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CHINA

GUAN JIAN. *The Indigenous Religion and Theravada Buddhism in Ban Da Tiu: A Dai Lue Village in Yunnan (China)*. The South East Asian Review 17, nos. 1–2. Gaya: Centre for South East Asian Studies, 1992. ii+ 60 pages. Paper; n.p.

It is still relatively rare to find modern anthropological studies, based on fieldwork and written in English, by scholars from the People's Republic of China. The present study is one of them. Guan Jian has given us an extraordinarily valuable account of the religious institutions of a Dai (Tai) Lue village, Ban Da Tiu, in Mengla county, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province. The topic on which Guan has focused—the concomitance of folk religion and Theravada Buddhism in a Tai-speaking community—is, of course, not new to Southeast Asian anthropology; we have a shelf of fine studies on the subject from Burma and Thailand (e.g., BROHM 1963; KIRSCH 1977; PFANNER 1962; SPIRO 1967; TAMBIAH 1970; TERWIEL 1975). The great value of Guan's work is that it is from China, and postdates the Cultural Revolution.

Guan's "Background of Dai Lue Society" (chapter 2) is an excellent adumbration of the traditional politico-administrative structure of Xishuangbanna, from the ruling prince, the *zhao pienling*, through the chiefs of the twelve *panna* (*zhao panna*), the lords of the thirty-four *muang* (*zhao muang*), down to the village headmen (*zhao ban*) and, finally, the household (*hen*) heads. Interestingly, though the former princedom and its twelve *panna* were abolished by the Communist regime when it assumed power in 1950, the old divisions of *muang* (traditionally, the irrigation units) and *ban* (natural villages) have been retained as the "township" and "village" units in the present administrative structure of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture.

Chapter 3 is Guan's introduction to her study community, Ban Da Tiu, located close to the Lao border and sixty kilometers from the prefectural capital of Jinhong. The description gives the impression, at one level, of a fairly typical seventy-six-household Tai rice-farming village, such as one would expect to find all over these Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands, from North Thailand through the Burmese Shan State, northern Laos, and into Yunnan. But of special interest is Guan's portrait of a vibrant on-going religious tradition, in both its Buddhist and its folk dimensions. It is difficult to remember how close we still are to that frenzied decade (1966–76) of political turmoil and antireligiosity that marked Chairman Mao Zedong's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. (Incidentally, I experienced something of the same sense of surprise when, in Xishuangbanna and in neighboring Lancang County of Simao Prefecture, I attended Lahu Shi and Lahu Na temple rituals and soul-recall rites with Lahu friends who are card-carrying CCP members—and proud of it!)

Ban Da Tiu is an exclusively Dai Lue community, with the exception of a few in-married Han carpenters. It is not, however, a particularly isolated settlement. The

paved highway from Jinhong to Mengla's county seat, Menglun, passes right through the village; a branch of the Han-dominated Menglun State Rubber Plantation is only a few kilometers away; the Xishuangbanna Tropical Plant Institute (employing almost a thousand people) is just across the river from the village; and an office of the Han-staffed Menglun Road Service is only a kilometer from the village. In addition, most young people speak Chinese in addition to the Dai language—all village children advancing to senior primary and middle school attend institutions where two-thirds of the student body and most of the teachers are Han, and where Chinese is the sole language of instruction. Given the circumstances of the recent past, along with the present physical, economic, technical, and cultural proximity of modern Han social-cultural institutions, it is remarkable just how very Dai Ban Da Tiu remains.

Chapters 4 to 6 of Guan's study, dealing respectively with folk religion, the contrast between folk religion and Buddhism, and the coexistence of the two traditions, constitute the heart of her work. Again, this reviewer was less struck by the ethnographic details (though specialists will want to examine these carefully, e.g., her report [50–51] of the recent institution of so anti-canonical a practice as sacrificing buffaloes to the Buddha) than by the fact that such a vibrant tradition appears to be enduring within a politico-economic ambience that, officially at least, sees the world in very different terms. The details of local beliefs in soul-essence, deities, and spirits; of medicine men, spirit specialists, and ritual bards; of monasteries, monks, and merit-making; of recalling lost souls, honoring protective deities, and propitiating malevolent spirits—and of the Dai Lue villagers' ability to accommodate two sets of beliefs and ritual practices—must all be very familiar to anyone conversant with Tai ethnography. But with these as the backdrop, it is sometimes hard to recall that only a few years ago Buddhist temples were being destroyed, and Buddha images desecrated, by young Maoist proletarians who included (so this reviewer was told in Xishuangbanna) goodly numbers of Dai in their midst. Today, as Guan tells us in her introduction, not only is there "a marked revival of Buddhism [as evidenced by the] reconstruction of monasteries, building of images of Buddha, training of monks, copying of Buddhist texts and setting up of monastic libraries," but the "indigenous [folk] religion has also become more active. Instead of the traditional bamboo temples for the village gods, the villagers . . . [have] rebuilt these temples with cement and bricks [and] the sacrificial ceremonies for the indigenous gods tend to be more frequent and more serious" (3).

Guan's characterizations of Buddhism and folk religion, and her explanations of why they are able to coexist among the Dai Lue, are, in this reviewer's mind, just a little too much those of the outsider ("etic" in current—and ugly—anthropological jargon). One may, like Guan, "definitely distinguish these two beliefs and practices, and state where Buddhism ends and where the indigenous religion begins" (44). But is this also invariably true of the participants themselves? Moreover, although the search for characteristics common to both systems (such as tolerance and respect for all forms of life) is important, it does not seem to tell the entire story. I suggest Guan is more truly on the mark when she cites her informants as saying:

> It is better to worship both in our village temple [of the village guardian deities] and the Buddhist temple as well . . . When we have a new baby or marriage or travel we pray to our village gods; when somebody dies we ask monks for chanting because Buddhism is very helpful for the death.

In effect Buddhism and folk religion fulfil different, nonconflicting functions. The one deals essentially with the hereafter, the other with the here-and-now.

Altogether there is much in Guan's book to interest and excite specialists on the Tai-speaking peoples, as well as those more generally concerned with China's minority peoples. It is a pity, however, that the work was not better edited before being placed in the public domain. It seems to me that in view of the enormous effort Guan made to present her research in English (the Chinese-language literature is voluminous), she should have been entitled to receive, in return, some competent editorial assistance. As it is, the publication is plagued with typographical, spelling, grammatical, and factual errors. A few samples: the area of Xishuangbanna is given as "nineteen square kilometers" (7); the Aini (Akha) are referred to as "a branch of the Hans" (for Hani!) (20); and the annual monastic retreat is described as a "three-month festival" (37). In addition, British and American standard spellings are intermingled, and Tai words are rendered in a sometimes confusing mix of Hanyu pinyin and other romanizations. These are all items that a conscientious editor should have caught and addressed.

Thanks then to Ms. Guan for this valuable sample of post-Maoist Chinese scholarship, but less thanks to her publishers for the final production (which, incidentally, would have benefited enormously by maps and photographs, particularly of Buddhist and village temples and their associated rituals).

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