

Special Focus: Bad Buddhism

## Monastic Intimacies: An Anthropology of Good and Bad Buddhism among the Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna (P.R. China)

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The Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna (Chinese: Xishuangbanna), in southern Yunnan Province, are usually identified as the largest community of Theravada Buddhists in China. Following the end of the repression of the Maoist period, Sipsong Panna monastics have gradually incorporated into regional and global Buddhist networks. Within this context of increasing connectivity and visibility, the public participation of Tai Lue monks and novices in practices usually considered inappropriate and even unacceptable for monastics in China and Southeast Asia has become problematized and identified as proof of ‘ignorance’ or ‘defectiveness’ on the part of this minority religious community. Building on long-term fieldwork among monastics in Sipsong Panna, this paper questions popular and academic portrayals of such unorthodox monasticism as a symptom of backwardness and degeneration, using the notion of ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld 1996) to offer innovative insights onto the articulation of contemporary forms of Buddhist monasticism, and onto anthropological debates concerning their conceptualization.

**Keywords:** monasticism; Sipsong Panna; cultural intimacy; masculinity; Tai Lue

In late 2014, a short documentary produced by the *Asia Feature* branch of global news channel VICE circulated around Chinese social networks. The 12-minute film, titled “Border Monks” (Ch.: *bianjing heshang*), presented the situation of a village temple in Sipsong Panna, a frontier region in Yunnan Province of China, and home to the Tai Lue, a Tai-speaking group and the largest community of Theravada Buddhists in the country. Apart from interviewing the novice residents of the monastery, the documentary showed the young abbot dining and toasting with friends at a local restaurant, then dancing and again toasting with another group in a karaoke room. With commentaries by lay villagers and the monastics themselves on the current conjuncture of village monasticism, the documentary portrayed Buddhism in this area as slowly decaying into unruliness and oblivion. Not only the apparent lax discipline of the abbot, but also the fact that novices coming

from the other side of the border with Myanmar were substituting for local boys (who, so the interviewees argued, were not interested in ordaining anymore), were offered as tangible proof of this decadence.

The piece caused a small uproar among informed Tai Lue in the cyberspace of Sipsong Panna. Commentators complained that the film showed aspects of local religious practice that should not be seen. One anonymous user of WeChat (Ch.: *Weixin*) posted a short text in which he denounced those who encouraged monastics to go out at night and drink as guilty of misunderstanding the high goals of Buddhism, of contributing to the lack of interest in ordination on the part of local youths, and to the overall demise of the religion.<sup>1</sup>

Incidentally, this was not the first time that the discipline of the local Sangha<sup>2</sup> had become the subject of controversy in Sipsong Panna. Monastics in this region are conspicuous for frequently and publicly engaging in activities considered in neighboring countries as inappropriate and even incompatible with monastic practice, such as eating solids in the afternoon, flirting with women, practicing sports, and drinking alcohol. The current ubiquity of new technologies and the frequent appearance in social networks such as WeChat of pictures and videos showing Tai Lue novices and monks dancing and/or drinking during karaoke sessions, or posing unashamedly with beautiful women, have brought this “problem” to the spotlight for a larger audience.

Non-local, informed observers of these phenomena may very likely agree that such unorthodox behaviors point to a degenerate or corrupted form of monasticism. Unburdened by collective experiences and memories of repression and violent conflict linked to other forms of organized religion, and deprived of its most strident ritual and “superstitious” elements, that is, de-contextualized and de-historized, Buddhism is popularly envisioned outside of Asia as proof that spirituality is still possible in a world utterly corrupted by materialism and greediness. Similarly, the traditional elaboration of Buddhism as a “good” religion, concerned with the self-improvement of the individual and the betterment of society, still determines the scholarly study of this tradition today, hampering the task of understanding practices which seem to fall outside of such concerns. As for the more blatant deviations of orthopraxy, seemingly contravening the discipline registered in monastic codes in a direct fashion, they are downplayed or simply ignored in scholarly accounts of “lived Buddhism” as degenerations of supposedly purer forms of renunciation.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of ignoring the alleged “malpractices” monastics in Sipsong Panna and elsewhere engage in, or seeing them as undeniable tokens of “bad Buddhism” (a term referring here specifically to unorthodox monastic behaviors), this paper takes such practices seriously. It looks at them as examples of what Michael Herzfeld defined as “cultural intimacy,” that is, “those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide

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<sup>1</sup> See Vice.cn, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> The Pali term *Sangha* refers here to the monks and novices in Buddhist monastic communities sustained by the laity.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring here not to practices breaking social convention, or, occasionally, breaking a code of law, but to socially sanctioned practices which are nevertheless perceived by outsiders as heterodox and unacceptable. For scandals involving monastics and concerning the former type of “indiscipline,” see Kitiarsa (2012: 3-4), and Keyes (2007).

insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (2016: 7).<sup>4</sup> I argue that paying attention to unorthodox instances of discipline, and to the different discourses and practices surrounding them, is fundamental in order to shed light not only upon monastic experiences alternative or even divergent in regards to those usually studied by specialists on Buddhism, but also upon issues of intellectual prejudice concerning the understanding of phenomena conventionally identified as “Buddhist.” Whatever insights might be obtained from this approach, they are undoubtedly applicable to other Buddhist localities, as the case of Sipsong Panna is far from being unique, both from the point of view of the ethnographically observable phenomena, and from that of the treatment they receive from scholars.

The paper starts with an introduction to the region’s historical vicissitudes, including the insertion of Sipsong Panna in regional and global networks informed by “modernist” understandings of Buddhist practice. This is followed by a cursory discussion of the reasons why I believe the participation of monks in non-monastic activities is conspicuously absent in scholarly studies of Buddhism, anthropological and otherwise. The last part of the paper explores how the perspective offered by anthropology, and by ethnographic work in particular, may help transcend such widespread moral valuations of the apparently unorthodox behaviors of Tai Lue monastics in terms of “good” or “bad,” and lead to a broadening of the academic notion of “the religious.”

### A short history of Sipsong Panna Buddhism

Before confronting the issue of unorthodox monastic behaviors, it is necessary to say something about the historical and cultural background against which this idiosyncratic form of monasticism takes place today. Until the first half of the twentieth century, Sipsong Panna (Ch.: *Xishuangbanna*) was a semi-independent principality or *moeng*, in turn sub-divided into other *moeng*, each of them ruled by a (usually male) member of the *chao*, the ruling class in pre-1950s Lue society. All these smaller *moeng* were under the nominal authority of the *chao phaendin*, the “lord of the land,” residing in Chiang Rung (Ch.: Jinghong), and paid allegiance to both the Chinese and the Burmese empires.<sup>5</sup> This situation of relative indeterminacy of status and autonomy continued until Sipsong Panna was formally made part of the Chinese Empire, as a result of the negotiations held between France, Great Britain and the Empire to draw the borders in the area, at the turn of the twentieth century (Liew-Herres et al., 2012: 6).

The inclusion of Sipsong Panna into the structures of the Empire and later the Republic of China was to have significant consequences in the long run for the different peoples inhabiting the

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<sup>4</sup> This paper is concerned with the dynamics of a cultural politics involving a minority group in relation not to the state in which the group is integrated, but, paraphrasing Benedict Anderson’s seminal concept, to the “Buddhist imagined community” which that minority group has joined in the last decades. Even if Herzfeld’s study focuses on the national space, he himself acknowledges that nation-states “are not the only imagined communities” (2016: 10).

<sup>5</sup> The *moeng* is a recurrent feature of the socio-ecological landscape of mainland Southeast Asia. It can be described as a geo-political unit comprising both valley-dwelling Tai groups, and non-Tai populations, the latter usually inhabiting uphill areas and engaged in symbiotic economic relations with the Tai, albeit from a symbolically inferior position. See Condominas, 1990: 35–40; Turton, 2000: 6. Usually transcribed as *muang*, here I use the convention *moeng*, following Liew-Herres et al. 2012.

region, and in particular for those practicing a textual and ritual tradition customarily identified by specialists with Theravada Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> According to several authors, this tradition was introduced in Sipsong Panna, then known as *Moeng Lue*, by monks belonging to the two main sects in northern Thailand at the time, travelling via Kentung, in present-day Shan State of Myanmar, around the sixteenth century AD. This interpretation corresponds with the fact that, today, the writing system used in Sipsong Panna temples is almost identical to that still in use in Kengtung, and to the traditional Lanna script (Iijima, 2009: 16–20; Kang, 2009: 11–19).

After Sipsong Panna was officially made first into a “region” and then a “prefecture” (Ch.: *zhou*) within the newly founded People’s Republic, and due to its being in conflict with the ideological principles sustained by the Communist Party, Buddhist practice suffered intermittent repression (Hansen, 1999: 93–96; Hsieh, 1989: 157–58). During the Cultural Revolution in particular, temples in Sipsong Panna were destroyed or put to more earthly uses (such as serving as pigsties or granaries), monks and novices forced to disrobe, and public religious practice in the region brought to a halt (Hsieh, 1989: 224–35).

Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the subsequent opening-up of the economy and relative relaxation of political control in China, Buddhism in general and monasticism in particular experienced a strong recovery in Sipsong Panna. Starting around 1980, Tai Lue villagers set out to restore local religion, relying on knowledgeable elders and Tai monks from outside China to rebuild temples and shrines and to conduct mass novice ordinations (Davis, 2005: 123–132; Kang, 2009: 23–25). In the years to follow, the number of monastics as well as of temples and shrines was to grow firmly, and Buddhist practice in Sipsong Panna gradually consolidated. In 1995 a first, makeshift educational institution for novices and monks was established at Wat Pajie, the central monastery (Tai: *wat*) located in Jinghong City, seat of the old *moeng* capital and of the current Chinese prefectural administration. In 2004, the same temple hosted the coronation of the new *khuba moeng*, the highest religious authority in the region, attended by thousands of devotees (Casas, 2008); and, in 2007, Wat Long Moeng Lue, a new monastery cum tourist complex was inaugurated in grandeur. The upgraded Sipsong Panna Buddhist College, already recognized by the government as an educational institution, moved there in 2008 (Casas, 2011: 26–36).

At the time of the inauguration of the new *vihaan* or prayer hall of Wat Pajie in December 2012, Buddhism in Sipsong Panna seemed to have returned to stay. However, broader processes are currently transforming this centuries-old tradition, if not threatening its very continuity. In the decades since the country’s reform and opening-up, and thanks to the commodification and exploitation of minority groups’ cultures on the part of the tourism industry and to the expansion of monocultures such as tea and rubber, the economy of Sipsong Panna has boomed. Part of the money these developments brought to the region has reached rural households, raising living standards in the countryside dramatically since 1980, and allowing an increase in what is usually called “religious investment,” that is, basically, ritual expenditure. In general, though, economic development may be

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<sup>6</sup> Due to space limitations, I cannot explore further the problematic character of the designation “Theravada.” See Borchert, 2017: 29–30.

said to have negatively affected the traditional role of ordination as an avenue of social prestige for local males. Together with the consolidation of the public-school system, economic development has opened alternative avenues for the social mobility of individuals, Tai and otherwise.. Consequently, at present the number of Tai Lue boys ordained is gradually but steadily decreasing.<sup>7</sup>

While such processes may be also observable in other countries in the region, the peculiarity of Sipsong Panna is, that, as mentioned in the introduction, it is common there to come across men in robes publicly participating in activities not associated with monasticism in the majority of “Buddhist societies.” Such activities include eating solids in the afternoon, sometimes in restaurants in urban centers in the region, and often in the company of females; practicing sports in public, for instance playing basketball in courts built next to village monasteries, or even in the ones at the main temple school in Sipsong Panna, Wat Long Moeng Lue; drinking alcoholic beverages, not only during village festivals or celebrations, but often on a daily basis; driving girls around on motorcycles, and so on.

It must be pointed out that not all monastics in Sipsong Panna partake in such practices. Many monks, including senior leading monks at Wat Pajie, adhere to a kind of discipline commonly associated with the more conventional tenets of Buddhist monasticism, such as indulging in only two meals a day, practicing meditation and promoting it among lay people, and avoiding drinking and carousing altogether. In any case, and as shown in the case of the VICE documentary mentioned in the introduction, what Michael Herzfeld (2016: 2) calls the “social poetics” engaged by Tai Lue monks and novices is often interpreted, even by locals, as symptoms of “bad Buddhism.” Whenever these local intimacies are exposed to outsiders, a tension develops between “the creative presentation of the individual self [...] and the formal image of a [...] collective self” (Herzfeld, 2016: 2), in this case the image of the local Sangha as a proper and legitimate monastic community.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, informed Tai Lue may offer an array of explanations in order to justify the misbehaviors of their monks and novices. The dramatic contemporary history of Sipsong Panna, and Maoist repression in particular, is for many the cause of the unorthodox behaviors of local monastics. Others, especially elders, mention the corrupting influence of a “modernity with Chinese characteristics,” embodied in the unlimited opportunities for unrestrained consumerism and entertainment it offers, to explain the apparent lax discipline of local monastics. Yet another, more subtle local argument states that it is the scarcity of monastics which provokes that instances of lack of discipline are treated with permissiveness or simply looked over by both laity and senior monks. According to this argument, unruly monastics are allowed to have their way, lest they decide to disrobe, therefore depriving the laity of the essential mediators in most temple and household rituals. Conversely, according to many Tai Lue I have talked to, it is the lax discipline and overall low quality of the monks, that keeps male youth away from ordination. In this interpretation, monastic

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<sup>7</sup> For ethnographic studies on contemporary economic dynamics involving ethnic minorities in Sipsong Panna, see Evans (2000) and Sturgeon (2009). I will return later to the issue of how the crisis of autochthonous ideals of manhood is key to understand the current situation of monasticism in Sipsong Panna.

<sup>8</sup> Borchert (2017: 109-18) provides a discussion of unorthodox practices among Sipsong Panna monastics.

indiscipline provokes the current crisis of monasticism. The decreasing numbers of ordinations thus become both cause and effect of the misbehaviors of monks and novices.

Before giving my own interpretation of the problem, I want to examine the reasons behind the embarrassment felt by informed Tai Lue. In order to understand why monastic behaviors are nowadays seen as “bad Buddhism,” we need to look back to the time of religious revival.

### **Emergence of a defective Buddhism**

At the same time it allowed for the rebuilding of temples and the ordination of local boys from the early 1980s on, political reform in China facilitated the normalization of the centuries-old connections between the Tai Lue and culturally related populations across the border. With the gradual restauration of border-crossing, monks and novices were again able to travel back and forth across areas inhabited by culturally related populations in eastern Myanmar, northern Laos and northern Thailand (Davis, 2003). From around 1990 this well-studied cross-border movement of monastics is supervised by the provincial and prefectural branches of the local Buddhist Association (Panyagaew, 2010: 47–51).

This movement is not a one-way phenomenon. From the 1980s onwards, Tai monks from Shan State in Myanmar and Thailand started visiting Sipsong Panna as well; Thai academics and tourists could also for the first time in decades travel into China. Importantly, and thanks to these renewed exchanges, the Tai Lue became gradually entangled in trans-local and pan-regional symbolic networks and imaginings regarding ethnic and religious identities, and, importantly for my purposes, informed by “modernist” constructions of Buddhism that include clear-cut notions of monastic and lay morality, and of “good” and “bad” practice.<sup>9</sup> This is especially true regarding their connection to neighboring Thailand. The fact that Sipsong Panna Buddhism had suffered the attack of anti-religious Communism (from which Thailand was spared), as well as the relative deprivation and backwardness of the Chinese frontier, has legitimated a paternalistic attitude toward the material and spiritual situation of the Tai Lue on the part of Thai lay and religious patrons.

This attitude has in turn materialized in the last decades in the aid provided by Thai individuals and groups for the “development” of Sipsong Panna Buddhism, arguably the most significant symbol connecting the Thai and the Tai Lue in the imagination of the former. The support given to Tai Lue monastics by the abbots and senior monks of several monastic educational institutions in Thailand is a relevant example of this (Panyagaew, 2010; Casas, 2015; Borchert, 2017: 159–163).

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<sup>9</sup> On the historical processes behind such constructions, see Almond (1988); McMahan (2008); Masuzawa (2005). For contemporary Buddhism in Southeast Asia, Swearer, 2009: 129–202. In what concerns Sipsong Panna and its connections to Thailand or Sri Lanka, I see the main tenets of “modernist” forms of Buddhism as being informed by: an emphasis on meditation as a practice of self-development among both monastics and laity; a stress on the study of canonical texts channeled through “universal,” bureaucratized systems of formal education; and a more strict observance of the different sets of precepts in the canonical discipline among both monks and lay people, coupled by a closer policing of monastic communities’ behaviors on the part of the laity.

Importantly, besides their contemporary insertion in trans-local networks of an imagined Buddhist community, following their transformation into a *minzu*<sup>10</sup> in the 1950s the Tai Lue have become members of another “imagined community,” the *Zhonghua Minzu* or “Chinese Nation,” the national community encompassing the *Daizu* as well as all other *minzu* in the country. At that point the Tai Lue lost their symbolically dominant position in relation to other, non-Tai populations inhabiting the mountainous areas of Sipsong Panna, a position legitimated to a significant extent by Buddhist ritual knowledge and moral discipline (Turton, 2000: 27). From then on, the Lue were represented in official discourse as simply one *minzu* among others, all culturally deficient in relation to the newly dominant majority, the Han, the “elder brother” burdened with the task of helping its underdeveloped and backward siblings attain development and modernity (Harrell, 1995; Davis, 2005: 17–20).<sup>11</sup>

The Lue are therefore represented as doubly defective, on the one hand in relation to Han Chinese civilization, on the other to the publicly performed religious orthodoxy of the Thai. To the extent that these symbolic hierarchies have been assimilated by Tai Lue individuals over the years, it is this double deficiency that may explain why the problem of unorthodox monastic practices and of the alleged low quality of local monks has become a cause of embarrassment. Among other values, and especially in the Thai case,<sup>12</sup> these symbolic hierarchies articulate around notions of proper Buddhist knowledge and practice, including monastic discipline. Within this framework, unorthodox behaviors on the part of monks and novices in a context where, unlike in other countries in the region such as Thailand or Myanmar, no state-led religious reform worthy of that name has been attempted in the contemporary period, can be (and most frequently are) interpreted as proof of such deficiencies.<sup>13</sup>

The symbolic nature of these processes does not make them any less real or influencing, and their impact on the collective imaginary and practice of the Tai Lue should not be underestimated.<sup>14</sup> They are the motivation behind efforts on the part of Tai Lue monastic circles to develop an autochthonous monastic educational system. Upon their return to China in the mid-1990s, several of

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<sup>10</sup> In the 1950s, the Tai-speaking populations of Sipsong Panna were officially included in the Dai *minzu* (Ch.: *Daizu*) in the state ethnic classification system. The Chinese term *minzu* refers to the categories created after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China to articulate this system, modelled on that of the Soviet Union. At present the term is usually left untranslated in academic studies.

<sup>11</sup> This symbolic subordination of ethnic minorities (and other population groups) is articulated in present-day discourse around the notion of *suzhi*, usually translated as “human quality.” For an introduction to the concept, see Kipnis (2006).

<sup>12</sup> Even if the position of the Tai Lue as an ethnic minority in China is relevant to understand cultural processes among the Tai Lue, in this paper I focus on the group’s subordinate position in relation to Thailand or Thai culture, as Buddhism plays a more important role in this relation.

<sup>13</sup> Apart from the occasional attempts at obliterating religious practice during the political movements of the Maoist period, cultural distance has prevented the Chinese state from attempting to reform Buddhist doctrine and discipline in Sipsong Panna, centralizing and adapting it to the requirements of the nation-state, as it happened with the Buddhist cultures of Thailand’s own periphery. Religious reform in Thailand has been dealt with extensively. For a summary as well as a critique of studies overemphasizing the effects of reform, see McDaniel (2009: 92–116).

<sup>14</sup> As Herzfeld noted, the phenomena the concept of “cultural intimacy” is concerned with “are not *less* material than economic, military, and political ones” (2016: 33).

the monks who had spent time in Thailand monasteries would play a crucial role in the establishment of a local system of education based on the Thai model. The Sipsong Panna Buddhist College, currently located in Wat Long Moeng Lue and offering education in junior and vocational senior secondary school, provides official degrees to graduates and the possibility to study in other, both religious and secular institutions in China. Based on trans-local understandings of Buddhist practice and doctrine, the curriculum and discipline taught at the College has become a key port of entry for regional and global cultural hierarchies (Casas, 2011: 21–25; Borchert, 2017: 152–171).

However, indoctrinating Tai Lue monastics in the tenets of “Buddhist modernism” is not an easy task. At the time the College had its seat at Wat Pajie, still the central temple of Sipsong Panna, novice students frequently left the monastery at night to dine at one of the many barbecue places (Ch.: *shaokao*) and restaurants nearby the monastery and across town. As Jinghong is a place visited not only by Han but also by Thai and western tourists, and therefore serves as a public stage for Lue monasticism, this habit was a source of concern for the senior monks running the College. So much so that for some time in the 2000s, the monks had a temple van drive around Jinghong searching for novices having fun outside the monastery, and transporting them back to the temple. As these attempts to prevent the exposure of the local “monastic intimacy” proved ineffective, the initiative was ultimately discontinued. The issue remained one of the main concerns of the senior monks when the College moved to its present location in the outskirts of Jinghong City, in early 2008.<sup>15</sup>

### “Why Buddhism?” revisited

As mentioned, the problem of unorthodox monastic behavior is not exclusive to Sipsong Panna, nor is the phenomenon circumscribed to our time. Accounts from colonial officials and explorers travelling the Upper Mekong region in the nineteenth century offer a very peculiar image of what could be called “pre-modern” monasticism (see Grabowsky and Turton, 2003: 301; Bowie, 2017: 40–43). Such accounts record what might very well have been a common scenario in pre-modern mainland Southeast Asia, particularly in less-urbanized areas.<sup>16</sup> Instances of monastic heteropraxy are not only to be found in areas culturally related to Sipsong Panna such as northern Thailand or eastern Myanmar, but in other regions of Asia as well, as shown by the occasional mention in ethnography-based studies of Buddhist communities (Lempert, 2012: 30; Makley, 2007: 270).

Why is it then that the apparent “malpractices” of monastics are not dealt with more in-depth by specialists? One possible answer to this question may be (in)visibility. Just as in other locations, in Sipsong Panna, monks, aware that they are engaging in activities which may be considered

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<sup>15</sup> The fact that, in 2015, there were rumors that the temple van was to take to the city roads again demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the initiative.

<sup>16</sup> The peculiarity of the so-called “Yuan” or “Lanna” Buddhism, dominant in the Upper Mekong region, in relation to the mainstream, officially supported traditions in the then nascent nation-states of the region, was already identified by William C. Dodd, a US missionary from the United States doing work in the area in the first decades of the twentieth century (Dodd, 1997). For other nineteenth century references, Bowie (2017: 40–43). See also Iijima (2009). The last decades have seen a surge in the interest toward “Lanna Buddhism.” Cohen (2017) is a recent collection of articles dealing with a variety of aspects in this tradition.



inappropriate, strive not to be seen. Most of the tourists visiting Sipsong Panna (both Chinese nationals and foreigners) concentrate in urban areas, where a heightened awareness of trans-local notions of proper monasticism makes both monks and accompanying lay Tai Lue put more effort in not being noticed when engaging in unorthodox practices (for instance eating in the private room of a restaurant, etc.). This cautiousness is further proof of how sensitive the issue has become for locals, but the relevant point here is, that, for most outsiders, the “misbehavior” of local monastics may simply go unnoticed.

On the other hand, scholars of Buddhism, even when they are well acquainted with the phenomenon, may consider such instances of monastic indiscipline as anecdotal. If the “malpractices” are simply a problem of individual (mis)behavior, then it follows that they are unessential to the study of monasticism, otherwise a collective and institutionalized practice informed by rules whose workings are abstracted from the contingent behavior of actual, flesh-and-bone monks. One could argue, however, with Michael Herzfeld, that accusations of anecdotal character “are diagnostic of a politics of significance in which much hinges on what is deemed important and what is relegated to the limbo of mereness” (2016: 2).<sup>17</sup> Far from being irrelevant, such instances are in fact essential to the proper understanding of Buddhist monasticism in Sipsong Panna.

Furthermore, and beyond any “politics of significance,” in Sipsong Panna heteropraxy is *not* an anecdotal problem of individual monks or novices but a widespread feature which could actually be described as *the norm* among Tai Lue monastics. In my experience in the region over the years, it is more common than not to come across monastics who may at some time or other engage in activities commonly understood as unrelated to monastic discipline. For instance, and returning to the aforementioned story about novices going out of the monastic school at night, it must be pointed out that boys were not the only culprits. Even while they were trying to prevent College students from leaving the temple-school quarters at night, some of the senior monks of Wat Pajie were doing the same thing. As one resident novice confided to me at the time, “the *tubi long* [senior monks] tell us not to go out at night, but then they get on the van and drive out every night, so what do they expect us to do?”

I have already mentioned that not all monks in Sipsong Panna find participating in such practices acceptable. But, once again, if such monastics are actually the exception confirming the rule, why does this problem remain underexplored in academic work? Another relevant factor accounting for the absence of such problematic habits from academic accounts is the scholarly idealization of Buddhism. This idealization can be traced back to the beginnings of Buddhist studies as a discipline within the field of religious studies and the articulation of the concept of “Buddhism” itself (Masuzawa, 2005: 121–146; McMahan, 2007). These troubled origins, and especially the early significance that the study of texts and the reference to canonical doctrine held within the study of Buddhism, continue, to some extent or other, to influence the study of local practices until today (see Gellner, 2001: 100–104). The frequency with which the issue of the “mismatch between the ideal and

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<sup>17</sup> “The data of cultural intimacy are primarily what we would expect to find in ethnographic accounts; they are also often summarily dismissed as mere anecdote. But who sets the boundary between importance and mereness?” (2016: 16).

the real” (Tannenbaum, 1999: 251) reappears in accounts of contemporary Buddhist practices, demonstrates that the question is far from being solved.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the key to the problem may lie not only on the continuing reliance of specialists upon texts or doctrines, but on the dependence on the very notion of “Buddhism” itself. More than twenty years ago Nicola Tannenbaum criticized the tendency of western scholars to understand “Buddhism” as a determining feature in the lives of peoples who are *a priori* defined as “Buddhist” (1999: 251–253), in contrast to the “secular,” *ergo* capable of rational analysis, western analyst. According to Tannenbaum, the idea that the lowland states of mainland Southeast Asia are “Buddhist” is “a cultural and academic cliché” (1999: 252). She emphasized that specialists (she is addressing anthropologists in particular) should look beyond this cliché if they are to “understand and contextualize” the “various interpretations and assertions about Buddhism rather than accepting them at face value or deciding that one interpretation is more “correct” than others” (1999: 253).

Even if these ideas have been occasionally espoused in the past by different authors, the uncritical use of the notion of “Buddhism” as a heuristic device is alive and well.<sup>19</sup> What happens, then, when ethnographically observable phenomena do not fit conventional definitions of Buddhism or even of “the religious”? While the notion of Buddhism has been expanded to include non-orthodox practices and beliefs previously considered as outside the sphere of “proper” Buddhism,<sup>20</sup> there remains the issue of how to account for those aspects of religious practice that seem to fall outside the realm of “the religious” itself and to be in conflict with conventional understandings of religiosity altogether.

Can we apply these ideas to the study of monasticism, that is, of so-called *religious specialists*? Within religious communities, monastics are conventionally identified as the ones closer to ideals of moral doctrine and behavior. They are seen as pursuing a path of renunciation and self-improvement for the sake of becoming proper “fields of merit” within their communities (see Swearer, 2009: 51–54). But what if “Buddhism,” and the moral ideals allegedly suffusing from it, are actually not such fundamental features in the lives of “Buddhists” as we tend to think? Can it be argued that there are values and goals that take precedence over those associated with the narrow definition of Buddhism, even for monks?<sup>21</sup>

In order to fully explore “people’s lives and the contexts –often changing and inchoate– in which these are played out in as a holistic way as possible” (Marsden and Retsikas, 2013: 1), it is therefore necessary to break free from the limitations imposed by conventional academic notions of “the religious,” starting by questioning the very definition of the people under study as “Buddhist” (a category with little explanatory value anyway), and turn toward other spheres of social practice

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<sup>18</sup> See for instance McDaniel (2011), Cassaniti (2015), and Chladek (2018). As many have pointed out, debates and claims concerning the authenticity or purity of Buddhism have been historically common in “Buddhist” societies (see Gellner 2001: 50). Some scholars of Buddhism may avoid discussing the issue of monastic heteropraxy out of a genuine concern to protect the local Sangha from criticism and, ultimately, from a potential withdrawal of lay support. I will return to it in the Conclusions to the paper. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Cassaniti (2015).

<sup>20</sup> See Kitiarsa (2012).

<sup>21</sup> In a recent article, Michael Chladek (2018) has dealt with the issue of monastic heteropraxy in northern Thailand.

generating expectations and demands equally affecting monastics, but usually left aside in academic narratives. In short, if we are to deal with how Buddhism is “lived” in particular localities, we might as well pay attention to other spheres of social action outside of what we commonly understand as “the religious.”<sup>22</sup>

### Contextualizing Tai Lue monasticism

Returning now to the case of Sipsong Panna monasticism, is it possible to understand the apparent misbehaviors of Tai Lue monastics, their deficiency, their lack of discipline, as a productive phenomenon? To explore this possibility, let us look at the institution of monasticism, in the form it has adopted among the Tai Lue. In the past, and similar to culturally related areas such as northern Thailand, all Tai Lue boys and young men were expected to ordain and spend time at the temple as novices (Tai: *pha*). Of course, this does not mean that all males ordained; however, even today, it is uncommon to come across Tai Lue male elders who have not spent any time in the temple, at least as novices. Traditionally, around the age of 20, novices could receive the full ordination as monks (Tai: *tu*).<sup>23</sup> If they decided to become monks, young men understood that they should remain in the monkhood at least a few years as well. Importantly for my purposes, the great majority of those ordained would eventually disrobe and resume the life of laymen, without any discredit to their reputations. If ordination was seen as a necessary condition for men to become “ripe” (Tai: *suk*) or fully mature, and even if the age at which a boy or man chose to disrobe varied according to circumstance, the quasi-universal nature of ordination went together with its temporary, contingent character.

Already more than 30 years ago, Charles Keyes, in his study of novice ordination in northern Thailand, emphasized that the goal of most ordained boys and men was not to become a celibate religious specialist for life, but, in Keyes’ words, a “morally tempered male householder” (Keyes, 1986). The fact that, after disrobing and leaving the monastery, a man would get married, set up a family, and work in the fields, essentially living like the rest of his fellow villagers, must be taken in all its significance. In rural Sipsong Panna, both individual and collective goals and expectations regarding monastics were, and still are, oriented toward this model. A very important consequence of this is that the links between the ordinand and his relatives, non-monastic peers, as well as the secular life of the village in general, are never completely severed.

Accordingly, during their time in the monastery, boys and young men must respond to demands coming not only from what we would call their own vocation, but to those posed by other

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<sup>22</sup> See also Marsden and Retsikas (2013: 4): “Rather than being treated as distinct in an a priori fashion, these fields of social life are also mutually constitutive of “the religious” in particular settings.” Marsden and Retsikas’ piece demonstrates that at least some of the issues I am dealing with in this paper are pressing and relevant not only with regards to the study of Buddhism, but to that of Islam (or, as they put it, the study of “people of Muslim background”) as well.

<sup>23</sup> The word *tupha*, literally “monks [and] novices,” is the local term designating the monastic community.

villagers, especially by their relatives and peers.<sup>24</sup> Especially relevant for my present purposes are those demands coming from novices and young monks' age-cohort peers (Tai: *poko*). Through their interactions with lay boys and elders visiting the temple, a privileged space for male socializing in rural contexts, monastics are constantly (albeit not explicitly) reminded of their connection to the secular and of their status as marriageable men (Tai: *bao*).<sup>25</sup> In rural Sipsong Panna, young monastics are often tempted to leave the monastery and enjoy a night of carousing with friends (Tai: *koseo*, a term differing from *poko* in that the former does not imply similar age), usually at a barbecue restaurant or a karaoke room. Practices such as drinking, driving motorcycles, or flirting with girls, constitutive of what can be called "competitive masculinity," become features of the performance of monastic manhood as well.

As grown-ups' friendship networks are reproduced through the performance of commensality as well, these demands continue haunting the monks throughout their monastic "careers," even if they somehow become gradually less intense. Whatever the case, monks and novices act the way they do in order to earn their peers' esteem and respect as truly "ripe" men and worthy companions. These habits are also at the root of tensions concerning Tai Lue monastics studying in religious schools outside Sipsong Panna, and where divergent conceptions of monastic discipline prevail (Casas, 2015).

Moreover, such behaviors may not only be socially sanctioned by local laity, but it is often the case that it is precisely the demands of relatives and other villagers that force the monks to "break the rules," such as when relatives and friends invite the monks to drink and toast with them at meals organized during village and household festivals, sometimes within temple grounds; or when the relatives of a young monk put pressure on him to find a girl and to be ready to marry as soon as he disrobes. Therefore, what at first sight may be considered as misbehaviors on the part of Tai Lue monastics, are not deviations from some past, pristine monastic practice, or a matter of certain individual cases of "bad Buddhism." On the contrary, commentary on the part of local elders regarding similar behaviors of novices and monks in pre-1980 Sipsong Panna (even if attenuated, as alcohol or entertainment venues were practically non-existent at the time) proves that this type of discipline is a distinctive part of religious traditions in this particular locality.

I have suggested that the awareness of trans-local cultural hierarchies and of outsiders' perception of Tai Lue monastics' idiosyncratic behaviors may provoke embarrassment among informed locals. Furthermore, in the current cultural context, these behaviors help reproduce long-standing stereotypes on the incapacity of certain groups to adapt to and to absorb "superior" cultural forms. Displays of agency on the part of Lue monks thus paradoxically serve to reproduce their

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<sup>24</sup> This is especially true in a context in which family planning policy allows only two children per couple. A Tai Lue monk once told me that, as a novice, he helped his family in the fields, until his younger brother was strong enough to give a hand. It is very common to find similar cases among monastics all over the region. On monastic work in Sipsong Panna, see also Borchert (2011).

<sup>25</sup> Researching Tai Lue communities in northern Thailand in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Michael Moerman observed how lay young men frequently teased their ordained peers with the joys and pleasures of living outside the temple (Moerman, 1966: 54). As far as I know, Moerman is the only scholar who has paid any attention to the significance of this factor in village monasticism. The role of same-age peers in the "education" of monastics in Sipsong Panna and northern Thailand is glossed over by Borchert (2017) and Chladek (2018).

symbolic position as backward and deficient, asserting their defectiveness in relation to the modernizing and civilizing project of both trans-local Buddhism and the Chinese state.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, as Herzfeld puts it, “the official devaluation of the culture of the conquered may become a source of secret pride” (Herzfeld, 2016: 21). Indeed, the possibility of participating in such practices of masculinity is considered by many locals (monks and lay people alike) as a feature that sets Tai Lue monasticism apart from other similar traditions in the region, promoting among them “a sense of local cultural and moral autonomy and dignity” (2016: 22). In this sense, many Sipsong Panna monks and novices revel in the awareness of their distinctiveness, and in particular in the enactment of a socially sanctioned freedom to do many things their counterparts in other countries in the region are not allowed to do, while maintaining a detached and ironical attitude towards the reformist educational project set in motion by some of their urban-dwelling, Thailand-educated counterparts and friends, refusing to be co-opted into such a project. As a Tai Lue former novice put it, “Of course being a monk is so much better here than in Thailand! Life for monks in Sipsong Panna is very relaxed (Ch.: *qingsong*). If it were as strict (Ch.: *yan*) here as it is there, who would ordain then?”

## Conclusions

In this paper I have attempted to explain the public participation of Sipsong Panna monastics in activities commonly not associated with monasticism and in conflict with contemporary dominant understandings of this practice in other countries of the region. While extreme cases of indiscipline can undoubtedly be attributed to individual inclination and to the contemporary multiplication of earthly temptations in Sipsong Panna as in the rest of China, I have interpreted the participation in non-monastic practices on the part of Tai Lue monastics as giving expression to an embodied, non-explicit and collective habitus that members of the monastic community put into practice.

I have pointed to the peculiar history of the region as responsible for the preservation of a tradition that in other countries has been superseded by contemporary, “modernist” understandings of Buddhist practice. The relative lack of concern on the part of the officially secular Chinese state regarding religious orthodoxy and orthopraxy has prevented Sipsong Panna Buddhism from undergoing any collective reform in modern times (apart from that determined by the pure violence of the Maoist movements). In fact, the absence of reform may be the only true peculiarity that distinguishes Sipsong Panna monasticism from that of their neighbors. Heteropraxy may have been the norm in most Buddhist localities, not only in the region of “Lanna Buddhism,” during most of the history of monasticism.

While the awareness of the idiosyncratic nature of Sipsong Panna monasticism in relation to broader contemporary orders of value provokes among locals embarrassment and a desire to overcome the alleged deficiency of local discipline through reform, for many Tai Lue such idiosyncrasy is at the heart of such tradition. In fact, the reason for the decline in the number of ordinations lies probably not in the character of the local monasticism itself, but in the crisis of values

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<sup>26</sup> This structure echoes that described by Paul Willis in his seminal work (1977) on the predicament of working-class schoolboys in the UK.

it informs, and by which it is informed. That is, in essence, the crisis of Tai Lue masculinity, provoked by the emergence of new models of manhood unrelated to temple discipline.<sup>27</sup>

I have also pointed to how the relative invisibility of unorthodox monastic practices partly accounts for their absence in academic studies of Buddhist localities. Lingering intellectual biases and, especially, conceptual problems affecting the study of Buddhist practice, particularly the overreliance upon the concept of Buddhism as an explanatory device, may also be counted as reasons preventing specialists from properly dealing with the issue.

A further potential reason for the said absence is the reluctance on the part of some researchers to “expose” the intimacy of monastics, in a commendable attempt to protect the reputation of the Sangha. However, I believe that the risk of actually harming the reputation and consequently the local sources of lay patronage for monks and novices, by discussing this problematic in publications mainly targeting western academics is remote, at least in Sipsong Panna. On the other hand, confronting monastics’ “malpractices” and the debates surrounding them as part of a local monastic “cultural intimacy” not only facilitates obtaining a clearer comprehension of socially sanctioned forms of monasticism, but also throws light upon pervasive and resilient inter-ethnic and inter-cultural hierarchies in different parts of Asia and beyond. Uncritically downplaying or ignoring monastic heteropraxy helps sustaining and reproducing normative hierarchical schemes which portray some forms of Buddhism as being purer or more authentic than others.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, there is no “good” nor “bad” Buddhism. There is no “real” nor “lived” Buddhism either, but only individuals engaging with their situated lives, routinely responding to and navigating a multiplicity of demands and expectations, some of which happen to originate in a field of doctrine and practice we tend to identify as “Buddhism.” While we may perpetually debate whether drinking, playing basketball, or flirting with women are attributes of “true” or “good” monks or not, the fact that researchers of contemporary monasticism should be paying attention to these kind of “unsanctioned” phenomena seems hard to refute. Acknowledging monastics’ diverse and idiosyncratic sensibilities and dispositions may help scholars expand their understanding of monasticism and of the notion of the “religious” in general.

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<sup>27</sup> On how minority groups’ models of masculinity in contemporary China are articulated against those performed by the Han majority, see Hillman and Henfry (2006).

<sup>28</sup> “There is a suspiciously close convergence between the refusal to take ethnographic detail seriously and the homogeneity enjoined by nationalist ideologies” (Herzfeld, 2016: 16).

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