The religious beliefs of the Tai Daikong are based on the Buddhist religion of the Theravada sect which spread to the Tai Daikong people via Burma and the Tai people in Shan State. Even though the Buddhist religion originated in India 2,500 years ago, traces of the Buddhist religion began to emerge for the first time in Burma during the fifth century AD.\(^1\) Legends of the Tai people in Shan State and the Tai Daikong spoke of the Tai ancestors as professing the Buddhist faith during the sixth century AD.\(^2\)

Buddhist beliefs and rituals played an important role in the lifestyle and viewpoints of the Tai to the extent that some scholars are of the opinion that being Tai and belief in Buddhism are identical.\(^3\) Buddhism is deeply embedded in culture, art, music, architecture, articles of faith and mentality of the Tai Daikong and has also played an important role in the social and cultural life of the Tai up to the present. The Buddhist religion was severely persecuted during the period of the Cultural Revolution, with temples being torched, stupas demolished, monks and novices caught and defrocked, the Tripitaka and Buddhist religious scripts burnt, yet from the early 1980s onwards the temples and various religious edifices in Daikong area—including the temple in Lak Chang village—were gradually repaired and restored, or newly built.

\(^1\) Coedes (1968:17–18).
\(^2\) Nanthasingha (1997).
\(^3\) Leach (1954).
From a cultural perspective, it would not be an overstatement if we were to say that almost all aspects of the Tai culture have derived from Buddhist beliefs. Important rituals including merit-making or charitable ceremonies and beliefs connected with production and daily living are almost entirely entwined with Buddhism. The Jataka stories of the various incarnations of the Buddha before enlightenment became important themes of legends and folktales of the Tai Daikong. Architectural styles such as temples and pagodas, including ethnic symbols such as the peacock and the long drum, are a blend of Burmese and Tai religious traditions. Tai Daikong dramatics such as the famous bird dance are also influenced by traditional celebrations welcoming the return of the Buddha to earth according to the Tai belief. Calculation methods relating to the world and universe, relationships between human beings and surrounding conditions, relationships between human beings themselves and between human beings and other supernatural things are mostly based on Buddhist beliefs.

Buddhism also plays an important role in the social life of the village. The importance of Buddhism in the lives of the Tai can be measured from the time, resources and energy contributed wholeheartedly to the Buddhist religion and various merit-making or charitable ceremonies. Buddhist teachings also dominate the conduct of the Tai from birth through adult life. In old age a Tai favours visiting temples, observing the precepts, practising meditation and using the greater part of leisure hours in religious pursuits.

Buddhism is of greatest significance to the Tai identity in village society. The predominant element of being a Tai is to be a Buddhist. The Tai separate themselves from surrounding ethnic groups such as the Han, Jingpo and Lisu for one important reason—these people are not Buddhists. For this reason being a Tai means and includes unconditionally being a Buddhist. Persons who are not of the Buddhist faith are viewed as outsiders and are excluded from the Tai village community.

Buddhism also plays an important role in defining social norms and proper behaviour. Goodness and being a good person are judged by the standard of observing Buddhist religious precepts, so persons occupied in slaughtering animals or distilling liquor for sale afford a rather inferior status in Tai society. In the same way, persons who regularly breach the five precepts, who are in the habit of taking lives, drinking or committing adultery, are treated as social outcasts by
villagers. The influence played by Buddhism in the daily lives of the Tai people can also be seen in the inclination of villagers to chat about merit-making as well as the teaching of Buddhism on various occasions. Old people are fond of entertaining children by reciting Jataka tales and stories relating to the Buddha.

Although the Tai people stress the importance of Buddhism in their daily lives, in fact the religion and religious beliefs of the Tai Daikong, like other societies, are interwoven with various forms of beliefs, in particular belief in spirits, black magic, incantations and witchcraft. These beliefs are deeply rooted in and are inseparable from the religious faith of the Tai. For this reason, some scholars are of the opinion that Tai people believe in Buddhism but they are unable to weed out the spurious elements that adulterate their Buddhist faith.\(^4\) Although the Tai people are well aware that Buddhism and animism are theoretically separated, in practice these beliefs are closely intertwined in ritual and daily life. For example, Lah, Sam Fong's youngest daughter-in-law, married and lived with her husband for quite a number of years but had no children. She was urged by the elders to visit the temple frequently to make merit and give alms generously so that the couple's meritorious acts would bless them with a child. At the same time, Lah's grandmother taught her to make small clay dolls, dressed up in pretty clothing, to be hung up near a Buddha statue in the temple with the belief that the spirit that will lead the child's soul to be born, will acknowledge her heart's desire and help her to soon have a child.

**Buddhism and Animism in Daily Life**

Buddhist beliefs and practices in the daily life of the Tai people were heavily influenced by Burmese traditions. King Anoratha of Burma was converted to Buddhism in 1058 AD and played an important role in spreading Buddhism rapidly throughout the various parts of Burma. When Bahyinnong completely subdued the various townships of the Tai people in Shan State in 1562 AD, the Tai people in Shan State began to convert to the Buddhist religion of the Theravaddha sect. The influence of Theravaddha Buddhism spread from Shan State to the Daikong area later on.\(^5\)

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4 Cochrane (1915).
Buddhist beliefs derive from Dharma tenets in the Tripitaka which the Tai Daikong received from Burma. The Tripitaka, which was in the Pali language, restricted studies in the Dharma principles only to a small number of monks who were able to read Pali. During the Cultural Revolution some of these monks were caught and disrobed whilst some escaped to Burma, resulting in disruption of the Buddhist religion for a lengthy period up to the present time. The beliefs—including understanding of the Buddhist Dharma principles—of the Tai Daikong, therefore derive mostly from reading annals and folklore written in the Tai language adapted from the Jataka stories with insertions of Dharma principles of the Buddhist religion, rather than from direct studies of the Tripitaka script.

The Tai Daikong believe in reincarnation of all forms of life according to the law of karma determined by one’s past deeds. The condition and fate of each person are the result of good and bad deeds accumulated during previous existences. The Tai therefore favour making merit, giving alms, observing religious precepts and doing work for the temples in order to accumulate merit which one would depend upon in the next life. Accumulation of merit will ensure that a person will be born in a better position until accumulation of virtue is great enough for them to reach Nirvana.

It may be this reason that makes Tai forsake worldly matters and turn towards religion from the time they reach middle age. It is the normal custom that when a woman passes 40 years of age, she will change her clothes from pretty bright colours to a skirt and blouse of dark colour and begin to attend religious rituals more often. A Tai will give alms to the temple, present Buddhist statues, build pagodas and donate money and labour for repairing temples. These works are considered acts of high merit because they are for the preservation of the Buddhist religion. Conversely, breaches of the precepts, especially the slaughter of animals and taking life, are considered as hideous deeds or very sinful acts which a Tai tries painstakingly to avoid.

Almost every village in Daikong has its temple. Some temples which were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution have begun to be repaired or built anew. However, a scarcity of monks is being experienced in Daikong as the values of entering monkhood begin to change. Formerly, parents sent their children, particularly their sons, to learn the letters in the temple. Monks are the teachers of Tai and Pali languages as well as moral ethics to the children of the village. Every

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male must take the vows of monkhood for at least one Lent before marrying and having a family in order to undergo spiritual training to be ready for life’s responsibilities. However, in the last three decades, schools and teachers have begun to take over the roles of the temples and monks. Religious opposition and continuous Communist ideological propaganda, as well as smaller families due to the rigorous birth-control policy augmented by labour requirements for year-round agricultural production, may have been the cause for the decline in ordinations into monkhood.

Nevertheless, the faith in Buddhism remains incredibly strong. Elderly people like to take their children to the temples to hear sermons or simply to chat with monks, sweep the temple grounds, clean up dust and arrange flowers for worship. Villagers will stop working on Buddhist holidays to go to the temple to listen to religious sermons. Normally, Tai monks will not go out to receive morning food offerings like the monks in Thailand do. Each household will take turns to present food to the monks regularly on a daily basis. Temples also serve as the centre for merit-making rituals and religious festivities for the entire village.

From the Tai’s point of view, beliefs other than teachings of the Buddhist religion are collectively said to be matters concerning animism and magic which include occultism, incantations, tattoos, geomancy, shamanism and healing. Animistic beliefs and practices are closely intertwined with Buddhist religious beliefs so that they contain no contradictions. A Tai believes that every living being and material thing possesses a soul which is a more refined essence of matter. These souls have the power to control the growth and development of all such things. They may become endowed with individual conscious life and, when freed from their grosser elements, they become beings that preside over the various departments of nature. Some wander at will through space and can transform themselves with great versatility; others, more pure and ethereal, rise to the regions of the stars. Hence, stars and planets are not worldly but divinities, and their motions control the destinies of man. In the ancient Tai myth of Genesis it is said that all spirits as well as the earth and the universe were created by Indra who miraculously caused some primeval eggs, which already existed without his action, to be fertilised and hatched into gods of various kinds: the sun-gods, the moon-gods, the gods of all natural forces—of light and air, of wind and sky, of forests and

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streams, of spirits, of men and even of dreams. When human beings die, their souls will be born again without end. Bad people when they die have to repay for all their misdeeds before they can be born again.

The Tai believe that the soul or spirit is of the same basic nature as things that live—they have goodness and badness, strength and weakness, are benevolent or malevolent. For this reason man does not have to be under the control of the spirits all the time but he can bargain with the spirits by various means, such as propitiations, enticements or threats (by incantations) in the same manner as one person does with another. Evil spirits are to be feared because they interfere with a person's life, cause illness and disease, accidents or bad luck on various occasions. These are the evil spirits that villagers come into contact with during their daily lives. The customary practice of the Tai is to propitiate spirits and this is not confined only to benevolent spirits. Often the villagers propitiate evil spirits by way of offering bribes or asking them to hold the peace and not hurt their households. Appeasing the spirits like this is usually done at times of trouble or sickness, or to prevent various calamities during house-building or when long journeys are to be made.

The Tai Daikong separate the benevolent spirits absolutely from the malevolent ones. The good spirits do good to people by giving protection, guarding people, households, trees and crops in the fields as well as the well-being of the villagers, whilst the evil spirits are purposely mischievous and malevolent. Normally, evil spirits are more powerful than good spirits but the powers of both types of spirits also lie within the laws of karma. Good spirits cannot save a person when his time is up; likewise bad spirits cannot do harm to a virtuous person. For this very reason, to propitiate, bribe or entice evil spirits to stop attacking a sick person may not be successful—the patient may die, the bad luck or disasters may persist—due to the result of past life deeds that give the evil spirits the chance to exercise greater ruthless power and punish this unfortunate person. Therefore the powers of spirits are restricted by the merits of virtue or by karma as destined by deeds that one has accumulated in past life. Thus Buddhist and animistic beliefs are reconciled.

The vital reasons for a spirit to harm a person may be because that person has offended the spirit or may be due to certain acts performed at an inappropriate

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7 Cochrane (1915:116–118).
8 Milne (1910:122).
time, or it may be that the influence of their horoscope has destined that they shall encounter misfortune during that time frame, or it may be due to the malevolence of that spirit itself.9

From ancient times every Tai household usually has had a spirit house installed in the compound to be the dwelling place of the guardian spirit whose duty is to give protection to members of that household. At present the erection of guardian spirit houses has been neglected. In Lak Chang, there does not appear to be even a single spirit house remaining in any of the households. There is only one “chao baan” spirit tower serving as protector of the village. According to the belief of the Tai Daikong, the chao baan represents the soul of the first ancestor to die since the building of the village. The chao baan spirit of Lak Chang is that of a woman named Yod Saeng. According to customary practice at times of various rituals—such as marriages, funerals, when sickness occurs, before planting or harvesting rice—the villagers will bring vegetarian food and fruit as offerings to the chao baan to ask for protection. The chao baan spirit will be able to protect the villagers only in the household area. When leaving the village, Tais in the past favour propitiating spirits that guard rivers and streams, mountains and forests for help according to particular needs.

If a member of the household becomes ill and cannot be cured or if an illness recurs time and again, the villager will go to a medium to ask for help in finding the cause of illness. The medium in Lak Chang, an old man nearly 80 years of age, will interrogate the sick person regarding his actions to find out what he had done to incur the wrath of the demon who thus punished him. What causes the spirit to attack may be some action on the part of the person which has offended the spirit, or some action that has been performed at an inauspicious moment, which exposes the person to the spirit’s attack; or it may be because of the inherent malevolent nature of the spirit itself. Thereafter, the medium will disclose the method of dispelling the bad luck such as to make offerings to beg forgiveness and to stop inflicting punishment. The villager may erect a small shrine in the compound, near a bridge or under a tree, to propitiate the demon so that it will stop hurting the member of his household.10

When Saeng, the youngest son of Sam Fong, became sick for many days for no reason, Sam Fong visited the medium and asked him to find out which evil spirit

10 Thorp (1945:136); Pattaya (1959:293).
had maliciously made his son sick. Saeng had nightmares due to the fever and was not conscious, so the medium was unable to question him regarding his actions. The medium therefore went into a trance to ask the demon and found that Saeng was being molested by the *phee kho* (water spirit) because he had failed to make offerings to the water spirit before planting rice, thus making the *phee kho* angry. Sam Fong therefore performed the rites of begging the *phee kho* for forgiveness by erecting a small shrine near the bridge crossing the main sluice at the end of the village, according to the advice of the medium, bringing pork, rice, white wine and flowers. Sam Fong said that on the next morning Saeng’s feverish condition disappeared miraculously.

Newborn infants, women just after childbirth and sick persons in convalescence are especially susceptible to being maligned by evil spirits and have to be protected by charms and talismans such as large needles attached on the headband or scarf of newborn infants or the wrist-tying of strings duly blessed by a person with mystical incantations.

Present-day Tai Daikong people still maintain beliefs regarding geomancy, particularly matters concerning building of houses and constructing burial grounds of ancestors. When constructing a house or burial place, a knowledgeable astrologer must be invited to choose its direction and location to ensure that such constructions are auspicious and conducive to the well-being of its occupants in the future.\(^1\) A Tai believes in matters of auspicious moments, when fixing the appropriate time for building homes, for burials and other important ceremonies. For this reason, almost every Tai village has an astrologer to determine the time to ensure auspices. Tais also have many taboos regarding time, such as cutting fingernails or toenails on days coinciding with the day of one’s birth; for instance, a person born on Monday may cut nails on any day except Monday. Tais are also in favour of charms and talismans to guard against evil spirits or to attract feelings of kindliness and friendliness, including the tattooing of mystic writings with the belief that they will be invulnerable and no dangers whatever can approach them.

The belief system of the Tai Daikong, whether they are Buddhist religious beliefs or beliefs in spirits, play an important part in the daily conduct and life of the Tai, including social relationships at the village level. Participation in rituals, merit-making and religious festivities play important roles in augmenting good

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\(^1\) Milne (1910:183); Cochrane (1915:137).
relationships between families, friends and neighbours. Invitations to ceremonies are occasions for making-merit and reaffirming the bonds of social relations.

The belief in merit plays an important part in establishing social order as well as status and prestige of various households in the village. Arranging ceremonies for making-merit or *poi* (festivals), including marriage and funeral ceremonies on a grand scale, bestows honour, prestige and social status upon the host. In social terms, to make merit means showing that a person possesses virtue by holding parties, giving alms, building pagodas and temples. All these things are tangible aspects of virtuous august grandeur heaping higher social prestige and status upon the donor and respect for his greater merit.

**Beliefs and Rituals in Tai Society**

Rituals are social displays that support and confirm religious beliefs. Rituals help man to have confidence in life, to adjust himself to changes according to age and to face various crises that may take place. In anthropology, we can distinguish three types of ritual action: expressive, instrumental and commemorative. Expressive ritual serves as a vehicle for manifesting emotions, attitudes and sentiments felt toward the religious sacra. It plays a part in expressing collective disposition, reaffirming piety in religious principles and beliefs or a showing of respect for things sacred. In Daikong, for instance, the Buddha, the Dhamma (Buddhist teaching and precepts) and the Sangha (Buddhist monks) are objects of intense reverence, and the performance of many Buddhist rituals is a means of expressing veneration, homage and devotion to these representations. Instrumental ritual, performed to achieve some purposive end, is rather more complicated. The end may be some extrinsic goal—physical (health, beauty), social (wealth, power, fame) or natural (plentiful harvest, rainfall)—which could be attained either in the present life or not until after death. Sometimes, however, the end to be achieved by instrumental ritual is an intrinsic goal, that is, a spiritual, emotional or meditative change in the self. Commemorative ritual is performed in remembrance or celebration of some event, historical or mythological, sacred in the annals of the religious tradition. In Daikong, for

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instance, many rituals serve to commemorate an event in the life of the Buddha, such as commencement of Lent, Makhabuja or Visakhabuja. The majority of Buddhist religious rituals are in this category.

In addition, we can also divide rituals that are performed periodically into three types. The first type are calendrical rituals. They are cyclical, performed on predictable occasions, at fixed periods and periodic intervals. The second type are life-cycle rituals. They are related to birth, initiation, marriage and death. The third type is the crisis ritual. They are performed to extricate the actor from a calamity which she is presently suffering or to save her from one which is or may be impending.

**Annual Rituals and Celebrations in Daikong**

Religious rituals of the Tai Dikong are mostly connected with timetables based on the lunar calendar. Such rituals are chronologically arranged, that is, they are held regularly at fixed time periods.

*New Year festivals:* Tais commence the cycle of religious rituals with celebrations of the New Year in the month of April which coincides with the Thai Songkran festivals. Children and persons of lower status will pour water on the hands of elders and playfully splash one another with water, similar to Thai customs and pleasantries. The New Year festivals are times for enjoyment, flirtations between young men and maidens, feasts and gambling within the village. The old and elderly will celebrate the New Year by visiting temples to make merit or they may observe the precepts throughout the festival, so as to commence the year with an accumulation of merit.

At present, the Tai New Year festive season has caught on with the Han Chinese and other ethnic groups. In Muang Khon the New Year celebrations of the Tai are held on a grand scale, with traditional Tai dancing and playful water splashing on roadways throughout the three-day period.

*Visakhabuja day:* The Tai observe the day of the full moon in the month of May as the occasion to celebrate the Buddha’s birthday, enlightenment and attainment of complete bliss. The Tai treat Visakhabuja as the time for making-merit, cleaning and repairing the village temple, with the custom of watering the Bo tree,
which is the emblem of the Buddhist religion. Watering the Bo tree signifies the dedication of oneself to the support and continuity of the religion. At present, Visakhabuja is not so vigorously celebrated as in former days, as this period is the time that the majority of villagers are fully engaged in agricultural production with overwhelming chores that leave very little time for arranging celebrations during this period.

*Kao phansa:* The three-month period from the full moon of July through to the full moon of October may be called the Buddhist lent. Monks or chao chong may not travel for that period and it is also a solemn season for laymen as well. Marriages cannot be performed, plays and other forms of public entertainment are forbidden and devout Buddhists attempt to observe the wan pra (Buddhist sabbath) as frequently as possible during this time. Villagers will visit the temple to make merit and listen to sermons every holiday throughout the period. On ok phansa day (end of lent), the Tai Daikong in almost every village will arrange merit-making activities on a grand scale called poi chong or “celebrations for the lord”. According to ancient concept or belief, the Tai Daikong pass on the story that the Lord Buddha went up to the second level of heaven to preach a sermon for his mother, and on his return to earth the Tai people therefore built a palace made of bamboo, decorated with cloth of beautiful colours and arranged group dancing to greet his return. During the ok phansa or chong celebrations, the villagers will beautifully decorate temples in the village and hold parties by inviting friends from other villages to join in the merriment.

*Tod kathin* (presentation of robes): From the end of October onwards, the Tais favour the custom of tod kathin in the belief that persons who perform the kathin ceremony—presenting the robes and various useful articles to monks—will live happily and become wealthy. Following the harvest season, from October until March, Tai people prefer to arrange poi celebrations or merit-making celebrations of the village including marriages and other auspicious celebrations.

*Poi festivals:* Prior to the Cultural Revolution, the poi were the most grand and jubilant of all celebrations in the Tai farming villages. After the harvest season has ended, news of poi celebrations spreads all over the village and its vicinity. Some households in the village are prepared to host the poi celebrations. One household may dedicate itself to donating a Buddha statue to the temple, another household

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may make dedication by donating a cabinet for holding the Tripitaka, whilst yet another may host the *kathin* offerings by specifying a sum of money. The host of a *poi* celebration may consist of only one household or may include other households of close relatives or friends.

After the various households have dedicated themselves to act as hosts of the *poi* festivals and have fixed the days with the temple in order, the news of the festivals spreads throughout the village as well as around the surrounding villages. News regarding a *poi* festival affects the village people in at least two ways. In one way, the householders who dedicated themselves to host the *poi* festivals begin to hear that a lot of people are excited and happy over the *poi* festival on this occasion. The host begins to worry that the number of guests attending the festival may exceed the ability of the host to offer them a good reception. The large number of guests attending the festival means that the expenses will increase correspondingly. On the other hand, households that hold a position of affluence but did not intend to host this *poi* festival at first, now begin to catch on with excitement to the news and may think back on the honours and high regard they had received from the community when hosting the festival last time to the point of wanting to join in as host of this festival. A father and his children, brothers and sisters may make a collection to act as host of festivals. Some households borrow money from close relatives and friends to pay the expense of hosting such festivals.

It would be rather difficult for outsiders, especially for persons who had never attended a Tai *poi* festival, to understand the feelings of the villagers towards having

![Figure 5.1 A poi festival in Muang Khon](image)
a *poi* festival. The importance of *poi* festivals in the life of a Tai can be put at least at two levels. At the first level, they are accumulations of merits as the Tai believe that the host of a *poi* festival, including his descendants, will go to heaven after death. Arranging for a *poi* festival therefore is like buying insurance or building up merit for enjoying happiness in the next world. At the social level, a *poi* festival helps the host to become a person of esteem, gaining honour and respect from members of the village, enjoying an enhanced social standing and status. A household that often arranges *poi* festivals increases its social standing and status. In real life, households that are affluent enough to arrange *poi* festivals, may host *poi* festivals again and again without becoming weary of it. When a *poi* festival is being held, every activity in the village will come close to a complete standstill for weeks on end. Everyone in the village will await in anticipation the *poi* festival. In a large village, which may have several hundred households, it would be difficult for a host consisting of only one single household to be able to entertain all the villagers, not to mention guests from other villages who come to join the party without invitation. Should the host drive away guests who are not of his village or is unable to accord them a befitting welcome, he would lose face. For this reason, a host would be happy if other households offer to become joint hosts.

The various households that decide to act as joint hosts will send representatives to negotiate the agreement and discuss various matters, such as fixing the date of the festival, the journey to obtain the Buddha images, priestly offerings and other things for presentation to the temple at the *poi* festival. The households acting as host will send household members to travel together with a group of young villagers for the purpose of buying Buddha images and other things from Nam Kham village on the Burma side of the border, setting the time for the group of young men to travel back a little before the date of the festival. Joint purchases in large quantities enable the host to save a considerable amount of money for the cost of the goods and expenses for the trips. The *chao chong* or monk of the village by implication becomes the adviser to the sponsor committee, giver of opinion relating to the size and shape of the Buddha image that the temple wants, as well as suggestions regarding prices and types of other paraphernalia.

When the day fixed for the trip comes, every household of the sponsors will send its representatives to travel with the group of young villagers to Nam Kham. The sponsors have to engage scores of village young men to help in carrying back the
Buddha image and other valuable items. The trip from Muang Khon to Nam Kham takes four days each way. Trips of this nature are heavy work because, apart from having to shoulder the Buddha image as well as other goods, the journey has to be undertaken with care to prevent damage occurring and the travelling party has to camp in the forests in a cold, damp atmosphere risking the dangers of jungle fever and ambush by khang marauders. The meagre fees earned by the young men from the sponsors are poor compensation for the hardship and dangers of many days’ travel and camping. However, members of the youth group still take on such journeys regularly to bring back Buddha images because, according to the Tai belief, those taking part in such journeys obtain grace and merit second only to the sponsors of the poi festivals.

On the way back, one day before reaching the village, the group of youths will send a representative to inform the households of the sponsors to make preparations. The sponsors begin to feel uneasy with countless worries as to whether or not the Buddha image brought back will be beautiful or whether the various things have suffered damage during the journey. When the group of young men and the party reach the house, they will receive a warm welcome. The sponsors’ households will go and wait at the entrance of the village to receive them with gong and long drum beatings leading the procession to welcome the Buddha image to the sponsors’ house. The weariness from many days’ long journey disappears almost entirely. The sponsors of the poi festival will offer the utmost welcome to the group of young men and the party. All will sit down to enjoy the food and drinks together from the afternoon until late at night. Various exciting incidents that took place during the journey will be narrated with merriment. Householders of the sponsors and the group of young men that travelled to bring the Buddha image often cultivate friendships that in future develop into firm and steadfast ties.

When the Buddha image and other merit-making items arrive at the village, the householders of each sponsor will take them to the temple. The sponsors will invite close friends and relatives to help in the task by solemnly parading the Buddha image from the village to the temple. The monks will chant prayers of felicitations and blessings on the sponsors’ households. After every one of the sponsors’ households has presented all the items to the temple, then the important day that all await is due. The entire village begins to stir with lively
activity. All of the sponsors’ household including various relatives will be busy arranging for the party, preparing food and wine to entertain guests joining the *poi* celebrations. The old people and women engage in sewing handsome robes for the Buddha image, sewing curtains, tablecloths for the offering tables, temple floor-covering material, suits of yellow robes for the monks; hanging banners or flags for decorating the temple; and preparing other paraphernalia to be presented to the temple and monks.

The sponsors’ household members have been preparing tables for entertaining relatives and friends for weeks in advance. Friends and relatives from other villages in numbers make social calls and mill about as spectators. The sponsors from all households will start sending representatives to welcome the guests, friends and relatives who have joined the *poi* festival to congratulate the sponsors on the appointed day. Visitors joining the festival usually bring rice, woven cloth and meat with them to present to the sponsors as gifts for the occasion.

On the *poi* festival day, all the households of the sponsors transform themselves into a village meeting point and entertainment centre. Within the household compound, scores of tables are set with food to entertain visiting guests for three consecutive days and nights. Guests drink and dine in continuous feasting, the sponsors’ households having to recruit friends and relatives to prepare victuals, set tables, serve food, wash dishes and plates as well as other chores lasting throughout the festival time.

At dawn of the first festival day, a group of young men will parade through the village, beating gongs, long drums and playing music creating a euphoric atmosphere for the whole village. Guests from within and outside the village, dressed in their newest and finest suits, will proceed to the donors’ houses with smiling faces to offer congratulations to the donors for their benevolent acts and merits acquired. The unhurried and gentle manners of the guests appear to completely reverse those of the donors’ household members who scurry about to prepare food and beverages. The guests, relatives and friends are invited to take seats and partake of the first meal of the *poi* festival. After the morning meal, the host will perform the rite of “receiving the lord”, that is, receiving the Buddha image back to the house.

The host and all the villagers will assemble outside the house and arrange a procession to the temple to take the Buddha image back home temporarily to
allow the guests a chance of joyful admiration. Household members of each donor will gather all the items intended for presentation to the temple and the monks—such as Buddha statues, the cabinet for holding the Tripitaka, the robes, blankets, sandals, thermos flasks, lamps, bedding, tea pots, dishes and curtains—and display them on the verandah for all the visitors to view.

Throughout the three days of the festival, visiting guests who drop in to drink and dine will praise the beauty of the Buddha image, the magnanimity of the sponsor and give blessings that he may become richer and richer.

The next day, the second day of the poi festival, is regarded as the most important day. The sponsor will install a set of tables for worshipping the Buddha image so that guests who come to visit can worship the Buddha. The elder of the household will sit on a chair beside the Buddha image. When guests participating in the festival walk up to worship the Buddha image and pay respects to the elder of the household, this gesture signifies that the elder or head of the host’s household is the one who is given the highest honour and respect by every guest and visitor who attends the festival.

In former times, the sponsor of the poi festival would invite the chaopha to attend on the second day. The chaopha might travel there himself or send a representative to congratulate the sponsor for this merit-making festival. The holding of a poi festival therefore was the occasion when the villagers might talk with or receive the chaopha or his representative. On the other hand, in attending a poi festival, the chaopha was able to become aware of the welfare and problems of the people under his control.

On the afternoon of the third day, the sponsor will arrange a huge procession led by a large group of musicians with drums, gongs and pipes playing lively tunes. Following the musicians will be a troupe of maidens each wearing beautiful dresses and adornments, followed by a group of youths shouldering a bamboo palanquin bearing the Buddha image and various presents to the village temple. The villagers will pack both sides of the road to have a view and will follow the procession to the temple.

The sponsors and family members wearing brand-new dresses lead the Buddha image with the procession. In sponsoring a poi festival, the sponsor and his household must toil hard for many years, saving bit by bit to accumulate money
for the cost of a festival. The duration of the *poi* festival is a special occasion when the sponsor becomes the admiration of everyone on all sides for three whole days. When the procession reaches the temple and has completed three circular rounds, the sponsor leads the Buddha image and various offerings into the temple for official presentation to the monk. Thereafter all the villagers will join in chanting prayers. The monk will give a sermon with felicitations and blessings to the sponsors and families to enjoy lasting peaceful happiness.

On completion of the rituals, each donor family will bring a bamboo pole about 10 metres high and erect it in front of the temple, one pole for each family, with a banner or flag attached to the top of the pole whilst the bottom part is decorated with banana plants. Trays of food and fruit will be tied to the bottom part of the pole to propitiate spirits. *Toongs* (flag) of the Tai Daikong are similar in shape to the *toongs* of the northern Thai people. The majority are made of woven cloth some 15–20 centimetres wide and about two to three metres long embroidered with beautiful designs. The designs favoured by the Tai people for *poi* festivals are mostly of pagodas or seven-tiered umbrellas, embroidered with brightly coloured thread on white cloth. The Tai people tell the story that, during the time of the Buddha, a widow heard the news that the Lord Buddha would be passing through her village. Her neighbours all prepared trays of good food together with the finest robes to be presented to the Lord Buddha. This old widow had only a little money and she took all of it to buy thread and was able to obtain merely two rolls which she could weave into only one long strip of cloth. When the Buddha arrived, this old woman presented this piece of cloth to him. The people who attended the Buddha all laughed in contempt of her gift of so little worth. The Buddha accepted the cloth from the widow and gave a lesson saying: “This strip of cloth was a gift of countless value because it was a gift that came with utmost piety.” From that time on the *toong* became the symbol of benefaction and merit-making with utmost piety in commemoration of that widow.

When the *poi* festival comes to an end, the sponsor is likely to hang a *toong* some place in front of the temple as a symbol. The Tai people believe that when the sponsor of a *poi* dies, he will go to heaven; his ancestors and his descendants will also obtain grace from the merit-making and will likewise go to heaven. The *toongs* of *poi* festivals are therefore the symbols of reservations made in heaven for the donor and members of his family.
Poi festivals of the Tai Daikong, apart from being an important occasion for celebration after finishing hard work in the fields and farms, renew the good relations between kin groups and members of the whole village who are usually invited to join the festival, as well as being an occasion for making-merit and creating esteem for the donor. Poi festivals also play an important part in providing training to a new generation of youths to start learning about their duties and responsibilities to society. The youth group plays the important role of acting as representatives of the donor in taking the journey to bring back Buddha statues as well as in purchasing the various articles for presentation to the temple, not to mention being the basic labour force for making preparations and repairs to the temple prior to holding the poi festival. The group of maidens has the basic role of assisting elders in tidying up and beautifying the temple as well as assisting the donor with all sorts of handicraft work.

Presently, poi festivals, in which various households in the village join as donors in the above manner, have declined because the increase in agricultural production has saddled every person in the village with greater duties on the farms and trading their products than in former times. Nowadays, the Tai Daikong favour arranging poi festivals or merit-making events at temples as activities for which everyone in the village acts as joint donors, with the group of elders of the village acting as the committee for such events. Poi chong therefore is of a nature similar to poi festivals of old in almost every respect. The difference lies only in the fact that the funding for holding the festival comes from donations given by every household and the banquets.

Figure 5.2 The local temple is beautifully decorated during the poi festival
are held on the temple ground. A *poi chong* makes it an important occasion for joint participation by the various households in the village to effect repairs, cleaning and making the temple beautiful as well as preparing food for the parties.

During the past decade *poi chong* has become a traditional event that various villages arrange on a grand scale to which guests from outside the village are invited and has begun to assume the nature of competition between villages in the vicinity to see who can arrange a grander event. If Lak Chang happens in the previous year to have held a festival that was very grand and was the talk of people in the area, then next year nearby Fa Pho village would try to arrange a bigger and more colourful festival in order to surpass the other villages and make them lose face; so *poi* festivals have to be bigger and grander each successive year. The manner in which *poi* festivals are celebrated by the Tai has begun to change from being activities that stress competing for social prestige between different households in the same village, to becoming competitions for prestige and eminence between villages.

**Death and Life-Cycle Rituals**

The Tai Daikong give importance to changes according to life cycles by performing rituals and celebrating important occasions in a grand way for the three phases of life, namely: birth, marriage and death. We have already described rituals relating to birth and marriage in Chapter 3, so this part will highlight rituals that relate only to death and funeral preparations.

The thoughts and feelings of the Tai people regarding death have been influenced by Buddhism, particularly as regards reincarnation in various lives according to the laws of karma. Death in Tai cosmology is therefore something like an occasion for enhancing one’s position or status in the pyramid of merit. The Tai firmly believe that if they accumulate merit by consistently fostering religion, observing the precepts and giving alms, they will definitely be born again in a status higher than their previous existence. For this reason, on approaching middle age, the Tai prefer to “prepare oneself” for death by regularly visiting temples to listen to sermons, observing the precepts, practising meditation, making merit and participating in religious rites. Tais in general look at death not as a fearsome occasion but merely as a passage to a state higher than the present one. To die peacefully at the appropriate age is therefore an ordinary happening, but death
due to an epidemic or an illness lasting over a lengthy period are the doings of evil spirits. Moreover, death due to brutal attacks, such as being stabbed to death or being murdered are the results of evil deeds accumulated from the previous life. The Tai believe that the soul of a woman who dies while in the state of pregnancy and during childbirth, will turn into an evil spirit, so rituals must be performed to prevent the evil spirit from coming back to haunt her husband and relatives by cutting open the abdomen and removing the dead child. The corpses of the child and the mother should be wrapped in mats and buried apart from each other so that the souls of the two persons shall not meet, and also to prevent this woman from having to encounter such bad luck again in her next life.

When someone dies in the village, his or her relatives will help to bathe the body meticulously clean, dress the corpse in the finest suit and put a silver coin in the mouth as the fee for the boatman to send the soul of the deceased to a blissful place. The corpse is put into a coffin with the head turned towards the north; the body then lies in the house to allow relatives and neighbours to come by and pay final respects to the deceased, according to custom.

In customary practice, the Tai hold funeral rites for three days, and throughout these three days neighbours, relatives and friends will visit and offer condolences to the family of the host. Repasts are provided throughout these three days to entertain visitors who come to pay respects to the deceased. Visitors who join in the ceremony usually make token donations to defray expenses for the food. Some family relatives may bring articles of use—including money—and hand them over to the host family who will collect the money and various things for donation to the temple on behalf of the deceased after the burial ceremony. During all the three days’ wake, the front of the house will be attended by young men beating long drums, gongs and firing off crackers at intervals to scare away demons that come to prey on the soul of the person who has just died, to entice or trick it into following the demons away to other places. Within the house, the host will set up tables of food to treat guests who come to pay respects to the deceased. Guests will take turns to express sorrow on his passing away and recall

16 Milne (1910:179).
17 In old times a corpse was dressed with the opening of the jacket to the back, instead of being fastened in front in the usual way. The reason for this custom was the belief that the spirit escaped from the back of the body.
his goodness and his benevolent character. Unlike funerals of the Thai people, no chao chong or priest is invited to say prayers at the ceremonies of the Tai.

On completion of three days, the host family will transport the deceased for burial at the village cemetery, an astrologer having been consulted in advance as to the auspicious hour for moving and burial. At the auspicious hour for moving the body, some five or six musicians striking drums and gongs and playing pipe instruments will lead the procession, followed by a group of male relatives acting as pall-bearers, the coffin having been placed on a wooden litter and covered with a funerary tower similar to funerals of the northern Thai people. Descendants and close relatives walk behind the coffin, followed by friends and neighbours proceeding in the direction of the cemetery. Tai villagers usually select a nearby hillside as the site for the village cemetery which has carved stones in the shape of a coffin and stone slabs engraved with names of the dead, similar to the “huang sui” or burial place of the Han Chinese.

If the deceased is a single woman who has not married, her relatives will take the coffin and tap it against trees during the procession to the cemetery in the belief that in her next life she will not be so unfortunate as to die before having been married. Should the deceased be a person of affluence, the funeral tower and the procession will have exquisite and elaborate decorations; the spire of the tower will be adorned with metal fretwork sheets of beautiful patterns whilst the coffin will be covered with cloth embroidered with designs of dancing angels.

On arrival of the funeral procession at the cemetery, the monk who is already waiting at the grave will start the prayer rites for sending the soul of the dead person to the blissful world. Women generally do not climb up the hill to the cemetery but wait down below whilst the men carry the coffin up and lay it into the grave while the chao chong is praying. Normally the head of the dead will be turned towards the north, to help the spirit of the dead begin his journey to Mount Meru, the abode of God and great spirits. Inside the coffin, it is customary to place uncooked rice, tea and tobacco as rations for the deceased to carry on the way. After burial has been completed and a stone slab inscribed with the dead person’s name has been erected, children or relatives of the deceased will set up a tray of food as propitiation and burn silver paper and gold paper to send

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18 In traditional Tai cosmology, the tree was looked upon as an emblem of fertility, cf. Milne (1910:94).
to the soul of the deceased.19 Thereafter, on completion of seven days after death, the family of the deceased will once again give a feast in the belief that on completion of seven days the spirit of the deceased will return to the house to say farewell for the last time. Descendants, relatives and close friends will gather at this ceremony to propitiate the spirit of the deceased. This propitiation marks the end of the funeral rites.

**Life Crises Rituals**

Calendrical rituals are arranged with feelings of piety. They are celebrations to commemorate important religious anniversaries, whilst cyclical rituals are those that have been arranged for a person or a community to adjust to the changing stations in life. Both calendrical rituals and cyclical rituals display the nature of expressive feelings shown collectively by a community or a large number of people, whilst crisis rituals are those with clearly instrumental aims or which must be for a certain purpose, such as to remedy a calamity, an adversity or for the purpose of escaping from a critical situation in life.

The causes and occasions of crisis may emanate from natural conditions, for instance, diseases of some type, accidents, drought or robbers plundering property. Such crises may be remedied by various methods, such as digging a canal to solve the problem of drought, posting guards to watch out for thieves, consulting a doctor to cure the malady, but certain crises cannot be corrected with reason or methods in the normal way, such as a prolonged illness that cannot be cured and persists in spite of hospital treatment. In such cases, explanations of life’s crises may be somewhat different from the ordinary and normal reasons, such as this person may have been maliciously attacked (by spirits), or sometimes the explanation for the life crisis may derive from the influence of destiny and of the stars. For example: there was a man of middle age named Yee. This Lak Chang villager had to face drastic life crises in the interval of a few years; he fell ill many times and, after recovering from the latest bout, his young wife met an untimely death. Yee went to consult an astrologer in the village and got the explanation that the bad luck was because his house was not auspicious and was in conflict with his horoscope; he must move out to escape from the life crises.

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19 Many elements of the Tai burial rite have been borrowed from the Han Chinese.
On such premises, some of life’s crises such as chronic illnesses, natural calamities, accidents or bad luck of certain types cannot be remedied by normal means but must rely on supernatural measures of which there are at least four forms: astrology or predictions by horoscope; propitiating spirits to stop taunting and making mischief; the use of incantations, sorcery or employment of other propitious objects; and the performance of Buddhist religious rituals.

That the stars have influence over the lives of human beings is deeply rooted in the way of thinking and cosmology of the Tai people. Without access to the day, month, year of birth and actual moment of delivery used in determining his horoscope, a Tai barely has anything left to cope with his life, whether it concerns giving a name, choosing a life partner or even simple things, such as having a haircut or trimming nails. His life would be left only with confusion and complications because of inability to read his horoscope which is like a compass needle directing his life path. The Tai believe that the stars or the position of the various stars at the actual delivery time at birth and the movements of the stars at a later time have influence over the luck or misfortune that occur in the life of every human being. For this reason, various acts when done correctly according to auspicious hours will bear good results and conversely if performed at the wrong time or during an interval that is not propitious will have adverse results later on.

Life is lived under auspicious and inauspicious planets and planetary constellations whose influence on human affairs is self-evident to all Tais.

Omens, like planetary constellations, may augur either good or bad consequences. Bad omens include a number of major types. Prominent among them is belief in the evil effect of a wild animal entering a place of human habitation, especially a house. Should one find a vulture or a crow perched on the house roof, it is an indication that its occupants may meet with bad luck. If reptiles crawl into the house, the Tai people believe that this is a bad omen signifying that the house-owner will lose property or may have bad luck in his trading. When Ai, an old woman in Lak Chang of some 70 years died, neighbours spread rumours that she had discovered a large beehive on a tree branch in front of the house and on the very same day a crow alighted on the house roof. Many neighbours warned her that this was a bad omen and urged her to go and consult an astrologer or to move out and sleep somewhere else temporarily, but she refused and therefore met the end of her life a couple of days later. Belief in things like horoscopes, the
influence of the stars and luck make the Tai people often consult astrologers prior
to engaging in any activities in order to check their horoscope and determine a
propitious time, particularly for important acts in life, such as giving names,
marriage, house-building and funerals.

When danger occurs in life, such as being knocked down by a car, being inflicted
with a disease of unknown cause or which could not be cured, or encountering
persistent bad luck time and again, then a Tai will choose to visit a medium for
assistance in finding out the cause of the crisis that is afflicting his life, whether it
was he himself or someone in the house who has done something that enraged an
evil spirit. The medium will sit in meditation to discover the cause and to
recommend remedial measures, such as recommending that the afflicted person
erect a shrine with offerings to beg forgiveness from the spirit. Sometimes, the
medium may suggest other techniques for fooling the spirit, such as changing
one’s name, moving away temporarily, feigning death and asking relatives to
display a mock funeral. Such techniques are ruses to trick the demon into
thinking that its victim is already dead and to eventually stop its taunts and
attacks.

According to Tai beliefs, bad luck, illnesses and various crises emanate from karma
that cannot be eliminated by propitiating spirits or by other methods or
techniques but can be offset only by performing religious rituals and making
merit and giving alms. In resolving life’s problems, the Tai people turn to
Buddhist rituals for protection against all other types of supernaturally caused
dangers. For instance, to avert the dangers caused by planetary influence and
terrestrial omens, the most effective defence is to build a *kongmu* or pagoda and to
arrange for a *poi* festival to present Buddha statues and various articles to the
temple. Other rituals performed in order to avert an impending calamity include
the use of Buddhist sacra, spells and the practice of meditation, while others
consist of the practice of alms such as redeeming the life of an animal that is going
to be killed, making vows before a sacred Buddha image, saying prayers,
oberving the precepts and dedicating oneself to enter the priesthood if one
escapes from the crisis or dangerous malady.

Furthermore, the Tai people also have various ways to cope with life’s twists and
turns and uncertainties by the use of necromancy, occultism and cabalistic
inscriptions to achieve self-immunity, to obtain protection against snakes and for creating magnetic attraction and charisma, including the use of various charms and talismans as well as implanting rolled leaf amulets on the arms and legs.

For the Tai Daikong, occultism, propitiating spirits and the employment of sorcery or black magic in various forms are inseparable from Buddhist religious tenets.

The Tai believe that the incantations, occultism and the spirits are always subjected to the laws of karma according to the Buddhist faith. Buddhism, spiritualism and occultism are tangibly present in the roles of the *chao chong* who officiates in Buddhist rites and frequently acts as astrologer and inscribes magical tattoos as well. For this reason, belief in spirits, Buddhism and occultism are intermingled as one and inseparable in the viewpoints, beliefs and rituals of the Tai Daikong.

**Beliefs, Rituals and Social Change**

During the past few decades, although Buddhism has still played an important role in the life and culture of the Tai village society, changes in the economy and social pattern in several aspects, especially the expansion of the market economy and the rapid increase in demand for agricultural products, have resulted in inevitable variation in the beliefs and rituals of the Tai Daikong, whether they are changes in the roles of the temples and monks, merit-making or performances of rituals in the social life of the Tai.

In former days, a Tai would treat a monk or *chao chong* with reverence. A monk is ranked as a “noble”, not as an ordinary man, but as a special person who has an important role in performing religious rituals, a teacher of books, an adviser of the community on various matters and the pivot of merit-making and alms-giving of all types. In a society where right living according to the Buddhist teaching is of extreme importance, the way of life of the monk is the ideal in the scale of values of the Tai. Thus the monk is revered in the capacity of one who fosters the Buddhist religion, an ideal model of moral standard and life conduct; the *chao chong* is the children’s mentor, counsellor of the village head, a spiritual guide for the elderly and also a mediator in disputes and discord within the
Villagers should show respect to the chao chong by kneeling or squatting on the floor in polite attitude when facing him, and provide support in matters of food and other necessities for maintaining the monkhood.

During the past few decades, the role of the chao chong clearly began to decline. Schools began to replace the temples and the chao chong’s duties as a teacher decreased. During the period of the Cultural Revolution, many temples in Daikong were destroyed and the chao chong were apprehended and disrobed. Although during the past ten years or so, continuous renovations, repairs and rebuilding of temples have been done to replace the old ones, the values of being ordained as a monk began to decline from the viewpoint of the Tai. Strenuous agricultural production resulting from a constant attempt to keep pace with growing market demands, as well as the strict birth-control policy have caused the demand for labour in the agricultural sector to multiply. The importance of

encouraging sons to devote themselves to studies and to the preparation for ordination has quickly declined. Many temples, including the Lak Chang village temple, remain without a resident chao chong. The absence of chao chong inadvertently began to put an end to the required officiating role of the chao chong at religious rituals.

Furthermore, merit-making of the Tai people began to show a downward trend. In former days, occasions for merit-making and alms-giving were the main incentives for the Tai people to save up money to accumulate merits and virtue for the next world. In times past, the Tai people considered that a person who did a lot of merit-making was a good person, honourable and highly regarded socially. However, at the present time, the values of the Tai regarding merit-making have begun to change. Poi festivals have now become activities which the whole village joins in arranging, in order to compete with other villages. Within the village itself, the Tai now lay stress on worldly matters, such as marriage and funeral ceremonies by spending lavishly and incurring huge expenses for arranging such events. Although Buddhist beliefs and rituals still prevail as important influences in the way of thinking, the traditional customs and daily life of the Tai, economic and trading activities have gradually become more and more important in the lifestyle and culture of the Tai Daikong.

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