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The Practice of Deference and Its Politics:

Theravada Buddhist Beliefs and Hierarchical Dynamism in China's Southwest Border Areas*

Tzu-kai Liu
Department of Anthropology
National Taiwan University

In this article I examine the dynamics of religious and political hierarchies in Wa Buddhists' practice of Theravada Buddhist beliefs in the Autonomous County of Cangyuan, Wa Nationality, in China's southwest border region. Communities of Wa Buddhists in Cangyuan have gone through a number of historical phases for which the notion of "hierarchical dynamism" (Robbins 2015), is a useful theoretical framework for understanding, in particular, the workings of complex, multilayered hierarchical relations in the local history of religious conversion and practice. Here the symbolic role of the Wa king and the agentive role of senior Wa orators illustrate a feature of nested hierarchies by which the political and religious domains are contested and juxtaposed over time. In particular, the Wa deferential greetings performed by senior orators are not only confined and grounded in the religious field, but also feed into the hierarchical dynamics by which community tensions and conflicts are managed, where political distrust is expressed, and where social relations are reconfigured in light of local ethnolinguistic practices and ideas of *nbuan* (merit).

Keywords: hierarchical dynamism, Theravada Buddhist beliefs, religious conversion, deference, Wa Buddhists

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Introduction: Current Background to the Wa Story

Dax Mao, a Wa orator in his early 70s, expressed mixed feelings about the mainstream dismissal of his religious knowledge as he accompanied a group of senior Wa Buddhists to a funeral ritual that commemorated the death of a charismatic Wa orator. The event took place at Cangyuan, the seat of the Autonomous County of Cangyuan, Wa Nationality (hereafter, Cangyuan Autonomous County) on China's southwest border.

> I know our religious history and language well. Based on my earlier training as a Buddhist monk at a local monastery, I can say that I am a religious master. But by official Chinese standards, my position as a religious master is not taken seriously. I have no *wenhua* [Ch. *mei wenhua* or *wenmang*, literally lacking cultural or linguistic capital, illiterate]. [But] for locals who can speak the religious language, I am not an illiterate. I am recognized as a literate person in our religious language, having a "degree" similar to a junior high education in the public school.
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> [2004, *my translation*][1]

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[1] This interview was conducted in the interlocutor's native language of Wa and was designed toelicit his views on becoming an orator in contemporary Wa communities. The three languages transliterated in this article are Wa, Shan, and Chinese. These transliterations are given in parentheses, preceded by an indication of the language, e.g., (Ch. for Chinese, Wa. for Wa, Sh. for Shan, Wa/Sh. for expressions that mix Wa and Shan words). Wa words are transliterated using a Wa orthography, first created by Chinese philologists around 1965 with the support of the PRC government (Wang 1994). This standard Wa orthography is currently used in the government-funded publications and local media reports.

In Cangyuan Autonomous County, the adopted religious language, a dialect of Shan (Dai) used in Wa Buddhist practices, is often denigrated by local government officials and people with a standard Han education.[2] As a Wa Buddhist orator, Dax Mao has dismissed this antagonistic view by asserting his literacy in the language of his position, but he also has to acknowledge that his religious title and language are not valued in the broader public realm. These tensions reflect the religious status of senior local orators and their Theravada Buddhist knowledge under the changing religious hierarchies and ideologies of post-reform China. Despite variations among individual narratives, the experience of marked Buddhist knowledge like Dax Mao's is common in the contemporary Wa practices of Theravada Buddhist rituals and beliefs. His experience further exemplifies a feature of "nested hierarchy," in which the value of Theravada Buddhist knowledge encompasses and engages secular values in hierarchical dynamics. Amidst the growing influence of PRC state power in Wa Buddhist community life through the implementation of development projects (e.g., modern housing, poverty alleviation, and illiteracy eradication), Dax Mao and other senior Wa orators often sense that their status as respected leaders at the local religious level contends with their status as a marked Chinese minority citizen, having no *wenhua* at the translocal secular level. Their local status is nested within the translocal value system.

While focusing on the negotiation and contestation between the religious and political hierarchies in Wa Buddhists' practices of Theravada Buddhist beliefs, I argue that hierarchical dynamics and nested hierarchies are, historically and culturally, embedded in both the local history of Wa kingship and the Wa Buddhists' practices of deference and their appreciation of the exalted Theravada Buddhist value of *nbuan* (merit) (a borrowed Shan word) in local oratory performance and ritual acts. Buddhist values and oratory are appropriated selectively to invoke the symbolic

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[2] This article follows local Wa people's quotidian expression, which is officially categorized as Dai in Chinese literature, official archives, and media reports in China. Wa Buddhists of Cangyuan use the same Wa word, "*siam gix*," referring to Shan Buddhists in the Shan State in Myanmar and Dai Buddhists in China. However, they recognize the difference in religious influences between these two groups. In Cangyuan, Wa Buddhists have developed a close religious-economic tie with Dai Buddhists through exchanges of Theravada Buddhist knowledge and the borrowing of Buddhist scriptures. But they would not use the Buddhist scriptures circulated in Shan Buddhist communities of Myanmar. In this article, "Dai Buddhists" refers to the Dai people of Cangyuan in China. "Shan Buddhists" refers to the Shan Buddhist group in Myanmar. The Shan language then is a local dialect of Dai commonly used in Buddhist communities in southwestern Yunnan (e.g., Cangyuan and Mengding). This dialect differs both from the other Dai dialect commonly used in Xishuangbanna, China, and from the Shan language used in Myanmar.

authority of Wa kings and are performed strategically when senior Wa orators meet with significant political authorities.

Theravada Buddhist Beliefs and Wa Buddhists in the Border Areas

In Cangyuan, localized Theravada Buddhist beliefs (Wa/Sh. *ih* sam kain),[3] the result of a long-term conversion process that was initiated and patronized by Wa kings in the past, lack the prestige and political power granted to Cangyuan's Dai Buddhist lowlanders and the Chinese political regimes that have been imposed on the area over the years. In large part, this inequality derives from and is preserved by the Chinese political authorities' control over and replacement of the native religious and political powers of the Wa king (Ch. *hulu wang*). This history of political domination has resulted in a situation in which the Wa Buddhist system has no dominant central Buddhist monastic authority because the religious role of the Wa king is now publicly prohibited. Although the religious and political power of the Wa kings has been replaced by the PRC government, most Wa Buddhists continue to memorialize the symbolic role of the king by using a language of merit that celebrates the cultural values of deference and Theravada Buddhist hierarchy of merit. In the everyday lives of Wa people, the values of Theravada Buddhist belief are often ranked much higher than those of traditional animist beliefs (Wa. *ih lein sain*) as these are reflected in the spatial, ritualistic, and temporal arrangements in ethnic Wa communities.

Condemned by China's socialist state in the 1960s and 1970s, Buddhist monasteries and conventional religious practices underwent a difficult revival process, when, in the early 1980s, the state authorized the revitalization of ancestral religions and cultural heritage from before the Cultural Revolution (1965-1976). Subsequently, despite the government's ongoing control over civil liberties, institutional boundaries have become more porous, and religious, civil, and political discourses have become intertwined (see Lagerwey 2010, McCarthy 2009, Yang 2008). The new postsocialist governmentality also brought fiscal decentralization to the People's Republic, which trickled down to affect Wa monasteries in Cangyuan.

In the past, Theravada Buddhist regions were dotted with village monasteries

[3] In Cangyuan, Wa Buddhists memorize and talk about the influences of Theravada Buddhism in their ongoing practices of the belief system rather than in a canonical sense of a religion. Thus, using the term Theravada Buddhist beliefs rather than "Theravada Buddhism" is closer to local people's conception of religious practice.

(Sh. *vat*), the number of which had expanded from three in the 1920s to around twenty in the mid-1960s (Yuan 1997). [4] Currently, Buddhist monasteries in Cangyuan Autonomous County vary considerably in size and scope. Larger monasteries, located in the lowland basin region of the Dai people, have fifty to sixty monks and novices in residence. But having received only minimal government funding, Cangyuan's upland Theravada Buddhists have had to collect donations from villagers and devote their time to rebuilding. Unlike the Dai monasteries, all thirty-five Wa monasteries are village-based and smaller in size and population.[5]

Every Wa community has its own village monastery, which is usually located on a small sacred hill on the eastern or northeastern side of the village, at a short distance from the traditional Wa village center (Wa. *nyiiex sila*).[6] The elevation of Wa village monasteries signifies the superiority of Buddhist value and its symbolic sanctity compared with the lower ground of sacred animist sites in each Wa community.

My ethnographic research was conducted in the Banhong and Banlao Townships, which have the largest population of Wa Buddhists and the longest history of religious conversion to Theravada Buddhist beliefs. During the Qing dynasty, in the late 1880s and 1890s, Banhong was one of eighteen imperial chieftain (Ch. *tusi*) territories under the Ministry of Border Control (Cangyuan xianzhi bianji weiyuan hui 1998). This article draws on data I collected through participant observation of rituals, community-based social events, and interpersonal interactions over a span of eighteen months in 2004-2005 and six months in 2009-2010. To better understand locals' personal memories of and participation in Theravada Buddhist practice, I also interviewed senior male orators and junior monks; these interviews were conducted in Wa and Chinese. The recorded interviews allowed me to make detailed transcriptions of personal narratives and identify gaps in those narratives and reflections. This further filled out my understanding of Wa Buddhist activities and

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[4] This number is based on local Wa elders' memories collected during my fieldwork. The only available census numbers on Buddhist monasteries in the whole Cangyuan region are from the early 1950s. At that time, there were forty-three Buddhist monasteries. But in this account, there was no information on how many were located in Wa communities. See Yuan 1997: 33-34.

[5] Based on my ethnographic data, in 2011 there were fifty-four Theravada Buddhist monasteries in Cangyuan, including fifty village monasteries and four large monasteries run by Dai Buddhists and located in the town of Cangyuan. Among them, thirty-five village monasteries are located in Wa communities.

[6] Because of the small population of monks (1-3 persons) in each village monastery in Banhong and Banlao Townships, I do not intend to emphasize any single village monastery, but discuss the thirty-five village monasteries in the areas of former Wa kingdom as a whole.

oratory and the hierarchical dynamics of Wa Buddhism in the context of postsocialist Chinese society.

Wa Buddhists are often positioned as an unofficial scion of a recognized ethnic minority in contemporary China. They are considered "inauthentic Wa" because of their religious conversion from animism and "unorthodox Buddhists" because of their syncretistic animist/Buddhist practices. But as followers of Theravada Buddhist precepts (Sh. *sin*), Wa Buddhists prohibit and resist the act of killing, for example, the ritual of killing water buffalo or headhunting, both of which are officially celebrated and commodified as authentic features of traditional Wa culture in China's tourist market.

Founded in 1964, Cangyuan Autonomous County is a mountainous, multiethnic border region in southwest China. Even in the late 1990s, Cangyuan had still not been opened to domestic or foreign tourism. The PRC government has maintained strict border control in the region, and its inspection stations monitor the roads to control drug smuggling and illegal trans-border trade with Myanmar.[7] Given the complex economic, migratory, and political realities of trans-border living, Wa people seldom fit into a fixed ethnic category. The various Wa dialects belong to the Mon-Khmer (Austroasiatic) language family of mainland Southeast Asia (Wang 1994). Wa Buddhists also speak a local dialect of Cangyuan Chinese when they interact with Han Chinese and other ethnic minorities (e.g., Lahu and Dai)[8] in Cangyuan and local Wa communities. Their native Wa is mainly used in face-to-face communications in their home communities. The Shan language, associated with adopted Theravada Buddhist practices and Buddhist literacy, was taken up by Wa Buddhists in the course of their conversion from animistic beliefs to Theravada Buddhist beliefs.

The current population of ethnic Wa in Cangyuan Autonomous County is fourteen times that of Han Chinese people.[9] The overwhelming majority of Wa

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[7] In 1989 the Burmese military government officially changed the country's name to Myanmar; it was earlier known in English as Burma. In this article, I follow the historical line of 1989. If an event happened before 1989, then I use Burma; if after 1989, Myanmar.

[8] Only school children and those who graduated from local junior high school can master and speak standard Mandarin Chinese (*putong hua*). Meanwhile, when Wa Buddhists of Cangyuan converse with other native Wa speakers, who live in the eastern regions of Cangyuan Autonomous County and other Wa areas in Yunnan Province and in Myanmar's Wa State, they use Yunnanese Chinese because their Wa dialects are not mutually intelligible.

[9] According to the Cangyuan Autonomous County government's published materials on population, in 2010, the ethnic Wa population was approximately 145,000 (85 percent) (2010 Nian diliuci chuanguo renkou pucha, 2011). The remaining populations are Han Chinese, Lahu, Dai, and Yi. Wa

are farmers, while Han tend to be entrepreneurs, bus drivers, migrant workers, government officials, and staff. However, among the government officials and staff at the county offices, about two-thirds are native Wa intellectual elites, mostly college graduates from the provincial capital Kunming or the municipal seat Lincang, which is administratively above Cangyuan. Many native Wa officials have accepted the civic view that Mandarin Chinese signifies modern citizenship and far exceeds the importance of their native Wa language and their adopted Shan religious language. However, contemporary Wa Buddhists have expressed interest in connecting with Dai, Shan, and Wa Buddhist leaders and cohorts in Myanmar and Thailand. Their interest aligns with an imagined Theravada Buddhist center and Buddhist rituals based in Myanmar that lie beyond the political control of the PRC government. But the borders between the Wa and Burmese Buddhists are often guarded by the PRC government, while the county government keeps an eye on the charismatic Wa Buddhist leaders who have established monasteries-in-exile in northern Myanmar. Wa Buddhists share the same religious roots and "Buddhascape" as their counterparts all across the China/Myanmar border areas, but in Cangyuan, they identify as Chinese Wa rather than Burmese Wa.

Banhong and Banlao were home to a combined sixty-two senior Wa orators (Wa/Shan. *dax hrein* lai siam) in 2010. These charismatic orators had been monks at village monasteries. As in earlier times, most Wa Buddhist practitioners have great respect for these orators, whose religious titles were hard won through long-term training in scripture at local Wa monasteries and under the personal mentorship of senior Dai monks in Cangyuan and senior Shan monks in Myanmar. Recognized by local Buddhists as prestigious literati, these charismatic elders have established reputations as skilled orators by virtue of their fluent and eloquent delivery style during readings of Buddhist scriptures and other ceremonial performances of Buddhist oratory. Wa orators are essential within the religious realm and regularly celebrate their faith among the general public at ritual events.

The Theoretical Framework: Hierarchical Dynamism and Nested Hierarchy

My theoretical focus on the practice of Theravada Buddhist beliefs and the

Buddhists comprise approximately 28 percent of the entire local population. The majority of the Wa residents still practice conventional animist customs. Influenced by Western missionary activities in Yonghe District in the early twentieth century, one group of Wa residents also converted to Christianity.

role of senior Wa orators in Cangyuan is necessarily based in the politics of religious revival in contemporary China. As Mayfair Yang has argued, "Whereas the more dramatic and vociferous forms of religious resurgence around the world have taken the form of political movements… religious revival in post-Mao China has been marked by quiescence and accommodation with the state" (2008: 5). Yang further explains that the movement is marked by the interconnectedness of the political and the religious (2008: 9). [10]

The Wa Buddhists' elevation of Theravada Buddhist practices over their native animist beliefs certainly points to the dynamics of religious and political hierarchies. Scholarly research on the topic of hierarchy has proposed the notion of "hierarchical dynamism" (Dumont 1980, Robbins 2009, 2015). Joel Robbins (2015) focuses on hierarchical dynamism in Dumont's discussion of caste hierarchy (1980) and applies it in his discussion of individualism as a value in the context of Christian conversion in Papua New Guinea. He proposes that "hierarchical dynamism results both from the ways values solicit efforts at full realization from those who hold them, and from the ways social formations are organized such that some elements and levels routinely encompass others, which leads to situations in which efforts to fully realize any one value often come into conflict with the demand to realize others" (2015: 176). Robbins extends Dumont's holistic view of "hierarchy as a value system" and emphasizes that while no value system produces a timeless, encompassed social structure with a set of hierarchical relations, value systems set social life in motion.

This notion of "hierarchical dynamism" has three unique features. First, it focuses on the ways in which values or hierarchies are related to one another. As Louis Dumont observed (1980), a higher-ranked value system constantly encompasses a lower-ranked value system. As Romeyn Taylor suggests in her study of Chinese hierarchy, "Chinese society in its entirety came to be hierarchically organized in an empire, and this empire-society was understood by its members to be universal ('all under the heaven')" (1989: 493). Chinese hierarchy has the unique feature of human-earth-heaven relationships. Second, no single hierarchy or value can have full dominance over other hierarchies or values. Any value or hierarchy coexists with others. Dumont's holistic view of hierarchies also emphasizes that a value system is not a closed system (see Kapferer 2010; also see Ho 2013). In her study of Zaiwa people's social transformation in southwest China, Ho Ts'ui-p'ing (2013) proposes that the influence of PRC state power has had a clear impact in

[10] However, extant ethnographic research has also shown how ethnic minorities in China employ local religious practices to memorialize the power and violence of state domination (see Mueggler 2001).

breaking down the cultural values of personhood and kinship ethics. Yet, local Zaiwa people strategically employ selected ritual practices and the house-based spatial practices to re-encompass their kinship values even in China's rapidly changing social and cultural milieu. This breakdown/re-encompassing process has shown that Zaiwa kinship is a value system in motion.

Third, as proposed by Robbins (2015: 188), the formation of social relations is deeply influenced by tensions between values rather than by the workings of a single value system. Hierarchical opposition and tensions between values and hierarchies are central to Dumont's notion of encompassment (1980). Such views on hierarchical opposition and tensions give a dynamic account of value relations. [11] This further reveals that hierarchical dynamism should be recognized as a force within competing, encompassed hierarchies and socialities rather than simply as social change and transformation (see Hoëm 2009, Iteanu 2005, Robbins 2007)

How can these theoretical discussions, and especially Robbins' notion of hierarchical dynamism (2007, 2009, 2015), help explain the ways Buddhist hierarchy and the adopted Buddhist values of deference and merit play out in contemporary Wa communities? While Dumont's notion of encompassment is useful for understanding the mechanism of social transformation or cultural change, it cannot get at conflicts among the competing values of hierarchies. Hierarchical dynamism, however, offers a better framework in which to contextualize palimpsest-like hierarchical relations in Wa peoples' social life.

The historical circumstances and ethnic identity of Wa Buddhists have long been influenced by the two dominant hierarchies of Theravada Buddhist practices and Chinese political authority. While Theravada Buddhist tradition and its religious hierarchy offers a significant path by which Wa men can become Buddhist literates and local elites, this path is ranked low in the Chinese political hierarchy. In addition, Wa orators, by serving as mediators between family and supernatural beings, have a superior social status in the religious field, but an inferior civil status in the broader field of Chinese society. This being the case, I also emphasize the "nested" nature of hierarchies (an idea proposed by Gal 2006, Gladney 2004: 189; also see Bateson 1972: 96) in the Wa practice of Theravada Buddhist deference, where Wa Buddhists' oratory not only represents local ideals of Buddhist morality and merit (Sh. *nbuan*), but also serves as a discursive field for managing community tensions, commenting on political

[11] Dumont's view of hierarchical opposition and tension is close to Pierre Bourdieu's structuralist discussion of "field." For Bourdieu, any field is a dynamic form of social organization, not a fixed structure. Within a field, social actors' positions are defined by hierarchical opposition, e.g., ruler and subaltern (see Hanks 2005: 72). While Dumont focuses on the opposition of values and hierarchies, Bourdieu emphasizes subject's position-making within a field.

distrust, and reconfiguring hierarchical social relations.

Within this theoretical framework, I also show how senior orators' acts of deferential greeting demonstrate Wa agency in performance. Their agentive acts within and struggles through competing hierarchies negotiate their marked Buddhist status in light of community tensions that have developed between young Wa political leaders and Buddhist villagers. By emphasizing the multiple and complex representations of agentive actions, earlier studies have contributed to our understandings about the existence of inherent structural contradictions (Ortner 1989) and the complex forms of agency within them (Ahearn 2001). As Laura Ahearn argued (2001: 112), agency, as a "socio-culturally mediated capacity to act," is always complex and ambiguous. Sherry Ortner has proposed that "actors [are] loosely structured" (1989: 198) in that they are neither totally socially formed cultural products nor free agents. Such a framework is central to understanding how individuals can transform the nested hierarchical relations that produce them over history.

The act of greeting itself does not simply involve the use of honorific language. Asif Agha (2007: 302) explains that the tendency to speak politely and respectfully to significant outsiders is an act that not only recognizes those others' higher status but also displays a speaker's own position. Greeting, then, indexes social relationality and potentially initiates a renegotiation of relationships between addressors and addressees, strategically and discursively. We may think of the Wa Buddhist orators' practice of deferentially greeting (Wa. *rap houig*) important outsiders as a case of hierarchical dynamism, one that forefronts their agency in negotiating nested hierarchical relations.

Grounded in the history of religious conversion, Wa views of the Buddhist hierarchy resonate with scholarly research on the Theravada Buddhist notion of "power protection" and merit-making in mainland Southeast Asia (Davis 2005, Eberhardt 2006, Tannenbaum and Kammerer 1996). Nicola Tannenbuam (1995: 79), for example, has explained that "power protection" has had a direct influence on the constitution of a spiritual hierarchical order between protectors and dependents (or followers). The Buddha, senior monks, parents, pious seniors, and young worshippers are ranked from the highest to lowest in symbolic power, according to their degree of Buddhist merit. People on the lower end demonstrate their dependence on more powerful beings through shows of respect, expressing gratefulness for their symbolic protection, and routinely invoking the greater merit of those beings in oral performances (Tannenbaum 1995: 94). Tannenbaum (1995) further describes the modern context in which ordinary Shan Buddhists in Myanmar are mindful of and grateful for symbolic benefits from government officials because of their greater power protection. By the same token, people fear that failure to treat officials with respect could incur negative practical consequences (e.g., illness).

But neither Tannenbaum's work nor other literature in Theravada Buddhist studies provide detailed ethnographic or linguistic data to explain how Buddhist ideas are appropriated to mediate the power of political figures or how Buddhist values intersect with the political hierarchy. My study of Wa Buddhists brings into play the historical and ethnolinguistic contexts that explain these questions.

Robbins's discussion of hierarchical dynamics and Gal's discussion of nested hierarchies thus suggest ways to explain the shifting meanings of Buddhist hierarchy in Wa society, in the contexts of both religious conversion and the decline of native Wa kingship. Nested hierarchy and hierarchical dynamism are also illustrated in the invoked memory of the Wa kings as well as the expressed shown to high-ranking outside leaders.

Contextualizing Religious Conversion and the Buddhist Hierarchy

Before the local chieftain system was replaced with China's political system in the 1930s, the Wa kings were recognized as the highest native political authority and religious leadership in Banhong and Banlao, as well as in a section of Wa territory in northeast Burma. Their kingship passed along a male hereditary line. They were referred to collectively as "kings of the gourd" in Wa and in Chinese as *hulu wang* (gourd kings). Each Wa king also had a specific name in Chinese, Shan, and Wa (see Table 1).

Table 1 The Genealogy of Wa Kings

Year in Position	Political Regime	Name
1st Wa king (early 1880)	Qing dynasty	[*unknown*]
2nd Wa king (mid 1880)	Qing dynasty	[*unknown*]
3rd Wa king 1880-1934)	Qing dynasty/ Nationalist government	Hu Yushan (Chinese)
4th Wa king(1934-1942)	Nationalist government	Hu Yushan II (Chinese) aka: Gein Jong (Wa); Jiam Jum (Shan) Hu Zhonghan (Chinese)
5th Wa king (1942-1969)	Nationalist government/ PRC government	Hu Zhonghua (Chinese)
	Cultural Revolution/ PRC government	*[suspension of the king's title]*
6th Wa king (1978-present)	Post-Cultural Revolution/ PRC	Hu Desheng (Chinese) aka: Indae (Shan)

Source: The data in this table was collected from my interview with the Wa king's family in 2005.

The Wa kingdom was a small, a semi-autonomous native ethnic polity of four to five thousand people living in the borderlands between southwest China and northeast Burma. This native polity controlled land, religious practices, mining activities, and regional politics (see Fiskesjö 2010, Zhou 1968 [1935]). Situated on the Han-Wa frontier, the Wa king's authority was established in the mid-nineteenth century and lasted until 1952 when the PRC government established county government offices in the previously semi-independent Wa territories on China's southwest border.[12]

In 1891, the third Wa king (Ch. Hu Yushan) was appointed an imperial official with the formal Chinese title Banhong Wa Chieftain (Ch. *banhong tudu shi*), as a strategy of frontier governance that symbolically incorporated the kings' power into the Qing political regime. But he had only a limited affiliation with Chinese political authorities (Fang 2008 [1943]). The king's Chinese title was a formality only and did not imply political affiliation or patronage. Nor did this appointment legitimize Chinese political rule in Wa territories prior to the establishment of the Nationalist government in 1911.

In areas the Wa kings governed, the local people's acceptance of the tenets of Theravada Buddhist beliefs took shape over four major historic periods; these stages included early conversions (1890-1930), expansion (1933-1966), repression (1967-1976), and revival (1981-present).

Between 1880 and 1930, Wa kings played a significant role in the introduction of Theravada Buddhist beliefs to their territories. Those beliefs, a trans-border, lowland religious system in mainland Southeast Asia, had a long history of adoption by upland ethnic minority communities, for example, Wa highlanders. This religious system was the cornerstone of Dai Buddhist polity, which historically took the lead in overseeing economic and political activities in the China/Burma border areas.

In my interviews with twelve senior Wa orators in Banhong, they recounted their collective memories about the early stage (1895-1930) of local Wa religious conversion. Although variations emerged in individual memories, these senior Wa orators and other Wa Buddhist practitioners gave a largely shared account of the earliest stage of remembered local religious history. One elder Wa man recounted his community's conversion in a story:

> It was at a time when an ethnic conflict [Wa. *bang laih*] had just ended that we

[12] James Scott (2009) explains the lack of state-like societies (e.g. Wa animists) in the mountainous areas of Southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia. But the native polity of the Wa Buddhist kings amounted to a state-like society, which raises problems with Scott's argument.

[Wa Buddhists] started to accept Buddhist monastery practices in Banhong. At that time, we had a Wa king. A group of Dai Buddhists from the Mengka region on China's borders had moved to Mengnong, a region mainly populated by Wa animists [headhunters], because of that ethnic conflict. These Dai had believed in Theravada Buddhist culture for a long time. One day, a relocated Dai Buddhist and an animist Wa from the Mengnong community went hunting in the wild. They saw a deer nearby. However, the deer ran away from where the Wa was standing. The Dai severely blamed the Wa man for this. The Wa was unhappy and went to the house of the Dai man in the Mengnong community that night. They had a serious argument. The Wa man was upset and started to destroy that Dai Buddhist's house. The Dai headman heard the sound of fighting and was upset that other Dai villagers in the community did not come out to assist that family and alleviate the conflict. He raised a gun, firing it into the air. The Wa man ran away. After that conflict, all Dai Buddhists living in the Mengnong village decided to move to other places because they were really afraid of revenge by the Wa, who still practiced headhunting. They first moved to the territory of the Wa king, relocating to Jannyom village in Banhong. For years, that Wa king had routinely been participating in ritual events held in the Dai chieftain's community. When he heard that the Dai Buddhists had temporarily moved to the Jannyom community, he contacted them to ask if they could assist him in establishing a monastery. The king wanted to have a Buddhist monastery in Banhong, but there was no chance of finding Dai monks in the area. The Dai Buddhists promised to persuade Dai monks to go to Banhong, but they wanted to get a flat site close to a river where they could settle and farm sweet rice. Eventually, the Wa king gave them lands in the Namroung community for free, along with gifts of seven water buffaloes and gold. The local Wa Buddhist tradition started in that community and spread to other Wa communities in the king's territories and part of the western Menglai region. However, the Dai stayed in Namroung only until 1951. The Wa villagers came to believe that the Dai Buddhists were practicing sorcery which threatened serious misfortune for the Wa. Due to the enduring distrust, the Dai eventually left Namroung. After that, village monasteries in Wa areas were run only by Wa orators and monks. [Eventually] the real power of the Wa kings was replaced by Chinese power. But we still believed that Wa kings had most Buddhist merit (Sh. *nbuan*) and they were positioned on the top of religious hierarchy.

[2005, *Author's translation*][13]

[13] This narrative was given in Wa.

Although written accounts of Wa religious conversion are lacking, such personal narratives offer a collective memory that is shared by Wa Buddhists right across Cangyuan. In his narrative, this elder framed the story of conversion in accounts of interethnic conflict and Dai Buddhist migration. The ethnic war between Wa highland animists and Dai in the Dai-governed part of Mending adjacent to Cangyuan was part of the ongoing resistance against Dai chieftains who were Qing representatives in the border areas of Yunnan in the 1880s and the 1890s.[14] When that war ended, the Wa people of Cangyuan began to follow the third Wa king (Hu Yushan), and like him began to accept Buddhist practices.

In his narrative, the orator further evokes social memory in a number of ways. He ascribes certain emotions and the origins of another ethnic conflict to a hunting incident. The migration of Dai Buddhists into the Wa king's territory is given as the historical background of ethnic conflict and he points to the enduring threat of Wa headhunting. With the Dai migration, the Wa king's intention to establish the first monastery could be fulfilled thanks to his offering paddy fields, gifts, and political patronage to the relocated Dai Buddhists. Cultivating sweet rice had long been an identifiable cultural practice in Southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia; sweet rice was also an important ritual food commonly used in Dai Buddhist activities and ritual exchanges. And finally, prior to 1951, Dai Buddhists and monks who lived in the Wa king's territory assisted with training Wa novices at the village monasteries. But because of the enduring distrust between Dai and Wa Buddhists combined with their tense competition for agricultural lands, the Dai eventually left the Wa lands. Since 1951, the monasteries and monks in the Dai Buddhist communities are all Dai and in the Wa Buddhist communities, they are all Wa.

This Wa cultural memory also shows that the localization of Theravada Buddhist beliefs came with the Dai migration from a lowland area to the highland Wa king's territory, where monastic practices and the values belonging to Buddhist hierarchy gradually became an integral part of Wa religious life. It was important that the Wa king had developed closer economic-political networks with the Dai chieftain who officially governed the ethnic minority areas of Cangyuan when the Wa kingdom was founded in the nineteenth century. This distinguished Cangyuan from the widespread conflict between Wa animists and Dai chieftains in other ethnic minority regions of Yunnan.

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[14] Before the 1880s, there was intense conflict between the Qing dynasty and ethnic minorities in China's southwest border areas. For instance, the Panthay Rebellion (1856-1873) involved Muslim Hui people and other ethnic minorities against the Qing authorities in Yunnan. That rebellion, however, had no direct impact on the native polity of the Wa kingdom.

Theravada Buddhist beliefs and associated hierarchical values were considered desirable in the minority highland societies (see Giersch 2006). Adopting the Buddhist monastic system provided highland minority communities a path to acquire Shan literacy and Buddhist written culture. Religious literacy was viewed by non-Buddhist minorities such as the Wa as symbolic of Buddhist nobility and offered Wa men a means to achieve trans-border social and class mobility.

While the Wa kings did not promote rebellion against the authority of Dai chieftains, the Wa did undertake active resistance against Han Chinese authorities and the British colonial power in the early twentieth century. Archives produced by British officials in the 1890s described the Wa Buddhists as "tamed" or "semi-civilized," compared to Wa animists, who were considered "wild" or "barbarian" because of their traditional custom of headhunting (Scott 1893: 316-317).

The pre-1930 history of religious conversion points to the hierarchical dynamics between the Wa kingdom and Dai Buddhist authorities, and between the Wa Buddhist system and the Dai Buddhist system. The Wa's relationship with the Theravada Buddhist system was troubled by mutual fears around animist headhunting and Dai witchcraft. This resulted in the Wa people adopting Theravada Buddhist beliefs and appreciating Buddhist values but not being integrated directly into the governing of established Dai monasteries. After the 1930s, the Buddhist system as religious hierarchy still exerted great influence in the territories of the Wa kings and Wa areas in Banhong and Banlao. While Wa kingship continued to work as a Wa-based political system within a national political regime over the last decades of the Qing dynasty and the Republic of China, Buddhist values and the religious hierarchy had consequences for the political hierarchy across different stages of political transformation in ethnic Wa areas.

The personal memories of senior Wa men reveal their shared memory of how Theravada Buddhist beliefs affected the fate of the Wa kings between 1934-1958. One commonality was the Wa king's promotion of Theravada Buddhist practices over native animist practices in the 1930s. The Wa king imposed a compulsory order on his political subjects: Most Wa people living in the townships of Banhong and Banlao were to adopt Buddhist literary practices and establish village monasteries in their communities. With the continuing threats from Wa animists and border disputes in the 1930s, the order to convert was intended to develop closer ties with the dominant lowland Dai Buddhists, which would help protect Wa lands and mining resources. As members of the Wa king's family recalled, if Wa villagers violated this order, they were subject to a monetary penalty and excluded from the Wa king's political patronage, putting them at risk in the interethnic conflicts that were ongoing in the border regions.

According to my Wa Buddhist interlocutors—orators ranging in age from their late 60s to mid 80s—their fondest memories come from the era of expansion between 1930 and 1966, the heyday of Wa monastery culture, even though it was also a period of shifting politics when the whole Cangyuan region was in turmoil. During this period monasteries were freely constructed, and by 1958 their personnel and syncretic Buddhist/animist ritual repertoires came to constitute the heart of localized Buddhist practices. Syncretic Buddhist/animist practices reveal a nested religious hierarchy that was intimately linked to the earlier adoption of dominant Shan language ideology, liturgical practices, cosmology, and hierarchical orders introduced from outside. These practices connected Wa Buddhists with the symbolic realm of male-dominated Buddhist authority and the symbolic power of religious hierarchy that was effective across mainland Southeast Asia. At the same time, it allowed the preservation of a few animist practices (e.g. *goug kuan*, literally "calling vital essence ritual") that connected Wa people to their pre-Buddhist past.

Another feature of emerging Theravada Buddhist practices in Wa territory was the adoption of the ritual group hierarchy, *yong sin* (borrowed from Shan), literally "to gather together to follow the Buddhist precepts"). This Dai Buddhist hierarchy significantly impacted Buddhist practices in local Wa communities. Following the canonical allusion to the Buddha's return to the sky for three months between the day of the full moon in the seventh lunar month and the same day in the tenth lunar month, the Wa kings and ordinary villagers were divided into thirteen ritual groups that took turns organizing and preparing a series of Buddhist ceremonies to be held every seven or eight days. Observances around the Buddha's retreat during the monsoon season are also common in Theravada Buddhist societies across mainland Southeast Asia (Davis 2005, Eberhardt 2006, Tannenbaum 1995). Each *yong sin* ritual group is connected by household or kin ties. The hierarchical order of each *yong sin* group represents a semi-economic-political hierarchy that resembles a "galactic polity" (Tambiah 1970) or "emboxment" (Condominas 1980)—a multilayering of concentric containers for incorporating local political power within larger dominant translocal powers.

The *yong sin* provides a unique view of the Buddhist hierarchy and how it shapes the social life of political subjects in accordance with religious ontology and symbolic power. In the past, the first and last groups were always assigned to the Wa king, in appreciation of his highest Buddhist merit; the rest were assigned to traditional Wa headmen and other village leaders. Starting on the day of the full moon in July, the Wa king held a "closing the gate" (Sh. *ko va*) ritual to gain symbolic protection for the community and dispell the threat of bad spirits and other evils. Three months later in October, restrictions on travel and ascetic precepts were lifted

in a rite known as the "opening the gate" (Sh. *bong va*), initially organized by the Wa king and his family members. On the day of this ritual, monks and elders from each Wa community participated and assisted fellow villagers in sending monetary tribute to the king and his kin. In this way, Wa kings adopted the rubric of Buddhist hierarchy and merit to assert their political authority and created a new dimension of hierarchy that stabilized the relationship between them and their followers.

Once the power of the Wa kings had been replaced by the authority of Han Chinese and Wa officials in 1952, the Buddhist system was deprived of its king-governed center and a dominant monastic institution in Cangyuan. Still, local Wa orators and Buddhist practitioners would continue to use the language of religious hierarchy to memorialize and honor their Wa kings. Most Wa Buddhists still express respect for the power of Wa kings through the idiom of Buddhist hierarchy. They voluntarily involve themselves in *yong sin* activities and continue the ritual exchanges with the current Wa king's family in appreciation of its symbolic religious role.

History of the Wa Kings' Families and Changes to Wa Kingship

Unlike the Wa Buddhist orators' collective memory of religious conversion, the oral narratives of the Wa king's descendants highlighted their family's historic ties with the Chinese authorities, their people's political repression, and the shift in the Wa king's authorities. These transformations affected how local Wa monastic practices were organized and eventually revived from the 1930s, the repressive years of the Cultural Revolution, and on to the present.

One member of the Wa king's family in Cangyuan explained that with the political insecurity and uncertainty stirred up by fighting between the Wa and British colonizers in 1933-1934, the weak political affiliation between the king and the Chinese state gradually turned into a heightened consciousness of the modern Chinese state in the 1930s. The fighting had erupted over the British invasion of Wa mines, which were under the direct control of the Wa king at the time. In China's official discourse, this is known as the "Banhong Incident" (Ch. Banhong shijian), which is considered part of China's national history and was a victory for the Chinese-Wa military allies over British colonial invaders (Cangyuan xianzhi bianji weiyuan hui 1998). It was during the Banhong Incident that the Wa king first developed a close tie with Chinese Nationalist authorities.

In October 1933, British colonial agents sent several Muslim Chinese to bribe the third Wa king with money and gifts in exchange for permission to develop the Wa mines. The Wa king was told that Britain had obtained permission from the

Chinese Nationalist government to run the mines at Lufang, located within the king's territory. But the king did not believe the Muslim Chinese negotiators and asked them to show him official documentation, which they did not have. Having failed at negotiation, the British organized a serious military force in late January 1934 and entered the Wa lands. That military surge lasted from January to March 1934 (also see Duan 1998: 72). That February the Wa king dispatched several persons to report the impending regional crisis to local Chinese representatives, including military commanders and other KMT (Ch. Guomingdang) officials in Yunnan. The Banhong Incident quickly became a national issue, rousing wide public sentiment against the British. Later, through diplomatic channels, the British and Chinese governments reached a resolution, and the British government agreed to return the occupied mining region of Banhong to China in 1937 (also see Duan 1998: 353-356).

The Wa king's ties with modern Chinese authorities went through a radical change in the 1950s and 1960s. To begin with, in 1952, the PRC government asserted greater political control over Cangyuan County. The Wa king at first agreed to the county government's proposal that his territories be incorporated into the Chinese system of land registration and collective ownership (Xiao and Hu 1997: 169). This was much like what happened in ethnic regions elsewhere in southwest China; the assimilation of the Wa king fell under the policy known as *gaitu guiliu* (literally, to change from indirect control of minorities through local native chieftains to direct control by the PRC central government) (Fang 1990, Herman 2006).

Meanwhile, Wa Buddhists in the Cangyuan region had historically called themselves *gon buraog* (sons of the *buraog* people). Before 1952, the ethnic name, Wa, was not commonly recognized as a unified ethnic category. It was not until the late 1950s that the PRC government started its rigorous reclassification of the country's ethnic regions and coined the name, *wazu*, (Wa nationality) to be one of the fifty-six official ethnonyms (Harrell 1995).

During the years of the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976), the king and his kin suffered terribly from political repression. Repudiated as a member of the noble exploiter class, the fifth Wa king and his senior family members were sent to labor camps in southwestern Yunnan where they died. Some family members fled to the Wa regions of northern Burma to avoid capture. At that time, the authority of Wa kingship was completely suspended and removed from the sacred and political realms of Cangyuan. At that time, relatives of the Wa king faced public challenges when they tried to reassert their traditional titles and status.

Although the sixth Wa king was officially reinstated in the early 1980s after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the role with kingship had become symbolic

rather than authoritative. Currently, all conventional ritual practices that affirm and celebrate kingship's religious-political power are prohibited by the PRC government. Such political control has resulted in a depoliticized Theravada Buddhist system that lacks a dominant center, although the sixth Wa king is still recognized by the Wa Buddhists of Cangyuan as a religious icon of the Wa kingdom and its highest political leader. The current Wa king remains a significant source of merit in the idiom of Buddhist hierarchy.

Furthermore, around 1985, the PRC government proposed a civic strategy to incorporate the sixth Wa king and his family into the PRC bureaucracy. He was given an official title (Ch. *guanzhi*) by the Yunnan Provincial government: Deputy-Chairman of the PRC's Political Consulting Committee (Ch. *zhengxie weiyuanhui*). This appointment was a pragmatic way for the PRC government to develop closer civic relations with the Wa king and his kin. In 2012 five more relatives of the sixth Wa king were appointed to positions as high-ranking Cangyuan County officials. Such civic appointments have transformed ordinary Wa Buddhists' conceptions of Wa kingship by linking the king and his family members with the PRC government. These civic appointments have not resulted in independent governance held by the former Wa kings; rather, they are part of a civic strategy to develop a dual (native Wa and official Chinese) status that will integrate the prestige of the Wa king into the PRC government, officially fashioning a multiethnic nation-state. The creation of this dual Wa/Chinese political status rests in the nested nature of hierarchical dynamism across the long-term transformation of Wa kingship.

In accordance with new state policies of the 1980s, the Cangyuan county government began encouraging local Buddhist citizens to revive their religious customs and rebuild their monasteries. Similar to the revival of local folkloric practices throughout rural China since the early 1980s (Anagnost 1994, Kipnis 2001), Wa Buddhists are in principle free to celebrate their religious and moral ideals without direct interference by the Chinese state. But because the PRC government institutions have stepped up control over the Wa headman system and destroyed local religious institutions during the Cultural Revolution, the religious power of the Wa kings has been greatly diminished. The management of Wa monasteries is carried out solely by community-based Wa monks and ordinary senior Wa orators in each community.

China's compulsory education laws, implemented in the mid-1980s, have also directly impacted Buddhist literary training in Wa communities. These laws prohibit all young boys (between ages 7-16) from becoming novices at village monasteries. In addition, state discourse on regional development often privileges the significance of scientific development over religion and ethnic minority culture. As a result, every

Wa village monastery has been left with a small population of young monks (2-5 boys), who are either younger than the official school age or who have had to drop out of school because of family financial problems. The experience of young monks is quite different from that of the senior orators' before the Culture Revolution. The religious life of Wa Buddhists now centers on the role of the senior orators, who organize community-based activities and perform liturgical and oratorical rituals.[15]

Before the opening of village public schools in Bahong and Banlao in 1985, sending one's young son to a village monastery was a popular way of introducing a child to literary training and showing respect for the Theravada Buddhist hierarchy. As in other Theravada Buddhist societies in mainland Southeast Asia, providing one's son to pursue novicehood and monkhood is locally seen as a way for Wa parents to make Buddhist merit that transfers from their sons to themselves and their extended families. To cultivate oneself to become a senior orator in the Wa Buddhist regions of Cangyuan is also a significant path to attain merit (Wa/Sh. *dox* nbuan; literally "send merit"). Whereas Wa males may become monks, a married Buddhist woman can only connect herself, and her natal family, with the sacred realm by the pragmatic means of sending a son to the monastery. Nowadays, as in the past, gender privileging in the monkhood is still effective and Wa women cannot become nuns in the Buddhist Sangha.

Currently public appreciation of the moral values of Buddhist hierarchy and its ritualistic practices for many rural Wa girls and married women in Banhong and Banlao has been greatly reshaped by outside nonreligious factors. Women have adapted to political-economic changes and acceptance of notions of gender equality and economic independence come from beyond the religious field. These include elements of the dominant Han Chinese culture and language that are part of the national ideologies contributing to the self-identification of Wa youth. For many young unmarried Wa females, seeking work opportunities away from home in urban manufacturing districts is a pragmatic means of self-cultivation and creating upward social mobility that will help them step away from the impoverishment in their home region. For some, it is a potent way of augmenting family income, providing necessary financial support for local monastic services, and participating in the Buddhist idiom of merit-marking (also see Tannenbaum and Kammerer 1996: 3-5).

[15] The role of male Buddhists can also be seen in other Theravada Buddhist societies (also see Eberhardt 2006).

Performing Deference, Reconfiguring Hierarchies

Since the Cultural Revolution, senior Wa orators, by virtue of their competence in performing Buddhist chants, continued to be publicly recognized as charismatic religious leaders. They are known locally as senior orators (Wa. *dax hrein si daeg*) and Shan literates (Wa/Sh. *dax hrein lai siam*), but the local community leadership disdains them as lacking culture and impeding economic development. These men developed their oratorical and literary skills through a long-life trajectory: from boyhood to monkhood to seniority, from training in the monastery to self-cultivation at home after leaving the monastery and resuming secular life. Pious Wa Buddhists follow these senior orators' advice and look up to them as moral guides and religious masters. Senior orators lived the life of a monk during their teenage years. In 1962 there were still no public schools in remote Cangyuan, and on their parents' advice, they entered local Wa monasteries to be educated in basic monastic literacy. The lengths of their monkhood and reasons for leaving the monastery varied. Some were forced to leave when local religious practices were suspended during the Cultural Revolution. Some decided on their own to return to their lay lives, in response to their family's request for labor assistance on the family farm. Among the orators, Dax Meng is the most senior, having lived in the village monastery from age 11 to 23 (1944-1956). Other senior orators' served as monks from four to eight years.

Oratory skills are the most important element in the reputation of these elders as they assert their religious authority in the Wa Buddhist communities. Oratory is a poetic representation of social relation. One instance, known as *rap houig* in Wa (*rap* means "to welcome," *houig* means "one just arrived at a specific place"), is a greeting widely used in the ethnic Wa regions of the China-Myanmar borderlands. It is described as a kind of *loux nab* (a language of deference), expressing homage and respect to one of higher status such as the Wa kings, Wa elderly, parents, and prestigious leaders. Skilled orators can mold the context of an immediate event based on the ritual needs of families and participants. Their oratory displays their mastery of poetic styles, linking verses and couplets, and their expert use of grammatical and semantic parallelisms. Some of their poetic styles are memorized and inherited from the past; others are spontaneously produced according to the nature of the ritual occasion or social event at hand. Their performance of deferential greetings is closely associated with the idiom of Buddhist hierarchy, in particular the notion of merit.

During my fieldwork (2004, 2005, 2009, and 2010), I observed senior Wa orators frequently improvising deferential greetings and displaying Buddhist merit to Han Chinese and Wa political leaders from outside the area in various encounters. One common occasion involved visits to local Wa communities to inspect the progress

of state-funded development projects (e.g., village road construction and modern housing) that were carried out between 2000 and 2010. When these political leaders visited, they were normally accompanied by young local Wa elites who served on the Village Committee, the smallest administrative unit in each rural community in China. On these occasions, the senior orators would greet the outsiders with a formal performance of deferential greeting. They consider these powerful outsiders, with whom they rarely have personal contact, as sources of Buddhist merit even though they were not Buddhists. As in other research on honorifics (Agha 2007, Philips 2010), we see that the Wa orators' performance of deference to significant "others" marks those others as agents whose goodwill can potentially benefit the local Wa. Paying homage mandates the return of merit. This speech act is a means for Wa orators to influence and reconfigure social relations within the ideologically ranked political hierarchy. Their act of performing deference further reveals a hierarchical dynamic in which the Buddhist value of merit is appropriated to reconfigure nested social relations, honoring outsiders over local young leaders to express distrust of the young leaders' political authority.

An excerpt follows from a deferential greeting performed by the Wa orator Dax Meng at the wedding of Nyi Rai and U Ga in Banhong in 2005. Four high-ranking officials from the county government and two civil servants from Banhong Township were invited to attend. Two local Wa political leaders from the Village Committee of their community accompanied these official visitors. Here I will focus on the ways deference and social hierarchy are marked through the use of stereotypically honorific indexicals, including social titles and honorific emblems. In the performance of deferential greeting, merit flows from the high-ranking political authorities (Text B lines 21-30) to the deceased elderly and the parents (Text B lines 38-39) through the linguistic markers of hierarchy. I have divided this deferential greeting into two sections, Texts A and B. Transcribed below are the two portions of the speech, which consisted of 198 lines of verse. By leaving out repeated verses, the remaining lines number forty-nine. The selected verses here exemplify how Wa orators "domesticate" high-ranking outsiders and their authority to the local value of merit and the Buddhist hierarchy with regard to honor and respect. The general structure of this deferential speech includes a beginning section that acknowledges the ritual participants and distinguished leaders, and a subsequent section that expresses gratitude to them.

Text A Evoking Merit and Acknowledging Participants

1	*dax gix box moh dax hox*	The elder's name is Dax Hox.
2	*dom yuh ga baox in ngaix*	Today is the date for the wedding.
3	*dom* **qing** *beix houig dix qag*	[They] invite you to witness it.
4	*beix box moh si miang*	You are political leaders.
5	*gum beix ndaex* **xiang** *ndaex* **xian**	Your group is from the township and the county.
6	*moh lang ndaex gein eix*	You work in our district.
7	*eix dom yuh lang kao mad naex beix*	We perform the Five Bowls ritual for you.
8	*rap lang nbuan eix ah naox*	We say this ritual is performed to welcome merit.
9	*gu gaex gu bui*	Coming from each person.
10	*houig* **lingdao** *ndaex nyiex ndaex yaong*	[You as] political leaders visit our family and our village.
11	*in ngaix goui u goui nyi ah gix sum gix ga baox*	Today is the day our son, Nyi, marries U.
12	*ndaeh lang gix glong mong*	[This is the date] they [ask young people to] strike the gong (a traditional musical instrument).
13	*in ngaix dom leg lang boux ngaix lang*	[They] selected this "long" date to bring happiness to [everybody].
14	*jang lang boux deid ngaix hmom*	[They] selected this good day.
15	*dom greih eix naex grum*	We gather together.
16	*dom grum eix naex gu*	We gather together.

Text B Addressing Merit

17	*beix moh lang kix si ngaix laex si miang*	You are the Moon, the Sun, the Woman Immortal, the Political Leader.
18	*moh lang beix jao being nbeen vong kun kei*	You are also the men who transmit the policies from the central government.
19	*being lang loux gix kix si ngaix laex si miang*	[You are] also the messengers of the Moon, the Sun, the Woman Immortal, the Political Leader.
20	*in ngaix oud lang beix ndaex* **xiang** *ndaex* **xian**	Today you are in this township and this county.
21	*gix dom goui lang grax grub grai vai sa*	They welcome you sincerely.

22	*rog lang boux nbuan hu ga nbuan dah kaix*	We welcome your merit.
23	*nbuan kix si ngaix laex si miang*	Merit from the Moon, the Sun, the Woman Immortal, the Political Leader.
24	*in ngaix dom greih beix naex grum*	Today we gather together [here].
25	*krom beix naex gu*	We are here each in a pair.
26	*daeg being daix beix naex haig bong*	[They] hold your hands to walk up the stairs of their stilt house.
27	*grong being jaong beix naex haig nyiex*	[They] raise your legs to lead you into their house.
28	*houig guang oud guang goui gix*	You come to their living space [Nyi Rai's family].
29	*guang ngom grong grox gix*	They [Nyi Rai's father and family members] squat down [to conduct the welcome speech].
30	*ndaex nyiex si vax ma*	You come to their house.
31	*i dom rap lang being nbuan hu ga nbuan ndah kaix*	They welcome merit from the past [refers to deceased family members] and merit from the living honored figures.
32	*nbuan kix si ngaix laex si miang*	merit from the Moon, the Sun, the Woman Immortal, the Political Leader.
33	*jao vong kun kie*	A good message from "the leaders in the central government."
34	*ang gah goui kong pid*	Do not let them commit transgressions.
35	*ang gah goui pid lud*	Do not let them speak wrong things.
36	*ang gah goui kong pid na da lang…*	Do not let them commit transgressions.
37	*in ngaix goui nang grax nab gam yam moun*	Today is the day we worship those who we respect and those from whom we expect to gain symbolic protection.
38	*nbuan dax nbuan yax*	Merit from the deceased grandmother and the deceased grandfather.
39	*nbuan max nbuan geeing*	Merit from Mother and Father.
40	*nbuan kix si ngaix laex si miang*	Merit from the Moon, the Sun, the Woman Immortal, the Political Leader
41	*jao vong kun kei*	[Merit] from the leaders in the central government.
42	*in ngaix grum si du hu si naix eix naex*	Today we gather together.
43	*in ngaix rog being dix oud veei*	Today we pray to be protected in the symbolic realm of merit.

44	*rog being dix geei nbuan*	Today we pray to be protected with merit.
45	*rog being dix oud nbuan soun ngao*	They pray for the protection of merit.
46	*gah boux dix ding brax*	Let them [crops and poultry] grow quickly.
47	*gah boux dix rag riang naex*	Let people become very strong [stay healthy].
48	*lang nju nbu riang*	Let people live a long life and grow "thick teeth" [enjoy longevity].
49	*lang een breem guad*	Let people live to be old and stay healthy.

Note: Wa appears in italics; Shan is underlined; Chinese is in bold. The data of Text A and B was collected from my participation in this ritual event.

Text A explains the purpose of the ceremonial event, incorporating the officials' social status into the ritual chants, and evoking the merit to come from the presence of visiting officials. Text B prays for symbolic protection derived from that merit. In line 1 of Text A, Baox Sai begins by addressing the groom's grandfather (Dax Hox) as a way of introducing his family to the guests. This is a conventional way of introducing the wedding family. The living elder's name is spoken first and then the visitors' names. Baox Sai then turned to the officials, addressing them in Wa using the categorical social title, *si miang*, (see line 4 of Text A). In lines 5-6, he expressively pointed out their districts of responsibility. After that, he extended his right hand toward the outside officials and then the township civil servants, simultaneously raising his voice to a heightened pitch and addressing them all in Chinese as *lingdao* (line 10). Baox Sai's gesture and change of pitch immediately attracted the officials' attention to lingdao, one of the few Chinese terms in the whole sequence of the deferential speech and, thus, one of the few words the outside Chinese officials understood.

In the 1980s, the native term *si miang*—used in the past to address a Wa king—also began to be used in Wa oratory to address respected traditional leaders, e.g. Wa headmen (Wa. *dax gei*). In contemporary Wa community politics, the usage of *si miang* has been extended to include high-ranking non-local state officials. However, the application of this honor is open to debate. The ambivalence of local Wa Buddhist orators toward young local political leaders exemplifies this issue.

Before the inception of rural political reform in 1999, local Wa political leaders were relatively well respected for their considerable efforts in managing community affairs. In the 1970s, most of them had worked as Red Guards and, afterwards, in 1978, the county government in Cangyuan appointed them political leaders. This early group of local leaders was held in high esteem because they maintained close

relationships with traditional religious leaders and elders despite their new state-based political power and influence. But following the 1999 political reforms in Cangyuan, a group of young (in their 20s-30s) Wa Buddhists, who were literate in Mandarin, were elected the area's new political leaders. Aligning themselves with the PRC's official ideology of scientific development for Cangyuan, these young leaders gradually came to despise conventional Wa Buddhist ethnolinguistic practices and the traditional Wa orators, and have often tried to distance themselves from local ritual events.

Not surprisingly the senior Wa orators and ordinary Wa residents do not generally respect these young local officials and never address them as *lingdao* or as *si miang*. This lack of respect is attributable to the new leader cohort's youth and lack of social experience as well as their antagonistic views toward revived Buddhist activities and local religious leaders. But in truth their uneven allocation of poverty alleviation aid, seen locally as corruption, is the pivotal reason most rural Wa lack respect for them. Beginning with the PRC's campaign to "Open Up to the West" in 2001 (Yeung 2004) and the construction of a new socialist rural society in 2004, township governments in Wa Buddhist regions have promoted new civilizing discourses and offered anti-poverty funding in the hope of improving the standard of living among the poor in the Wa uplands. Ordinary villagers have frequently criticized the young Wa officials for misappropriating anti-poverty funds for their own personal needs.

So when the social titles (*lingdao* and *si miang*) are woven into an oratory text, directly indexing political officials and, indirectly, the power of the Chinese nation-state, the orator harkens back to religious contexts which pertained only to the Wa kings. The honorific emblems, *kix si ngaix laex si miang* (Sun, Moon, etc., as in lines 17, 19, 23, 32 of Text B) used to introduce the officials would at one time have only been used to address the Wa kings. Invoking *kix si ngaix laex si miang* in a strategic way, the orator creates an intertextual link between the political authority of past Wa kings and that of the contemporary visiting officials. The moon (*kix*) and sun (*si ngaix*) mark the canopy of past Wa kings' political authority. Two other terms, *laex* and *si miang*, are added to make a single honorific emblem.

Unlike Dai Buddhist views on respect for government officials as symbolic protectors (Tannenbaum 1995), Wa Buddhist orators have developed more complex ideas about government officials. They differentiate their leaders into several categories: previous communist cadres, current young political leaders, and distinguished leaders from higher levels of governement. At present, honorific forms of oratory are only used in encounters where Wa Buddhists meet distinguished outside officials, whether Wa or non-Wa Chinese leaders, at the township, county, or

province levels, as well as at the national level.

Since the early 2000s, showing deference for important outside officials through *rap houig* has become a social act that celebrates the local Buddhists' conventional religious norms of respectability and merit, and has helped them work toward reconfiguring social hierarchies. By rejecting the use of either the social titles (*lingdao* and *si miang*) or the honorific emblems (*kix si ngaix laex si miang*) to address their own junior political leaders, while applying them to outside officials, they have recalibrated their relations to create a field for expression that mixes political lament with the ideals of Buddhist hierarchy. Publicly performing this deferential speech before both outside officials and young local leaders delivers a critique of the local leadership and indirectly expresses their view of their leaders' failure to adequately care for the needs of Wa residents. Although semantics of the deferential wording may be lost on the visiting officials they are understood by the locals, most importantly members of the community who are being ill-served.

In an interview I conducted in 2004 with An Jan, a rice farmer and an orator in his seventies, in response to my asking why orators incorporate powerful outsiders into their verses of deferential speech, he explained, "We want them to hear [Wa. *meng*] our ancestral words [words formerly addressed to the king] expressing our respect toward them. We also want to report current problems in the community through our way of speaking. These problems derive from development plans we have for the community, for example, remodeling a temple or constructing a new road… ".

But the efficacy of these deferential performances is often in question. When the orators reach beyond the monastery to public arenas or teach Buddhist scripture, they face derogatory comments about their Buddhist knowledge. Furthermore, although Wa Buddhist elders are recognized by young monks and laypersons as the highest religious authorities, conflict between the political and religious hierarchies often results in the marginalization of these orators in the public political arena (as in Dax Mao's account at the beginning of this article). Under the influence of these multilayered and nested hierarchies, Wa Buddhist orators are neither free agents nor totally structured cultural producers. Their deferential greetings to important outsiders show how they apply the Buddhist notions of deference and merit to negotiate their ambiguous status, a status grounded in the nested hierarchies of local social relations.

Conclusion

The historical and political contexts of religious conversion represent a situated convergence of an introduced Buddhist belief system and its associated hierarchy of values with native understandings of Wa kingship, community-based political distrust, and the leading performative role of senior Wa orators. All this taken together creates the converged, nested feature of hierarchical dynamism. The multilayered dynamics between Wa kingship and modern Chinese politics and the orator's strategic appropriation of conventional honorifics to address high-ranking non-Buddhist leaders show how that dynamism plays out. The appropriation of externally introduced Theravada Buddhist values illustrates how Buddhist hierarchical ideas are recontextualized over time and highlights the dynamics between political and religious orientations. These processes involve the reconceptualization and articulation of introduced notions of hierarchy and merit, which are then applied in the negotiation of conflict and distrust in contemporary community politics.

As the Buddhist hierarchy is constantly recalled and practiced in ritualistic and spatial arrangements, and continues to reference the authority of past Wa kings in local religious life, and Wa orators and laypersons continue to memorialize the symbolic authority of the current Wa king in local rites and observances, the living king and some of his family members now hold civic appointments in high-level government offices at the proposal of the PRC government. Since the authority of the Wa king has declined, the management of Wa Buddhist religious life is now carried out only by a group of young monks and senior orators. Although the practice of Theravada Buddhist beliefs is now politically constrained to the religious field, senior Wa orators are active agents who appropriate the language of the Buddhist hierarchy and reinterpret social relations, community politics, and political corruption in light of Buddhist moral values. Their innovative, agentive acts in the practice of conventional deferential greetings allows them to judge who is worthy of being honored and who is not, who is worthy of being valued in terms of merit and who is not. Lastly, by analyzing Wa accounts of their religious conversion, the shifting authority of the Wa king and the deferential act, this article shows how practices of Theravada Buddhist belief can work through conventional notions of value and ethnolinguistic expressions to maneuver among multilayered nested hierarchies.

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劉子愷

臺灣大學人類學系

106 台北市大安區羅斯福路四段一號

tzukailiu77@ntu.edu.tw

恭敬的實踐及其政治：
中國西南邊境地區佤族人的南傳佛教信仰與階序動態

劉子愷
國立臺灣大學人類學系

本文探討生活於中緬邊境的滄源佤族自治縣內信仰南傳佛教佤族人的宗教階序和政治階序關係的動態歷史和文化實踐，說明他們以*nbuan*（佛教功德）和恭敬觀念的文化詮釋方式和儀式行動來理解佤王政權和當代政治階序關係。本文以「階序動態」（Robbins 2015）的理論，說明佛教階序與政治階序是緊張、相互涵括的關係，以及兩種階序的相疊性。以佤王主導的佛教改宗是因十九世紀末期中緬邊境地區的民族衝突而起，佤族採納了傣族的南傳佛教信仰，但最終以佤族人來傳承佛教知識和管理佛寺。1952年之後，佤王統治權力被中國的政權所取代，他原享有最高的宗教地位也被中國政府禁止。中國文革之後，當代佤族人透過每年舉辦的儀式行動來記憶和彰顯佤王擁有最崇高*nbuan*的象徵地位。階序動態的關係也展現在漢族高層官員造訪佤族村寨的場合，當地男性儀式專家會以恭敬儀式來歡迎官員，並將官員視為擁有較高的*nbuan*，但對於同時出席的村委會佤族幹部們，佤族老人卻避免使恭敬語彙來稱呼他們。本文提出佤族人的南傳佛教階序和政治階序不是時間靜止或固定的結構關係，在不同歷史脈絡中，階序關係是動態形成和相疊的，以*nbuan*為主的文化價值系統和佛教階觀念是佤族人的儀式行動準則，並成為他們理解和批判當代佤族農村政治階序的文化方式。

關鍵詞：階序動態，南傳佛教信仰，佛教改宗，恭敬，信仰佛教的佤族人