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SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM OF THE THERAVADA MONASTIC SANGHA: CASE STUDY OF THE BULANG BUDDHIST COMMUNITY IN LAOMAN'E VILLAGE, XISHUANGBANNA, YUNNAN PROVINCE, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the socially engaged Buddhism of the Bulang people in the Laoman'e village in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China. The socially engaged Buddhist activism of the Bulang Theravada Buddhist community remains unreported, and scholars have widely ignored this topic. Therefore, this study fills a research gap by examining the socially engaged Buddhism found among the Bulang people in Laoman'e village. This study highlights the influence of the important Bulang Buddhist monastic figure Phra Somdet Aggamuni and how he serves as a role model for a young generation of Bulang Buddhists, particularly regarding social engagement and Buddhism in their unique cultural and ethnic context. According to the research, socially engaged Buddhism is a relatively new form of Buddhist movement in the region that places a strong emphasis on morality, loving kindness, compassion, and ethical behavior. In Asia, it has played a critical role in settling contemporary political, social, and spiritual conflicts. On the other hand, Phra Somdet Aggamuni, a prominent Theravada Buddhist monk, actively participated in socially engaged Buddhist activism, which had a favorable impact on the community's growth both religiously and socially. The local Buddhist community continues to acknowledge and value his efforts. The Theravada Buddhist community has experienced a partisan tendency and a shortage of skilled leadership since the passing of Phra Somdet Aggamuni.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bulang are a small ethnic minority group living in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China. They primarily adhere to and practice Theravada Buddhism in the region. The population of the Bulang is estimated at 119,639, according to the Chinese government census report of 2022.¹ Among the regional ethnic minorities, the Dai ethnic group is predominant and controls all spheres of social and political power, including religious, commercial, educational, and political affairs in the region. The Bulangs are among the most marginalized groups within the Dai autonomous prefecture, particularly in terms of cultural and social rights.²

The Bulangs are thought to be one of the most backward and deprived ethnic groups, due their limited access to education, business opportunities, religious practices, autonomous decision making, and various means of government support. While theoretically the Chinese government tries to provide various means of support equally to all all citizens, regardless of race or religion, the Bulang have lagged behind. The dominance of the Dai Ethnic group in the region has led to a concentration of support for the Dai at the expense of the Bulang in terms of political, education, economic, and social power.

As a result, it is extremely difficult for small ethnic groups like the Bulang community to develop leadership within their society and this lack of qualified leadership is detrimental to social development. In previous decades, the Bulangs were extremely poor, and their income was under the regional average.³ Therefore, most Bulang parents could not afford adequate food, accommodation, or clothing for their children, and often could not send their children to school. However, the economic value of the Bulang community has gradually increased including growing family incomes. The main cause of this economic change is tea farming, specifically of the prized ancient and king teas. This variety of ancient and king teas have recently enjoyed increased demand in the tea beverage market. For the majority of Bulangs, ancient and king teas are their main source of income, and some of have grown wealthy through the ancient and king teas' cultivation in Laoman'e village.

Despite of economic advancement, socially engaged Buddhist activities among the Bulang is extremely rare. This is largely due to a lack of qualified monastic leadership because the Bulang Buddhist sangha is subsumed by larger Dai Buddhist sangha, creating a barrier for Bulang Buddhists independently to lead themselves. Phra Somdet Aggamuni (1923–1969) was a prominent Bulang monastic figure who effectively oversaw religious and political affairs in the middle of the 20th century. The Buddhist community of Yunnan province highly respects and honors him due to his great contribution to Theravada Buddhism and its community in the region during his lifetime. This study describes the significance of socially engaged Buddhism and how previous and modern Buddhist leaders evolve and contribute their

¹ Anonymous, "Ranking of the Top 500 Universities in China, Ranking of the Top 500 Universities in the Seventh Census," 中国大学, Accessed October 16, 2023, <https://www.dm-6.com/daxue/19567.html>

² Leonardo D. Amico, "Ethnic Tourism and Folksongs: A Case Study among the Blang (Bulang) of Yunnan, China," *Asiatische Studien – Études Asiatiques* 10 (2023), 01-26.

³ Zhen Ma, "Uncertainty, Risk, and Merit-Making: Tea Economy and Religious Practices in a Southern Yunnan Bulang Community," *The International Journal of Anthropology* 65 (2021), 88-109.

services for social welfare through socially engaged Buddhist activism. Additionally, this study also illustrates the historical context of the Bulang ethnic group and Laoman'e village and the problems of confronting socially engaged Buddhism in the Bulang community. Since no scholarship has previously been done on this specific topic, this study is significant for the local community in many ways. This research will thus provide new and important findings and advance Southeast Asian studies particularly in the context of Buddhism and its expression in the minority communities.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BULANGS

The Bulangs are predominantly Theravada Buddhists, and they received this type of Buddhism in the early eighth century from neighboring India.⁴ In the 13th century, however, Buddhism was also extended from neighboring countries such as Thailand and Myanmar through Buddhist missionary. The modern Bulang people who once lived in the Lancang valley of Yunnan province are thought to have descended from the ancient "Bai-Pu" tribe and belong to the Mon-Khmer-speaking language family.⁵ However, Most of the Bulang population lives in China's Yunnan province, specifically in Menghai, Zhenkang, Shuang, Jiang, Lincang, Lancang, and Mojiang villages. The Bulang generally live in remote, mountainous regions where they construct their way of life. Furthermore, Bulang populations have also been observed living in the eastern Shan state of Myanmar, and Thailand. specifically in the Mong Yang region and the golden triangle region that shares borders with Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. According to Bulang oral legend, they inhabited the Laoman'e village during the Ming dynasty.⁶

The Bulang ethnic group is said to have lived in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province, some 2,200 years ago, during the Qin dynasty.⁷ The Bulang peoples are known by various names such as Blang, Brang, Plang, Pulang, and so on in different countries' regions depending on local customs and language.⁸ However, the elderly Bulang people believe that their ancestors originated and lived here in Xishuangbanna since its origin, so they cannot tell exactly where they come from. In addition, the history of Bulang ethnic group is not clear enough due to lack of reliable evidence, so it needs further study to understand the origin of Bulang people. There are several Bulang settlements that located in separate area within Yunnan province. The Laoman'e village is one of them that this study selected for case study on Bulang Socially Engaged Buddhism.

⁴ Wenen Yan, "The Laoman'e Bulang Tradition of Tea-Tree Consecration Under Theravada Buddhism: An Empirical Study," (M.A. Thesis., Mahidol University Press, 2022), 16-17.

⁵ Gérard Diffloth, *On the Bulang (Blang, Phang) Languages: Mon-Khmer Studies* (New York: The Cornell University Press, 1980), 35.

⁶ Deason, R. "Buddhist Monks and Democratic Politics in Contemporary Myanmar," *Buddhism and the Political Process* 23 (2016): 56-77.

⁷ Yee, Jaffee Yeow Fei, *Peoples of the Greater Mekong: The Ethnic Minorities* (London: The World Scientific Connecting Great Minds, Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd, 2023), 8-18a.

⁸ Anonymous, "Bulang in Myanmar (Burma)," *Joshua Project*, Accessed February 16, 2024, https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12665/BM

LAOMAN'E VILLAGE

It is important to highlight Laoman'e village since this study is concerned about Socially Engaged Buddhism of the Bulang people in Laoman'e village. According to a stone inscription, Laoman'e village is more than 1,880 years old. It is located on a high-elevation mountain range in Menghai, Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province. There are a total of 300 families in the villages at present, a population of approximately 1200 people that has lived harmoniously and peacefully there for many centuries.



Figure1: Laoman'e Village Stone. Image courtesy of the author.

According to the local dialect, Laoman'e means "reed grass and laurel tree" _ Laoman'e village is surrounded by a deep reserve forest with thousand-year-old ancient and king tea trees. This striking location makes the village attractive to many tourists, and has become one of the finest tourist destinations in Xishuangbanna. A few families of the village are benefited by selling different types of customs and traditional souvenirs from tourists, but tea is the only major source of earning for the villagers. A lifestyle changes in the area has occurred due to the increased price of ancient and king teas in the tea beverage market since 2013.



Figure 2: View of Laoman'e Village and Laoman'e Village Temple Landscape.

Image courtesy of the author.

These thousand-year-old tea trees have been protected for many generations and handed-down from generation to generation for many centuries. As a result, these ancient and king tea tree gardens have become a blessing for the villagers and have gradually developed their economic situation. To safeguard

and maintain the reputation and moral standing of the village, the heads of the village established certain social norms, or rules, for the residents. It is to protect and maintain the ethical or moral conducts of villagers because it is a Bulang traditional belief that if someone involves with any criminal or unsocial activities from the village then all villagers feel sad and lose faces because of it. So, villagers run the risk of being ostracized and shunned if they do not obey the village's rules, such as:

1. One should not take intoxicants such as drugs, and alcohol.
2. One should not buy a horse to ride⁹, even if one is powerful, wealthy or has social and political influence.
3. One should not steal other people's belongings, even if it is negligible value or belongs to a subordinate.
4. One should not make or produce any liqueurs for business purposes or personal consumption.
5. One should not have any illegal relationships with other people's wives or husbands or engage in sexual misconduct with men and women.
6. A man should not marry two wives or cheat on his wife.
7. A boy must go to a temple and learn Pali scriptures until he can understand the basic teachings of the Buddha (the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Paths).
8. One should not be friends with someone who has no faith or no morality like thieves, robbers, cheaters, scammers, etc.
9. The residents of the village must help each other with social work when it is necessary, such as building houses, raising funds when someone cannot effort medical treatment for sickness or a natural disaster hits the village, causing a lot of casualties, such as lost properties, lives, etc.
10. Residents who die outside of the village are not eligible for burial in Laoman'e Village. He or she will not be buried in the village graves of Laoman'e if they die from snake, bear, or tiger bites or any other accidents, such as self-inflicted fasting or suicide.
11. Animal sacrifice and killing of any life, including pigs, chickens, cows, buffalo, snake, etc., are not allowed in the village.¹⁰

These are seen as the charest laws that are believed to bring benefits in many ways for the villagers including as peace, harmony, unity, trust, fortune, protection, business growth, and so on. It is believed that ancient and king teas price suddenly increased due to the satisfaction of village deities because the villagers strictly followed those social rules for many years, generation after generation. As a native of the Bulang ethnic and Laoman'e village, the author is a witness that Laoman'e village is now one of the richest and most developed villages in Xishuangbanna due to the ancient and king teas price rapidly growth since 2013. In contrast, the community and its Laoman'e village were in such bad financial shape before 2013—when the price of tea was still relatively low in the tea beverage market—that they were unable to even purches their daily food needs and endured years of deprivation. Furthermore, they were unable to buy other daily necessities, such as clothing, medicine, housing, and basic education.

⁹ Horse is regarded as a royal property and sacred animal, which is why horse is prohibited to be used or ride by Laoman'e villagers, according to the opinion of elderly people of Laoman'e village.

¹⁰ Wenen Yan, "The Laoman'e Bulang Tradition of Tea-Tree Consecration Under Theravada Buddhism: An Empirical Study," (M.A. Thesis., Mahidol University Press, 2022), 16-17.

The author is also witness of how other ethnic groups treat the Bulang peoples at that time because of their low income and low social status in the area. As a result, other community members constantly denigrated and mistreated the Bulang people. Since other community members have witnessed the remarkable development of the Bulang community and its village in recent years, they have begun to respect Bulang people. In comparison to previous decades, the Bulang community and Laoman'e village are now quite wealthy and developed. Since their family income increased the Bulangs often engage in performing social welfare for community development, and support Buddhism especially to the monks who go to study Buddhism in abroad like in Thailand, and Sri Lanka. As a result, the Bulang Buddhist monks can greatly contribute social service through the involvement of Socially Engaged Buddhist activism when they complete their graduation from the collages and universities.

SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM

Due to a shortage of capable Buddhist monk leadership, it is very uncommon to find a good and influential Bulang Buddhist monk who participates in social activism for the purpose of social service and community development in these modern times. In order to smoothly lead the community, the Theravada Buddhist community of Yunnan province needs to produce more knowledgeable and erudite Buddhist monk leaders within its community. As per the author's observations regarding the social phenomena within the Bulang Buddhist community, greater social activism is necessary for the community development, and to address the social and religious issues prevalent in the area. Socially Engaged Buddhism, also known as Engaged Buddhism, is a contemporary Buddhist movement that places a strong emphasis on Buddhist principles—like mindfulness, compassion, moral code, and conduct—to alleviate political, social, and environmental problems.¹¹ It encourages active involvement in social and humanitarian work as an expression of one's spiritual practice—Values such as loving-kindness and compassion are tangibly expressed through practical participation in social endeavors. Engaged Buddhism promotes the concept that Buddhist practice can put into action on social concerns using mindfulness and by realizing the needs of society and the potential of each individual. Therefore, the Buddha taught compassion and kindness to all living beings, which eliminates selfishness and egoism.

When one actively participates in social activism, one can effectively eradicate the concepts of selfishness and egoism. The practice of right action, compassion, and loving kindness towards the community or society is thus one of the paths to purifying the mind. Hence, we can put our Buddhist practices into action by helping meet the needs of society and the community. For example, Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monks Thich Nhat Hanh, who led a peace-building movement against the Vietnam-American War, founded educational and religious institutions with a focus on peace, re-establishing villages, resettling refugees, and actively supporting international peace negotiations.¹² The term “engaged Buddhism” is usually attributed to that Vietnamese monk, Thich Hanh. He likely first coined the term

¹¹ Paul Fuller, *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2022), 56a.

¹² Hunt-Perry, Patricia, and Lyn Fine. “All Buddhism Is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing,” *In Engaged Buddhism in the West*, edited by Christopher S. Queen, (2000), 35–65. Sallie B., “Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church: Nondualism in Action.” *In Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, edited by Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (1996), 321–363.

“engaged Buddhism” in the mid-20th century in his work “*Dao Phat Di Vao Cuoc Doi* (1964)”, which translates as “Buddhism entering into society” or “Buddhism entering into life.”¹³

Since the 1960s, socially engaged Buddhism has become a vehicle capable of giving voice to the people’s political aspirations, bringing about social change, provides a path of psychological and practical liberation for oppressed people and offers the opportunity for economic development for impoverished people. Engaged Buddhism is a contemporary form of Buddhist activism that engages actively and nonviolently with social, economic, political, environmental, and economic issues. For example, engaged Buddhism played a major role in the Vietnam Peace Movement, and particularly in the Buddhist conversion and anti-caste movement started by Indian Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) in 1956.¹⁴

Consequently, the following three new religious movements—the Tzu-Chi Foundation, founded in the 1960s by a Taiwanese nun named Cheng-Yen, the Sarvodaya Shramadanan village development and peace movement of Sri Lanka, founded by A.T. Ariyaratne in 1958; and the Pan-Asian movement to restore the Buddhist ordained women, (Bhikkhuni Sangha) all spread throughout Japan. In Asian nations where Buddhism is the most common religion, Engaged Buddhism evolves into a powerful instrument that could topple national governments and raise the political aspirations of the general public. An excellent example of Engaged Buddhism is Phra Somdet Aggamuni (1894-1979), the late Bulang Buddhist figure who successfully led the Theravada Buddhist movement in China. He was regarded as a significant monastic figure in the 20th century who represented Theravada Buddhism during the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the region. As a result, Theravada Buddhism is still a strong presence in Xishuangbanna, even though Buddhism suffered significant damage during the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1979). Hence, Phra Somdet Aggamuni was regarded as an iconic model and greatly respected monastic figure in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, China. However, there exists a tension between Socially Engaged Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism. Rather than promote social activism, Theravada emphasizes on self-liberation through the practice of mindfulness meditation and the development of inner morality. The degree to which Buddhism should be engaged with spiritual training and practices versus social and political matters is an ongoing debate.

Many adherents to Theravada Buddhism actively avoid direct involvement with socially engaged matters and rather emphasize and focus on spiritual practice. The existing literature of socially engaged Buddhism suggests that Socially Engaged Buddhism is actually originated from the Buddha’s teachings. For instance, the scholars contend that social policies, teachings on service to others, philosophical analysis, personal morality, spiritual practice, monastic order, and all other major tenants contribute to the welfare of society as a whole, as found in the Pali Jataka stories. As a result, Jataka depicts the qualities of kindness and generosity through fables in which the future Buddha, having existed in numerous past lives in various human and animal forms, gave his life to protect others from harm. Furthermore, the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta and Kutadanta Sutta of the Digha Nikaya also illustrate that crimes and vio-

¹³ Hanh, Thich Nhat, *Buddhism and Social Action: Engaged Buddhism, Pluralism Project* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2022), 25.

¹⁴ King, Sallie B., *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: The University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 321.

lence are often related to poverty and describe how to promote a harmonious and peaceful society in the community.¹⁵ These are all illustrations of how Socially Engaged Buddhism originated from the Buddha's teachings. When compared to Mahayana schools in Asia and the West, the Theravada school may be seen as occupying a lesser role in terms of Socially Engaged Buddhist practices.

However, there are several prominent Theravada Buddhist monks directly involved in Socially Engaged Buddhist activities in Asia. For example, Ashin U Ottama in the Burma-Angolo War, Ven. Bimal Bhikkhu in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), and the armed conflict between Bangladeshi security forces and ethnic armed groups.¹⁶ Phra Mahaghosananda (1913–2007) was one of the monks who survived in Cambodia. During the Khmer Rouge regime's civil war, Ghosananda (1913-2007) was one of the monks who survived in Cambodia. He proposed the peaceful, non-violent reconstruction of the destroyed Buddhist community in Cambodia. He therefore led the Cambodia Peace Walk movement, which brought back to their homeland the refugees of the Khmer Rouge era. Under Cambodian King Narodom Sihanouk, Ghosananda held the position of Patriarch (Samdech) and addressed social and political issues in order to resolve and rebuild Cambodian society.¹⁷ He led the restoration of Buddhism after the Khmer Rouge had all but wiped it out, and as the head of Cambodian Buddhism, he worked diligently to heal the profound wounds of the Cambodian people, both at home and abroad. Despite the fact that his entire family died during the Cambodian Holocaust, Ghosananda always radiated infectious joy. He was a significant peace and reconciliation leader in Cambodia, where he is sometimes referred to as the Gandhi of Cambodia.

Another important example is Sayadaw U Ottama (1859-1939) who was one of the leaders of the Burmese independence movement during British colonial rule. During the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885, he was a key player in promoting peace and Burma's independence. He is frequently referred to as the "Gandhi of Burma", having introduced new developments in the country's national movement based on the "non-violence and boycott" philosophy of Indian Mahatma Gandhi. He spent the majority of his early years in Calcutta, India, after growing up as a young monk and being able to travelling there for higher education. He maintained close ties with national activists and political parties in India while he was in the country. After the Russo-Japanese War, he also travelled to Japan, where he spent several years. When he returned to Burma in 1919, he realized that the country's political situation was unstable and that many Burmese citizens were suffering from British colorism.

Theravada Buddhist monastic orders often avoid direct contact with socially engaged Buddhist activism. The emphasis of Theravada is spiritual welfare and insight mindfulness development. However, Theravada lay Buddhist society has no such barrier to performing socially engaged Buddhist activities. In contrast, the Mahayana school actively promotes social welfare through socially engaged Buddhist activism. This is perhaps best illustrated through the Bodhisattva concept, which is highly revered and

¹⁵ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, History and Practices* (Cambridge: The University of Cambridge Press, 2013), 35.

¹⁶ King, Sallie B. *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Hawai'i: The University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Ven. Sarum, "Ven Maha Ghosananda's Contribution to Social Well-Being in Cambodia," *Preah Sihanoukrajā Buddhist University* 9 (2020), 01-12.

seen as a prerequisite to become a Buddha. The Lotus Sutra¹⁸ explains how a Bodhisattva (Future Buddha) performs different kinds of perfections life after life for many cycles of rebirths that are needed to achieve Buddhahood. Indeed, the Mahayana Buddhist tradition commonly adheres to the Bodhisattva doctrine, wherein practitioners strive to engage in humanistic service for the betterment of the community as well as gain merit for oneself.

This commitment to service is regarded as a fundamental duty in Mahayana tradition. The scholarship on the Mahayana school's humanistic Buddhism is well-developed, and numerous scholarly works on Chinese monks have been produced. For example, Chin Kung (Yehong Xu) contributed himself to the propagation of Dharma and the provision of humanistic services across Asia and Europe.¹⁹ Chin Kung perceived Buddhism as a form of humanistic education rather than a religious practice. Consequently, in his role as a monk, he identifies himself primarily as an educator rather than assuming the mantle of a spiritual leader. On the other hand, Tai Xu (1890–1947) was a prominent Chinese monk who made significant contributions to the advancement of humanistic Buddhist concepts in 20th-century China. He demonstrated great courage in advocating for progressive ideologies, spearheading various social development initiatives, and engaging in a wide array of social endeavors.²⁰ According to Aristotle (2022), Thich Nhat Hanh effectively addressed the societal demands for social and humanistic assistance amidst the Vietnam War. He actively advocated for a nonviolent approach to conflict resolution, which encompassed safeguarding villages, aiding displaced refugees, and engaging in international advocacy for peace negotiations.²¹

PHRA SOMDET AGGAMUNI IN XISHUANGBANNA

In 1894, Phra Somdet Aggamuni (Zaiwen Yan) was born in the Laoman'e village of Menghai city to a family of Bulang ethnic tea farmers. In the 1910s, Phra Somdet Aggamuni was ordained as a novice at the Laoman'e village temple at the age of sixteen. He took higher ordination as a Theravada Buddhist monk at the age of twenty in 1914. He studied Pāli and Buddhism at the Laoman'e Village Temple and completed the sixth grade Pāli exam. He also studied Mandarin at the same time and gradually became involved in socially engaged Buddhist activities. He represented Theravada Buddhism and its community to the Chinese government because he was the only one who could speak Chinese from the community in Laoman'e village. Later on, he was appointed as a community leader to raise the voice of the community and address social, religious, and political issues to the government. Phra Somdet Aggamuni actively participated in socially engaged Buddhist activities and services for the community in significant ways.

As a result, he became a well-known and influential Buddhist figure among his community peoples in the fields of socially engaged Buddhist activism. Therefore, Phra Somdet Aggamuni was an iconic

¹⁸ Kumārajīva, *Lotus Sutra: Translated from the Chinese of Kumārajīva (Taishō 9, No. 262) by Kubo Tsugunari and Yuyama Akir* (Taipei: Numanta Center for Buddhist Translation and Research 1993).

¹⁹ Ann Gleig, "Engaged Buddhism" *The University of Oxford Press* 10 (2021): 13-37.

²⁰ Yu-Shuang Yao, and Richard Gombrich. "Christianity as Model and Analogue in the Formation of the Humanistic Buddhism of Tàì Xū and Hsīng Yūn." *Equinox Publishing Ltd* 35 (2017): 205-237.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

model of a Theravada Buddhist reformist and a developer of the community in the region. He especially represented the Dai and Bulang Buddhist cultures in the 20th century to the Chinese government and regularly reconciled the community and cooperated with the government to implement projects. To attend a single government official meeting at that time in the 20th century, he had to travel for more than six months—sometimes even a year—from the Laoman's village of Menghai city in Xishuangbanna and then onwards to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan. Because there was not as good communication or transportation as there is now, he travelled by foot and rode on horse.

He received a white horse from the Chinese government so he could go to formal gatherings, seminars, and conferences. Regardless of race, Phra Somdet Aggamuni was merely a leader who fairly represented the Buddhist communities in his day, both Dai and Bulang. It means that he showed his kindness to every community when he was a prominent Bulang Buddhist leader in his time. He consistently represented the economic, cultural, political, and social concerns of the Bulang and Dai ethnic Buddhist communities during meeting participation. However, the Dai leadership still feels a certain amount of prejudice towards other ethnic minority groups. As a result, other small ethnic minority groups can not advance under Dai leadership. Yet, Phra Somdet Aggamuni was a very tolerant Bulang Buddhist leader who treated everyone with equal respect.

Therefore, he firmly established Theravada Buddhism in the Xishuangbanna under government patronage, he also motivated the government to recognize Theravada Buddhism in the area, as his community believed in and practiced it. The leaders of the community and chiefs of the villagers would step forward to greet Phra Somdet Aggamuni upon his return from the official meeting, which would take place after six months or a year. The villagers looked forward to hearing from him about the decisions and progress made during the meeting. Therefore, he was the only a Buddhist leader for the entire Dai and Bulang ethnic Buddhist communities at that time in the 20th century. So, all Buddhist communities relied on and greatly respected him as an excellent leader. He brought all of the Buddhist communities in Xishuangbanna together under the umbrella of Theravada Buddhism, strengthened Buddhism in the region, and addressed the social and political problems of Theravada Buddhism with peace and nonviolence. In 1956, he was elected as a Deputy Sangha Rāja of the Xishuangbanna Theravada Buddhist Association. The Xishuangbanna Theravada Buddhist Association bestowed upon him the highest religious title of “*Somdet Aggamuni*,” in recognition of his achievements and contribution to Buddhism and its community.

To train and instruct the villagers, he ran a monastic school at his temple to teach Buddhist Dhamma and meditation. However, after some time, Buddhism was suppressed and all religious activities were suspended in the People's Republic of China during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). At the same time, a large number of Buddhist leaders and activists, including Phra Somdet Aggamuni, fled to the neighboring countries in Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. Thus, once Buddhism in Yunnan was isolated from the outside world during Chinese cultural revolution.²² During his more than five years of

²² Kang, Nanshan, *Theravada Buddhism-the Most Important Element of the Tai Tradition* (Kunming: Culture in Sip-

exile in Thailand, Phra Somdet Aggamuni studied Pāli and learned Thai Buddhism including meditation alongside socially engaged Buddhist activities. When the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1967, Phra Somdet Aggamuni returned to his homeland and was again involved in socially engaged Buddhist activities to propagate Buddhism and develop the community.

In 1967, he was nominated as a Sangha Rāja (head of the Supreme Sangha Council) in Xishuangbanna. Ajanh Phra Somdet was an activist of socially engaged Buddhism who significantly contributed to the revival of Theravada Buddhism in the Yunnan province. This led to the reestablishment of Theravada Buddhism, which is practiced and believed in by numerous ethnic groups in Yunnan. There are still many adherents to the Theravada Buddhist tradition in Xishuangbanna, which is the only area where this tradition of Buddhism exists in mainland China. Notably, Phra Somdet Addamuni's tremendous efforts and contributions have allowed Theravada Buddhism to persist in the region. In addition, Phra Somdet Aggamuni composed and wrote a great deal of commentaries on the Vinaya, Sutta, Jataka, and Abhidhamma, as well as on the history of Buddhism, which are remained unpublished still today.

CONCLUSION

A new religious movement within Buddhism that emphasizes the teachings of compassion, loving-kindness, morality, and ethical conduct and is focused on the application of these ideals in modern society is known as Socially Engaged Buddhism. In Asia today, this type of socially Buddhism has been crucial in resolving political, social, and religious conflicts. Compared to the Theravada schools, the Mahayana school is more influential and widespread in the modern Chinese context and is particularly known for its humanistic Buddhist approach. Nonetheless, Theravada Buddhism is an important thread of the Buddhist tradition in China both historically and today although it is limited to minority groups in Yunnan province near the border with Theravadian nations of Southeast Asia. Since the majority of Han Chinese are Mahāyana Buddhists, they primarily a significant influence on the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The Mahayana expression of socially engaged Buddhist activism, and they follow the concept of Boddhisatva idea align with Socially Engaged Buddhism. As a result, most of the Chinese Mahayan Buddhist monks directly involve in doing social activism through the performance of socially engaged Buddhist activities for social and community development.

In the People's Republic of China's Yunnan province, Theravada socially engaged Buddhism has been virtually nonexistent for a long time. Nonetheless, Phra Somdet Aggamuni was a significant monastic figure in Theravada Buddhism who actively engaged in socially engaged Buddhist activism and positively impacted the religious and social advancement of the community. In Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province, Phra Somdet Aggamuni made a significant contribution to Theravada Buddhism, despite the fact that his important works have not been highlighted by earlier scholars and researchers. The benefits of these efforts are still being felt by the Buddhist communities in the region. A few years ago, at the various Bulang and Dai temples in Xishuangbanna, lay followers depicted several of his statues and created

printed images to show him respect, and they showed reverence for his status in a similar way to Buddha's status. It is clear that Phra Somdet Aggamuni is an important and influential figure in 20th century Buddhism in the region, and he leveraged the principles of socially engaged Buddhism to benefit the Bulang and Dai communities in Xishuangbanna.

Since Phra Somdet Aggamuni passed away, the community has sadly been unable to produce a suitable monastic leader from either the Bulang or the Bulang ethnic groups. As a result, the Theravada Buddhist community is facing a qualified leadership crisis, and Buddhism has become more partisan. However, in terms of sharing political authority, making decisions, and protecting commercial and religious rights, another side of the same Buddhism faces a variety of challenges. For most of the Bulang tribe, the ancient and king tea trade is their only significant source of income, and tea brought about many changes for the village of Laoman'e's community development. Nevertheless, more research is required to ascertain the Bulang people's origins because their history is not sufficiently clear in terms of how and where they originated.

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