CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS - THE LIMITS OF REVIVAL

6.1 Introduction

After being intermittently repressed for almost three decades, Buddhist practice in Sipsong Panna experienced a strong recovery following the political and economic reforms implemented by the CCP at the national level at the end of the 1970s. The strength and visibility of Buddhism in the region today seem to validate State claims regarding the renewal of ethnic policies (based on the recognition and protection of 'minority' identities) and religious freedom. Accordingly, both official and academic views subscribe to the idea that the re-establishment of ethnic and religious policies in the PRC during the reforms period has provided historically subordinated groups with space for the development of traditional customs and practices.

Certainly, religious actors in Sipsong Panna have come to play a prominent role in the process of recovery of Buddhist practice; the Lue Sangha has re-established its traditional, hierarchical structures at the local level, and in many respects the present configuration of the Buddhist church resembles that of pre-1953 Sipsong Panna – even if, importantly, this configuration is now linked to national-level state structures and agencies which in turn act as "patrons" of Buddhism, guaranteeing the maintenance of freedom of religion, and partially helping legitimate local religious institutions.

What I have called throughout this study the "local Buddhist elite" have also actively participated in commercial ventures related to the contemporary development of a market economy in Sipsong Panna. Even if this participation can be read as a necessary compromise in terms of providing the local Sangha with the material and symbolic resources needed to maintain their relevance within Lue communities, it is my contention that the heads of the Buddhist church have become instrumental in the

developmentalist project of the State, as well as in the dissemination of conceptions of production and consumerism linked to a capitalist economy. The participation of the local Buddhist elite in the construction of Wat Luang Muang Lue can be cited as an example of this – as well as of the contradictions determining the participation of the Sangha in economic ventures.

Lastly, the reform of Buddhist education and the integration of the Buddhist training provided at Wat Pajie into state educational structures through its recognition as a legitimate secondary vocational school, is in my opinion another example of the active participation of the local Sangha in the process of institutionalization of religious traditions according to contemporary conceptions of education and religion dominant both in the PRC and in Thailand.

However, the Sangha in Sipsong Panna cannot be seen as a homogeneous entity; the participation of religious actors in all these processes has been mainly promoted by a small elite of monks commanding the necessary religious authority and government support to act as leaders of the institutionalization process at the local level. The form and content of this process have continuously been subject to contestation among Lue religious communities, and even if this "resistance" has remained unarticulated and almost totally hidden, its mere existence must account for a diversity of attitudes and visions regarding the contexts and goals of Buddhist practice among the Sipsong Panna Sangha and the community of lay practitioners.

In the following sections I will develop some theoretical questions related to these issues.

6.2 Reductive Dichotomies

In spite of this, one of the main conclusions of this study is that the "State" cannot be singled out as the only party responsible for the processes of institutionalization of local religion and the ongoing transformations of Buddhist practice. As mentioned occasionally throughout the previous chapters, usually a dichotomy is more or less explicitly established in academic approaches to Buddhism in Sipsong Panna - between the State or the local government on the one side, and the ethnic or religious groups on the other (even when, as in the case of Borchert,

attention is drawn towards the complexity of the situation or the heterogeneity of state institutions; see 2005(a)).

Two important conceptual problems are in my opinion linked to this "dichotomy paradigm" (see Ashiwa and Wank 2009; Goossaert 2005). The first is related to the importance this paradigm implicitly places on the importance of rational *agency* on the part of different actors within the field of religious practice. As State and local religious groups are presented in basic opposition (no matter if this is in terms of conflict or negotiation), action on the part of social groups and individuals is interpreted in terms of the rational choices and means employed in order to achieve specific 'agendas'. On the CCP state side, governmental policies are allegedly aimed at perpetuating the symbolic subordination of "minority" groups and the control of the exploitation of local resources on the part of the State and those private interests associated to it, as well as the economic subordination of "minority" groups. However, on the other hand, social action on the part of these groups is directed at counteracting State action and preserving traditional culture and identities, and with this the allegedly legitimate rights over access and control of local resources. In the work of Sara Davis; for instance, this consciousness on the part of the Tai regarding cultural matters and their solution - unable to find open expression, is located in a space outside of state control. The Lue divide their social action between a "front stage" - aimed at contenting officials and tourists, and thus helping the perpetuation of a "backstage" - in which traditional culture and local interests are preserved (Davis 1999, 2005). This perspective not only implies a clear understanding on the part of social actors of (favorable) ends regarding the preservation and promotion of local traditions, and of the necessary means to achieve such ends, but also a reductionist instrumental conception of culture, which neglects the complexity of motivations for social action at different levels.

The second problem is intimately related to this, as the "dichotomy paradigm" offers a vision of social groups as homogeneous entities – again, acting rationally towards specific goals. The State; for instance, is seen as a kind of Leviathan moving inflexibly towards self-perpetuation through the destruction of any opposition confronting it. This conception evades the question, first, of the fundamental heterogeneity of state apparatuses (already conceptualized by Gramscian and post-

Marxian theorists). In the case of the regulation or management of religion in the PRC and Sipsong Panna, different institutions and agencies with sometimes diverging interests are involved. The violent shifts in policy during the Maoist period are only the most extreme example of this; however, other cases of inconsistent policies can be found at the local level; for instance those concerning state linguistic policy in Sipsong Panna - the creation of the 'new Tai' script, the return to the old script (*To Tham*) between 1987 and 1996, and the return to the new one once more, all of which points to conflicting interests among different government agents and organizations. In short, the complexity, the different levels involved in the regulation of religious practices, as well as the multiplicity of factors determining state religious policy (and which include private economic interests), make it very difficult or impossible to talk about 'the State' as a homogeneous entity[1].

Secondly, the "dichotomy paradigm" also tends to emphasise the negative aspects of control and repression among State action[2], ignoring the positive (in the sense of creative or productive) effects of the State's regulation of religion. While it is true that the PRC state defines itself as "atheist", this does not mean that it is totally unconcerned with religion, nor that government action is limited to repression; the simple existence of five officially recognized religious traditions shows an effort on the part of the State to acknowledge these traditions while participating in their definition and regulation[3]. We can affirm, with Goossaert, that "[t]he religious policies of the modern Chinese [including the PRC] State, rather than anti-religious, have amounted to a radical reinvention of the religious field, redrawing boundaries between acceptable, legitimate religion and otherwise unacceptable superstition, and to attempt to refashion religion in a way compatible with the modernist Nationalist project (2005: 4)"[4]. According to some authors, there has actually been a reinforcing

[1] This does not mean that it is not possible for us to identify certain more or less dominant trends in the social actions of the State on any other group or institution. On this problem, see below.

[2] We may recall; for instance, Borchert´s comments in relation to Lue Buddhism, when he stated that "[t]he PRC has not tried to engage Buddhism on any kind of ideological level. Instead, the state's general response has been to abolish it, control its forms, or ignore it" (2008: 137).

[3] "under the influence of Western secular models of a nation-state's religious policies (separating state from church and negotiating with a limited number of recognized churches), the modern Chinese state attempted to reconfigure the religious field, thereby creating new dividing lines between politically acceptable and unacceptable forms of religion" (Goossaert 2005: 2)

[4] "…other scholars have evidenced that both the Nationalist and the Communist state have continued to be actually deeply involved in defining orthodoxy from heterodoxy, that is, intervening directly in the

of this trend in the post-Maoist era in the PRC – exemplified in the importance granted by the State to the "heresy" of the Falungong, or the active interventionism of the PRC Government in the regulation of Tibetan Buddhism, and in the election of re-incarnated Lamas in particular[5].

Obviously there are limits to this interventionism, more than anything when, as in the case of the Lue, the religious tradition under regulation is somehow alien to that of the majority in charge of that regulation[6]; however, this does not diminish the importance and influence of state intervention upon the religious field. Following Goossaert, we can define three major kinds of state action in the modern Chinese state – including the PRC:

> "first…, attempts to impose a clear-cut distinction between those 'religions' that are recognized and accommodated within the state project for social modernization and repression of 'superstition' and all forms of religious practices not confined to these 'religions' (including death rituals and healing practices); second, attempts to reform and reinvent those recognized religions –including endeavors to control them through politicized national associations and new economic foundations, to redefine doctrines and practices, fostering reformism (and quite often fundamentalism) in tune with state ideology be it scientism, nationalism, socialism, democracy, etc.)-; and, third, cutting from their original religious framework, nationalizing, and recycling some parts of the religious heritage such as martial arts, self-healing and self-strengthening techniques…for the state's own secular purposes …These threefold policies have had a deeply felt impact in the religious field" (2005: 5).

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religious realm…few [states] have assumed the posture of theological authority so clearly as the Chinese Nationalist and Communist states" (Goossaert 2005: 10).

[5] "The recent return to an explicit discourse of orthodoxy and heterodoxy by the People's Republic state, in the wake of the Falungong crackdown as well as its involvement in the politics of Tibeto-Mongol reincarnations are yet other proofs of this characteristic of all modern Chinese states that find it impossible to declare themselves not competent in any field, even that of gods and rituals. Of course, even deeply secular states cannot refrain from actually judging religious groups on a religious level, even when they apparently they base themselves on civil law, but the Chinese state has gone further than many in that direction" (Goossaert 2005: 11). On the "issue" of Tibetan Buddhism, see Schwartz (1994 and 1999).

[6] As Goossaert has stated in relation to the intervention of the modern state in the religious field, while "imperial-times orthodoxy had to fit with imperially-sponsored cosmology, morality and the classics, whereas modern 'religion' had to have its own doctrinal texts, preferably foreign or with international diffusion" (Goossaert 2005: pp. 4-5). In the case of Sipsong Panna, an important factor is the fact that the Buddhist scriptures belong to a different tradition than 'Han Buddhism', and the scriptures are written in a different language, hindering the potential direct intervention of the State and the nationalized Buddhist church into the doctrine and teachings of Lue Buddhism. In other contexts; for instance in Siam-Thailand and the different regional traditions, the close relations between languages, scripts and canonical traditions has facilitated the centralization of religious structures.

In fact, and "[w]hile the state has failed to sort 'religion' from 'superstition', it has managed to a certain extent to impose new categories in which to think and negotiate the public practice of religion in modern China" (ibid.: 6).

The previous observations, in spite of the limitations acknowledged for the involvement of the State, can apply to the regulation or management of religion in Sipsong Panna. Because of the continuing relevance of traditional religious practice in this region, different government agencies are involved in an active regulation of religious activities among Lue communities, a regulation which, as I have been trying to show throughout this dissertation, involves the support of certain institutional trends and traditions within the local Sangha, even if this support is given indirectly, through the support of particular groups or individuals associated with such trends and traditions.

In relation to this, one of the most relevant points of this dissertation is to draw attention to the necessity to acknowledge the heterogeneous nature not only of state institutions, but of the local community of monks as well. As I have shown, academic studies generally tend to present an image of the Sipsong Panna Sangha as a homogeneous entity, with a single interest: the preservation and promotion of Lue traditional culture (identified, as I said, with Theravada Buddhism). In fact, this view of the Sangha relies on an ethnometodological approach which reflects the self-representation of the Sangha elite as "guardians of Lue culture" (Borchert 2008). According to this interpretation, the main goals of the senior monks and of the fundamental educational project supported by them are related to the preservation of traditional culture, identified with the survival of Buddhist religion[7]. Things are obviously much more complex than this, and the critique of these conceptions must start with the critique of traditional representation not only of religious, but also of ethnic groups. In a recent work, Antonella Diana has criticised the dominant academic representation of the Tai Lue as a group defined by their links with related, Tai and/or Buddhist groups on the other side of the border, and in particular the "common

[7] This identification is also accepted and promoted by international organizations and agencies. For instance, the UNESCO-funded project 'Cultural Survival and Revival in the Buddhist Sangha', of which I was a local coordinator in Sipsong Panna, also acknowledged this intimate relationship of the monks at Wat Pajie with Lue traditional culture – backing claims on the part of the Buddhist elite to represent traditional culture and to head projects related to its preservation and/or promotion.

assumption that members of the transnational community express their collective identities when they stand at its boundaries by distinguishing themselves from the entities of the nation-states with which they come to interact" (Diana 2009: 197). While Diana´s own conclusions regarding the Lue identity I believe are objectionable, her work does call attention to the fundamental heterogeneity informing such "collective identities"; the Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna (not to speak of the 'Dai') cannot be considered as a unitary and homogeneous entity, and; therefore, to talk of a unitary "Lue identity" becomes useless if our aim is to define the different factors, influences, structures, attitudes or interests determining the social ethos of individuals and of the institutions they are part of.

These ideas also apply to an understanding of the local Sangha. As I have tried to show in this paper, in many respects, the political, economic and cultural interests of the local Buddhist elite overlap with those of (some elements of) the State and private interests linked to them. In terms of strictly institutional processes, the re-establishment of the XBA and of a new 'Buddhist elite' after the period of repression of religion is intimately linked to state intervention in the regulation of local religious practice. Even if the XBA and the monks cannot be strictly considered state agents, it is clear that the Association currently favors the establishment and promotion of a certain version of Buddhist practice according to official conceptions of modern religion dominant in the PRC, Thailand, and even in Western countries. At the economic level, the Buddhist elite and the XBA have been, in the last few years, involved in a series of commercial enterprises (the most conspicuous of which is the recent construction of Wat Luang Muang Lue) linked to the establishment and expansion of modern economic values of capitalist competition and consumerism. Finally, the educational project of the local Buddhist elite is a clear attempt at reforming and adapting 'informal' Buddhist education to contemporary understandings of 'modern' education prevalent in the PRC – and particularly of Buddhist education in Thailand. The legitimacy of the current religious elite in Sipsong Panna does not spring exclusively from what could be called "religious charisma", but also from their participation in the official, government-promoted processes of religious institutionalization according to officially-approved and promoted notions of religion.

These interests and attitudes regarding the institutionalization of local Buddhist practice are obviously not shared by all members of the Sangha. It can be argued that, to a great extent, the attitude and choices of the Sipsong Panna Buddhist elite regarding political, economic and educational institutionalization enter into conflict with local traditional religious values – but that these "alternative views" or traditions have been partly set aside during the process of recovery of Buddhist practice in the region. As mentioned, conflict and contestation within the Sangha is difficult to identify due to the respect paid to religious authority at the local level (which in the case of Sipsong Panna adds up to restrictions imposed on political freedom within the Chinese system). Nevertheless, the occasional disrobing of a monk, or the fall into retreat of another, point to this and to a silent conflict process of "depuration" of elements contrary to the direction the revival has taken. In any case, these individual attitudes and renunciations also point towards an essential heterogeneity of interests and visions within the Sipsong Panna Sangha.

The recognition of this heterogeneity among both groups, those traditionally identified as opposed to each other (the State and the local Sangha) has two theoretical consequences. First, in order to understand processes of religious institutionalization at the local level, it is necessary to look beyond the 'state', usually reduced in academic studies to an institution with a limited number of functions, interests and goals which logically make it the target of criticism concerning cultural transformations or economic exploitation. To identify the state as a "culprit" limits our capacity to understand the relation between social and state institutions, as well as the complexity of power relations at the local level. In the case of Buddhism in Sipsong Panna, we must pay attention to the relevance of other actors and factors in the process of institutionalization at the local level; for instance, the importance of local actors such as the "Buddhist elite" I have referred to here, or of conceptions imported from Thailand regarding the role of religion and of religious specialists in society.

Second, even if I have referred to specific government policies and actors´ interests, it is important not to relate simplistically the current transformations in Lue Buddhism to specific interests on the part of any individual actors involved in the regulation or management of religious practice, for, quoting again James Ferguson, "economic functions and 'objective interests' are always located within other,

encompassing structures, that may be invisible even to those who inhabit them" (Ferguson 1990: 17). Although I have criticized the self-representation of the monks as the 'guardians' of Lue traditional culture, this does not mean that this discourse is aimed at hiding from view the real intentions on the part of the monks (the so-called "agenda") – in short, that such representation is not true. The monks may well have the best intentions regarding their actions and their understanding of the situation regarding local Buddhist practice; I only want to emphasise that we must be aware of "how easily structures can take on lives of their own that soon enough overcome intentional practices" (Ferguson 1990: 17), and; therefore' that even processes which are originally intended to promote the development of local Buddhism might very well actually become a hindrance to it. In this sense, the case of the (initially) willing participation of the local Sangha elite in the project to build Wat Luang Muang Lue may be a good example of this (see Chapter 4).

6.3 The Limits of Revival

How do we interpret these trends; these processes within the Sangha, within the context of the current political and socio-economic transformations in Sipsong Panna? Beyond the officially-emphasised visibility of religious activities in the region today, it is necessary to question the validity of this discourse, as well as the nature of the "ethnic revival". Although it is undeniable that the end of overt repression on the part of state agents has allowed for the renewed and open expression of cultural traditions and for many practices to be revived. It can be argued that the increasing inclusion of "minority" cultures in PRC national-level structures has during the last 30 years accelerated the loss of autochthonous traditions and the subsequent assimilation of such cultures into mainstream (Chinese) culture. Ultimately, it can be argued that it is precisely the recognition of "minority" traditions on the part of the State, and the subsequent intervention such as the active participation of the Government in the regulation of such traditions, that accounts for this phenomenon – and, conversely, that the previous outright repression, the confrontational model between the State and non-Han groups dominant during most of the Maoist period, helped the preservation of minority cultures, activating a social resistance aimed at the self-preservation of local identities.

In relation to my topic, it seems to me that what we have seen so far puts into question the idea of the Buddhist "revival" in Sipsong Panna in two senses. On the one hand, the "limits" mentioned in the title of this dissertation refer to the broad institutional processes, discursive or non-discursive, explicit or implicit, that are at present hindering the expansion and development of Buddhist practice in Sipsong Panna. As mentioned, these processes cannot be attributed to any particular agency within the field of religious practice, but still, certain trends can be identified within the process of institutionalization – such as the interaction of Buddhism with the market economy, and the increasing regulation of Buddhist education or of trans-border exchanges. In fact, the space which has been re-created by the State and other institutions allegedly for the free development of religious practice, is heavily regulated by such institutions, all aimed at certain political and economic goals.

As we have also seen, the local Sangha elite are important actors in this regulation. As a bridge between the State and local communities, the current heads of the Sangha have played a fundamental role in the spread at the local level of contemporary conceptions of institutional, economic and educational development. To some extent, their role and their relation with the State can be interpreted as "co-option" – the State rewards certain individuals and groups in order to assure their connivance in the implementation of local processes of institutionalization (see Turton 1984 on the idea of "selective rewarding"), or simply in favor of particular institutions or private interests related to them. To the extent that the Buddhist elite and, to a certain degree, all of the Sangha, benefit from this situation, can also be seen as a case of "symbiosis" (Taylor 2007).

On the other hand, the "limits of revival" refer to the limitations inherent in the official representations of the recovery. According to propaganda, the CCP guarantees ethnic groups equality as citizens of the PRC, and provides them with a space for the preservation and promotion of their "minority" traditions. However, as we have seen, this space is limited not only by legislation (which at least in the case of Buddhism in Sipsong Panna, is still a very relevant element), but also by other factors belonging to the economic and social spheres, and which ultimately account for the decreasing relevance of "minority" traditions in the country – and in Sipsong Panna in particular. This official representation is contested at the local level – even by those monks

belonging to the local religious elite. Even if this contestation is unarticulated and hard to identify, it points to the limits of the official project of institutionalization carried out by the State, by economic agents and by actors within the Sangha itself.