

## Buddhism in Sipsongpanna, Yunnan China

Phramaha Suwei Yingdabanruo, Ven. Yan Lazhuangxiang,  
Ven. Yan Wen, Ven. Yan Wen, Ven. Yan Wenhan  
Mahamakut Buddhist University Lanna Campus  
Mahamakut Buddhist University

### Abstract

Buddhism has been disseminated to Sipsongpanna, Yunnan Province, for thousands of years. Theravāda Buddhism began its spread through Mueang Luang and Ban Hua Luang, with significant centers at Wat Ban Kong Hang and Phra That Pu Lan. These reflect beliefs and cultural arts influenced by India and Myanmar, as well as the influence from Wat Pa Daeng and Wat Suan Dok in Chiang Mai.

In the past, King Tilokkarat sent the Lanna-script Tripitaka to Sipsongpanna, strengthening cultural ties with Lanna, Kengtung, and Mueang Yong. The revival of Buddhism occurred in later periods through ordination ceremonies, the restoration of abandoned temples, such as Wat Pa Chet by Chao Saeng Mueang, and the establishment of monastic schools (Pariyatti Dhamma schools).

These schools collaborated both domestically and internationally, such as by sending monks and novices to further their studies in Thailand and abroad, enhancing the capacity of Buddhism on a global level. Wat Pa Chet has thus become a significant center in Sipsongpanna and a symbol of religious and cultural revival in the region.

**Keywords:** Buddhism , Sipsongpanna

### Introduction

The Dissemination of Buddhism in Sipsongpanna, China, in the Modern Era

Buddhism began to spread to Sipsongpanna around the late 14th century to the early 15th century. The people of Sipsongpanna believe that Lord Pachaoke Nagamana (the Buddha of Kunasa) visited Jinghong along with Lord Pachaokassapa (Kassapa Buddha) and Lord Pachaekudema (Shakyamuni Buddha). This event significantly expanded Buddhism in the region. Lord Pachaekudema preached the Dhamma to discourage the killing of animals, which led the Tai Lue people to develop deep faith and respect for Buddhism.

Buddhism in Sipsongpanna follows the Theravāda tradition, similar to other Tai states,

while also incorporating elements of Mahayana Hinduism and animistic beliefs. This blending of faiths reflects the ability of Tai Buddhism to unify diverse beliefs. For the Tai people, Buddhism is the sole "religion" they know, serving as a moral foundation and societal ideology that governs the behavior of the Tai Lue community.

Tai people observe Buddhist practices, such as visiting temples on Buddhist holy days and participating in religious activities, considered acts of merit-making. They uphold "15 customary rules" related to Buddhism and practice a "12-month tradition" centered on Buddhist activities. Religious rituals are integral to Tai life, with community members playing active roles in ceremonies. These roles are regarded as duties requiring the dedication of both labor and resources to support and sustain the religion.

The Tai lifestyle is deeply rooted in traditional wisdom, Buddhism, and a shared linguistic foundation with Sipsongpanna. Although separated by national boundaries, the Tai people of Sipsongpanna and other regions can communicate effectively due to their common linguistic roots. This unique cultural and religious identity has made Sipsongpanna a subject of interest for academics, historians, anthropologists, and religious scholars, attracting extensive study and research.

In Theravāda Buddhism, it is believed that the religion was first propagated through the city of Luang before spreading to the village of Hua Luang. During that time, a young boy was ordained into the Buddhist Sangha, becoming the first monk in this region. To this day, the relics of this monk are enshrined at a temple in the village, now known as Ban Kong Hang or Wat Ban Kong Hang.

Regarding religious traditions and rituals, Wat Ban Kong Hang serves as a significant center for the community. Whenever merit-making events or traditional ceremonies take place, this temple becomes the starting point for rituals, which are then followed by other households in the community.

A crucial piece of evidence linking Buddhism to this area is the "Phra That Pu Lan" (Grandfather and Grandson Stupa), located on a mountain in the Chiang Mueang Luang district. It is believed that, in ancient times, a previous Buddha visited this site to bless an elderly man and his grandson. Today, the stupa remains an important place of worship for the community.

Additionally, there is the "Phra That No Ban Fuei Lung," which, according to history, was built after a monk and eight lay followers traveled from India or as some say, from Myanmar. The stupa's architectural style reflects a blend of Indian and Burmese art. Other significant stupas in the area include Phra That Chom Kai, Phra That Chom Mok, Phra That Chom Thong,

and Phra That Kesa, all of which represent the region's rich cultural and religious diversity.

The propagation of Buddhism in this area follows two main traditions: the "Forest Tradition" and the "Village Tradition." The Forest Tradition was influenced by Wat Pa Daeng in Chiang Mai, while the Village Tradition was influenced by Wat Suan Dok in Chiang Mai. Both traditions are still practiced harmoniously today, without division or conflict in doctrine or practice.

During the reign of King Tilokaraj of the Lanna Kingdom, the king sent a set of the Tipiṭaka written in Lanna script to the region of Sipsong Panna. This transfer contributed to the past uniformity of Lanna script and the script used in Sipsong Panna. However, in later periods, the script in Sipsong Panna underwent changes to make it more practical and easier to use in contemporary contexts.

According to the legend of Queen Chamadevi, it is said that she traveled down the Mekong River and brought fabrics known as *phaa tang maa* to Sipsong Panna as offerings to the temples and monks in the region. This act reflects the close relationship between Lanna, Chiang Tung, Muang Yong, and Chiang Rung—cities within the Sipsong Panna network—highlighting their strong bonds as sister cities, a connection that continues to the present day.

Another story relates to the forest monks of Lanka in Sipsong Panna. It is told that a forest monk from the Lanka tradition arrived at Ban Mai Pan in Mueang Luang. The monk was well taken care of by the villagers, who provided him with food and necessities. One day, the villagers complained about the lack of clean water in their village for daily use. The monk, using what the Tai Lue people called the "divine staff" (*khon tao thip*), pointed to a spot in the forest. Following his guidance, the villagers dug at the indicated spot and discovered a spring of clean water, which became a vital water source for the community and remains in use to this day.

These stories reflect the beliefs, faith, and deeply rooted religious and cultural connections that link the Lanna region with Sipsong Panna. They highlight not only the Buddhist religion and its rituals but also the ongoing cultural exchanges and shared ways of life. These connections reveal the unity of the communities in this region, founded on their faith in Buddhism and their mutual dependence in both spiritual and material aspects.

Sipsong Panna was ruled by 44 monarchs, beginning with Phaya Cheng, the founding king of the administration. According to the local legends of Sipsong Panna, governance often demonstrated the influence of commoners in state affairs, particularly in appointing the initial monarch of the Cheuang dynasty. For instance, it is mentioned during the reign of Chao Sam

Khai Nueang, "...the commoners of the town raised Chao Ai Kung to replace his father..." The last monarch was King Suwannamom Khum Lue, who passed away on October 1, 2016. His relics are enshrined at Wat Pa Chet, which continues to be a revered site for the people.

Buddhism in Sipsong Panna experienced a period of stagnation for about 20 years. Although it did not entirely lack monks, their numbers drastically decreased as many monks disrobed to take up civil service roles and contribute to nation-building. However, before the political changes, Buddhism in Sipsong Panna was overseen by Somdet Phra Akkhamuni, who served as the Supreme Patriarch of Sipsong Panna. He played a crucial role in preserving Buddhism in the region. The current supreme patriarch is Somdet Luang Chom Mueang, marking a gap of over 60 years between the two leaders. Somdet Phra Akkhamuni is noted for dedicating his personal resources to the construction of Wat Pa Chet, which remains significant today.

Since the revival of Buddhism in Sipsong Panna, ordination ceremonies have resumed. In the initial phase, monks from Muang Yong, Muang Wa, and Chiang Kham were invited to serve as preceptors for these ceremonies. Although many monks from the early generations returned to lay life, later generations produced steadfast monks who continued to uphold Buddhism. Notable figures include Phra Khru Ba Mee, Phra Khru Ba Maha Saeng, Phra Khru Ba Saeng, Phra Khru Ba Ping, and Phra Khru Ba Kham Thin, all of whom have significantly contributed to maintaining and spreading Buddhism in the region.

Additionally, Chao Saeng Mueang played a vital role in reviving Buddhism in Yunnan and Sipsong Panna. One of his most significant accomplishments was the restoration of Wat Pa Chet, which had previously been abandoned, transforming it into a central hub of Buddhism in Sipsong Panna. During the early stages of the restoration, Chao Saeng Mueang faced ridicule and skepticism from many who doubted his ability to revive the temple. However, with unwavering determination and faith, he succeeded in developing the temple into a thriving center with many monks and novices, becoming the focal point for Buddhist activities in the community.

Currently, Wat Pa Chet serves as a vital center for Buddhism in Sipsong Panna, welcoming both monastics and laypeople from within and outside the region. It stands as a symbol of the revival and preservation of Buddhism in this area.

The Buddhist Pariyatti School in Kunming, established in 2000, was designed to unite monks from the three major Buddhist traditions—Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Theravada—demonstrating efforts to harmonize the diversity within Buddhism.

In a significant development, during the tenure of Somdet Luang Chom Mueang as the abbot of Wat Ban Luey, Mueang Chae, in the Hai region, he led a community field trip. This opportunity was extended to communities that successfully sold substantial amounts of rice. During this trip to Kunming, he paid homage to the Triple Gem at Yuan Tong Temple, where his resonant chanting deeply impressed Chao Saeng Mueang, then President of the Yunnan Buddhist Association. Observing Somdet Luang Chom Mueang's dignified demeanor and commanding voice, Chao Saeng Mueang recognized his potential as a leader in Buddhism and invited him to become the abbot of Wat Pa Chet. Initially hesitant, Somdet Luang Chom Mueang eventually accepted the position after several days of contemplation and devoted himself to developing Wat Pa Chet as a key Buddhist center in Sipsong Panna.

Since 1994, with the increasing number of monks and novices residing at Wat Pa Chet, a Buddhist Pariyatti School was established. Initially, the curriculum focused on Buddhist studies, taught by instructors primarily educated in Thailand, especially from Wat Phra Buddha Bat Tak Pha in Lamphun Province, who were pioneers in the first teaching phase.

In its early days, Wat Pa Chet served as the classroom for Pariyatti education. Over time, the curriculum expanded to include general education courses from lower secondary to upper secondary levels, supported by teachers from local schools. The Sipsong Panna Buddhist Pariyatti School also established collaborations with Jisuxueyan School, a vocational school in Sipsong Panna. Graduates received dual certificates from both institutions.

For higher education, the school has sent monks and novices to study at institutions across China, including Suzhou, Shanghai, Guangdong, Jiangxi, and Fujian, as well as in Thailand, such as Mahamakut Buddhist University (Lanna Campus) and Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (main campus and branches in Phrae and Phayao). Additionally, monks have pursued Pali studies at various centers, including Amornkiri Temple, Paknam Temple, Doi Suthep Temple, Phra Bat Ming Muang Temple, and Wat Sroi Thong in Bangkok.

Beyond Thailand, the school has sent monks to study in international institutions in Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Myanmar, enhancing their global Buddhist scholarship. This effort reflects the commitment to developing Buddhist personnel with diverse knowledge and skills in both religious and academic fields.

In 2024, the establishment of the Higher Theravada College of China marked a significant milestone, with its first undergraduate program accepting 20 monk students per year.

In terms of ecclesiastical administration, the monastic governance structure in Sipsong Panna is organized from the national to the provincial and district levels, down to the subdistrict level and individual monastic units. Each subdistrict monastery is overseen by a senior monk or preceptor, responsible for supervising the monks in their jurisdiction.

Currently, Sipsong Panna has become a significant tourism hub for both domestic and international visitors, supported by a well-connected travel network. The introduction of the high-speed railway connecting Kunming to Sipsong Panna, and extending to Laos via Bohan, Oudomxay, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane, has been in operation for two years. This development has led to a consistent increase in the number of tourists visiting the region daily.

In addition, air travel between Sipsong Panna and Chiang Mai is available, with two round-trip flights per week. These flights enhance tourism between the two regions effectively.

In terms of Buddhism, there is a strong emphasis on social aid, particularly assisting disaster victims. Over the past 30 years, the Sipsong Panna Buddhist Association, with Wat Pa Chet and Somdet Luang Chom Mueang as key contributors, has regularly delivered essential supplies to disaster-affected villages, alleviating their hardships.

Education remains a prioritized area, especially for monks and novices studying at the Sipsong Panna Buddhist Pariyatti School and the newly established college. These institutions receive annual per-capita financial support from local authorities. Currently, approximately 100 monks and novices are enrolled, with the number sometimes reaching 200 during certain periods.

Each village in Sipsong Panna organizes religious activities, such as merit-making during the Buddhist Lent. Monthly religious ceremonies involve collective efforts from households practicing precepts, including temple cleaning, ringing the temple bell, and assisting with community events like housewarmings or weddings. These activities foster cooperation among community members.

Ordination of monks and novices in the past played a crucial role in preserving local culture, traditions, and Buddhist teachings. Educational activities included reading and chanting Pali scriptures, learning Lanna scripts, and practicing Maha Chat sermons. During the mid-Lent period, monks and novices rotated among temples to deliver sermons, honing their skills in preaching with correct tones and rhythms.

Each region has unique sermon tones, such as the Luang and Hai styles, which sometimes caused misunderstandings among locals when monks unfamiliar with the area's

tone preached there. Therefore, mastering appropriate tones and rhythms is vital for maintaining cultural and traditional integrity.

Additionally, writing on palm leaves and making Saa paper are traditional methods for preserving Buddhist teachings. These practices, passed down through generations, are integrated into the curriculum at the Sipsong Panna Buddhist Pariyatti School, ensuring the continuity of local religious and cultural heritage.

Despite modern technology enabling the printing of teachings in books, Saa paper remains historically significant and is still used in certain cases due to its durability, lasting over 300 years. The use of Saa paper in creating manuscripts supports the sustainable propagation of Buddhism for future generations.

## References

- Charuwat Phromwong. (1992). "Tai Lue: History, Culture, and Changes in Phayao: Some Cultural Changes of the Tai Lue." Master's Thesis in Anthropology, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Graduate School: Chulalongkorn University.
- Thawi Sawangpanayakoon. (1986). *The Local Legends of Xishuangbanna*. Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai Book Center.
- Manee Phayomyong. (2000). *The Traditions of the Twelve Months of Lanna Thai*. Volume 2. 4th Edition. Chiang Mai: Thap Printing,
- Yanyong Jiranakorn and Rattanaporn Setthakun. (2001). *The History of Xishuangbanna*. Bangkok: Sathit Witthitham Institute.
- Xishuangbanna Tai Studies Association. (2012). *Buddhism in Xishuangbanna*. Kunming: Yunnan Nationality Publishing House.