

The Two Khruba Lue: Buddhist Place Makers of the Upper Mekong¹

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ABSTRACT—Since the 1980s, the mobility of people in the borderlands of the upper Mekong region has been reactivated, simultaneously regulated by the state's changing policy on borders and regional development. This paper traces the respective life stories of two charismatic Lue monks, Phra Khru Weruwanpithak, or 'Khruba Khuen Kham' (1929-2005), and Chao Khun Phra Rathanarangsri, or 'Khruba Saeng Lha' (1928-), and their Buddhist practices across borders, showing their religious journeys from the early 1980s to the beginning of the 21st century; this led these two Khruba Lue to play a significant part in Theravada revivalism in northern Thailand, the eastern Shan state of Myanmar, and in Sipsong Panna of south-west China. These activities not only restored Theravada Buddhist sites and developed extensive and influential networks among Buddhist monks and laities across borders, but also created a new sense of belonging among the Lue, who have long lived across national borders in the upper Mekong region.

Introduction

In present-day northern Thailand, there are many Lue descendants of war captives, who in some areas—in the Lamphun-Chiang Mai region in particular—call themselves *Khon Yong*, and in others *Khon Muang*, or the people of Lan Na. Within the process of the formation of the modern Siamese state, since the mid-19th century, these people have become members of the Thai nation. Under such powerful national integration processes, local histories were manipulated and replaced, and the Lue's traumatic memory seems to be silent. Since the 1980s, however, under the rapid changes of the Thai national economy, which has been unequally distributed, a huge divide resulted between Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, and the countryside, a collective memory of the Lue in exile was restored as part of the local movements in the North. In a regional context, Lue cultural revivals also took place, as particularly demonstrated through Theravada revivalism in the borderlands of the upper Mekong. The revival began at almost the same time as the former socialist countries, namely China, Laos and Myanmar, turned their economic policies towards the outside world. Many Lue families, who had found refuge in northern Laos and the eastern Shan State of Myanmar, decided to return from exile to their 'home places', to recover their displaced lives and families (Condominas 1985; Wasan 2008).

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Among these people, groups of cross-border monks, particularly from northern Thailand and eastern Shan state of Myanmar, have played an important role in the transportation of culture (e.g. Tai fonts, Dharma script and textbooks, Buddha icons, Buddhist art, activities, and architecture, and recently modern items and material culture such as music, VCD karaoke and films, particularly from northern Thailand) across national borders (see also Davis 2003). The cross-border connectivity among the Lue, which has been fundamentally based upon family, kinship, trading networks, ethno-history and religion, has been reactivated and maintained, basically through these journeys across borders (cf. Cohen 2000, 2001; Wasan 2010).

From the 1990s, the mobility of people in these borderlands of the upper Mekong has also been accelerated and complicated by regional co-operation in trade and economic development among the Mekong countries. This resulted in a massive flow of commodities, culture, information, and capital across these national borders. Within these changing contexts in the age of globalisation, where culture can be commoditised and consumed, either by others or by those culture owners themselves, the search for routes and roots seem to be what most matters. This is particularly the case among the Lue living across the borders of upper mainland Southeast Asia today.

This paper examines Buddhist journeys across borders, within the context of nationalisation and regionalisation, through the life story of Phrakhrū Weruwanpitak, or Khruba Khuen Kham (1929-2005), and Chao Khun Phra Rathanarangsri, or ‘Khruba Saeng Lha’ (1928-); both Khrubas are Lue descendants and charismatic Buddhist monks. Khruba Khuen Kham lived in Lamphun, northern Thailand; however, he preferred to identify himself as a *Yong* (a social label used by the locals in Lamphun-Chiang Mai who believe that their ancestors were forced to leave Muang Yong, in the present-day eastern Shan state of Myanmar, about two centuries ago), whereas Khruba Saeng Lha, originally from Sipsong Panna, has resided in Tachileik, a market town on Thai-Myanmar border, for decades.

These two Khruba Lue have devoted their lives through the monkhood, following Theravada tradition, which has faithfully been practised for centuries in mainland Southeast Asia, and led their disciples and lay people to restore and rebuild religious sites and cultures across the borders of northern Thailand, eastern Shan State of Myanmar and southern Yunnan in China. For three decades, Khruba Khuen Kham and Khruba Saeng Lha played an important part in the Lue cultural revival from the early 1980s to the beginning of the 21st century.

These two charismatic monks devoted themselves to following the *ton bun* tradition, which has been widely practised in modern times and was initiated by Khruba Sriwichai (1878-1939), a Buddhist saint in northern Thailand (Bowie 2014; Cohen 2001; Keyes 1982; Tambiah 1984). As Charles F. Keyes points out, in contrast to the *Arahan*, or “one who has fully realized the truth of Buddha’s teachings and who, at death, will be released from the shackles of rebirth” (1982: 150), which in Thai society is exemplified by Acan Man (1871-1949), the Buddhist saint of the north-east of the country, a *nakbun* or *ton bun*,² who is idealised by Khruba Sriwichai, is “one who is so endowed with [so

² *Nukbun* is a central Thai term, *ton bun* is a northern Thai term.

much] merit himself that he can, through compassion towards others, serve as a means for them also to acquire merit”; whereas the *Arahan* is one who seeks salvation by rejecting the world, a *ton bun* is one who is “actively involved in the world and gain[s] a reputation for his organization of major efforts to construct and/or...repair Buddhist monuments” (ibid: 149-150).

Both these saints (Acan Man and Khruba Sriwichai), who lived from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, and those monks who have continued their practice, adhere to the forest-monk traditions and rigorously follow the practice of strict asceticism (Tambiah 1984; Taylor 1993; Tiyananich 1997, 2003). The state’s reform of Buddhism, particularly in Siam (later becoming Thailand in 1939) that began in the early 20th century, led to a decline in local Buddhist traditions and religious communities. Before this reform, which was, in fact, part of the creation of the modern Siamese state, there had been different forms of Buddhist tradition throughout the area that is now Thailand. The emergence of ‘Thammayut’ and ‘Mahanikai’ *nikais* in the Thai Sangha, however, has not led to the total disappearance of other Buddhist traditions, such as the wandering monk, and in fact, in Thailand and other Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, different varieties of Theravada tradition are still popular and continue to be practised.

Accordingly, as I will show in this paper, the cross-border journeys of the two Khruba Lue, in themselves a transformation and persistence of local Theravada Buddhism, i.e. the *ton bun* tradition, occurred under a powerful context in terms of the state of Buddhism and the changing upper Mekong region during the age of globalisation. As mentioned earlier, the *ton bun* is a form of local Buddhist sect centred in northern Thailand, and “is a uniquely Yuan Buddhist variant of the *bodhisattva* ideal, expressed typically in the building or renovation of religious monuments and the sharing of merit with the laity” (Cohen 2000: 142). This Theravada tradition was nurtured between the 14th and 15th centuries in central Lan Na (present-day Chiang Mai in northern Thailand), and spread to other Tai regions in the upper Mekong, which cover the area of present-day northern Thailand, eastern Myanmar, southern Yunnan in China and northern Laos (Swearer and Sommai 1978).

In Paul Cohen’s study on Khruba Bunchum, a charismatic Lue monk, a *Yong* monk if you like, who is the contemporary exemplar of the *ton bun* tradition in modern times, he investigates the reliquary building tours of this holy man around the Golden Triangle area. Cohen concludes that the cross-border journeys of Khruba Bunchum, are part of “the re-imagining and renewal of pre-modern ideas of sacred space that challenge modern conceptions of sovereignty and national borders” (Cohen 2000: 141). I will show, however, that in the age of regionalisation of mainland Southeast Asia and China, the *ton bun* is not simply a form of religious revivalism, but is a remembered person; thus, this tradition is a reflection of mnemonic practice among the Lue as a Diaspora. The religious practices of Khruba Khuen Kham and Khruba Saeng Lha, have not only helped to remind and reform Theravada Buddhism, but have also created a (new) sense of place and belonging among the Lue of the upper Mekong.

I will begin with a snapshot of the history of Lue mobility, which arguably created what should be called Diasporic Lue communities in upper Mainland Southeast Asian borderlands today. Then, I will investigate the respective biographies of Khruba Khuen

Kham and Khruba Saeng Lha, showing that the journeys and missions they conducted significantly transformed Theravada revivalism, developing cultures across borders. In conclusion, I argue that, in the changing context of regional development and the integration of China and mainland Southeast Asia, the religious practice of these two Khruba Lue not only restored Buddhism and Theravada traditions and developed the most influential networks among Lue monks and laities across the national borders, but also created culture and a new sense of belonging among these uprooted peoples, who have long lived across national borders in the upper Mekong region.

Tragic history: mobility that originated in the Lue diasporic communities

Anthropologically speaking, the Lue³ are members of the Tai-speaking peoples, and have lived in frontier regions of southern Yunnan, northern Laos, northern Thailand and eastern Shan State in Myanmar, today widely known as the upper Mekong region, for centuries (Cohen 1998, 2002; Keyes 1992; Lebar et al. 1964: 206-213; Moerman 1965; Turton 2000; Wijeyewardene 1993). Through the myths surrounding their origin, the story of Lue mobility can be traced as far back as the early 12th century, the early period of Tai settlement in present mainland Southeast Asia. In one myth, known as *tamnan phyaa aa lavo*, it is told that Prince Aa Lavo, a mythical Lue leader, and his people began an expedition from the south, speculatively to ‘a Lao country’. The Prince led his servants to hunt for golden deer until they reached a field at Chiang Hung, where the golden deer, having transformed itself into a normal deer, was eventually hunted down. The Prince thus decided to resettle to this glorious field, leading his people to build a Lue country, later called Chiang Hung, the first centre of the Lue confederation of states in the upper Mekong, an area which later became Sipsong Panna (Wasan 2005). From the 13th to the 16th centuries, these Tai allies, by adopting local customs and beliefs, as well as Theravada Buddhism, established and expanded their power, mostly southwards, to exercise control over the indigenous people in the region of upper mainland Southeast Asia.

In *The Legend of Lord Buddha’s Journey around the World*, which is founded in both the Lue and Lan Na regions, it is mentioned that the peoples in these two regions belonged to the same Buddhist tradition, which might be called Lan Na Buddhism (see Cohen 2017). Note that this legend, believed to have been written in the early 16th century, during the reign of the Mangrai dynasty, narrates the travels of Lord Buddha across Lue and Lan Na countries, simultaneously demonstrating the creation of those visited places as part of the Tai world. Undoubtedly, in this legend the towns in Sipsong Panna and the Lan Na countries were situated in and belonged to the same Buddhist world. Lord Buddha visited, named, and predicted the future of these places and towns in the Lan Na and Lue regions after attaining nirvana. Buddha left his traces or footprints on many hills and valleys. His fellow monks later brought the Lord’s relics to those sites to erect pagodas or develop them

³ Today, they are officially called Shan in Myanmar, the Dai ethnic minority in the People’s Republic of China, and simply Thai and Lao in Thailand and Laos respectively.

as sacred places. This story of Lord Buddha's journey, on the one hand, could be interpreted as a history of the Buddhist Tai state formation. On the other hand, it could also be read as a glorious story of the Tai expansion and victory over indigenous powers in the hill-valley regions of upper mainland Southeast Asia (Keyes 1977).

One moment in the history of Lue mobility into the Ping valley was captured in *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* in the late 18th century, when the Tai warlords, led by the (new) Lan Na rulers, attempted to liberate their kingdoms from domination by the Burmese, who had governed the Tai states in the upper Mekong region for over two centuries, from the late 16th to the late 18th century.

From the late 18th century and up to the mid-19th century, the story of Lue mobility is itself the story of the decline of the Tai allied states in the upper Mekong, where the kingdoms were at war for more than a half a century, from the 1780s to the 1860s. Among Lue oral history, the homeland was at war and their ancestors had become prisoners of war in both Lan Na and (present day) Myanmar. To the (new) Lan Na rulers, who later established a Lan Na dynasty called the *Chao Jed Ton*, or the Seven Princes, these forced settlements were part of a series of campaigns carried out with the support of the Siamese rulers, their (new) allies, in which they attempted to rebuild their kingdom and restore their power after the defeat and deportation of the Burmese out of Siam, a kingdom itself newly established in 1782, along with its tributaries (Grabowsky 1999).

From the late 18th century to the early 19th century, these Lan Na rulers forced the peoples in Chiang Tung and Sipsong Panna, Muang Yong in particular, to resettle in their principalities in the Ping Valley (the Chiang Mai-Lamphun region today). It is believed that these campaigns resulted in two-thirds of the population in the Chiang Mai-Lamphun area being not indigenous, but war captives from the Red Karen states along the present Thai-Myanmar border, the Shan States to the north-west, and the Lue petty states to the north, particularly from Chiang Tung, Muang Yong (in eastern Shan State today) and Sipsong Panna (southern Yunnan Province of China). While in the eastern regions of Lan Na, the Lue war captives were from the north-east and south-east of Sipsong Panna, including Muang U, Muang La, Muang Phong, Muang Mang, Chiang Kheng, and Muang Singh. They were resettled in Nan, Phrae and Chiang Rai in the mid-19th century.

The advent of European colonialism in the mid-19th century not only intensified a worst-case scenario for the Lue, but also began to turn almost everything in their areas upside down; this was a time when friends became enemies and family became unfamiliar. By the end of the 19th century, the old confederation of Lue minor states, commonly called Sipsong Panna, was conquered, divided, demarcated and controlled by the three main colonial powers of British Burma, French Indochina and China.⁴ The coming of the colonial regimes did indeed change the destiny of the Lue during this historic moment in the late 19th century in the globalisation

⁴ According to the Anglo-Chinese Boundary Treaty of 1 March 1894, Chiang Hung, the Lue capital on the west bank of the Mekong, was ceded to China, "but the cession was made conditional upon China not surrendering these states to a third party" (Boundary Treaties in Siam and Indo-China 1896: 299). It was not until the end of the mid-19th century that the major part of the Lue confederation states of Sipsong Panna was finally incorporated into China.

process in the upper Mekong, and as Wijeyewardene (1993) suggests, played a crucial role in the genesis of the Lue Diaspora. The Lue have thus become an internally uprooted people, who live scattered across different areas of their home territory; regions which today are part of the four nation-states of the upper Mekong: China, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar.⁵ As Charles F. Keyes (1992: 12) remarks, “[t]he division of the [upper Mekong] region between the four states of the colonial era only began, however, the process which was to lead to the emergence of new identities among the Lue and other Tai-speaking peoples of the region.”

The Lue in Diaspora, as Paul Cohen suggests, can be understood as peoples, who “have ‘divided loyalties’ and a sense of being simultaneously ‘here and there’” (2002: 5). For these members of the Lue Diaspora, their “orientation to the homeland is expressed in two ways: by the preservation of ties of kinship and locality, by regular cross-border visiting and/or imagined attachments to their place of origin” (ibid). Under the modern nation-state regimes, which tend to regulate rather than liberate people’s mobility, this ‘place of origin’ in many ways, I argue, is transformed, through symbolic forms of cultural articulation into an “imagined destination” that members of the Lue Diaspora desire to visit or revisit, and in many cases this cultural process of imagined place-making takes a religious form. It is in this process that the two charismatic Buddhist monks, Khruba Maha Khuen Kham and Khruba Saeng Lha, played a pivotal role in restoring and reconnecting Lue networks across the national borders of the upper Mekong.

The biographies of the two Khrubas

Khruba Khuen Kham

Khruba Khuen Kham was born on 14 July 1929, in Ban Chang Khaw Noi (Pa Sang district, in Lamphun). He was the third son of four children in his family and when he was about seven years old, his father took him to study at Ban Chang Khaw Noi primary school. He completed primary school in 1937, having studied under the state’s compulsory education. After that, like many boys in northern Thailand who wanted to study more, he went to a temple where he aimed to continue his higher studies, becoming a *kayom* or ‘apprentice’ (to be a monk) at his village’s monastery for two years. As a *kayom*, he had to study the Tham script and practise chanting the sutras before he could qualify as an ordained novice, which he achieved in 1944. Later, he moved to study at Wat Pa Yang, the old Buddhist monastery in Pa Sang.

By the time he was fifteen years old, he already knew the Tai and modern Thai scripts. Unfortunately, that year his father passed away and his mother left home. This crisis in family life was a traumatic experience for the young novice. Nevertheless, he continued his Buddhist studies, moving further south to Wat Pa Nhung Cedi, a forest monastery situated about seven kilometres from Pa Sang town. Thereafter, he resided

⁵ There are also a few Lue people residing in what is presently north-western Vietnam. This paper, however, concerns only the Lue who have long lived in the areas currently comprising the four countries of the upper Mekong region.

and studied at this forest temple for about four years, until one day he had the chance to meet and serve Khruba Phromma, a famous nomadic monk who had just returned from his ‘forest retreat’ and a long period of meditation. The nomadic monk accepted the young novice Khuen as his disciple, and in 1948, when Khruba Phromma was invited by the Pa Sang Sangha (monastic order) to direct the construction of Wat Phra Buddha Bat Tak Pha (later Wat Phra Bat), Khruba Khuen, then still a novice, went along with his master to develop this new temple, where he would later be ordained as a monk (Bhikkhu) when he was twenty-one. A few decades later, he would also become its second Abbot (from 1986 to 2005), after the death of Khruba Phromma, the first Abbot, in August 1984.

After becoming a Bhikkhu, Khruba Khuen followed his master, Khruba Phromma, adhering to the forest monk tradition, which focuses on the practice of strict asceticism rather than Pali studies; however, as Khruba Khuen told some of his disciples later, he had to be a teacher in Buddhist studies at Wat Phra Bat, so he also studied on the *nak tham* programme and in Pali studies.

In 1953, the same year that the Buddhist monastery school was officially established at Wat Phra Bat, Khruba Khuen passed both the highest level of *nak tham* studies, called *nak tham eak*, and also Pali studies to Level 3, called *Parian Tham Sam Prayok*. As a result, he was given the title *Maha*, signifying that he was a senior monk who commanded great respect and had a deep knowledge of Pali, the language that Lord Buddha used in his teachings. The local laity and his disciples, therefore, sometimes refer to him as *Maha Khuen*.

Khruba Khuen Kham initially practised *dhutanga*; and in 1952, he became a forest monk at the age of twenty-three. He later wrote that his master took him and some other disciples south-west, wandering bare foot, via Muang Hot, to Tha Song Yang (in present Tak Province), and across the border to Myanmar where many Karen communities were settled. Khruba Phromma had been there previously, when he lived with the Karen for about six years. In the following years, Khruba Khuen went on *dhutanga* with his master several times. In 1953, for example, after completing his Buddhist studies, they both journeyed to southern Surat Thani Province, making a pilgrimage to Chaiya Reliquary. This journey, surely on foot, took many months.

Although he was appointed the first Patriarch of Wat Phra Bat, Khruba Phromma still took long journeys with his disciples, mostly in the forests along the Thai-Burma border, right up until the late 1960s. The Wat Phra Bat development project was, thus, mostly assigned to Khruba Khuen, his closest disciple, who had loved Buddhist art and architecture since he was a young novice. Khruba Khuen Kham learned and practised by himself, particularly when he had to visit Buddhist monasteries or religious sites. He saw himself as “a practical architect.” At Wat Phra Bat, under the supervision of his great master, Khruba Khuen thus began to apply his practical knowledge, and in 1959, restored the Main Hall, called *Viharn Jaturamuk*, which had been built in 1929 by Khruba Sriwaichai, in order to cover the Buddha’s footprint. Following this meaningful restoration, Khruba Khuen constructed a new monastery hall (*bot*), a facilitating hall, the buildings for a new Buddhist monastic school and a temple wall. For three decades (after 1948), Khruba Phromma, the master, and Maha Khuen, the disciple, worked together

in turning Wat Phra Bat, once a sacred site on the forested hill, to be a Great Royal Temple, or *Phra Aram Luang*, a title which was officially given by the Thai monastic order in 1978.

The most significant piece of work, however, seems to have been the construction of *Cedi Si Khruba* (the four charismatic Buddhist monk stupa), which is situated on top of Doi Khure Hill. Envisaged by Khruba Phromma just a year before his death, this reliquary site was erected on the hill that rises behind Wat Phra Bat (see Figure 1). Khruba Khuen began the construction project in 1985, just a year after his great master passed away, and it took a decade to complete the whole project, which included a long Naga aeries of steps stretching from the foot of the hill to the top, a new monastery building (on the hill), a new road up the hill and Cedi Si Khruba, where the ashes of his great master, and the father and two brothers of Khruba Phromma, are enshrined.

Along with the development of Wat Phra Bat, Khruba Khuen also restored and built at least two other Buddhist monasteries nearby. One was Wat Mon Ma Hin (where he was the Abbot from 1968 to 1975), a place where his master practised meditation, situated about eight kilometres to the south of Wat Phra Bat. The other was Wat Suwan, situated on the Pa Sang to Li Road, about ten kilometres to the south of Wat Phra Bat. He was the Abbot of this temple for a decade, between 1976 and 1985, before returning to Wat Phra Bat to take up the position of Abbot after the death of his master, as mentioned earlier.

His reverence had been accumulated. Not surprisingly, as well as being appointed Abbot of Wat Mon Ma Hin, Wat Suwan, and Wat Phra Bat, Khruba Khuen was also appointed to be *Chao Khana Tambon*, the Sangha Governor in Makok sub-District, from 1970 to 1975, and *Chao Khana Amphur*, the Sangha Governor in Pa Sang District, from 1976 to 1986, the highest rank attainable.

In 1987, however, after his return to Wat Phra Bat and being made the Abbot there, Khruba Khuen retired from the highest order and detached himself from the Thai Sangha (despite this, the Pa Sang Sangha still paid him the highest respect by appointing him an Honorary District Governor, a position he held until his death, as mentioned in his biography). Seemingly, he wanted to practise the strict form of asceticism and preferred to apply his 'practical architect' skills and carry out journeys to far-off places, and it is these religious activities, particularly the forest *dhutanga*, that he was taught by the great nomadic monk Khruba Phromma, his master.

Throughout his life as a Buddhist monk, Khruba Khuen devoted himself to maintaining, building, restoring and creating Buddhist sites. As stated in his biography, he helped to build or restore fifty-seven *viharn* (main monastery building), thirty-eight *bot* (a monastery building that is smaller than a *viharn*), twenty-six *sala* (temple hall) and eight pagodas, as well as one Buddhist monastic school. Khruba Khuen Kham died on 31 March 2005, and his body was cremated on 11 March 2006 at a temporary site, outside Wat Phra Bat Tak Pha, where he spent fifty-five *vassa* (years of monkhood). He was acclaimed as a charismatic Yong monk, who adheres to the modern *ton bun* tradition, in the Pa Sang area where many Lue families, originally from Muang Yong, have resettled.



Figure 1. Khruba Khuen 'in the forest,' somewhere in Sipsong Panna



Figure 2. Khruba Saeng Lha, the Patriarch of Wat Sai Muang Buddhist Monastery, Tachilek.

Khruba Saeng Lha

Khruba Saeng Lha Dhammasiri (under Chiang Tung Sangha) or Chao Khun Phra Rathanarangsri (under the Thai Sangha) was born on the ninth day of the second month of the Lue Calendar, the Tai year 1291, or in late December 1928, in Muang Hoon, a small town situated in southern Sipsong Panna, bordering the eastern Shan state of Myanmar. In his home village, he was ordained first as a novice and later as a monk when he turned twenty. This was similar to Khruba Khen Kham and other village boys in the Tai Buddhist world, where entering the Buddhist monkhood and studying Tai script, Buddha's teachings, and other kinds of traditional knowledge, artistic skills, medical and magical practices were common. For Bhikkhu Saeng Lha, his love and pride in Dhamma studies led him to devote his life to Buddhism, continuing his monkhood with the aim of following the Lord Buddha into Nirvana. When he was about thirty, in 1958, the disastrous Great Leap Forward took place in China, which possibly caused him to flee across the border to Chiang Tung where he could continue his religious life.

He resided at Wat Chiang Yun in Chiang Tung. About three years later, when he was thirty-three, he was promoted to the Savathi title, the first rank for a senior monk in the Chiang Tung Sangha. In 1967, one year after the Cultural Revolution began in China, Phra Savathi Saeng Lha was invited from Chiang Yun temple to reside at Wat Sai Muang and became the Patriarch of this Buddhist monastery. From then on, Abbot Saeng Lha and the Lue laity, most of whom had escaped from Muang Hoon during the decade of the Cultural Revolution, began to restore and develop this temple, first as a spiritual centre for the exiled Lue community in Tachileik, and later becoming a centre for Buddhist studies in the upper Mekong region.

In 1970, or about ten years after his first promotion as Phra Savathi Saeng Lha, he was promoted to the higher rank of Phra Savami Saeng Lha. In the Tai Buddhist World, the longer he continued and maintained his monkhood, the more knowledge he would acquire, leading to a higher rank and greater reverence. When he was fifty, in 1978, he was promoted again to the Khruba title, the highest rank that any monk in the Chiang

Tung/Sipsong Panna Sangha could hold. Since then, he has become Khruba Saeng Lha, a great master among his disciples and Lue followers.

Led by Khruba Sang Lha from 1967 to the present, the construction and development of Wat Sai Muang monastery have dramatically helped to restore the life of exiled Lue families, most of whom escaped from southern Sipsong Panna and Muang Yong during the three-decade ‘dark age’, from 1958 to 1978, and resettled in Mae Sai-Tachileik.

Wat Sai Muang today is the central temple and the centre for Buddhist Studies in Tachileik district. It is said that the temple was rebuilt on the historic site that had formerly been Wat Ges, supposedly about 600 years old. Probably, in the early 1950s, the same period that groups of Lue fled from Sipsong Panna and resettled in the Mae Sai-Tachileik border areas, the temple was first restored by a leading monk, Khruba Doang Kaew, and laymen. Nevertheless, the clearest history of this Buddhist monastery reconstruction began in 1967, when Phra Savathi Sang Lha was invited from Chiang Tung to be the temple abbot. From then on, Khruba Saeng Lha started leading his Lue followers to construct and develop this temple, which later became the Buddhist centre in this border region.

In 1978, the same year that he received the title “Khruba”, Khruba Saeng Lha began to develop the Nak Dham Studies programme at his Buddhist monastery school, which gradually expanded its network into the surrounding towns and villages in eastern Shan state, and later beyond the national borders to northern Thailand and Sipsong Panna, when Buddhism was allowed to be practised faithfully again in the early 1980s by the Dai in Xishuangbanna.

Apart from his mission to restore Buddhism through developing religious sites and a formal study programme, Khruba Saeng Lha also led his followers since 1975 to develop schools and other social services in Tachileik town. These included a kindergarden in 1976, a primary school in 1990, a primary high school in 2002 and a high school in 2005. All are situated in the area surrounding his monastery compound. Interestingly, in 1998, during the period that the border economy was promoted by the four nation-states of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and China, he was also appointed by the Myanmar government to be a leader of the construction of a replica of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Tachileik. In 2006, he began to build a home for the elderly, and in 2007, he started to develop the Pali studies programme at Wat Sai Muang. He also began seeking sponsors among his network which, after 1980, had been established across the national borders of China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, to establish scholarships for his students to study abroad.

For three decades, at Wat Sai Muang, a number of monks and novices, both from eastern Shan state and southern Sipsong Panna, have come to study and undertake the Nak Dham exam, turning Wat Sai Muang into a Buddhist studies centre and, later, a hub for cross-border student monks. After graduating and becoming competent in the Thai language, these monks would travel to Bangkok, and Yangon for their higher studies. The Khrubas’ missions were, therefore, not limited to Myanmar, but transcended borders, to Mae Sai in northern Thailand and Sipsong Panna in southern China.

Khruba Saeng Lha is undeniably a charismatic Lue monk who traversed the borders. His religious practice and monkhood belong to the Tai Theravada tradition. His charisma and higher rank has been attained through his focus on his religious mission

in restoring and remaking the Buddhist world. The great reverence in which he is held by huge numbers of Lue, Shan and Thai followers comes fundamentally from what one might call a symbolic exchange, through the blessings he gives and the donations he receives from his faithful followers. Consequently, in 2011, he received from the Thai king the Pad Yot, or fan of rank, in the Thai Sangha, yet another historic phenomenon.

In 2012, at the height of his monastic life, he donated the hospital that he and his Thai and Lue followers had built to the Myanmar government. The hospital, sometimes called the “Thai hospital” because of the many donations from Thailand, was named the “Dhammasiri Hospital”, after his Buddhist title.

Each year in late December for over a decade, the people of Ban San Sai, now the oldest Lue community in Tachileik, have organised a birthday ceremony for Khruba Saeng Lha at Wat Sai Muang. The birthday ceremony in 2011, however, was particularly historic and important, since it was the year that Khruba Saeng Lha was given the royal Pad Yot. In the border towns of Tachileik and Mae Sai that year, the Lue of Ban San Sai, co-operating with both Thai and Myanmar state officials, organised a special ceremony in recognition of Khruba Saeng Lha’s great achievement in receiving the Pad Yot from the Sixth Sangha regional governor, and being given the royal title, “Chao Khun Phra Rathanarangsri”.

The two Khrubas traversing the borders

Khruba Saeng Lha is not a nomadic monk, although to maintain his Buddhist monkhood he had to live in exile from his motherland. Through this historic journey, he has become a Khruba who lives along the borders. His Buddhist missions are not simply limited to Myanmar, but traverse the borders, north and south, to Sipsong Panna and Northern Thailand. In 1983, he helped, for example, to support the restoration of Wat Dao Wow stupa in Mae Sai, and thirty years later, in 2013, he continued this religious mission. Since the early 1990s, in Sipsong Panna, he began to transport Buddha images to those in need and arranged financial support to rebuild the town stupa of Muang Hoon, his mother’s hometown.

Similarly, late in his life, Khruba Khuen Kham continued his religious mission to restore and create Buddhist sites in Muang Yong, his ancestral hometown in eastern Shan state, and later he often went to Sipsong Panna in southern Yunnan with his Thai and Lue disciples. For many years, he also ensured that donations, mostly from Thailand, were passed to remote areas like Muang Yong and Sipsong Panna. As a result, he gained a reputation for his religious practice and his journeys across borders, becoming probably the best known monk from northern Thailand among the Lue communities in Muang Yong and Sipsong Panna.

The year 1976 marked a turning point in Khruba Khuen’s long journeys, when he traversed the north to Mae Sai and across the border to Tachileik, then a small town where many Lue refugees from southern Sipsong Panna had resettled. There, at Wat Sai Muang, he met Khruba Saeng Lha and established contact with monks from the town of Muang Yong. Khruba Khuen had first learned about Muang Yong from the wooden inscription in the monastery of his home village. It was, indeed, the home of his

ancestors, those Lue who had been forced to resettle in Pa Sang in the early 19th century, as mentioned earlier. Three years later, in 1979, after contact had been renewed via Khruba Saeng Lha, an initial group of eleven Lue monks and novices from Muang Yong were, at the request of Khruba Khuen, sent to study with him at Wat Suwan. Incredibly, from 1980 to about 1995, delegations of monks and novices from Muang Yong made an annual trek across the border to study with Khruba Khuen at this monastery (and later at Wat Phra Bat).

In 1984, the year his master passed away, Khruba Khuen was finally able to make his first journey to Muang Yong, after which he continued to visit, sometimes accompanied by Thai lay people, in order to donate Buddha images and funds for the restoration of old monasteries or to build a new religious site in Muang Yong (and later in Sipsong Panna). As well as these cross-border journeys to eastern Shan state, Khruba Khuen also invited a group of Lue monks from Muang Yong to cross the border in 1986, to participate in his great master's cremation at Wat Phra Bat.

Interestingly, there are two significant Buddhist sites in Muang Yong that were restored by Khruba Khuen, one being the main monastery building at Wat Ho Kong (the Central Temple of Muang Yong), and the other being the Johm Yong Pagoda, the religious site where Khruba Khuen implemented designs of northern Thai Buddhist art and architecture. The restoration of Thad Johm Yong pagoda finished in 1994, and also included the construction and renovation of the *bot*, *dhatu pidok*, *kuti* and *viharn* on Doi Johm Yong hill.

In 1986, on his journey to Muang Yong, Khruba Khuen made his first visit to Sipsong Panna, accompanied by the Abbot of the Central Temple of Muang Yong, travelling across the border from the eastern Shan state of Myanmar. During this trip to Chiang Hung (Jinghong), he took with him a Buddha image to donate to the Sipsong Panna Buddhist Association at Wat Ban Tin, and from that year to 1999 he made several trips, often accompanied by Khruba Saeng Lha, from Muang Yong to Sipsong Panna, where he took part in the restoration of several Buddhist sites, as described below.

In 1995, he brought financial support (from a Thai businessman in Bangkok), as well as a leading craftsman from Muang Yong to rebuild the great Buddha image in the *viharn* of Wat Suan Mon, a tourist spot in Muang Ham (called Galanba in Chinese), about thirty kilometres to the east of Jinghong. Another example of Khruba Khuen's work in Sipsong Panna was his leading role in the construction of a *bot* at Wat Pa Che, the Central Temple of Sipsong Panna, in Jinghong, which was completed in 1998.

In this sense, the cross-border journeys of the two Khruba Lue, one from Pa Sang another from Tachileik, to Sipsong Panna can probably be seen as having been part of a Theravada revival in the upper region of the Mekong. This is exemplified through a historic cross-border journey made by monks and novices from Muang Yong and Sipsong Panna to northern Thailand, lasting about two decades from the mid-1980s to the early 21st century, in order to study at Wat Suwan and Wat Phra Bat, which was then governed by Khruba Khuen as the Patriarch. Not surprisingly, most have since become the Khruba's disciples (see Wasan 2010).

From 1991 on, pioneer groups of Lue monks and novices from Sipsong Panna in southern Yunnan travelled across the national border to pursue their Buddhist studies,

particularly in Lamphun, northern Thailand. The first and the only formal group of ten were sent by the Xishuangbanna Buddhist Association to travel by air (from Kunming to Bangkok and from Bangkok to Chiang Mai) to Wat Phra Bat in May 1991. These student monks and novices were determined to establish a Buddhist monastery school at the Central Temple of Sipsong Panna, then still under construction. After finishing their three-year programme of study abroad, all of them had to return to Sipsong Panna, in accordance with a formal agreement between Thailand and China. However, each year from 1991 to the late 1990s, there were also other groups of Lue monks and novices (about thirty of them in 1992 alone), who crossed the border to make the long journey overland, mostly via the Mae Sai-Tachileik border, to northern Thailand. Most of them hoped to improve their knowledge by studying in a Thai monastery, and at the same time to experience life in Thailand: to acquire modern knowledge and experience in Thai society.

Although not all of these Lue monks studied at Wat Phra Bat in Pa Sang district, which was then governed by Khruba Khuen (some went to temples in Lamphun or Chiang Mai), within a few years the number of Lue monks and novices at this temple had increased dramatically. Most of them came to Wat Phra Bat through the transnational network of Khruba Saeng Lha and Khruba Khuen, but they made the long journey by themselves, utilising 'underground links' developed soon after the arrival of the delegation sent by the Buddhist Association in May 1991. For almost two decades, Wat Phra Bat was transformed into a hub for border-crossing monks from the eastern Shan state of Myanmar and southern Yunnan in China. In Lamphun, the Lue monks initially formed an informal meeting group to help each other and look after newcomers.

In January 1994, the ten members of the delegation sent by the Buddhist Association returned to Xishuangbanna after completing their studies. A couple of years later, other Lue monks and novices also began to return to their home country. The number of border-crossing monks at Wat Phra Bat has continually decreased since the death of Khruba Khuen.

Most of the Lue monks continued their monastic lives for years after their return to Sipsong Panna, leading the Lue laity in reforming and developing Theravada Buddhism in their home country. The return of these monks has meant the transportation of Buddhist practice and tradition, knowledge and experience learned in Thailand to southern Yunnan, resulting in new schooling practice in Lue Buddhist monasteries, religious practice at annual festivals, the (re)construction of temple buildings, a revival of Buddhist art and architecture, and other kinds of artwork, or simply through stories told in everyday conversation. The story of the cross-border journey of these Lue monks, and the renewal of their Theravada practice after their return home, can undoubtedly be seen as part of Theravada Buddhist revivalism in Sipsong Panna that has taken place since the 1980s.

Most of these monks are the disciples of the two Khruba Lue; thus, their journey can be interpreted as a form of transportation of Thai culture across the border into this frontier region of south-west China. A question remains as to how the social process of transporting Thai culture across the borders through the cross-border journeys of these Lue monks and novices actually took place.

Conclusion

The Tai world of the upper Mekong region has a long-shared culture, society and history, and the region has a lengthy tradition of Lan Na Buddhism, which is represented through a common belief in *ton bun*. This type of Theravada Buddhism has distinctive traditions based on the practice of strict asceticism and merit-making, as fundamentally expressed in the carrying out of long-distance pilgrimages (Keyes 1975; Pruess 1976), in the construction and restoration of religious sites (Cohen 2000a; Keyes 1971), and in daily activities undertaken at festivals or monasteries (Davis 1984; Pruess 1979; Swearer 2009; Turton 2006). These Theravada practices, in turn, have played a crucial role in forming and transforming Tai localities and community life.

Making long journeys to faraway places in the pursuit of knowledge - to towns, forests or sacred sites - has long been practiced in the Tai world. Monks and laymen still make journeys, seasonally and annually, to pay homage at sacred sites, such as stupas, pagodas and Buddha's footprints, at the same time taking with them the Buddha's teachings and images, ancient texts and architectural knowledge. As a consequence, the practices of the Tai Buddhist tradition have mapped out a religious space that cuts across nation-state territories in the upper Mekong region (cf. Cohen 2000b; Keyes 1975). The cross-border journeys of Khruba Khuen and Khruba Saeng Lha, nevertheless, make this point much more complicated. Their religious and regional journeys were historic and transnational in nature. The cultural consequences of these cross-border journeys have had a great impact in reviving Buddhist sites in the places they visited, across the national borders of Myanmar, China and Thailand.

Since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, global and regional economic forces have drastically pushed and pulled the borderlands of the upper Mekong to become a marketplace. The transformation of China, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar in the post-Socialist age has resulted in changing state policies on border regulation and the development of this region. Moreover, a regional co-operation agreement among the Mekong countries, widely known as the 'Great Mekong Sub-region', aimed at boosting and promoting regional trade and investment, has accelerated changes in this border region. The change in state policies and the new flow of capital have deeply and hugely altered the livelihood of residents in those localities. Various kinds of travel along and across this historic frontier have recurred, including the renewed movement of cross-border monks and local pilgrims, as well as forced resettlement and the return of refugees.

The journey of the two Khruba Lue monks has been a religious mission across borders. Their cross-border journeys, I would argue, not only reminded people of, and restored, Theravada Buddhism in the area, but also reconnected the Lue, who have lived dispersed across the national borders of northern Thailand, the eastern Shan state of Myanmar and southern Yunnan in China. Ultimately, these transnational journeys have helped to create, not only an influential transnational network, but also a new sense of place and belonging among the Lue residents of the upper Mekong region. In other words, the Khrubas or their representations, such as statues, stupas, Buddha images, amulets, photos, gifts, can still be seen today everywhere in the upper Mekong region; indeed, each Khruba has become an avatar of *ton bun* in the Lan Na Buddhist world.

However, as I have argued, *ton bun* is not simply a form of religious revivalism but is a remembered person; thus, this sign of Theravada tradition is a reflection of mnemonic practice among the Lue members in the Diaspora. A social history of the journeys of the two Khruba Lue monks across borders, as traced through their life stories, represents not only local memories and the history of those places, but also reveals the significant changes that have taken place in these localities as a result of the powerful constraints and structural transformations imposed by the state projects and regional processes of economic development in the borderlands of the upper Mekong.

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