

Legend of the Lao Royal Spirits in Dansai District, Loei Province and the Construction of Their Sacred Identity¹

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Abstract

The legend of Lao royal spirits is a story about the spirits of sacred persons who were royal members and played significant roles in Lao society, either having existed in history or just in the imagination of the Lao people. The aim of this study is to analyze, based on the concept of symbols and cultural interpretation, the creation of the sacred identity of Lao royal spirits in Dansai District, Loei Province. The findings show that the Lao royal spirit legend has played a significant role in constructing the sacred space in Thai-Lao border communities at Dansai, at the center of the sacred cities. Phra That Si Song Rak, a Buddhist stupa built in c. 1560 by Laotian and Thai kings, is located on the Man River in Dansai District. The stupa and Wat Phon Chai have been bound together as sacred places of Dansai since ancient times. Spirit houses, rivers, sacred space for the ritual of Lao royal spirits, legends, and other rituals related

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to the spirits, are symbols reflecting the cultural communication through persons, ritual priority, and timing. Tradition, ritual, color, costume, and language are the symbols indicating power, social class, mental culture, kinship relation, and the practice rules for the ancient Lao royal members. These symbols are the factors for creating the sacred space of spirits linking the state relationship across the geographical border.

The Legend of Lao Royal Spirits and the Construction of Sacred Space

Dansai is a district in Loei Province in present-day Thailand, 20 miles (32 km) from the Thailand-Laos border. People in Dansai and Laos have a close kinship relationship, since it is believed that the two groups of people have an ethnic relationship. According to the legends, the people in Dansai migrated from Luang Prabang, Laos. Therefore, Dansai people have been aware of their Lao roots through literature, language, tradition, ancient places, and belief in the ritual related to the legends of Lao royal spirits.³

The legends and rituals of Lao royal spirits (ผีเจ้านายลาว) in Dansai can be considered unique, having a local identity. These legends and rituals play an important role in making Dansai a center of sacredness and belief. The rituals reflect the root of culture and the sense of being Lao, similar to that found in the study of Siraporn Nathalang which indicated that legend is not just an ordinary narrative, but there is a relationship with the belief system that a group

³ Bourin Wangkeeree, "Folk Literature in Luangphrabang Laotian communities and its role in transmitting Luangphrabang Laoness in Thai social Context" (Doctoral Degree of Philosophy Program in Literature and Comparative Literature, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 2008) (in Thai).

of people have towards a supernatural power.⁴ Legend is a narrative that influences people's perspective towards the universe and their society, and implies a person's social status. In addition, legend reveals the identity of an ethnic group or a group of people.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the beliefs and rituals in relation to the legends of royal spirits in Dansai District are sacred narratives which reflect the symbols and the meaning of Lao culture in the ancient time.

Mueang Dansai: Center of a Sacred Town

The first generation of people founding Mueang Dansai [เมืองด่านซ้าย] included Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao [พ่อขุนบางกลางหาว] and Pho Khun Pha Mueang [พ่อขุนผาเมือง]. These two princes led their people from Lan Chang kingdom passed the Hueang River (แม่น้ำเหือง) to the Man River (แม่น้ำหมัน), stayed at Ban Na Ho [บ้านนาหอ] before making another migration to Ban Doen [บ้านเดิน] where Dansai District is presently located.

According to the principles of city establishment of the ancient Thai people as stated by Chao Phraya Surasakmontri's report of Yunnan Chinese war, the cities in Laos, especially in the areas of *Sip Song Chu Tai* [สิบสองจุไท], the area in the north of present-day Laos and the northwest of Vietnam, *phuan* [พวน] were found with land marks for the four-side boundary of each city. The marks were called "kong mueang" [กงเมือง].⁵ These people believed that the "city" was a special area completely separated from the residential and the forest areas. Mueang Dansai was not only situated in the right location according to the principles for city establishment, it was also constructed as a city gate and designed as specified in the ancient administrative plan during that

⁴ Siraporn Nathalang, *Theory of Folklore: Methodologies in Analyzing Myth and Folktales* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2009) 367-368 (in Thai).

⁵ "Kong Mueang" [กงเมือง] is a belief of the ancient Lao people in establishing a town, with a capital city at the center and four small cities the gates of four directions around the capital city; the rulers of those cities were mostly from the same clan.

time. In addition, during the Ayutthaya period, the city was located on the route connecting Luang Prabang and Vientiane.⁶

It could be seen that the location of Dansai was geographically suitable to be the center for communication. The area has been considered sacred as it is the place where Phra That Si Song Rak [พระธาตุศรีสองรัก], the center of faith representing the perspective of Buddhist cosmology, exists. The four city land marks of the four directions also indicate the sacred boundary of Mueang Dansai. As evidenced through the legend told by the old people and Chao Pho Kuan [เจ้าพ่อกวน], the medium of male royal spirits, during the construction of Phra That Si Song Rak, Chao Mueang Wang [เจ้าเมืองวัง], the Lao royal spirit assigned to guard Mueang Dansai, built four city gates to save the stupa from invasion by the enemies which might have been the Burmese army or *Mara* [มาร, the Buddhist personification of evil]. The four city gates are: Han Hao [หันหัว], the gate to the west of Dansai (presently Ban Bo Pho [บ้านบ่อโพธิ์], Nakhornthai District, Phitsanulok Province); Han Fa Maep [หันฟ้าแมบ], the gate to the north (presently Ban Na Ho [บ้านนาหอ], Dansai District, Loei Province); Hua Hom [หัวหอม], the gate to the east (presently Ban Na Hin [บ้านนาหิน], Phon Soong Subdistrict, Dansai District, Loei Province); To Mat [ตอมาตย์], the gate to the south (presently Ban Mueang Baeng [บ้านเหมืองแบง], Wang Ban Subdistrict, Lom Kao District, Phetchabun Province). Today, it is believed that the royal spirits living in the communities of the four gates have taken possession of the bodies of mediums, “Chao Pho Kuan” and “Chao Mae Nang Thiam” [เจ้าแม่นางเทียม], the medium of male and female royal spirits, respectively.

⁶ Loei Provincial Cultural Office, *Phra That Si Song Rak: The Land of Honesty and Friendship Amphoe Dansai, Changwat Loei* (Loei: Rungsangthurangitgarnphim, 2004) 68 (in Thai).

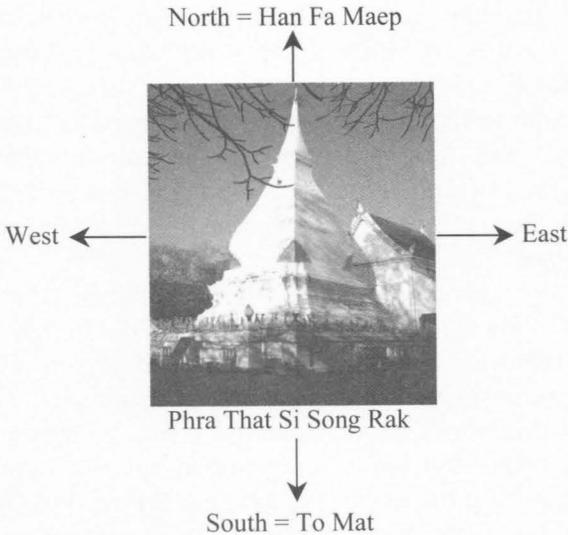


Figure 1: The concept of “*Kong Mueang*”

Mueang Dansai has Phra That Si Song Rak as the center of faith, with the four city gates of the four directions serving as the city land marks and satellite cities. It was told that the construction of the four satellite cities had been supervised by Chao Mueang Wang who was assigned by Pho Khun Si Inthrahit [พ่อขุนศรีอินทราทิตย์], Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao [พ่อขุนบางกลางหาว], and Pho Khun Pha Mueang [พ่อขุนผาเมือง] to guard Mueang Dansai. The story implies that the history of this city could be traced to the ancient age of Sukhothai. Chao Mueang Wang had the right to guard Mueang Dansai. There are also the legends of eight more Lao royal spirits: (1) Chao Luang Ong Thai [เจ้าหลวงองค์ไทย], the spirit of Phra Maha Chakkraphat [พระมหาจักรพรรดิ], “a king in the Ayutthaya period” who had given a contribution to build Phra That Si Song Rak; (2) Chao Luang Ong Lao [เจ้าหลวงองค์ลาว], the spirit of Phra Chaichetthathirat [พระไชยเชษฐาธิราช], “a king from Krung Si Sattana Khanahut, Laos” who had also given a contribution to build Phra That Si Song Rak; (3) Chao Saen Mueang, [เจ้าแสนเมือง], a Lao royal spirit guarding Mueang Dansai together with Chao Mueang Wang; (4) Chao Mueang Klang [เจ้าเมืองกลาง], a Lao

royal spirit guarding Mueang Dansai together with Chao Mueang Wang and Chao Saen Mueang; (5) Nang Khao [นางเค้า], (6) Nang Chuang [นางจวง], (7) Nang Chan [นางจัน], and (8) Nang Noi [นางน้อย], four ladies who were reportedly sisters and/or wives of the Lao royal spirits. These spirits have responsibilities for protecting the whole city of Mueang Dansai, while Phra That Si Song Rak is protected by Luk Phoeng Luk Thian [ลูกเฟิ่งลูกเทียน], a group of people who have faith in the royal spirits.

The “*kong mueang*”, thus, indicates exactly where the city boundary is following the legend that has been told from generation to generation about the correct location for establishment of a city, as specified in the plan in relation to Buddhist cosmology. This defines the area of Mueang Dansai as sacred space or space under the protection of ancestral spirits or guardian spirits assigned by the ancestors who were the founder of Mueang Dansai and Phra That Si Song Rak.⁷ Therefore, it can be said that Mueang Dansai has been purposively processed to be sacred space.

Phra That Si Song Rak and Wat Phon Chai: Their Relationship

Based on the concept in establishing a sacred city, two ancient places in Dansai District considered sacred – Phra That Si Song Rak and Wat Phon Chai [วัดโพนชัย] – have a relationship in terms of the concept of city establishment and their ritual functions. Wat Phon Chai was appointed as a royal temple under the king who founded Phra That Si Song Rak and was considered as the place of the royal spirits called “*ho phi*” [หอฟี].⁸ The location for Phra That Si Song Rak was chosen by taking into consideration the link between the location and the legend, the relationship between the forecast and the dreams, the idea of growing Plumeria (*dok champa-lao* [ดอกจำปาลาว]) and of having religious symbols. The location, which is quite rocky, could be interpreted that it represents stability and strength. The two *rang* trees

⁷ Nidhi Eewsriwong, *Words and Their Power: Language, Culture, and Power* (Bangkok: Matichon, 2002) 137 (in Thai).

⁸ *Ho* [ห่อ] is a small house with a big space serving as the residence of the royal spirits and the place for sacred rituals; lines of small spirit houses with decorations are found in the west and the east.

(*Shorea siamensis*), the trunks of which bend closer to each other, represent the tied relationship between the land of Laos, Si Sattana Khanahut, and the land of Siam, or Ayutthaya. It is believed that the *rang* tree was the birth and the death places of the Buddha.

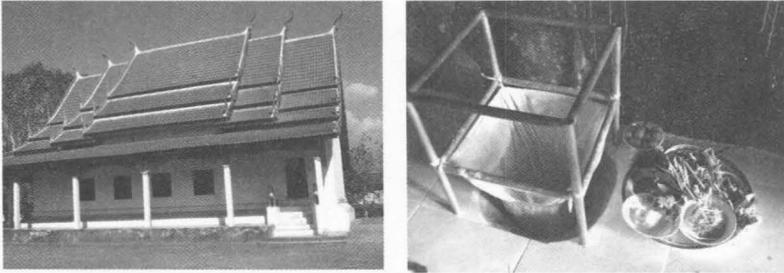


Figure 2: Wat Phon Chai (left) and Trace of Naga (right)

Therefore, the *rang* tree is treated as a sacred tree bringing luck to the people and the Plumeria is considered the tree of relationship, a symbol of Laos meaningful to the people of the Lan Chang kingdom. It is said that this was the favorite tree of a Lao prince, Chao Fa Ngum [เจ้าฟ้าจ๋ม] since his wife was a princess under the royal family of Angkor. He was the first one who grew this tree in Laos. This could explain why Plumeria is used for forecasting and also is the sacred symbol for Lan Chang people when performing any rituals.

There are many stories relating the suicide sacrifice for Phra That Si Song Rak based on the belief in the sacred construction of the pagoda. Si Song Rak does not only represent the strong relationship between the Ayutthaya kingdom and Krung Si Sattana Khanahut, it is also a love symbol of the young lovers named Mr. Mun (นายมัน), meaning something stable, and Ms. Khong (นางคง), meaning something remain unchanged. The story as stated by Suthuspong Gulraburt might be influenced by the legend concerning the ritual for establishment of a city pillar or house pillar.⁹ It is believed in the ancient times that such a ritual would not be perfect without having

⁹ Suthuspong Gulraburt, *Phra That Si Song Rak: The City Pillar as the Heart of Dansai People, Phuen Thin Isarn Phuen Ban Khorat* (Nakhon Ratchasima: Arts and Culture Center, Vongchavalitkul University, 1994) 84 (in Thai).

people with auspicious names such as Mr. Mun or Ms. Khong be buried under the pillar. The spirits of these buried people would be responsible for saving and keeping the city in peace. This legend could explain that the stupa has been protected by the guardian spirits, similar to the city pillar. In terms of a religious concept, the stupa was constructed near the *rang* trees and it is believed that the little finger bone of the Lord Buddha was placed in the stupa. The legend of Lao royal spirits, combined with the religious beliefs, has created the sacred identity of the stupa since it was established.

Phra That Si Song Rak and Wat Phon Chai are considered ancient sacred places. They were built under the same concept with mutual functions: Phra That Si Song Rak is similar to a palace for the royal family or a place of royal spirits, a “*ho phi*”; while Wat Phon Chai is a royal temple. It was explained through the legend that:

...at the beginning of the construction of the stupa, there was no drinking water for the construction workers, people then made a wish for a pair of Nagas from Phu Hin Rong Kla [ภูหินร่องกล้า, a mountain in Phetchabun Province] to do religious practice: one around the construction area; one at Wat Phon Chai. The two places then were built as a pair. The stupa was a place for the royal spirits.¹⁰

From the story, it could be understood that Phra That Si Song Rak is a place for the Lao royal spirits who contributed to the construction of the stupa. Within the stupa area, there is *ho luang* [หอหลวง], a small building serving as the residence of two royal spirits: Chao Luang Ong Thai and Chao Luang Ong Lao. All servants of the two princes were Buddhist, so they followed the ancient royal practice of building a royal temple for doing religious activities or making merit. They named the temple “Wat Phon Chai”.

Pho Saen [พ่อแสน, the person assigned to serve the royal spirits] informed that when Chao Mueang Wang takes possession over the body of Chao Pho Kuan, the spirit always asks “How are our temples?”

¹⁰ Sim Insingthong, 23 Feb 2010.

How are Wat That and Wat Phon?”¹¹ This indicates that Wat That and Wat Phon, where the ancient king performed Ngan Bun Luang,¹² are related to each other. The reason why the *naga* played a role in the legend with relation to Phra That Si Song Rak and *ho luang* could be that the *naga* was regarded as the god of earth and water. The *naga* can give water for agriculture which helps the people produce plenty of food all year long.¹³ For the legend of Wat Phon Chai, the *naga* was involved with Buddhism because the *naga* was a servant of the Lord Buddha. The *naga* had the responsibility to save Buddhism and to come to worship the Lord Buddha regularly. Pathom Hongsuwan stated that according to most Buddhist narratives, the *naga* played an important role as a major patron of the religion.¹⁴

The concept in constructing Phra That Si Song Rak showed that it had a connection with Wat Phon Chai in view of the legend of the *naga*, the history of Wat Phon Chai as a royal temple and as a place for the ritual of the Lao royal spirits, and for Phra That Si Song Rak in performing worship for the spirits of Mr. Mun and Ms. Khong or the ancestors who scarified their lives for the completion of the stupa. Since the stupa is regarded as a spirit house, the monks can not do religious practices there, but must be done at the temple instead. It can be concluded that the two places share the same concept of construction as evidenced by the legends, as well as the related rituals that link both places as sacred spaces through the sacredness of the Lao royal spirits.

¹¹ Jarn Chueabunmee, 24 Feb 2010. Note, Pho Saen is Jarn Chueabunmee, a relative of Thaworn Chueabunmee, Chao Pho Kuan.

¹² Ngan Bun Luang [งานบุญหลวง] which integrates the Bun Phawet [บุญเผาเวด], one of the twelve Buddhist traditions (*hit sip song* [ฮีตสิบสอง]) of Isan culture with the Phi Ta Khon [ผีตาโขน], a traditional mask festival, and the Bun Bang Fai [บุญบั้งไฟ], a traditional rocket festival, has become a merit-making festival that embodies a unique local identity, as well as a rite of celebration after the harvest.

¹³ Sujit Wongtase, *Nagas in History of Southeast Asia* (Bangkok: Matichon, 2000) 5 (in Thai).

¹⁴ Pathom Hongsuwan, *Once upon a Time: Myths and Culture* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2007) 21-22 (in Thai).

Spirit Houses and Rivers: Area for the Rituals

The rituals related to Lao royal spirits, such as the annual banquet for spirits and the compensation for the vow to the spirits, will be held at the spirit houses and the rivers on different occasions. It is believed that the spirit house, such as *ho luang*, which is situated in the same area as Phra That Si Song Rak, is the residence of Chao Luang Ong Thai and Chao Luang Ong Lao; *ho noi* [หอน้อย] (a small building serving as the residence of Chao Saen Mueang), located at the bank of the Sok River [แม่น้ำศอก], is the place of Chao Saen Mueang. *Hing* is another type of spirit house made of wood in the form of a shelf with a small house as a residence of the spirits.¹⁵ There are two *hings*: one, for Chao Mueang Wang, placed at Chao Pho Kuan's house; one, for Chao Mueang Klang, Nang Khao, Nang Chuang, Nang Chan, and Nang Noi, placed at Chao Mae Nang Thiam's house.

In addition, there are rivers related to the rituals, such as the Un River (แม่น้ำอุ้น), a river near the *ho noi*. This is where the ritual of sword cleaning is held. The ritual is a part of the major ritual for annually cleaning the shelf of the spirit house which is to be performed in every fourth lunar month at Chao Pho Kuan's house in Dansai. The Man River is another place considered sacred for the ritual in relation to the religious practice for the pagoda. The place where the ritual of royal spirits is held is regarded as sacred space and there are rules that people must strictly follow, which no one can overrule. The persons allowed to perform rituals in the sacred space are Chao Pho Kuan, Pho Saen, and Nang Taeng [นางแตง]. The sacred space for performing the ritual includes two types: the sacred area, and sacred building.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Hing* [หิ้ง], a one square meter wood shelf hanging on the wall in the house of Chao Pho Kuan and Chao Mae Nang Thaim, is a place for all the worship offerings: candles, flowers, small sculptures of elephants and horses. It is believed that the shelf is the residence of Lao royal spirits guarding Mueang Dansai

¹⁶ Saeng Jan Ng-am, *Religious Studies* (Bangkok: Thaiwattanaphanit, 1991) 182-185 (in Thai).



Figure 3: The Un River (left) and *ho phi* at Chao Mae Nang Thiam's house

Symbols in the Legends, Rituals of Lao Royal Spirits and Cultural Interpretation

Symbols, consisting of actions, situations, qualifications or relations, are a necessary tool for people in a society to communicate their ideas.¹⁷ The symbols found in the legend and rituals of Lao royal spirits communicate hidden cultural meanings.

Symbol of Person: Reflection of Social Classes

The persons involved with Lao royal spirits are symbols of social classes. These persons can be divided into two groups as follows:

The first is the group of sacred persons in the legends, which includes Lao royal spirits named in the legends. Most of these people were members of the Lao royal family and played significant roles in ancient Luang Prabang, Vientiane, or Ayutthaya. They might have existed in history or may only be in the people's imagination. It is believed that the group came to Dansai to construct Phra That Si Song Rak, after which they were assigned to save the stupa and the younger generations. The first group consisted of nine people, both male and female: Chao Luang Ong Thai, Chao Luang Ong Lao, Chao Mueang Wang, Chao Mueang Klang, Chao Saen Mueang, Nang Khao, Nang Chuang, Nang Chan, and Nang Noi.

¹⁷ Akin Rabibhadana, *Culture is Meaningful: Theory and Methodology of Clifford Geertz* (Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center, 2008) (in Thai).

The second is a group of ordinary people who have been appointed by the royal spirits to perform a particular job. Those people include Chao Pho Kuan, Chao Mae Nang Thiam, Pho Saen, Nang Taeng, and Luk Phoeng Luk Thian.

The roles and responsibilities of the above two groups, the allocation of the area for the rituals, and people's faith in Lao royal spirits, are the symbols reflecting the political system in ancient Lao society which was administrated with a system of social classes. The Lao royal spirits, Pho Saen, and Nang Taeng, are similar to people in the political class. Luk Phoeng Luk Thian are similar to people in the working class. As Pho Saen and Nang Taeng are alive and they have been assigned to serve the Lao royal spirits, they are also in the working class. The relationship between the two classes is similar to that of the boss and the servant, which may be called the patronage system.

Ritual Priority and Timing: Cultural Significance and Kinship Relations

The priority in taking possession over the medium's body is a symbol of the Thai-Lao culture of giving honor to guests and treating them with generous hospitality; the host will only eat after the guests have finished their meals. In the same way, the rulers will first give priority for their people to have enough food. Body possession will be conducted in the cleaning ritual of the spirit house shelf of Chao Mueang Wang in the fourth lunar month, in the morning at around nine o'clock. The ritual will be held at Chao Pho Kuan's house at Dansai, the group of Pho Saen will invite Chao Mueang Wang to take possession over Chao Pho Kuan's body. After that, Pho Saen will first worship Chao Saen Mueang with offerings since Chao Saen Mueang is considered a visitor, even though he is not taking possession. Then, Pho Saen will give offerings to Chao Mueang Wang who will greet and talk with Pho Saen and Luk Phoeng Luk Thian before leaving. In the afternoon, the group of Pho Saen will invite Chao Saen Mueang to take possession over Chao Pho Kuan's body. The spirit will talk and give instructions to the people before performing the important ritual called "Liab Hai Lao" [เลี้ยงไหเหล้า] to signal the time for successful

farming to people. This ritual will start with walking around a jar of liquor, and then continue with picking up the small earthen figures of buffalos, elephants, and cows to act like fighting, followed by throwing cotton seeds, then walking around the jar again. Next, the performer will drink the liquor just as if he feels tired. The course of actions will be conducted in series. After completing the actions, there will be another ritual of wrist tying with holy thread for good luck to the people, then the spirit will leave.

Chao Mueang Wang, who is the host, will take possession over the medium's body then leave Chao Saen Mueang, the city guest, to perform "Liab Hai Lao" and the wrist tying with holy thread before leaving the body. This shows that the host will honor the guest by inviting the guest to chair the ritual. The priority in taking possession does not tell the seniority, but infers who is the host or the guest. The cultural practice of the ancient royal members reflects the generosity of the host which is a great sacrifice with a sense of the great unselfish ruler leaving the important role with high respect to the city guest.

The annual banquet for spirits implies the kinship relationship and the hierarchy of authority. The banquet will be held in Dansai in the seventh lunar month, the ninth and the tenth days of the waxing moon period, which is during the month of June. Such banquets in Dansai will be organized starting from the Ho Luang [หอลวง], Ho Noi [หอน้อย], then Na Ho [นาหอ] communities, and finally at the Na Hin community, respectively. The people perceive that Chao Mueang Wang at Dansai community is the most senior of the royal kinship. Chao Mueang Wang, the ruler of Na Hor, was Chao Pho Han Ha's brother [เจ้าพ่อหาญห้า]. Since Chao Pho Han Hok [เจ้าพ่อหาญหก], the ruler of Na Hin in Phon Soong Subdistrict, was the brother of Chao Pho Han Ha and Chao Mueang Wang, Na Hin community will arrange to have the annual spirit banquet in the eighth lunar month, after Na Hor. It is believed that Chao Pho Han Hok was the general responsible for the security of Hua Hom city gate during the construction of Phra That Si Song Rak. After completion of the pagoda, the general became the guardian spirit for the houses of Luk Phoeng Luk Thian.

The priority of organizing Bun Luang at Dansai District has been done with regard to the kinship relationship. Wat Phon Chai is a royal temple which belongs to the most senior prince; so, their Bun Luang is placed as the first priority. Other temples, such as Wat Si Phume at Ban Na Ho and Wat Nam Thang, will be held later. The Bun Luang event will be organized with the play of Phi Ta Khon, spirits serving the Lord Buddha and royal spirits, such spirits wearing masks and colorful costumes, to entertain the royal spirits. The kinship between Thai and Lao is related to the patronage system which is important for living, as well as the strength of the ruler. All the leaders of city gates in Lan Chang kingdom had the same royal kinship.¹⁸ The concept of “*kong mueang*” in establishing Mueang Dansai is also rooted in the kinship relations.

Timing is another symbol representing the sacredness of the ritual, with the concept of timing of the ritual concerning Phra That Si Song Rak mostly related to agriculture and religious practices since the king who led the ritual was the person who encouraged the Dansai people and the ritual participants to have a brave heart.¹⁹ The concept of timing is also involved with Buddhism; for example, the religious event for worshipping Phra That Si Song Rak will be held on the full-moon days in the sixth lunar month, which is one of the important day for Buddhist; and the Bun Luang event will be organized in the eighth lunar month during the Buddhist lent period, which is also one of the important periods for Buddhist to make merit in the temples.

The ritual is performed based on the belief that Chao Pho Kuan will never perform a ritual of presentation for a vow to the spirits or any rituals related to royal spirits on Wednesdays, Buddhist holy days, or during the Buddhist lent period. However, people still can make a wish during that time. This might be the religious belief in Buddhism that the royal spirits are spending the period of time in meditation, which is the normal practice of the royal members who are following

¹⁸ Sopee Untaya, “Lao Customary Law: Lao Society 1353-1695” (PhD in Tai Studies, Mahasarakham University, 2008) 241 (in Thai).

¹⁹ Suthuspong Gulrabort, “The Traditions and Rituals Relating to Phrathatsrisongrak Amphoe Dansai, Loei” (Master of Arts in Thai Studies (focused on Humanity Sciences), Mahasarakham University, 1993) 346-348 (in Thai).

the virtues of the king, behaving well, and cleaning themselves of all their sins. In Dansai, there is no restriction on the time for the royal spirits in taking possession over the mediums when the ritual is held; while the spirits in other communities will never take possession in the afternoon as it is regarded as the time for moving the dead body to the crematorium. The compensation for a vow to the spirits will be conducted in the morning or before noon as it is believed that this is the time for deities to take the offerings.

Traditions and Rituals: Reflection of the Practice Rule of the Ancient Royal Members

The practice rules of the ancient royal members refer to the traditional rules for Lao royal members to follow since they were in the ruling class whose responsibility was ruling and saving the country, taking care of the people, and playing roles in leading traditional rituals. Now they play their roles through the body of Chao Pho Kuan, the medium. The spirits will participate in the social activities which are parts of the royal practices; for example, the Bun Luang event and the Phi Ta Khon Festival. The significant ritual highlighting the event is the Upakhut [อุปกุต], a rock which the local people believe is a symbol representing Phra Upakhut, a guardian spirit whose duty it was to save the Bun Luang ritual, the ceremony of Vessantara's reentry to the country, and the play of Phi Ta Khon. The Upakhut ritual will be performed at 3 a.m. on the reunion day or the second day of the Bun Luang ritual. Pho Saen Kao Un Mueang [พ่อแสนแก้วอุ้นเมือง] is a person who will ordain as a Brahman and will run the Upakhut ritual. Pho Saen Mueang Chan [พ่อแสนเมืองจัน] will take the job of getting Phra Upakhut from underneath the Man River. The important elements for the ritual are Thai classical music, an umbrella of kingship, groups of Pho Saen, and Nang Taeng, as well as the seniors in the Dansai communities. The Upakhut ritual will be conducted by Pho Saen as the representative of Chao Pho Kuan, who is considered the body of the Lao royal spirit. The spirit will act as the traditional leader of the religious ritual. A "white tiered umbrella" is the symbol implying that the ritual has been traditionally conducted by the king. Traditionally, the white tiered umbrella, originating from an

ordinary umbrella, has been an honorable decoration of higher kingship. Along with the Phra Upakhut procession, Chao Pho Saen will bring the white tiered umbrella as the symbol that the Lao royal spirit is joining in the sacred ritual.

This obviously evidences the legend that Bun Luang in Dansai is the practice rule of Lao kings which has been passed on from ancient times. Prior to the organization of the event, the group of Pho Saen and Chao Pho Kuan will invite every Lao royal spirit from every spirit house to be present at the event. A small house or a small shelf will be placed at one corner of Wat Phon Chai. Flowers, candles, foods and desserts will be offered to the spirits. In the morning of the second day or the reunion day, a ritual of health and luck, called “Bai Si Su Khwan”²⁰ will be set for Chao Pho Kuan and Chao Mae Nang Thiam at Chao Pho Kuan’s house. The spirits will also be invited to be present in the Bun Luang event. Phi Ta Khon will be played to entertain the Lao royal spirits. The procession will be set and move to Wat Phon Chai. Chao Pho Kuan, Chao Mae Nang Thiam, Pho Saen, Nang Taeng, Phi Ta Khon, and the people will also join the procession. Chao Pho Kuan and Chao Mae Nang Thiam will represent the Lao royal spirits at the ritual which means the event has formally begun. The third day is also a day of important ritual: the procession to bring Vessantara back to the country. Prior to the procession, Bai Si Su Kwan of Vessantara will be performed by using a Buddha image as a symbol of Vessantara. Saen Dan will be holding a container of Bai Si leading the procession, followed by a procession of Buddha images, a four-monk procession, a procession of Pho Saen, Chao Mae Nang Thiam, Nang Taeng, Phi Ta Khon juniors and seniors, and at the end will be a procession of fire rockets with Chao Pho Kuan sitting on the rockets.

²⁰ Bai Si Su Khwan [บายศรีสู่ขวัญ] is a traditional ritual found among Thai and Lao people. It is believed that everyone is born with “*khwan* [ขวัญ]”, an invisible element, which will always be attached to the body of a person to prevent that person from danger and evil. The Bai Si Su Khwan ritual is performed to invite the lost “*khwan*” to come back to the body and give the person a feeling secure with luck, and to be of strong health and mind.

As the procession is moving, “*mak kallapaphruek*” [ห ม ๑ ๓ กั ล ป พ ร ุ ก ษ์] or coins wrapped in golden or silver paper, will be thrown into the air for people in the procession to take as lucky coins of prosperity. Upon arrival at the temple, the procession will move around the temple three times, then Chao Pho Kuan will light the three rockets: Chao Pho Kuan’s rocket, Chao Mae Nang Thiam’s rocket, and Pho Saen’s rocket. The fourth day, a sermon on the story of Gautama Buddha as Vessantara will be given to people. A procession for the donation of money will also be made for charity with Chao Pho Kuan setting a procession for money donation annually.²¹

We can assume from the traditional Bun Luang event and Phi Ta Khon procession that Chao Pho Kuan is not only the community leader in ritual performing in the real world, but he is also the leader of the sacred world in conducting the Bun Luang event by acting on behalf of the Lao royal spirits. He is the leader of the ritual of bringing Gautama Buddha as Vessantara back to the city. By sitting on the fire rocket, Chao Pho Kuan is treated as a representative of the Lao royal spirit in the sacred world. He will throw the “*mak kallapaphruek*” to people. The action is a symbol of donation without expecting any returns. Whoever catches the coins, that person will be considered a person born with “*bun* [บุญ]”, which means all the best things leading their life to peace. The coins are regarded as auspicious. The lighting of the fire rocket can be interpreted that Chao Pho Kuan has done his job in the sacred world. He is leading the people to worship the heaven, or “*thaen*” [แทน], who is one of the ancestors of the king of Lan Chang. On the last day of the event, Chao Pho Kuan will arrange a money tree for charitable donations to the temple. All such activities are the king’s obligations to continue the religion. The king or Lao royal spirit will be able to do his job in the real world only through the medium or Chao Pho Kuan’s body.

Phi Khon or Phi Ta Khon has been developed from the belief in Pu Yoe Ya Yoe [ปู่ ย อ ย าย อ], or the spirits of Thai and Lao ancestors in the Lan Chang kingdom. It is believed that the native people of

²¹ Muenpim Suwankart, *Bun Luang at Dansai Newsletter*, Lek-Prapai Viriyapant. 13 (73) July-August 2008 (in Thai).

Dansai were from Luang Prabang, where the culture of Phi Ta Khon can also be found. Dansai people have conserved this traditional religious event until today.²² Because of the change of society and culture, the belief of Pu Yoe Ya Yoe has developed and become Phi Ta Khon. Srisak Vallibhodom explained that the Phi Ta Khon were forest ghosts that felt guilty and wanted to do good deeds, so they followed Prince Vessantara to the city.²³ The researcher viewed that Phi Ta Khon has developed in two ways: evolving from Thai-Lao ancestor spirits to be the servants of the Lord Buddha (Vessantara); and developing from the spirits of Lao royal ancestors to be the servants of Lao royal spirits.

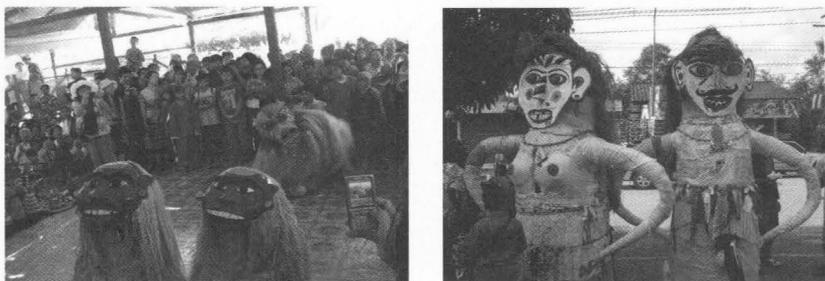


Figure 4: Pu Yoe Ya Yoe (left) and Phi Ta Khon (right).

Any performances concerning Phi Ta Khon have to be permitted by Lao royal spirits, and the performances are to entertain those spirits during the ritual of Bai Si Su Khwan for Chao Pho Kuan and Chao Mae Nang Thiam on the second day of the Bun Luang event. Therefore, this traditional event is similar to a cultural symbol that can be interpreted as one of the rules for Lao royal family members to follow. The rulers have the duty to support their people and act as the

²² Pol. Capt. Sanong Upala, "The Development of Phi Ta Khon festival at Amphoe Dan Sai, Changwat Loei" (Master of Arts in Thai Studies for Development, Rajabhat Institute Loei, 2003) (in Thai).

²³ Srisak Vallibhodom, *Spirits and Buddhism: Religion and Belief in Dansai Society: the Spiritual Balance in the Minds of the People in Basin of Man River* (Bangkok: Lek-Prapai Viriyapant, 2005) 231 (in Thai).

religious leader. Chao Pho Kuan in the real world acts as the representative of the royal spirit which is in the sacred world. Therefore, the spirit can communicate with people in the real world through its medium.

Color and Costume: Symbols for Sacred Space

Color and costume are the cultural symbols of the sacred space of Buddhism. The sacred space is at Phra That Si Song Rak, and the space for the ritual of Lao royal spirits. The area was established with the concept and plan designed according to the specification supporting the idea of sacred space where the two kings of Thailand and Laos made a vow to fight the Burmese. The sacred space is also the land marks indicating the border of both kingdoms. It is the living place of two royal spirits of the two kingdoms: Chao Ong Luang Ong Thai and Chao Ong Luang Ong Lao. People entering the sacred space are not allowed to wear red, they must behave themselves well, and pay respect to the site.

There are many legends concerning the prohibition of people wearing red when entering the sacred area. First, during the construction of the stupa, Thao Mun and Nang Khong, brother and sister, sacrificed themselves to worship the stupa and they wore red. People, therefore, told their children not to insult the spirits by wearing red when going into the pagoda area. Second, it was said that “red” is the color of blood and war. This stupa was evidently established to represent the tight relationship and cooperation between two kings in fighting the Burmese. The first story links the concept of the construction of the sacred space that needed two sacred persons to sacrifice their lives to pay worship to the pagoda. The “red color” is linked to the costume of the two sacred persons. The second story explains the connection between red color and history. Ayutthaya and Krung Si Sattana Khanahuta agreed to stop their battle and grow their relationship by constructing Phra That Si Song Rak. Red color, which is the symbol of war, thus is not allowed to appear in such a peaceful area.

With regard to the old view of spirits, the “red color” is a symbol of old belief as evidenced by the red masks of Pu Yoe. The flowers for

the ritual are also red. The people participating in the ritual of Lao royal spirits in Dansai will normally dress in white, but never black. This practice might be also based on religious belief combined with spiritual belief; “white”, thus, has become the color for the spiritual and Buddhist rituals in Dansai. White flowers are also used in the ritual. However, other flowers with other colors will also be acceptable if they are considered auspicious. It is possible that, according to the original belief, the king is a member of “*thaen*” family. Khun Borom or Chao Fa Ngum had faith in Pu Yoe Ya Yoe. Although the two people died, the belief of “*thaen*” and red color still exists. As the royal spirits were Buddhist, the activities related to the spirits have been linked to Buddhism, combined with sacredness. The ritual practice has also been influenced by the change of society, and political policy.



Figure 5: White (left) and Red (right)

Language: Culture and Power

In the ritual, the Lao royal spirit is regarded as the king in the same family with “*thaen*” or the king of deities. He is not just an ordinary person, but one of the deities. As a result, the language used with the spirit and the ordinary people is different. This might be called language culture which implies the social status of people, for example, formal language is used with upper class people. During the ritual, it is found that formal Thai language is spoken to the royal spirits, with dialect also occasionally used. This indicates the power of

language and the power of the ruling class. From the field work, it was noted that the conversation between Pho Saen, Nang Taeng, and Luk Phoeng Luk Thian was carried on through particular words or language. Such language reflects the culture of ancient language used to speak with the spirit representing the king. The spirit is not just the spirit of an ordinary person, but represents the king of Laos. Therefore, the language for communication with the spirit is in a particular formal pattern. During the ritual, the spirit will speak formal Thai language with the four Pho Saen; but, he will speak in dialect with Nang Taeng, or Luk Phoeng Luk Thian. The use of language shows that Lao royal spirits can speak many dialects, understand the power of language and use it in the appropriate social context. The atmosphere of sacredness may be a factor influencing the spirit's choice of language. Dialect may be considered the language of the lower class, informal, which lessens the sacredness and the seriousness of the atmosphere during the ritual. The conversation communicated in formal language is about the preparation of the event, consultation, news, daily life, warnings, and instruction. The conversation communicated in dialect is to lessen the gap between the royal member and the ordinary people. As a result, Nang Taeng and Luk Phoeng Luk Thian feel more comfortable to talk with the spirit, and the sacredness of the ritual will be lessened. This shows that the royal spirit has the good sense of language nature and its power in communication.

It has been around 100 years that Dansai has been in the process of city establishment. The Lao royal spirit has changed itself to suit the changing context of Thai society. It is also found that the issues discussed among the spirits and Pho Saen are updated. Any ritual performances to be organized in relation to the Bun Luang event, Chao Pho Kuan will officially inform all the units concerned the kind of cooperation among them. Lao royal spirits will also be provided with updated information as well. The change in accordance with the changing social context has affected the traditional ritual practice.

The explanation above reveals that the language used in the ritual reflects culture and social classes. The use of many dialects by the royal spirits helps both create and also lessen the sacredness of the

ritual. The intention of the royal spirits can be interpreted through the language used. Language has its own power, as stated by Nithi: "Language is deeply related to culture and power. It is very complicated. Therefore, language is the stage of performing, fighting, and bargaining for power. Language is a tool to create a wall of difference separating people into many small groups."²⁴

Legends of Royal Spirits and the Construction of Spiritual Space

The belief in Lao royal spirits at Dansai District covers many provinces, including Loei, Phetchabun, and Phitsanulok, as well as some communities in Laos PDR. Chao Pho Kuan said that during the time of Chao Pho Kuan Thaew Chueabunmee, his father, it was very convenient for Thai people in Dansai and Lao people to travel back and forth across the border. Many Lao people cross the Hueng River to perform worship and make a wish at Phra That Si Song Rak. Presently, the social context has changed, and travelling across the border cannot be made as easily. As a result, the number of Lao people coming to worship and make a wish at the pagoda has declined. Most of them now being Lao government officers and local politicians.²⁵ With the power of faith in the sacredness of Lao royal spirits that has existed for over 100 years, a spiritual space has been created over the geographical border between the two countries. The space is in the belief of the original Thai-Lao race.

As already mentioned regarding the concept in constructing Phra That Si Song Rak or city establishment, Chao Mueang Wang built four city gates for the four directions around Mueang Dansai. They are like a network of spiritual space covering the four directions. The faith in the greatest Lao royal spirit which is centered in Dansai has been widened to other remote areas. It is not possible for Chao Pho Kuan in Dansai to conduct the rituals for every community covering those remote areas. Kuan Cham, then, plays his role on behalf of Chao Pho Kuan. People have the perspective that Chao Saen Mueang is the guardian spirit saving the spiritual area. In the legend of Chao Saen

²⁴ Nithi, *Words and Their Power*, 8, translation by the author.

²⁵ Thaworn Chueabunmee, 24 Feb 2010.

Mueang, there are the statements: “Chao Saen Mueang was able to reach about ten thousand communities a day;” “We only pray, Chao Saen Mueang will have already acknowledged it.”²⁶ These statements imply that there is a spacious area under the protection of Chao Saen Mueang. The area ends at the border of the ancient Lan Chang. It signifies that *mueang* or the kingdom is much more spacious than that of Chao Saen Mueang. When he takes possession over the medium, he always says “I have very little time.” This means he has lots of obligations as he has shelves in many communities all over the area of Nakorn Thai District, Nam Nao District, Lom Sak District, and Loei Province, including the spiritual space of the four city gates serving as the satellite cities of Phra That Si Song Rak.

Conclusion

This research focused on the study of the legends and the rituals related to the Lao royal spirits found in Dansai, Loei Province. The legends of Lao royal spirits played a significant role in the establishment of Dansai city, with Phra That Si Song Rak, Wat Phon Chai, spirit houses, and rivers considered sacred spaces. The symbols and the rituals related to Phra That Si Song Rak, i.e., person symbols, priority and time, traditional rituals, language, color and costume, reflect the culture of kinship relation, royal culture, and the king’s activities. The symbols have been found through the spiritual ritual conducted by Chao Pho Kuan. The legends of Lao royal spirits also have roles in creating the sacred space, both physically and spiritually. As a result, Dansai has become space with an identity of sacredness. The sacred identity links the culture rooted from the ancestors from Lan Chang, Vientiane to the symbols appearing in the legends of the Lao royal spirits.

²⁶ Jarn Chueabunmee, 24 Feb 2010.

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