

## Songs, Sounds, and the Dai's Senses of Belonging Xishuangbanna, Southwest China

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In 1997, while the Thai were being frightened by the downturn in their national economy and the currency crisis of Thai baht, the Dai<sup>1</sup> were excited about the first ever album of Dai modern music produced and performed in their own language. The legendary album was released (on a cassette tape) with the most famous song at that time being, “Sao Dai Pai Fon Muang Haw” (Dai girls go to dance in a Han country). The performers were ‘Dao Mai’ (New Star in English), a band led by a lead singer called Ai Sam, supervised by a group of senior monks at the Centre Temple of Xishuangbanna (CTX). This cultural movement of Dai modern music, called New Star phenomenon in this paper, made a great impact in this rural area, as reflected in the recent works of scholars in this minority region of modern China (see Davis 1999; McCathy 2000). The cultural formation of Dai modern music in Xishuangbanna, has particularly been discussed in Sara Davis’s work, which focuses on Lue oral poet and poetry, and she considers this ‘new music’ movement to be ‘the continuation’ of the Dai minority tradition in these global days (Davis 2001). Nevertheless, her account of the formation of this new music development is still partial, limited, and debatable<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps it is too early to conclude that the movement of Dai modern music, an ongoing popular process, has a particularly political significance in this minority region, where all cultural activities and

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1. The terms Tai, Dai, and Shan refer to the Tai speaking language groups: Tai is widely used among scholars; Dai is a Chinese official term referring to the groups in China (and the Lue are simply part of them); and Shan is the British term, originally referring to the Tai groups in Burma (the Lue are also one of the groups in this country). In Laos and Thailand, the Lue have usually become part of these two nationalities. The term Dai used in this paper mainly refers to ‘the Lue of Sipsong Panna.’ The terms Dai and Lue will be used interchangeably in this paper. The names Sipsong Panna, Xishuangbanna, or Banna for short, will also be used interchangeably.
  2. For example, she argues convincingly that the Dai pop music movement owes very much to Thai and Shan popular music, which developed in the 1970s (Davis 1999: 192-201). Situating the movement within the national context of modern China, she emphasises that this movement echoes Mao’s notion of “using music to serve the community, and making it accessible to all.”(ibid: 196) However it is still not clear, in my view, how these processes happened.

traditions automatically tend to turn themselves into everyday minority acts of resistance.

When I arrived in Xishuangbanna in October 2002 the New Star band had already split up. The band ended its legendary activity less than a year after their first and only album was released. However, from stories I heard and investigated during my fieldwork, in this paper I will re-tell the stories about this cultural phenomenon, which are partial and limited as well. My exploration of this phenomenon will be focused on the life stories of two leading actors: Kruba and Maha. Both of these have played a crucial role in the re-inventing of Theravada Buddhism and other Dai traditions, particularly since the mid 1980s<sup>3</sup>. Following the New Star phenomenon, we will turn to the formation and transformation of Dai Dynamo, the band I worked and lived with. Contextualising the Dai of Xishuangbanna, as members of the Lue of the borderlands of the upper Mekong region, who have in fact lived dispersedly across the national borders of modern China, Burma, Laos, and Thailand (Keyes 1992), the stories of this band will show how this minority music has been significantly influenced by historic and ethnic connections with the Tai peoples in this region. The development of this minority band also shows that it owes a great deal to the paradoxical processes of cultural revival among the Dai minority in modern China which occurred in response to national and regional economic developments in this frontier<sup>4</sup>.

### **The music band and the temple**

Back in 1987, the first 'Dai pop band' was formed in Muang Jae, a small town in the countryside of western Xishuangbanna, led by the then abbot of a village temple who became the 'Krubu Muang of Sipsong Panna' in the beginning of 2004. Born in 1960 in a

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3. The former is now the abbot of the CTX, the Director of Xishuangbanna Buddhist Association, and the Kruba Muang of Sipsong Panna. The latter is the former deputy abbot, who has recently turned himself into a Shan/Dai music producer and distributor in Takeelek town, in the Shan state of Burma.

4. Data used in this article is drawn from my fieldwork, conducted from October 2002 to September 2003, with follow-up fieldtrips from May 2004 to December 2008, in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China; in Mae Sai-Tachilek border towns of Burma and Thailand; and in northern Thailand. In contrast to Sara Davis, who mainly used Chinese and learned Dai during her fieldwork. I started my fieldwork with modern Yong, northern Thai, and sometimes modern Thai and English (when I went to banks). During my fieldwork I learned everyday local Chinese (Banna dialect?) from my Dai friends. Epistemologically, these two methodologies are different, particularly in terms of the 'politics of doing fieldwork', in this minority region, where the natives are naturally bilingual at least. However, no one approach is better than another. In fact we need a combination of both.

town in southwest Xishuangbanna, bordering the Shan state of Burma, two years after the Great Leap Forward broke out, Kruba described his young life to me, “I grew up in the battlefield.” Because of the civil war that had happened along the borders years earlier, his father encouraged him to be ordained as a novice when he was 13. Perhaps it was a way to distract him from joining the Shan State Army, Kruba explained. Just months after his ordination, his parents had to escape to Keng Tung. There, the then novice spent his teenage life, simultaneously studying in the Buddhist monastery. Once in Keng Tung, he first helped his Shan compatriots to produce and distribute cassettes of the Kuen pop album, Kruba told me seriously. It was not successful though. When Kruba was 16, his mother passed away. One year after that, he moved further to Rangoon, studying there for three years before returning to Keng Tung. In the early 1980s Kruba and his colleague crossed to northern Thailand for further study. The then young monk studied and lived in a temple in Chiang Mai city, where his senior from Keng Tung had been earlier. The temple is situated in the Kuen descendant community of the city<sup>5</sup>. Kruba lived in Chiang Mai for three years. He has become multi-lingual. He is fluent in Lue, Kuen, and Yuan (Kham Muang), also Burmese, Chinese, Thai, and northern Shan.

In 1986, his father passed away. That year was a turning point in his life. He had been about to disrobe, more than twice, but never did it. His father left a request with Kruba, whether disrobed or not, asking him to visit relatives in his fatherland. The journey back to Sipsong Panna to visit his father’s hometown was the beginning of Kruba’s mission in the Dai country. In his father’s hometown, he was invited by the villagers to be the abbot. Kruba accepted this faithful invitation, at least for a year, he said. Though one year passed, what he had seen and experienced led Kruba to devote his life to re-install the Dai laity’s spirit. He first reformed the Buddhist monasteries of his new hometown; rebuilding the temple and the pagoda, getting the young locals ordained, teaching them Tai scripts and Buddhism. Furthermore, the then abbot of this small village led a group of young locals to form the first Dai pop band. This was partly to fulfil the promise he had made to himself in Keng Tung, Kruba said. The instruments were transported from Kunming, because Jinghong then still did not have any of them. Not surprisingly, the officials, perhaps from the Communist Party, came to see the then abbot, soon after the ‘new sounds’ spread throughout the community, questioning whether it was a monk’s business to form the band. Kruba responded to them sincerely, maintaining that it was useful, entertained the people, and could help the local government to promote Dai cultures. Finally,

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5. Historically, the Kuen of Keng Tung were forced to resettle in a southern zone of the old city of Chiang Mai during warfare in the late 18th century.

as Kruba expressed (to me), it does not break the laws, so why not? The officials could not stop the Dai, led by their spiritual leader, to develop their modern culture. The little move in this countryside later made the great impact throughout Sipsong Panna.

In Muang Long, southern Xishuangbanna, about a year after Kruba transported the band's instruments into the west, Maha, the then abbot of Ban Thang temple also led the young Dai laity to form another Dai pop band. Maha and Kruba in fact had first seen each other in northern Thailand. Both of them, however, independently transported new music into these two Dai communities. The two bands in these two communities eventually came into contact via the band tours between the two towns during the annual festivals. Two members of each band later formed the historic band of Xishuangbanna, New Star. Let us get to know Maha, a cultural transporter of Thai style country music into the Dai musical world.

Born in the mid 1960s in Muang Yong (the Shan state of Burma), Maha was one in a group of cross-border monks from that town who were brought to study in a northern Thai monastery in the early 1980s by the then abbot of Wat Suwan, called Tu Lung. He studied and lived for about eight years in Pa Xang District, Lamphun, where a majority of the population had ancestors who were forced from Muang Yong to resettle in the region almost two hundred years before, and speak Lue dialect, known as Yong. Accomplishing the highest degree of study in Buddhist monastery, he became Maha.

In the late 1980s, Maha went back home and later moved to a village in Muang Long, his mother's original hometown in southern Sipsong Panna. There he renewed the temple building, formed the village monastery and became an abbot. Importantly, he began to transport modern musical instruments and 'new culture' into his new community. The then abbot led the local laity to form a village band and began to write Dai pop songs, initially translated from Phleng Luk Thung (Thai style country music). Many songs written by Maha later became legends, such as 'Dai girls go to dance in a Han country' on the New Star album (1997), and Akara (Tai scripts) the golden prize song of the third national competition of a music television program, re-produced by the Xishuangbanna Television Station (BNTV), in 1999.

In 1993, when Kruba, then abbot of the village in Muang Jae, was invited to be the abbot of the CTX, Maha, then abbot of the village in Muang Long, moved to the CTX to be the deputy abbot. Significantly, when the two village abbots moved to Jinghong to take up their higher positions in the Banna Sangha, both of them brought to their new positions in the city the new culture that they had imported to the countryside years earlier. Since then, the abbot and

the deputy abbot of the CTX have devoted their lives to lead other fellow monks (most of them being former cross border monks who had been to study in the northern Thai Buddhist monasteries and initially began to return to their country in the mid 1990s) and the Dai laity to re-install the Banna Sangha and establish the Buddhist monastery school, which held its first class in 1994 and formally opened one year after that.<sup>6</sup> Maha had played a crucial role in this invention of Dai tradition for a decade. At the CTX, supported by the abbot, the deputy abbot, with a few senior monks, continued to develop his Dai song writing skills and finally led the Dai laity (two of them from Muang Jae, the other two from Muang Long) to form the band which later became 'Dao Mai' or New Star. The band's name was in fact taken from Maha's penname.

### **New Star and its legacy**

At the CTX, the members of the Dai pop band, all in their twenties and thirties, led by Ai Sam the lead singer, worked closely with a group of senior monks/song writers. Apart from Maha's works, many songs written by other senior monks were therefore great material for New Star to perform. And many of these works were passed on to the second band, which later became Dai Dynamo.

Ten years after the first modern musical instruments had been imported into the Dai country, the pop band supervised by Maha and his fellow monks, finally released the historic album of modern Dai popular songs in 1997. As notes previously, the New Star band lasted only one year. The band' members, most of whom were then in their thirties, split up just a year after their first ever album was released<sup>7</sup>. This was partly because an internal conflict between the lead singer and a group of senior monks. But this did not mean that the institutionalisation of Dai modern music was halted. What New Star created was not only a legendary album but also a new cultural space for the Dai minority. The band were invited to perform in the communities during the Dai annual festivals (Poi, pagoda worshipping festivals, new temple building celebrations, etc) around the countryside. The biggest impact that the New Star band had was probably their live performance, in December 1997, in the final round of the first Dai pop song singing contest, organised by Don in cooperation with the township government in

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6.The school was just registered as part of the state educational system in 2007.

7. While Ai Sam and Dump, a bass guitar player, both from Muang Jae, still continued their musical careers after that, two other men (one was a school teacher) from Muang Long went back to their village. In early June 2004, I met another former member of New Star band, who is now on a village committee. He still continues a band in his village, in Muang Long.

his hometown, the CTX, the Xishuangbanna Dai Cultural Research Centre, and a group of Dai journalists in BNTV.

On stage, New Star performed their own Dai songs and played as the backup band for a variety of Dai singers. Paradoxically, all the singers in this Dai pop singing contest sang Shan songs<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, among the Dai, the story spread throughout the countryside. The Dai not only had witnessed that they now had their own 'modern songs,' they also saw the new opportunities and potentialities to make and produce their own works, just like the Thai, the Shan and the Han, who had developed this new culture before them for decades.

In 1999, Maha decided to disrobe. It was the most emotional moment, I was told. No one could stop him. He moved back to Muang Yong to take care of his elderly mother, then got married and settled down in Takeelek town. There, Maha has continued his musical career. The contacts between him and his Dai friends in Sipsong Panna are still strong. About one year after he moved, he opened a music shop and began to distribute Shan and Thai (country) musical products and the Dai modern music albums, which are transported to him soon after they are released in Xishuangbanna<sup>9</sup>.

Now we turn to the formation and transformation of Dai Dynamo.

## **Dai Dynamo and its members**

### **The manager**

Born in 1970 in one of the twelve Chiang-villages of Keng Hung in the old days, Don was one of the cleverest students among the young Dai in his generation. After his school years in his hometown, Don moved to Jinghong city for further study, where his talent and love of music was strongly re-stimulated. Being Dai in a Han dominated world school, where any idea about the Tai peoples who live outside Banna was still untold in the classroom, it was the structural context that constrained and intensified his curiosity about the Tai, and the Thai perhaps. Banna in the eighties was so different from the old days two decades earlier. What he was told by the elders about his relatives outside Banna in the south and a Tai cross-border voice that he listened to on his AM transistor, encouraged him to seek release from state

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8.Observed on a film (two video tape cassettes) produced by BNTV that Don provided to me.

9.On my re-visit in late April 2004, I found that Maha had just expanded his business, opening the first branch of his music shop in his hometown, Muang Yong.

suppression. With his fluent Mandarin, Don in his high school days ambitiously began to write Dai lyrics by translating them from Han songs. After his graduation from the city school in the late 1980s, he was appointed as an official in a township of southern Banna. In this border town, he had a greater chance to access the Shan and the Thai musical worlds. His curiosity about the Tai and the Thai outside his country eventually caused him to cross the border to visit the upper town of Thailand. In the early 1990s, during the Dai New Year holidays, Don, with another friend, took the journey from Muang Long, via Muang Yong, to Takeelek border town<sup>10</sup>. When he crossed the border checkpoint to the Thai side, Don told me that, the Tai/Thai in Mae Sai he first saw were “just like the Taiwanese Han, why don’t they look like the Dai!”

Don’s imagination about the Tai and the Thai in those days perhaps ironically reflected his nostalgic idea of his Dai world in the past, which was suddenly demolished during the Cultural Revolution. He was a little disappointed. However, he spent a few days in these border towns, observing and buying, particularly northern Thai and Shan songs (his favourite singers are Sai Mao and Jaran Manophet, the leading singers of the Shan and northern Thai, respectively) and took them back to Banna. The adventure not only brought him ‘new knowledge’ about the Tai modern world in northern Thailand, but he was also told, by a Lue driver, where his father’s relatives who had fled from Keng Hung to live there for decades were. Don therefore extended his holidays for a few more days in the border towns<sup>11</sup>.

Following his first cross-border journey, Don was promoted to Simao (a big city situated in between Jinghong and Kunming) for higher study. After a short course of study he moved back to Xishuangbanna with a new position in his hometown. He then was put into the township government’s Culture and Youth activity unit. This position brought him into contact with the abbot of the CTX and other senior monks. And finally they organised the first Dai pop singing contest in December 1997, as mentioned earlier. For Don himself, however, his dream about developing the Dai modern music was really re-stimulated by Dunk, the then lead singer of the band in the Big Feast restaurant. The two Dai first met each other one night in late 1998 in this restaurant, which had opened months after the first singing contest.

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10. Since the 1980s, for the locals in these two countries (Burma and China) these border lines have been “opened.” And, as I was told, for some of them actually the so-called borders never “closed.” However, this conception is perhaps unthinkable for the subjects of modern nation state!

11. After this first trip, Don told me he had made at least two more trips to re-visit northern Thailand via this route, and from the latest trip, which was along the Mekong, he brought back a Sony TV set!

The young Dai singer had just returned from northern Thailand himself for his new job as a musician in this restaurant.

### **The band members**

Dunk is now 26 years old. Like some other boys in the Lue tradition he was ordained as a novice when he was about ten. In the 1990s, just months after his ordination, a monk who crossed the borders from northern Thailand to his hometown brought novice Dunk back to study in a northern Thai monastery, in Lamphun city. The destiny was extraordinary, he explained. He was there for six years<sup>12</sup>. Similarly to other student monks in the northern Thai monastery, he had to learn Thai and Pali, as well as improving his spoken language in northern Thai and modern Thai. Besides studying the Buddhist texts and practicing to chant the Sutra, there was plenty of time for hobbies. Some monks might prefer to write Thai prose or poetry, some might be happy with repairing electric items: rice cookers, radio and TV sets, or cassette players. But for the young novice Dunk, partly inspired by the temple boys who sometimes with their vocational school friends came to the temple with song books and acoustic guitars, he finally decided to let one temple boy use his savings to buy a second-hand acoustic guitar to practice on.

After six years of life and study in the northern Thai monastery, Dunk went back to his country, decided to disrobe about a half year after that, and then returned to Lamphun for one more year. During this extra year in northern Thailand, he worked as a car-care shop boy, and sometimes as a ten-wheel bus boy for his boss's factory which brought him the great experience of travelling along the roads of North-Central and Southern Thailand. In his workplace there were not only immigrant workers like him but also other Shan friends and the northern Thai. The room that he lived in was his only real world, however. This lonely small world led him to create his own space and pay much attention to practicing the guitar. From then on he began to write his own songs, by translating from Thai pop songs, he said.

In early 1998, in Lamphun, Dunk first heard New Star's songs from a tape cassette that a cross-border monk had brought in from Sipsong Panna. The monk came to visit his former temple by chance. It was startling, he said. After that, he kept practicing harder his guitar-playing skills with his second-hand instrument. His dream of being a musician came true when he heard from a friend that Maha, the then deputy abbot of the CTX, was looking for a

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12. He lived in a temple about four kilometres north of Lamphun city, but studied in Wat Pra Thadu Haripunjaya, in the inner city.

new musician who would be able to sing and play with a band, the second band of the CTX, and work in a new restaurant. From Lamphun, Dunk decided to go up north, heading to Jinghong, via Muang Yong<sup>13</sup>.

In late 1998, when Dunk went up to Jinghong (with another friend, but only Dunk was qualified), two other prospective members of the band had already been there for months. One was Dump, 31, the former youngest member of New Star, but the oldest in Dai Dynamo<sup>14</sup>. The other was Dam, now 28 years old, a nephew of the CTX's abbot. Dang, 29 years old, another member, who would be rhythm guitar player in the band, came to join Dai Dynamo a few months after Dunk's arrival. In the band, Dunk takes an important part as leading singer, lead guitar player and song writer<sup>15</sup>. Dam is head of the band. He therefore represents the abbot of the CTX. As notes above, he had been in Jinghong for some months before Dunk. His young life was not in Xishuangbanna. He grew up in Keng Tung, was a college student in the Shan state's capital city, Taungyi, but left college life in second year, when he was about 21. Banna is his father's country, so after that he came back to his fatherland, seeking jobs. According to him, he was a local bus driver for a year. Besides a little English, he also speaks Burmese, Shan, Dai, and Mandarin quite well, but could not read Tai script. The abbot's nephew was ordained as a novice for only seven days.

### **Dai Dynamo and its formation**

The Big Feast restaurant, opened in 1998, was situated behind Ban Tin Park, not far from the CTX. It was run by the two younger sisters of the abbot one from Keng Tung and the other

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13.Sadly, on the way back before crossing the border, in Mae Chan district of Chiang Rai province, Dunk with a few passengers on the bus were suspected of being illegal immigrants and investigated by a police patrol. He had to buy his freedom with the new guitar that he just bought from a shopping mall in Chiang Mai city a month earlier.

14.After the Dai New Year festival in April 2003, Dump decided to retire from the band, and got married a month after that. He is now the owner of a music shop in his hometown, opened in the beginning of 2004. I re-visited Dump in his hometown in May 2004.

15.Actually there were six members in the band then. However, Dunk, Dam, Dump and Dang had been in the band together for about five years, from late 1998 to April 2003. These four were the core members of this legendary pop band. Among the Dai fans, as I was told by some of them, if the band lost one of them its live performance was not as perfect as it should have been. In the beginning of 2004, when their story was filmed by the Yunnan Television station, Dump was therefore called back to fulfil a legend. The documentary film was screened on YNTV 1 in February 2004. Here I highlight the life stories of two leading members: Dunk and Dam.

from Bangkok. The food shop was designed as a leisure space for tourists and probably Banna urbanites who wanted to escape from their routine activities, simultaneously consuming a 'modern life style.' The band was to perform music (e.g. Thai, Dai, Shan, and Han songs), entertaining and pleasing the restaurant's customers.

Unfortunately, partly affected by the Thai economic crisis which started in late 1997, not many customers, particularly the target group tourists from Thailand, came to eat and consume Dai culture in the Big Feast restaurant. Moreover, the internal conflict between the Keng Tung and Bangkok based managers seemed to be uncontrollable, even Kruba could not stop them. The new Dai entertainment complex therefore soon collapsed; its life no more than a year. However, for the band members, who would later become the most famous band in the Dai country, the experience in this workplace was long enough for them to practice and to develop their musical skills.

As The Beatles had their Cavern Club, so the band had their Big Feast Pub & Restaurant. The restaurant was not only their meeting place, music school, and home studio for everyday practice. It was also their first recording room. Dai Dynamo members were formed in this workplace and practiced, played and created their first album here. For Dunk, music was part of his devotional life. In his first year, he not only worked, practiced, and performed music in the Big Feast. In afternoon he went regularly to the CTX, where he was taught intensively how to write Dai pop songs by Maha. The then deputy abbot taught and transferred all he knew about how to write Dai modern songs and practical knowledge he had developed to Dunk, as if he knew that the younger mate would later become his successor. This story was explained to me by Dunk himself. From that year onwards he has written Dai songs, following what Maha taught him. With his good knowledge of Pali texts and the Buddha's teaching, Dunk has therefore become one of the most prominent Dai song writers. Maha is still another figure. Some other senior monk/song writers have disappeared after they disrobed. However, they have left their works, mostly unfinished, to the band.

In early 1999, when the band members were told that the Big Feast's business would soon collapse, they decided to produce a memorable album for themselves. A few songs which were written/translated by Maha and many that Dunk wrote or translated from Thai songs were included in this album. They live-recorded all the master songs in the restaurant, simply using an Aiwa tape cassette player. The album was finally completed with financial support from one senior monk at the CTX, and about 500 cassette tapes were produced. In April 1999, Dai Dynamo first released its album into the Dai world. The album sold out rapidly. With the popularity of this first release the band were initially invited to perform in the countryside.

They thus decided to reproduce the album, after the Dai New Year Festival that year. This time they co-produced it with Orn Napa, a female singer in the restaurant. The re-produced album was entitled ‘My Country’<sup>16</sup>, named after the first song, which was originally derived from a Lue pop band in Muang Yong. Since first released, this song has been played and re-played on cassette players throughout Dai communities. The village girls also utilise the song in their performing dances, as I witnessed. It is perhaps the most nostalgic Dai modern song that they have ever heard.

### **Dai Dynamo and its transformation**

Following the release of this album, the band nearly broke up, however. Living in Jinghong city, they basically needed money not moral ideology (their work was rewarded as a great social contribution, but they did not get enough money). Relying upon the CTX as if they were temple boys was also ridiculous. Fortunately, in late 1999, promoted by Don, five songs from their album were selected for a co-production of the first Dai video-discography, with six songs from New Star performed by Ai Sam and other two songs performed by Orn Napa. Managed by Don, the music video films were made by a team from BNTV. It was the first Dai MTV album, entitled in English ‘New Music of Banna’, released during the Dai New Year festival in 2000. The album, distributed by a Han music supplier in Jinghong, sold out. The band, and Ai Sam, really became popular.

At that time, Dunk and Maha also released their co-produced album across the borders. It had been recorded earlier in Takeelek town in late 1999. The new cassette album was distributed widely in Lue communities: the Shan state of Burma, Mae Sai, Chiang Rai (northern Thailand), and Xishuangbanna. This work was also a big hit. The popularity of this modern Lue album can perhaps be measured by a problem that soon occurred. It was pirated, re-produced, and re-sold by a local Han merchant in Muang Hai (western Banna). The temple, the band members, also many Dai, and Don were very angry, not only because the Dai culture had been stolen for sale by the Han merchant but also because it was re-presented rudely. The pirate merchant distributed the stolen album by reproducing it with erotic scenes, Don, Dam, and Dunk said. Finally, Don (who from then on got more closely involved with the band) led officers to arrest a pirate group. However, they were released soon after that. This was partly

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16. ‘Banna Khong How’, in Lue. In this first album, seven songs are translated from Thai songs (five of them by Dunk, two by Maha and one former cross border monk). One is translated by Maha from a northern Thai song. Another one is written up by Dump. The first song in this album is derived from a band in Muang Yong.

because the Lue original album had been released without the State's license.<sup>17</sup>

With the great success of the Dai modern music album, however, the CTX and a group of younger Dai loosely led by Don, realised that the Banna musical world was truly opening up for them. Many villages in the countryside continued to invite the band to visit and perform their songs in Dai annual festivals. Dai Dynamo's concert tours significantly introduced 'new culture' into the rural communities, simultaneously advertising the band to the fans.

In mid 2000, led and co-funded by Don, the band (supported by senior monks at the CTX) continued to work on their new album. Dam and Dunk were sent down to Takeelek town with their songs, to produce the album's demo. As envisaged by Don, this time they would also make music video films. Arranged by Maha, the two friends spent about a month there working on the master album, in a Shan studio – where a musician claimed that he used to join Carabao, the iconic country-rock band of (new) Thai nationalism, as a back-up follower. For Dam and Dunk the trip was a great chance to experience a real studio for the first time (all the songs performed by them were recorded here). Due to Don's professional management, the album production was finalised a few months after that in Kunming by Han musicians and film makers. Dai Dynamo's first solo video discography was tactically released just about a week after The Five-Chiang Regional Trade Fair and Cultural Expo, the representation of the regional trade co-operation among the four nation states in this upper Mekong region, took place in Jinghong city, in late October 2000. The album was entitled "Welcome to Banna", named after the first song, which was written by Dunk, purposively introducing Sipsong Panna to its visitors. The song's concept was initially suggested by Don<sup>18</sup>.

Managed by Don, the band had also a good opportunity to join in this cross-border trade fair and cultural expo. Introduced as a representative of the Dai cultural shows, they performed their Dai pop songs on stage on behalf of the Xishuangbanna Dai Cultural Research Centre. It was Dai Dynamo's first big show. This album was a huge success. As musicians, the band members began to receive some respect and new social position in Xishuangbanna. Financially, though, there was still a big problem. The band members earned little money. Moreover, pirates still copied their work to re-distribute cheaply. The newly minority

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17. I tried to find this pirated album but never saw it. Don and Maha later decided to co-produce a video-discography of this cassette album, called "the Red album", released in April 2001.

18. In this ten-song album, eight songs are translated and inspired by Thai songs. One song is translated from a Han song by Dump. The only original song is "Welcome to Banna", which Dunk himself creates, mixing Thai and Indian melodies.

musicians could do nothing else but produce new albums and make their concert tours. However, whilst the former needed huge capital, professional management, and connections, the latter basically depended on the annual festivals, which usually take place from the first Dai month (November) to the sixth Dai month (April-May), and most importantly, the economic prosperity of the Dai communities in the countryside. Again the band nearly split up.

Early in 2001, after the Chinese New Year holiday, Don eventually decided to take Dunk up to Kunming to improve the younger Dai's musical skill. Don himself had actually already been there for further study at college level for a year. Dunk therefore moved up to the capital city of Yunnan for his first systematic study of musical theory. During the Dai New Year Festival that year, while Dunk was experiencing his new world in the big city, his friends in the band were continuing their concert tours in Banna countryside. Following the band tours Dam moved down south, via Keng Tung and Taungyi, to Rangoon, acquiring knowledge of film production for a few months. After this experience of 'a short course on film editing', as he told me, Dam returned to Xishuangbanna. Soon after that the abbot decided to set up 'a film unit', giving his nephew a new digital video camera and a computer purchased for working on film production.

In late 2001, Don and Dunk shocked the Dai by releasing what I would refer to as the first Postmodern Dai album. The album entitled "O My Dear" provoked the Dai audiences with its 'postmodern style.' The ten-song album is made up of Rap, Hip-hop, Pop and Rock style Dai songs. It was really popular among the young Dai. Six songs were written and composed by Dunk, while Maha also shared his song-writing skill in this successful album through four songs co-written with Dunk, the most significant of which was 'Coming Home', as presented earlier in this paper<sup>19</sup>.

However, senior monks at the CTX were not happy with this album, particularly about Don's involvement. Don, the new entrepreneur, was accused of exploiting Dunk for his private business, as Dunk himself told me about this controversial situation. In early 2002, Dunk met the abbot, who kept 'teaching' him, while he had little chance to explain what had happened. The abbot suspected that Don and Dunk would split from the band (and the temple perhaps), which was not acceptable. The suspicion was then still unresolved. Don promised the abbot

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19. This song, entitled 'Pok Ma Maun Pi Mai' in Dai, was co-written by Maha and Dunk when they were in Kunming in March 2001.

that at least he would take care of the band members<sup>20</sup>. The band, at the same time, decided to move on, producing the third album, which later became their last work. The simple demo was developed and finished quickly in the CTX. It was quick, partly because a few songs had already been written up by Dump, while four songs had been left to them by Maha. Interestingly, one song was revised from a draft work left by a north-eastern Thai monk who had earlier visited the CTX for about six months. Dunk himself wrote only one song for this album. Another was a Han song, contributed to them by a local Han musician who sometimes visited them. And Dunk, the young Dai superstar was determined to sing this Mandarin song<sup>21</sup>.

In February 2002, Dunk returned to Kunming to continue his 'musical training' with the new demo of ten selected songs. With Don's help the demo was first sent to Ruili, a tourist spot in western Yunnan, then transported across the border to a Shan music studio in Namkham, the border town on the Burma side, to re-produce its master<sup>22</sup>. About three months later, the master tape and CD were sent back from Ruili to Dunk in Kunming. The album recording was done in the big city, in May 2002. Three members of Dai Dynamo and a new female singer came up from Jinghong, spending about a week in Kunming to work in a music studio (one day) and shoot the scenes, both in the studio and in this modern city. The film they shot, Dam told me, was for their memory and to produce the new album's music videos. The album, which took one day to record but one year to produce, was strategically released in early April 2003, just about a week before the Dai New Year Festival. During the festival that year, Dai Dynamo Corp, a music business group formed by Don, also released its product for the first time since its establishment in July 2002: the contemporary Dai popular music which I refer to as Modern Kham Khap (Volume II)<sup>23</sup>. The two albums therefore were released, for the first

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20.Six months later he formed a music business group, called Dai Dynamo Corp, merging Dai Dynamo members into the new company. Dump however, decided not to join in.

21.In May 2004, when I visited the band, Dunk and his band were invited by a Dai youth social club to perform a concert in Banna college (opened in 2003), in Jinghong city. It was the first move into this space. Dunk's solo album (released in December 2003) has been very popular among the local college students.

22.Don and Dunk have worked with this group of northern Shan musicians since 2001, when they produced the first Postmodern Dai album.

23.The Modern Kham Khap, Volume I, was released in April 2002 (produced in the name of Don's private business). The album uniquely has its own style, juxtaposing traditional Lue songs with Thai style country music, and other various genres. It is not like world music however. The work includes about 3-4 Dai singers. Besides each individual singer's songs, the album always puts a few duets, male and female. Most importantly, it also targets tourists, thus was strategically released during the Dai New Year Festival. This kind of modern Lue album therefore is always composed of songs about the New Year, Banna country, traditional and modern ways of life, and sometimes a Tai legend.

time in the name of Dai Dynamo Corp.

For about two weeks, during the Dai New Year Festival of 1365 (2003), incredibly without any ads, songs from these two albums were played and disseminated all day and all night in the music shops around the city and in the towns around the countryside. In Jinghong, wherever I went, on the city streets, down along the Mekong, to the venue that held the Dai cultural shows or in the temple, the two albums were distributed to the consumers rapidly. The work just advertised itself through the supplier's shops, small music shops, even the street vendors, either Dai or Han (or others), who got the Dai commodity from the dealers to retail. For me this successful story signals a landmark in the minority project of modern music development in this rural area of modern China.

### **History, state ceremony, and a minority band**

The Dai year of 1365 was indeed historic and unique, since it was also celebrated as the 50th anniversary of the establishment of this Dai Autonomous Prefecture. It marked, in short, fifty years of the national incorporation of 'Sipsong Panna' into the People's Republic of China. Although the exact official date authorised as commemorating this fifty years of establishment was 23 January 2003, the local government postponed the state ceremony to mid-April. Together with the Dai New Year Festival, that year, the local government thus funded and organised the night events to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Xishuangbanna.

Undoubtedly, this state plan carried out by the local government was strategically commercial and used to promote and mobilise the tourist economy in this minority region. This was overtly manifested through a superb advertising film financed lavishly by the local government. This film was devoted to the theme 'Xishuangbanna, Muang Palanasi' (which literally refers to Benares but is translated into Chinese as 'heaven on earth'), and was divided into four sub-themes, comprising (1) 'Beautiful Xishuangbanna' (2) 'A land of various national minorities' (3) 'Travels through Xishuangbanna' and (4) 'Xishuangbanna in Modern days'. Following these themes, the long version of this advertising film (about ten minutes), mostly portrays panoramic views, and sequentially represents what had been achieved in this minority region throughout the past fifty years and projected this frontier region into the future.

As part of the tourist campaign, this advertising film was broadcast daily on local television channels throughout Xishuangbanna from the beginning of April, at least twice day and night (and probably also in some other regions in Yunnan) for about two weeks. The countdown

message at the end of this film directly referred to the state ceremony and celebration program, which would be grandly opened at the city stadium the night of 13 April 2003, corresponding to the first day of the celebration of the Dai New Year Festival<sup>24</sup>.

Talking to some Dai scholars and friends, it seemed this public event might have been the biggest state celebration ever held in this Dai Autonomous Prefecture. To have the chance to join in this state ceremony and celebration held in the city-state of Jinghong, was thus important for everyone, Han, Dai or other ethnic peoples, ordinary and official. Although the 50th anniversary celebration decreed by the local government was commercially organised as part of the new tourist campaign of Xishuangbanna, this state ceremony was symbolically historic and political.

This event was the state's historic celebration of fifty years of the national integration of Xishuangbanna into the People's Republic of China. It was a way in which the State, as I see it, 'writes' its history, a history of the establishment as displacement of 'Sipsong Panna' in the nation-state formation of modern China. History, as Yi-Fu Tuan remarks, "is not only the passage of events but their conscious reconstruction in group memory for current purposes"; accordingly it "play[s] an essential role in the human sense of territoriality and place" (1976: 272, cf. Tapp 1989, 2004).

The participation of Don and Dai Dynamo as Dai music performers in this state celebration seemed particularly historic and symbolically important: to take some part in this process of writing the history of the establishment of Xishuangbanna. Since the show was the only one in Dai language that night, this public participation not only meant to them great honour and symbolic power but also implied that they were representatives of the Dai minority nationality of Xishuangbanna. The musical performance in this city stadium was probably the only 'national venue' in rural China where this minority band would have a chance to join in a Chinese state ceremony. Contacting Don, via the Director of the Dai Cultural Research Centre, Dai Dynamo determined to perform two songs, representing Dai culture and cultural identity, as part of the program for the second night of the 50th anniversary celebration. Dai Dynamo's musical performance, in other words, was presupposed to be 'something' expressive of the Dai minority people of modern China in these modern days.

On the evening of 13 April 2003, the first day of the Dai New Year Festival in the city and

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24. After the celebration, a shorter version of this film was still broadcast on BNTV channels for a year.

the grand opening day of the state celebration of the 50th anniversary of Xishuangbanna, we (Don, Dam, Dunk, Dump, Dock and I) went to the city stadium to join in this historic ceremony. Although the tickets had been sold out for a week<sup>25</sup>, Don and members of Dai Dynamo received tickets to observe and participate in this biggest ever event held in Xishuangbanna. Don also took me along, as a band follower. The ceremony and celebration show produced by Chinese Central Television (CCTV)<sup>26</sup> was really enormous and spectacular.

Funded by the local government, CCTV also planned to broadcast live this grand opening night throughout Xishuangbanna (and on CCTV in other parts of China). All the shows were performed by professional singers and dancers. The most spectacular one was a ballet-peacock dance, supposedly representing the Dai or something about this minority region, performed by a female dancer. Her powerful body movements charmingly attracted the spectators, mostly Han, inside the city stadium throughout the show.

Most of the shows used Chinese songs and Mandarin. The only dancing show, nevertheless, used a Dai song and was called after the song's title Akara! Using a Golden Prize song written by Maha and sung by Dunk (discussed in the previous chapter) as background music, a hundred young boys (aged under 15), who had shaved their heads and dressed in yellow robes, performed body moves on the stage which looked very much like Shoaling martial arts. At that moment, Dunk was the first who whisperingly complained to other friends about this 'controversial show.' I was just shocked! It was controversial because for Theravada Buddhists this kind of novice-like dancing performance was unacceptable and should not have happened or even been thought about. Don said nothing else about the Akara show. Also at that moment, I dared not ask him any questions. How did the Dai audience, most of whom were probably watching this live program at home (though some might not have known anything about it) react to this? It was probably the same feeling as when the Hollywood film, 'The Passion of Christ,' produced and directed by Mel Gibson, was banned in many Catholic countries in South America and some countries in other parts of the world.

At about 10 pm we left the stadium earlier than the end of the shows that night. Dock seemed

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25.A-Mei, who worked at the Bangkok Airways Jinghong headquarters office, confirmed this and was a little surprised that I could get into the city stadium on the first night.

26.Chinese Central Television is the state-run national broadcaster. Its networks include English-language which broadcast on CCTV-9.

to be the most critical among these minority men. He said, 'tomorrow it will be our turn.'

On the 14 April 2003, the second day of the Dai New Year Festival and the second night of the 50th anniversary celebration, two Dai songs performed by Dai Dynamo were symbolically put as the opening show of this celebratory night. In the late afternoon, led by Don, Dai Dynamo (and I) went to the city stadium again, but this time as presenters, not viewers. Not long after that, E-Kham, the female Dai musician who would co-play violin with Dai Dynamo for the first song, also arrived in the stadium. In her Dai costume, she looked charming.

While the sun went down, although tonight there was no official ceremony, huge numbers of people began to enter the stadium, taking their seats; the celebration of the second night was about to begin. All the members in Dai Dynamo, like E-Kham, dressed in Dai costume, presenting what one might call a symbolic representation of the 'Dai-ness' of Xishuangbanna. They were ready to perform their Dai modern music, in the name of this Dai country, at this city-state ceremony<sup>27</sup>.

As planned by Don, they selected two famous songs to perform in this city-state venue. One was 'My Country', from Dai Dynamo's first album released in 1999. The other was 'Welcome to Banna', from Dai Dynamo's second's album, released in 2000. Musically, the former, performed as the opening song, was rearranged for violin rather than for Dunk's voice, as it had originally been. Symbolically, this was a way in which Dai Dynamo expressed their 'Dai modernity' and simultaneously positioned their 'Dai cultural identity' in the modern days of China. In addition, I would say, throughout the past 50 years there are many things that had happened in this Dai country. The things that these minority people would have had to say, if they could, were 'more than words.' To me, the violin version of 'My Country', specially performed only on this city-stage, indeed did powerfully and successfully deliver that message of powerful sentiments to the audience. You needed not to talk about it, but just sense it: the Dai's sense of place.<sup>28</sup>

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27. With the help from a Dai friend who worked in a local television station, I got a press card, though temporarily, so I decided to make a film of this historic show rather than taking a seat in the frontline with Don. Although I was disturbed a little by a police security guard while I was filming the second song performed by Dai Dynamo, everything on the front stage went well.

28. This sense of place, as formulated by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, is a terrain which includes "the relation of sensation of emplacement; the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested, and struggled over; and the multiple ways places are metonymically and metaphorically tied to identities" (1996: 11).

Following ‘My Country’, the minority band continued to the second song they had prepared earlier. It was Dunk’s turn to represent the Dai minority by using his voice to say something about their country, singing the song ‘Welcome to Banna.’

Although there were only two songs Dai Dynamo had a chance to perform that night, these two opening songs performed for a majority Han audience (in the stadium) were symbolically and longlastingly significant. As discussed earlier, if we look at this state ceremony and celebration of the 50th anniversary of the ‘establishment as displacement’ of Sipsong Panna, we can see it as one of the ways in which the Chinese state ‘writes’ its history, or, more specifically, the identity of Xishuangbanna as part of modern China. Dai Dynamo’s participation in this state celebration, brief but still the opening show on the second night, I argue, shows very much the way that these native Dai minority citizens take part in this ‘writing process,’ through their musical performance, of the identity of Xishuangbanna, as a place, in modern China. The visibility of place that is experienced by all human beings, as Yi-Fu Tuan remarked, is made and shaped through art (here popular music included), politics, and education (1975: 161-164). And the identity of a place, he suggests, “is its physical character, its history, and how people make use of their past to foster regional consciousness” (Tuan 1976: 272-273).

Jinghong is today undeniably a Han dominated city, demographically, economically, and politically (see also Evans 2000, Hyde 2001, Hensen 2004), and this was particularly manifested in the practice and meanings of Dai Dynamo tour in this case, which turned this minority band into simply a part of the whole (the Nation), as seen above. This powerful city-space creates and produces various conditions that limit and define Dai Dynamo tour mobility, physically. The fluidity of the messages and meanings that Dai Dynamo created and delivered through their Dai sound and musical performances within this power-charged setting, however, I argue, may have been able to generate (and circulate) a highly provoking impact in a much wider atmosphere. Moreover, if we look at the distribution and virtual circulation of Dai Dynamo’s products (copies of karaoke VCD and music videos via local TV channels) in this city, and other towns and communities throughout Xishuangbanna today, things become even more complicated.

### **Conclusion: Songs, Sounds, and Senses of Belonging**

Traditionally, the transportation of culture (technology, knowledge, and tradition) in this ‘Tai world’ mainly operated through Theravada traditions, such as schooling in Buddhist

monasteries or the performances of Lue oral poetry, locally called Kham Khap, by Lue oral poets, called Chang Khap. The Lue Kham Khap, or the Lue storyteller, similar to the Xor in northern Thailand, was typically performed as a male-female duet. The Chang Khap (in Sipsong Panna), similar to the Chang Xor (in Lan Na), primarily transferred a simplified version of Buddhist legends, such as Sitha Ok Bout (literally the Prince Sithadha becomes a monk), Vessantara, folktales, and loves songs to a wider audience, and this usually took place during Buddhist festivals or cultural activities in a community, such as the Poi, Pagoda pilgrimages, the New Year festivals, as well as weddings, house warming ceremonies and courtship. The traditional circulation of these legends and folklores typically operated through two-way communication processes, interactively between two singers themselves and between them and their audiences (Hartmann 1984, Davis 2001).

Within the changing processes of Chinese national incorporation, state development, and commercial tourism, this Lue performing art, however, has recently been manipulated, 'preserved', and developed. As Sara Davis suggests, there are 'the declining standards' of the Lue poets and poetry, the problems of 'linguistic assimilation of Tais' and 'poor compositional skills' of the Chang Khap (2001: 37). Nevertheless, groups of Lue poets and cultural activists have also tried to maintain and 'develop' this Tai performing art (the poets producing their works in the form of tape cassettes and video-discography, for example). The powerful processes of linguistic assimilation and national incorporation, which are built on what I see as 'state displacement', have not been passively accepted by these minority people. Today the Kham Khap still continues to be performed at annual Buddhist festivals, or, on social occasions such as weddings and house warming.

Since Dai popular music developed in the mid-1990s, this 'new music' has spontaneously become part of the daily life of Xishuangbanna, as shown in this article through Dai Dynamo's concert tour and their music product distribution (via copies of music VCDs) and dissemination. The concerts which seasonally take place during the annual Buddhist festivals in Xishuangbanna today, the Dai New Year Festival (in April) in particular, are therefore really a supplementing cultural activity or, ultimately, a replacing of the traditional Kham Khap in these festival venues. Significantly, the consumption of this new Dai music eventually transforms that public setting into a new Dai social space. The scope and social consequences of the practice of Dai popular music is indeed enormously much more than the Kham Khap. The spatial setting in which Dai Dynamo's concerts have come to get involved (constituting and boosting, and transforming) itself is complex and complicated.

These concerts may be simply considered as ways in which the musicians sell their

commodity/live performances to the fan-consumers in appropriate social venues. Economically, this demand-supply interaction produces new relationships and social activities in 'Dai society.' Socially this entertainment business involves lots of social actors, for example Dai Dynamo members, village headmen and community committees, the fans (old or young), leading monks and abbots, local businessmen, state officials and local agents of power, and others. But most importantly, Dai Dynamo's concerts and their popular songs which are mobile by nature, physically and virtually, demonstrate the fluidity and the ability of Dai popular music to move and penetrate into different places and spaces of 'society.' Interpreting Dai Dynamo as a cultural transporter, who delivers Dai popular music, via their songs and concerts, to their audiences in towns or communities, Dai Dynamo's physical mobility expresses the transportation of 'Dai modernity' to their fans and simultaneously produces 'new social spaces' in the venues where they perform. As discussed and described in this article, the development of Dai popular music can be understood as a social process of transporting culture/knowledge across borders. But also, these processes of 'transporting culture' through the circulation and consumption of Dai sounds and images in Xishuangbanna can be considered as resulting in the cultural production of a 'Dai soundscape', which in turn creates and constitutes the sensibility and visibility of a Dai 'home place': the making of Dai 'senses of place.'

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