

CHAPTER 3 FORMAL INSTITUTIONALIZATION

3.1 Introduction

After the repression during the Cultural Revolution, the new political conditions in the PRC at the end of the 1970s facilitated the recovery of Buddhist practice in Sipsong Panna – and with it the institutions aimed at its regulation. This chapter traces the reconstruction of Wat Pajie and the re-establishment of a religious center in the region, and describes the links of this center to PRC national-level structures and agencies. Special attention is paid in this chapter to the figure of Khuba Longjom, the Abbot of Wat Pajie for almost twenty years, and whose coronation as the highest religious authority in Sipsong Panna can be considered the peak of the Buddhist revival. Longjom is presented as occupying an ambiguous position, between a charismatic religious figure on the one hand, and an institutional, quasi-political one on the other, a fact which is symptomatic of the complexities and ambiguities of the Buddhist revival.

Apart from the focus on formal institutionalization, this chapter also deals with other, less tangible aspects of this process – and in particular with the issue of the transformation of the traditional role of Lue religious specialists in the context of the conversion of the Lue into a “minority nationality”, and of Lue religious specialists into “Chinese citizens”, examining some of the consequences that these transformations imply.

It will be argued here that the current process of institutionalization has excluded other, alternative visions of Buddhist practice, those in less agreement with the state project of adapting local religious traditions into modern notions of religion and of the expected social role of religious actors. In relation to this, I will reflect on the character of local contestation against the institutional process and the ways in which internal conflict in the Sangha has been articulated by the actors

involved - all of which will be aimed at highlighting the heterogeneity of the Sipsong Panna community of monks.

The focus on formal institutionalization will serve as a background to the narratives dominant in the following two chapters; identifying the main actors and institutions responsible for the regulation of Buddhist practice in Sipsong Panna.

3.2 The Third Plenum and the Recovery of Religious Policy

By the time the Third Plenum of the Eleventh National Party Congress Central Committee of the CCP took place in 1978¹, and the subsequent political and economic reforms had been implemented at the national level, Buddhism had all but disappeared in Sipsong Panna. The reforms; however, would pave the way for a vigorous recovery of religious practice in the region, and in around 1980, Lue society was transformed, as one Lue scholar has put it, “from a non-Buddhist to a Buddhist society” (Kang Nanshan 2009: 23).

Concerning state intervention into religious practices, the reforms brought the progressive re-establishment of institutional bodies aimed at the regulation of religious practices as part of the overall recovery of the limited regional autonomy policy carried out by the CCP in areas where non-Han groups constituted a significant part of the population (see Chapter 2). As discussed previously, together with the “ethnic identification” (民族识别, *minzu shibie*) project undertaken by the Government in the 1950s, this policy was aimed at making local groups “masters of their own destinies”, granting recognition to local, “minority” identities and facilitating the administration of these territories (frequently located in border areas); supporting at the same time state claims to appear as the legitimate guarantor of local traditions – including religious ones. As we have seen, the administrative and legal structure concerned with regional autonomy was minimized or simply abolished during the political movements and campaigns from the 1950s to the 1970s; however,

¹ The Third Plenum is considered a major turning point in Modern Chinese political history. “Left” mistakes committed before and during the Cultural Revolution were “corrected”, and the “Two Whatevers” (两个凡是, *liangge fanshi*) policy (“support whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made and follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave”) was repudiated. During the Plenum, the CCP issued the document ‘Basic Opinion and Basic Policy on Religious Matters’, one dealing with the future trends of religious policy (see Hasegawa 2000).

following the death of Mao Zedong, at the Third Plenum the Cultural Revolution was officially identified and condemned as a period that had strained relations between different social groups and the Party (Hasegawa 2000). A priority of the reform period was; therefore, to reinstate the conciliatory attitude towards such groups and the system of regional autonomy, in order to guarantee the alleged right of “minority” groups to express their cultural (including religious) identities.

This priority is reflected in an important document issued in 1982 by the Central Committee of the CCP entitled ‘The Basic Viewpoint and Policies on Religious Issues During Our Country’s Socialist Period’, commonly referred to as ‘Document 19’. This document, while sticking to the Marxist view of religion as “an opiate and as an important and vital means” in the “control of the masses” on the part of the “oppressor classes”, nevertheless acknowledges the “protracted nature of the religious question under socialist conditions”, emphasising that “the only correct fundamental way to solve the religious question lies precisely in safeguarding the freedom of religious belief” (Document 19, Par. XII). According to the document, “the Party’s religious policy is not just a temporary expedient, but a decisive strategy based on the scientific theoretical foundation of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, which takes as its goal the national unification of the people for the common task of building a powerful, modernized Socialist state”. Its authors explicitly warn against any other approach to the question on the part of Party members: “we must understand that it will be fruitless and extremely harmful to use simple coercion in dealing with the people’s ideological and spiritual questions — and this includes religious questions...To behave otherwise would only exacerbate the estrangement between the mass of believers and non-believers as well as incite and aggravate religious fanaticism, resulting in serious consequences for our Socialist enterprise” (Document 19, Par. IV).

It is clear; therefore, that the CCP saw self-restraint and negotiation as a means to secure the cooperation of religious groups, prevent opposition to state policies and facilitate governance overall, particularly in territories with relevant numbers of religious communities. In practice, this change of attitude and the recovery of previous policies would mean the revalorization of the symbolic capital of Buddhism in the PRC and in Sipsong Panna in particular; the Party had once more committed

itself to acknowledge, respect and promote religious practices within the country - taking an active role in their regulation².

3.3 The Buddhist ‘Revival’: From Repression to Regulation

Some authors (see Peters 1990: 348) have traced the beginning of the Buddhist “revival” in Sipsong Panna back to 1982, when the Constitution of the PRC guaranteed freedom of religion for all citizens. However, the reconstruction of temples and shrines, as well as the renewed ordination of novices, seem to have started before that (see; for example, Kang Nanshan 2009)³. In any case, all sources point to the fundamental grassroots nature of the phenomenon, in which members of village communities undertook the task themselves of reconstructing temples and shrines, as well as training a new generation of religious specialists, without coordination of any kind by institutional structures beyond the village. At this time, locals unearthed the sacred items which had been buried during the political movements of the Maoist period – items such as religious books or the ‘Heart of the Buddha’ (*Chai Pha Chao*) and ‘Heart of the Stupa’ (*Chai That*). According to Hasegawa, this was an important source of relief for local communities after the suffering caused by the Cultural Revolution and other movements and campaigns⁴.

² A translation of ‘Document 19’ appeared in McInnis 1989; see also Borchert 2005(b). Government sensitivity concerning religious affairs was not only related to the potential appearance of independent spheres of power inside the PRC in the form of religion-based organizations, but also to the contacts of religious groups inside the PRC with groups abroad - sharing faith in a similar creed. This problem is mentioned on the 1984 Law on National Regional Autonomy, Ch. 1, Art. 11, where it is expressly stated that “religious organizations and affairs shall not be controlled by foreign countries”. Tibet and its government in exile are maybe the most obvious reasons for this concern, but one may also think of the Uygurs and other Muslim peoples in Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan) and other north-western provinces, or the clash between the Catholic Church in Rome and the Government in Beijing. As for the Lue of Sipsong Panna, and as we have seen, strong cultural links tie them to other Lue and Tai groups in Myanmar, Laos and Thailand. Although these contacts are not likely to create any kind of separatist movement inside the PRC, the consciousness of belonging to a greater (Tai-Buddhist) community may nevertheless place into question the centralizing discourse of the CCP government regarding the national, internal bonds of minority groups. See Davis (2003).

³ The recovery of Buddhist practice and the reconstruction of religious sites took place at an uneven pace in different areas of Sipsong Panna, being apparently less strong in Muang La (In Chinese: Mengla) County, Muang Yang and other areas north of the Mekong River which traditionally have been more exposed to the influence of Han culture (Hansen 1999). This complex problem will not be dealt with here.

⁴ The *Chai Pha Chao* is a collection of precious items such as dedicated silver plates, coins, etc., which are placed together and buried on the ground under the Buddha altar inside every Lue *viharn* (ordination hall) before construction of the altar begins. The *Chai That* is a similar item, but located

Hsieh and other researchers have described the problems that existed in relation to the need for qualified masters who could teach Lue script and Buddhist doctrine throughout the 1980s, as a whole generation of local males had been prevented from being ordained during the political movements of the Maoist era, and many religious specialists had simply fled the country. This problem was partially resolved with the assistance of Lue monks and artisans coming from Thailand and, especially, Burma. As a result, apart from village elders, former monks (In Lue: *Khanan*) and former novices (In Lue: *Ji noi*), the transnational cultural links the Lue had maintained with other Tai communities in neighboring countries played an important role in the task of reconstituting local Buddhism, as many ‘foreign’ monks came to Sipsong Panna to act as abbots and religious specialists in the process of rebuilding temples and re-enacting rituals⁵. Even today, it is common to see Lue or Tai monks and artisans coming from abroad to help with the reconstruction of temples and shrines in Sipsong Panna. Arguably, the presence of Burmese monks has been the most fundamental element in the process of recovery, due both to the border shared between Myanmar and Sipsong Panna, and due to the strong ethnic consciousness among the Lue and other Tai groups in that country. In fact, there is still a regular traffic of Burmese-Tai monks coming to visit their counterparts in Sipsong Panna, and some of them are even serving as abbots in temples in Sipsong Panna – especially in Menghai and Jinghong counties⁶.

underground under the stupa. The popular enthusiasm for this practice during the revival has been vividly described by Kang (2009).

⁵ On the problems of training novices and monks during the first stages of the revival, see Hsieh 1989: 239 ff., and Peters 1990: 349; Davis 2005; Kang Nanshan 2009.

⁶ During my stay in Sipsong Panna I met several monks from Muang Yong, a Lue enclave in Shan State in Myanmar. On the relations between Lue in Sipsong Panna and communities abroad, see also Cohen (2000), Thipmuntali (2000), Peters 1990: 342 ff., and Davis (2003, on the role of the Sangha in creating a trans-boundary “pan-Tai community”). On the recovery of monastic education, see Hansen 1999: 109 ff.



**Figure 3.1: The temple of Ban Tin (in Jinghong City) in the 1980s
(Image: Dr. Rujaya Abhakorn)**

The process of recovery of Buddhist practice, as well as the participation of monks from abroad in the process, has been sufficiently documented in itself (see for instance Hsieh 1989, Peters 1990, Hasegawa 2000, McCarthy 2009, Kang Nanshan 2009, Davis 2003 and 2005, Wasan 2010. Facts regarding the revival are shown in Tables 1 and 2). Here I would like only to emphasise that, as mentioned, the process of the reconstruction of Buddhist temples in Sipsong Panna was, during the first few years, mainly a grassroots phenomenon, and essentially unregulated. However, this situation was soon to change, due to the recovery of a combination of state and local, traditional hierarchical institutions.

Table 1: Temples, pagodas and members of the Sangha in Sipsong Panna – A 1990 survey (Source: Hasegawa 2000)

Year	Temples	Pagodas	Monks	Novices
1950s	574	67	889	5560
1966	556	54	742	3448
1981	145	-	-	655
1982	-	-	-	4365
1984	140	-	-	6614
1985	415	-	-	5532
1988	474	67	-	4980

Table 2: Temples, pagodas and members of the Sangha in Jinghong City - A 1990 survey (Source: Hasegawa 2000)

Year	Temples	Pagodas	Monks	Novices
1980	-	-	-	-
1981	-	-	1	40
1982	-	-	20	656
1983	-	-	44	1525
1984	138	4	123	2098
1985	155	8	155	2158
1986	172	20	170	1868
1987	173	39	205	1734
1988	182	43	201	1514
1989	182	46	237	1931

3.4 The Reconstruction of Local Religious Structures

Once the recovery of Buddhist practice and the reconstruction of the Sangha had started in the villages, it was only a matter of time before the regional level religious hierarchy would be re-established. In fact, it can be argued that the Sangha structure in pre-1953 Sipsong Panna was at least relatively centralized, as temple organization essentially seemed to mirror the different levels of the political organization of the polity⁷.

In the past, Sipsong Panna was a loose confederation of *muang*⁸ headed by the *Chao* (ruler) of Muang Chiang Hung, the *Chao Phaendin* - the Lord of the Land, whose residence was located in Wieng Pha Haan, a hilly area situated at the confluence of the Nam Ha River (Chinese: *Liushahe*) and the Mekong. As mentioned in Chapter 2, traditionally there was one temple (*wat*) in every Sipsong Panna village. Village temples were in turn grouped in higher units of around ten to fifteen, called *bosut*. The temple at the head of each *bosut* was called *wat kao*; decisions concerning religious affairs of the district would be taken by the head monks of each village temple, who gathered regularly in the *kao bosut*⁹. On the next level, each *muang* in

⁷ On the socio-political structure of Sipsong Panna, see Hsieh 1989: 99 ff. and Davis 2003: 186-7. See also Chapter 2.

⁸ For a brief introduction to the conceptual complexity of *muang* (sometimes spelt *mouang*, *meung* or *meeng*, 勐, *meng* in Mandarin) as an administrative unit of the Lue/Sipsong Panna kingdom and other Tai polities, see Turton (2000).

⁹ Some *kao bosut* may include several dozen *wat*. 'Bosut' also refers to the architectural part of a Lue temple where senior monks meet once every fortnight (during the new moon and the full moon of each

Sipsong Panna had its main temple or *wat luang* and its *khuba muang* at its head, but all temples in the principality were, at least in theory, subordinated to the *wat luang* of Wieng Pha Han, the area in Muang Chiang Hung where the Chao Phaendin, his relatives and servants lived. The Abbot of this temple, the Khuba Muang of Muang Chiang Hung, was also the highest religious authority in the polity. Wieng Pha Han was therefore the religious center of Sipsong Panna, as Wat Luang plus four other temples linked to the royal family were located in the area¹⁰.

In spite of the apparent centralized nature of the system, this religious hierarchy was probably, as in the case of the political one, loosely structured, and the role of Wat Luang Sipsong Panna in the regulation of Buddhist activities taking place in the region was arguably limited. Drawing on a comparison between the functioning of the political confederation and that of the religious structure in Sipsong Panna, it may be inferred that each *muang* were basically responsible for dealing with local religious matters independently of the Wat Luang in Wieng Pha Han. From this perspective, the central temple of Sipsong Panna would not have had direct control over local temples, and as we shall see in following sections, this situation has strong parallels with the context in present-day Sipsong Panna.

Whatever the case, during the Buddhist revival of the 1980s, this religious structure, starting from the village temple level, was progressively re-constructed, and at present a “central temple” manages religious affairs in every religious district in Sipsong Panna. This organization, managed by local monks and assisted by former monks or lay specialists, remains in principle essentially outside the regulatory control of the state.

month) to recite the *Pathimok* (In Pali: *Pattimokha*, the canonical Theravada Buddhist code of monastic discipline) and discuss religious issues – hence the name for the administrative unit. See Zhu 1993: 57 ff. See also Chapter 2, n. 14, of this paper.

¹⁰ During the political movements of the 1950s, the population of Wieng Pha Han was relocated across different villages in the valley, and the area was turned into a rubber plantation under the administration of the state-managed Jinghong State Farm. All political and religious buildings were destroyed during subsequent campaigns (see Hsieh 1989 and Hasegawa 2000). *Chiang Hung* is the transcription of the Lue term for Jinghong (Mandarin), the capital of contemporary XDAP. The former main temple of Muang Chiang Hung was located in Ban Kongcing (*Man Gangjing* in Chinese, Mandarin *Man* transcribing the Lue term *Ban*, or ‘village’). For more information on this area, see Hasegawa (2000), Hansen 1999: 103, Hsieh 1989: 346 (n. 5) and 347 (n.10), and Zhu 1993: 40-1 (on the local religious administrative structure). There is a map of the former capital of the Sipsong Panna kingdom area in Zhang and Guan (1983); an English version of the map is to be found in Hsieh 1989: 108.



Figure 3.2: The ‘Octagonal Pavillion’, a famous *bosut* in the Chiang Jeng (Ch.: Jingzhen) area (Image: Neil Kittipalo)

As mentioned, at the beginning of the 1980s a necessity arose for the local government to re-establish state organs that would regulate the recovery of Buddhist practices. In this context, the Xishuangbanna Buddhist Association (西双版纳佛教协会, *Xishuangbanna Fojiao Xiehui*, XBA) was set up anew in 1980. Originally established in 1963, the XBA was shut down during the political turbulences of the Maoist period. As with other official *minjian zuzhi* (民间组织, ‘folk’ or ‘non-[Chinese Communist] Party organizations), the XBA is an organization run by members of the local community – and so its staff list is made up of monks or former monks. As with other *minjian zuzhi*, the Association, in spite of being ultimately set up by the State, does not receive any public funding, though it is linked to a regional and national-level network of institutions set up by the State in order to regulate Buddhist practice; for example, it is a branch of the province-level Yunnan Buddhist

Association (YBA), in turn subordinated to the China Buddhist Association, an institution belonging to the officially named “patriotic religious organizations”¹¹.

The structures of the XBA and Wat Pajie clearly overlap. The monks holding official jobs at the XBA (acting as Head, Vice-Heads, Treasurer, etc.) are basically the same people who occupy top positions in the Buddhist hierarchy of the region – and who are also responsible for maintaining Wat Pajie as the regional religious center. Most of them reside inside the temple itself, although some monks may be occasionally assigned to carry out tasks outside of Jinghong; for instance, one of the senior monks who is part of the XBA nowadays acts as the head monk at the Provincial Buddhist Institute near Kunming (see Chapter 5 of this dissertation). As a result, decisions concerning the regulation of Buddhist activities at Wat Pajie and the rest of Sipsong Panna cannot be easily ascribed to either one of these two institutions. A handful of former monks are also part of the XBA as secretaries.

The decision-taking process takes place through more or less informal meetings of monks at Wat Pajie – former monks and other lay workers related to the temple may also take part in the meetings, but even if everyone has the right to speak during a meeting, major decisions are taken according to the principle of a simple majority among the senior monks.

Apart from being part of the structure of the China Buddhist Association, the XBA is formally under the supervision of an executive branch of the local government: the Xishuangbanna Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs (西双版纳州民族宗教局, *Xishuangbanna Zhou Minzu Zongjiao Ju*, or BERA). The current Bureau is actually a product of the merging of two different offices: the Bureau of Ethnic Affairs and the Bureau of Religious Affairs – which implies that the State sees these two kinds of ‘affairs’ in Sipsong Panna as closely related. The BERA is a state organ subordinated to two provincial offices, the *Minwei* (abbreviation of 云南省民族事务委员会, *Yunnan Sheng Minzu Shiwu Weiyuanhui*, or the Committee of Ethnic Affairs of Yunnan Province) and the provincial *Zongjiaoju* (abbreviation of 省宗教事

¹¹ The China Buddhist Association was created in 1953, and as with every other organ related to ‘minority’, ethnic or religious groups, it ceased operating during the Cultural Revolution. At present, the offices of the Association are located at Guanji Temple in Beijing. The Yunnan Buddhist Association has its seat at the Yuantong Temple in Kunming. On the “religious patriotic organizations”, see the Introduction, n. 4.

务局, *Sheng Zongjiao Shiwuju*, or the Bureau of Religious Affairs). The administrators of the XBA must report on all religious activities to the BERA – especially on those issues which involve the participation of crowds, such as the celebration of important Buddhist festivals; but also on other issues such as the visit of foreign monks and the importing of religious items (generally from Thailand). At the same time, the BERA is the official link between the XBA and the local government, which makes the interaction between the two institutions and their members a fundamental part of the local politics on religion. While most of the members of the BERA belong to several of the diverse *minzu* communities inhabiting Sipsong Panna, many of them are members of the CCP as well – and so their shared interests may be said to lay with the party-state.

Whatever the case, I do not imply that there is a fundamental conflict of interests between the two institutions. Traditional accounts of religion in the PRC have tended to emphasise the division between the state agents, institutions and religious groups (see the Introduction to this paper), but I will explain the dynamics between different state agencies and local communities in terms of “symbiosis” (see Taylor 2007) - a kind of relationship in which both state and religious agents (or at least some of them) work together with the common aim of adapting local religious practices to modern definitions of religion (Ashiwa and Wank 2009; see also Hasegawa 2000)¹².

The first office of the re-established XBA was located in Ban Tin, a village in Jinghong City whose temple was formerly ascribed to the local royal family (Wasan 2010). In any case, this was a temporary solution, for the local Sangha and the staff of the XBA and the YBA looked for the opportunity to re-establish a central temple that would serve as the catalyser of the material and symbolic resources needed and employed in the restoration of local Buddhist practice. According to Hsieh and Borchert, the reconstruction of a central temple in Jinghong City remained a politically sensitive issue for some time after the beginning of the recovery of Buddhist practice in the region (Hsieh 1989: 242; Borchert 2005(b): 257). As mentioned, the area where the previous *wat luang* and the rest of the buildings

¹² I will come back to these issues in detail in the Conclusions section.

comprising the political and religious center of Sipsong Panna had stood, had been completely emptied of the native population during the political movements of the 1950s and 1960s and converted into a rubber plantation, and, more recently, a tourist park. Therefore, when government authorities granted the XBA permission for the construction of a new central temple, this was built in an area to the south of Jinghong City and north of the Nam Ha River, the old site of one of the temples under royal patronage: Wat Pajietan (see Wasan 2010)¹³.



**Figure 3.3: The old *Vihaan* of Wat Pajie, demolished at the end of 2008
(Image: Roger Casas)**

The reconstruction of Wat Pajie started in 1988 – although before the main ordination hall (*viharn*) was rebuilt, monks and novice monks started living within its quarters. The responsibility for choosing the Abbot as well as the novices to live in Wat Pajie seems to have fallen to the Head of the YBA, Mr. Dao Shuren. Construction of the *viharn* was funded mainly by the provincial government of Yunnan – which, according to Mr. Dao, provided one million RMB (around 150,000

¹³ According to my own research, and *pace* Borchert and other authors, this was not the central temple of pre-1953 Sipsong Panna. In spite of its symbolic significance, this temple was basically a forest retreat for local monks (interview with Mr. Dao Shuren, December 2009). As stated, the main temple in traditional Sipsong Panna in terms of religious hierarchy was the Wat Luang in Wieng Pha Han.

US Dollars today). Other funding sources included the World Fellowship of Buddhists (presided over at the time by a Thai citizen). The main Buddha image in the ordination hall was also donated by a Thai entrepreneur, and after the *viharn* and other minor buildings had been completed, and in what can be considered another step in the institutionalization of local Buddhism at the beginning of the 1990s, the office of the XBA moved to Wat Pajie.

3.5 Consolidating the Center: National and Trans-National Links

The construction of Wat Pajie was gradually completed through the 1990s, thanks to the help of local, national and international donations. Regarding this help; for instance, for Thai donors, there were visits by the Supreme Patriarch (*Sangharat*) of the Thai Sangha in 1991, by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn in 1995, and by the late elder sister of the Thai king - Princess Galyani Vadhana, in 1998. All of this implied strong economic as well as moral support on the part of Thai influential personalities, those willing to help with the restoration of Buddhism in Sipsong Panna. The last building in the compound to be completed (in 2001), the residence of Khuba Longjom, was also built with Thai money (see Wasan 2010).

The role of the “trans-border religious networks” (Davis 2003; Wasan 2010) in the construction and development of Wat Pajie and the XBA can hardly be over-emphasised; most of the monks working in one or both of these institutions (basically overlapping) during the 1990s had spent some time studying in Thailand, either relying upon their own resources, or officially sent by the XBA¹⁴: In 1991, the provincial and prefectural Buddhist Associations, together with Maha Khuen Kham, the Abbot of Wat Phra Phuttabaat Taak Pha in Lamphun Province, Thailand, organized the stay and studies of a group of Lue monks and novices in the temple. These monks would later form the backbone of the local Buddhist Institute which would open at Wat Pajie in 1995¹⁵.

While Wat Pajie has been consolidated as the religious and educational regional center for the Sipsong Panna Sangha, the monks who are part of the XBA and Wat

¹⁴ “Officially” means here “with the approval of the government”, and “according to regulation”, that is, the monks travelled with a passport, etc.

¹⁵ For more details on this group and on the development of the Buddhist Institute, see below, Chapter 5.

Pajie have also taken part in social-relief projects funded by international organizations. One of these projects is *Foguangzhijia* (佛光之家, ‘the House of the Light of the Buddha’), a local derivation of *Sangha Metta*, a project initiated in Thailand in the 1990s to address social issues related to the spread of HIV-AIDS in the region with the help of Buddhist monks, and funded by UNICEF. *Foguangzhijia*, created in 2003 within the structure of the XBA, is also devoted to raising awareness on HIV-AIDS prevention, as well as organizing social and leisure activities for those who are HIV-positive. The organization has as its seat Wat Pajie, and although it is currently managed by a lay person, monks take usually part in the ongoing activities of the organization, which include village youth training and other awareness-raising activities among Tai village communities, sometimes made more enjoyable by the presence of local pop music groups¹⁶.



Figure 3.4: Lue monks and novices participating in an awareness-raising activity on World AIDS Day - December 1st 2006 (Image: Roger Casas)

Between October 2004 and December 2007, Wat Pajie was also the local center for the implementation of the UNESCO-funded regional project ‘Cultural Survival and Revival in the Buddhist Sangha’, aimed at revitalizing Buddhist artistic traditions in Sipsong Panna, severely damaged during the violence unleashed by the Cultural

¹⁶ On *Foguangzhijia*, see also McCarthy 2009: 95 ff. and Kang Nanshan 2009.

Revolution and other political movements, and also affected by the continuing decrease in artistic knowledge among locals through the post-Maoist period. Local monks also played a pre-eminent role in this project, which focused on the training of new generations of Lue artisans within the Sangha (see Kang Nanshan 2009).



Figure 3.5: Monks and novices during a crafts training conducted by a former monk at Wat Pajie - August 2006 (Image: Roger Casas)

Throughout the last twenty years, Wat Pajie has become “the centralised hub of Dai cultural networks of Xishuangbanna in this regional age” (Wasan 2010: 11), a “product of...trans-local and transnational processes” and “of the duo-tracks of cross-border mobility and connectivity in the borderlands of the upper Mekong today” (ibid.). However, while this is true, it would be wrong to see the re-establishment and development of the temple as merely the fruits of a local effort and of the revitalized trans-border contacts of the Sip song Panna monks¹⁷. For instance, during the process of the reconstruction of Wat Pajie, links were also established between this and other Buddhist temples within the PRC¹⁸; and not only temples belonging to the Han

¹⁷ In relation to this, Prof. Wasan’s interpretation of Wat Pajie: “the construction and expansion of this Buddhist place and its territory can be thought of as a symbolic manifestation of the complex processes of Theravada revivalism and social risk engagements among the Dai in their displaced homeland” (ibid.: 7), seems to me to rely on an arguable dichotomy confronting the state in terms of ethnic minorities and religious groups. On this issue, see the Conclusions section in this paper.

¹⁸ While the Central Government of the PRC granted permission for the construction of the Buddhist Institute (see Chapter 5 on Education), it did not provide any funding for the construction of the main

tradition contributed money to the construction of the temple, but dozens of Lue monks and novices have since been sent to study in temples across the country¹⁹. It is therefore necessary to stress that the construction and development of Wat Pajie has been the result of internal, nationally-oriented processes and of the engagement of the local Buddhist elite with Chinese state structures, as well as with modern notions of religion (Ashiwa and Wank 2009), in which national links have also played an important role. In this sense, the life story of Khuba Longjom, the current Head of the XBA and Wat Pajie, and the highest religious authority in Sipsong Panna, may be used as an example of the different national and transnational processes that have determined the contemporary development of local Buddhism.

3.6 Khuba Longjom

Born in 1960, as a boy Longjom left the PRC for Burma with his family, escaping the political violence of the Maoist period. Longjom started his religious career as a novice in Shan State, Burma at the beginning of the 1970s²⁰, then spent most of his youth in the country, first as a student, and then, after taking advanced education at Wat Meng Mang temple in Chiang Mai, as a teacher of Dhamma (Buddhist doctrine). In the mid-1980s Longjom crossed the border into the PRC and back into Sipsong Panna, becoming Abbot of his native village temple in Muang Jie (Menghai County). According to Mr. Dao Shuren, in 1987, during a visit to the Yuantong Temple in Kunming (seat of the YBA), the then Tu Longjom met the Head of the YBA for the first time. Afterwards, Mr. Dao decided to take Longjom from his native village in Muang Hai (In Chinese: Menghai) to Jinghong in order to work in the Buddhist Association. After a few years spending time between both places, and after the disrobing of Tu Jom, the first Abbot of Wat Pajie, Tu Longjom finally became the Abbot of this temple in 1993. Since then, he has carried out intense labor

school building. Part of the money came from other Buddhist institutions, such as the famous Shaolin Temple (in Henan Province), or the Temple of the Jade Buddha in Shanghai, as well as from Singaporean donors (interview with Mr. Dao Shuren, December 2009).

¹⁹ For more information on these temples, see Chapter 4.

²⁰ The information in this paragraph has been taken from the biographical section (in Lue, English and Chinese languages) of a brochure entitled 'A Brief Introduction to Phra Khubaa Longjom Wannasiri' which was distributed on the occasion of a festival promoting Longjom to the status of Khuba Muang (see below).

as a propagator of Theravada Buddhism, travelling abroad and holding different posts in political and religious bodies in the PRC²¹.

Although Wat Pajie, the new regional *wat luang*, and the XBA has been functioning for almost twenty years, the highest religious position in the Prefecture has remained vacant since 1974, when the last Khuba Muang of Sipsong Panna died after “receiving criticism” from CCP activists during the Cultural Revolution (Hsieh 1989: 233). As the Abbot of Wat Pajie, and therefore *de facto* head of the local Sangha, Longjom was the natural candidate to becoming Sipsong Panna’s first Khuba Muang in several decades. The festival that promoted him to the status of Khuba Muang took place in Jinghong at the end of January 2004. As for official attitudes on the event, it is clear that, apart from showing the usual concerns about public security and monitoring the arrival of foreign visitors in the city, local authorities supported its celebration; government agencies even contributed some funds to the ceremony and helped organize the festival that celebrated the coronation of Longjom²².

The first day of the festival represented an opportunity for devotees belonging to different Lue communities in Sipsong Panna to carry their offerings to Wat Pajie. The second day of the ceremony included a parade in which Khuba Longjom was taken around Jinghong wearing the insignia of Buddhist royalty. A massive parade of monks, dancers, musicians, community leaders and other representatives of Lue communities from Sipsong Panna and abroad, carrying banners with slogans and *thung* (Lue banners), accompanied the monk on a procession that started and ended at Wat Pajie. On the third day of the ceremony, Tu Longjom was ceremoniously appointed Khuba, and after spending the night in a small hut (*kuti*) outside of Wat Pajie as a token of his renunciation of earthly assets, Longjom was carried in the early morning back to Wat Pajie, where the main ordination rite was to take place.

²¹ Khuba Longjom has made official trips to Nepal, South Korea, Japan and the United States. On his political jobs, see below.

²² According to a member of the BERA (interview, May 2009), the provincial Bureau of Religious Affairs contributed 50,000 RMB (around 6,250 US Dollars at the time), the same amount as the government of XDAP. Public security for the celebration was also provided by local government offices.



**Figure 3.6: Khuba Longjom is carried to Wat Pajie on the day of his ordination
(Image: Khanan Sam Sao)**



Figure 3.7: Attendants take the leaves from the *Ho Dio* where Khuba Longjom was ritually bathed during his ordination ceremony (Image: Roger Casas)

The rite, which involved the elevation of the monk to a superior dignity in the Buddhist hierarchy, and; therefore, a renovation of the *upasampada* (In Pali: “higher ordination”, the ‘common’ ordination of a monk), consisted essentially of a bathing ceremony conducted by four senior monks belonging to the Tibetan, Chinese and Theravada schools of Buddhism, in a *Ho dio*, a ‘Palace of the Fig Tree’ - especially

built for the occasion and covered by leaves of the *Ficus racemosa* tree (hence its name. On the temporary ordination buildings used, see Bizot 2000: 515-6). The act ended after the elder monks taking part on the ceremony chanted on behalf of the newly appointed Khuba and of the people attending the ceremony, under a large bamboo structure also built for the occasion. At noon, the ceremony was over, and a martial arts exhibition by monks from the Shaolin Temple in Henan Province marked the end of the celebration.

It can be argued that the festival was a success in terms of establishing the newly acquired authority of Khuba Longjom among the Lue (although his popularity as religious leader for the Lue people may still not be compared to that acquired by Khuba Bunchum Yaansuamro²³), as well as linking Lue communities inhabiting different states in the region²⁴. Portraits of Longjom distributed during the festival can be seen nowadays in homes in every Lue village in Sipsong Panna.

In short, the inauguration of Longjom Wannasiri can be considered as representing the high-point of the recovery of Buddhist practice in Sipsong Panna since the beginning of the 1980s. From his leading position in Wat Pajie, during the last twenty years Khuba Long has played a fundamental role in the process of the recovery of local Buddhism – both as a leading figure for the revival and as a bridge between the state and the local government on the one side, and the local communities of practitioners on the other. There is arguably an implicit ambiguity in his position, for, apart from the purely religious role as Abbot of Wat Pajie and highest religious authority in the region, Khuba Longjom has also acted as a quasi-political figure²⁵ within local Buddhism.

On the one hand, and thanks to his missionary activity among the Lue, Khuba is seen as a *Ton bun*, a “‘source of merit’ (accumulated from this and past lives) who, out of *bodhisattva*-like compassion, initiates the construction of religious monuments

²³ On Khuba Bunchum and his religious mission among the Lue (and other Tai groups) in Laos, Myanmar and Sipsong Panna, see Cohen 2000: 155-7 and 2001, and Thipmuntali 2000: 158.

²⁴ Although there are no official figures concerning the people attending the festival, XBA personnel estimated that between 700 or 800 people coming from neighboring countries (mainly lay people accompanying invited monks) attended the ceremonies; the group from Myanmar being by far the largest. There are no estimates concerning the number of those coming from other areas of the XDAP.

²⁵ The expression is McCarthy's (2009: 97).

to provide others with the opportunity to make merit” (Cohen 2001: 228)²⁶, whilst on the other, Longjom is an institutional figure, an active negotiator and a player in local politics, arguably far from the messianic character of other monks in the Yuan tradition such as Khuba Siwichai²⁷ or, in the present, Khuba Bunchum. Apart from the post as Head of the XBA, which he attained in 1998, Khuba Longjom has been a member of several committees and standing committees of the local Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (中国人民政治协商会议, *Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi*, abbreviated 政协, *zhengxie* – here CPPCC), and the Yunnan and the China Buddhist Association²⁸. Although most of those holding posts at any of these institutions do not carry any significant political power, they are guaranteed at least a relatively influential position. Khuba’s influential role as a community leader and as a bridge between local devotees and government institutions is granted by his charisma as a *Ton bun*, but also by the official ‘backing’ provided by the local government²⁹.

²⁶ Although Cohen identifies this tradition mainly with Yuan Buddhism, he also specifies that it “was also shared by other Tai-speaking peoples who periodically came under Lanna’s political influence, such as the Khuen or Shan of the Kengtung [Th. Chiang Tung] region in Burma, the Neua of Dehong County in Yunnan, the Lue of Sipsong Panna and the Lao of central and northern Laos. Yuan Buddhists have a common script (called *tham*) and religious literature (written in that script), an accommodative attitude towards popular animistic religiosity as well as a common belief in *ton bun*” (Cohen 2001: 229)

²⁷ For a biographical account of Khuba Siwichai, see also Cohen 2001.

²⁸ According to the document issued at the time of his coronation as Khuba Muang, Khuba Longjom has been a member of the Political Consultative Committee of the CPPCC of Menghai County, and Vice-Head of the Sipsong Panna Political Consultative Committee on several occasions. As mentioned, he is the currently Head of the XBA, and, since August 2002, also of the Sipsong Panna branch of the Yunnan Buddhist Institute, as well as a Vice-Head of both the Yunnan and the China Buddhist Association (from October 2002). Officially, the CPPCC is a consultative organ whose task is to “to conduct political consultations and democratic supervision, and organize its member parties, organizations and personages from various ethnic groups and walks of life to discuss and manage state affairs” (see official information in <http://www.china.org.cn/english/archiveen/27750.htm>). While the CCP maintains a high level of control over the CPPCC, the body is intended to include representatives of different parties (always official parties) and social groups (including ethnic and religious groups), and, although it does not involve effective decision-making power, the conferences do arguably hold a degree of influence in decisions taken at different levels of the executive structure of the state. The CPPCC was abolished in 1966 and re-established in 1978. See Hsieh 1989: 182 and 223 on the participation of former members of the Sipsong Panna nobility in the CPPCC.

²⁹ This idea can also be applied to the Number 2 of the Buddhist hierarchy in Sipsong Panna. As this monk is the main force behind the current local Buddhist educational reform, I will refer to him in Chapter 5.

3.7 Ambiguous Positions

Apart from the two heads of the local Sangha, the other senior monks in Sipsong Panna do not hold institutional positions (excluding their being part of the XBA), and, in spite of their influence within local communities (particularly within their communities of origin), they maintain a very tenuous relationship with government institutions and officials³⁰. In spite of this, it can be argued that the monks (and arguably, former monks) who form the local “Buddhist elite” share important interests both with the local government and the central state, for the continuity of the XBA and their own position within the socio-political and cultural structures of the region depends on their cooperation on the implementation of religious policy and their abiding with the regulations concerning Buddhist practice. In relation to this, and as will be discussed later in detail, to view the relationship between the local government, the State and the local Sangha in terms of a fundamental dichotomy and conflict may obscure a proper understanding of the complex ways in which the political, economic and cultural interests of state institutions and those of the local Sangha are linked.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the prominent place occupied by the current Buddhist elite within the local religious hierarchy is not only a result of their charisma and prestige among locals, but also of their position in relation to government initiatives and (at least some) religious policies, and especially to the participation of local novices and monks within the state educational system (see Chapter 5 of this dissertation) – a result, in short, of their accommodating attitude regarding the “institutionalization” of a specific model of “religion”, that also favoured by state institutions and policies.

³⁰ In fact, they can be accused of mistrust against government officials and institutions, which they see often as opposed to Buddhist practice.



Figure 3.8: Khuba Longjom during the ceremonial alms-collection marking the end of the Buddhist Lent retreat (*ok wasaa*) (Image: Ai Khamngoen)

If we ask the monks, at least those belonging to the local religious elite, those who command relevant religious authority across peasant communities in Sipsong Panna, we will find that they tend to represent themselves as the “guardians of tradition” (see Borchert 2008), defining their task as an effort devoted to the preservation of traditional Lue culture (obviously identified by them with Buddhism), and implicitly aligning themselves with the interests of local Lue communities. However, it is legitimate to contest this self-representation and to suspect that the heads of the local Sangha are promoting a particular version of Buddhism which accords with their corporate and individual interests, as well as with those of government agents and institutions plus other agents related to Buddhist practice in Sipsong Panna (such as, as we shall see in the following chapters, tourist entrepreneurs, local cultural specialists and education professionals, among others), and not necessarily to the expectations of local devotees. It is therefore more accurate to view religious practice in Sipsong Panna as a complex field composed of a multitude of different agents and interests. Within this field, the Buddhist elite maintain an ambiguous position in between local communities and government

authorities, a position which obviously brings benefit to its members at the individual level in the form of social and even economic capital (political relations, participation in business ventures etc.).

Sometimes; however, this ambiguous position brings exacting demands upon the senior monks. In March 2009, the two heads of the local Sangha were called upon by the local government to help convince a community whose village stood on the way of a planned expansion of the international airport of Sipsong Panna in Gasai (In Chinese: *Gasa*, a small township around six kilometers from Jinghong City), to relocate their households to an area nearby. Initially, the villagers refused to move to a new location, and the government expected that the respect these Buddhist leaders command among local communities would cause the villagers to change their minds on the issue. Instead of this, the two monks were received with insults and booed by villagers when they spoke favourably of the Government's intentions (according to witnesses they were called "Communist monks"), and had to leave without having achieved their goal. Afterwards a few representatives from the village visited Wat Pajie and apologized to the monks for their behavior³¹.

In any case, it can be argued that the favoring on the part of Khuba Longjom and other monks, part of what I have called the 'Buddhist elite', of certain trends of religious institutionalization instead of others, has been both the cause and effect of their leading position within the local Sangha, and that the "revival" of Buddhist practice in Sipsong Panna has involved the exclusion of other, alternative visions of what Buddhism should be and how Buddhist specialists should behave, through the operation of what Raymond Williams called "selective traditions" (Williams 1977; see also Turton 1984). In relation to this, the current problematization of monastic discipline in Sipsong Panna, as well as the interventions on the part of the Buddhist elite to solve this problem and "improve" the behavior of local monks according to ideals on the model role of monks in Thai society (including the emphasis on modern, standardized education, see Chapter 5), can also be seen as an attempt to impose a

³¹ Interview with a former member of the BERA in Jinghong City April 2009. By the time of writing (July 2010), all village households had moved to the new location, except two.

certain tradition, a particular form of Buddhism – and, at the same time, the authority of its promoters³².

3.8 Regulating the Monkhood

This project of transformation and improvement can be said to have been determined not only by conceptions elaborated from local tradition and through the re-vitalized contacts of the Lue Sangha with other Theravada communities abroad (especially in Thailand), but also by ideas of belonging to the national community of the PRC – the “Chinese nation” (中华民族, *Zhonghua minzu*). Within this process, the Buddhist elite have tried to adapt local discipline and, most importantly, the social role of monks, to national ideas of citizenship, including culturally dominant conceptions on the *suzhi* (素质) or “quality” of the individual and the group, as spread by the national media and the education system³³.

In relation to this, there has been an increasing concern, shared by the local Sangha and the local government, with the problem of the identification of legitimate Buddhist clergy (a problem related to the generalization of the use of identification cards among all PRC citizens), and a few meetings involving representatives of both groups have been organized in XDAP in order to establish a standardized way of identifying legitimate monks. This problem is related to the frequent appearance of

³² Measured by the standards of monastic discipline in Thailand and other countries in the region, the behavior of monks and novices in Sipsong Panna, where drinking alcohol, eating full meals in the afternoons, driving motor vehicles, working in the fields and flirting with girls are common practice among members of the Sangha, is nowadays considered by both insiders and outsiders as “backward”, and a reflection of the extreme repression suffered in the recent past. However, many of such practices can be attributed to the endurance of previous Buddhist traditions – and for more on this see Chapter 2, and on the discipline problems within the Sipsong Panna Sangha, see Kang Nanshan 2009. The attempt to improve the behavior of local monks according to Thai standards of monastic discipline on the part of the Buddhist elite is not without its tensions and drawbacks, as several senior monks in the region seem to favor what might be called the traditional version of the discipline.

³³ There is a growing literature on the origin, implications and cultural influence of the contemporary concept of *suzhi*, understood as a measure of the value of individuals and groups in the current context of market economy competition in the PRC. See, for instance, Ann Anagnost ‘The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*)’, *Public Culture*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2004); Andrew Kipnis, ‘*Suzhi*: A Keyword Approach’, *China Quarterly* 186 (2006), and the articles included in the special issue of the journal *Positions*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2009).

fake monks coming to Sipsong Panna from other areas in the PRC, in order to take advantage of the willingness of local villagers to economically support the Sangha³⁴.

Some areas of Sipsong Panna (at least Muang Long) have issued their own identification cards, in both the Tai Lue (*To Tham*) and Chinese script, for local monks, and these cards reflect an attempt on the part of the local Sangha to coalesce with national state policies as well as adapt to nation-state ideas regarding the regulation of the activities of Sangha members. On the other hand, during my fieldwork in Sipsong Panna I came across several cases of monks who had been forced to dress in a 'lay' shirt when having their (national) ID photo taken. The official explanation for this is that, as most monks and novices will disrobe after a normally short period of time spent in the Sangha, their appearing as monks on ID cards would involve a potential problem for future individual identification. Nevertheless, several villagers expressed to me their discomfort about this issue (interviews with villagers, Muang Long, October 2008). Although most monks comply with officials' demands, others have succeeded in being photographed dressed in the Sangha robes. A member of the Buddhist elite I talked to about this problem showed a certain sympathetic understanding of the Government's position – although this could also reflect merely the official, non-confrontational position of the senior monks (interview with a senior monk, Jinghong City, October 2008).

Unlike in the case of Thailand, for members of the Sangha, ID cards carry no further significance regarding their status within the national community; Chinese law establishes the basic equality of all citizens³⁵, and therefore the recognition of a monk as a legitimate citizen does not imply a parallel recognition of his sacred character – as an individual at least relatively separated from the social body – as happens within Tai Lue rural society. This de-sacralisation of the liminal nature of monkhood reflects the ambiguous position of the monks in relation to the State, for the recognition of

³⁴ For a 2001 incident involving fake monks, see Borchert 2005(a): 105-6. The XBA conducts regular censuses on the population of monks and novices in Sipsong Panna (see Borchert 2005(a): 99, n. 9; 2005(b): 255, n. 17).

³⁵ See Article 4 (Ch. 1) of the 1982 Constitution (where reference is also made to the concept of "regional autonomy"): "All ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority ethnic groups and upholds and develops a relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China's ethnic groups. Discrimination against and oppression of any ethnic group are prohibited; any act that undermines the unity of the ethnic groups or instigates division is prohibited".

their status arguably implies what we could call a “symbolic discrimination”, a devalorisation of their sacred character.

3.9 Contestation

All these trends and processes related to the institutionalization of local Buddhism have met with a certain resistance among locals, and many of them, members of the Sangha included, see official attitudes regarding religion as undermining the local practice of Buddhism, and resent the participation of the Buddhist elite in the implementation of state religious policy. This criticism is based in traditional forms of morality and of Buddhist practice, and related to the previous symbolic framework dominant in Sipsong Panna (and which granted social domination on the part of the Lue). In this sense, it can be argued that both the form and content of the “revival” have been, and still are, contested since their beginning in the 1980s.

However, this “contestation” has remained for the most part unarticulated, and almost silent, and in my opinion, it is precisely the continuing authority of the local Sangha elite which accounts for this, as any eventual conflict within the institution regarding major as well as daily decisions taken by the central temple, is softened by the prevailing authority of the senior monks, who, at least in theory, have the final word on religious affairs in Sipsong Panna. Usually, important conflicts are resolved by the eventual disrobing and return to his community of the monk who finds himself in disagreement with the views and attitudes promoted by the Buddhist elite, and since the reconstruction of the XBA and Wat Pajie, there have been many cases of this. Notwithstanding the fact that these conflicts do not necessarily imply an open confrontation with the elite monks, and that it is therefore difficult to trace their history, during my fieldwork in Sipsong Panna, I often come across (usually younger) monks who complained about some aspect or other of the way senior monks manage Buddhism in Sipsong Panna, while at the same time acknowledging their incapacity to effect any change on the situation.

As an example of this, one former monk responsible for overseeing the students at the Buddhist Institute in Wat Pajie (see Chapter 5), once mentioned to me his frustration at the slow progress of the school, referring to the lack of discipline

among novices but also to the lack of interest towards problems concerning religious education on the part of other senior monks at the temple, and he finally disrobed and went back to his village in Muang Luang. Another monk (also from Muang Luang) complained that, in spite of working hard for the temple, the senior monks at Wat Pajie did not give him the chance to benefit from state social security (as most other monks and lay workers at the temple do), so eventually he also disrobed³⁶. These signs of dissatisfaction are related to the way in which members of the local Buddhist elite usually try to block any attempts to change the direction of the institutionalization process (even if such attempts are supposedly aimed at improving the current situation for Buddhism in the region), or to question their leading position in that process.

Apart from the phenomenon of disrobing, understood as a form of showing disagreement and an action which may highlight latent conflicts within the Sangha - among monks related to Wat Pajie and the XBA in particular, in some areas of Sipsong Panna local monks have established structures which, while acknowledging the authority of the XBA and the Buddhist elite in Jinghong, function more or less independently from them, having developed their own hierarchies and religious networks and allegiances, though of course not totally separated from those centered in Jinghong but maintaining a high degree of independence at the local level regarding issues such as the ordination and promotion of monks, and the setting up of Buddhist education and examinations.³⁷

At the individual level, there are also Lue monks who have moved away from the cities and towns and now lead a more secluded existence in order to further their knowledge of, among other things, meditation practices.³⁸ One of the more

³⁶ Interview with a monk in Jinghong City, April 2010.

³⁷ Muang Luang is one of such areas. The monks of the central temple of this area, in the south of Sipsong Panna, have issued their own identification cards for local monks; furthermore, in the last few years, two Khuba ordinations have been conducted there independently from the regional-level structures. This phenomenon can be related to the relative de-centralization of the Buddhist structure in Sipsong Panna mentioned previously. In spite of the establishment of the XBA and the attempt of the Sangha elite to affirm their own authority within the region, there are undoubtedly issues related to local Buddhist practice which escape their control. It can be said that the issue of centralization/de-centralization is related to the personal networks of each monk when compared to the senior monks in Wat Pajie, the religious center of Sipsong Panna, who possess a greater degree of control on religious affairs in their districts of origin.

³⁸ These monks often live next to a sacred site such as a stupa, in a very simple manner, in a more canonical, while at the same time less institutionalized form of monasticism. The border and

charismatic monks, Khuba Sinman, dwells in the border area between Sipsong Panna and Shan State in Myanmar, where he has attracted a cohort of followers who understand his position as more ‘authentic’ than that of the monks in Jinghong.

These ascetic attitudes, as well as the search of more authentic forms of Buddhist practice, can very often be identified as a rejection of the process of religious institutionalisation taking place in the townships and conducted by the monks within the XBA.

3.10 Summary

After decades of repression, the political reforms that took place in the PRC at the end of the 1970s paved the way for a strong recovery of Buddhist practice in Sipsong Panna. After the “spontaneous”, grassroots revitalization of Buddhist rituals and ordination, the former regional Buddhist hierarchy was also progressively re-established. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the new religious center of the region, located at Wat Pajie, was consolidated and expanded, a move which included the establishment of a Buddhist institute in the mid-1990s, in order to regulate the development of Buddhist activities in Sipsong Panna. The coronation of Tu Longjom as Khuba Muang in 2004 marked the peak of this process of recovery for Lue Buddhism.

However, it would be wrong to see in this recovery simply a sign of “renewal” of local Buddhism, as facilitated by the return of religious freedom. Many signs point to alternative trends and traditions which have been discarded during the institutionalization that has taken place over the last 30 years or so. This process, especially apparent in the recovery of the Buddhist hierarchy and its entanglement with local government structures (which has been the main concern of this chapter), or in the educational project carried out by part of that hierarchy, has favored certain attitudes and developments among the Sangha, while neglecting others. Although difficult to identify and define, a certain “contestation” against the institutionalizing project of the elite can be identified. In spite of the implicit and unarticulated

mountainous areas of Muang Luang or Muang Hai districts are specially preferred by these monks, as they are closer to the “forest tradition” of northeastern Thailand (Isan). On this tradition, see Kamala Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand*, University of Hawaii Press, 1997, or J. L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*, ISEAS, Singapore, 1993.

character of such contestation, its mere existence should warn us against the dangers of considering the Sipsong Panna Sangha as a homogeneous entity, engaged in confrontation with the State for the preservation of Lue traditional culture. In the next two chapters; therefore, I will focus on some of the phenomena that reflect different aspects of the institutionalization of local Buddhism, the participation in it of the Buddhist elite and the “resistance” against it; the engagement of the Sangha with the market economy and the related issue of the representation of Buddhism, as well as the fundamental issue of education.