Year, which coincides with the Chinese New Year, the Vietnamese sometimes resorted to putting up a sign saying "Thai people's house" in front of their residence in an attempt to avert house wrecking or bodily harm from attack by some of the Thais. The Vietnamese came under critical pressure from the local Isan Thais. In practice, the Vietnamese were not always protected by laws. They had to make certain behavioral adaptation to their ways of life to gain acceptance from Isan Thais.

¹⁷ Khajatpai 1978, 148-149.

¹⁸ Praphat Sawatwongchai, 15 April 2008.

Social Adjustment that United the Thai and Vietnamese Groups

After several rounds of negotiation with the Vietnamese government, the Thai government was able to send 46,256 Vietnamese back to Vietnam between 1959 and 1964. This process, however, was halted after military clashes between the Vietnamese and American armies in the Tonkin Gulf broke out. The Vietnamese government was reluctant to take the Vietnamese refugees back for fear of adding to the country's military problems. The Thai government recognized the Vietnamese government's intention and reckoned that it would not be possible to return these refugees to Vietnam. Since the refugees' children had increased in number, the Thai government decided to modify its Vietnamese refugee policy and introduced a policy of assimilation instead.¹⁹

A large number of Vietnamese refugees remained in Thailand and was the cause of many serious conflicts with the locals. Under the new assimilation policy the Thai government permit mixed marriages between Thais and Vietnamese people; Vietnamese women could legally marry Thai men. Marrying a Thai man had become an alternative for the Vietnamese to obtain Thai citizenship. Children from such mixed marriage were also able to become Thai citizens under the law. With changes in the Thai government policy, many Vietnamese had abandoned the idea of returning to Vietnam and resolved to settle permanently in Thailand instead.²⁰

With their hope of going home gone, Vietnamese refugees began a process of social adjustment of their behavior and ways of life to gain better understanding from local Thais. For example, more and more mature-age Vietnamese refugees began to change their religion from Christianity to Buddhism. They frequented Buddhist temples to mingle with local Thais on merit-making occasion, as well as to rally for support from the monks and Thais of the older generation who were more partial to the Vietnamese' grievance. These people were ready to render assistance to the Vietnamese. At present, a large

¹⁹ Khajatapai 1978, 94-96.

²⁰ Khajatapai 1978, 101.

number of Vietnamese are Buddhists who behave exactly as Thai Buddhists, making merit at Buddhist temples during Buddhist Lent and having their male offspring ordained as Buddhist monks at a suitable age.

When the Vietnamese refugees first arrived, they tried to get Thai citizenship by having their children adopted by local Thais so that the children could have a proper home and education while escaping from discrimination or attacks. The Vietnamese tried to join major functions or welcoming ceremonies for key government figures organized by Mukdahan provincial government units. It was their intention to become a part of Mukdahan's social scene and to establish themselves as persons of significance who earned the Thai government's approval and acceptance to join major community functions.

Senior Vietnamese leaders also tried to participate in all kinds of social functions in order to befriend high-ranking officials, such as chief district officer, governor, policemen, and military officials. Vietnamese traders would prepare gift baskets to be presented to these officials on New Year or other important occasions. The gift baskets would be placed in front of important government officials' house with or without the house-owner's knowledge in an attempt to secure their acceptance, assistance, and protection from the Thai people's assault.

The attempt to foster connections with local monks and local government officials for self-protection did not always succeed as the officials could not grant them protection at all times. The Vietnamese continued to live in constant fear of being attacked by the local Thais.

Newly-arrived Vietnamese refugees in Mukdahan usually settled in the community in front of Sri Mongkhol Nuea Buddhist Temple among the Thais and Kha ethnic group who were the area's original inhabitants. Community members highly revere Chaomae Wen Siew and believe her to be a spirit of their ancestor. According to legend, "Chaomae Wen Siew migrated from Vientiane with Chaomae Song Nang and other Chaopho and Chaomae in their retinues."²¹

²¹ Phan Chanthom, 17 October 2007.



Figure 2: Chaomae Wen Siew Shrine

Troubled villagers come to pay respect and ask for assistance from Chaomae Wen Siew. Even the Vietnamese of Christian faith also come to pay respect and make offerings to this goddess in the same manner as the Thais. The Vietnamese mostly ask for her protection against the Thais' assaults. "When the Vietnamese gathered for a party or entertaining function they would ask for Chaomae Wen Siew's protection from the assault."²²

This community has a version of the Chaomae Wen Siew legend that is similar to the legend of Chaomae Song Nang and their retinues from Vientiane. Mrs. Doklum Jarutan stated that:

²² Phan Chanthom, 17 October 2007.

A medium of Chaomae Wen Siew tried to join Chaomae Song Nang worship ceremony as one of her retainers, but she was rejected by other mediums of Chaomae Song Nang's soldiers. This rejection came from the belief that since Chaomae Wen Siew was a mermaid spirit who guarded a whirlpool at the mouth of Huay Mook pond she smelled of fish. This odor repulsed Chaomae Song Nang and did not allow her to participate in the ceremony. However, Chaomae Wen Siew was subsequently permitted to attend the ceremony as a maid who looked after Chaopho Kham Daeng's attires.²³

Allowing Chaomae Wen Siew's medium to participate in the Chaomae Song Nang worship ceremony as the maid of Chaomae Song Nang's disciple, Chaopho Kham Daeng, indicates the locals' acceptance of the Vietnamese and Kha disciples of Chaomae Wen Siew as 'disciples' of Chaomae Song Nang.



Figure 3: Chaomae Song Nang Shrine

After becoming disciples of Chaomae Song Nang, the Vietnamese also adopted the Isan Thais's practice of offering garlands of fragrant flowers, fragrant water, and liquor to Chaomae Song Nang in exchange for their blessings of happiness and prosperity.

²³ Personal communication, 17 April 2011.

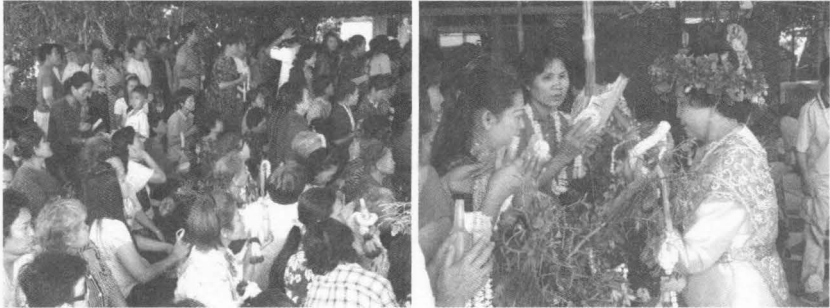


Figure 4: Presenting offerings to Chaomae Song Nang

Chaomae Song Nang do not discriminate among their disciples on the basis of race or religious belief. They are willing to grant assistance and protection from all dangers to all their disciples, both Thais and Vietnamese. Under the sacred context of the Chaomae Song Nang worship ceremony, the Vietnamese were able shed their status of 'Vietnamese refugees' to become the 'disciples' of Chaomae Song Nang, rendering them the same status as Thai participants. Regardless of their race, all ceremony participants are equal as Chaomae Song Nang's disciples who must respect and observe Chaomae Song Nang's teachings. They must love one another and participate in the worship ceremony with unity and harmony. Anybody who assaults a disciple of Chaomae Song Nang is challenging their authority and command; the violators will be punished and stricken with misfortunes. The only way to avert such harms is for the violators to ask ceremonially for forgiveness from Chaomae Song Nang. Isan Thais have always believed in the sacred power of Chaomae Song Nang and dare not defy her authority.

The fact that the Vietnamese always participate in Chaomae Song Nang's sacrifice ceremony with great decorum, respect and humility make them most welcomed by Isan Thais as fellow disciples of Chaomae Song Nang. The Vietnamese, therefore, believe that they will be protected by the sacred power of the two goddesses. Phruekkunchai Naphatkan, in an interview on 10 April 2008, stated that:

When my grandparents and my father first came from Laos they suffered great hardship but they were able to seek accommodation and food at Sri Mongkhon Nuea Buddhist Temple. The good lives we enjoy today came from the mercy of Chaomae Song Nang. I really believe in their sacred power. My family and I must come to pay respect to them every year.

Participation in the Chaomae Song Nang worship ceremony provides the Vietnamese with an opportunity to make their presence openly known and accepted in Muang Mukdahan community. They make cash donation to organize the worship ceremony and to gain more social acceptance from Isan Thai locals. The Vietnamese are finally able to become members of one of Muang Mukdahan's most important groups. Through participation in this ceremony, violent relationships and prejudice against the Vietnamese in the past eventually eased and turned into friendly coexistence and unity today.

Summary

The Vietnamese have adopted local Isan Thais' customs, culture, and traditional beliefs in Mukdahan Province in revering and participating in the worship ceremony of Chaomae Song Nang who was the ancestor spirit of the peoples of Muang Mukdahan. Similar to most local Thais, the majority of Vietnamese have become Chaomae Song Nang's disciples to seek their audience, to present offerings, and to ask for protection during the annual worship. Pledging allegiance to Chaomae Song Nang allows the Vietnamese to change their status from 'Vietnamese refugees' to Chaomae Song Nang's 'disciples'. The Vietnamese believe that in doing so they will be protected by the sacred power of these spirits. The Vietnamese's change of attitude from seeking the protection of Thai officials to seeking Chaomae Song Nang's spiritual protection greatly contributed to the improvement of the relationship between Vietnamese refugees and local Thais. Previous violent conflicts gradually petered out. Local Thais who used to resent the Vietnamese presence became more

partial to their causes. It can be said that Chaomae Song Nang's worship ceremony has played a significant role in reconciling the Thai-Vietnamese in Mukdahan Province to more amicable and harmonious relations.

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