



Collective Memory and Embodiment of the Naga in the Northern Thai Cultural Landscape

An Introductory Observation

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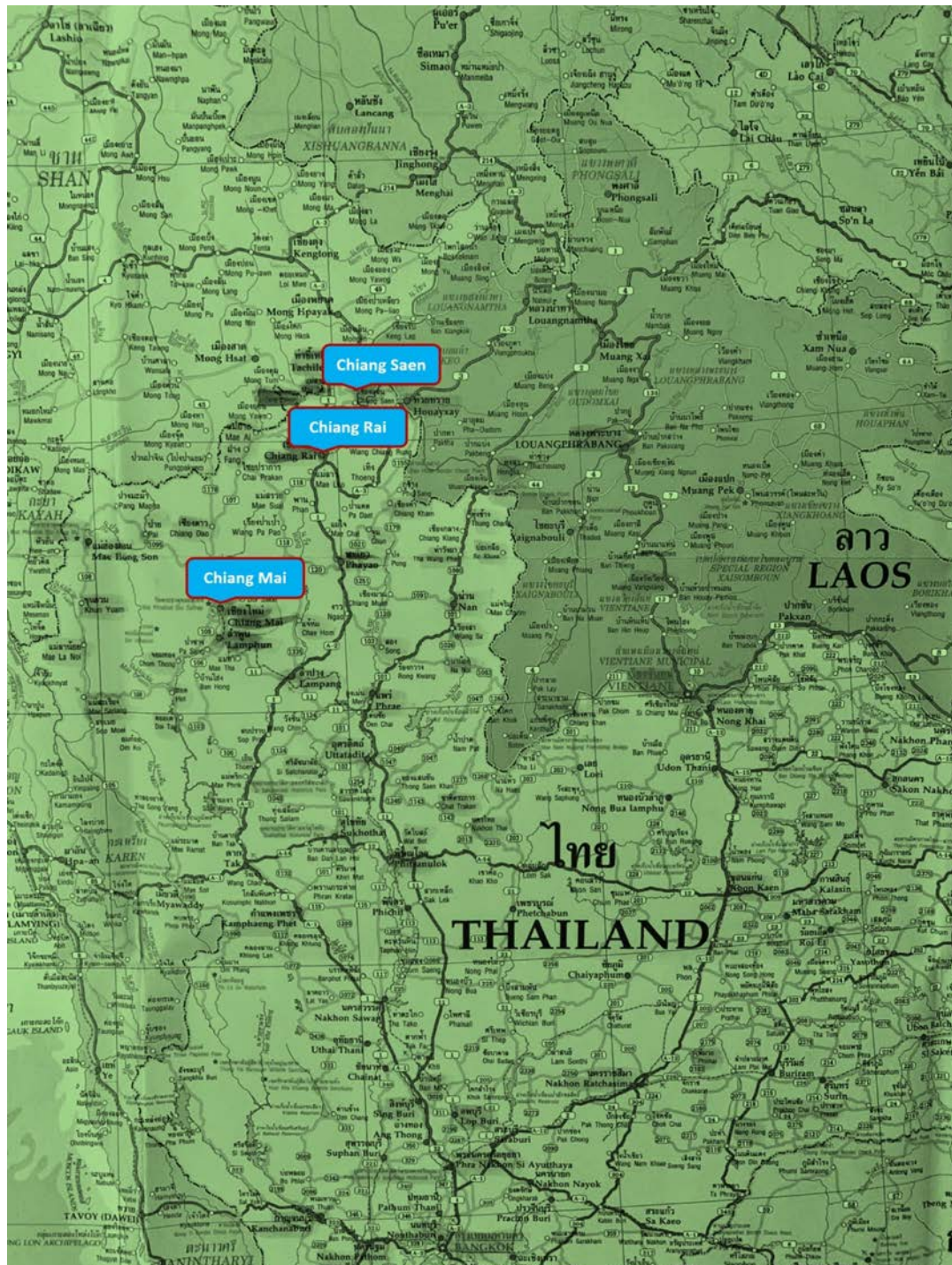
Abstract

A powerful myth tells of the naga, a serpentine spirit or deity, which came to destroy the town known as Yonok after its ruler became unrighteous. Despite this divine retribution, the people of the town chose to rebuild. In many Buddhist traditions, the naga is seen as the guardian of the land and the creator and protector of rivers, lands, villages, and towns. The naga myth is used to understand the changing landscapes. Moreover, it frequently gives people the agency to act, feel, and reflect on their self-embodiment. This paper argues that the myth is an agentive element for people to initiate action. The myth is used as a referential knowledge by the people to interact as well as modify the physical landscapes. It is also seen as a source of knowledge for people to negotiate individual and communal identity within the larger social space.

Prologue

I grew up in a Theravada Buddhist environment. Every week we went to the temple to participate in religious ceremonies and to cherish the Buddha. We observed Buddhist practices such as offering food to the monks, praying to Lord Buddha, and accepting the monks' blessings. During the chanting ritual, people sit on the floor of the *sala* (an open villa and common building where people perform most religious

activities at the temple) with their palms put together by their chest, in gesture we call '*phanom mue*', to pay respect to either the Lord Buddha or the monks. Each time as the ceremony progressed, I always felt some enormous energy enveloping us. The energy, which I could not easily identify, emerged either from the atmosphere generated by the collection of people in the *sala* or the space inside the *sala* itself. It seemed as if the space within the *sala*



Map of the studied area, Northern Thailand and Laos
Image: Piyawit Moonkham

released this energy, making people act in a certain way: the ways in which people have been practicing for generations or what they developed from their immediate understanding.

The differing reactions of people are not limited to the chanting process. They also vary from one space to another, such as the spaces adjacent to the Buddha statues and other religious figures, namely naga staircases, or the distance from those items. I came to realize that certain materials and objects could affect people's actions, especially animated objects that are related to religious beliefs. As Bautista and Reid suggest "faiths have social, public lives that are lived in and through the believer's engagement with tangible things and spaces."¹ Thus, the relationship between people and those spiritually significant objects also somehow reflects their interactions and behaviors. It helps people maintain a sense of understanding the external world and internal self. This engagement creates meaning through the process of living in addition to the practices which are involved with space and things at all times. Furthermore, through the process

of living and cultural practices, people also create the sense or sensation from those living spaces. These living spaces, such as buildings and material elements, in turn, affect the ones who are dwelling through religious practice within that space as well.² This paper will mainly discuss and illustrate this theoretical picture through analyzing particular religious practices and beliefs in the Northern Thai cultural landscape. This region's broad floodplain, ringed by its misty mountains and rivers, has landscape features that are seemingly perfect as a natural abode for spirits. Historically, beliefs in spirits pervaded all aspects of religious life and daily activities of the people in Northern Thailand. Many oral traditions are believed to originate from such spiritual beliefs, many of which predate the introduction of Buddhism. In this region, the mythical serpent, or the naga, is seen as a protector and guardian of the land and rivers. Some scholars believe that the naga may have been one of the local beliefs which were practiced by the local people long before.³ However, the naga eventually became a part of Buddhist tradition and belief as there is an abundance of their

¹ Julius Bautista and Anthony Reid, "Introduction: Materiality and religious diversity in Southeast Asia," in *the spirit of things: Materiality and religious diversity in Southeast Asia*, ed. Julius Bautista (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012), 3.

² Rebecca Lester, *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 134-142.

Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape." *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (October 1993): 152-174.

Anna Kallen, *Stones Standing: Archaeology, Colonialism, and Ecotourism in Northern Laos* (California: Walnut Creek, 2015), 25-30.

³ The estimated time that Buddhism was introduced into Southeast Asia was around the third century C.E. according to many Southeast Asian Chronicles or *Tamnan*. However, according to archaeological evidence, the earliest form of Buddhist practice appeared in the region around the seventh century C.E., see Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995); and Charles Higham and Rachanie Thosarat, *Prehistoric Thailand: From Early Settlement to Sukhothai* (Bangkok: River Books, 1998).

figures in most Buddhist temples and stories in Buddhist texts.⁴ It also became a significant actor in some of the major stories of the Buddha's past lives and other related stories. Perhaps, its most important role is in its protecting of the Lord Buddha after he reached an enlightenment. Accordingly, the naga was later adopted to be the guardian of the Lord Buddha's followers.⁵

This paper examines two aspects of the naga myth. First, I argue that the naga myth itself has an agency to initiate people's actions and that it can be seen as a figure which partially acts on their behalf. In other words, the naga myth and individual actors influence one another to initiate the same action to fulfill the same purpose while the action is in motion. As such, the naga myth also reflects an individual's self-embodiment, regardless of their actual belief. Second, the spaces which have been created by the naga myth represent the contestation and negotiation between local belief and mainstream Buddhist concepts.⁶ In other words, the naga myth plays a role as an alternative space for people to relate their self-embodiments to the myth in order to understand how the world functions and to

reposition themselves within the larger social space. To emphasize the argument, this paper also discusses the agentic elements of the naga myth which have influenced northern Thai people's perceptions and understandings of self and embodiment. By emphasizing people's worldviews of the naga myth, it can also demonstrate the way in which people are interacting with their community and their physical environment and space. Furthermore, it seeks to illustrate how people's worldviews and understandings have transformed the cultural landscapes to become their monumentality.⁷

The Body of the Naga

Apart from the scenic picture that begins to develop with the ideas of mainstream monastic Buddhism, people in my village incorporate other forms of practice which involve animated objects, including a window ghost's amulet and the story about naga.⁸ I first came across the naga when I was young. My grandmother told me the story of this mythical creature every night with a full moon, recounting tales of how some of them have certain

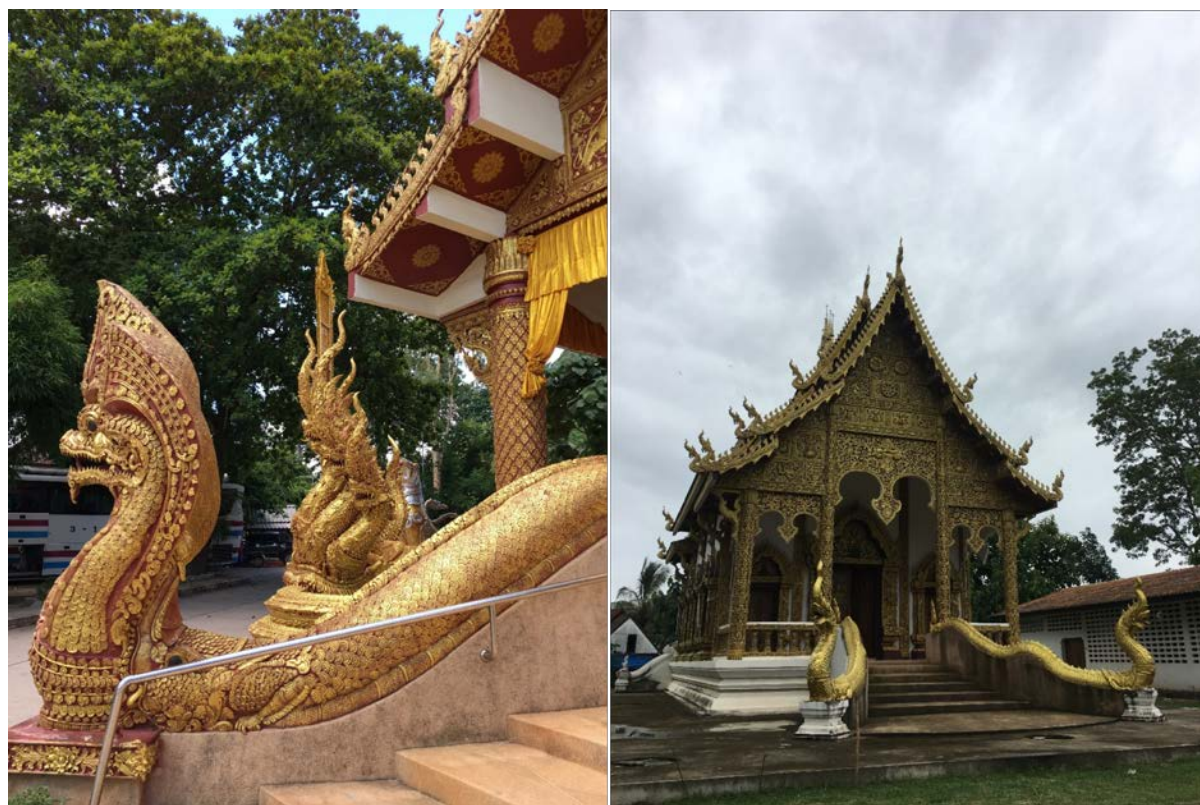
⁴ Promporn Phakkham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics in Mekong Basin and Upper Northeastern Thailand*. (Bangkok: Silpakorn University, 2007) in Thai.

⁵ Phakkham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics*, 33-38.

⁶ Or state-sponsored Buddhism, see more Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005): 461-487.

⁷ The notion of "monumentality" refers to the production, or reproduction, and transformation of collective memories in relation to the landscape. Monumentality attempts to understand what kinds of memories were given "permanent material form as monument, and why particular versions of the past were privileged over others," see Neill Wallis, "Networks of History and Memory - Creating a Nexus of Social Identities in Woodland Period Mounds on the Lower St Johns River, Florida," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (2008): 237.

⁸ This practice is also common in the rural area in Northern and Northeastern Thailand, see more detail on Mary Beth Mills, "Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 244-273.



Naga staircases in front of the *vihan*.

Image: Piyawit Moonkham

magical or supernatural powers that can either bless or harm people. However, from what my grandmother told me, the naga are best understood as good supernatural beings and that the figure of naga is always connected to the Buddha statue of my birthdate (I was born on Saturday which people believe that the *nak prok* Buddha, the Buddha under the naga, is the designated Buddha image for the people who were born on Saturday). People often believe that some power can be generated through this figure of the naga.⁹ I cannot help but notice certain reactions, like pausing, speechlessness, or even idleness, when people hear about the naga. This is what I am interested in observing: peoples' self-embodiment

within certain spaces. While I conducted interviews with informants from Northern Thailand, although some of them are not originally from the region, they have heard stories about the naga since they were young. For those who come from outside of the region, they have come to feel a closer affinity to the story as they now live closer to Northern Thailand where the stories remain prominent.

The naga, or '*nak*' in Thai, mostly refers to the serpent-like mythical creature which is believed to possess a certain supernatural power to give protection and wealth. In Buddhist belief, they are considered to be the guardian of the

⁹ Peerach Likhitsomboon, *The Nowadays of Buddha Image Under Naga* (Bangkok: Silpakorn University, MA Thesis, 2005) in Thai.

religion.¹⁰ The naga is strongly connected with many sects or schools of Buddhism and Hinduism as well as features in religious texts, such as the Vedas, but none can trace its origin.¹¹ Although it is believed to have emerged from the ritual worship of serpents or serpentine deities in many places, such as Egypt, Greece, Roman as well as the Iranian Plateau, none of these traditions can link to the naga in Southeast Asian region or in the West Pacific.¹² With particular social and communal contexts, people in much of Southeast Asia have developed their own belief of this serpent creating their own unique ‘naga.’

In Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand, I still go to the temple at least once a week to make merit by either releasing live fishes, which were about to be killed at the market, or offering some practical gifts to the monks. I usually walk mindfully past the staircase in front of the main hall or *vihan* (*vihara* in Pali) where the figures of the naga are often located. With their sparkling skin in various colors and the extra pointer head(s), and the way that their bodies lay down on the staircases, it alludes to the meanings of the sacred, powerful, pure, and

wise one. It indeed becomes the protector of the place.¹³ They are often seen as the ones who are without sin and equal to the Buddha.¹⁴ The naga play many important roles by appearing in many stories from the life of the Buddha and, periodically, as the individual who aims to enter into Buddhahood but who was later refused by the Buddha because they are not human.¹⁵ Despite the fact that they cannot be ordained as monks, they requested that the Buddha used the term ‘*nak*’ to refer to the liminal stage of a person when they are about to be ordained as a monk prior to the ordination ceremony.¹⁶ These are common stories that have frequently been told and practiced in Thai Buddhist communities, including my own community. In Chiang Saen, a small town in the far north of Chiang Rai Province, people often have different stories and beliefs surrounding the naga.

My parent was always telling me stories about the naga when I was young. That they are guardians of the lands and rivers. They are always watching us in order to see if

¹⁰ Promporn Phakham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics in Mekong Basin and Upper Northeastern Thailand*. (Bangkok: Silpakorn University, 2007) in Thai.

¹¹ Phakham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics*, 6-7.

Phasook Indrawooth, *Mahayana Buddhist Iconography*. (Bangkok: Amarin Printing Group, 2000).

Julia Shaw, “Naga sculptures in Sanchi's archaeological landscape: Buddhism, vaisnavism, and local agricultural cults in Central India, first century BCE to fifth century CE.” *Artibus Asiae*, 64, no.1(2004):5-59.

¹² Sumet Chumsai, *Naga: cultural origins in Siam and the West Pacific* (Bangkok: Chalermnit Press and DD Books, 1997).

Promporn Phakham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics in Mekong Basin and Upper Northeastern Thailand*. (Bangkok: Silpakorn University (BA Thesis, 2007), 12-19.

¹³ Phakham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics*, 23-25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ Mahachulalongkorn Rachawitthayalai, *Phratripidok Phasathai*. [Thai Tripitaka] Chabap Mahachulalongkorn Rachawitthayalai (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkorn Rachawitthayalai, 1997)

¹⁶ Mahachulalongkorn Rachawitthayalai, *Phratripidok Phasathai*.

you are a good person or doing something good for other people. I always behaved after I heard these stories.

Tan, a middle-aged university professor from Chiang Rai, shared with me one of her experiences about the naga. There are numerous types of these beliefs and stories which people have told their children concerning how sacred and powerful the naga are. In most Tai language family communities, which now live across mainland Southeast Asia and southwestern China and form the majority populations in Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar's Shan State, people believe in this magical serpent.¹⁷ This belief is embedded within communal daily life as a symbol of water and as a guardian of the lands, rivers, and rain.¹⁸ As such, in all activities and changes that occur in or involve physical environmental landscapes and weather, people habitually perceive naga-related actions.

The Naga's Space

The notion of human agency has appeared in anthropological research and

theory for decades.¹⁹ Agency, in a general sense, tends to move toward progressive changes or evolves in the form of a progressive line.²⁰ In Soba Mamood's attempt to offer another perspective on agency, she argues that agency is not always the power to resist the dominant power within a particular cultural context, but it is also the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist in some circumstances as well.²¹ In other words, agency could emerge in any circumstance, situation, time, and place in which people happen to be. However, some scholars argue that the agency people act upon, many of them involved non-human entities and those agencies, can be concerned with either objects or narrative.²²

Every time that I heard about [the naga], I always wanted to go and see them and prove that they are real.

Soi, a 50-year-old local librarian originally from Mea Hong Son now living in Chiang Mai, told me. I asked her what her reaction was when she hears about the naga. Soi told me that she does not reject the possibility that they are real, but merely

¹⁷ Sumet Chumsāi, *Naga: cultural origins in Siam and the West Pacific* (Bangkok: Chalermnit Press and DD Books, 1997).

¹⁸ Ibid., 21-23.

¹⁹ Soba Mahmood, "Feminist theory, embodiment, and the docile agent: Some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic revival," *Cultural Anthropology*, 16, no. 2 (2001):202-236.

Katherine Frank, "Agency," *Anthropological Theory*, 6, no. 3 (2006): 281-302.

James Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Craig W. Gruber, Matthew G. Clark, Sven Hroar Klempe, and Jaan Valsiner, *Constraints of Agency*. Vol. 12. *Annals of Theoretical Psychology*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015).

²⁰ Soba Mahmood, "Feminist theory, embodiment, and the docile agent: Some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic revival," *Cultural Anthropology*, 16, no. 2 (2001):202-236.

²¹ Ibid., 220-222.

²² Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications" *Soziale Welt* (1996): 369-381.

that she just wants to see a real one. Later, she also told me that when she thinks about the naga, she has to concentrate harder while she engages with or performs religious activities.

I mostly follow the Budd-hist ways to make merit when I go to the temples.... I always go to pay respect to the Buddha image inside the *vihan* But at the same time, I always feel in between preparation of being ready, to be more behaved when I see the naga. I feel like I have goosebumps just a little bit.

Some scholars suggest that agency primarily concerns human actors since they initiate the actions.²³ On the contrary, most actions that humans initiate are partly influenced by non-human actors, such as cars, chairs, mobile phone, and, in this case, the naga myth.²⁴ Most importantly, these connections or networks, or ‘actor-networks’ are supposed to flow in order to keep this function alive and meaningful.²⁵ Although the Actor-Network Theory does not explicitly mention what really is the

non-human being discussed and the theory is more concerned with technological objects, we should not deduce this critical theoretical approach to solely focus on those objects. The theory itself “offer[s] a rich repertoire of concepts and ideas, but also a profound rethinking of how we do scientific analysis,” which in this case includes anthropology as well.²⁶ As such, in many cases, the narratives or myths (which are non-human entities) can play an important role in human actions. In these cases, the narrative and myth have a particular agency for humans to act for either to brutally initiate the warfare or construct the religious building.

Fai, an employee at local company in Lamphun province in her mid-forties, is always excited when she hears the mythical stories of various non-Buddhist or Buddhist magical creatures. She told me that the naga figurines at the temples come from myths and narratives which have been told for generations:

I did not really understand why they were always there until my parents told the story about them. I was surprised to learn that the

²³ Most scholarly works on the theory and notion of agency extensively discuss behaviors and performativity of human actors. These performances and actions conceptualize identity and gender that dictate human behaviors to either endure, resist, or abide by in a particular social movement. For this reason, the discussion tends to overlook that within certain social circumstances, non-human actors also play an important role in enhancing these human behaviors, see Butler, Judith. “Performative Agency.” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3, no. 2 (2010): 147–161, McNay, Lois. “Agency, Anticipation and Indeterminacy in Feminist Theory.” *Feminist Theory*, 4, no. 2 (2003): 139–148, and Gruber, Craig W.; Clark, Matthew G.; Klempe, Sven Hroar; Valsiner, Jaan. *Constraints of Agency*. Vol. 12. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015.

²⁴ Bruno Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications” *Soziale Welt* (1996): 369–381.

²⁵ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

²⁶ Christian Bueger and Jan Stockbruegger, 2016. “Actor-Network Theory: Objects and Actants, Networks and Narratives.” In *Technology and World Politics: An Introduction*, ed. Daniel R. McCarthy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 1.

figures of the naga and all of these buildings were built in accordance with those stories.

Fai also mentions that these figures somehow give her a particular sense that informs her behavior, namely the speed and fashion in which she enters the *vihan*.

I think they tell me to not move too quickly, not to rush in, and should walk with *sati* because you are about to enter the sacred place.²⁷

Unlike Fai, Boom, a 40-year-old local employee at the Fine Art Department in Chiang Saen, seems to have a different reaction when I asked her how she acts when she approaches the naga staircase.

I do not really change my reaction or my bodily movement or anything there that much.... this is just the product of the old stories which people created.

However, she also admitted that the naga is a part of Buddhism, which she believes in, and that she would act differently in order to not offend them. Boom also said that they are symbols of the liminal world, those in-between places which demarcate a sacred space from the regular human space.

You are sort of ... you have to prepare yourself a little bit

before you enter the sacred space.

Although Boom is a devoted Buddhist and attempts to ignore this non-canonical belief, she is open to belief in naga. Within this realm of thoughts and context, the naga's figures, stories, and space tend to reflect on local people's bodily movement and self-performativity in various degrees: the degree to which different sets of narratives affect their understanding of their religious worlds. Furthermore, the narrative indeed has agentic elements which encourage people to perform in a certain way.

Negotiating Space with the Naga

Fai likes to go to the temple and make merit as many times as she can over the weekend, no matter how much available time she actually has. She told me that every time she goes to the temple, she feels calm and peaceful at some point during her time there. Yet, she also admitted that she does not feel fully relaxed and comfortable.

You have to behave very neatly and politely in there, and do not let other people laugh at you regarding the way you walk or act in the *vihan* or at the temple, because it's a sacred space ... I feel sort of uncomfortably calm, yet peaceful. When I walk through the staircase, I always pause a bit

²⁷ *Sati* translates into English as 'Mindfulness' which means to be able to recall their actions at every moment for their bodily movement, see more detail at Julia Cassaniti, *Remembering the Present: Mindfulness in Buddhist Asia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2018).

.... As I see the naga...it kind of reminds me of what I should do or not do in the temple...or outside sometimes, I guess.

However, when I asked Fai about the naga or the places that have stories related to the naga, she suddenly changed her demeanor to be more relaxed. She became more comfortable talking about the subject. Tan also reacted quite similar to Fai when she heard about them and told me that the naga stories seem like another world or space apart from the canonical Buddhism, even though they are related.

It is like another folktale that my grandparents and parents use to tell stories to the children to tame their naughtiness. And most of the time it works It has nothing to do with Buddhism that much, I suppose.

In this context, I did not come across any anthropological works that attempt to distinguish this binary set of ideas in Buddhism. For this reason, we should look at both sides of the narrative and identify the range of its variations in order to

understand their functions and spaces. In doing so, we can better understand these religious phenomena, as James suggests, “religious phenomena must be compared in order to understand them better.”²⁸

Regarding spaces, Lester argues that they and material objects also play a significant role on the individual space and self-embodiment.²⁹ New environments or places with new rules, which people learn and abide by, depict another world of understanding for that person.³⁰ In that world, people learn how to feel, behave, react, think, dwell, and negotiate their self in a new realm of thoughts.³¹ In that world, people attempt to recognize their embodiment and “to discover a common ground where self and others are one, for by using one’s body in the same way as others in the same environment.”³² Thus, in the cases of the informants, they attempt to negotiate their self within these two spaces of understanding by relating themselves to either one side of the narrative or both. This process of negotiation also reflects how these informants create and maintain their social relationships as they have learned how to understand the world around them or learn how to live with it.³³ Fai also mentioned that if she has a chance to go to

²⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), 41.

²⁹ Rebecca Lester, *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 132-160.

³⁰ Ibid., 132-160.

³¹ Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space*. (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Tim Ingold, “The Temporality of the Landscape.” *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (October 1993): 152–174.

Christopher Tilley, “Introduction - Identity, Place, Landscape and Heritage.” *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 1-2 (2006): 7-32.

³² Thomas J. Csordas, 1993. “Somatic Modes of Attention,” *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (1993), 151.

³³ Nancy Eberhardt, *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006).

the river associated with a naga tale, she would act differently than in the temple as she thought that the naga at the temples and those at the river to be of different kinds.

I would feel different when I am there.... I do not know what I will feel or act, but I think I would act or feel differently.

As Lester suggests “social relationships... are not simply ephemeral abstractions. They are often materially (re) created through the positioning of an actual bodies in space.”³⁴ This might not represent an entire picture of this particular phenomenon, but it shows how these two worlds of conception have developed among individuals within their social and historical contexts.³⁵

The binary set of beliefs or religious worlds as Tan and Fai attempt to understand are the production of a historical phenomenology of the place which many Southeast Asian scholars have discussed and debated for many decades.³⁶ Mean-while, it seems

that the naga has offered a set of understanding that comforts people who practice Buddhism. There is no evidence nor oral tradition that can be traced back to the collision of these binary concepts. Nonetheless, this contestation suggests that the naga myth has been a process which local people use to negotiate with the mainstream religious system and its rigid concept of the world.³⁷

I think the naga, as most people see from the temple, come from Buddhism ... and the naga that have supernatural power were created by the people who live around the river...for myself I do believe they are real andit might be more real for those people.

Soi reiterates her position on whether she believes the naga might have supernatural powers.

³⁴ Rebecca Lester, *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 134.

³⁵ Neill Wallis, "Networks of History and Memory - Creating a Nexus of Social Identities in Woodland Period Mounds on the Lower St Johns River, Florida," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (2008): 236-71.

³⁶ Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the spirit cults in north-east Thailand* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and The Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005): 461-487.

Julia Cassaniti and Tanya M. Luhrmann, "Encountering the supernatural: A phenomenological account of mind," *Religion and Society*, 2, no.1(2011):37-53.

Julia Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism: Mind, self, and emotion in a Thai community* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2015).

³⁷ Mary Beth Mills, "Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 244-273.

The Place in Memory

In the Chiang Saen basin, Northern Thailand, one naga myth still resonates and plays a significant role in the community's daily life activity. The story portrays that the naga who first came to build the city of Yonok (later calls Wiang Nong Lom) later came and destroyed the city after the king and the people mistook and offended the naga.³⁸ Although the destruction from this incident may have caused tremendous damage to the cultural landscapes in Wiang Nong Lom, people still reside in the area and have continued to connect with the naga myth. They reconsider the area as a "communal" monumentality.³⁹ According to archaeological surveys, the artifacts and structures that have been found at Wiang Nong Lom and recent communities at Chiang Saen Noi and Chiang Saen indicate a continuous series of developments.⁴⁰ These practices are still seen in the modern community in all activities that relate to temple construction. The naga figures still appear in the same locations of the building, and people still observe their ceremonies and beliefs.⁴¹

At Wat Pamaknoh in the Wiang Nong Lom area, there is a structure that depicts Wiang Nong Lom's incident. Some people visit the site and perform certain ceremonies to commemorate the sacredness of the place. Judging from the visitors' reaction and the performances, it may be assumed that these people see those areas as monuments intended to remind them not to perform bad deeds or offend the naga. Although people in recent years are less attached to the naga story, this story remains as their monumentality. Monumentality in this context is filled with a new story that blends with the old stories and local people apply them as their communal identity.

I met Phor Phu [the naga] in a dream one night, ... I never thought that he would come and talk to me, ... Phor Pu Phanthu Nakkharat [the naga name Phanthu], ... the statue over there in front of the hall, ... is the main naga that I can talk with really, ... He also tells something to me through the stone (she handed me the yellow gem-like oval shape stone while

³⁸ Phra Lakkhawutthajan. 1973. *Tamnan Muang Chiang Saen (the Chronicle of Chiang Saen)*. Chiang Saen: Wat Chedi Luang.

³⁹ The term "communal" in this context means the local community reproduced their own version of the collective memories that provide the monumental form to the landscape, and created their own understanding of social space, in this case, the naga myth, see Neill Wallis, "Networks of History and Memory - Creating a Nexus of Social Identities in Woodland Period Mounds on the Lower St Johns River, Florida," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (2008): 245.

⁴⁰ Nootnapang Chumdee, *The settlement patterns and development of ancient communities in the Chiang Saen sovereignty during 13th-18th centuries* (Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University, Thailand, 2006).
Sawang Lertlit, *The Management of Archaeological Resources in Thailand: A Case Study of the Historic Town of Chiang Saen* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University, 1997).

Michel Lorrillard, "Souvanna Khom Kham ou Chiang Saen rive gauche? Note sur un site archéologique lao récemment," *Aséanie*, 5, no.1 (2000): 57-67.

⁴¹ Sumet Chumsai, *Naga: cultural origins in Siam and the West Pacific* (Bangkok: Chalermnit Press and DD Books, 1997).

she was telling me the story), ...he is the one who brought us here, even the reason that you came here too,...People who came here have some connection through him, we all somewhat relate to him or the naga,...We are the children of the naga,...this land is the land of him, he built it and he destroyed it because some people offended him and became immoral. I think it's the reason why he came to see me.... to guide us of course, to not doing some-thing that offended him or something bad.

While the story of Mae Wanna, an elder local business owner and farmer in Chiang Saen, implies a different social dynamism from other informants, it seems that she is more attached to the myth and created her own identity from the myth. The myth, in this case, is the legitimized narrative that one can rely on to get a sense of oneself and become a part of it.⁴² In this sense, it seems that the naga myth is not only influential in Mae Wanna's life, but also in the lives of those around her.

For these reasons, the location of Wiang Nong Lom today is perceived by local people as a sacred space and marked with communal monuments where spatial meanings are accumulated. Experiences

within these places can be "conveyed, compared and contested through storytelling."⁴³ As such, the center of such powers can be modified, adapted, or completely changed when the new generation of people started to reside there. Similar to the knowledge that people collected over time, it is also diachronically subject to change. The changes, however, initiate new journeys and link the relationships between the former residents and later communities through spatial meanings. This new collective memory of naga (as we see from the modern community), thus, is reinterpreted from the previous cultural landscapes by the later community. This later community comes to regard it as the lesson in paying proper respect to the local spirit of the place and creating their communal identity.

Conclusion and A Further Discussion

Within the Northern Thai cultural area, the people in the Chiang Saen Basin have come to understand places through embodied experiences of every moment of their daily social life. These experiences can be acquired from all aspects of their personal self within their social, cultural, and religious contexts. Within their personal self, they have learned to project, represent, reflect, and understand individual and communal identities through these experiences. Additionally, they have also used the

⁴² This process has been seen throughout mainland Southeast Asia in many Tai ethnic groups. A good example in this case would be the Shan in Mae Hong Son province, see more detail on Nancy Eberhardt, *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

⁴³ Neill Wallis, "Networks of History and Memory - Creating a Nexus of Social Identities in Woodland Period Mounds on the Lower St Johns River, Florida," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (2008): 245.

myth as a tool for negotiating with unknown external spaces and places, which in turn creates a new set of knowledge for individuals to comprehend these unfamiliar spaces. These spaces have also historically provided meaning to a person through narrative form. It does not matter how people experience the past, their experiences will manifest in the form of myth and then pass along from generation to the next one.⁴⁴

The myth has agency for people to initiate their performance and action in certain ways within their historical and cultural settings. In other words, agency can emerge from cultural dynamism or social relationships between people within that particular culture. In the case of Northern Thai communities, the naga myth provides agentic forces and elements for local people to think, act, feel, and reflect on their self-embodiment between different sets of knowledge, location, time, and space.

Within the contestation and negotiation of the two narratives in a Northern Thai context, the naga myth is an element for the people to use as a common knowledge in order to understand how the world functions. The world of the mainstream religious system sometimes fails to provide a full picture of their individual life within the larger social and communal spaces. Furthermore, the naga myth serves as the alternative concept and

space in which local people employ a set of referential knowledge for understanding. They reflect on their self through the process of negotiation and the contestation of narratives.

In terms of the cultural landscape, the naga myth is one of the reasons that people remain in the area despite its unpredictable landscape changes. The naga myth also plays a significant role in which people create the meaning of the place through its narrative and the perception of its monumentality. The monumentality has existed through time from early historical settlement until today in Chiang Saen eventually becoming a communal landscape. It emerged from the natural landscapes created by the people who lived and continue to live within or nearby the places where particular spatial meanings were embedded within daily social life. And it accumulates like Ingold's timeless taskscape within the Northern Thai cultural contexts reflecting their social dynamism and individual space throughout the landscapes.⁴⁵ The naga myth can be utilized as an important area in understanding how Northern Thai communities and individuals adapt and modify the cultural landscapes in order to protect, prevent and negotiate themselves from a further unpredictable landscape change.

⁴⁴ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, colonialism, and the wild man: A study in terror and healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 368.

⁴⁵ People tend to create meaning about the surrounding landscape from daily experiences; therefore, meaning is constructed from routine activities within that landscape, which Ingold refers to as a "taskscape," see Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape." *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (October 1993): 152–174.

Acknowledgements

I would to acknowledge Dr. Julia Cassaniti for her invaluable comments and ideas. I would also like to express my gratitude to those individuals in Northern Thailand who agreed to participate in this research.

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