

# SELF-AWARENESS OF LUANG PHRABANG LAONESS IN THAILAND:<sup>1</sup> A CASE STUDY OF MYTH AND RITUAL<sup>2</sup>

Bourin Wungkeeree<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

*This article offers a study of Lao people who migrated from Luang Phrabang to settle in Thailand, especially at Amphoe Lom Kao and Lom Sak, Phetchabun Province and Amphoe Dan Sai, Loei Province. These migrants have maintained their self-awareness as Luang Phrabang*

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<sup>1</sup> The Lao identity here means, in the context of the research, the fact that they are aware that they are from Lao Luang Phrabang in the Kingdom of Lanxang. The tradition, ceremonies, beliefs, religions, and languages emphasize their identity and language. In this context, the awareness of being Luang Phrabang Lao is part of their identity. However, as they have lived in Thailand for a long time, they call themselves “Thai people of Luang Phrabang ancestry.”

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<sup>3</sup> Lecturer, Department of Thai, Faculty of Humanities, Chiangmai University.

*Lao by transmitting their own folk literature—for instance, local legends and hero tales, and rituals. Such ethnic transmission has been interpreted as an important mechanism for ethnic maintenance. Repeatedly reproduced in a discourse of myth telling in the context of spirit offering rituals, this transmission helps the community realize and remember that they are from Luang Phrabang, Lanxang, which was once a prosperous Buddhist centre in ancient times.*

## Introduction

A legend or a myth is an ancient story that has been passed on over many generations in a given culture. As such, it is a vital tool in recording the events, attitudes, and thoughts of the society. Most legends are generally related to supernatural or mysterious things. They might be variably interpreted across the course of their history. There are several types of legends: most notably, the legend of the origin of the world and the universe; the ghost legend; the ritual legend; and the local legend. Ritual and local legends are distinctive in their purposes to show cultural origins, to explain local geography and how to build a community, or to explain the background of each ritual. Thus, legends and myths make it possible for people in the community to understand their culture as well as to create mutual appreciation of their history.

Luang Phrabang Laotians have migrated into Thailand since the reign of King of Thon Buri, who led the military conquest of Vientiane, then under King Siriboonsan. After his victory, King of Thon Buri appointed two noblemen, Chaophraya Chakkri and Phraya Phichai, to lead the Luang Phrabang Laotians to the city of Nam Pat, Lom, and Loei. There were

subsequent migrations into Thailand between the reigns of King Rama I and King Rama III, especially during the war of Chao Anuwong of Vientiane which saw the largest single wave of Laotian migration. Even after resettlement, the Luang Phrabang Laotians maintained much of their lifestyle, society, culture, and attitude in their new home.

Two key issues emerge out of a consideration of this history of Lao-Thai migration. Firstly, why do the Luang Phrabang Laotians in the city of Lom Kao and Lom Sak (excluding the Vientiane Laotians in Tambon Ban Tio, Ban Rai, and Ban Wai) in Petchabun Province and in the city of Dan Sai in Loei Province still have a strong sense of Luang Phrabang Lao identity even though they have lived in Thailand for more than two hundred years? Secondly, how is it that these people continue to pass on the Luang Phrabang Laoness from one generation to the next?

### **The importance of Luang Phrabang Laoness in the context of Thai society**

In preliminary research for this study, it was found that there were two factors driving these people to try to maintain their identity. The first reason is that Luang Phrabang Laotians in Thailand retain strong pride in the glorious past of the Kingdom of Lanxang Luang Phrabang. The second reason is the desire to resist the influence of Thai society and to maintain a sense of cultural distinction. Therefore, they try to keep their culture and maintain beliefs and attitudes through such things as ghost feast rituals or local legends. The first point offers a good case to illustrate the causes of this practice. Luang Phrabang Laotians' thoughts,

beliefs, culture, and their sense of Luang Phrabang Laoness are obviously derived from their motherland, the Kingdom of Lanxang Luang Phrabang. This area used to be highly prosperous both in terms of society and culture. Therefore, people carried a rosy perception of their happy homeland. Away from home in Thailand, and surrounded by different ethnicities including Thai, Lanna, Isan, Hmong, and Chinese, the latter two groups having moved into Thailand over the past eighty years, they try harder to keep their identity and culture. One of the methods of maintaining their culture is to distinguish themselves from other groups. In particular, they feel that their culture is superior to others (the Chinese, Hmong, and Thai Tai<sup>4</sup>) because they used to be the people of the capital city of Laos. This kind of thinking still remains prevalent among the Luang Phrabang Laotians in Thailand. This attitude can also be noticed in their folklore, especially comic tales. The competing character traits and differences between each culture are the topics most frequently criticized and pilloried. This is interesting and implies a sense of cultural separation. For example, Hmong people migrated to settle down in Lom Kao district and Dan Sai district after the communists were defeated. Due to cultural and ethnic differences, Hmong people are often perceived as uncivilized, dirty, and different. They have a lower social status compared to Luang Phrabang Lao people. This can be seen in a

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<sup>4</sup> Luang Phrabang Laotians residing in these three districts still call Isan people "Thai Tai" as their ancestors used to do while living in Luang Phrabang. In the past, they did not realize that "Thai Tai" was the same as Isan people. They only identify those living on the right side of the Mekong River as Thai Tai or people living in the South of the Kingdom of Laos.

humorous tale called “Yak Dai Mia Maeo” (“Wanting to have a Maeo Wife”) and “Kin Khao Ban Maeo” (“Having a Maeo Meal”). These stories foreground ethnic and cultural differences as a source of comic effect. In addition, Luang Phrabang Lao people have a better social status in every respect. Similarly, Isan Lao people who mostly come to be workers in Lom Kao and Lom Sak, have been perceived as inferior to Luang Phrabang Lao people. Institutionalized further via the differential relationship of an employer and an employee, the unequal status encourages criticism and making fun of the culture and lifestyle of Isan Lao people. They are perceived to be people who like drinking, arguing, being cheerful and being poor. On the other hand, the Luang Phrabang Lao people think of themselves as peaceful, neat, and civilized. This perception can be seen in the humorous tale “Tai Tai Kin Khi Maphrao” (“Thai Tai eat coconut dregs”). Chinese people, by contrast, generally have high influence in terms of economics because most of them are merchants who buy agricultural produce from people in the community and lend money through a black market financial system with high interest rates. They are often perceived as always trying to take advantage of others. This motivates compensatory tactics through local humorous and sarcastic tales such as “Bak Lak Bak Laem” (“The Intelligent Person”), “Bak Siang Jip” (“Story Related to Former Monks”), and “Bak Po Khi Tua” (“The Lying Po”). The common theme of these stories is the cheating behavior of the Chinese. It is satirized and reversed in narratives where the Chinese are cheated by Luang Phrabang Lao people. In summary, the Luang Phrabang Laotians distinguish people from other cultures through the use of humorous tales passed from generation to generation in

the community. The feeling of strong ethnic difference can still be found in the Luang Phrabang community.

In this way, the pride of being Lao descendants of a great and prosperous royal culture has largely taken root in their mind. Because of their pride in their origins, it is not strange for them to continue to identify themselves as Luang Phrabang Laotians and to use this identity to separate from other groups of people. Considered more deeply, even though they have moved to Thailand, the sense of being Luang Phrabang Laotians still remains. They have tried to maintain the culture, thoughts, lifestyle, and customs of Luang Phrabang. The pride in Luang Phrabang Laoness can be today seen from their acting, tone of voice and reaction toward people from different groups. This clearly shows their feelings of difference and separation.

The sense of pride and distinction profiled here has not only been found in the Luang Phrabang community in Thailand, but it can also be found in those currently living in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. People there are also very proud of their ancient culture and art.<sup>5</sup> When UNESCO announced Luang Phrabang’s World Heritage listing, this kind of feeling became even more intense. However, people here do not feel separated from others. It is because in the past the city of Luang Phrabang was occupied by people of varied ethnicities, as detailed in the Khun Burom legend. This situation didn’t create a feeling of separation but rather one of negotiation and cooperation as they

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Professor Nou Xayasithivong, special lecturer in the Department of Lao Language and Mass Communication, Faculty of Arts, the National University of Lao on July 24, 2006.

worked together to build a rich and prosperous culture. In addition, the Lao people of all ethnicities were united in their common struggle against colonialist enemies, France and America, until they were free. Furthermore, cross-ethnic marriage is common among Laotians. For example, Lao Lum people regularly get married to Lao Toeng and Lao Sung people.<sup>6</sup> The equality in ethnicity is highly accepted in Luang Phrabang. Therefore, this kind of ethnocentrism in Luang Phrabang is less intense than in Thailand because of different political, historical, and social factors. In summary, pride in a prosperous past, a civilized culture, and former geopolitical centrality, help Luang Phrabang Lao people maintain a strong sense of distinctive identity which has been passed on through generations via socialization.

### **The (local) legend: implication of space, identity, and how to find new reference for the community**

Every society has its legends, but they might be slightly different depending on objectives, cultural and social factors, and interpretation. The same legend can differ depending on its purpose, how it is told, why it is maintained, and its role. Therefore, to study the same legend across different societies can help us understand more about the people in those cultures. For Luang Phrabang Laotians in Thailand, legends are very important in passing their identity and cultural self-awareness to successive generations. Significantly, their local legends always refer to their

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Mr. Humphan Rattanavong on July 24, 2006. At present, he is a freelance researcher on art, culture, and literature. He was born in Luang Phrabang and still has the self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness.

migration into Thailand and subsequent settlements, to heroes who established their society firmly in the Kingdom, and to places of settlement. Each legend emphasizes each concern of the society.

### **The legend of the city and geography: the link between the past, the present and the existence of the community**

The local legends told widely in the Luang Phrabang community can be divided into two types. The first kind is the establishment of the city, geography, and heritage. This is called a city legend. A city legend actually describes the geographical aspects of the community such as the Mueang Lom legend.<sup>7</sup> This legend tells of Grandpa Bua and Grandma Phan who moved from Luang Phrabang and set up their big family here. One day, a father and his son went into the woods to hunt. They caught a white squirrel, the meat of which was shared among other villagers. A widow was the only one who missed eating the white squirrel. Eating this white squirrel doomed the city. It was besieged by the Naga who was very angry

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<sup>7</sup> This legend is sometimes called "Nong Ko Legend." Nong Ko is a big swamp in Ban Na Ko, Tambon Na Ko, Amphoe Lom Kao, Phetchabun Province. There are two kinds of legend for Nong Ko. The first one is similar to the legend of Nong Han in Phadaeng Nang Ai story. The second one is related to the spread of Buddhism by the Lord Buddha to Mueang Lom and Mueang Dan Sai. It was told that the Naga (a giant sacred snake) was angry with the monkeys that flocked to pay respect to the Lord Buddha. The Naga put a spell on the land, causing it to sink into a swamp. The city has from that time been called [miaŋ-lòm] (เมืองหล่ม) or [miaŋ-lòm] (เมืองล่อม).

with the fact that the citizens/villagers had eaten the white squirrel. The city was then called [mian-lòm] (เมืองหล่ม) or [mian-lôm] (เมืองล่อม).<sup>8</sup>

This type of city legend, rather than the version related to Buddhism, is widely told in Mueang Lom Kao. The assumption is that, like other Thai-Lao people, locals know the story of the falling city well because of the Nakarae (Nakara disguises as a white squirrel) such as the one told in Nong Sae legend, Suwan Khom Kham city legend, and Nong Han legend (Pha Daeng Nang Ai story). It is possible that the people use the same story of the falling city to describe the existence of the swamp in their new land. More importantly, this story represents how the people transform their identity and self-awareness. They attach the story of moving to the new land to the city legend. Grandpa Bua and Grandma Phan emigrated from Luang Phrabang to set up their new city in the Lom Kao area. The adaptation is to try to maintain the story of their origins and ensure that people do not forget their past, thus helping maintain traditions of culture and society and a general sense of continued Luang Phrabang Laoness. The revised version of the Mueang Lom legend relates the original land, Luang Phrabang, to the new home, Mueang Lom Kao. When the story is told from generation to generation, people maintain awareness of their origins and emphasize their Laoness.

In addition, the story of the people's immigration appears in the legend of other minor communities such as Ban Huai Ma Khuea legend. It was told that two monks

led people to escape from the war and difficulties in Luang Phrabang during the reign of King Chai Chettha Thi Rat. While wandering through a basin area, they found many eggplant trees growing. There was a river passing through the fertile land. This area was then named "Ban Rong Makhuea" (the village of eggplant ditch) and later changed to "Huai Makhuea" (eggplant creek). After setting up a community, people built a temple beside the Nam Phung River, where there was a pure, white sand beach. The temple was then named "Wat Sai Ngam"<sup>9</sup> (the temple of beautiful sand). This legend has been continuously told.

The researcher found that the Lom Kao legend and Huai Ma Khuea legend are told in order to link the story from the past during the reign of Lanxang Luang Phrabang Kingdom with the identity of Lao people currently residing in Thailand. By so doing, they are reminded of the time when the community used to be located in the prosperous ancient Kingdom of Lao Luang Phrabang. The Laoness is signified by the culture and the fact that their kingdom is ancient. The message has been passed through the word "Capital city." The capital city here does not mean only the geographical location, but it means culture and the thinking of the community. According to Khongwijit (2000: 78), the Luang Phrabang people in Laos have been deeply aware of their identity through ceremonies such as Heatkhong. These ceremonies show that they saw their city

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mrs. Lam Nualchorn, a villager in Tambon Ban Noen, Amphoe Lom Kao, Phetchabun Province on May 25, 2006.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mr. Phleang Chansae, a villager in Tambon Na Saeng, Amphoe Lom Kao, Phetchabun Province on April 4, 2005. According to him, there had been sacred palm leaves describing the immigration of Luang Phrabang Laotians during the reign of King Chai Chettha Thi Rat. They used to be kept at Wat Sai Ngam but are now lost.

as ‘a capital city’ which was ancient and full of culture. It is the city where the king used to reside and where a lot of temples and holy places were constructed. Therefore, the dignity of being the people of “the capital city” or the community which possessed prosperous culture has been deeply rooted in the minds of Luang Phrabang people in the district of Dan Sai, Lom Kao, and Lom Sak. This kind of thinking has been passed from generation to generation through legends. Their legends are a key point in distinguishing them from people of other ethnicities. In addition, they help to emphasize the existence of their community and ethnicities in order to pass on knowledge about their tranquil and happy land to the next generation. Likewise, people in the early Rattanakosin period still yearned for the prosperity of the kingdom of Ayutthaya. They referred to that period as “the time when the city was still prosperous” (meaning the time before the city was destroyed by the Burmese). The researcher of the present study contends that the identity of being Luang Phrabang has been continuously passed to each generation with a particular period of concentration during the reign of King Rama III. Chuethai (2004: 180–206) shows that during that time, the prosperity of their city was shown through wall paintings at Wat Si Mongkhon, Ban Na Sai, Lom Kao District. The paintings feature prosperous Luang Phrabang symbolized as a new land. The people in this community used to join the Lao military led by King Anuwong to gain independence from Thailand during the reign of King Rama III. This obviously shows that their primary allegiances were with “Lao” rather than “Thailand.” The belief in their Lao nationality has been deeply rooted in the community.

In summary, Luang Phrabang Laotians have linked their history with local legends. These legends are important because they record stories, transmit principles, attitudes and thoughts. The theme of these legends is related to space. The space here means physical geography like the mountains that help define the territory of the Luang Phrabang Lao people. The unity in the community then becomes more intense. However, space here does not only mean geographical aspects, but it also covers cultural and ethnic borders. In other words, space plays an important role for Luang Phrabang people both in tangible and intangible terms. It separates Luang Phrabang people from other communities nearby. The legend serves this objective well. The stories have been continuously told, so they emphasize the message and help maintain the awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness.

### **The hero legend:<sup>10</sup> how to select stories to transform history**

The hero legend here means a story about leaders in the community of Lao Luang Phrabang. They believe that these heroes really existed, ruled the community and/or initiated good things for the community. The legends are both about heroes who are Lao and those who are Tai (Thai). The legends about the two kinds of heroes serve to emphasize collective thoughts and history and the Lao identity.

### **The legends about Lao Luang Phrabang heroes**

Heroes here mean the leaders of Luang Phrabang people who really existed and

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, a hero legend is a kind of local legends. Here, the author explains it separately to emphasize its role.

led the community to migrate from Lao to settle in the area of Lom Kao district. These heroes are therefore very important as they are considered the ones who led the Luang Phrabang Lao people to settle in a new land. The Luang Phrabang identity is thus reinforced through these heroes such as the ten Luang Phrabang leaders legend mostly told in Lom Kao. It is about the heroes moving from “Luang Phrabang.” It is told that:

In the past, the Thai and Lao people were enemies. They often fought with each other. The Lao leaders saw that a lot of people died, so they led their people to the city of Lom Kao and settled down at Ban Hin Kling, Ban Wang Ban, Nong Kham, Nam Khrang, Na Sai, Cho Wo and others. The important leaders included Chao Pho Khun Chok, Pho Khun Si, Khun Krai, Khun Chai, Khun Det Raksa, Chao Pho U Kaeo, Chao Pho Lek Si, Chao Pho Suliwong, Chao Pho Kham Daeng, and Chao Pho Phromthat. These heroes were good at fighting in a war. In addition, they were leaders with strong ethics. After they died, these heroes became the “holy spiritual guards” who protected the community.<sup>11</sup>

It can be noticed that the aforementioned legend not only emphasizes the Luang Phrabang identity and their migration into Thailand, it also shows the social development of the Luang Phrabang community in Lom Kao. After the

settlement, the Luang Phrabang Lao people were grouped into ten communities. Each of the ten leaders ruled ‘Khum’. These ten groups have since become the communities residing in Lom Kao. They are linked closely with one another by the ceremony to pay respect to the ancestral hero spirits. The ceremony is conducted annually. In addition, the legend of *Chao Pho Ban Umkathat*, another small community in the town of Lom Kao, also mentions heroes from Luang Phrabang:

In the past, these hero spirits used to be human beings. They led people to flee the war and to settle down in Thailand. Chao Pho Simala and Chao Pho Bua Khai are the key leaders. After they died, they were respected as guardian or leader spirits to protect the people. During these ceremonies, the people who act as the medium are believed to be possessed by the guardian spirits, and will do a sword show and fighting. They also dress like the leaders in the past such as wearing decorative string on arms and legs, folding cloth around head, wearing Khao Ma cloth around waists, chewing betel, and smoking traditional cigarettes.<sup>12</sup>

It can be noted that the Lao Luang Phrabang hero legend is mostly about the courage of the leaders, the migration to a better place, and setting up a new community in a new land. This imbues the leaders with wisdom, strength and

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Mrs. Booncham Meebuathong on April 22, 2005.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Mrs. Ladda Mahawan on April 14, 2005.

efficiency. It is because they are able to take the people from drought, food shortage, and crisis. Understandably, the hero for Luang Phrabang Lao people should be good and do good jobs for the group, especially during the crisis such as leading the group to a land with more food and natural resources or creating a new community. In the context of diaspora, those having important roles in setting up and ensuring prosperity for the community will be much respected. Therefore, the heroes for Luang Phrabang Lao people are not those who won a war, but those who led the people through the crisis whether it be a drought or a war. They can settle up a new and strong community. The respect for “the hero” has been passed on to the next generation through the local legend. There is also the ceremony to pay respect to these hero spirits. The legend plays an important role in controlling the thought patterns, and beliefs, both at the individual and community levels. It can be said that the hero who is Luang Phrabang Lao hero can help emphasize the Luang Phrabang Lao identity and encourage the people to be aware of their history.

### **The legends talking about the heroes who are Tai (Thai)**

In the process of creating the identity of the Luang Phrabang Lao in the Thai context, people need to select things they prefer to focus on or to ignore. These identities are created from interpreting history, legends, and tales. These identities do not have a single, homogeneous meaning. Rather, they can be interpreted in different ways and will not be consistently interpreted. It can be changed all the time, especially the identity interpreted from the hero legend. They start to accept the heroes of the Thai

people and take them as their own heroes. The researcher discovered that the Luang Phrabang Lao people in Thailand had mentioned the cultural heroes of Thai people including Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao and Pho Khun Pha Mueang, as their leaders. Luang Phrabang people in Dan Sai community choose Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao or Pho Khun Si In Thra Thit as their hero. They think he led a group of people to establish a community in Dan Sai before moving to Bang Yang and Sukhothai respectively. In Lom Sak community, people paid respect to Pho Khun Pha Mueang as their cultural leader. According to Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao legend/Dan Sai:

Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao moved from Lao (some said that he was from Luang Phrabang) to settle a new community in the town of Dan Sai, which is located on the side of Hueang river and is presently named Ban Kao. Later, he moved to settle another community in “Dan Sai Mai” at the area of Ban Dern. The old Dan Sai was then called Dan Sai Kao and the new city was named Dan Sai Mai. Later, their name was shortened to Dan Sai and Ban Kao respectively. Pho Khun then moved to settle the city of Bang Yang and ruled Sukhothai.<sup>13</sup>

Pho Khun Pha Mueang, the ruler of Rad, is believed to be from the same area as Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao. He is celebrated for his bravery and outstanding prowess in fighting the Khmer troops to

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<sup>13</sup> The information is summarized from interviews with local philosophers and leaders in Tambon Na Ho, Dan Sai district, Loei Province.

re seize the city of Sukhothai and his subsequent ruling of the city of Rad. It is believed that the city of Rad is presently Lom Sak. According to the legend:

Pho Khun Pha Mueang moved from Dan Khwa to settle the city of Rad. Later, he married the Khmer princess, Singh Khon Dhevi, who was the daughter of the Khmer king. He ruled the city of Rad, but later joined Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao to seize Sukhothai back. Princess Singh Khon Dhevi got angry. She burned the barn and killed herself. This is why there is at present a lot of black rice in the area of Rad city.<sup>14</sup>

The interesting question is why people in Dan Sai and Lom Sak regard the Thai hero as their own. According to historical and social analysis, Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao was an important king of Thailand because he was the founder of the kingdom of Thailand. He was much praised by Thai people, but his origin and history are not clear because of limited sources of information. It can be interpreted that Pho Khun Pha Mueang and Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao are the “heroes of Tai people.” It can also be understood that they are Thai-Lao. It is because “Tai community” and “Tai ethnic” mean “Tai people” both residing in Thailand and in Lao and other groups. Professor Dr. Prasert Na Nakara, an expert in language and ancient scripts, writes:

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<sup>14</sup> The information is summarized from interviews with local philosophers and leaders in Lom Sak, Phetchabun Province.

It cannot be explained that Pho Khun Pha Mueang and Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao are Thai or Lao. However, they are Tai, leading people to migrate from the South of China and settle a new community on the land called presently Thailand.<sup>15</sup>

The researcher thinks that whether Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao and Pho Khun Pha Mueang were Thai or Lao, the more important point is how the Luang Phrabang Lao people utilize and analyze the legends. They use the ambiguous history to create a “cultural advantage.” They apply and adjust it to their context as the “shared identity” between Thai and Lao (being Thai and being Lao) through a hero who is Tai (Thai). In other words, to regard the Thai hero as their own hero is an effort to identify themselves as the “Thai people from Luang Phrabang.” Although they are Thai and live in Thailand, these people are still willing to continue the Luang Phrabang Lao identity. This can be seen from the fact that they claim that Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao and Pho Khun Pha Mueang migrated from Laos. This interpretation can be changed. To claim a historically popular ancestor as their own leader does not happen only in the Luang Phrabang Lao community. In the past, many leaders became heroes in several communities. For example, Phaya Chueng is the hero of Lanna, Tai Lue, Tai Khern, Tai Yai, Tai Dam, Lao, Khamu, and Hmong people. According to Wongthet (2002: 31), all of them respect Phaya Chueng as their heroes. This is how to enjoy the benefits of the existing history by using “the cultural and ethnic hero” to strengthen the community identity. This is

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Professor Dr. Prasert Na Nakara on August 26, 2004.

to “make the interpretation” in defining and transferring the identity of Lao Luang Phrabang people by linking it to the person and community in an intelligent way.

In summary, the legend about heroes who are Tai (Thai) or Luang Phrabang, is to define the identity and the awareness of being Luang Phrabang Lao through the interpretation of history, legends, and Tai heroes. Then the legend is linked to the identity and the awareness of being Luang Phrabang Lao. Luang Phrabang Lao people try to emphasize that they are Thai but of Lao ethnicity (Luang Phrabang). Therefore, the aim in reviving legends related to Luang Phrabang Lao heroes and Tai (Thai) heroes is to pass on the identity and awareness of being Luang Phrabang Lao. This process can be a direct effect from the Luang Phrabang Lao hero story or through the interpretation of legends and history in the context of Thai historical discourse, globalization, tourism and local trends. This reflects the changes in defining their identity, the awareness, and the interpretation. As such, these legends are extremely valuable. They are not mere nonsense stories because “the strongest point of legends that enable them to endure for a long time is the fact that they are flexible and their contents can be adjusted to suit every condition. They seem to be tangible and real but at the same time are intangible and may not exist. According to Pulsuwan (2001: 152), this qualification enables legends to be flexible in every situation under the changing culture. Luang Phrabang people intentionally create their own hero legends to transfer their historical story and Luang Phrabang Lao community to cope with the lifestyle in Thai society. They emphasize their long and enduring history and the right to live in Thailand, similar to that enjoyed by other ethnicities, as Thai

people who have Luang Phrabang Lao ethnicity and who still maintain the identity of Luang Phrabang Lao. As producers of discourse and its users, Luang Phrabang people accept and understand themselves more in terms of where they are from, who they are, what is their lifestyle, and how to adapt themselves to Thai society which is increasingly influenced by globalization and materialism.

### **Ritual legends and rites: roles, identities, and Luang Phrabang Laoness**

Luang Phrabang people possess legends related to many rites. There are two types of rites. The first one is the ritual directly related to the progress of life such as eliminating bad luck, averting one’s poor fate, reviving one’s predestined life, removing one’s astrological star, subduing calamities, wiping out bad luck, and recalling lost spirits. The second type is communal rituals such as Nang Thiam ghost feast, house blessing, and the recitation of the last life of the Boddhisattava. In this article, legends related to two rituals practiced in the community will be discussed: Chao Pho Dan Sai Ghost Feast and the annual ten Luang Phrabang Lao hero ghosts feast. The objective of this brief study is to analyze how these rituals maintain the identity, culture, and the awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness in Dan Sai community.

### **Chao Pho Dan Sai ghost feast: implications and roles of the rites**

In Dan Sai community, Loei Province, people practice the rite of Chao Pho Dan Sai Ghost Feast (the ruler ghost). These ghosts refer to the ancestral rulers. When they passed away, their spirits would be respected by the people in the community. It is believed that Chao Pho Dan Sai refers to the first rulers of Dan Sai.<sup>16</sup> The spirits possessing Chao Pho Kuan (the medium) in this ritual are Chao Ong Luang, Chao Ong Thai, Chao Mueang Wang, and Chao Mueang Klang. From the ranks and titles, all of them are Lao rulers, with the exception of Chao Ong Thai.<sup>17</sup> For the spirits of rulers who possess Chao Mae Nang Thiam, they include Chao Nang Khao, Chao Nang Chuang, Chao Nang Chan, and Chao Nang Noi. They are all female members of Lao royal family. These spirits take possession of Chao Pho Kuan and Chao Mae Nang Thiam in the seventh month of the Lao calendar or the month of June in Thailand, although the exact date changes from year to year.

Chao Pho Dan Sai, the spirits of female members of Lao royal family, as well as their servants, play an important role and

have a strong influence on the lives of Luang Phrabang Laotians in Amphoe Dan Sai, Wang Saphung, Phu Ruea, Na Haeo, Nakhon Thai, Lom Kao and Lom Sak. These spirits also protect other groups of Luang Phrabang Lao people in other areas such as Sa Kaeo, Amnat Charoen, and Bangkok. When the annual ghost feast's day arrives, everybody respecting Chao Pho Dan Sai must take it seriously and attend this rite. It can be considered a reunion among relatives and people in the community. This encourages people to come back and renew their communal ties. In addition, this helps emphasize the same identity through the shared belief in the same ghosts and the awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness.

Chao Pho Dan Sai ghost feast ritual encourages Luang Phrabang people to be together. It has been practiced by Luang Phrabang people for their own benefits. The ritual is a focus for the people's spirituality and it also maintains their beliefs, faiths, and cultural symbols. How the Chao Pho acts and what he says are symbols mutually understood between sender (the medium) and audience (the rite participants). This enhances the semiology of the culture and is what the Luang Phrabang people understand in the same way. They respect the same spirit. They are all Luang Phrabang people or are relatives in the same community.

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<sup>16</sup> This city was established in the reign of King Chai Chettha Thi Rat, contemporaneous with King Chakkraphat of Ayutthaya. The two kings agreed to form an alliance by building a monument to house the holy relics of the Lord Buddha. The monument was located at the boundary in Dan Sai, now called Phra That Si Song Rak. Therefore, the city of Dan Sai forms the boundary between Lao and Ayutthaya. As part of the Ayutthaya-Lao co-operation, high-ranking Lao lords were sent to help the Ayutthaya people, and they were granted leave by the Lao King to rule the city of Dan Sai.

<sup>17</sup> In this community, Chao Ong Thai was meant as the King Chakkraphat of Ayutthaya.

### **The annual ten Lao Luang Phrabang hero ghosts feast:<sup>18</sup> how to revive the awareness and the search for the identity of Luang Phrabang people in Lom Kao**

The legend of the ten Luang Phrabang Lao heroes or Chao Pho Tomat Legend has been told widely in Lom Kao area, in addition to Nong Ko and Mueang Lom legends. This legend refers to the time when Luang Phrabang people migrated to settle down in this area. Most villagers cannot identify when exactly their ancestors moved into this area. However, it may be inferred from historical documents, local novels, myths, and the stories told by old people<sup>19</sup> that this group migrated here during the reigns of King of Thon Buri and later between the reign of King Rama I and King Rama III. According to the ten heroes legend, the Lao leaders took a group of people to Thailand, passing Bo Taen City and Kaen Thao to settle down in Dan Sai and Mueang Lom.<sup>20</sup> At Mueang Lom, they

divided the area into ten parts and each part was separately ruled. The ten rulers agreed to meet again on the New Year occasion at Wang Ban community. When the ten rulers passed away, their spirits were respected by villagers and taken up as guardians for the people. Every year, the ten spirits possess the medium and attend the ghost feast. Like the Chao Pho Dan Sai Ghost Feast, the ten hero ghost feast is held in the seventh month of the Lao calendar but on a different day.

The importance of the ten heroes ghosts feast ritual to Lom Kao people can be identified in three ways. Firstly, it helps explain the immigration of the Luang Phrabang Laotians to Lom Kao because of the war between Lao and Thailand. Secondly, this ritual creates a feeling of unity as well as spiritual support and security for Laotians in Lom Kao. Thirdly, this ritual is the reproduction of culture both to emphasize the Luang Phrabang Lao identity and self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness. This last point is borne out by the details according to which the ritual is observed.<sup>21</sup> With the reunion of the heroes to join the annual feast, the community prepares food and drinks, comprising pork, duck, chicken, and desserts. They also prepare other offerings such as flowers, joss sticks, candles, cigarettes, Miang (tidbits wrapped in leaf), and betel nuts. People usually use this occasion to request for what they wish. In this ritual, the ruler ghosts help relieve their believers' anxieties through fortune telling, or find resolutions for

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<sup>18</sup> This legend is sometimes called "Chao Pho Tomat Ghost Feast." The spirit mentioned refers to the ghost of Mat tree or thingan tree. According to the legend, Mat tree is gigantic. The governor of Dert city (นครเด็ด) wished to construct a ship from this tree and send it to Ayutthaya. He commanded the ten heroes to cut the tree down and take it to Ayutthaya. On reaching Saraburi city, the wood could not be pulled further and was lost in the water. The ghost tree wanted to return home. It cried every night. The area was later named Mueang Sao Hai and is now Amphoe Sao Hai (meaning a crying pillar).

<sup>19</sup> For example, Suthep Chanwang (1998); Chanthana Chanbunchong (2000); and *The history of Lom Sak District, Phetchabun* (1999).

<sup>20</sup> See Krom Praya Damrongrajanuphap. (n.p.; n.d.)

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<sup>21</sup> However, the ritual has grown over the last ten years because the thingan tree ghost (called Chao Pho Tor Mat) also possesses the medium of Chao Pho Khun Si. The ritual is now more widely believed, especially regarding the miracles and magic of the thingan ghost.

problems.<sup>22</sup> What must be stressed is that the ritual is crucial for the self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laotians. In the ritual, Chao Pho Khun Si tells the people about their history and origins, especially those related to the immigration from Luang Phrabang. (This theme is often mentioned in the city legend, hero legend, village legend and ritual legend). It is the effort to revive the collective cultural memories through the stories passed from old people. When emphasized by the ghost feast ritual, the self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laotians is even more intense. This is further enhanced by the actions of the hero spirits such as sword play and mock war scenes. The conversation between the spirits and the villagers is similar to that between a ruler and his people. The spirits also greet each other. These actions emphasize the background of the community and reinforce the self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness for Lom Kao people.

### **The self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness through contemporary rituals**

Chao Pho Ghost Feast ritual is compulsory for all Luang Phrabang people. Actually, they have to pay homage to the spirits on every Buddhist Holy Day. The medium of Nang Thiam has to go to Ho Phi (the ghost hall) to conduct this ritual. Chao Pho Kuan, Chao Mae Nang Thiam, and their servants are present to accept the respect. For the ghost feast in the seventh month,

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<sup>22</sup> This duty is taken by Chao Pho Khun Si. It is told that when Khun Si was alive, he was a Lao nobleman and was very good at fortune telling. He was also the leader in conducting rituals. After his death, his spirit assumes responsibility for these duties.

every family (or its representative) must attend. Therefore, the ritual helps build the self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness both at the individual and the community levels. This belief is regularly reproduced through the ritual that symbolically unites the people with shared origins and history in a sacred atmosphere. This ritual therefore serves the community objective: that is to maintain the self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness.

However, Luang Phrabang Laotians in some villages respect different spirits other than Chao Pho Dan Sai or the ten heroes of Lom Kao. They might believe in other guardian ghosts. Furthermore, some villages also invite ancestral ghosts from Luang Phrabang. In Tambon Sila, Amphoe Lom Kao, the ruler spirits from Luang Phrabang have been invited to take care of their people. These ghosts are ancestral ghosts or lord ghosts. They have been respected since they were alive such as Chao Phi Si Thon, Ai Phaya Hanhok Kadi, the Two Sisters, Lady Kiang Kaeo, Chao Pho Bua Khai, Chao Pho Si Mala, and Ai Mo.<sup>23</sup> These guardian ghosts protect their people from bad things and create peace and happiness. This makes the villagers feel safer in the new land. Furthermore, this shows the relationship between the new world (the home land) and the old world. In political respects, this practice (both in stories and rituals) is the effort to maintain culture, identity, and self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness in Thailand.

The legends, beliefs, and the ghost feast rituals in Luang Phrabang Laotians communities are important tools for maintaining the self-awareness of Luang

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mr. Salee Wungkeeree on April 22, 2005.

Phrabang Laoness. Their narratives of the past, influential in maintaining the Lao Luang Phrabang cultural identity, are regularly reproduced. The self-awareness in Luang Phrabang Laoness is linked to the belief in lord spirits, and the ghost feast. This is deep in the people's minds and is powerful in maintaining the self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness.

### Postscripts

The effort to maintain the self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness in the three areas mentioned in this article indicates how much the people here yearn for their glorious past in the Kingdom of Lanxang. It is an important factor in differentiating their community from others. It is also to bolster self-confidence and to build symbolic bridges from the past to the future. The legends and the rituals are tangible and help the villagers feel more confident. Their self-awareness of Luang Phrabang Laoness is revived through stories. Moreover, in addition to reproducing the narratives of the past, they invent new ones such as the story about Phi Ta Khon or a ghost mask. This shows the effort of maintaining their self-awareness. It is not surprising the Luang Phrabang Laotians in Thailand still maintain the same self awareness and culture although they have lived here for over 300 years.

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