

Buddhist Space and the Identity Expression of the Phu Tai People on Both Sides of the Mekong River

by Pichet Saiphan

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Introduction

The article on Buddhism and Ethnic Identity Politics among the Phutai in Northeastern Thailand by Pichet Saiphan from 2016 in the Journal of Sociology and Anthropology is considered an interesting academic anthropological article on ethnography. Especially for those interested in studying the history of the Phu Tai ethnic group. This article concluded that there are two principles related to the relationship between Buddhism and Ethnic Identity Politics. The first principle is that Buddhism is an essential tool used by the government to connect the local region to the central region, along with the governing mechanism and the ideology of a nation. At the same time, each ethnic group perceived and adjusted this new set of relationships to maintain their social status by finding opportunities to merge their local or ethnic culture into the religious and governing ideology. The second principle is that the ethnic groups had created and presented their acceptance of the central region by raising their groups' status to be accepted by the government under the frame of Buddhism emphasized by the government (Saiphan, 2016). The limited number of pages in the journal caused interested parties who wanted more detailed information to wait for the follow-ups of other articles from this

academic. Their patience paid off when the author released a book called "Buddhist Space and the Identity Expression of the Phu Tai People on Both Sides of the Mekong River."

The book entitled Buddhist Space and the Identity Expression of the Phu Tai People on Both Sides of the Mekong River was published under the TRF Senior Research Scholar in 2015, Professor Dr. Samoechai Phunsuwan on Theravada Buddhism in the cultural context of Southeast Asia (Circa A.D. 11th Century – present) with eight topics briefly presented as followed.

Abstract. In this part, the author clearly concluded the research by mentioning the Phu Tai people on both the Thai and Lao sides of the Mekong river, who rely on Buddhism's power to maintain their ethnic characteristics and identities amidst the changing social status. This process differs based on the local contexts of each side of the Mekong river, both in the Thai and Lao states.

Rationale and Methodology. In this part, the author presented the research methodology, especially the use of various primary documents, survey records, records of monastic examinations, academic research on

the topics related to Buddhism of the Phu Tai people on both sides of the river, and crucial data and evidence from the field study.

Phu Tia People on Both Sides of the Mekong River. In this part, the author presented the status and the study on the Phu Tai ethnic group, discussions related to the ethnic group's history from the past to the present, the status of the old city of the Phu Tai people, and the current city of the Phu Thai people.

Phu Tai People's Buddhism. In this part, the author presented the topic of "Nang Lao," the Buddhism symbolic origin of the Phu Tai people, Nang Lao stupa in Muang Vang, Nang Lao stupa, Phra Ong Saen of Muang Vang and Phra Ong Saen of Renu Nakhon.

Adaptation of the Phu Tai Buddhists. In this part, the author presented the Lan Xang Buddhist ritual of the Phu Tai people in Thailand, their references to the new central region and Bangkok, Dhammayut Nikaya and Maha Nikaya within the Phu Tai group, Phu Thai monk and the reform of Buddhism in Isaan, and important monks for the Phu Tai people.

Buddhism Space and the Expression of the Phu Tai Identity. In this part, the author presented the stupas and Buddha images with the identity of the Phu Tai people, Nang Lao stupa representing the spirit and the

identity of the Phu Tai people, Renu Stupa and the creation and maintenance of the identity of the Phu Tai people, the belief of Phra Ong Saen at Wat That Renu temple and the new identity, Phra Kaew Komen of Kuchinarai city, the stupa space and the Phu Tai dance, and Buddhism and the nation and ethnicity.

The trend of identity restoration of the Lan Xang Buddhism. In this part, the author presented the restoration of the Nang Lao stupa and the identity of the Phu Tai people and the restoration of the Lan Xang Buddhism identity of the Phu Tai people in Thailand.

Buddhist Space and the Identity Expression of the Phu Tai People on Both Sides of the Mekong River. In this part, the author presented the relationship in terms of the Buddhist space and the expression of the Phu Tai Buddhists on both sides of the Mekong river. The author presented the fact that the Phu Tai people rely on Buddhism to explain their identity through their Buddhist belief as Buddhist people. This Buddhist space is, therefore, a forum for the Phu Tai people from both sides of the river to be presented, both for wanting Phu Tai to appear more internationally and the merging of the different complex Phu Tai identities in each community to create a different and more various Phu Tai identities.

Critics: Buddhist Space and the Identity Expression of the Phu Tai People on Both Sides of the Mekong River

Chaiteing (2012) questioned the article entitled *The Cultural Ties of the Phu-thai Tribe* between both Mekong River Banks, which can be concluded as follows: "...After several days of coming back to Thailand, my mind was still constantly thinking about Muang Vang like it was yesterday that I left. In Thailand, where many Phu Tai people from Muang Vang Ang Kham still continuously maintain, preserve, and develop their language and culture, even though it has been almost 200 years since they parted from their families in Muang Vang..."

If Tunwa Chaiteing, an academic on ecoculture from Kalasin University, had read this book, he would have found the answer to the question since this book provided essential answers and new knowledge from the aspect of an anthropologist.

This anthropologist perspective opened new perspectives overlooked by other fields of study. Such as the study on Phu Tai dance, in which Tatisa (2017) stated that the Phu Tai dance in Kalasin was rooted in the ritual and belief of the Phu Tai people of the Yao Ceremony that has been passed down from their ancestors. The Phu Tai Dance on Phon Village was created in 1978 to welcome Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. Phu Tai Dance of Kok Kong village was passed down from their

ancestors. The Phu Tai Dance of Phon Sawang village was created from the coming together of the Cultural Preservation Group. The research by Saleepun et al. (2022) entitled "The role of the Phu Tai dance drama in the presentation of the image of Praewa cloth in the Thai nation-state culture: A case study of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, the Queen Mother" stated that Her Majesty Queen Sirikit and the Queen Mother supported that performance of the Phu Tai ethnic group in the northeast to be used for advertising Phu Tai textile in the international forums, which led to different performances be created within the country later on. Apart from the historical aspect of the Phu Tai Dance, being a medium of advertising the textile, and the fact that the Phu Tai Dance became a form of cultural diffusion to different sub-units within society, according to Pichet Saiphan's perspective, which provided an in-depth explanation of the "Stupa's Space and the Creation of Phu Tai Dance," the conclusion is as follows, "The identity of Phu Tai people in Renu has a clear meaning of taking their cultural performance to perform in front of the head of the country, who is the highest symbol of the national state. As well as performing in front of Phra That Phanom, a unique symbol of local Buddhism. Therefore,

the mixture between their cultural ceremony and a sacred religious symbol emphasized their cultural power. Therefore, the traditional creation of the Phu Tai Dance became a model for other dances as a form of worshipping other stupas."

From the above phenomenon, it can be seen that the work of Pichet Saiphan in this book helped identify the importance of the anthropological study that helped delve into human behaviors in social and cultural aspects, which differs from other fields of study. Additionally, the work also helps create a better picture of the topic from all aspects.

The limitations, which is also the weak point of this book, were minor, such as the black and white images that reduced the communication of the meaning. For example, the stupa space and the creation of the Phu Tai dance, the restoration of the Lan Xang

Buddhist identity, and other images. This might be due to the limited research fund. Another issue was the imbalance amount of content, especially towards the end, where the content is not balanced compared to the beginning of the article.

However, the limitation mentioned above did not reduce the value of this book. Especially when there are fewer studies on anthropology and ethnic groups since the government emphasizes the 20-Year National Strategies more. On the other hand, this emphasis made this book more valuable and gained more references for students, academics, and researchers in anthropology, ethnic studies, ethnic identities, and Buddhism studies. Moreover, many people are still waiting for valuable research by this anthropological academic named Pichet Saiphan.

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