

THE MYTHS OF CHAO PHO PAK HUENG: THE DYNAMIC OF THE SACRED NARRATIVES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL SPACE IN THAI-LAO BORDER COMMUNITIES¹

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Abstract

This article is responding to 2 questions: 1) what roles do the myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng (Chao Ong Luang) (เจ้าพ่อปากเหืองหรือเจ้าองค์หลวง), the sacred narratives found near the Thai-Lao borderland in the Pak Hueng community of Chiang Khan District, Loei Province, Thailand and in the Pak Nam Hueng community of Ken Thao, Xayabouly Province, Laos, play in constructing a physical sacred space and a spiritual sacred space through personal symbols, objects, places and rituals, and culturally, what do they communicate?; 2) what roles do the dynamic sacred narratives on Chao Pho Pak Hueng play in constructing a social space for the Thai-Lao borderland people in relation to the social and the political

contexts? The analysis was based on symbols, symbolic meanings, concepts of sacred space and social space.

1. Introduction

The findings indicate that the myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng were sacred narratives that reflected their meaning through the following symbols:

1) Person: Chao Pho Pak Hueng, the ruler of Panjanakhorn, (เมืองปัญจนคร) was Chinese (race: Haw). He played a significant role in bringing a sacred Buddha image into the community.

2) Object: Phra Siangthaai, (พระเสียงทาย) or the Buddha of prophecy, a Buddha image which was considered a sacred object. Phra Siangthaai was believed to be a son of Chao Pho Pak Hueng.

3) Place: the estuary of Hueng River (แม่น้ำเหือง) and Wernkham (เวินคำ); it was believed that the estuary was the place where the cave of Chao Pho Pak Hueng's treasures that were under protection of his son were located; Wernkham was the place where Phra Chao Ton Luang (พระเจ้าตนหลวง) was sunk.

4) Sacred rituals: *Bai Si Su Khwan* (บายศรีสู่ขวัญ) (the ritual of welcoming), *Liang Pee* (งานเลี้ยงปี) (the ritual annual feast for spirits) and *Suang Huer* (บุญสว่างเรือ) (the ritual of boat racing) were like meeting places between Chao Pho Pak Hueng and his followers. These symbols helped to construct the sacred spaces both physically and spiritually through the concepts of Buddhism and primitivism. They represented a sense of the cultural root of Lao: Lan Chang, Luang

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Phrabang. The concepts and the sense were reproduced through the narratives and *Heet Khong* (ฮีตคอง) (customs and traditions) for the purpose of security in the community. Moreover, it has been found that the myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng had some dynamics in relation to the social context. The politics along the Thai-Lao border also played a role in building a sense of history and ethnicity which, in the early stage of settling the communities, concentrated the minds of the people on the newly established space and tied them together. During the reign of King Rama V, there was a change of nationality to Thai. Clues to the conflict and the argument with the state authorities over the acceptance of the new nationality are also reflected in the myths. However, the myths and the rituals concerning Chao Pho Pak Hueng were symbols representing the community identity. Such practices were passed from generation to generation and tied the minds of people from both sides of the Hueng River together. As a result, the spiritual space and the social space constructed a unity of the peoples across the borders of Thailand and Laos.

2. Background of the Pak Nam Hueng Communities

Hueng river is an important river in the northeastern region of Thailand. Some parts of the river in the Na Haeo District, Dan Sai District, Tha Li District, and Chiang Khan District of Loei Province, in Thailand and in the Bortaen District, Ken Thao District in Xayabouly Province, Laos, are treated as the natural border between Thailand and Laos. The river originates from a mountain in the Na Haeo District of Loei Province in Thailand. It joins the Mae Khong River in the Pak Hueng community of Chiang Khan District in Loei Province, Thailand. The Pak Hueng community on the right bank of the river consists of three villages: Ban

Na Jaan, Ban Tha Dee Mee and Ban Khok Ng-ew in the Pak Tom Subdistrict of Chiang Khan District in Loei Province, Thailand. The Pak Hueng community on the left bank of the river consists of three villages: Ban Boun Kla, Ban Mai Wernkham and Ban Huay La which are all in Ken Thao District of Xayabouly Province of Laos.

There are some myths concerning the estuary area of the Hueng River on the left bank. According to a study by Saratassananan (1992: 37-43) on the myths and the history of Pak Hueng town, there was a deserted town called Panjanakhorn (ปัญจนคร) or Pengjaan town (เมืองเปงจาน) ruled by many rulers from generation to generation; and there was a ruler who had a beautiful daughter named Khamkong (นางคำทอง). One day, a weird phenomenon occurred when a huge rainbow came and ate a lot of people in the town. The ruler and his people except for the daughter left the town. Her father put her in a big drum for safety. Panjanakhorn became a deserted town. Many days later, a handsome young man called Thao Khatanam (ท้าวคัตนาม), who was originally from Krung Srisattanakhanahut (กรุงศรีสัตนาคนหุต) (Vientiane) came to the town. He was a brave young man. Before leaving for the town he had killed a giantess who gave him a magic stick before she died. The magic stick would bring death if its head were pointed; while the other end would bring life if it was pointed. Thao Khatanam found that there were no people in the town so, he walked into the temple and beat the drum to see if anybody was still there. To his surprise, he heard a scream from the drum and when he opened it, he found a beautiful woman—Khamkong - inside. He had saved her life.

When Thao Khatanam had killed the huge rainbow, before it had died, it had given him a magic object. He used the magic stick to point to all the bones and the skeletons around the town to and bring them back to life and make them human again. When all the people who had escaped from the town heard the good news, they came back to the town – Panjanakhorn. Later, Thao Khatanam married Khamkong and returned to rule his own town: Vientiane.

From the historical dimension, Panjanakhorn town or Pak Hueng town was founded by Paya Julanee (พญาจุลณี) who led his people from the north to establish their own town. The Lan Chang chronicle states that the town was set up in B.E. 2225 (1682). In B.E. 2238 (1695), Luang Phrabang and Vientiane split into two kingdoms. Luang Phrabang established Pak Hueng and Chiang Khan (the former Chiang Khan) as its border towns. Vientiane also appointed Chiang Khan (the former Chiang Khan) as its border town.

In B.E. 2321 (1778), the late Thonburi period (สมัยธนบุรี), Thailand merged all the towns in Lan Chang kingdom and directed more people to settle in Pak Hueng. Afterwards, the king of Thailand designated Pak Hueng a colony of Nam Paad (Uttaradit), which was a major town at that time, so that Pak Hueng would be free from Luang Phrabang.

Between B.E. 2369 and 2370 (1826-1827), the King Rama III period, there was a Vientiane rebellion which was defeated by the Thai army. As a consequence, more people from the left bank of the Mae Khong River were brought to settle down on the right bank of the river in Pak Hueng. The King Rama III assigned Phra

Anuphinard (พระอนุพินาศ) (a ruler who was the forefather of the Kruathongdee family) to be the first Pak Hueng ruler and the town was then renamed 'Chiang Khan'. Between B.E. 2417 and 2418 (1874-1875), the former Chiang Khan, which was on the left side of the Mae Khong River (in Laos), was invaded by the Haw ethnic group. A lot of people from the former Chiang Khan moved to the new Chiang Khan (Pak Hueng town). However, it was not considered to be the right place, so the town was moved to Ban Tha Naa Jaan village and afterwards was given the name Chiang Khan, which exists in Chiang Khan District at present.

In B.E. 2436 (1893) (year of 112 of Rattanakosin Era), the land on the left side of the Mae Khong River was taken over by the French. People from ancient Chiang Khan did not want to submit to French government, so some of them moved to settle in the former Pak Hueng town and some moved to the new Chiang Khan. Until the year 2446 (1903), the land on the right side of the Mae Khong River opposite Luang Phrabang was taken over by French. Pak Hueng town on the left side of the river was also taken over by the French. The people then moved en masse to settle down in the new Chiang Khan and Pak Hueng became a deserted town.

According to myth, Pak Hueng is a town with long history and clues to its settlement in each period. The town was divided when Lan Chang was split into two kingdoms using the Hueng River as a natural border. During the Thonburi period, King Taksin had merged the two kingdoms into one. He directed more people to live in Pak Hueng and renamed the town 'Chiang Khan'. In the reign of King Rama V, there was a war with the Haw ethnic group which caused people to move from the former Chiang Khan to the

present Chiang Khan (Ban Tha Na Jaan). So, Pak Hueng became deserted. When the French colonized Laos, the Hueng River was used as a border between Thailand and Laos.

For the Ban Tha Dee Mee, (บ้านท่าดีหมี) Ban Naa Jaan, (บ้านนาจาน) and Ban Khok Ng-ew (บ้านคอกจั่ว) communities, it is recorded that their ancestors emigrated to the right side of the Hueng River because of the war with the Haw ethnic group. People escaped from the land in increasing numbers and left the town an almost abandoned place. During the period that Laos was under the control of the French government, the community was firstly settled in Ban Pak Tom (บ้านปากตม). Because of an outbreak of contagious disease, the people moved again to Ban Na Jaan, Ban Tha Dee Mee and Ban Khok Ng-ew where they established their farmlands, which have renamed villages to this day. For the Ban Boung Kla (บ้านบึงคล้า), Ban Huay La (บ้านห้วยหล้า) and Ban Mai Wernkham (บ้านใหม่เวินคำ) communities in Laos, it was perceived that, after the war with the Haw ethnic group, the people moved to the right side of the Hueng River. However, they crossed the border to work on their farms on the left side of the river as usual. After the change of Laos's administration in B.E. 2518 (1985), people were no longer allowed to freely cross the border for farm work and the farmlands became deserted. Subsequently, the Lao government gave an opportunity for people to take over the land and set up a community during the years 1983-1989 (Saenphansiri, 2010).

3. The Myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng and the Construction of Sacred Space

A sacred narrative is a supernatural narrative. It is related to a belief and faith in god or religion that the people of the community have, and is evident in the sacred words used when mentioning to their god or religion. A study of myth leads to the study of the meaning or the underlying meaning of a narrative which may be in the form of symbols, myths or rituals. Therefore, myth is considered a kind of communicative system that enables us to understand and perceive the cultural dimension of people in each ethnic group and society (Hongsuwan, 2007: 3). In addition myth plays a role in explaining the origins and the identity of an ethnic group. Ritual has a role in providing education and training in social order to the people of a community in order to maintain the behavioral standards of society. It is also a solution for the people who feel uncomfortable with the social regulations (NaThalang, 2009: 363).

The new perspective in studying myth as a narrative considers that the narrative deals with the construction of the meaning of things. The science of narrative is, therefore, related to symbol which is one of the important elements in forming meaning. As it is also involved with power, the new perspective of narrative seeks to ask why those meanings are formed. As the word 'sacred', it refers to the events, the country area and the space and time that are different from that of ordinary life. It reveals the existence of a supernatural power as a bridge crossing from the past to the present, from this life to the next life, to the god world, to the ghost world, to the spiritual world and to the eternal world. These powers exist in

different forms such as the natural environment or objects built by human beings, most of which are represented by symbols, traditions, rituals and performances (Kaw-anantakul, 2003: 2). In conclusion, the sacred narrative is an element forming the meaning of a thing and leads people to feel or witness a supernatural power, a power that is not to be found in real life. The tight relationship among the sacred narratives, the meanings of things and supernatural power plays a highly significant role in creating a sacred space and a social space. Referring to Eliade (1961: 20-29), the sacred world is in another dimension overlapping with the real world. It is boundless. It is timeless. It is the world of religion. For example, the entrance of a church is like a linking point between the ordinary world and the sacred world. The sacred world has symbols, rituals and sacred words. The miracle is also another link between the two dimensions. It makes the sacred world a sacred space. In the same way, the myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng which are the sacred narratives of the Pak Hueng communities have a significant role in creating a sacred space both physically and spiritually through personal symbols, objects, places and rituals in order to communicate cultural meaning and to construct the social space which will be described as follows:

3.1 The Diversity of the Myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng

Based on both documents and the memories of the people in the communities on both sides of the Hueng River, there is a diversity of the narratives on the myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng or Chao Ong Luang as follows:

Myth 1: Chao Pho Pak Hueng travelled from Luang Phrabang after the war with the Haw ethnic group (as related by the local people, they believe that the group was Haw (ฮ่อ) from the evidence of the accent spoken by the spirit through a medium). He left the town with his family and four children. When he reached Panjanakhorn or Pengjaan town, he rescued the princess – Khamkong – from a huge hawk that ate humans as its food. The princess then became his wife (Boonphrom: 2010).

Myth 2 Chao Pho Pak Hueng's parents lived in Ting cave in Luang Phrabang. During the war with the Haw ethnic group, he and his family together with Phra Siangthaai (พระสี่งทหาย) and Phra Chao Ton Luang, escaped from the town by raft along the Mae Khong River until they reached the estuary of the Hueng River, and his wife had an argument. The raft was wrecked and Phra Chao Ton Luang happened to drop into the water at Wernkham (เวินคำ). His wife left him for her family at Ban Pha Laad (บ้านผาลาด) (in Laos). As for him, he acquired a second wife named Eakkai (นางเอกไค้). Later, his first wife came back and they lived together in Thailand (Hompheng: 2010).

Myth 3 When the Lan Chang kingdom was divided into two parts, the people emigrated to Pak Hueng. They made a gold horse. Later, they were robbed by the Haw ethnic group but when the robbers arrived at the estuary of the Hueng River, they felt thirsty and drank the water from the river. The water gave them a severe stomachache and they all died. They became sacred spirits watching the estuary which was called Pak Nam Hueng.

Phra Chao Panjaraj (พระเจ้าปัญจราช) ruled Pak Hueng town. When there was a war with the Haw ethnic group, the ruler moved his people from the town. He also brought Phra Siangthaaai with him and kept the image in Ban Tha Dee Mee while Phra Chao Ton Luang was taken to Chiang Khan. However, on the way to the town, the raft was wrecked at Wernkham. Phra Chao Ton Luang was dropped into the water and sank beneath Mae Khong River. During the trip to Panjanakhorn, it is believed that Phra Chao Panjaraj was killed by the Haw ethnic group at the estuary of the Hueng River (Tunming, 2009: 69-70).

Myth 4 Chao Pho Pak Hueng was ethnically Haw. He escaped with his four children and two wives from the war in Luang Phrabang. He carried Phra Siangthaaai and his son named Thao Kong (ท้าวทอง) along with him. Another version of this myth says that Chao Pho Pak Hueng and his followers travelled along the Mae Khong River in order to take his treasures for donation in constructing Phra That Phanom (พระธาตุพนม). However, the *Phra That* was finished before his arrival so he desired to bury the treasures at Pak Tom. Unfortunately, he was killed before he could fulfill his desire (Tunming, 2009: 72-74).

Myth 5 Chao Pho Pak Hueng was a leader of Haw ethnic robbers. He invaded Pak Hueng town and was killed by the Thai army in the area called Pak Hueng. His soul then stayed in the estuary of Hueng River (Sapha: 2010).

Myth 6 Chao Pho Pak Hueng with his four children escaped from the war with the Haw ethnic group to live in Ban Tha Dee Mee, Thailand. He used a stick to

carry the two baskets of his children and a Buddha image called Phra Siang. The baskets were so heavy that the stick became bent (which is 'kong' in Lao language). Another version of the myth tells that, when the Lao people lost their faith in him, he emigrated to Thailand with his son and Phra Siangthaaai, a Buddha image (Tumsongkram: 2010).

All the myths about Chao Pho Pak Hueng are sacred narratives. Therefore, the narratives related to objects, places and rituals on Chao Pho Pak Hueng are also sacred and help to create a sacred space physically and spiritually through the following symbols:

3.2 Chao Pho Pak Hueng (Chao Ong Luang): Sacred Spirit

The diversity of the Chao Pho Pak Hueng myth in 3.1 presents the characteristics of Chao Pho Pak Hueng as a great robber and also a ruler. As a great robber, Chao Pho Pak Hueng was described as a leader of Haw ethnic robbers who came to steal a gold horse at the estuary of Hueng River and died there. In another myth, it is believed that he was killed by Thai soldiers as described in the story where Chao Pho Pak Hueng was the leader of Haw ethnic robbers that came to attack the towns around Hueng estuary and Chiang Khan but was beaten by the Thai army and died at the estuary of Hueng River. His spirit lives there. Another version of the myth tells that after the Lan Chang kingdom was divided, people emigrated to live around the Hueng River estuary. There they made a gold horse and later, Haw ethnic robbers came to take all the treasures of these people. When the robbers arrived at the Hueng River estuary, they felt thirsty so they drank

water from the river. After drinking, they had a bad stomachache and died at the estuary of the river and remained there as sacred spirits.

The role and behavior presented, on the other hand, was narrated in three versions. In the first, it was believed that Chao Pho Pak Hueng was Phra Chao Panjaraj who ruled Panjanakhorn and built Wat Luang, Phra Chao Ton Luang, Phra Siang, Phra Yaem and some Jataka allegories. During the war with Haw ethnic group, conducted on elephant, Phra Chao Panjaraj took treasures to hide at Ban Tha Dee Mee. He wished to move the big Buddha image called Phra Chao Ton Luang to Chiang Khan by raft. While transporting the Buddha image, the raft was wrecked at Wernthong and Phra Chao Ton Luang sank into the Mekong River at Pak Hueng estuary. After moving all the children, old women and treasures to hide them at the foot of the hill in the south of the town, Phra Chao Panjaraj returned to the war. No matter what the Haw robbers did to try to kill him, he did not die. He was immortal and could not be killed because he was an honest person who truly believed in Buddhism, and had the protection of magic against death. Finally, in order to save all his people, he surrendered to the robbers and told them to stab a wood stick into his anus which was the only way to kill him. After he died, the robbers dug for the hidden treasure but because of a magical phenomenon, the treasure could not be retrieved (Tunming, 2009: 72-74). In the second, it was believed that Chao Pho Pak Hueng or Chao Ong Luang was a great ruler in Luang Phrabang and had parents who lived in Ting Cave. During the war with the Haw ethnic group, he and his family, his wife named Oob Keaw (อุบแก้ว) and four children, together with Phra Siangthaa and Phra Wernthong escaped

from the town by a raft along Mae Khong River. When they reached the estuary of the Hueng River, he and his wife had an argument. The raft was wrecked and Phra Wernthong happened to fall into the river at the estuary. The couple agreed to end their relationship and live separately. Chao Pho Ong Luang and his four children, together with Phra Siang, landed at Pak Hueng town and afterwards he had three children with the second wife named Eakkai (เอกไค้). His first wife landed at Ban Pha Laad in Laos and had a new family. Later, she came back to Chao Pho Ong Luang after her new husband had died. When the war ended, his brothers and relatives moved to live in Pak Hueng with him (Hompeang, 2010).

Likewise, the myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng is also presented as Thao Khatanam (ท้าวกัดนาม). Chao Pho Pak Hueng (Thao Khatanam) was the ruler of Luang Phrabang who escaped in the Haw War with five children: Euey-Phrommajaree (เอื้อยพรมจारी), Aai Kong (อ้ายก่อง), Aai Phudao (อ้ายภูด้าว), Aai Siang (อ้ายเชียง), and Aai Thao La (อ้ายท้าวหล้า). Together with his son, Aikong, and Phra Siangthaa he sailed along Mae Khong River on a raft until they reached Panjanakhorn which was a quiet place without people and he decided to land at the town. In Panjanakhorn, he found Khamkong hidden inside a drum. He helped her and she told him the story of a gigantic rainbow coming to eat all people in the town and how she had been hidden inside the drum by her father. Before that time, the drum had had to be beaten three times a day in order to protect the town people from the gigantic rainbow. Phra Chao Ong Luang killed the gigantic rainbow by cutting its tongue and he used his resurrection stick to resurrect the town people and Khamkong's father. Later,

Khamkong became his ladylove. The myth was then the story of *Champa Si Ton* (เจ้าฟ้าสี่ต้น) (Boonphrom, 2010).

It can be explained that the roles which Chao Pho Pak Hueng had as the leader of the Haw robbers who stole treasures from the community and then forced with bad phenomenon and died, and the role as a Haw robber who was killed by Thai army were created to describe his characteristics in relation to the history of the Haw war based on the bias and hatred that the people had towards the Haws in wartime. It can be interpreted that the myth was used to explain the characteristics of Chao Pho Pak Hueng, who was Haw, in using Chinese when possessing the medium. When time had passed and the community had been built, the belief in the sacred ancestor spirit was created to tell the myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng as the ruler. It can be seen that the myth was created in order to suggest that he was the hero in Haw wartime who sacrificed himself for his people or to tell that he was a true observer of the precepts, a Bodhi who gave a great support to Buddhism. More importantly, the myth was created in correlation with the story of Phra Siangthai which was the holy Buddhist image of the community. It was told that Chao Pho Pak Hueng was the one who brought Phra Siangthai into the community and Phra Siangthai was like his son. For the goodness and the power of Buddhism, the myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng developed from a bad spirit to a good spirit which related to Hongsuwan (2007: 6) who stated that at the beginning of legend contained in various Tai stories, there would be bad characters such as *Yak* (giant) and ghosts who were to be believed the representatives of evil, ethnic groups without precepts, and all manner of scary things. However, in the last part of the stories, those things were taught to believe

in Buddhism and to do good things and became dharma practitioners. So the image of the *Yak* and spirit without the precepts were the representatives of the bad, and the image of the *Yak* and spirits with Buddhist precepts in mind were the representative of the good. It can be seen that the myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng explained that he was a Haw who robbed the town but he became the hero of the community because he was a developed spirit.

Considering the stories of the role and the behavior of Chao Pho Pak Hueng or Chao Ong Luang as the ruler in the context of the history of the creation of Hueng River estuary community, the stories described the way of life that the people had and their experiences in war, unending emigration and secession. The legend of Chao Pho Pak Hueng would be presented depicting him as king of the deserted Panjanakhorn at Pak Nam Hueng. He was an ethnic Haw but he was a Buddhist and the creator of invaluable community property. During the war, he was a war-hero, a leader who protected the people and their property so his role and behavior was presented as that of a Bodhisattawa named Khatanam who conquered the gigantic rainbow and revived the Panjanakhorn people. This is the legend of the royal spirit in the Pak Nam Heung community that was constructed by relating their hero to the legend of Panjanakhorn through his role as a ruler in local history during the Haw war at the Pak Nam Hueng where the hero fought with the Haw robbers to the death. The legend is related to community property that are Phra Yam and Phra Siang and Phra Chao Ton Luang as their king who became a creator and a benefactor to Buddhism and the legend that is related to local literature and spread widely along

the Khong River was that he is like the Khatanam Bodhisattawa who is brave grateful and believes in Buddhism.

His behavior and his role as a ruler indicate that the legend or myths created an identity and a sense of unity for the Pak Nam Hueng community; that is, the people who lived in the Pak Nam Hueng area of Thailand are refugees from Pak Hueng town on the left bank of the Hueng River or are from the old Chiang Khan (Chanakham). Whatever the reasons were for them to move to Thailand, war, to escape from French colonization and seeking for a new homeland, when they came and settled down in a new place, they needed spiritual refuge and a community identity to explain the roots of their identity so people in the community had their own myths and memories to explain that they were from Lan Chang or Luang Phrabang and they had come to Pak Hueng or Panjanakhorn which was deserted owing to Haw war. Pak Hueng is the place which had been governed by rulers and the Pak Hueng people have their own supernatural ancestors. According to their myths, Chao Pho Pak Hueng was a king from Luang Prabang and his parents lived at Ting Cave but he immigrated to Panjanakhorn with Phra Siang and Phra Chao Ton Luang and rescued his mistress Khamkong.

It can be interpreted from these myths that the Pak Hueng people created them to explain the community identity and give a sense of ethnic unity and a sense of ethnic history which is related to their local literature – Thao Khatanam (ท้าวคัตนาม), and to Ting Cave at Luang Phrabang with the myth of Pha-Hung (ผาฮุ้ง) at Pak-U (ปากอุ) where mistress Khamkong hid in the big drum to keep safe from the rainbow and

where the people were killed by the rainbow. The myths are also related to the history of the Haw war and inform them about their ancestors, the roots of their community, their Laotian ethnicity and their ancestor who was a great and brave ruler of Luang Phrabang. The occurrence of the Haw war drove their ancestors to move to take over the abandoned town of Panjanakhorn.

The myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng reflect the lives of people in a state of war. They are separated from their families, relatives and spouses. When their country is at peace, their relatives can discover each other and immigrate to live together in a new land. The myths are symbols communicating to the coming generations that it is decidedly hard to settle down and create a community in a state of war because relatives become estranged from one another. So, it has been said in the myth that it plays a good role in recording the traces of the religious conflict and ethnic group conflict. It is the record of Thai ancestors' attitudes which have been passed on to the coming generations in the form of myth instead of in the form of fact; so myth is for communicating a "message" through a symbol system with the complexity of a thinking and belief system (Jaruworn, 2006: 394) so the myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng explain the important background to the Pak Hueng community in Thailand, their long history, their ancestors and the roots of Laotian ethnic group from Lan Chang kingdom.

In conclusion, in the myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng it is believed that he was either a king or a Haw robber. The researcher considers that the myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng as a robber would be the former version and the version of Chao Pho Pak Hueng as a ruler was told later. The

change of time, the foundation of the community and the belief in the ancestor spirits may have influenced the content of the myth highlighting the role of Chao Pho Pak Hueng as a hero who sacrificed himself for his people and had a true belief in Buddhism. It can be said that the myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng have played a role in creating a community identity and a sense of ethnic history for the people living at Pak Nam Hueng.

3.3 Pak Nam Hueng and Wernkham: Sacred Places

Sacred places are related to the myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng because there is a myth about Pak Nam Hueng telling of the cave of Naga. In the cave, Chao Aai Thao La was the guardian of the estuary of the Hueng River and the treasure that had sunk in the water at the time the raft had been broken. It was also Wernkham (เวินคำ), a place in the Mae Khong River near the estuary of Hueng River where the Phra Chao Ton Luang (Buddha image) sank. There was a narrative in the communities that, previously, when the water in the river was high, there would be a loud noise which was believed to be caused by a current of the water hitting the Buddha image under the river. When the tide was low, people who went fishing would be able to see the image. Narratives on the Buddha image and the sacred places were created in relation to the myth. That is the Buddha image or the treasure was guarded by Chao Pho Pak Hueng, the owner. It represents a link with the former perception of the Naga, Chao Aai Thao La whose cave was at the estuary of the Hueng River, and the perception of Buddhism. The two perceptions were linked and applied to the myth in order to explain that Wernkham and Pak Hueng were scary water areas. No one dared to

invade these places. The treasure buried there, as told in the myth, belonged to the community as a whole. At the estuary of the Hueng River on the Thai bank was the place where the house of Chao Pho Pak Hueng's spirit resided. It was a respected place for people travelling by the Hueng River in the past. People who travelled by boat would take off their hats and pour some liquor into the river or they would *phanom Mue* (ประนมมือ) (putting the palms of hands together and bowing the head close to the tips of the fingers) to show respect to the spirit when passing by the area. This was regarded as a symbolic ritual to be performed when entering into the sacred spaces.

To define the meaning of these sacred spaces is to delineate the area in the ordinary world as the area of spirits or a sacred space by relating the Buddhist dimension to the former view point. Wernkham is the place of Phra Chao Ton Luang, a Buddha image that was a treasure of Cha Pho Pak Hueng. The estuary of the Hueng River is the place of treasure and the cave of Chao Aai Thao La, a Naga. Kaw-anantakul (2003: 2) indicated that in the process of creating a sacred space there were many sacred spaces. It could be a natural area such as under a big tree, a cliff, a mountain or an invention of humans. These things are mediums that people in each culture select as a means that leads to the answer of how the supernatural power exists. The estuary of the Hueng River and Wernkham then could signify the sacred space of the spirit: Chao Pho Pak Hueng, and Chao Aai Thao La. When people passed by, they would pay respect and try not to do things that were not allowed. People witnessed the communication with a sacred person and could request for protection and wishes from the space. In turn, if anyone did

something that was prohibited by the supernatural power in the area, that person would be punished by death.

3.4 Sacred Objects

According to the myth, Chao Pho Pak Hueng brought Phra Chao Ton Luang and Phra Siangthaai Buddha image into Pak Hueng estuary together with his sons. The images were in one basket and his sons were in the other basket. The two baskets were put at each end of a stick for balance. However, because of the heavy weight, the stick bent. The word 'bent' in the Lao language is 'kong' which later became the name of his son, 'Aai Kong'. Phra Siangthaai was like a child to Chao Pho Pak Hueng. Before organizing any religious event or ritual, *Pho Saen* had to worship and inform the image. The narrative on the sacredness of Phra Siangthaai tells that once the religious hall in the temple was burnt down no harm was done to the Buddha image. Another was about a thief who tried to steal the image but became faint hearted and failed to do it and, also, the story of a Chiang Khan ruler who was afraid of losing Phra Siang, so he moved the image to Chiang Khan town but, when he arrived at Pak Hueng, suddenly, the weather became stormy. So, the image was taken back to the former place. These sacred stories were a combination of the two dimensions of the primitive and the Buddhist perspectives joined in order to create the significance of Phra Siangthaai in terms of symbol or as a representative of the Lord Buddha. The image was also regarded as a child of Chao Pho Pak Hueng. Aai Kong and Aai Phudao, two of the four sons of Chao Pho Pak Hueng were the guardians of the image. This implied a relationship between the power of the Lord Buddha and of the spirit; one which was flexible

depending on how the people defined its meaning. If Phra Siang's status was as Chao Pho Pak Hueng's child, it would show that the power of spirit was stronger than that of the Lord Buddha. However, the Buddha's power was able to turn the evil into a good spirit.

The construction of the meaning on the sacredness of Phra Siangthaai, the production of the narratives on the miracle and the magic of powers of Phra Siangthaai which no one could own and even the leader with foremost power of the town as sacred narratives signified that Phra Siangthaai was not only a treasure of Chao Pho Pak Hueng, it was also a treasure of the community since their ancestor was the one who brought it to the town. Communications, by signifying the sacred space through the sacred objects, reflected the roots of the people in the Pak Hueng community. They had had a long faith in Buddhism since ancient times. Therefore, they had the right and power to possess the sacred Buddha image. This can be related to the saying that the symbolic narrative was constructed to signify its meaning in relation to power. The new perspective of narrative then poses the question on why the constructed meaning is signified like that. (Kaewthep, 2010: 252)

3.5 Sacred Rituals

All year round, there are significant rituals related to Chao Pho Pak Hueng and his followers as follows: in the 6th lunar month, there is *Bai Si Su Khwan* (บายศรีสู่ขวัญ) (the ritual of welcoming) for Chao Pho Pak Hueng and his followers; in the 7th lunar month, there is the *Liang Pee* ritual (a ritual of feast for spirits), the feast is conducted via the medium and is treated as a ceremony for the spirits; at the end of

Buddhist lent (the 1st day of the waning moon of the 11th lunar month), it is a tradition for the community to have a long-boat race to please the spirits. Such rituals reflect the culture and the sense of Laoness rooted in the Lan Chang kingdom. The *Bai Si Su Kwan* ritual does not only reflect the concept of *Khwan* or soul which is the primitive perspective of Tai-Lao ethnicity but it is also the meeting space among the sacred souls. *Liang Pee* (งานเลี้ยงปี) is a ritual of feasts for the spirits to show that the community is grateful to them as they are the respected ancestors who are bringing all the fruitfulness, and joy to the community before starting the New Year which is before the Buddhist Lent period. The *Linag Pee* is also the space for the reunion of all the descendants of Chao Pho Pak Hueng. The ritual reflects the root of Laoness and the high culture in the royal palace of Luang Phrabang. The communication is done through mediums. The priority in taking possession of the medium is based on seniority: father, mother and the young, respectively. The young will show respect to their seniors. On meeting, all the mediums will embrace one another as if they were from the same family while Chao Pho Pak Hueng sits on the highest seat under protection of the left *Saen* ((พ่อ)แสนซ้าย) and the right *Saen* ((พ่อ)แสนขวา) (*Saen* means a person who is assigned to serve Chao Pho Pak Hueng, one sitting on the right and one on the left). For security purposes, the two *Saen* will taste all the food and drink before it is offered to the *Chao Pho*. The favorite ritual of Chao Pho Pak Hueng is boat racing. It has been said that the result of the race does not be a matter to him, what he wants is to have his descendants get together and have the race because it was the tradition of the King of Laos in the ancient time. It is also part of the culture

of the river-based community people to have a boat racing to worship to the Naga. Singyabut (2010: 142) indicates that *Boon Suang Huer* (บุญสว่างเฮือ) or the boat racing tradition is an activity performed in the Khan River during the 9th lunar month. As it was regarded as a royal tradition, it was named *Phra Rajaprapaynee Boon Yueng Khan* (พระราชประเพณีบุญเชียงคาน) (the *Boon Yueng Khan* Royal Tradition). It is sometimes called the Ritual of Khan River (แม่น้ำคาน) which is considered another sacred tradition. However, joy can also be found in the tradition. Taking into consideration the myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng, it reveals some corresponding clues that the Chao Pho emigrated from Luang Phrabang and his parents were in Ting Cave at the estuary of the U-river, so, undoubtedly, the ritual reflects the root of Lan Chang Laoness.

The rituals of Chao Pho Pak Hueng have been reproduced to pass on the ideology of Lan Chang Laoness. They play a role in maintaining the ethnic identity, explaining the ethnic roots and the cultural strategy used in getting community members together. The role of myths in social tradition viewed by Bascom (1965: 279-298) that there is a relation between myth and ritual. A myth is a narrative which is make-believedly true in ancient times. It is treated as a sacred narrative and always has some relation to the belief in God and ritual. Ritual is also significant to a culture in creating the identity of an ethnic group or of a community. A particular ritual will be related to a particular ethnic group or a particular community that created that ritual. Therefore, to humans, ritual is an important cultural strategy as it gives support to let them live their lives with psychological and social security. It can be concluded that belief and myth are

important elements in explaining the origin of a ritual.

The sacred narratives of Chao Pho Pak Hueng analyzed through the people the places, the objects and the rituals indicate that Pak Hueng communities are meaningful physically due to their spiritual richness in the dimension of Buddhism, Brahminism, and primitive perspectives. In the view of Vallibhodom (2010: 12-36) on the creation of sacred space, he points out that the physical space is meaningful to the settlement of any community as space cannot exist without meaning to human beings. On the contrary, human beings always signify a geographical space based on the geophysical conditions supportive to the settlement of a community. Therefore, every social culture attaches a sacred meaning to any spaces with a unique geographical condition. In the same way, the myths of the Pak Hueng communities are related to the history of their emigration, the fight against the difficulties of life on a land which was divided into two separate kingdoms and the separation from homeland, family and kinship. The settlement of a new community needed stability and identity. The community then created the myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng to emphasize history and reproduced the stories from the past in order to pass on the ideology, power and ethnic identity to the younger generation. Tresidder (1999: 141) views the creation of a sacred space as the creation of cultural, social and historical treasures. It is a place of community identity. The sacred narratives and rituals at the Pak Hueng communities reflect the root of Laoness in Lan Chang, Luang Phrabang. The stories have been reproduced over and over from ancestors to descendants. They have been continued through community tradition in order to

maintain community security in the new land. The creation of the sacred space is a combination of the primitive perspective and the Buddhist perspective. The combination is a clue to community thoughts that are full of the belief in spirits, Naga, giants and monsters. These supernatural things were, afterwards influenced by the stronger power, Buddha's power. They developed moral characteristics and, though there is an acceptance of the Buddha's power, the primitive perspective is still to be found perfectly mixed with the new belief in Buddha. This is considered a typical aspect of Thai myth as viewed by Jaruworn (2006: 389). He points out that the conflicts reflected in the myths are through the paradigm of the characters in the myth. The conflicts are mostly found between human beings and supernatural power, the conflict between the belief in the primitive perspective and that in Buddhism. The creation of sacred space through the symbols: people, objects, places, and rituals in the Pak Hueng communities is the change of physical space to spiritual or mental space which is a kind of strategy in creating social space of the Pak Hueng communities which will be explained as follows.

4. Dynamic of the Myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng and the Construction of Social Space

Based on the myths and the history of the Pak Hueng communities, the people living on the right bank of the Hueng River in Thailand believe that their ancestors were from Panjanakhorn who had emigrated to and from Thailand, on and off, and eventually settled down in Thailand and became Thai people. The Hueng River became a natural border between the two countries: Thailand and Laos. The

brotherly relationship between the two was also discontinued for a period of time. However, the Hueng River presently is no longer a border between two countries but it is a river symbolizing the relationship among people living in Hueng communities. The dynamics of the Hueng community settlement has been reflected through the dynamics of the sacred myths and the narratives on Chao Pho Pak Hueng as follows:

4.1 The Myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng, the Construction of Identity and the Public Sense of the Communities

The people living in the Pak Hueng community in Thailand are the group that emigrated from the other Pak Hueng community and the former Chiang Khan (Sanakham) which are on the left side of Hueng River in Laos. No matter what was the reason for them to leave their homeland to seek a new land for settlement, when they settled down as a community, they needed protection to psychologically secure their lives and needed the creation of an identity to explain their history, background and roots. Therefore, the community created narratives from their memories of their past experiences that they were from Laos, Lan Chang, Luang Phrabang. Due to the war with the Haw ethnic group, their ancestors had emigrated to Pak Hueng town or Panjanakhorn which was a deserted town. The town had been ruled by many rulers from generation to generation. Their ancestors possessed some magic and part of the myth said that Chao Pho Pak Hueng was a king from Luang Phrabang. His parents lived in Ting Cave. He moved to Thailand with two Buddha images: Phra Siang and Phra Chao Ton Luang. During the trip, he found a town called Panjanakhorn and happened to

help the princess, Kham Kong. Some versions say that Chao Pho Pak Hueng's ethnicity was Haw. He was about 13 feet high. He brought some sacred objects with him on the way to Thailand to help in constructing Phra That Phanom. From the myths, we can infer that the purpose of creating the narratives was to express the community identity and to create an ethnic and historical sense among its members. The strategy involved local stories like *Thao Khatanam*, a story that linked Ting Cave in Luang Phrabang which contained the narrative of Pha Hung (ผาฮุ้ง) (Hung cliff) in Pak U River (ปากแม่น้ำอุ). The story was about a woman named Kham Kong who hid inside a drum. The people in the town were all eaten by a monster. The myth was also linked to the history of the Haw war in order to explain the Lao ethnic roots of the community. It was reported that their ancestor was the king of Laos, Luang Phrabang, who was brave. However, because of the war with the Haw ethnic group, their ancestors moved to rule Panjanakhorn which was a deserted town. He became the ruler of the town for acceptable reasons.

The myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng also reflect the lives of people during the war which brought them separation from family and the desire to seek for a new safe place for settlement. Based on the myths, while travelling to escape from the war, Chao Pho Pak Hueng had an argument with his wife and the raft which they used for travelling happened to fall apart. They were separated and had new families of their own. Later, they came back to live together and settled down on the land on the right side of the Hueng River in Thailand. The myths are symbols to communicate to the younger generation about their ancestors' lives during war period. As has been said, myth plays a role

in recording a history of conflicts in different dimensions, and religions and ethnic groups. In comparison to the written record, myths have collected more detail on the perspectives of Thai-Tai ancestors in ancient times and have passed it on to the younger generations. It is therefore a communication of 'information' through a symbolic system. It is even more complicated as it includes many aspects and dimensions of thought and belief (Jaruworn, 2006: 394). That is why Chao Pho Pak Hueng is most significant to the Hueng community in Thailand.

The Pak Hueng community on the left side of the Hueng River in Laos was just established around 30 years ago. The people living there are from different places and from several ethnic groups. There are some narratives that serve to create the community identity. It said that in the last life, Chao Pho Pak Hueng used to live in Panjanakhorn. The treasure, Phra Chao Ton Luang, which was under the water at Wernkham and Chao Pho Pak Hueng all used to be at Panjanakhorn before leaving for Thailand. So, the people still pay respect to Chao Pho Pak Hueng as it is understood that he was their ancestor in the last life. The new community at Wernkham was named Wernkham Village and this shows that the community defined itself based on the myths in order to explain their right to set up the community in that place and imply to their ethnic root. They took the meaning of the space by using the name 'Wernkham' which is the sacred place with which to name their community. They created a sense of unity among the different races to include the Lao Lum (ลาวลຸ່ມ) (Lower Lao) and the Lao Therng (ลาวเทิง) (Upper Lao) and the highland Laos by motivating people to have the same respected sacred spirit in order to bind the people minds as one.

The sacred narratives of Chao Pho Pak Hueng during the beginning of the community establishment indicated the roles of the sacred myths in creating the ethnic identity, the sense of unity and the sense of the ethnic roots of those people. This aspect concerns with the study of Wangkeeree (2008: 391) on the literature in Dan Sai, Lom Sak, and Lom Kao Districts. The findings indicate the creation of the identity of the Lao in Luang Phrabang in the early period of emigration and are related to the historical sense of the emigration, the community establishment and the respect for the Lao hero from Luang Phrabang. The creation is not just to define their identity and to have a community history and background but it also constitutes the claim to have the right over the new land which includes emphasizing the ethnic sense of the Lao from Luang Phrabang which will always remain in their minds.

4.2 The Myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng, the Response and the Negotiations with the Thai Government

The Pak Hueng community people became Thai citizens after the Haw ethnic war during the reign of King Rama V and they had to accept all the Thai authorities. However, their sense of their ethnic roots still remained. The myth indicated that Chao Pho Pak Hueng died in the estuary of the Hueng River because of the Thai army. During his travels to Chiang Khan, he brought along Phra Chao Ton Luang as he wished to place the image in the town as a safe place. However, his raft was sunk before reaching the town. Chiang Khan was considered a safe place for the image because it was the center of authority. The sacred narrative of Phra Siang, a child of Chao Pho Pak Hueng, states that no one was able to steal it and this implies that the

Pak Hueng community in Thailand had a sense of being of Lao ethnicity even though they had already become Thai citizens. They were controlled by a central authority that had tried to possess the community treasure and to rule the community. The myths were therefore created to reflect their acceptance of and their negotiations with the Thai authorities and also to express their right to protect the highly valued treasure of their ancestors.

The myths have not only reflected the negotiations that the Pak Hueng community in Thailand had the state authorities but the rituals related to Chao Pho Pak Hueng also indicated the creation of a social space for the Pak Hueng community in Thailand and in the Ken Thao Province of Laos in B.E. 2518 (1975) (before the revolution in Laos). There were some narratives found in Ken Thao Province such as the story of their ancestors who came from Panjanakhorn – Pu Lan (ปู่ล้าน) and Ya Ng-onk (ย่าหงอก) (Grandpa Lan and Grandma Ng-onk) and the story about a medium of Chao Pho Pak Hueng and a medium of Chao Pho Ken Thao (เจ้าพ่อแก่นท้าว) and his followers. Even though the two communities have been separated into two towns from different countries, whenever and wherever there are any traditional events held, the mediums of Chao Pho Pak Hueng from the Pak Hueng communities will always participate in the events which are, for example, the *Bai Si Su Khwan*, Buddhist event of the 7th lunar month. Such practices show that the communities have faith in the same spirits, share the same ethnic roots and come from the same hometown. This creates a sense of unity among these people. The unity acts as a tool in co-constructing a social space for them in order to negotiate with the

authorities of the two states. The use of custom and tradition as a strategy for building friendship over the borderland was studied by Thongkhanarak (2008: 105). According to this study, during the year B.E. 2480 (1937), *Boon Phawate* (บุญพระเวสสันดร) was a significant religious event in a village in Mueang District, Nakhorn Phanom Province. The event was held annually. It was the opportunity for family members who lived in long distance places to come back home because they could not visit the family so often because of the poor transportation. Some lived in Laos and had to travel by boat across the Mae Khong River to join the event. It was a time of family-reunion. The study of Petkham (2010: 144) found that the beliefs and the rituals of *Phi Chao Huen Sam Phra Ong* (ผีเจ้าเฮือนสามพระองค์) or *Hor Chao Tong Kwang* (หอเจ้าโต้งกว้าง) in Nakhorn Phanom Province was one of the processes in creating a sacred space to maintain the existing economic and social areas. It also continued the social relationship network in the lower Mae Khong area.

4.3 The Myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng and the Nationality Change to ‘Thai’

As time has passed, the people of the Pak Hueng community in Thailand have changed their nationality to ‘Thai’ and accepted being governed by the Thai authorities. However, their ethnic sense of being Lao, Lan Chang still remains. This can be seen through the myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng or the former Chao Ong Luang, after he escaped from Luang Phrabang to Thailand during the time of war. Because the people in Thailand did not pay respect to him, his spirit house was built at the estuary of the Hueng River in

Thailand and that, he was named Chao Pho Pak Hueng. After settling in Thailand, his wife (named Oob Kaew, นางอุบแก้ว), his brother, and relatives from Laos also moved to join him in Thailand. Chao Pho Pak Hueng was Chao Pho Pu Lup (เจ้าพ่อปู่หลุบ)'s brother. He was the person who brought Buddhism into the community. He did not like I-sarn performances or the *Morlum* (หมอลำ) on Nang Kham Kong (*Champa Si Ton*, จำปาสีตัน) and *Sung Sin Chai* (สังสินไช). A narrative said that Chao Pho Pak Hueng disliked Aai Pak Kwang (อ้ายปากกว้าง) (Aai Tongkwang living in the estuary of the Krading River) who was his son-in-law; so, he hid his daughter called Phromajaree at Ken Thao town. The story indicated that the myth and the narrative were changed and pointed to the reason why these people moved to Thailand, a land of peace and freedom. They became Thai citizens because they had built a kinship relationship with Chao Pho Pu Lup (a royal spirit guarding Dong Lan in Phupaen mountains). They denied their Lao ethnicity through the myth of Naang Kham Kong and they rejected Aai Pak Kwang, a Naga, who had some relationship with their origin in Lao. Wongtase (2000: 4-5) opines that the myth of Urangkhathat (อุรังคธาตุ) indicates that Naga was a symbol of the ethnic people who originally resided in Nong Sae (หนองแส) in the south of Yunnan Province, who emigrated in small groups to settle along the banks of the Mae Khong River and ended up at Kaeng Li Phi (แก่งหลี่ผี) which was the end of the waterway made by Naga. In other words, it was the story of the people who emigrated to the Mae Khong area in the northeastern part of Thailand.

The refusal Lao ethnicity implies a political issue because the Hueng River was the border between the two countries. The people residing on the right bank of the Hueng River were Thai citizens according to the building of the nation state and the people refused to be Lao ethnics as is reflected in the myth. There are different versions of the myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng because it was modified by incorporating the concept of Buddhism into the myth to make the space more refined. This is how they created their identity in the new land to identify their higher civilization. This was the strategy to make their myth a Buddhist story.

The dynamic aspect and the role of myth, as mentioned above, constitute the nature of the narrative that the communities invented based on the original story. The invention was modified in some parts to suit the local environment and social context at each period of time. The major purpose of these narratives was to repeat and reproduce the story of the past with a combination of ideology, power and ethnic identity (Hobsbawm, 1998). The Pak Hueng communities changed to become 'Thai' and 'Lao' according to factors of social and political context that have changed through the passage of time. The myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng have shaped the ideology of Lao ethnicity from Lan Chang. The rituals and the myths about Chao Pho Pak Hueng have built up a unity among Thai people, among Lao people, and also between Thai and Lao people. The myths explain the ethnic roots and the characteristics of the people residing at the banks along the Hueng River. Kaewthep (2010: 266-267) states that a narrative has the function of shaping the original ideology and making it sustainable, in building a unity in society in explaining the phenomenon and

supplying facts on the characteristics of the people, nation, things, places and actions which is the new paradigm in storytelling.

4.4 The Myth of Chao Pho Pak Hueng and the Present Construction of Social Space along the Thai-Lao Borderland

Currently, the Pak Hueng communities on the banks of the Hueng River still maintain a relationship in spite of the fact that there is a border (the Hueng River) dividing them. They still have the same daily life activities involving crossing the river back and forth. People from Laos will cross the river to shop at the local market on the river bank in Thailand every Wednesday and Sunday. Some are workers on farms in Thailand. Whenever there are any traditional events, the people from both river banks will always get together to celebrate. They have the same faith in Chao Pho Pak Hueng who will guard them when travelling no matter whether by waterway or land-way, solve problems, eliminate all difficulties, be reliable on economic issues and safeguard the communities' treasures.

Because Chao Pho Pak Hueng is considered a highly respected ancestor to the people of the two communities, the people have always shared a sense of kinship. They will join ceremonies together such as *Bai Si Su Khwan*, and *Liang Pee*. Together, they will donate to the *Liang Pee* feast. The most important activity is participating in the boat racing at the end of the Buddhist Lent period (*Auk Phansa*, ออกรพรรษา). One narrative suggests that, at first, the boat race was organized only on the river bank in Thailand. The purpose was not for competing but only to please the Chao Pho

Pak Hueng. Later, the people on the river bank in Laos who also had faith in the spirit participated in the racing. The local administrative organization (Pak Tom Sub district) has allocated a budget to support the activity since the year B.E. 2540 (1997). The boat racing or *Suang Huer* has become more meaningful and enjoyable and a greater number of people from both river banks have joined the activity. The unity of the two communities is, thus, stronger.

The myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng are symbols linking the people from both river banks together. When Lao people say *Pai Hor* (ไปหอ) (go to the spirit house), everyone in Pak Hueng will understand and facilitate travelling across the river. It can be concluded that the belief in the Chao Pho Pak Hueng spirit represents the local power to respond or negotiate with the state authority over the borderland.

The belief in Chao Pho Pak Hueng and his follower, Chao Aai Thao La, who was a guardian of Phra Chao Ton Luang – the Buddha image sunk in the water at Wernkham, Mae Khong River led the people in Ban Mai Wernkham (บ้านใหม่เงินคำ) community, Laos, to understand that the Buddha image remained under the water. When they learned that a group of state officials and Chinese people would come for the image (between March and April B.E. 2553 (2010), they felt that the image belonged to them. The villagers consisted of a village leader and some followers who had worshiped the spirits of Chao Pho Pak Hueng and Chao Aai Thao La for protection of the treasure. Arising from this situation, there are stories told by the villagers from time to time. One example is the story of a giant snake that was opening its mouth wide to protect the

Buddha image when one of the group members dived into the water and tried to get the image. There were at least 3-4 people who died trying to rescue the image from under water but it did not even move in spite of the fact that it was light (Bodhiwan, 2010). These are the sacred narratives and sacred rituals related to Chao Pho Pak Hueng. They suggest the local power that the communities have used for negotiation with the unrelenting state authority invading their social space. The myth is a piece of local wisdom to protect their community treasure. The Pak Hueng community in Thailand has also produced some narratives to make the situation more sacred. For example, the Buddha image in Wernkham has already been moved to Phra Yai in Phu Fah (พระใหญ่ฟ้า), Thailand. The one under the water at Wernkham is just a body without a sacred spirit. This can be considered to be a fight for significant space and to reduce the sacredness of Chao Ong Luang in order to respond to the power of the right possessor.

According to the above information, the myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng have a dynamic aspect in relation to the social and the political context of the people residing along the banks of the estuary of the Hueng River. The dynamic has been processed since ancient times to the present but they still hold on to a sense of their ethnic roots. The sacred spirit of Chao Pho Pak Hueng is respected in the two communities. They have participated in the same rituals regardless of the national border that divides them into two communities of two nations. They have considered the border as 'the matter of authority' not their business; so the social space of the two communities is undividable. Kaewthep (2001) states that social space is a special space constructed

in relation to the society and it serves as a tool of control, social space construction, identity and culture among marginal people. It has been selected to reproduce and produce differently. It is a means of control and, hence of, domination and power in order to construct a space for itself and the ethnic group. In the same way, the construction of a spiritual space combines the primitive perspective and the Buddhist perspective on the physical area of the Hueng River, especially, at the estuary of the Hueng River which has been constructed as a sacred space that is actually a social space for the two communities residing along the Hueng River banks both in Thailand and Laos. The space serves as a tool of control against the state power which divides the group into 'Thai' and 'Lao' or others. However, the separation cannot be completely successful. The space has changed based on values and the social production of meaning and it could be said that it has dynamic aspect. As a result, the sacred narratives have been affected and changed in the same way.

5. Conclusion

The myths of Chao Pho Pak Hueng are narratives on the spirits of sacred people well known by the people in the Pak Hueng communities in both sides of the river, Thailand and Laos. The sacred narratives allow the sacred spaces to exist both physically and spiritually. The development of the sacred spaces has been processed through Chao Pho Pak Hueng, the sacred Buddha images, the estuary of the Hueng River and Wernkham, and the sacred rituals in the communities. The myths make a contribution in constructing the sense of ethnic root – Laos, Lan Chang in Luang Phrabang. The communities' ideology has been reproduced through

local traditions. The myths are dynamic in relation to the social context during the period of community settlement on the new land when the sense of community history and their ethnicity were established. The myths also reflect the Thainess of the community people and their acceptance of and negotiation with the state authority of Thailand. Currently, the myths and the rituals related to Chao Pho Pak Hueng allow the sacred spaces to exist and they are still in practice and function in strengthening the spirits of the people on both sides of the Hueng River and create a social space for them. The unity of the two communities over the Thai-Lao borderland has been founded.

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