

# ANNUAL NON-BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES OF MAE HONG SON SHAN

by

PAUL E. DURRENBERGER\*

Thai know them as Thai Yai; Burmese and English as Shan; they call themselves Tai Long. In the village of Thongmakhsan in Mae Hong Son Province, Shan cultivate rice in irrigated fields in the bottom of a narrow valley and in swiddens in the neighboring hills. Thongmakhsan is a poor village of only about 38 households. All the people are devout Buddhists. Spiro (1967 : 3) writes :

Wherever it is found, Buddhism is accompanied by some other religious. . . system. In Burma and in the other countries of Southeast Asia, the latter system comprises a folk religion which postulates the existence of 'supernatural' beings and which includes a set of rituals relating to them.

In addition to Buddhist observances, the people of Thungmakhsan participate in several non-Buddhist religious events during the year. Some of these, such as the propitiation of the "rice soul", are individual or household observances. Others are for particular groups within the village, such as the propitiation of the swidden spirit which is done by all those households which make swiddens in the same area, or the propitiation of the valley spirits which is done by all those who release buffalos, when they are not being used to prepare irrigated fields, into the valleys to forage. Still other ceremonies, such as repairing the country and repairing the village, are for the whole village. All of these ceremonies are regular annual events. In this article I describe only the annual non-Buddhist ceremonies and related interpretations and stories.

Some, but not all of the households propitiate the soul of rice (*khon khau*). Early in August Can Tha and his young daughter went to one of their irrigated fields to "begin rice" (*hik khau*). Cushing (1914 : 637) translates *hik* as "to begin a work; to begin by doing a little, because it is declared to be an auspicious day". Can Tha had selected a Monday as auspicious since his daughter was born on a Monday. He had experimented with different days in the past. Can Tha selected one section of the plowed field surrounded by bunds, and cleaned and puddled the mud in the northwestern corner. He said, "I have come to begin rice. Let it be lucky, let there be no insects or pests. Let what I do be successful."

He placed a star-like, open, braided bamboo "spirit screen" on a stick (*ta leu*) at each corner of the two-foot area of the section of the field he had cleaned, and then placed a shelf on a stick at the northwest corner. On the shelf he put a candle and a banana-leaf packet of rice, coconut and a banana slice. At the base of the shelf, on the ground, he placed two joss-sticks, a candle and a packet containing rice, coconut and a banana slice upside down while he prayed:

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\* Department of Anthropology, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA.

*Tsau hong* (lord of the canal), *tsau hoi* (lord of the valley), *tsau loi* (lord of the hill), spirits of the forest, today is a good day to plant. Let it become better; let the insects not bite; let the animals not destroy; let the caterpillars and mosquitos not bite. Let it be better than last time. *Tō lin* (lord of the earth) please help. Today I come to plant rice. Let it be better than last time. Let it be good, let it be successful. *Tsau wan* (lord of the village), *tsau mōng* (lord of the country), *phi pong pa* (spirit of the forest) help it be good in the future. Let the rice soul (*khon khau*) be fertile. Please help.

He then hung a small bundle of kapok from each spirit screen and had his daughter plant eight rice seedlings. He made a small fence with bamboo strips using the four spirit screens as corners.

Some time after this, the field can be transplanted. Many fields have spirit houses, small houses on stakes. They are places to make offerings to *tsau lin*, the earth spirit, who guards the fields. In December, when rice is harvested, the rice from the first ceremonial planting is gathered and kept separately from the rest. Harvesters move through the fields cutting shocks of rice with sickles and placing the shocks on the rice stubble to dry. Later, they collect the rice shocks and pile them into tall mounds. The farmer then clears one area of the ricefield near the rice pile and plasters the earth with a mixture of buffalo dung and mud which dries to form a smooth threshing floor. He pulls out the spirit house and puts it on top of the rice pile with the soul-of-rice plants in it.

Pō Thau Ti prepared an enamel tray with a bowl of cooked rice, a glass of water, two eggs, a bowl of biscuits, two bananas, two bundles of steamed sticky rice and two slices of cooked pumpkin, and presented it at the base of the rice stack while praying:

Pu tsai khai nai tsai khai, please come. Today I will thresh rice. Let us have many baskets. Let there be much rice soul. If we receive twenty lang [large baskets of two hundred and twenty-four litres] I will offer to you again. There are thirty-two souls of rice. All come together. Please let us pick up rice in the storage basket at the house. This year let it be better than before, pu tsai khai nai tsai khai.

He placed the tray on top of the rice pile and then prayed at each corner of the threshing floor, starting in the southwestern corner while he placed a banana-leaf bowl with cooked rice, a piece of banana and a piece of biscuit at each. At the southwestern corner he prayed:

Today we will open the rice stack. All bad spirits [*phi ho phi hang kat*; informants explained this meant spirits without heads, without tails] please do not come to my threshing floor here. Let me receive many baskets of rice.

At the southeast corner he prayed:

*Tsau nam tsau lin* (lord of water, lord of earth) come here from every place. I will open the rice stack so let me have soul (*mi khon mi phi*) to receive much rice from this time. Let it be better than before.

At the northeast corner he prayed:

*Phi hsi tseing* (spirit of the four corners) please come. Let me have soul (*mi khon mi phi*). Let me receive more rice than before. All bad spirits (*phi am li tang long*) do not come to this place. Let me have enough rice to eat and to offer.

The fourth prayer, at the northwest corner was:

Let me receive more rice and let it be better than before. Bad spirits please do not come to my place here. Let me have rice to eat and to offer. Let it be better than before. *Phi ho phit hang kat*, please do not come.

The old man made a brief prayer and lit two homemade candles, and placed them in front of the rice stack. After the candles had burned down and went out, the old man's son climbed to the top of the rice stack and began tossing bundles of rice down to begin threshing.

While the candles were burning down we drank tea in the field house, and the old man told the following story.

The rice soul and the Buddha argued as to which was more powerful. Each said he was more powerful. There was no one to arbitrate between them or to pacify them. The rice soul ran away from the Buddha thinking, "I will show you who is more powerful", and went into a dark country.

On the way the rice soul met a fish and said, "If the Buddha follows me, do not tell him I am going to the dark country. If you tell him, you will die."

The Buddha stayed in the human realm and followed the Buddhist precepts (*hsin*). But he could not follow the disciplines or duties without rice. So he said, "Perhaps the rice soul is more powerful", and followed the rice soul to call it to come back. On the way he met the fish and said, "Did you see the rice soul go this way?"

The fish thought, "I must answer. This is the highest one of the human existence. If I lie it is an offense (*phit*) against the duties (*hsin*). I must therefore answer truthfully. But if I do that, I will die. All right, I am willing to die rather than offend the duties and the Buddha."

The fish said, "The rice soul went to the dark country."

The Buddha followed and arrived there. It was so dark he could not see anything. The rice soul came out and the two fought. At that time the soul of rice was very large. But those two fought a long time so the rice soul became as small as it is today. The rice soul went back to the human world, it followed the Buddha and the two returned.

The Buddha visited the fish and asked, "Where is that fish?" and the others said, "He died after you left." The Buddha said, "I am sorry." The other fish offered the dead one to the Buddha so each year at the fifth month—this was in the fifth month—people offer dry fish to the Buddha.

Then the Buddha went to the human realm and checked. He said, "The rice soul is more powerful than I", so he marked the young rice leaves with his hand. The marks on the young rice leaves are there from the Buddha's hand.

Another villager told an abbreviated version of the story on another occasion. The rice soul said it was more important than the Buddha because people need to eat rice to live. The Buddha said it was not more important because all people respect the Buddha. The rice soul ran away and at the end the Buddha said, "You are more important than I", and marked the leaves.

Later I heard the story of *pu tsai khai nai tsai khai*. Long ago there were a husband and wife who were very poor but made irrigated fields each year for a living. One year after they had finished threshing rice, they carried it home each day. *Pu tsai kai nai tsai kai* looked like cranes or storks, and came and laid eggs on the pile of threshed rice. These eggs became much rice, and the rice increased. Every day the two people carried rice but the pile of rice did not diminish. Each day *pu tsai khai nai tsai khai* laid eggs, and increased the rice. The man said "Why is it like this? I carry rice every day and it is never finished." He went to the rice pile and checked. He hid and saw the two storks lay eggs and saw the eggs become rice. He said, "This is amazing", but he was very lazy and did not want to carry rice every day. He took a bamboo pole for carrying rice and killed the two birds and buried them in his field. Then he went home and checked his storage baskets and saw all of the rice was gone and he had only the rice from his fields. He was very sorry. Every year, after that, he called the *pu tsai khai nai tsai khai* to come to his fields and lay their eggs in his rice. People do this now before they start to thresh rice. *Pu tsai khai nai tsai khai* are the same as *khon khau*, the rice soul. *Pu tsai khai nai tsai khai* were the body of the spirit.

People who propitiate the rice soul keep the shock of rice from the original first planting separately, and do not thresh it. When they have filled the storage baskets at the houses, they place this shock of rice plants inside.

Early in January villagers feed the spirits of the valleys and the hill fields. They call this *leing phi*. Cushing (1914 : 571) translates *leing* as to feed or nourish or cherish; to give a meal, feed; and *leing phi* as to offer to the spirits. Many households make hill fields either because they have no irrigated fields or because they need to supplement the rice they get from their irrigated fields. Some people put a spirit screen in their swiddens to indicate they are human places so spirits will not destroy them. People who have water buffalos turn them into the forest to forage for themselves until they are needed for plowing the irrigated fields again. People's swiddens are close together in several areas. They feed the *hai* (swidden) spirit at each area. They selected the day of the chicken, a day spirits are supposed to eat chickens, for these offerings.

Five people who made swiddens in one area went to the swidden area and prepared an altar. They made a bamboo framework and covered it with banana leaves. They supported one end of the altar on a log and the other on sticks. They made a small ladder with five rungs on the front of the altar. They put cooked hill rice, snacks, sweet rice, a broken peeled banana, purchased banana-leaf cigarettes, pickled tea (Yuan, Thai : *miang*), sticky rice from irrigated fields, beeswax candles and white wax candles all on a plate. They put the plate on the altar with a cup of water (on the left side) and a cup of liquor (on the right side). One of the men held two chickens to his forehead and then slit their throats. The chickens were plucked, tied, cooked, and put on the altar again. There were no prayers.

Meanwhile another group of people gathered in a nearby valley and built an altar with a five-runged ladder under a banyan tree. They prepared two banana-leaf trays with offerings like the ones for the spirit of the swiddens, and placed one on the altar and one under it. The one on the altar was for the forest spirit, and the one on the ground for the earth spirit,

*tsau lin*. The officiant made a brief and inaudible prayer before placing each tray. He took a similar tray to the stream and offered it to the stream spirit:

*Hsa thu hsa thu, tsau hoi kha han, tsau hoi keu long, tsau hoi mi long, tsau hoi mi ong, tsau hoi phi long, tsau hoi ka ling* (lords of named valleys) come meet together here. We come to feed you offerings (*hsqm*). We come to leave buffalos in your care, all the buffalos in Thongmakhsan. Now, we come to feed you. You should come receive our offerings (*hsqm*), all spirits of the valleys here. I also call all the spirits of the valleys and the streams. *tsau hoi kiu long, tsau hoi kha han, tsau hoi kan, tsau hoi nam kok*, please come. Now I call all the spirits; please do not say I did not call all. From now we ask to be well and have good appetites, people and animals. Let our cows and buffalos not be destroyed by disease. From this time let us not be strangers, let us be friends. This year you helped us to care for the buffalos, we are happy for this. We thank you. So we come and offer to you, spirits, and you should come receive our offerings (*hsqm tq*), rice and curry. In the future please be friendly like this year. Please remember us, do not forget us. Let it be better than before. Let us be well, every person, male and female livestock. Please. *Hsa thu*.

He then returned to the altar and held two live chickens and prayed in a similar way. He cut their throats and bled them onto the altar and steps. One of the men added to the altar a lamp and a loaded opium pipe with some powdered aspirin and a small mixing cup. The officiant lit candles on the offering in the stream and others prepared a banner of bamboo splints woven together to form a long strip. They tied the banner to a pole. They explained this was a banner like the ones used at the temple after a ceremony. Others cooked the chickens and drank liquor. The people explained that everyone must drink liquor; not to drink is an offense (*phit*) against the valley spirit. The officiant was the servitor of the lord of the country. It is one of his duties to officiate at this offering. The officiant then offered the cooked chickens at the altar with a similar prayer.

The officiant removed the liquor cup from the altar and passed it around. The people then took the food from the offerings to a field house in the swidden area where people had made offerings to the swidden spirit, and joined them to eat and drink.

Each village has a fenced compound inside which is a small house which contains an altar for *tsau möng*, the lord of the country. Cushing (1914 : 170) translates *tsau möng* as the ruler of a country, or a spirit supposed to have rule over a country.

*Tsau möng* belongs to the village and takes care of the villagers. I could find no evidence of a mythology that connects *tsau möng* with any person who ever lived, past rulers or the like. A Shan from the Shan States told me *tsau möng* was a leader or conqueror, an important person. When the person died, his spirit did not die, so people offer to him. He said in Hsenwi there are three *tsau möng*, *tsau möng long* (big *saw mung*) *tsau möng kang* (middle *tsau möng*), *tsau möng qn* (small *tsau möng*). He did not know their names but said *tsau möng long* was the first *tsau pha* (prince) of Hsenwi, but knew nothing of the other two. *Tsau möng* is held to be the most powerful spirit, the same in rank as the Buddha, both inferior to rice. Villagers agreed that *tsau möng* and the Buddha belong to very different spheres, however. The Buddha pertains to monks and merit-making, while *tsau möng* protects people from evil spirits. This function is not related to the monks or to Buddhism. Some villagers pointed to the use of liquor and animal offerings for spirits in contrast to Buddhist practices. Each village selects a *phu möng* to serve the *tsau möng*. Here there was some difference in terminology. One man in

the role labeled it *kon yip möng*, man who holds the country. He said that a *phu möng* properly is a *ti nang phi* (literally, a "spirit seat", one through whom a spirit speaks). Others said that *phu möng* and *kon yip möng* are different names for the same role, that a person through whom *tsau möng* speaks is called *ti nang tsau möng*. People select someone who knows "spirit words", the prayers for *tsau möng* to be *phu möng*. If he wants to resign, he tells the headman and the people select a new one. I asked a former *phu möng* why he had resigned. He answered:

I became old and did not want to kill chickens for the offerings; people who are old need to follow the precepts (*hsin*) of Buddhism and it is not good to do this, take life and use liquor. It is against the disciplines, so it is not suitable for old people. When I resigned, people selected someone who was younger.

People say there are 32 *tsau möng*. Each village is associated with a named *tsau möng*. The *phu möng* invokes this *tsau möng* and perhaps others, and asks them to invite the others. Several villages may be associated with a single *tsau möng*, each with a separate *tsau möng* house and *phu möng*.

The *phu möng* keeps the *tsau möng*'s belongings—a mattress, pillow, white shirt, white trousers, white handkerchiefs, white sheet, red sash—and lays them out in the *tsau möng* house every holy day, *wan hsin* (literally, "day of discipline"). The *phu möng* I talked to attributed no especial meaning to these things, said they were only old-style Shan clothes. Every *wan hsin* the *phu möng* also changes the flowers and water at the *tsau möng* house, makes an offering to the Buddha, and offers flowers and rice to *tsau möng*. He calls the *tsau möng* from every place, presents the offerings, lights a candle and waits until the candle burns down. If the *phu möng* does not know the name of the *tsau möng* he can address him as the *tsau möng* of that place. The *phu möng* invites the *tsau möng* to the temple on *wan hsin*. Some say the *tsau möng* stays in the temple and observes the disciplines on *wan hsin* even though people often do not. People, for instance, often hunt on *wan hsin*; *tsau möng* keeps the precepts. The *phu möng* also makes an offering at the temple on behalf of the villagers each *wan hsin* because no one can make offerings every *wan hsin*.

On 12 May there was a village meeting. At the meeting the *phu möng* announced the date of the ceremony to "repair the country", *mei möng leing möng*. He said that while the ceremony was in progress someone would have to stay at the head and foot of the village and not allow any vehicles to pass on the road while the offerings were being made. The group selected people to stop the traffic.

Can Ta explained that bad spirits follow cars and horses, and disease will follow anything one carries from another place. People have to wait outside the village and not allow anyone to come in when the villagers feed *tsau möng*. If the people offer liquor and chickens, *tsau möng* and the spirits come to eat and are happy and distracted. During this time they cannot take care of the village, so while they are eating we have to be sure to keep bad things and sickness out of the village. During this time the spirits cannot take care of us, we are defenseless. Suppose an important person wants to pass through the village. He must pay for all the liquor and offerings and then he can go. The villagers then have to make a new offering, and offer new liquor and chickens and start again. *Tsau möng* always takes care of the people and buffalos

and fields, so we thank him one time each year. The seventh month is the best time, but some villages do it on different days, or in different months. The *phu möng* of another village explained that people here offer chickens and liquor; people in other places offer only sweets and rice. The purpose of the ceremony is for everyone to be well, get more rice, to insure success, and to give the village power (glory) (*phung*).

The ceremony was late in May. Early in the morning the *phu möng* prepared the *tsau möng* house. Each household brought a chicken tied on a string, a bottle of liquor, and a tray with flowers and snacks on it. The chickens were tied to the fence on the south side; the other offerings were handed up to the *phu möng* who arranged the altar. The *phu möng* offered the offerings at the *tsau möng* altar, then the chickens were killed and two temporary altars were prepared, at the northeast corner and the southeast corner of the compound. On each was a bowl of flowers and joss-sticks and a tray with snacks and cooked rice, a cup of water and one of liquor, candles and a bottle of liquor hung from the front. A similar altar was prepared east of the *tsau möng* compound under a tree. These three altars were for *tsau möng*'s followers--his children, grandchildren, nephews and helpers.

The chickens were cooked in a pot over a fire outside the compound. Two chickens were put on each altar. The *phu möng* offered to *tsau möng*. People changed the liquor and water in the cups on the altars and lit candles. While the *phu möng* offered to *tsau möng*, another man offered to the other spirits at the temporary altars. The *phu möng* prayed:

*Hsa thu, hsa thu. I offer tsau nq kham leng [name of tsau möng of Huai Pha, a nearby village]; tsau khop mü leik (name of tsau möng of Mae Hong Son town); tsau khop mü tsong, tsau pa tsau long (lord of the forest); tsau paü hsi tseing pet na hsi na pet phai (lord who guards the four corners, eight sides, four sides, eight parts); tsau tham keing lau (lord of Chiengdao Cave); tsau tsong phök thi khau (lord of the white umbrella); tsau mau tsau hsau (lord of unmarried men and women); tsau nq lei pa khun hsikkya mang hsam hsip pai hsam (the four quarter-guardian 'stars' of Lord Indra of the 33 gods). We, the village of Thongmakhsan, all the village, young and old, large and small, cattle and buffalos are dependent on you, obliged to you. Tsau, come receive offerings of rice [khau hsqm tq]. Please support us from now, we of the village of Thongmakhsan, all the village, big and small, young and old, cattle and buffalos depend on you. Please prevent all the 33 diseases, let us be healthy and have good appetites from now. Let it be better than before, please. Let whatever work we do be profitable. So we can eat, so we can offer, let our trade be successful, let our selling be successful. Young and old, big and small come together and support us. Let the tsau who cannot hear and who do not know not say anything, please. Hsa thu, hsa thu, come receive and use, support us please. Eat and be happy. Let it be better than before. Let your mind be white like the white of cotton from now on [be generous]. Let it be better than before tsau. Hsa thu, hsa thu.*

After the prayer, after the candles had burned down, the *phu möng* distributed the offerings to the people. The food was distributed among the crowd. Some took it home to eat; some ate near the *tsau möng* house. People explained that food from the offerings was like medicine: "If you eat it, you will not be sick." Young men drank liquor and began a shooting match. By late morning, most of the people had dispersed.

Ten people had gone into one of the valleys to make a similar offering to the valley spirits.

Many ceremonies contain both Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements. Inside the temple compound are posts with shelves. As part of Buddhist offerings, people light candles and place small offerings on these shelves. They explained that these were for *tsau nam* (lord of the water), *tsau lin* (lord of earth), *tsau wan* (lord of the village), *tsau na* (lord of irrigated fields). Repairing the village is an observance which involves monks' chanting, directed at clearing each household and the village of evil spirits.

In each village there is a tall tower used in the ceremony to repair the village, *mei wan*. At the end of May each household prepares a basket of firewood, unmilled rice, candles, a spirit screen (*ta leu*), matches, sand, string, a bucket of water and soap berries. A villager explained, "After the monks chant, we put the string around the whole house, including the buffalo pen, then light candles everywhere. It will make us be well and have good appetites. We use the firewood to cook rice, and use the rice and sand to drive out bad spirits and use the spirit screen to keep out bad spirits."

Some men cleaned the area near the tower and repaired the tower, put up new shingles made from leaves braided onto bamboo sticks, and decorated each upper corner of the tower with banana leaves. A person from each household placed a basket under the tower. Some people made three small rockets about three inches long on the foot "tails" of bamboo. About three o'clock in the afternoon they shot the rockets, all of which exploded. The two tables from the temple were brought to the tower and people placed flowers and popped rice on them as they do in the temple.

At about half past three o'clock the monks and novices from nearby villages ascended the tower and the villagers clustered below. The headman and *phu möng* and another elder ascended the tower with the monks. In a nearby tree were four small baskets with offerings for bad spirits. People handed the tables of flowers up to the tower. The monks sat along the west side of the tower with buckets of water and a basket of rice, bananas and a coconut in front of them. A Buddha image was on the south wall of the tower with the two tables of flowers. A string ran from the Buddha image through the monks' hands and around the water buckets and basket. The basket was filled with unmilled rice; inside it was a basin of milled rice. On the milled rice were two green bananas with a coconut in the middle. A lit candle was on the coconut. A paper umbrella was on the side of the basin. The monks recited the duties and chanted for about 20 minutes. The senior monk extinguished the candle in the water and the monks took up the string. The senior monk then sprinkled the people with water and the people poured water from small vessels they were holding onto the ground (*yat nam*) as they do in the temple. The monks descended the tower and people collected their baskets from below the tower.

About 15 men carried the two sets of baskets from the tree, poles with a basket at each end, through the village to the south. Each basket contained packets of tea, milled and unmilled rice, seeds, and clay buffalo effigies. The last man broadcast sand and shouted:

'*Hoi, hoi*', go to another place, go to the big country, go to town, go to Möng Pai, go, go. Eat unmilled rice, eat milled rice. Come on, go, go. Eat good food. Go, go. All good food. '*Hoi, hoi*'.



Another man beat a gong. The men would not let small children join the procession. The men passed a bottle of liquor. At about 300 yards outside the village, the men erected two forked sticks on each side of the road and placed the poles on them with a basket hanging from either end.

People bathed and washed their hair with shampoo made from soapberries, limes and bark. They put the strings around the roofs of the houses and used the new firewood from the ceremony to cook. After supper they took buckets of water and splashed their houses with it. They scattered the sand around the compounds and put up the new spirit screens. This completed repairing the village.

Larger and richer villages sponsored rocket festivals. Since Thongmakhsan is a small and poor village we may suppose that the ceremonies I have described are the minimal non-Buddhist observances. Some do not observe even these. Some have no tower and do not observe the ceremony to repair the village. The present headman of Thongmakhsan claims credit for introducing the ceremony there. He said he saw it in larger and more prosperous villages and concluded that the performance of the ceremony would contribute to the prosperity of Thongmakhsan.

I noticed no spirit-houses in house compounds or ceremonies involving house spirits. When I inquired, people told me this was a Yuan (Northern Thai) custom which Shan do not share, that they "do not know the story of this one".

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