

CHAPTER 4

MARKET ENGAGEMENTS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF BUDDHISM

4.1 Introduction

It can be argued that the economic context within which Buddhist practice takes place today is very different to that of pre-1953 Sipsong Panna. In this sense, the current dominance of market capitalism and the links of the local economy to national-level structures may be contrasted to a past based on a subsistence economy, and services related to the land – a context deemed by Han researchers as a “feudal lord system” during their “minorities identification” work (see Hsieh 1989). However, we must be cautious when establishing this dichotomy, for markets were well developed in Sipsong Panna before the arrival of the CCP, and the local “subsistence economy”, inextricably linked to trade with the interior as well as with other areas in the Upper Mekong region (see Giersch 2006); though the end of trade restrictions imposed during the Maoist era and the subsequent development of markets at different levels over the last 30 years has arguably meant the acceleration of change in Sipsong Panna, from a “natural” to a “commodity economy”, linking the region to neighboring countries, and, most importantly, to national trade networks (see; for instance, Davis 2005 and Hansen 2004).

Since the 1980s, one of the most important economic factors in Sipsong Panna has been the development of a burgeoning tourist industry in the area. Thanks to an all-year-round mild climate and a reasonable amount of tropical rainforest areas, “beautiful Sipsong Panna” (*Meilide Xishuangbanna*) has gained a reputation as a small Southeast Asian paradise, especially among Han tourists, who make up the bulk of visitors to the area (Hasegawa 2002: 299), and it is widely known at present as one of the most important tourist destinations in Yunnan Province.

While political reform has facilitated the recovery of the previous ethnic and religious policies and has (re-)created a space for Buddhist practice to take place, the

development of a tourist industry based on the rich ethnic resources of Sipsong Panna can be said to have provided for the opening-up of spaces that have allowed the active participation of local minorities in the nowadays dominant market economy, and with modernity. Two phenomena can be associated with this last process; first, the renewed symbolic capital attained by minority cultures in the new multi-cultural context promoted by the State has provided them with an opportunity to exert at least a certain degree of control over their cultural resources, and; therefore, to benefit economically from the exploitation of such resources. Second, through the very process of cultural commoditization, minorities have become aware of the constructed, arbitrary nature of tradition and authenticity, and of the instrumental value of cultural representations. Thus, instead of being passive actors in the game of representation and tourist exploitation, members of the minorities (including religious specialists) have become active agents who consciously engage the market and modernity, and who make use of their symbolic resources to obtain material benefits from such engagement.

While this is not the place to conduct a thorough study of the economics of religious practice at the local level (expenditures in merit-making activities, etc.), in this chapter I will focus on the institutional links between the local Sangha (and especially the Sangha elite) and the market economy – particularly with a tourist industry based on the commoditization of local cultures, including Buddhism. My contention is that the attitude of the senior monks regarding the market economy accords at least partly with the official promotion of commercial enterprises and the participation of religious groups in such activities. The Sipsong Panna Sangha elite have thus arguably become instrumental in the propagation of new ideas related to production and consumerism at the local level.

Before exploring the dynamics of this relationship between Lue Buddhism and the tourist industry, I will focus on the issues of representation linked to the integration of “minority” cultures into tourist circuits of the PRC and Sipsong Panna.

4.2 Tourism and Ethnicity in the PRC

In spite of being popularly considered as a culturally homogeneous entity, the PRC defines itself as “a unitary multinational state created jointly by the people of all its ethnic nationalities” (Preamble to the PRC Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law).

According to 2005 data, members of the officially recognized 55 “national minorities” (少数民族, *shaoshu minzu*)¹ constitute around 9.5% of the total population of the country (that is, more than 120 million people), inhabiting all the provinces and autonomous regions in the PRC and accounting for a culturally diverse territory. Although CCP ideology, in line with Marxist-Leninist theory, considers the withering away of ethnic differences in a future socialist society as an immutable law of social development (Connor 1984: pp. 201-2), internal ideological conflict on how this cultural homogeneity will be achieved, as well as on how long it should take, have determined the violent swings of CCP minority policy between tolerance and enthusiastic affirmation on the one side, and outright neglect and repression of ethnic diversity in the country on the other – the latter best exemplified in the open repression of minority expressions of identity during the Maoist period’s movements and campaigns.

Political reform at the end of the 1970s marked the beginning of the current phase of PRC ethnic policy, a phase in which the previous representation of a culturally homogeneous “Chinese nation” (中华民族, *Zhonghua Minzu*) during the Maoist era gave way to the celebration of the country’s ethnic diversity. Since the end of the 1970s, the PRC Government has again committed itself to the fostering of ethnic cultures (Gladney 1994, Hasegawa 2003: 400), and so, 30 years after political reform put an end to the overt repression of minority traditions in the country, and despite the relatively small number of peoples other than the Han in the country, minorities policy can be considered today as representing a fundamental cornerstone of CCP political legitimacy (see Connor 1984).

The subsequent cultural revival that has taken place among the national minorities during the last three decades has gone hand in hand with the development of a national-level tourist industry in the PRC (Schein 2000: 88 ff., Kang Xiaofei 2009). Tourist development in “autonomous regions” of the country has generally adopted the form of “ethnic tourism”, that is, according to Erik Cohen, a “variety of ‘site-seeing’ tourism that targets groups that do not fully belong, culturally, socially,

¹ The Chinese term is also translated as “minority nationalities”, although “ethnic minorities” is nowadays gaining ground in the official literature. I will follow the current convention among specialists and often leave the term *minzu* untranslated.

or politically, to the majority (national) population of the State within whose boundaries they live and that are touristically ‘marked’, owing to their alleged ecological boundedness or cultural distinctiveness, uniqueness or ‘otherness’” (2001: pp. 27-8)².

Ethnic tourism, in China as elsewhere, is based on a particular representation of minority groups through which this cultural ‘otherness’ is transformed into “something more readily digestible to the thrill-seeking visitor” (Hillman 2003: 183). In general, and due to the (in theory) unlimited means at its disposal, the state agency is able to exert a strong control over expressions and manifestations of ethnic identity, and so minority groups may often find it difficult to impose a self-representation, contesting or opposing that presented by the State (Cohen 2001: pp. 44-5). This is perhaps particularly true in the case of the PRC, where the central as well as diverse regional and local governments have played an active role in determining the nature of *shaoshu minzu* public representation, mainly through the establishment of a classificatory system for the different “nationalities” inhabiting its territory (which have followed a massive ethnographic project aimed at identifying, classifying, preserving and developing the cultures of the ethnic (non-Han) peoples), and the subsequent implementation of a “regional autonomy” policy³.

Academic accounts have tended to emphasise the symbolic subordination of minority groups within this framework, as well as the negative effects that the relentless commoditization of minority cultures is bringing upon such groups. According to this perspective, state agents and entrepreneurs play a fundamental role in determining what cultural phenomena are to be promoted as the “healthy customs” of minority groups, and which ones are negative for the development of both production and culture, and; therefore, can be expected to disappear over the long term (Hasegawa 2003: 400). Through these interventions, allegedly ‘authentic’

² On the Chinese definition of “ethnic tourism” and the difference between *minzu fengqing luyou* (民族风情旅游, or “tourism of ethnic customs”), and *minzu wenhua luyou* (民族文化旅游, or “tourism of ethnic cultures”), see Hasegawa 2003: 401, 403. For a brief account of the present situation with regard to ethnic tourism in the PRC, see also Mackerras 2003: 70 ff. While acknowledging the differences between the two concepts, throughout this paper I will use the term “culture tourism” as an equivalent to “ethnic tourism”, as most Chinese researchers contrast both of them to “ecological” or “nature tourism”.

³ On this policy, see; for example, Dreyer (1976), Connor (1984) and Harrell (2000).



Figure 4.1: An official representation of the Dai *minzu*

cultural practices and performances are replaced by staged authenticity, potentially destroying “an authentic sense of place” (Oakes 1997: 36) on the part of the local minority groups.

Furthermore, the “selective preservation” (ibid.: 48) of cultural traits involved in the official representation of minority groups in the PRC is said to be still strongly determined by traditional Han conceptions of ‘alien’ or peripheral cultures as ‘backward’ and in need of guidance. In particular, the definition and representation of “peripheral peoples” has traditionally involved a process of “objectification and scaling”, in which minority groups are portrayed as feminine, childlike and ancient, in relation to the Han majority (Harrell 1995: 9 ff.). This problem is in fact often explicitly related to the self-representation of the Han majority, as, for Han tourists, the “pursuit of cultural difference and similarity”⁴ carried out through the encounter with the backward ‘other’ in the form of an official, recognized *shaoshu minzu*, is essentially one way of reassuring their own identity as part of the most ‘modern’ and ‘advanced’ group in the PRC (and a homogeneous one at that). Ethnic tourism thus helps legitimate the dominant role of the Han majority in the task of educating and modernizing the minorities (see Anagnost 1994: 231, Gladney 1994, Schein 2000,

⁴ Zheng Hongfang and Wang Hongxiao. ‘Establishing Tourism as a Precursor Industry and Developing Frontier Cities’. *Minority Rresearch*, no. 3 1996 (in Chinese). Quoted in Evans 2000: 168.

Harrell 1995, 2000). Acting as the main agent in the process of producing and reproducing the images of minorities spread through the tourist industry, the PRC State acquires what Bourdieu termed the “symbolic capital”⁵ necessary to legitimate the CCPs’ (as well as the Han’s) leading role in the cultural and economic development of the PRC, perpetuating the symbolic and economic subordination of ethnic minorities⁶.

In spite of acknowledging the negative effects of these processes in terms of the integration of these minority cultures within the tourist industry, other specialists have preferred to highlight the positive aspects of the social and cultural role played by tourism, a role “that cannot be dismissed as purely negative” (Oakes 1997: 67). According to this perspective, the commoditization of minority cultures has allowed for an active *engagement* with the market economy on the part of such groups, an engagement which not only enhances their opportunity to raise their living standards (non-Han groups usually inhabit areas officially labelled as “underdeveloped” or economically “backward”), but also allows for the appropriation of tourism by locals “in their symbolic constructions of culture, tradition, and identity” (ibid.: 36), providing minority groups with an arena in which to contest allegedly imposed official representations of local culture through the symbolic power that the very same tourist industry grants them. Tourism thus has itself become “an important factor in the ongoing construction of place identity” (ibid.).

Whatever the case, the commoditization of minority cultures has arguably had profound implications for the social life and expectations of the affected groups. The representation of ethnic peoples often becomes an arena in which power relations between the different agents and stakeholders involved (tourist entrepreneurs, the state and local groups) are established, negotiated and contested, and in general the negotiation over symbolic and material resources involved in the establishment of ethnic tourist sites can be seen as profoundly political (Cohen 2001: 29 ff., Tan 2001: pp. 2-3, Kang Xiaofei 2009).

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ On the topic of “oriental/internal orientalism” and its political implications, see especially Gladney 1994 and Schein 2000. On tourism in Sipsong Panna, see also Davis 2005 and McCarthy 2009: 83 ff.

4.3 “Meilide Xishuangbanna”

As mentioned in the Introduction, the “cultural revival” among the *shaoshu minzu* in the PRC has gone hand-in-hand with the development of the tourist industry in Sipsong Panna, thanks to an all-year-round mild climate, a reasonable number of tropical rainforest areas and the rich cultural diversity of the region. “Beautiful Sipsong Panna” (美丽的西双版纳, *Meilide Xishuangbanna*) has gained a reputation as a small Southeast Asian paradise, especially among Han tourists, who make the bulk of the visitors to the region (Hasegawa 2002: 299). Even if its reputation and the number of visitors are far from those of other destinations in the Province, such as Lijiang or Dali, Sipsong Panna is now one of the preferred tourist choices in Yunnan.

The potential of the region for tourist exploitation was confirmed soon after it was opened to tourists in the mid-1980s. Tourist arrivals grew at an average annual rate of twenty percent over the next decade (Wen and Tisdell 2001: 212), and the economy of the prefecture has since then become increasingly dependant on the tourist trade. In 1994, this accounted for 24 percent of XDAP’s gross product (*ibid.*), and by the end of the decade this amount had increased to around one-third of the Prefecture’s income (McCarthy 2004: 40)⁷. The numbers of domestic as well as foreign visitors have steadily increased over the last decade, and this growth is expected to continue now that various infrastructure works (particularly a highway linking the provincial capital Kunming with Jinghong City) have been completed or are nearing completion (Wen and Tisdell 2001: 215, Berlie 2001: 183, Panyagaew 2004: pp. 6-7).

State agency has played an important role from the beginning in the regulation of tourist development in Sipsong Panna, with XDAP officially designated as one of 44 official national-level scenic sites (Hasegawa 2002: 294). Nevertheless, the region did not become a key target for tourist exploitation until the mid-1980s, due to Government concerns regarding the security of border areas. When mass tourism began to reveal signs of congestion in other areas of Yunnan and demand to visit the area increased,

⁷ See Wen and Tisdell (2001: 213) for data on tourist trade growth in Sipsong Panna during the 1990s; see also Berlie 2001: 184 and Hasegawa 2002: 294 ff. On Sipsong Panna becoming a major tourist destination in Yunnan Province, see also Evans (2000: 166 ff.), and McCarthy (2009: 85) and Davis 2005.



Figure 4.2: An image from the daily re-enactment of the ‘Water Splashing Festival’ at the Dai Garden in Muang Ham

the provincial government decided to facilitate tourism development in Sipsong Panna (Wen and Tisdell 2001: 211), and in 1985, the Tourism Bureau of Xishuangbanna Prefecture (西双版纳州旅游局, *Xishuangbanna Zhou Lityouju*) was opened, with foreigners allowed to visit Jinghong and Menghai, two of the three county-level administrative structures within XDAP (Hasegawa 2002: 294). At the provincial level, the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1986-90) chose tourism as one of the main industries responsible for relieving poor economic development in Yunnan (Hasegawa 2003: 402, 404), and subsequently, 1988 saw the celebration of the first Yunnan Ethnic Arts Festival, which was aimed at the promotion of ethnic tourism in the region through performances of minorities’ songs and dance in Dali, Kunming and Jinghong (ibid.: 403). In a similar vein, in May 1992 the prefectural government included in its Eighth Five-Year Plan (1991-95) a project to promote the development of the tourist industry in the region through the use of natural resources and ethnic culture⁸.

Since the mid-1990s, tourism has officially become one of the four leading industries with responsibility for the development of the economy in XDAP (Hasegawa 2003: 403, Wen and Tisdell 2001: 212), and according to Hasegawa, this

⁸ See Hasegawa 2002: 295-6, and 2003: 402. The China Art Festival, organized in 1992 in Kunming, also took as its core the promotion of minority cultures within the context of tourist development (see also Schein 2000: 90).

period has also signaled a new phase in the regulation of the tourist industry in the area, in which the State has taken an even more active role in the control of private enterprise activities in order to improve the overall quality of the tourist offering in the region⁹.

4.4 The Representation of Buddhism

As mentioned, Theravada Buddhism, generally identified with traditional Lue culture, has played an important role in the state-promoted tourist industry in Sipsong Panna. This is so not just because of the high proportion of Lue in the region in terms of population, and the relative accessibility of most Lue communities in the area, but also because of the adaptability of Lue culture (and Buddhism in particular), to commoditization. According to Han conceptions of ethnicity, the Lue, while being a ‘backward’ people when compared to the more ‘advanced’ Han, are at the same time in possession of a developed culture (including a script of their own), and thus make for the perfect combination of an ‘exotic’ yet ‘non-savage’ minority people. Religion is allowed, even encouraged, to have a place in this framework because, as Anagnost has shown, after the 1980s “religious belief became recognized as an ethical basis for everyday life that was at least as effective (if not more effective than) socialist ethics in producing good civic behaviour” (1994: 235) in the PRC¹⁰. In this sense, Buddhist moral values are supposed to have exerted a beneficial influence on the Tai character; as a Han specialist on the Tai puts it:

“The Dais’ spiritual features can be summarized as follows: they are diligent, wise, kind, with merits of mutual-aid, of national concord and friendly affection, polite and peace-loving. All this show that their cultural quality and cultivation in spiritual civilization are on a high level. This kind of excellent ethnic character has been a social-historical product which closely connected with the long nurture of Buddhist culture”¹¹.

⁹ Hasegawa 2003: 405 ff. See also Wen and Tisdell 2001: 213, on some of the specific measures taken by the local government.

¹⁰ Zhang (2000) shares a similarly positive view towards the influence of Buddhism on Tai culture.

¹¹ Liu 1990: 269; see also Evans 2000: 169.

Official, state-promoted representation of the Lue within the PRC has long stressed these features, constructing an image of a “civilised” (有文明的, *you wenmingde*) ethnic people with a high “cultural quality”¹². Other positive aspects of Buddhism are also officially praised, such as the environmentalist emphasis on the “harmonious relation between man and nature” (Li 2004: 71) allegedly promoted in Buddhism-embedded traditional Lue culture¹³. While this does not imply that Buddhist religion is unambiguously accepted by State ideology as an influence worthy of respect, in practice the new tolerance towards religion and the revitalized role of Buddhism in the local public culture of Sipsong Panna has allowed for its full integration into the national tourist circuit, and since the 1980s temples and monks have become integrated into local tourist attractions such as theme parks and show performances. Some of the most celebrated sites in the region include the Octogonal Pavillion, a *bosut*¹⁴ in a small temple in the former principality of Jing Zhen, Wat Suon Muon in Muang Ham (In Chinese: *Menghan* or *Ganlanba*), around 30 kilometers south of Jinghong City), a temple located within the compound of the famous Dai Garden (傣族园, *Dai zu Yuan*, an enclosure of five Tai villages subject to tourist exploitation), restored in traditional fashion at the end of the 1990s with funding from Thai donors; or the famous Man Fei Long Pagoda (near Damenglong District (in Lue: Muang Long)). The central Buddhist temple in the region, Wat Pajie, is also integrated into the tourist circuit through its connection to Manting Park, a tourist site offering daily performances based on local minority cultures (see Borchert 2005(a) and 2005(b), and Casas 2008).

¹² On the contemporary Chinese concept of *wenming* (文明, “civilization”), see Anagnost 1994: 230 ff.

¹³ See the works by scholar Gao Lishi compiled in 高立士傣学研究文选, *A Collection of Gao Lishi's Research Works on the Dais*, Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, Kunming, 2006 (in Chinese and English).

¹⁴ See Chapter 2, n. 14, and Chapter 3, n. 9, of this dissertation.



Figure 4.3: Wat Suon Muon in Muang Ham

As suggested above, this integration has been carried out through the setting up and reproduction of specific stereotypes and the selective promotion of certain cultural traits, plus the elision of others according to such stereotypes – significantly those akin to offering an image of Buddhism which is contrary to state goals of social and ethnic harmony, and economic development. Several specialists have called attention to the problems derived from the integration of local culture into the tourist circuit, and in particular the gendered nature of the representation of local groups, such as images of Lue women bathing in the rivers, which have become a staple in tourist exploitation in Sipsong Panna (Evans 2000: pp. 169-70), and have facilitated the conversion of Lue women into objects of desire to be consumed by Han tourists¹⁵.

¹⁵ On the influence of the construction of Dai identity on sexual tourism in Sipsong Panna, see Gladney 1994: 103 ff, Hillman 2003: 183 and Sandra T. Hyde. 2001. 'Sex tourism Practices on the Periphery: Eroticizing Ethnicity and Pathologizing Sex on the Lancang'. In Nancy Chen et al. eds. *China Urban: Ethnographies of Contemporary Culture*. Durham: Duke U. P.



Figure 4.4: A promotional image of Dai girls bathing in a river

Similarly, the representation of local Buddhism within the tourist industry has reproduced not only what we could deem as positive stereotypes, but also others not so favorable. Lue culture is said to be able to serve as a base, not only for the development of the tourist industry in Sipsong Panna, but also for the building of a modern society imbued with Chinese notions of *wenhua* (文化, or ‘culture’) and *wenming*. Nevertheless, in spite of these positive elements, Lue culture cannot serve as a base for the overall economic or social development of Sipsong Panna. Its ‘backward’ nature, determined by its close relationship to agricultural modes of production (which still predominate in the area) prevents it from “[becoming] a strong support to [the] modern economy”. “After all”, as one Han expert has put it, Buddhist culture is “one thing left in history”, which, in the process of economic development, will come into conflict with the “requirements of...new times and [the] market economy” (Li 2004: 71). Therefore, the modernization of Sipsong Panna cannot be achieved without transforming and upgrading Lue culture, and it is the duty of the State and the CCP to “promote the modern transformation of the culture into a socialist new culture of the Dai people that can be a strong support to modern economy” (ibid., 72).

Importantly, this symbolic subordination of Buddhism and Lue culture is both the cause and effect of an economic disadvantage, and for the Lue (as well as for the other minorities involved in the tourist industry), their cultural and symbolic

integration into national tourist markets has apparently not translated into a major participation in the economic benefits this industry brings to the region. According to Yang and Wall, “the operation of ethnic tourism [in Sipsong Panna] is dominated by Han investors” from outside the region, rather than “by the main resource providers, the minorities themselves” (Yang and Wall 2008: pp. 538-9). In co-operation with local government officials, these entrepreneurs “take control of the use of ethnic resources and [the] commoditization of ethnic cultures and also determine the forms of cultural expression in tourist attractions”, exploiting “minority resources for their own benefits” (ibid.: 538), while “minority people are employed typically in low-paying jobs, such as [as] dancers, tour guides, cleaners and security guards...[f]ew can be found at the management level” (ibid.: 537)¹⁶.

While it is clear that the tourist industry provides jobs and brings economic benefits to the local Lue, the subordinated place the Lue and other minorities continue to occupy within the regional economic hierarchy must be taken into account. As awareness of this economically marginalized position has grown among minority peoples, tensions between local groups and Han entrepreneurs have intensified, and “conflicts continue to occur in many ethnic villages”¹⁷.

Although Yang and Wall’s study focuses on village theme parks in Sipsong Panna, their conclusions may be also applied to the situation at Wat Luang Muang Lue, where the symbolic and material subordination and disempowerment of the minorities also determines the operation of the temple; however, as Wat Luang is also now the seat of the main regional Buddhist Institute, a comprehension of the dynamics of the relationship between Buddhist education and the State, public system in Sipsong Panna, is necessary in order to obtain a comprehensive overview of the context within which the temple operates.

¹⁶ A similar “ethnic division of labor” in which members of local minorities are subordinated to Han managers can be found within the context of state rubber farming in the region. See Sturgeon 2009: 6-7.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 539; see also ibid.: 532 ff. and Oakes 2006: 167. On the conflicts between managers and the inhabitants of one of Sipsong Panna’s major tourist destinations, the Dai Garden in Muang Ham, see Cable 2008.

4.5 Monks and the New Economy

The relationship between Buddhism and tourism development in Sipsong Panna is complex and multifaceted – and somehow difficult to pinpoint. One reason for this may lie in the fact that, until recently, the integration of local Buddhism into the market economy was arguably not very relevant – only a handful of temples have been integrated in the tourist circuit as tourist sites (Borchert 2005(a): 102), and the possibilities for local monasteries to obtain high levels of revenue through the commercialization of religious items and services are not as great as; for example, in Thailand.

In any case, and as I have mentioned above, Buddhism in general plays an important role in the local tourist industry, mainly through the construction of the Dai as a “marketable” group for Han tourists. Apart from this, Buddhism also acts as a showcase for official claims on the part of the State to be the guarantor of religious freedom in Sipsong Panna: Buddhist monks, starting with the heads of the local Sangha, are present in all major tourist events in the region – such as the dragon-boats race and the parade organized by Wat Pajie during the New Year festival in April, a parade in which the local Sangha carries the Buddha image around Jinghong and which has become a commercialized act appropriated by the local government and commercial companies in order to publicize, not only the region as a tourist destination, but also the apparent realities of the freedom granted to local religious activities¹⁸.

On the other hand, and apart from this basically ‘symbolic’ role of Buddhism, the State encourages the participation of local religious communities in market economy – even religious specialists such as the members of the Sangha are “expected to take part in productive labor and set up profit-making enterprises”¹⁹. The XBA has responded to this call by participating in several commercial adventures. For a start, and although it actually forms a completely independent structure, Wat Pajie is

¹⁸ On the last year that I attended it (2009), many cars belonging to commercial companies took part in the parade, publicizing local tourist sites or even alcoholic beverages.

¹⁹ Kang Xiaofei 2009: 229. According to this author, who quotes the work of a Chinese social scientist, “[e]ven though central state regulations strictly forbid the involvement of outside investors in temple affairs, many local state agencies turn a blind eye to the collaboration between religious communities and business investors in developing ‘religious tourism’: the former owns the tourist facilities and the latter runs them, and the two share the revenue” (ibid.: 245).

presented on tourist brochures and advertisements around Jinghong City as a part of Manting Park (曼听公园, *Manting Gongyuan*), a privately managed “ethnic park” which includes as its main attractions a tropical plants garden, an artificial lake with boats, a reproduction of the Manfeilong pagoda in Muang Long (Damenglong), another of the Octogonal Pavillion in Muang Jie (Chinese: Mengzhe), and the temple itself, whose area is adjacent to that of the Park.



Figure 4.5: Visitors to Wat Pajie near the entrance connecting the Temple to Manting Park

Visitors can freely wander around the temple complex, and have a taste of the “mysterious” culture of Southeast Asia²⁰. Borchert has pointed towards the ambiguities in this arrangement, in which the temple dwellers must comply with tourist demands (see Borchert 2005(a)).

In any case, Wat Pajie is a separate and independent entity from that of the tourist park, and therefore the company managing the Park does not have any

²⁰ Some time ago, visitors to Wat Pajie had to buy an extra ticket of two RMB when arriving at its entrance, but now this has changed and, in spite of selling their own tickets, the temple receives one RMB for every ticket sold at the main entrance to the Park. The sign at its gate includes a piece on Wat Pajie, written in English as well as in Chinese, which literally reads: “The area of Buddhist Culture include The White Pagoda, The Octogonal Pavillion, The Pavillion of buying captive animals and the well-known Wa Ba Jie [Wat Pajie] General Temple, where you can hear the monks loudly recite the scriptures and read the palm leaves, while at the same time, you can take part in different kinds of buddhist service, such as the Buddha worship, burning joss sticks, and can feel the strange cultural atmosphere of Hinayana Doctrine [可体味到浓郁的南转上座部佛教氛围, *ke tiwei dao nongyude nanzhuan shangzuobu fojiao wenhua fenwei*]”.

influence in the regulation of affairs at the temple. However, at other sites the situation is different; at the entrance to the Octagonal Pavillion of Jingzhen; for instance, an entrance fee is collected from all visitors, and this has led to conflict in the past, as the managers of the entrance have been reluctant to compromise, demanding that even the senior monks from Wat Pajie buy a ticket to access the site (interview with a member of the XBA, April 2007). The same can be said of Wat Suan Moun (In Chinese: *Man Chunman*), a temple restored in the 1990s with the help of Thai donors and located within the Daizuyuan. The same as lay households, the temple is subject to the rules established by the company in relation to the regulations of the park and the maintenance of an “authentic” ethnic atmosphere within the complex (see Cable 2008). Within these sites, the symbolic subordination of local religious communities in relation to entrepreneurs is apparent.

Apart from this, the XBA and the Buddhist elite at Wat Pajie have been involved in other businesses and commercial transactions related to religious property. In the last few years, the XBA has rented a piece of land located just in front of Wat Pajie (and where the residence of several former monks working at the temple was formerly located) for the construction of a coffee factory. Within the temple itself, a few small businesses have also opened, the most important of which is a tea house also managed by Han businessmen, and which commercializes a tea brand using the name of the temple. The temple obviously benefits from these arrangements, and the senior monks have taken part in activities “consecrating” or “blessing” the business.

All of this is proof of the active participation of the Sipsong Panna Buddhist elite in market economy processes and cultural commoditization in the region, and this participation has often been interpreted by specialists as a more or less conscious move on the part of the elite aimed at obtaining the material and symbolic capital necessary to carry out the project of preserving traditional Lue culture (see Borchert 2005(a); Davis 2005; Wasan 2010). However, this interpretation of the involvement of the senior monks in different businesses - aimed at facilitating the implementation of a particular ‘agenda’ on the part of the Sangha, seems to me to rely on a strict interpretation of “rational choice”, as well as on a questionable dichotomy established



Figure 4.6: Wat Pajie monks participating in a ceremony blessing the tea produced under the temple brand



Figure 4.7: Khuba Longjom and the Head of the Yunnan Buddhist Association, Dao Shuren, with a tea company manager

between the State and commercial enterprises on the one hand, and local ethnic or religious groups on the other. I will deal in detail with this problem in the Conclusions section of this dissertation, but for now I would like to question the interpretation of daily religious politics as a “performance” in which the Buddhist elite plays a particular role in order to obtain certain benefits, while hiding the “true nature” of their intentions (their so-called ‘agenda’). From the perspective of institutionalization, and in line with what was said in the previous chapter in relation to the operation of

“selective traditions” at the level of the local Sangha, the involvement of the Buddhist elite in commercial business is part of their participation in the production of a new type of religion according to (in this case, economic) ideals promoted by the PRC State. Several members of the elite have shown an interest in commercial projects which can arguably produce economic benefits not only for the Sangha as a whole, but also for them as individuals²¹. In any case, the members of the Sangha elite have become instrumental in “the processes of inculcation of new patterns and ideas, norms and values, of work and consumption, ideas which can be conceptualized as being simultaneously both forces of production and ideology” (Turton 1984: 39) at the local level²². However, this cooperation with commercial companies is contested among both the laity and members of the Sangha, who see it as problematic. The current situation at the new Wat Luang Muang Lue, the new temple-school in Jinghong City, has galvanized local critiques critical of market economy developments – and of the local Buddhist elite as well.

4.6 Wat Luang Muang Lue

The original lodging facilities at Wat Pajie proved unable to cope with the increasing admissions of local novices and monks to the Buddhist Institute, so at least from the beginning of the 2000s, the XBA looked for funding to expand the school. Because of the relatively reduced scale of religious donations in Sipsong Panna, the XBA was forced to look for external funding to build a new temple-school. The government of XDAP had also for some time been looking for investment to build a tourist theme park based on trans-local representations of local culture and history, and Buddhism in particular, so the idea of merging the religious and educational project of the XBA with one of the pre-existing plans allegedly, had the support of

²¹ As Turton has stated, monks favoring the commercialization of Buddhism “may have all the personal consumer goods of high ranking officials and businessmen: cars, bank accounts, etc.” (Turton 1984: 41).

²² It can be argued that the ambition of the local Buddhist elite to build large-scale temples whenever possible is rooted in traditional competitive aspects of Lue society. In relation to this, the new *viharn* of Wat Pajie, still to be completed, is another example of an ambitious symbolic and economic project promoted by the senior monks. This attitude on the part of this group also influences villagers’ attitudes regarding their temples, and it can be considered partly responsible for the ongoing destruction of traditional crafts and skills among the local Lue. The words of Andrew Turton in relation to the Thai Sangha also apply to the situation in Sipsong Panna: “Temples are destroyed, and with them fine local craftwork and skills, not just because of ‘traditional’ values of making merit by rebuilding, but because high pressure entrepreneurs tout design books and credit systems” (Turton 1984: 41-2).

one of the former heads of XDAP (himself a Tai Lue), who also took account of the ambition of the local Buddhist elite to build a large-scale temple able in order to increase revenue in the form of donations from inside and outside the PRC, and which would allow them to maintain a higher number of students at the school²³. Different companies were considered as potential investors for the project, which was finally granted to a property development enterprise from Liaoning Province in the north of China. After Khuba Longjom, the Abbot of Wat Pajie, was crowned Khuba Muang of Sipsong Panna in January 2004, the following summer a contract between the XBA and the Liaoning Company was signed in which the Company committed to invest an estimated 350 million RMB²⁴ (more than 50 million US Dollars) in the construction of a new temple compound, including the facilities for a school, while retaining control over tourist activities and general management of the site over a period of 60 years, before transferring complete responsibility to the XBA (see Casas 2008; McCarthy 2009).

Construction of the new temple started in 2005 on a former rubber plantation around five kilometers south of downtown Jinghong City. The land where Wat Luang now stands was originally owned by the Ninth Team of the Jinghong State Farm, one of the several state farms which managed rubber plantations in Sipsong Panna²⁵, and, to a lesser extent, by villagers of Ban Nong Fong, a Lue settlement at the foot of the hill. The temple in fact sits at the center of an expansion area for the prefectural capital, known as ‘New Jinghong’, which is transforming the previous landscape of rubber plantations and Tai villages into an urban scenery in which Wat Luang already plays an important aesthetic role.

²³ Interview with a lay member of the YBA, April 2010. See Borchert 2005(b): 258, on the financial problems Wat Pajie experienced in supporting the boarding students.

²⁴ See “Xishuangbanna Touzi 3.5 Yi Yuan Dazao Nanzhuan Fojiao Wenhua Zhongxin” (西双版纳投资3.5亿元打造南专佛教中心, “Xishuangbanna Invests 350 Million Yuan [RMB] to Create the Theravada Buddhism Center”). Yunnan: Xinhua News. http://www.yn.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-11/04/content_11576417.htm

²⁵ In 2003, state farms were “hived off into private companies, responding to central state efforts to reduce their financial burden as well as WTO requirements to curtail state subsidies to industry” (Sturgeon 2009: 5).



**Figure 4.8: An image of the *Vihaan* of Wat Luang during its construction
(Image: Roger Casas)**

The multi-level structure of the compound itself is disproportionate in relation to traditional Buddhist temples in the area²⁶. On an ascending progression from the main entrance, one encounters the main ordination hall or *viharn*; the next level is dominated by a large, Thai-style Buddha image around 45 meters high. Once completed, an equally colossal stupa (*That*) will form the pinnacle of the compound at the top of the hill – all of it surrounded by extensive green areas. Apart from these main spots, several other religious buildings, designed to reflect architectural styles from Thailand, Laos and Sri Lanka, complete the compound, an element surely related to plans on the part of the local government, the Sangha elite and entrepreneurs to make the temple a “center of Theravada Buddhist culture” in the region, and which includes; for instance, moving the local Ethnic Research Institute (民族研究所, *Minzu Yanjiusuo*) from its present location in downtown Jinghong City, to the area where Wat Luang stands.

Going against the initial wishes of the managers of the Company, who wanted to have Han professionals in charge of the design work, the XBA prevailed and local designers were put on charge of the architecture and decorative design of the

²⁶ The surface of the temple totals 400 *mu* (around 266,700 sq. m.)

compound. These local artisans, mostly former monks or *khanan*, were part of the group of monks which studied in Thailand during the first half of the 1990s (see Chapter 5 of this dissertation), and so the architecture reflects a combination of local and trans-local Thai models, culminating in an ‘international’ Lue style. This group of local designers received logistical support from factories located in the eastern provinces of the PRC, as well as from Han professionals, in order to produce the specific architectonic and decorative elements of the temple, such as the Buddha image (*Pha Chao*) in the main ordination hall, or the mural paintings in the *viharn*, which reflect an amalgam of Lue, Chinese and Thai styles.

Both the scale, inspired by some of the massive Buddhist temple architectures in southern and eastern China, such as the Baolian Temple in Hong Kong or the Foguang Shan in Gaoxiong (Kaohsiung) City in Taiwan, and the style of Wat Luang Muang Lue, reflect a conscious attempt at “trans-local imagining” (Oakes 2006), in which the local Lue religious community sees itself as part of a broader cultural world which includes not only Southeast Asia and other Buddhist countries outside the region, but also the PRC. Allowing for control of the line between tradition and modernity, this conscious interplay of cultural elements helps to create a space in which the Dai are able to “perform their modernity and claim national authority”, representing themselves in front of the national and global communities as a “modern” group “with their own peculiarities”, thus vindicating their legitimate place in the national community (Oakes 2006: 183, McCarthy 2001, 2009).



**Figure 4.9: The giant Buddha image presiding over Wat Luang
(Image: Roger Casas)**

In any case, it would be misleading to present Wat Luang as a “fake” religious site, a project merely aimed at producing economic benefits for both the Company and the local Sangha through a blatant commoditization of local Buddhist culture, as during the construction of the temple, and up to its opening to tourists, several ceremonies and rituals involving the heads of the local Sangha as well as political authorities were conducted within the temple compound. This consecration of the main buildings in Wat Luang expresses a will on the part of the local Sangha to legitimate the temple as a sacred site for the local Tai.

4.6.1 Religious and Political Legitimation

Under the watchful presence of the regular and military police, on November 3rd 2007, the official inauguration of the ordination hall (Lue: *viharn*, a term sometimes translated as ‘hall of prayers’) at Wat Luang Muang Lue took place. Hundreds of local devotees, as well as government officials, journalists and onlookers

attended the ceremony, which was aimed at sanctioning the project, both religiously and politically.

The ritual section of the celebration was led by the heads of the local Sangha, accompanied by several other high-ranking Buddhist monks. The filiations of the senior monks attending the ceremony reflected the trans-local links of the Sipsong Panna Sangha, as well as the changes in the territorial organization of the region over the last 100 years. On the one hand, the traditional links the Lue maintain with Theravada communities in the Upper Mekong region, formerly inhabitants of an area located between the different empires that previously dominated the region, and now part of nation-states in the area, were represented by monks coming from Shan State in Myanmar, and from northern Thailand, whilst on the other, and in a clear enactment of a *national* religious community, the ceremony was also attended by monks belonging to both the Tibetan and Han traditions of Buddhism, with whom Lue Buddhism maintained somewhat tenuous links in the past. Now, monks belonging to the three schools fall together under the jurisdiction of the China Buddhist Association, and thus belong to the “great family” of Chinese Buddhism²⁷.



Figure 4.10: Tibetan monks chanting during the inauguration ceremony of Wat Luang - November 2007

²⁷ Borchert (2007) has dealt with the dynamics between the national and transnational links of the Sipsong Panna Sangha. See also Davis 2003. The China Buddhist Association, and all its branches, are officially designated “patriotic religious organizations”. On these organizations, see Chapter 3, n. 12.



Figure 4.11: Crowds attending the inauguration ceremony of Wat Luang - November 2007

Apart from this fundamental aspect of religious legitimation at Wat Luang, the ceremony also served to show the political support behind the project. Before the religious ceremony started, a more secular introductory formality took place outside the *viharn*, presided over by the Head of the prefectural government, Ms Dao Linyin (together with the last Chao Phaendin of Sipsong Panna, Chao Mom Kham Lue, now an honorary member of the Chinese political establishment), who even took part in some of the religious rituals concerning the consecration of the *bosut*, symbolising the endorsement that the Government of the CCP gave to the general developmentalist project, as well as the participation in it of local religious communities, who are “expected to take part in productive labor and set up profit-making enterprises”²⁸.

²⁸ Kang Xiaofei 2009: 229. According to this author, who quotes the work of a Chinese social scientist, “[e]ven though central state regulations strictly forbid the involvement of outside investors in temple affairs, many local state agencies turn a blind eye to the collaboration between religious communities and business investors in developing ‘religious tourism’: the former owns the tourist facilities and the latter runs them, and the two share the revenue” (ibid.: 245). This marriage between religious groups and the market economy was also expressed at the inauguration of Wat Luang by the auction of 108 new cars (108 being an auspicious number in Buddhist as well as other cosmologies), those which had served as transportation for 108 monks at the temple.



Figure 4.12: Political and religious authorities at the opening ceremony of Wat Luang - November 2007

After the inauguration ceremony, Wat Luang opened its doors to local devotees and visitors for two more days, during which time local Buddhists flooded the compound to make offerings, as is customary for any other ceremony involving the consecration of a religious building or the ordination of monks. After this, tourist exploitation of the site began.

4.6.2 Managing Wat Luang

The moving of the Buddhist Institute to Wat Luang in March 2008 marked the start of the joint operation between the Liaoning Company and the XBA. As mentioned, the Company is in charge of general management of the site, while several others are sub-contracted by it to manage different activities related to the tourist activities, such as the employment of tourist guides, access to the site, or the management of shopping malls. According to the contract, access to the temple is free for local Tai people, upon presentation of their ID cards²⁹, while outside visitors have to buy a ticket at a price of 120 RMB (around seventeen US Dollars). As happened with Wat Pajie and Manting Park (see above), the XBA receives a percentage of all

²⁹ PRC ID cards specify to which of the 56 officially recognized *minzu* the holder belongs.

the ticket sales collected at the entrance to Wat Luang, while the religious association takes care of the cost of the water and electricity used by the school.

As mentioned, the Buddhist Institute in Wat Luang (including monks and novices' quarters) is separated from the tourist area of the complex. Access to the school quarters is not specifically restricted to tourists; however, only a small number of them enter the area, as most visits are guided and the tourists are simply taken for a quick tour of the school area in golf carts. Monks and novices visit the *viharn* daily in order to carry out morning and evening prayers (*Sut Pha Chao*), at an hour when the temple is either not yet open or already closed to visitors, and make occasional use of the other religious buildings within the tourist compound. In spite of this, it is of course common to see monks or novices wandering around the temple area, although their interaction with tourists is limited. A small number of former monks and laywomen in the payroll of the XBA also help with school maintenance, cleaning the facilities, taking care of the school garden, cooking the daily food for the monks, or driving the different vehicles the school makes use of.

Management of the temple-school involves a daily negotiation between the tourist managers and the religious authorities at the temple; however, since the school moved there, relations between the Company's managers and the monks responsible for the school have become strained, due to alleged financial problems plaguing the whole enterprise. Although since its opening Wat Luang has become an important tourist spot in Jinghong, the income brought in by tourist groups seems to have been insufficient to recoup the whole investment. While the temple has been open to tourists for more than two years, construction of the temple has not been completed, and the building of the stupa, one of the highlights within Wat Luang, is at this moment still in its initial phases³⁰.

The slow flow of income seems to have put pressure on the Liaoning Company (as well as on the other companies sub-contracted to manage different aspects of the site), which has decided to charge a fee to Tai visitors as well as to outsiders. At present, every local Tai wishing to enter Wat Luang has to pay two RMB as "insurance", while

³⁰ On the other hand, and apart from the relatives of the novices and monks studying at the Buddhist Institute, the number of local devotees visiting Wat Luang is arguably limited, as the village temples remain the main places used for carrying out merit-making activities.

those without ID cards and who therefore cannot demonstrate their Dai identity, have to pay ten RMB (around 0.3 and 1.5 US Dollars, respectively). This has created tension between the site management and the Sangha, tension which has also occasionally erupted into open conflict. In December 2009; for instance, monks and novices working or studying at the Buddhist Institute blocked the main entrance gates of the compound for a few hours, effectively preventing tourists from entering the site, after a group of local Lue who refused to pay the ten RMB entrance fee were denied access to the temple. Company managers, for their part, are said to have resorted occasionally to cutting electricity and water within the school compound.



Figure 4.13: Monks and novices protesting against the Liaoning Company's management of Wat Luang - December 2009

Some of the different commercial companies working within Wat Luang have also been accused of resorting to illicit practices to help recoup their investments. Soon after the school moved to the temple compound, the XBA denounced to the local BERA the presence in the ordination hall of company staff demanding large donations from visitors, donations supposed to provide for the maintenance of the monks and novices living in the temple, but which never reached them. According to the monks, these illicit practices had expanded to the shops operating within the

temple compound, and which allegedly cheated tourists over the price of Buddhist paraphernalia (from interview with a monk in Wat Luang - April 2010).

With the Sangha becoming concerned that the activities of the companies may taint its image, the monks themselves have striven to curtail the irregularities by increasing their own presence in the *viharn*, as well as in the shopping areas, even organizing ‘patrols’ of novices with the aim of uncovering malpractices and denouncing any perpetrators to the managers of the Buddhist Institute. All of this points to the importance that the representation of Buddhism taking place within Wat Luang has for the local Sangha. In general, the heads of the institution and the XBA have refrained from directly intervening in the conflict; however, some signs point to their dissatisfaction with the situation. Before the opening of the new temple Khuba Longjom intended to move his residence to within its compound, but ultimately, the highest religious authority in Sipsong Panna has spent most of his time at his old residence in Wat Pajie (where most of the senior monks still live), visiting Wat Luang only occasionally. Furthermore, while in 2009 the Company organized a special program for celebration of the Tai New Year at Wat Luang, the Sangha organized their own separate activities at Wat Pajie for the celebration, and in general the involvement of the monks who started the Buddhist Institute with the new school at Wat Luang, has been very limited³¹.

On a more pragmatic level, after 2008 the XBA forwarded several reports to BERA and the Prefectural Government, complaining about the situation within Wat Luang and denouncing what they consider to have been inappropriate behavior on the part of the commercial companies. After receiving no response from the Government, in March 2010 the monks attempted to capture the attention of the local authorities using other means; at the end of the month, the local Sangha organized a communal, three-day-long religious ceremony aimed at relieving the severe drought that Yunnan Province was suffering at the time. More than 500 monks convened at Wat Luang to take part in the ceremony, and after this was over, the monks decided to remain in the temple, while members of the XBA displayed banners in the ordination hall demanding that the local government put an end to the commercial malpractices on the part of the company responsible for managing the shops at the foot of the large

³¹ That is, with the exception of Tu Kham Tin. On this monk, see next Chapter.

Buddha statue. The monks sat in the *vihaan* demanding to be listened to by members of the government. In response to this demand, representatives of the local BERA and the prefectural government visited the temple and negotiated with the monks, but did not comply immediately with their demands. As a result, the following day the monks continued occupying the ordination hall, at which point, and after the intervention of one of the vice-heads of XDAP, the local government complied with the demands of the monks and asked them to abandon the protest. The monks finally returned to their ad-hoc living quarters within the temple, and subsequently the local government issued a document forcing Company managers to close Wat Luang for ten days in order to find a solution to the conflict, also granting the monks use of an entrance door to the compound in order to facilitate the access of those people related to the Buddhist Institute, such as relatives of the student monks and teachers. Finally, the commercial company accused by the monks of malpractice was replaced by another.



Figure 4.14: Lue monks sitting in the *vihaan* demanding Government action

The conflict; however, seems to have continued unabated, and at the time of writing (July 2010), communication between the company managers and the religious and secular authorities of the XBA was practically non-existent. As the resources of the XBA are too limited to match the investment of the Company and take complete control of Wat Luang Muang Lue, the monks often express their desire that the local

government will intervene and take charge of the temple, granting greater control to the local Sangha and putting an end to the illicit practices that allegedly continue to take place within Wat Luang.

4.6.3 Contesting Sacred Space

As previously stated, the commoditization of minority ethnic cultures and traditions (including Buddhism) is based on a particular representation of such cultures and traditions, and in the case of the PRC, this is usually based on Han traditional conceptions of “peripheral peoples”. This representation is also subject to negotiation – it has to be accepted by locals, who in turn might not only not accept it, but also contest and even reject official representations of “authentic” local culture. Furthermore, through these processes of negotiation and reconfiguration of tradition, locals have become aware of the instrumental nature of culture (see also McCarthy 2009). As Oakes has stated “the objectification of display...confuses the distinction between the replica and the real, [which] allows for the active manipulation perhaps, of what suddenly appears to be a rather arbitrary boundary (between the real and the fake, the traditional and the modern, timeless authenticity and linear history)” (2006). In this vein, Oakes himself, as well as other authors, have criticized the application of Western conceptions of “authenticity” to the analysis of representation within ethnic tourism in the PRC³².

However, the conflict at Wat Luang points to another aspect of this problem. While it is not my intention to engage here in a discussion of the concept of authenticity³³, it is my contention that the conflict surrounding the representation of Buddhism within the temple compound (and which ranges from the employment of ‘fake monks’ to the use of the “new Tai script” (see Chapter 5 of this dissertation) in the shops within it, as well as the problems derived from the very use of a sacred space for commercial purposes), revolves around a conception of “sacred authenticity” which enters into direct conflict with the economic goals of the enterprise. Locals judge the Wat Luang project precisely according to their own conceptions of such authenticity – and it must be remembered that, even if such

³² See references in Oakes 2006.

³³ Oakes has done so extensively in Oakes 2006.

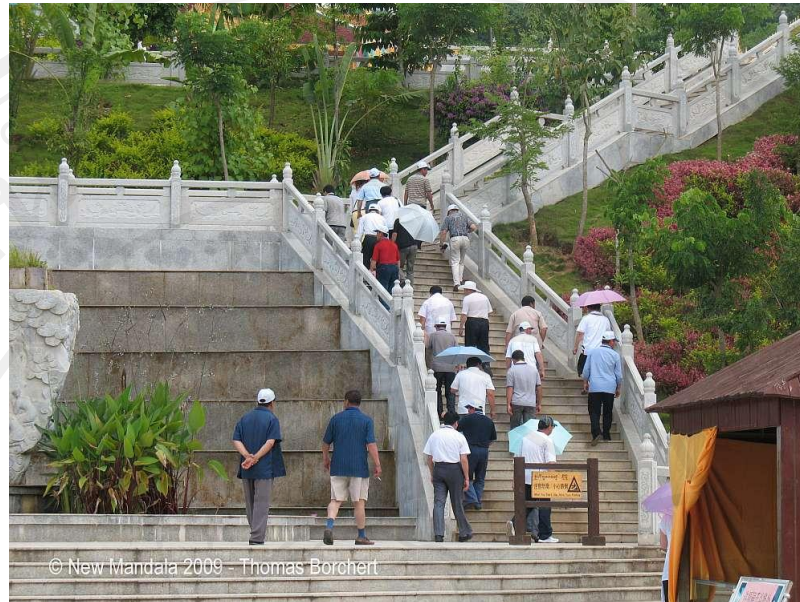


Figure 4.15: Tourists visiting Wat Luang (Image: Thomas Borchert)

arguments are often used when material interests are at stake, the mere existence of such a discourse calls into question the idea of a “infinite malleability” (ibid.) of authenticity.

The debate over the authenticity of Wat Luang is in fact part of a widespread and silent contestation against the temple as a project. Since the opening of the site a whole lore has developed among Lue monks, in which the Liaoning Company is portrayed as an amoral organization willing to make use of Buddhism for commercial purposes. One example of this deals with what I have just called “sacred authenticity”. As mentioned, during the Tai New Year of 2009, the Company managing the temple organized a special program for tourists within Wat Luang; the program included water-splashing, one of the staples nowadays of tourism in Sipsong Panna, as well as a performance by fake Buddhist monks played by local boys dressed in robes. Unfortunately, after the festival two of the boys hired to be monks died in a motorbike accident, and this tragedy was subsequently presented by monks as a moral example of the dangers of playing with the sacred (interview with a member of the Sipsong Panna BERA, Jinghong City - December 2009).

This and other stories about Wat Luang point to what could be considered generalized dissatisfaction with the project. For many locals, within and outside the

Sangha, Wat Luang is not a “real” temple at all, but simply one of many commercial projects in the region controlled by Han outsiders – and this is arguably where these discourses point; not merely to a conflict of economic interests between the local Buddhist elite and the entrepreneurs managing the site, but to a broader ethnic conflict which articulates, and is articulated by, the former. In this sense, the management problems in Wat Luang can also be said to reinforce ethnic divisions that official discourse tends to minimize through a presentation of the “social harmony” and “unity” among different minorities (Kang Xiaofei 2009).

However, at the same time it is important not to see this conflict as a confrontation between the State on one side, and ethnic minorities and religious groups on the other. In this context, the intervention of the Government, in its role as guarantor and protector of the “rights” of the Buddhist Lue (as well as of other minority groups and cultures), is viewed by the monks as the way to end the conflict and save the monastic school.

Moreover, the commercial companies involved in the management of Wat Luang are not the sole target of the dissatisfaction expressed by members of the Sangha and other Lue. Even if the protest at Wat Luang in March 2010 gathered hundreds of monks from all across the region against the commercial managers of the temple, this cannot conceal the existence of an ongoing internal debate within the Sangha regarding the goals and means of the project, and that criticism is also aimed, even from within the institution itself, at the heads of the local Sangha - those who supported the construction of the temple as part of their overall program to adapt local traditions to contemporary conceptions dominant in the PRC or Thailand of the economic and social role of religions. Once again, even if this debate is concealed and unarticulated, its mere presence points to the essential heterogeneity of viewpoints within the local Sangha regarding processes of religious institutionalization.

4.7 Summary

During the last few decades, the transformation of the economy of Sipsong Panna from a “natural” to a “commodity” economy has accelerated. An important aspect of this process is the development in the region of a burgeoning tourist industry, one which takes as its base the exploitation of the region’s rich cultural

resources through the articulation of so-called “ethnic tourism”. Buddhism is an important part of this exploitation, playing a fundamental role in the representation of local minority cultures as both “exotic” and “digestible” for tourists.

On the other hand, and in the context of a national-level process of institutionalization of local religious traditions into modern notions of religion, at present religious actors in Sipsong Panna are expected to themselves play an active role in commercial enterprises. Following this call, during the last few years the XBA and the Buddhist elite at Wat Pajie have participated in several business ventures, arguably becoming instrumental in the expansion of ideas of market competition and consumerism in Sipsong Panna.

Wat Luang Muang Lue is maybe the best example of the role that the members of the Buddhist elite are currently playing in the institutionalization of Buddhist traditions according to contemporary conceptions of capitalist economy. This temple can be considered a hybrid between a touristic, commercially-oriented site, and a sacred, religiously consecrated space. The participation of the Buddhist elite in this project may be seen as another instance of local participation in processes of institutionalization of religion, as well as an engagement with the market economy and modernity. Nevertheless, and though it can be argued that although the current political and social context certainly provides for the possibility of local minority groups taking control over material and symbolic resources, in practice different factors account for the fact that these groups are rarely in control of the material or the representational exploitation of the very cultural resources they produce. As we have seen, in the case of Sipsong Panna, control over the representational and material exploitation of tourist sites such as village theme parks, is often out of the hands of the locals. An alleged lack of education and the maintenance of traditional customs account for the continuation of the economically subordinate position of the Lue and other groups.

The case of those religious sites which have become integrated into the tourist circuit is similar; locals rarely have decision-making power on issues such as the exploitation of material resources or cultural representation, due to the fact that religious communities (both monks and lay people alike) generally lack the political

connections or the economic capital to negotiate in terms of equality with other stakeholders, such as local governments or entrepreneurs.

The situation in Wat Luang is in my opinion a clear example of this kind of problem – and, at the same time, of the contradictions in institutionalization. While the project has been built as a compromise between the interests of the companies involved, the local government, and those of local religious communities, the situation within the temple shows the power inequalities that exist between the Sangha and the entrepreneurs who provided the capital to construct the temple and manage it. While it is true that since the 1980s, Buddhism has been seen by the local government as a valuable resource in terms of tourist development and political legitimacy, the limits to the effectiveness of this symbolic capital are shown in the scarce capacity of the local monks to control events within the temple compound, and their failure to negotiate effectively with the local government and tourist entrepreneurs on issues that relate directly to the operation of the school and the reputation of the institution. The alleged benefits that such joint projects and tourist development bring to local groups must thus be called into question.

The problems within Wat Luang have also provoked a response on the part of locals against the crude commercialization of Buddhism, and contestation against the temple is also directed at the project reforming Buddhist education through its integration into the very system responsible for the reproduction of the symbolic subordination of the Lue and other local ethnic groups. It is towards this aspect of institutionalization that I will now turn.