

## **The *Langchuang* Epic and Pre-Modern Tai Dam Political Space in Vietnam<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the political implications of a Tai Dam story entitled *Langchuang*. Found in northwestern Vietnam, the *Langchuang* story is an important Tai Dam legend of a heroic figure named *Langchuang*. Based on my research on Tai literature, ethno-history, and ethnography of literature, I argue that the story of *Langchuang* is crucial to the formation of pre-modern Tai Dam spatial consciousness which term I use after Charles Keyes' (1995) and Benedict Anderson's (1991) "proto-imagined community," a shared identity over a large area of literary community whose residents are conscious that they belong to the same society without necessarily knowing one another in person. I take the *Langchuang* story to explore how the Tai epic creates the Tai Dam's imagination of political space. Before becoming a part of the Vietnamese state after 1954, the Tai used literature to tie people in a large area together. However, instead of relying on print-capitalism, which invents a common identity among a large population of a literary community of texts published in a vernacular language of one nation-state (Anderson 1991), the *Langchuang* epic was disseminated among the limited ruling class in both written text and ritual performance to create a "place world" (Basso 1996), a social identity of which people demonstrate how the text and its ritual performance of contributed to a formation of the Tai's political space and identity.

**Keyword:** Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai literature, *Langchuang*, Vietnam

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## Introduction

It is commonly acknowledged that the Tai in Vietnam are extraordinarily literate.<sup>2</sup> Written in many types of Tai scripts, Tai literature is plentiful.<sup>3</sup> Although Tai literary works are relatively well collected and quite extensively published, in-depth research on them is limited. This is due largely to the fact that scholars who have skill to read Tai scripts are very few and confined mostly to the context of Vietnamese academics. Even though Vietnamese academics offer some extensive study of Tai literature, most of the studies provide only the general review and classification of Tai literature (Cầm Cường 1993; Cầm Trọng 1978:438-475) or treat Tai literature as a source of cultural or historical information (e.g. Cầm Trọng 1978). Very few works offer profound textual analysis, and even fewer works approach Tai the historical, social, and political context of Tai literature which I shall provide in this essay.<sup>4</sup>

This article explores political consciousness of an ethnic group through a piece of folklore. My approach to folklore is “ethnography of speaking” (Bauman and Sherzer 1974) and “performance approach to folklore” (Bauman and Briggs 1990). In this respect, not only the text, but also “the intertext,” and the context are relevant to interpretation of folklore. Furthermore, suggested by Keith Basso’s approach to folktale and his idea of “place-worlds” (Basso 1996:6), I argue that, the text, the intertext and the context of the Langchuang story weave memory, place-names, political space, and ethnic identity together. Basso points out that “if place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of doing human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities. We are, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine” (Basso 1996:7). Based on these theoretical grounds, I read the Langchuang story through the content of the text, the inter-textual relation of the Langchuang text and other texts, as well as the “textual performance” of the Langchuang text.

This article is divided into four sections. First of all, I briefly introduce the Tai of Vietnam. The period in which the Langchuang epic played its role is the “pre-modern” period before the Tai became a part of Democratic Republic of Vietnam after 1954. In the second

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, I use the term “Tai” or “Vietnamese Tai” to refer to Tai speaking people in Vietnam. There are many branches of the Tai in Vietnam. The Tai I am focusing on are the Tai who reside in northwestern Vietnam. They are called *người Thái* or *dân tộc Thái* in Vietnamese official documents. The most common subgroups are the Tai Dam (the Black Tai), the Tai Don (the White Tai) and the Tai Daeng (the Red Tai).

<sup>3</sup> My PhD dissertation offers a political history of the Tai scripts (Yukti 2007). In the course of my dissertation research in 2002-2005, along with conducting ethnographic and archival research, I learned Tai Dam script and literature with Cầm Trọng. In addition, I reviewed an extensive amount of published and unpublished Tai Dam and other Tai literature.

<sup>4</sup> An exceptional political analysis is Mạc Phi (1961).

section, I present a version of the Langchuang text and discuss in what sense the Langchaung text is an epic. The third section presents an intertextual analysis of the Langchuang epic. Both Tai Dam literature and the literature in the middle Mekong region will be drawn into discussion. The fourth section offers an ethnography of textual performance illustrating how the Langchuang story is practiced in Tai Dam funeral rites and what the socio-political implications of the text and its performance are.

## Who are the Tai?

In addition to the Vietnamese majority, official documents record that Vietnam is comprised of 53 ethnic minorities, approximately 14% of Vietnam's overall population. Ranked the second largest ethnic minority (Asian Development Bank 2008:1), living in the northwest upland region, ethnic Tai (referred in Vietnamese as Thái) are inhabiting an area covering more than 30% of the landmass of northern Vietnam. The Tai speak a dialect of Tai-Kadai languages. The population of the Tai is 1,444,000 (Ethnologue 2010 [2002]) sharing their space with many different ethnic groups, which can be linguistically identified as Austroasiatic (e.g. Khmu, Muong, and several Mon-Khmers), Hmong-Yao (e.g. Hmong, Mien), Tai-Kadai (e.g. Giay, Tay, Nung), Chinese, and Tibeto-Burman (Ha Nhi).

Ethnically, linguistically, and culturally, the Tai are diverse. Although the present government classifies them into two groups, the Black Tai (or Thái Đen in Vietnamese, Tai Dam in Tai) and the White Tai (or Thái Trắng in Vietnamese, Tai Don in Tai), international linguists usually divide them into three groups, the Black Tai (Tai Dam), the White Tai (Tai Don) and the Red Tai (Tai Daeng). Their populations are 764,000, 490,000, and 190,000 respectively (Ethnologue 2010 [2002]). Not only their language, these Tai groups differ from one another not only in their language but also in many other respects ranging from costume, house style, wedding ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, as well as literature and political formation.

The Tai formed chieftain polities—commonly known as the Twelve Chau Tai or *Sip Song Chau Thai* to the Siamese—with certain autonomy in valleys of upland northwestern Vietnam until the French annexed this area into French Indochina in 1890. After the fall of the French regime in Vietnam in 1954, the Tai became part of Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). From 1955 to 1975, the DRV granted autonomous zones to the Tai. After the fall of Saigon and the reunification of the country, the autonomous zones were dissolved and areas where the Tai live were simply divided into provinces like the rest of the country. The period that the Langchuang epic was disseminated in the Tai area was before this area was under

the rule of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, including the French colonial period and before.

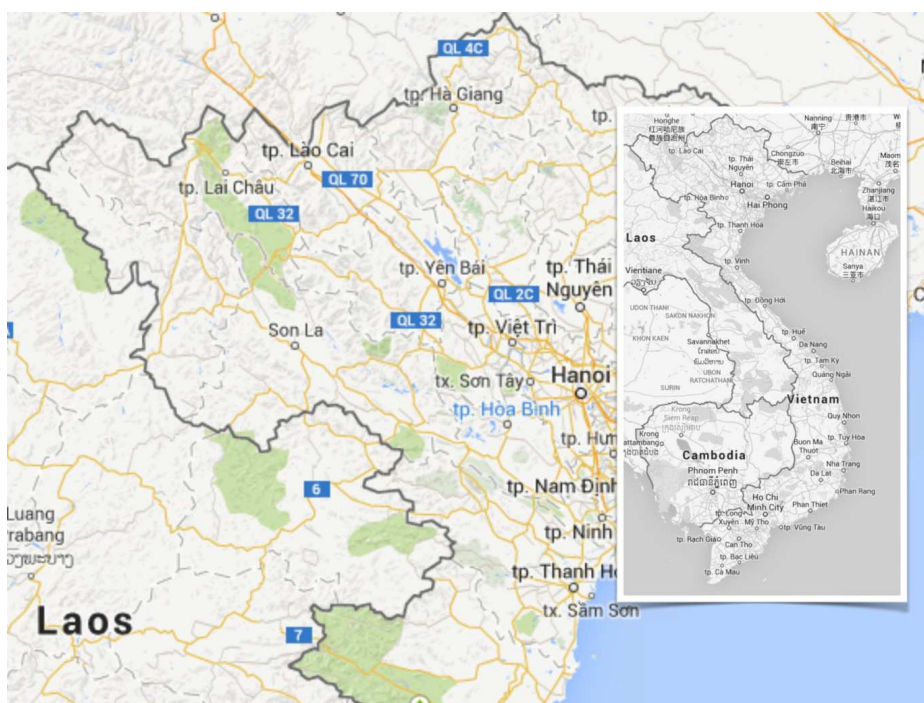


Figure 1: Map of Northern Vietnam. (Source: modified from Google Maps.)

Before the DRV, the Twelve Chau Tai was a political community organized loosely with twelve *chau muang* (principality).<sup>5</sup> Other ethnic groups were not included into the Tai principality system. They were considered by the Tai as the *Sa*, the outsiders of the Tai political system. (See a map of the Twelve Chau Tai in Figure 2). Each *chau muang* is comprised of four to five *muang* (district). In a *chau muang*, there was a *chiang* (core district) and three to four *muang nok* (peripheral districts) normally located around the core district. These Tai principalities established their relationship through marriage and warfare. The story of Langchuang is an example of Tai legends that tell how a Tai chief expanded his territory and conquered each *chau muang* with warfare and marriage. By disseminating the Langchuang story, I argue, Tai principalities reproduced political bonds that centered around the great legendary chief Langchuang. This bond is a sharing of “Tai-ness” consciousness that was invented among the Tai by reading and performing the story of Langchuang in a

<sup>5</sup> Some scholars, for example Cầm Trọng (1978), argue that there are sixteen Tai principalities. For more detailed discussion on pre-modern Tai organization, please see Cầm Trọng (1978) and Yukti (2007: 142-152, 191-204; 2014; Forthcoming).

similar way as modern nation-states rely on print-capitalism to create imagined communities. However, because the Tai are a class-based society comprising of *chao* (the lord) and *pai* (the commoner), in the past the Langchuang story was mainly known among a limited number of Tai ruling class.

## The *Langchuang* Epic

The following excerpt is a short version of the Langchuang story I collected from Vietnam. Its original text is in Tai Dam script. Although it is a short version, it maintains the similar main content of the epic. I will present the story by dividing it into four sections.

### 1. The Origin Gourd

[...] *Thaen* then ordered Chief *Suang* and Chief *Ngoen* to bring gourds to *Muang Om* and *Muang Ai* located outside of heaven.<sup>6</sup> He then ordered Chief *Ngoen*—who was Chief *Suang*'s son—to bring the gourds to *Muang Lo* located outside of heaven. He then had a son named Chief *Lo*.

And then Chief *Ngoen* ruled the country of *Lo*. He distributed the gourds everywhere, all over the earth. Then six gourds went to *Bo-Tae* Principalities. Six gourds and six bronze poles for holding the sky went to *Muang Zon*, *Muang Lao* and *Muang Koy*. *Muang Ly* and *Muang So* got two gourds and two bronze poles for supporting the sky.

And then Chief *Ngoen* allowed Chief *Lo* to “eat” (to rule) the principality. He ordered Sir *Luong* to be the *mo* (the head of ritual office) and Chief *Lo* to be the *tao* (principality chief). Chief *Ngoen* then left for *Muang Om* and *Muang Ai* where he previously lived.

In *Kwam To Muang* from which I took this version of the Langchuang story, the story of Langchuang is preceded by the myth of *Thaen*—the Tai gods—and the origin of the earth and human beings. Prior to the present era, *Thaen* gave birth to the earth and bestowed leaders to rule the earth. However, humans of earlier eras didn't respect *Thaen*'s rules. *Thaen* thus destroyed the earth and recreated the earth and humans several times. At the

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<sup>6</sup> A Tai *muang* is a normally in the size of a present-day district. However, the term *muang* is loosely defined as a political space. Its size ranges from a political space as big as a country to a village. Normally, when referring to a *muang*, such as *Muang Lo*, the Tai refer to a principality previously described above. In this article, I use *muang* and principality interchangeably.

end, Thaen sent a son and his grandson (Chief *Suang* and Chief *Ngoen* respectively) (both are Thaen's sons in some versions) to the earth.

The two rulers brought with him, as is told in the excerpt above, eight origin gourds and eight bronze poles. The gourds were full of animals and humans, while the bronze poles were for separating the sky from the earth. The gourds and the poles were distributed to all over the earth. When the gourds broke off, animals and humans came out to occupy the land. Chief *Ngoen* then established a country named *Lo*. He gave birth to Chief *Lo* and finally left his son—Chief *Lo*—to rule the *Lo* principality. Sir *Luong* was appointed as the first *mo*, the ritual expert.

## 2. The Origin Tai Dam Principality

Then Chief *Lo* gave birth to several sons, Chief *Ta Duk*, Chief *Ta Dau*, Chief *Lap Ly*, Chief *Ly Lom*, Chief *Lang Ngang*, and Chief *Lang Kwang*. Chief *Lo* had seven sons. Chief *Lo* then divided the country into regions for his sons to rule.

Chief *Ta Duk* “ate” (ruled) *Lo Luang*.

Chief *Ta Dau* ruled *Lo Cha*. Chief *Lap Li* ruled *Lo Za*.

Chief *Ly Lom* ruled *Muang Min*.

Chief *Lang Ngang* ruled *Si Sao Na On*.

Chief *Lang Kwang* ruled *Muang Puk* and *Muang Maeng*.

Chief *Lo* then ordered Sir *Kang* to be the chief commander and Sir *Luong* to be the head of literati office.

And then Chief *Ta Duk* had two nineteen [sic]. Chief *Ta Dau* had twenty sons. And then Chief *Ta Duk* divided the country to his sons. He let all of them rule the *Tao* River, *Daeng* River (the Red River).

Still, there left only Chief *Langchuang* who was the youngest brother. He had no proper land to rule.

This part of the story tells about Chief *Lo*'s family. He had seven sons. Six of them were appointed to rule different lands, including three parts of *Lo* Principality (present-day Nghiã Lô District located in Yên Bái Province) and its vicinities. These lands are located in the west side of the Red River. Langchuan, Chief *Lo*'s youngest son, however, had no land to rule.



Figure 2: Map of the route on which Chief *Langchuang* led his troops from *Muang Lo* to *Muang Thaeng* (presented by the broken line).

### 3. *Langchuang's March*

And then Chief *Langchuang* decided to fight for a *muang* to rule. He then organized his troops comprising of hundred thousands of them.

He rode his horse and went over *Ka Mountain* to *Muang Chian*. The chief of *Chian* was afraid. He gave women to Chief *Langchuang*. *Langchuang* then married them and became an in-law of Chief *Chian*.

*Langchuang* then went to *Muang Chai*. The chief of *Chai* gave *Langchuang* male and female buffaloes. He then took the buffaloes.

*Langchuang* passed to the *Sa Chai* whose chin were tattooed. The *Sa* then welcomed *Langchuang's* troops with their belonging and buffaloes. Chief *Langchuang* then made rafts for his troops.

He went along *Tae River* (the Black River or Sông Đà in Vietnamese) to the *Bu River*. He went on the *Bu River* to the north and took over *Muang Bu*. But *Langchuang* didn't deserve to rule a small *muang*. The chief then moved a thousand (or thousands?) of his troops along the *Bu River* whose rocks were rough.

He went to *Fa Mountain* and then reached *Muang La*. Chief *Langchuang* took over power from Sir *Kwang* who ruled *Muang La*. But *Langchuang* did not deserve to rule a small *muang*.

He thus moved thousands of his troops over *Hao* Mountain and reached *Muang Muay*. Chief *Langchuang* took over power from Chief *Am Poy*. *Langchuang* took both waters and fishes. He took both rice fields and pretty girls. But *Muay* Town was a long, narrow and isthmus-shaped town. It was rocky and creeping along a water creek. The chief said that he did not deserve a small horse. A narrow town was not enough for him “to eat” (to rule). It’s not enough for thousands of his troops.

The chief then moved his troops to cross *Hang* Mountain and *Ka* Mountain to *Muang Kway*. But he didn’t deserve to rule and to eat a small town.

The chief then ordered thousands of his troops to cross the mountains toward nice rice fields at *Muang Phang*. But *Phang* Town is a cold town and full of water.

The chief then said that *Muang Thaeng* had rice fields located on its two sides. It was good enough to serve thousands of his troops. The chief then moved to *Muang Thaeng*. *Thaeng* Town is curvy like the shape of a flat basket. It was a round shaped town like a pair of buffalo horns.

This is the longest part of the Langchuang story. It portrays Chief Langchuang as a great warrior. To search for a land to rule, Chief Langchuang led troops to the west. He went to the Black River, crossed the river, and moved to the western side of the Black River. The first country the chief stopped in was *Muang Chian*. He then went to *Muang Chai*. At both places, the rulers surrendered to Chief Langchuang. When Chief Langchuang went from the Black River westward, interestingly, the countries on the west side of the Black River were originally ruled by the people called *Sa* by the *Tai*. The chief then either fought against the *Sa* or married women of the *Sa*. Chief Langchuang finally settled at *Thaeng* Principality.

An important theme in this part of the story is ethnic relations. At many towns are located nearby the Black River, Langchuang confronted the *Sa*. *Sa* is a derogative term the *Tai* *Dam* use to refer to smaller ethnic groups such as *Kadai* speaking peoples or *Mon-Khmer* speakers. The *Sa* ruled these areas before Langchuang arrived. Langchuang’s troops found difficulties defeating the *Sa*; yet eventually, his troops murdered the *Sa* chiefs of many towns, or he established alliance with many *Sa* chiefs by way of marriage. Instead of conquering the *Sa*, he left those towns. On the contrary, at the places where the chiefs surrendered, unsurprisingly, they were the *Tai*. Consequently, they were allowed to rule their towns like before.

In terms of ethnicity, the legend of Langchuang does point out that the *Tai* were, at the very beginning, not the original inhabitants. Ethno-linguistically speaking, the geography of Langchuang’s marching corresponds to what James Chamberlain (1995:3-7) and Keith Taylor (1982:1-9) noted about “the birth” of Vietnam history, that ethnic *Tai* migrated



westward to occupy the area previously inhabited by indigenous Mon-Khmer speaking and Kadai speaking peoples. The Tai then conquered other ethnic groups either by force or by establishing marriage relations.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. *Muang Thaeng*

The chief then built a wide town. He ruled it. He married a woman at *Pae* Village. Chief *Langchuang* ordered Sir *Suang* to be the chief commander and Lord *Tan* to be the *mo* (the head of the court's ritual practitioners). Chief *Langchuang* had a son named *Khun Mun*. But Lord *Pae* is a kind of horse running ahead of a buffalo. The son died before his father.

And then Chief *Langchuang* adopted *Khun Mun* (who is his grandson) to raise as a son until he grew up. Chief *Khun Mun* married *Nang Id Liang*. They had a son named *Paan*. And then Chief *Langchuang* lived for many rice seasons and held stick for many years. He got old, passed away, and left his country. Chief *Khun Mun* then ruled *Muang Thaeng*. [...]

At Muang Thaeng, Chief Langchuang founded the center of the principality. He organized the principality by appointing two most important Tai Dam officers, the chief commander (called *pan* in Tai) and the head of the court's ritual practitioners (called *mo* in Tai). The chief married a local woman and had a son. However, his son died before him. The chief thus adopted his grandson to inherit his throne.

In summary, Langchuang descended from a god. Because his father, Chief *Lo*, left no muang for him to rule, he went to search for a muang by himself. From his hometown, Muang Lo (present day Nghiã Lộ District) he went as far as Muang Thaeng (present day Điện Biên Phủ Province) to found his own country. On his way to Muang Thaeng, Langchuang had to fight against local lords or peacefully allied with them. *Langchuang* becomes known to the Tai Dam as a great warrior. The story of Langchuang can be treated as a representation of the early Tai polity in a time when they were not yet settled down. The story implies that during this period the Tai Dam were in an age of stabilizing their political organization.

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<sup>7</sup> This theme is in fact a recurrent theme in Tai history. For instance, it appears that a most respected chief of *Muang Muay* named *Lo Laet*, who allegedly introduced Tai script to the commoners, was himself a son of a Tai chief and a Sa servant. According to information taken from a conversation with Cầm Trọng, This kind of ethnic relation is also preserved in the most important ritual of Muay Principality called *sen cha*. At the very beginning of the rite, the Tai and the Sa have to perform a dramatized fight. An informant told me that in the ritual, a principality's chair of the court's ritual practitioners was attacked and killed in the old regime.

Langchuang may be in this sense a symbolic figure representing perhaps many generations of Tai Dam warriors of this previous age. This was an age in which swords, troops, the marching of soldiers, and military organization were likely to play more important roles than *ban-muang*, the systematic political organization.

With respect to literary genre called epic, the Langchuang story may not be considered an epic in a strict sense of the term. This is because, as we have seen, the story is not necessarily poetry, and it is a relatively short story in comparison to a normal epic.<sup>8</sup> In terms of folkloristic genres, according to Dan Ben-Amos, “legends involve identifiable personalities, dates, or places, yet the events have an extraordinary quality, often involving integration between humans and supernatural beings” (Ben-Amos 1992:102). Thus, classified among myth, legend and tale, the Langchuang story is rather close to the genre “legend”.

Nonetheless, the Langchuang story is in actuality a legend told within other literary works. The Langchuang story is normally found in two important Tai Dam literary works, *Tay Pu Soek* (meaning “tracing along the wars of the ancestors”) and *Kwam To Muang* (meaning “stories of the country”).<sup>9</sup> Both *Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang* are stories told in chronological fashion. We may call them Tai Dam chronicles. In terms of literary form, however, while *Tay Pu Soek* is composed completely in poetic form, *Kwam To Muang* is written mostly in prose with some rhymes. In terms of content, *Tay Pu Soek* contains stories of the Tai “legendary” chiefs and “historic” chiefs. Although they are dissimilar in literary form, most of the stories collected in *Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang* follow similar chronology and historical information, despite different details.

In the larger context of Tai literature in Vietnam, there are several poetic stories whose lyrics are as long as 1500 to 2000 verse lines. In terms of literary genre, among major epics found among the Tai in Vietnam, *Tay Pu Soek* is considered an epic.<sup>10</sup> Three major epics

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, a short definition of epic defined by Encyclopedia Britannica is a “long narrative poem recounting heroic deeds” (Encyclopedia Britannica 2008). Interestingly, the term epic is hardly found in contemporary collections of folklore theory and methodology (Bauman 1992 and Dundes 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Despite an analysis of the variation of the Langchuang story is important, it needs to be carried out independently in a separate article. Other versions of the Langchuang story can be found in various versions of *Kwam To Muang* and *Tay Pu Soek*. As for *Kwam To Muang*, various versions can be found in Cẩm Trọng và Cẩm Quỳnh (1960), Đặng Nghiêm Vạn et al. (1978), and Tai Studies Center (1986). version of *Tay Pu Soek*, which is the version that I use for writing this article, are published in Tai Dam alphabet in *Sở văn hóa thông tin Tỉnh Sơn La* (1997). Recently there is a Vietnamese translation of this text. However, while I was revising this article, I have not had opportunity to access it.

<sup>10</sup> The term “epic” in Vietnamese is *sử thi*. Cẩm Cường, a Vietnamese Tai scholar classifies *Tay Pu Soek* as *sử thi* (Cẩm Cường 1993:112).

found among the Tai are *Chuang Han*, *Tay Pu Soek*, and *U Them*.<sup>11</sup> Composed in poetic form, three of these works tell about heroic characters in a certain period of time or several eras. *Chuang Han* is a variation of a literary and oral literature (known as, for instance, *Thao Hung*, *Chuang*, and *Khun Chuang*) found in a large area of the middle Mekong region, including Laos, northern and northeastern Thailand, southern China, eastern Burma, and northwestern Vietnam. *U Them* is found in the western part of Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An areas in Vietnam. *Tay Pu Soek* is a Tai Dam literary work found in Sơn La, Điện Biên Phủ, and western Yên Bái provinces of Vietnam.

Approaching it in this way, we can contend that the Langchuang story is a part of Tai Dam epics, whether it is told in poetic or prosaic form. In this article, instead of the *Tay Pu Soek* version, I examine the Langchuang story recorded in a version of *Kwam To Muang*.

### Inter-textualizing *Langchuang*

In order to understand the Langchuang story, at first, we need to locate the story in its textual context. In both *Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang*, the Langchuang story is located as a period within the Tai Dam's long chronology. The whole chronology begins with mythic ages, followed by a legendary age, and ends with an extensive historic age, which descends to the present day. In the beginning, similarly, *Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang* start with the story of the origin gourd, the birth of the earth, and the birth of the Tai, as previously mentioned. Not only does it refer to the heavenly bestowal of every species on earth, while particularly emphasizing the celestial origin of the ruling class, but it also locates the original home territory of the Tai Dam. After the mythic age, *Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang* continue with a "historic age," documenting the chronology of principalities, especially the chronology of the principality from which that version of the text originates. Stories presented in this section of the text are diverse, periodically expansive, and thereby voluminous. It depicts the Tai in the chronology of the region and refer to the reign of each Tai chief to the reign of Lao and/or Vietnamese kings. Thus, the Tai Dam chronicles provide clues for readers to investigate the period under consideration. Moreover, the Tai Dam chronicles perceive historical events from the local point of view. *Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang* in this respect may contribute a great deal to pursuing the investigation of history from the more or less indigenous' perspective.

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<sup>11</sup> A version of *Thao Hung-Khun Chuang* found in Vietnam was published in *Sở Văn hóa thông tin Tỉnh Sơn La* (1997). Other Tai epics found in Vietnam is *U Them* – an epic recorded in Tai Daeng script.

In this context, I argue that *Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang* in general and the Langchuang story in particular correspond and perhaps coincide with other major literary works in the middle Mekong region. In other words, these two epics emerged as Tai Dam chronicles, a literary expression of the political formation of an ethnic group. By way of discussion, first of all, I compare major motifs used in *Kwam To Muang* and *Laos Chronicle* to present an example of Tai historiography written prior to the age when Buddhist influences were stronger. Furthermore, I will demonstrate Tai political consciousness presented in the Langchuang story by referring to another Tai Dam literary work entitled *San Song*, a funeral chant leading the dead soul to the sky world.

### 1. The Langchuang story and Laos Chronicle

In a larger context, the major Tai Dam chronicle *Kwam To Muang* records how the Tai Dam and the Laotian of Luang Prabang intermingled politically. According to the chronicle, Lao kings of Luang Prabang rescued many Tai chiefs who were suspected or threatened by Vietnamese kings. In return, many Tai chiefs were recorded that they supported Lao kings in warfare. In addition, marriages between the Laotian ruling family and the Tai ruling family were relatively common (Yukti 2007:150-152). Given such political relations, the Tai exchanged culture, in particular literature and the writing system, with the Laotian extensively. It is most likely that the Tai adopted the writing system from the Lao as many Tai letters are similar to Lao letters, for example consonants *m* and *n* in the two writing systems. As this writing system related to Southern Indian scripts that are shared by many writing systems of mainland Southeast Asia, the Tai are more likely to have received or interchangeably created writing systems together with the Laotian and other Tai speaking peoples, such as the Lanna Tai and the Siamese (Yukti 2007:414-420). Moreover, there are several literary works that were disseminated within both Tai and Lao culture. The most widely known to both Tai Dam and Laotian studies are probably *Khun Lu Nang Ua* and *Chuang Han* (Sở văn hóa thông tin Tỉnh Sơn La 1997; Yukti 2010). In this context, as it will be demonstrated in the following discussion, the Langchuang story is one of the works of literature that the Tai and the Lao share.

It is significant that the origin myth presented in *Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang* (Tai Dam chronicles) is not necessarily limited to the realm of Tai literature. Many motifs presented in Tai literature show significant correlation to those mentioned in other Tai groups, particularly *Phongsawadan Lan Chang* (*Laos Chronicle*) (Wichianpreecha 1956:399-400), as follows:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The version of *Phongsawadan Lan Chang* used herein is presented in Siamese Thai.

### (1) Phrase

- “*Ko pen din pen ya*” (literally “to form the earth and the grass”) the opening stanza used in *Kwam To Muang* is also presented in the opening page of the Laos Chronicle's origin myth.<sup>13</sup>

### (2) Themes

- The conflict between *Thaen* or the sky and humans or the earth is presented in both Tai Dam chronicles and the *Laos Chronicle*.

- After the great flood, both sources present the re-emergence of present-day humans on earth as the species from the origin gourds.

- Both chronicles present the idea that humans formerly encountered difficulties in ruling themselves. Later, the nobles were sent from the sky to rule the commoners. The commoners were then socially organized and began to economically produce. The noble is referred as *Khun Bulom (Borom)* in the *Laos Chronicle*, and they are *Tung Hoang, Tao Suang, Tao Ngoen* in Tai Dam chronicles.

- *Borom* established the first organized society at *Ban Na Noy Oy Nu* located, according to the *Laos Chronicle*, in *Muang Thaen*, believed to be the same place as *Muang Thaeng* (often pronounced *Mường Thanh* by the Vietnamese and also referred as Điện Biên Phủ). *Tao Suang* and *Tao Ngoen* in Tai chronicles established the first organized society at *Muang Lo*, located near the place where the Black River and the Red River merge. Currently, the legend and the name of *Ban Na Noy Oy Nu* still appear at Điện Biên Phủ.<sup>14</sup>

### (3) Main Characters

- Humans that came out of the gourds also belong to different sub-groups. Tai chronicles mention the clan names of *Lo, Luong, Quang, Tong, Deo* (Đăng Nghiêm Vạn *et al.* 1977:55). The Laos Chronicle refers to *Tai Lom, Tai Li, Tai Long, Tai Lo, Tai Kwang* (Wichianpreecha 1956:391).

- Both *Borom* (in the *Laos Chronicle*) and *Tao Suang* (or *Tao Ngoen*, depending on the version of Tai chronicles) had a son named *Lo*. *Khun Lo* of the Laos Chronicle

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<sup>13</sup> However, as it is recorded in a Siamese translated version as *ko pen din pen ya*, (and then there emerged the earth and the grass). It is most likely that the Siamese version incorrectly transliterates the word *ko*; consequently, *ko* (to form) which I believe is supposed to present in the Lao Chronicle original version becomes *ko* (and then) in Siamese Thai.

<sup>14</sup> In November 2002, I visited *Ban Na Noy Oy Nu* located in the middle of the national highway connecting Tuần Giáo District with the city of Điện Biên Phủ. Villagers remained holding the legend of *Khun Borom* and the heavenly bestowed origin gourd.

ruled *Chawa*, the ancient name of Luang Phrabang. *Tao Lo* of Tai Dam chronicles ruled *Muang Lo*. This resemblance points out that the name “Lo” is seen as a significant name to many ethnic groups in the region.

- Linguistically, the initial consonant *s* in Lao can be transliterated to the initial consonant *ch* in Tai Dam language. For example, *sang* (elephant) is equivalent to *chang* in Tai Dam, and *su* (every) in Lao is *chu* in Tai Dam. In this respect, it is significant that the personal name *Langsoeng* appearing in the Laos Chronicle is a transliteration of *Langchuang* of the Tai Dam chronicles.

These affinities point to the fact that the origin myth recorded in both Lao and Tai literary traditions originates from a similar source. Whether the Tai borrowed from the Laotian or vice-versa does not necessarily affect its significance. However, it is most likely that both the Tai and the Laotian drew it from the regional “universal history,” the story which was well known and highly respected throughout the region at that period. Stories of *Thaen*, the gourd, and Chief Lo might have been treated by the Tai speaking populations, including other ethnic groups, in the region in the similar way as the presence of Buddha and his footprints are treated by the Buddhist-influenced Tai historiography.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, since the two historiographic traditions refer to different locations for their original polity, it is apparent that the authors from different ethnic backgrounds appropriated the similar universal history to establish and claim legitimacy for distinctive political spaces. The fact that a significant part of the Tai Dam origin myth may be drawn from different sources means that the Tai Dam’s memory of the ancient past does not necessarily dissociate itself from other ethnic groups. However, the unique part of Tai Dam chronicles is that it identifies the Tai with a specific place, Muang Lo (Nghĩa Lộ District, Yên Bái Province). In other words, the origin myth spatializes the location of the Tai nation. It facilitates the formation of a spatial identification of the Tai ethnic boundary.

## 2. The Langchuang story and *San Song*

After founding the Tai Dam original muang, according to the Langchuang story, beginning from Chief Langchuang period, then, the largest section of *Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang* is the historic era describing how Tai chiefs of different periods organized their *muang*. The historic section of *Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang* can be divided into two periods: the great warrior era and the ban-muang era. The great warrior era, which is the era

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<sup>15</sup> This is similar to the way David Wyatt refers to the Buddhist-influenced Tai historiography (Wyatt 1976). However, in fact, it is most likely that this kind of myth is treated as a “universal history,” not merely by the Tai, but also by other ethnic groups in the region (see Proschan 2001).

of Langchuang, refers to the period when Tai society was unstable. The wars among the Tai lords themselves and the Tai lords against ethnic groups are the major theme of the stories. The second historic era can be called the ban-muang era, which tells the Tai as an organized and relatively stabilized Tai society. In this period the Tai were settled and organized into chiefdoms. In this context, I argue, the Langchuang story facilitates the construction of an ethnic boundary through Tai spatial consciousness. The connection between the story of Chief Langchuang and the Tai Dam political space can be understood more clearly by uncovering the intertextual relation between the Langchuang story and a Tai Dam text entitled *San Song*.

*San Song* is a chant composed in verse as long as 400 to nearly 1000 verse lines, depending on the version. It has three sections: diagnosing disease, directing the spirit through the path of the dead, and guiding the people to return. The deceased's son reads the text in the very early morning on the third day (Ngô Đức Thịnh và Cầm Trọng 1999:841). At the same dawn, the son-in-law reads the text again before moving the deceased to the cremation, and he reads the chant again on the next day when the ash is moved to the grave. Note also that while the son may not necessarily read through the entire text, the son-in-law is expected to read through the entire text.<sup>16</sup>

By reading *San Song*, it is believed that the deceased's soul is led to its proper place in the sky. The first section describes how the deceased was born and grew up and how he (or she) became sick. He then hired a *mot* (sorcerer) to heal him. Nevertheless, he did not recover and finally died. The second section then leads the deceased souls from his house to the route. The souls of the reader will accompany the deceased soul to lead the deceased soul all the way through the sky. They have to follow the right track specified by place names of villages, principalities, and various landmarks, from places to places on earth and in the sky. No matter where the deceased's home is, the final destination on earth prior to the sky is *Muang Lo*, the original hometown of the Tai Dam. The last section is the shortest one, leading the son-in-law and his company's souls to return to the earth.

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<sup>16</sup> If the son-in-law cannot read the script, he can repeat the words read by his representative. How the Tai chronicles are used in the funeral context will be discussed at length in the following section.

Drawn from different versions of *San Song*, on the way to the sky, the significant places that the chant refers to, beginning from the house to the city of ancestors in the sky are:<sup>17</sup>

house door, principality gate  
*Tae* River or Black River  
*It Ong* Town (Sơn La Province)  
*Muang Chian* (Sơn La Province)  
*Muang Min* (Than Uyên, Lào Cai Province)  
*Muang Than* (Than Uyên, Lào Cai Province)  
*Lo Cha* Town, *Muang Lo* (Yên Bái Province)  
*Lo Ja* Town, *Muang Lo* (Yên Bái Province)  
*Lo Luang* Town, *Muang Lo* (Yên Bái Province)  
*Tat Fi Pai* Waterfalls (Yên Bái Province)  
The City of Common Ancestors or the City of Royal Ancestors

The order of place names shown above follows the order of the place names indicated in the chant. The places referred to in different versions differ on the basis of the elaboration of the text and, whether or not the places are described in refined detail. The list of places also differs based on the starting point of the practitioners. However, every version seems to step on this similar path. The final destination on earth is the three Lo Towns, which are all in Muang Lo, the legendary original home of the Tai Dam. *Tat Fi Pai* Waterfall, believed to be in a jungle nearby the Lo Towns, is a gateway through which the spirit can gain access to the upper world. After that, the souls will travel through different places in the sky until they reach the City of Ancestors.<sup>18</sup>

In comparison to Chief Langchuang's marching route, the deceased souls travel on a similar route, but in the opposite direction. As previously mentioned, Langchuang and his troops marched westwards to seek a suitable town for himself. Major places recorded on the route includes:

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<sup>17</sup> The La version (Hà Văn Thu 2002 [1931]), Muay version (prior to 1961, Ngô Đức Thịnh và Cẩm Trọng 1999: 866-887), and Lao Song version (Wisarat 1981:170-202) all provide Tai Dam script and a Vietnamese translation. As the Lao Song are the Tai Dam war captives resettled in Thailand in the 19th century, the Lao Song version leads the deceased's spirit from Thailand to Laos and finally to several places of the Tai Dam in Vietnam. The Mit version is transcribed in Siamese Thai (Sumitr 2002:87-89). Another La version appears to have a Vietnamese-based transliteration and a Vietnamese translation (Hoàng Trần Nghị 2000:628-722).

<sup>18</sup> On the way back, after the son or son-in-law and his company finish their trip to the sky, they will return quickly through a short cut. They go straight from the city of the ancestors to *Muang Lo* and cut through different principalities to get back to the house as fast as possible.



*Muang Chien* (Quỳnh Nhai District, Sơn La Province)  
*Muang Chai* (Mường La District, Sơn La Province)  
*Nam Tae* (the Black River)  
*Maung Bu* (Ta Bú, Sơn La Province)  
*Muang La* (Thị xã Sơn La Province)  
*Muang Muay* (Thuận Châu District, Sơn La Province)  
*Muang Kway* (Tuần Giáo District, Điện Biên Phủ Province)  
*Muang Fang* (Muang Phăng District, Điện Biên Phủ Province)  
*Muang Thaeng* (Điện Biên Phủ City)

With the exception of *Muang Chien*, which usually identifies itself as the *Tai Don* (the White Tai), all these principalities and districts are the *Tai Dam* (the Black Tai).

In principal, the destination on earth of the souls from different Tai towns is similarly the legendary town of *Muang Lo*, which is *Langchuang's* hometown. Thus since both the story of *Langchuang* and the *San Song* chant are performed in funeral rites, they echo one another to emphasize the significance of *Muang Lo* as a central reference for *Tai Dam* identity.

By way of intertextual reading, the story of *Langchuang* is a *Tai Dam's* memory of the ancient age. It presents the way in which the *Tai Dam* imagine themselves through place-names. Importantly, this memory associates the establishment of a *Tai* polity with a large area covering *Muang Lo* on the east and *Muang Thaeng* on the west. It is the region between the Red River Delta and *Luang Prabang* (Lao ancient capital city). The *Langchuang* story tells how the *Tai Dam* migrated and gradually conquered the western side of the Black River. Upon leaving this world, however, the *Tai Dam* send their deceased souls to return from anywhere they lived back to their homeland, *Muang Lo*, and then transcend to the upper world.

## Contextualizing *Langchuang*

*Tay Pu Soek* and *Kwam To Muang*, where the *Langchuang* story is recorded, are not merely meant to be reading in the context of individual reading. *Tai* “traditional literacy” (in the sense characterized by Goody 1968) uses both poetic works in ritual context. Traditionally, it is documented that *Tay Pu Soek* was performed among the elite mostly in *Sen Muang* (the principality's rite of passage) and in ruling class' funeral, while *Kwam To Muang* was normally read in funeral. As documents on the uses of *Kwam To Muang* is substantive, in this section, I present how *Kwam To Muang* is practiced in a funeral context. In the end, I argue that the

performance of *Kwam To Muang*, in which the story of Chief Langchuang is recorded, is crucial to the dissemination of the Tai Dam memory of political space and the formation of territorialized Tai Dam ethnic identity.

Preceding all of the complicated stories documented in the text, *Kwam To Muang* begins with this following passage:<sup>19</sup>

You held a royal hat down to live on earth until aged. You carried the wand down to live on earth until now. You stayed for many years and lived a good life for many harvesting seasons. You became an elder chief on earth for such a long, long life. The wood died; you then departed to the upper world. It is the end of human life; you then departed to the sky. You love the sky more than the human world. You love the upper world more than the lower world. You then held the hat to run to the sky and rode the horse to the upper world. You were human for such a long, long life, and such life then finished. Finish on time. Die like an [old] wood. The long spear reaches its end, so does the wand. Old age ends, so does youth. The jungle ends; it then reaches the forest. The others finish; it is then our turn. Your mourned child shall get blue eyes mourning. I shall open eyes to wait [for you]. I shall succeed [your] seat. I shall tell stories about the principality to you, shall not I? Remember it; memorize it. Remember the time of soil and grass. Memorize the age of sky [and] and the age of human, please. The mourned child talks; please, don't neglect. The orphan tells; then, don't forget. Keep it in mind and impress it into your "neck" [heart-YM], please [translation mine].<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Some sentences of this passage are composed in rhyme. So far as I have researched, the only published version of *Kwam To Muang* that presents this message is the translated version of Chăm Trọng và Chăm Quỳnh (1960). A similar text, without "origin myth" and "chronicle" proved, is published in Hoàng Trần Nghịch (2000:628-629).

<sup>20</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the translations, transliterations and re-writing of Tai Dam text decoded from the manuscript presented throughout this chapter are mine.

This passage demonstrates clearly that *Kwam To Muang* may not be properly understood by dissociating it from its ritual context since the text is limited to use in funeral rites.<sup>21</sup> The story of Langchuang is thus meaningful only in a ritual context that this story is recited as a part of the *Kwam To Muang* text in funeral. In this respect, a brief picture of Tai Dam funeral should be provided.<sup>22</sup>

On the first day of the funeral, relatives and family of the deceased proceed through the ritual process step by step, while mourning overwhelmingly dominates the scene. Initially, the corpse is carefully prepared. It is washed and dressed up with two layers of traditional textile. Next, the corpse is placed properly on the floor in the direction that crosses the main axis of the house. The deceased body is laid down on layers of mattes and blankets. Its face would be covered with embroidered textile. Then comes a procedure entitled “awaking the deceased.” Apart from making noise to announce to the village of what is going on, the deceased's sons and daughters-in-law will set up an offering tray comprised principally of boiled chicken, a piece of cotton textile, liquor and utensils. Next, the sons and their wives will sit down and bow to the corpse. They then cry aloud to “wake” the deceased to have a lunch.

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<sup>21</sup> Apart from the opening passage, this requirement to confine *Kwam To Muang* within the context of funeral rites is reflected by in Tai Studies Center's introduction on its publication of *Kwam To Muang*. The introduction states that: [Formerly] the elders do not allow anyone access to *Kwam To Muang* since it is prohibited. This text is preserved restrictedly for the deceased to listen to prior to Song San [the chant guiding the deceased to the sky-YM] [translation mine] (Tai Studies Center 1986:3). This tradition of contextualizing *Kwam To Muang* within the funeral rite follows, symbolically speaking, the Tai's practices of avoiding contacts between the deceased and the animate. The sphere of the deceased is *kam* (prohibited or tabooed). When raising issues related to the deceased, and the ancestors in particular, one should beg for forgiveness from the deceased by, according to what I have seen, sprinkling drops of liquor to pay homage to the deceased being addressed. In this regard, a polite or purified way of speaking is employed for speaking with the deceased. In this respect, the kind of texts relating to the dead people that are considered “historically non-fictive people,” especially the ancestors, are not allowed to be delivered secularly. This kind of text includes *Kwam Faeng Muang*, *Tay Pu Soek*, and *So Fi Huan* (the book of ancestor name list). Each text of this kind must be dealt with specific ways. As for *So Fi Huan* of the principality's chief's family, for instance, traditionally the principality had to assign a specific officer to be the keeper of this ancestral name list. The list would be employed by *ong mo* (the literati chairman) only in the rite of inviting the ancestors to receive offerings. *Kwam To Muang* is treated in a similar fashion.

<sup>22</sup> The funeral rite discussed in this chapter is a most elaborate version performed by the royal family in the early 20th century. The procedures described here are taken mainly from Ngô Đức Thịnh và Chăm Trọng (1999:810-1093) and my ethnographic research of Tai Dam funeral rites practiced by ruling class families in Sơn La Town in 2004 and 2005. It is believed to be practiced for the elderly, chiefs or very important persons. Funeral of commoners may be less elaborate.

On the following day, the son-in-law—chosen as “the chairman of sons-in-law” (*khuay kok*)—leads the following procedures of the cremation, ash collecting ceremony, and the tomb decoration.<sup>23</sup> Immediately after the chairman of sons-in-law arrives, the deceased's son arranges an offering tray to inform the deceased that the deceased's son-in-law has arrived. However, this tray is more precious than the one presented on the previous day. A pig, rather than chicken, is slaughtered and boiled. The boiled pig's head, feet and intestines are placed on tray to serve the corpse. The rest of the relatives then bring their gifts, particularly pigs or chickens, to offer to the corpse.

The rite of initiating the son-in-law to become *khuay kok* takes place afterward. The central procedure is that the deceased's son would invite or in fact beg his brother-in-law to be in charge of the funeral rite. The son-in-law and his cognate, including his wife who is the deceased's daughter herself, would then wear black attire, while the deceased's son and his relatives will dress in white. By now, in theory, those who relate to the deceased in the funeral are divided into two cognates (*va*): sons and the deceased's cognate (*va hoa don*, white head cognate) and son-in-law and their cognate (*va hoa dam*, black head cognate). The son-in-law chairman then brings the prepared offering tray(s) to serve the corpse. He proceeds to the corpse, sits on his knee, and holds a sword with its blade directing to the corpse. He talks to the corpse to invite him/her to eat the offering.

On that second night, the reciting of a couple of literacy works take place. In case the deceased is the principality chief himself, those who are in charge of preparing the chronology of the passing chief will jot down the events occurring in his reign. Late at night, the son-in-law should begin to read *Kwam To Muang*, whose first part contains the Langchuang story, right in front of the corpse, while the relatives are gathering around. To go through the entire text, if possible, could take two to three hours. In case that the son-in-law does not read the script, a “literate stand-in” (*khuay chau*) can read the texts for the son-in-law to repeat. When the dawn is likely to approach, the deceased's son may read some part of *San Song*, the poetic written chant guiding the deceased souls to the sky, as described earlier.

On the following day, the cremation rite is held. Before moving the corpse to the cremation platform, several important procedures occur at this point.

An offering tray is placed in front of the corpse... Now, the “son-in-law chairman” replaces his black headband with a white headband. [This is explained in the text as

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<sup>23</sup> Despite called the head of son-in-law, in practice this title is a ritual title. The title is not necessarily restricted to the deceased's oldest son-in-law. It can pragmatically be given to any son-in-law or anyone descending in the male-in-law's cognate. It can be the youngest son-in-law or even brother-in-law, for instance.

a sign to contact with the deceased-YM]. He sticks two sheathes to his waist and carries a small Tai style embroidered bag. He proceeds to sit and bow to the corpse three times. The son-in-law then sits down and places his knife by directing its blade to the corpse. His wife then suddenly holds his shirttail, while the son-in-law begins to read/sing the *San Song* chant of guiding the deceased souls to the sky.

(Ngô Đức Thịnh và Cầm Trọng 1999:929)

The knife and the small bag are the son-in-law chairman's uniform that he wears during the funeral. The chairman and his son-in-law colleagues are then assigned to move the corpse to the grave.

The ash is collected and moved to the tomb on the following day. After the ash is already placed at the tomb in the farther away grave, everyone returns to the house in which the ceremony is taking place. Now, another important step is to let the son-in-law slaughter a white water buffalo, allegedly as an offering to the deceased to use for farming on the sky. Along with informing the deceased of the various utensils and animals, among other things, that he/she will receive as offering and be able to take with him/her to the sky, the son-in-law chairman then again reads the chant guiding the deceased to the sky. Both "white head cognate" and "black head cognate" then leave the house to bring the offering to the grave. At the grave, they will decorate the tomb. After this stage, the son-in-law chair, other sons-in-law and the chair's cognate finish their responsibility. The funeral, however, continues.

Days after, the deceased's cognate will occasionally visit the tomb. When ready, the deceased's son may consult an expert of *Pap Mu* (the book of divination) to search for a proper day to hold the rite of inviting the deceased's souls. The purpose of the rite is to invite a portion of the deceased's souls to return to stay with the family at the ancestor shrine on the house. To the Tai Dam, a person has many souls--as many as 30 souls on the front and 50 souls on the back. Given that, the deceased souls are perhaps divided into three parts. Often stays with the living family at the ancestor shrine located at a corner of the house. Some stay at the tomb. And some, particularly the soul of the head, go to the sky to stay at the City of the Dead with the ancestor spirits. The part that stays in the sky, led by *San Song*, whose connection with the Langchuang story was previously demonstrated, is, however, the most important part.

Nevertheless, on the rite inviting the deceased's souls to return home, the ritual experts, *mo* and *mot*, not the sons-in-law and his cognate, are in charge. On this rite, *mo* is responsible for inviting the deceased's souls to the shrine at home. This includes not only the recently dead souls, but also the longer dead ancestors in this ceremony. The *mo* then needs to have in his hand *So Fi Huan* (the ancestor name list) in which he will read the ancestor names to take the offering. Meanwhile, the *mot* deals with the souls of the household family.

She chants to call upon the living person's souls, to return home, since they may be still at the grave or perhaps not yet returned from traveling with the son-in-law to accompany the deceased. For those souls at home, with this rite, the *mot* then also refreshes up the souls from mourning.

This practice of funeral rite is very much along the line of French sociologist Emile Durkheim's ideas of binary opposition separating the sacred/the deceased and the profane/the living. When death takes place, then, proper management of the contact between the deceased and the living is needed. The crisis of an abrupt death needs to be appropriately controlled through the process of funeral rites that gradually separate the deceased and the living. In this respect, Tai Dam funerals may be treated as a "rite de passage" (Gennep 1960) performed through steps of "ritual process" (Turner 1969). The Tai Dam funeral process may be divided into three stages, (1) preparation, (2) departure or transitional period, and (3) reunion. The first stage is in the hands of the deceased's family. The son-in-law is in charge of the departure stage, wherein the deceased travels to the spirit world, and puts away the cremated remain to the tomb. As for the departure stage, the son-in-law plays the role of primary mediator between the deceased and the living. *Kwam To Muang*, including the Langchuang story, is recited in this separation stage because it belongs to the dead world. Finally, when the deceased's family is ready for reunion, which takes place in the last stage, the son-in-law is not in charge. This final reunion stage is limited to the deceased's cognate.

The son-in-law deserves his mediator role in the transitional period thanks to the fact that, symbolically, he himself is ambiguous in many ways. He is part outsider, the foreign to the deceased's cognate, and yet insider, relating to the deceased by way of his marriage to the deceased's daughter. Moreover, within his wife's father's funeral, the son-in-law is himself part human, part spirit. He is consecrated by the rite of begging the son-in-law to play the role of "the son-in-law chairman." After the consecration, he is assigned to wear knives and a small bag. When he "talks" to the deceased, he would hold the knife with the direction of blade heading to the deceased. The way in which the son-in-law dresses and performs resembles the *mot* (sorcerer/witch) whose uniform consists of sword, amulet bag, and a headband, although in a less elaborate decoration than the *mot*. After all, in a Turnerian sense, during the transitional period, the "son-in-law chairman" is "betwixt and between," an anomaly, ambiguity, in-between the dying/decaying and the living/succeeding (Turner 1967).

Two texts involved in the transitional stage are *Kwam To Muang*, which includes story, and *San Song*. Despite the Tai claims that the two texts are meant to be delivered to the deceased person, inevitably it is the living that listen to the texts. As one can see, *San Song* is to inform the living that the deceased will now depart to the other world that he (or she) will leave for good, and that he/she will be at a proper place, the City of Ancestors.

*Kwam To Muang*, on the contrary, is to remind the audiences that the deceased had actually lived his life in the human world, and was not simply an independent individual. In case he is a noble, he descends from the former generation of Tai chiefs, most importantly chief *Lo*, the son of the original heavenly bestowed Tai chief. If the deceased was a commoner, he was a subject of a principality to which he serves as an ethnic Tai, not other ethnic groups. As a commoner, he was then ruled by generations of the noble Tai descending for centuries. In this respect, the recently passed away person, and implicitly so the living, are projections or representations of the long lasting descending Tai ancestors. After one died, he would travel on the same path that his ancestors tread for centuries in order to reach back to his original hometown, Lo Principality, prior to departing for the City of Ancestors in the upper world. By way of the textual performances taking place in the funeral, not only are the deceased and the living separated properly, but the individual, the polity, space and ethnic identity have all been clarified.

Sociologically, it is remarkable that the son-in-law, rather than the son who is succeeding as family head, is required to perform *Kwam To Muang* as well as lead the deceased to depart the world. The significant role of sons-in-law in the funeral confirms the fact that the Tai Dam maintains not only a single patrilineal cognate, but it maintains even multi-lineal family relation. The Tai Dam have a saying “people have three cognates: one's own patrilineal cognate, women giver's patrilineal cognate, and women receiver's patrilineal cognate” (*fu kon mi sam ho: ai nong, lung ta, ying saw*). In the funeral, the son-in-law appears to be *ying saw* (women receiver's patrilineal cognate) to the deceased, while, on the contrary, the deceased is *lung ta* (women giver's patrilineal cognate) to the son-in-law. To the Tai Dam the rule of reciprocity in the funeral is a part of the continuous process of marriage reciprocity. That the son-in-law serving his wife's family in funeral context is indeed a kind of everlasting mandate of *ju khay* (which requires period of matrilocality after the marriage, during which the son-in-law stays with his new wife's family for a period of time to serve his wife's family). In this sense, the funeral rite becomes a rite to re-strengthen multi-lineal family alliance. In other words, despite of the overwhelming mourning caused by the departure of the deceased the marriage alliance becomes re-united.

At another level, this system of family alliance is significant to Tai Dam politics. As marriage relation is a social tie to establish social and political alliance, both the ruling class and commoners of the Tai maintain relationships with both the father's lineage (*ai nong* and *ying saw*) and the mother's lineage (*lung ta*). Among the elites, when a chief dies, the arrival of the chief's sons-in-law, who are most of the time a prospective chief of a neighboring principality, explicitly reveals the confirmation of political alliance and continuity between the two, if not more, principalities. For example, in the early 20th century, at Muang Mua (called Mai Sơn in Vietnamese), where Cầm Bùn Oai was the chief appointed the Chief Commander

of the Tai in northwestern Vietnam by the French colonial government, this alliance was created between Muang Mua and Muang Sang (called Mộc Châu in Vietnamese) through relationship between the chief of Mua—Cầm Bun Oai—and the chief of Sang—Sà Văn Minh. When Cầm Bun Oai died, Sà Văn Minh who is Oai's eldest son-in-law came to *ju khay*, serve as the son-in-law, at Oai's funeral. He had to read or recite *Kwam To Muang* and the Langchuang story as a part in the *Kwam To Muang* to Oai. In so doing, the story was disseminated to reinforce their family ties and political alliance between the two chief. At the same time, the story was told to reproduce shared consciousness of spatial identity connected by their common ancestor, Langchuang, the great chief who forged Tai territory (Yukti 2007: 142-152, 191-204).

In summary, in the midst of the separation, through the ritual process, both the “white head cognate” and the “black head cognate,” regain the sense of unity, the “we-ness.” On the one hand, various stories of the spatial consciousness of the Tai Dam, the sharing of legendary warriors, and the common root in the origin myths told by *Kwam To Muang*, in which Langchuang is included, hold the mourned souls to live by the eternal past. On the other hand, the son-in-law's loyalty more or less helps to support the living to go on. The reading of *Kwam To Muang* in the funeral context circulates the chronology of the principality on two levels, within the principality that the text originated in, and across the boundaries of the original principality along with the son-in-law. As a result, *Kwam To Muang* in general and the Langchuang story in particular are circulated throughout the Tai Dam territory by way of the textual performance in the funeral ceremony. Through funeral rites and the use of Tai Dam chronicles, the Tai Dam's sense of place plays an important role to strengthen the symbolic management of the deceased and the living, socio-political cohesion, and the presentation of the continuity of Tai-ness.

## Conclusion

The Langchuang story—including its text, its intertext, and its context—is a means to construct Tai Dam memory. It is a way to imagine the Tai Dam past through stories of a legendary hero who fought for his land. It is an ethnic group's social memory embodied in a political space. Places, place names, and routes woven into Langchuang story help identify a nationhood of an ethnic group in the pre-modern period of Vietnam. In the similar fashion as Benedict Anderson's notion of “we-ness,” the Langchuang story constructs an imagined (political boundary of a community. However, rather than “print-capitalism,” the pre-modern Tai Dam employed ritual and storytelling to circulate the sense of we-ness.



In this respect, stories, places, and identity are interwoven within and through the Langchuang story. It is demonstrated from my reading of the Langchuang story that places are not a physical space detached from human experiences and consciousness. Humans define space and often identify themselves with places. The Langchuang story is a “place-making” which is “a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here’ ” (Basso 1996:6). Similar to what Keith Basso found in the American Indian’s stories of places, I have shown in the essay that the Langchuang story creates a “place-world—wherein portions of the past are brought into being” (Basso 1996:6). By practicing ritual and performing the Langchuang text, the Tai Dam define their territory ranging from Muang Lo to Muang Thaeng as their “dwelling.” Appropriating Martin Hiedegger’s concept, Basso concludes that “the concept of dwelling assigns importance to the forms of consciousness with which individuals perceive and apprehend geographical space. More precisely, dwelling is said to consist in the multiple ‘lived relationships’ that people maintain with places, for it is solely by virtue of these relationships that space acquires meanings” (Basso 1996:106). To dwell in pre-modern Vietnam’s northwestern area, the Tai Dam maintained their “lived relationships” with their geographical space by performing and telling their stories of the past, one of which is the Langchuang story.

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