

**SECULARIZATION OF SACRED SPACE:
AN ANALYSIS OF DAI FARMERS PLANTING
RUBBER TREES ON HOLY HILLS
IN XISHUANGBANNA, YUNNAN, CHINA**

by

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS
In the
Department of Geography

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Summer 2010

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ABSTRACT

In Xishuangbanna, the religious beliefs of the Dai ethnic minority have shaped the management of 'holy hills', sacred forests believed to be the dwelling place of the spirit of the ancestors. Logging and reclaiming land on 'holy hills' used to be forbidden by customary law. Shifting state land use policies have blurred the boundary between sacred forests and the secular realm. Indeed, during the past four decades the area covered by 'holy hills' has dramatically receded, with some holy hills partly or totally destroyed in order to plant rubber trees. By looking at the changing meaning of property and the allocation of state property rights, my research seeks to explain how some Dai 'holy hills' have been secularized and some others remain sacred.

Keywords: Xishuangbanna; Dai ethnic minority; holy hills; property rights; rubber trees

LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

“Traduttore, traditore” (Translator, traitor)
Italian proverb

As the Italian proverb suggests, some words are better not translated so that their real meaning cannot be distorted or misunderstood.

Most of the people from whom I collected the data necessary to write my thesis were Dai speakers. Dai language is spoken in Xishuangbanna, and belongs to the Tai language family. My interviews were conducted in Mandarin and some of them required the help of a Dai – Chinese translator. My informants and translator sometimes had no choice but to use a Dai term.

In my thesis, there are therefore Chinese and Dai words that I chose not translate in English. These words are places name, peoples’ titles and functions; I explained their meaning and limited their use. I have used the pinyin romanization system to transcribe these words. They are italicised in the text and included in the glossary.

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GLOSSARY

Terms in Chinese only are in italics. One asterisk indicates my romanization of the Dai term. Two asterisks indicate that the word in Dai has an official transliteration in Chinese characters.

Term in Dai or Chinese	Chinese characters	Definition
ban*		'Village' in Dai language. It was the third level of administrative divisions in Sipsongpanna.
Bolang ban**	波朗曼	'Village head' in pre-1950 Sipsongpanna. Their kin, the <i>zhaomeng</i> , granted them village land.
bomo**	波莫	Dai priest who mediate the relation between humans and <i>devata</i> . <i>Bomo ban</i> perform rituals due to the <i>devata ban</i> and <i>bomo meng</i> perform rituals due to the <i>devata meng</i> .
<i>cunweihui</i>	村委会	'Village committee'. Its members are in charge of implementing state policies at the lowest administrative division (the administrative) village in post-1950s Xishuangbanna.
Daimeng**	傣勐	Commoners in pre-190s Sipsongpanna. They owed corvée labour to the <i>zhao pianling</i> , the <i>zhaomeng</i> and the <i>bolang ban</i> .

devata*		General name of the spirits of the ancestors. They are divided in three levels: guardian spirits of the <i>meng</i> (<i>devata meng</i>), guardian spirits of the village (<i>devata ban</i>) and guardian spirits of the household (<i>devata hem</i>).
đong*		Dai traditional concept of holy hills. There are <i>đong ban</i> (village holy hills) and <i>đong meng</i> (meng level holy hills).
fanli	藩篱	'Line of defence'. Area controlled by native officials and subject to indirect imperial rule through the Native Chieftain system
<i>gaitu guiliu</i>	改土归流	"Merging Native Chieftain System with the regular bureaucracy". Policy implemented under Yongzheng of the Qing dynasty (r.1723 – 1735). The <i>gaitu guiliu</i> policy was designed to to abolish the Native Chieftain system and replace it with the existing official bureaucracy in order to extend direct control over previously autonomous areas.
gam ban*		Village level rituals due to the <i>devata ban</i> . They are performed by the <i>bomo ban</i> and protect village territory.
gam meng*		<i>Meng</i> level rituals due to the <i>devata meng</i> . They are performed by the <i>bomo meng</i> and protect <i>meng</i> territory.
Guhenzhao**	滚很召	Slaves attached to the rulers' family in Sipsongpanna. There were different categories to which was assigned a particular type of labour.
hem*		'Household' in Dai language.

Hunhuan*		Armed men in charge of enforcing law and implementing policies decided by the <i>zhaomeng</i> .
Hunxiet*		They were secretaries who worked closely with the <i>paya</i> . Their function was to keep records and write messages to the elite of nearby <i>meng</i> .
<i>lanye sanding</i>	林业三定	Three Fixes of Forestry policy. It was implemented between 1982 and 1984, and had an important impact on Dai holy hills.
meng**	勐	Second level of administrative divisions in Sipsongpanna. <i>Meng</i> land was granted to the <i>zhaomeng</i> who managed land and labour on behalf of his kin, the <i>zhao pianling</i> .
<i>mu</i>	亩	Measure unit equal to 0.667 hectares.
na**	纳	'Field' in Dai language. In pre-modern Xishuangbanna, <i>na</i> was also a measure unit equals to a quarter of <i>mu</i> .
<i>neidi</i>	内地	Under the Native Chieftain System, <i>neidi</i> was the zone under direct imperial rule.
panna**	版纳	First level of administrative division in Sipsongpanna. There were twelve panna, each of them divided into <i>meng</i> and villages (<i>ban</i>).
<i>paya</i> **	帕雅	High-ranking members of the <i>meng</i> level aristocracy. They were the <i>zhaomeng</i> 's first assistants and helped managing land and labour.

<i>shè</i>	社	In pre-modern Chinese language, <i>shè</i> refers to 1) a territorial unit 2) the god that dwell on this territorial unit 3) the altar on which sacrifices to the god of the territorial unit are performed. To some extent, the pre-modern Chinese concep of <i>shè</i> is similar to the Dai concept of <i>ḍong</i> .
<i>sheng</i>	省	Province. One of the four types of first level administrative divisions of the People's Republic of China.
<i>tebie xingzhengqu</i>	特别行政区	Special Administrative Region (SAR). One of the four types of first level administrative divisions of the People's Republic of China.
<i>xian</i>	县	County. Third level administrative divisions.
<i>zanhap</i> *		Sung verbal sparring that constituted a way to transmit knowledge during the pre-1950 period. Today, <i>zanhap</i> has virtually disappeared.
<i>zhao</i> **	召	General name for rulers in Sipsongpanna.
<i>zhaomeng</i> **	召勳	Ruler of the <i>meng</i> in Sipsongpanna. Kin of the <i>zhao pianling</i> .
<i>zhaopianling</i> **	召片领	Nominal king of Sipsongpanna who ruled from the political centre of Jinghong. The last <i>zhao pianling</i> abdicated his throne in 1950.
<i>zheng</i>	镇	Township. Fourth level administrative division in People's Republic of China.

<i>zizhiqu</i>	自治区	Autonomous region. One of the four types of first level administrative divisions in People's Republic of China.
<i>zizhizhou</i>	自治州	Autonomous prefecture. Second level administrative division in People's Republic of China. Autonomous prefectures have an important ethnic population.
<i>zhixiashi</i>	直辖市	Centrally administered municipality. One of the four types of first level administrative divisions in People's Republic of China.

1: INTRODUCTION

China offers a range of sacred places. Some are buildings (mosques, temples, churches, monastic towns, mausoleums and tombs) that symbolize China's ethnic and religious diversity, while others are physical features of the landscape (mountains, trees or forests). Religious beliefs have influenced the construction and/or management of these places. Most of them have become tourist destinations. They draw crowds of Chinese and foreign tourists, as well as believers or in some instances, pilgrims. These once sacred places are now entangled with the profane; they are commodities scattered throughout the country.

In February 2004, while I was studying Chinese language at Chongqing University, I travelled to Xishuangbanna, in southern Yunnan Province, Southwest China. The purpose of this recreation trip was to experience a taste of Southeast Asia and visit temples and pagodas. Most of them had been recently re-built and repainted in bright colors for the upcoming tourist season. During this short trip, I had the opportunity to go off the trails and visit Dai villages. Unexpectedly I found that villagers were quite wealthy thanks to their rubber plantations. Little did I know that five years later a stroke of luck would lead me back to Xishuangbanna for research that links both sacred space and rubber tree plantations.



Map 1 Location of Xishuangbanna and Yunnan Province in China

Situated in the southern part of Yunnan Province, China, and bordering on Laos and Myanmar, the Dai Autonomous prefecture of Xishuangbanna (*Xishuangbanna Daizu Zizhizhou*) is a sub-tropical region known for its ethnic and biological diversity. The region is home to thirteen ethnic minorities (Xu 2006: 255). While it covers only 0.2% of the land area of China, it contains 25% of all plant species of the entire country (Cao 2007: 600).

The Dai are the dominant ethnic minority; their religion is a blend of Buddhism and polytheistic beliefs that associate forests, animals, plants and

forces of nature with the spiritual realm. Dai religious beliefs have influenced the management of holy hills, which have contributed to the conservation of biodiversity in Xishuangbanna (Liu et al. 2002: 707; Pei 1993).

Holy hills are sacred forested hills believed to be the dwelling place of the spirits of ancestors (*devata* in Dai language) by Dai people. Dai holy hills are set aside, but are nonetheless an integral part of the village landscape; local people believe that the *devata* that dwell in these forests protect the territory of an administrative region (*meng*) or of a village. Villagers perform periodic rituals, which consist in the killing of animals to the *devata*, in order to ask for protection against natural disasters. Dai holy hills are not only a consecrated space, but also a forbidden space. According to customary rules one cannot claim land, log trees, pick non-timber products, and in some cases trespass on holy hill ground. Transgression of the rules would bring disease or even death upon the offender. In addition, it would also bring bad luck on the entire territory protected by the *devata* on the holy hill.

The concept of sacred forests is not limited to the Dai minority of Xishuangbanna. Sacred trees or sacred groves can be found throughout history and have virtually no cultural boundaries (Frazer 1959: 70-87; Lawrence 2002: 57-78). In China, similar religious beliefs that influence both the landscape and social behaviour can be found among Tibetan tribes of Northern Yunnan (Guo 2001), Gansu (Luo et al 2009) and Southern Tibet (Miehe et al. 2003). This type of religious classification of forests and groves affects people's actions and socio-spatial organization at the local level; however, at a larger scale, forestland

classification is motivated by administrative, economic criteria (Chandrakanth & Romm 1991: 741). When it comes to forest classification, secular motives influence policy makers who, understandably, do not acknowledge religious classification of forest (Chandrakanth & Romm 1991: 741). Consequently, because the religious beliefs associated with sacred forests are not acknowledged, they become entangled with the profane.

In the early 1950s, the newly established People's Republic of China faced a trade embargo on raw materials. In order to meet the country's demand for rubber, the central leadership in Beijing decided to establish state rubber farms in Southern China. In Yunnan province, an area of two million *mu*¹ was to be planted in rubber (Sturgeon & Menzies 2008: 24). With the economic reforms of the early 1980s, the government implemented new land use and resource management policies that allowed rubber trees to be cultivated as a smallholder crop (Chapman 1991: 31), although state-owned rubber farms continued. While villagers were wary at first, they have realized how lucrative the cash crop is and have since converted large areas of forestland to monoculture rubber. Today, rubber is virtually everywhere. In some cases, villagers have even planted rubber on their holy hills.

Before the 1950s, Xishuangbanna was close to 100% forest cover; however it decreased to 70% in 1976 and to 50% in 2003; forested areas have been replaced mainly by rubber (Li H. et al 2008: 20). Recent studies show that the area occupied by holy hills dramatically receded over the past four decades

¹ One *mu* equals 0.666 hectare

(Chen et al. 2007: 5844; Hu 2003: 131; Xu Z. et al. 1994 : 10). Many of these holy hills were partly disturbed or totally destroyed in order to plant rubber trees (Pei 1993 : 124), therefore contributing to loss of biodiversity (Liu D. et al, Pei. 1993). According to Li Hongmei (2001), this change in forest cover contributes to local climate change, decrease of rainfall and relative air humidity as well as gradual increase of mean air temperature.

The loss of biodiversity in Xishuangbanna over the past two decades has been a growing concern among Chinese scholars. Pei Shengji (1985) was the first to coin the term “Dai holy hills” and to assess their environmental value; certainly the remaining holy hills are reservoirs of biodiversity. For Chinese scholars, Dai people have traditionally managed holy hills with the conscious intention to conserve vegetation and its diversity. Supposedly, over the centuries, they have accumulated a traditional ecological knowledge, which helps them make rational and sustainable use of the forest (Cui & Chen 2002; Liu D. et al 2002; Liu H. 2001). It seems that holy hills are the embodiment of Dai eco-consciousness. During the fieldwork I conducted between May and July 2009 Dai informants, however, have challenged this view. Undoubtedly, religious beliefs associated with Dai holy hills have played a crucial role in biodiversity conservation. Today, remnants of holy hills constitute ‘green islands’ and ‘stepping stones’ in the development of biodiversity corridors (Pei 1993). Biodiversity conservation, however, is just a by-product; the main purpose and incentive for managing Dai holy hills was and still is religious.

In my research, holy hills are not the result of eco-consciousness, but a social practice that used to embody the politico-religious power of the Dai feudal society. I argue that the primary purposes of holy hills were to uphold and legitimate a socio-spatial organization of territory and to structure people's behaviour and labour. My research therefore contributes to providing a new point of view on pre-1950 Xishuangbanna's governance. In the 1950s, the Communist leadership of the People's Republic of China replaced the Dai feudal power; tremendous change ensued. My research provides an assessment of change that occurred during the past century with a special focus on the past few decades. I look at the changing meaning of property, as well as shifting policies for land use, and I explain how these two factors have contributed to the transformation of Dai holy hills and the practices associated with them. The Dai holy hills are still there. I sought to discover why they persist.

My research questions and objectives as well as the results of my data collection all stem from one simple question: how did Dai holy hills become entangled with the profane? This question struck me in October 2008 after I read Pei Shengji's articles on holy hills (1985, 1993). In order to address this primary question, which put in motion my research project, I also had to address the following three questions: what were the customary practices and property institutions that structured the management of Dai holy hills before the 1950s? After the 1950s, how did state policies for property rights and land use, including the introduction of rubber, transform Dai practices and institutions for holy hills, and how did these changes play out differently in different villages? Finally, how

is the loss or protection of holy hills viewed by Dai villagers, differing by age, gender, and location?

This thesis provides answers to these questions. In chapter 2, I describe how I gathered information and data during my fieldwork. I also explain the contingencies of doing fieldwork in remote ethnic areas of China.

In chapter 3, I explain the theoretical framework I use to inform the analysis of the data I collected. I use three main theoretical concepts: territory, property and sacred space.

In the section on territory, I first draw on Delaney (2005), Smith (1992) and Brenner (2001) to discuss the concept of territory. Territory is more than an enclosed space delimited by boundaries; production of meaning and enforcement of power are contingencies inherent to the construction of territory (Delaney 2005). Territory is socially constructed, and so is the concept of scale. The production of hierarchical scales structures socio-spatial organization within the territory (Brenner 2001; Smith 1992); moreover, it provides a strategy for the control of territory. I then draw on Sack (1986) whose theorization of the concept of territoriality reveals the mechanisms of control over territory. Construction of territory, hierarchical scales and territoriality are interconnected and mutually constituted; in addition, they are not fixed and they change over time.

In the section on property, I use Macpherson's (1978) theory. He underlines the fact that property is not a thing, but a political relationship between people. In addition, he explains that the meaning of property changes over time. Macpherson also states that property is embedded in a particular cultural and

historical context. After a general discussion of property I then explore property rights in humans (Feeny 1989) and property rights in land as it is defined by the current Land Management Law (*tudi guanli fa*) of the People's Republic of China. These concepts set the background of my discussion on property. I then turn to a more specific cultural context, which is sacred space.

In this last section of my theoretical background, I draw on Freud (1913), Van Der Leeuw (1963) and Chidester & Linenthal (1995) in order to give a definition of sacred space. From this definition, it is clear that sacred space is inextricably linked with the concept of property. I then use Durkheim's (1969) conceptualization of property to discuss property in sacred space. I use Chavannes (1910), and Maspero (1929) who explain the link between property in sacred space, divisions of territory, and construction of hierarchical scales to assert control over land and people in ancient China and in pre-modern Dai societies of Xishuangbanna and South East Asia.

For the sake of clarity, I chose to separate the theory in chapter three from historical background in chapter four. These two chapters are not independent, but interrelated. I examine the history of Xishuangbanna from the vantage point of the concepts explained in chapter three. Therefore, in chapter 4, I give first a historical overview of pre-modern Xishuangbanna between the thirteenth century and the Chinese Revolution of 1949. This historical background not only anchors my research in time, but also provides a starting point from which I assess recent changes. In a first section, I give a brief overview of Chinese control over Xishuangbanna. In two subsequent sections, I look at the political system,

property rights in humans and land, as well as how holy hills functioned and fit in Dai society of pre-modern Xishuangbanna. I then discuss the term 'holy hill' and its counterparts in Dai and Chinese language in contemporary Chinese scholarly literature.

My research looks at the loss and the conservation of sacred space. The changing meaning of property and the concept of territorialisation play an important role in the transformation of Xishuangbanna's sacred space. Equally important is the changing meaning of religion and the policies implemented towards religion within the Chinese context. Therefore, in my last section, I explain how the introduction of the word and concept of 'religion' in late nineteenth century China put in motion a process of secularization that affected Xishuangbanna after the 1950s. Indeed, after the 1950s the notion of religion becomes an integral part of class struggle. This period is marked by a shift towards militant atheism that culminated with the Cultural Revolution. The destruction of sacred space that occurred nationwide, although crucial, was but a step in the history of religion in China. The last step was initiated during the period of economic reforms of the early 1980s. Chinese officials criticized the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and admitted that religion could not be analysed separately from its political, economic, social, and historical context. They also called for a rational management of religious affairs and legislated on sacred space.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the data I collected during my fieldwork in two different areas of Xishuangbanna. This chapter is divided into four main parts.

The first part is about the pre-1950 period, the second about the evolution from 1950 to 1980, the third about the evolution between 1980 and present day, and the last explores villagers' points of view about changes related to holy hills.

In the first part, I start by introducing my research sites and their respective holy hills. I situate each of them geographically, and give a historical background. This historical background focuses on each study site and its surrounding area, as well as on the control over land and people. I also explain the narratives I collected about how each holy hill came to be, as well as the rituals that consecrated them. Before moving on to the second part, I clarify the issue of property rights and holy hills.

Shifting property rights in relation to the sacred is an overarching theme throughout my paper. In the second part, I focus on the 1950 to 1980 period, which is the Maoist period. During my fieldwork I identified the institutional and administrative changes that took place in the early 1950s that allowed for both loss and conservation of holy hills. Indeed, change in the institutions allowed for central leadership policies and campaigns to be implemented at the local level. I identify these policies and campaigns and explain their impact on my research sites.

The third part focuses on the post-Maoist period also known as the period of economic reforms. For this period as well, a series of policies has allowed for loss or conservation of holy hills. An important component of the landscape change was the introduction of rubber trees as a smallholder crop. I therefore explain how the implementation of economic reforms, new land use policies, and

rubber cultivation played out in my research sites. While during the Maoist period religious activity and rituals that consecrated the holy hills ceased, the post-Mao period allowed for a renewal of religious activity. I therefore explain how the rituals have been re-worked in each study site.

The last section of chapter 5 is devoted to the point of view of villagers and their opinions on changing landscapes. I look at the importance that Dai holy hills have for Dai people of different age and gender. Their attitudes towards loss and conservation of their sacred forests allow me to assess the extent to which we can talk of a secularized sacred space.



Map 2 Location of Xishuangbanna in Yunnan Province

2: METHODOLOGY

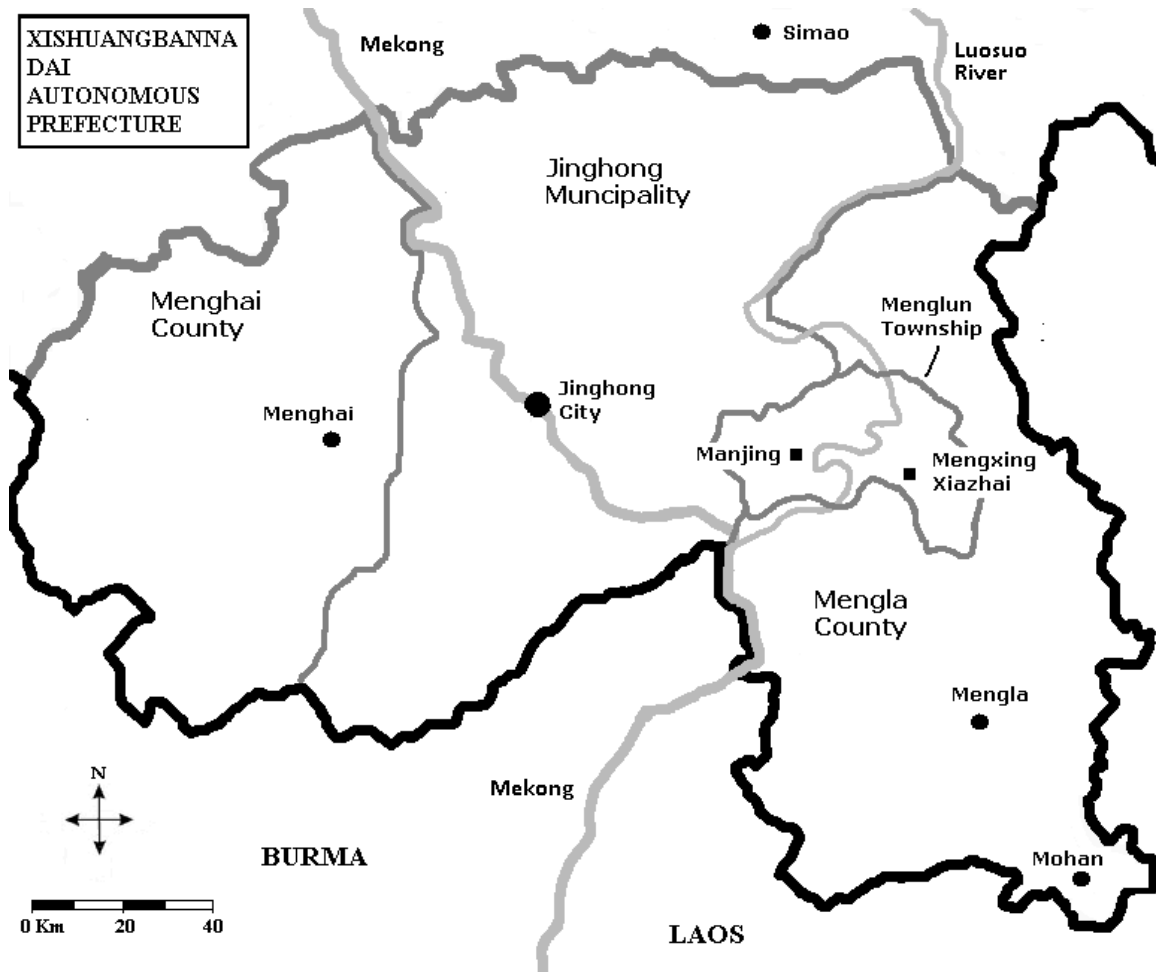
I conducted my fieldwork between early May and end of July 2009 in two Dai ethnic minority villages of Menglun Township, Mengla County, in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, in Southern Yunnan province, China. I was granted ethics approval from the Department of Research Ethics of Simon Fraser University on April 30th 2009, when I was travelling towards my research sites.

On my way to Xishuangbanna, I knew that my project was feasible and I was confident I had the capacity to gather the information I needed during my fieldwork. In my case, I had previous fieldwork experiences in remote ethnic areas of China. Between March and August 2007, I volunteered for a Hong Kong-based non-profit organization. During this period, I conducted interviews among tibetanized Lisu and Yi minorities of Northern Yunnan, as well as among one Li minority tribe on central Hainan Island. Mandarin is the *lingua franca* of China. However, for my informants and me, Mandarin is a foreign language, a communication device that my participants and I mastered to different degrees. When the interviewee and the interviewer communicate in a foreign language, both concur, to some extent, to try to understand one another. A reciprocal adjustment to one another's mode of expression (whether is it vocabulary or tonal accentuation in Mandarin) is then necessary. This linguistic adjustment is but one component of fieldwork in remote ethnic areas of China. When doing

fieldwork, as a researcher, I also have to adjust physically and socially to my surroundings. Concerning Xishuangbanna, physical adjustment means adjustment to the warm and humid climate of lowlands; social adjustment refers to the negotiation of social relations with informants. In Xishuangbanna, and in everywhere else in rural China, as a male guest I am expected to take part in meals, drink liquor and smoke as a way to demonstrate social integration to the milieu; this helps blur the sense of otherness villagers have of me and usually eases communication.

Before I reached my research sites, I stopped in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan province, six hundred kilometres north of my research sites. I met with Xu Jianchu, director of the World Agroforestry Centre, an international NGO based at the Kunming Institute of Botany (KIB). Xu Jianchu helped me contact Xu Youkai, a researcher at the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden (XTBG), to whom I explained my research project. Upon my arrival at the XTBG, Xu Youkai introduced me to Yi Zhuangfang, a Ph.D. candidate who was keen on helping me with my project. During the first week, she helped me find Dai holy hills and provided translation from Dai to Mandarin. More than a translator, she was also a valuable informant for she was both an insider and an outsider to her surroundings. Yi Zhuangfang was born and raised in a Dai village close to the XTBG; she knew people to whom I could talk and she provided her own insider knowledge and experience concerning sacred landscapes and changes the area went through. The only female Ph.D. candidate in the whole prefecture of Xishuangbanna, she graduated from a university outside Yunnan province.

Therefore, she could also provide a critical point of view informed by her education and her experience outside Yunnan.



Map 3 Location of study sites in Menglun Township, Mengla County, Xishuangbanna

My main objectives were to understand which state policies, including the introduction of rubber as a smallholder crop, have allowed for the transformation of Dai holy hills, and how this transformation has had an impact on Dai customary practices and religious beliefs. In order to understand the processes

that brought change in the region, I focused on three main periods: the pre-1950 period, the Mao era (1950-1980), and the contemporary period (from the 1980s onward). Ideally, for my research, I needed to find three different holy hills: one that was untouched, one that was partially destroyed; and a third one which was entirely destroyed.

After a week of exploration and preliminary interviews in different villages in Menglun Township and nearby townships, I chose two research sites: Manjing village and Mengxing Xiazhai village. I chose Manjing village because it used to be the home of the pre-1950 local ruler and its holy hill was partially destroyed. In Mengxing Xiazhai, I found two holy hills: one that was completely destroyed in the late 1960s and re-created in the mid-1980s, and one that was almost untouched. The two villages are only thirty kilometres apart and there are frequent buses between the two sites, making it convenient to travel between them. During the first month and half, I conducted fieldwork in the Manjing area. During that period, I also regularly visited Mengxing Xiazhai where I tried to learn Dai script and pronunciation of Dai language from a retired teacher. These informal lessons in Dai language allowed me to pronounce key words and holy hills' names in the Dai language, which eased the conversation with informants. Once my data collection in Manjing was finished, I moved to Mengxing Xiazhai. In both cases, my research area was not limited to the villages themselves. In the Manjing area, I conducted interviews in six other locales including the Township Bureau of Forestry as well as the local village committee. In the Mengxing Xiazhai area, I conducted interviews in four other locales, including the Mengxing

state rubber farm and the local village committee. In addition, after several bus trips between my two research sites, I became acquainted with Han-Chinese drivers who were a valuable source of information. These regular bus trips between the two villages also gave me the opportunity to interact with passengers, some of whom became informants.

Thanks to my translator, Yi Zhuangfang, I managed to talk with the right people very quickly. Participants as well as my translator re-directed me to people in surrounding villages for additional information. I covered a range of themes in each time period. I followed these themes during my semi-structured interviews and group interviews. In addition, interviews for each period were primarily targeted at the relevant age group. For the pre-1950 period, I interviewed older people (60 years old and older). My questions aimed at defining the customary practices and beliefs associated with the Dai holy hills as well as land use, mode of governance, and control over land and labour. This first period gave me the starting point for my assessment of change. For the 1950 to 1980 period, I interviewed middle-aged informants (between 35 and 60 years old). The goals of my interviews were to discover how the Communist leadership reconfigured the socio-spatial organization, which state policies have allowed for transformation and how they had transformed holy hills. I was searching for two types of change: physical transformation as well as transformation in Dai people's beliefs and customary practices. For the contemporary period (1980 until now), I talked to participants of all age groups. The purposes of my interviews were to discover how the economic reforms and

state-allocated property rights coupled with the introduction of rubber as a smallholder crop affected Dai holy hills and the customary practices associated with them. The thread lines to my interviews were the Dai holy hills and the guardian spirits (or *devata*) that dwell on them. I also wanted to assess the perception villagers from different genders and age groups had of their holy hills and their transformation.

I adopted an ethnographic, multi-method approach, which contributed to my understanding of the Dai holy hills and their transformation. In addition to multi-sited semi-structured interviews and group interviews with informants from different ages and genders, I also used participatory mapping and timelines as part of my methodology. Focusing on the holy hills, participatory mapping allowed me to understand how changes occurred in space while the timelines helped me to track down the state policies and political campaigns that triggered changes. The maps were useful for me to understand land use and shifting property rights on village territory. I also used the maps during interviews in order to get participants' viewpoints on changing land use. In addition, I also walked through the landscape with informants or alone.

I faced several challenges. I needed to find senior informants (sixty years old and above) who were knowledgeable about the pre-1950 period, and who could give me accounts of the customary practices associated with the holy hills. A seventy-year old man claimed he was too young and re-directed me to older informants; they had very limited to no knowledge of Mandarin. Therefore, I needed to organize interviews according to my translator's availability. My

translator was eager to provide Dai – Mandarin/ Mandarin – Dai translation, but she was also busy doing her own research. Consequently I also looked for informants who could speak Mandarin, and alternated interviews between Dai and Mandarin speakers. During semi-structured interviews with my translator, there were long conversations in Dai language; after the formal interview, I spent time with my translator in order to make sure I got all the details. In China, flexibility is the key and patience the mother of virtues. More than once a one-to-one interview became a group interview and vice-versa; people came in, joined the conversation for a while, talked in Dai with the participants, drank a cup of tea and left. In some cases, I was able to interview three generations in a couple of hours and meet new informants; alternatively, my translator and I were sometimes tracking one particular informant, knocking on every door in different villages.

In order to get a good understanding of Dai holy hills, I needed specific information about the spirits that dwell on them. The problem is that most people are not trained to give a detailed explanation on specific aspects of their religious beliefs. For the same reason that Roman Catholic believers are unable to explain the nature of the holy spirit or the meaning of transubstantiation, my Dai informants had a hard time giving me an accurate and comprehensive explanation of what guardian spirits (*devata*) are and the nature of their power. Similarly, villagers' conceptualization of the word 'collective' (*jiti*) gave me a hard time. All village land is collective (*jiti*), some parts are managed by the village committee, some are managed by production teams while others are contracted

out to households. The undifferentiated use of the word was confusing at the beginning, but I was able to make sense of the word.

During my fieldwork, I adopted an ethnographic approach to transformations in the landscape and the impact these transformations have had on people's religious belief and the concomitant dynamic between the two. Participant observation and involvement with village life was also an important part of my research.

In Manjing, village elders had bought a new statue of Buddha for the temple's shrine. It took ten days for the elders and villagers to make offerings, which included a throne of bamboo on which the Buddha was carried up to the temple, and money trees that were carried to the temple on the last day of a three-day celebration. During these ten days, the sounds of machetes, hammers, and drums accompanied my interviews. In the village of Mengxing Xiazhai, the suicide of a villager had some impact on my fieldwork. Most of the villagers observed a period of three days' mourning during which they did not work. I did not conduct any formal interviews, but did collect information. Following the period of mourning, most of my informants were busier than usual to make up for the loss of time.

The data collected during my fieldwork is informed by theory and library research. In the following two chapters, I explain the theoretical issues relevant to my research project and set the historical background.

3: THEORY

In this thesis, I examine changes in strategy for control over territory, people, land and resources at the intersection of sacred and secular space. I also look at how these changes have affected the landscape and people's behaviour in two periods of Xishuangbanna's history: the pre-1950 and the post-1950 periods. The main goal of this theoretical chapter is to explain the role and contribution of sacred space, in this case the Dai holy hills, in the production of the socio-spatial organization of territory.

I cover three main themes. First, I examine the concept of territory and the strategy to assert and exert control over it; I then look at the concept of property and follow with a discussion on property rights in humans and in land. Finally, I look at a special classification of territory: sacred space. In this last section, I discuss property in sacred space and explain how sacred space concurs with the construction of socio-spatial organization of territory in pre-modern China and Xishuangbanna.

3.1 Territory and territoriality

In this section, I will delineate the first part of the theoretical background used in this thesis. I start by looking at two concepts: territory, and territoriality.

I first draw on Delaney (2005) who points toward a definition of territory. From this definition, two things are apparent. First, territory is shaped by society,

second, society also shapes geographical scales. Territory and scale are both social constructs, and they are in direct relation to each other. There is a dynamic between production of scale and production of territory, for the production of scale leads to a deployment of an apparatus that acts as an instrument of control over the territory.

This discussion of the production of scale provides a transition to the concept of territoriality developed by Sack (1986) which he defines as “a powerful geographic strategy to control people and things by controlling an area” (1986: 5).

3.1.1 Territory: a socially constructed space

In his chapter *Entering the Territory of Territory* (2005: 1-33), Delaney goes beyond the abstract conceptual meaning of territory and shows that territories are more than “static and inert things” (2005: 12). He explains that the concept of “[t]erritory is anything but simple and clear” (2005: 9). He does not provide a straightforward and comprehensive definition of what a territory is. He states that a territory is not just an enclosed space; for an enclosed space to be a territory it must, first, signify; and second, the meaning it carries or conveys has to refer to or implicate social power (2005: 17). Because meaning and power and the contingencies of their relationships are two fundamental aspects of human social being (2005: 16), territories are human constructs that are “produced under specific historical and social conditions” (2005: 16).

Territory embodies the features of the society that shape it and it is a spatial practice in which the entire complexity of human social being is grounded. Territory is therefore the reflection of social identity. Precisely because it is socially constructed, territory *means* (2005: 14-15). This meaning is expressed inside, as well as outside the territory itself and is backed up by social power (2005: 15). Delaney therefore argues that territories are more than just human artifacts, they are communication devices, as well as political achievements (2005: 16-17). There is a dynamic between the shaping of territory, its meaning, and the concomitant construction of a social identity; space and society are therefore mutually constituted.

Territory is usually conceptualized as a “two-dimensional bounded space or mosaic of ... spaces” (2005:31); however for Delaney and Smith (1992) such a conceptualisation of space “fails to grasp the multidimensional, socially woven fabric of space” (Smith 1992: 67). Indeed Delaney notes that “every physical location ... is positioned within a dense matrix of *multiple, overlapping* territories” (2005: 31). Similarly, Smith explains that “produced space is ... intensely hierarchical” (Smith 1992: 67).

Geographical scales are generated by a web of power relations within which each agent and group has its own conception of power and space (Marston 2000: 221). Consequently, there is a multiplicity of scales, and because their production generates socio-political contestation, they are not fixed; their structure as well as their articulation changes periodically (Delaney & Leitner 1997: 93). The production of space thus entails the production of geographic

scale; space and scale are therefore mutually constituted and they are both social constructs. Interactions among different groups within and among territories allow for the construction of geographical scales, which are “implicated in the constitution of social, economic and political processes” (Delaney & Leitner 1997: 93).

Empirical research on and in localities can help reveal how scales are produced and articulated at different times; it also explains the mechanism by which meaning is produced and interpreted simultaneously at different scales, and how these overlapping meanings generate conflicts (see Sturgeon 2004).

For Brenner (2001: 599), the fact that “scales are socially constructed and thus historically changeable through socio-political contestation ... can now be considered an established truism within contemporary human geography”. He explains (2001: 599) that Neil Smith coined the phrase ‘politics of scale’ in the early 1990s, and geographers have developed the concept. Brenner distinguishes two meanings of this ‘politics of scale’.

The first meaning of ‘politics of scale’ refers to the “production, reconfiguration or contestation of some aspect of sociospatial organization *within* a relatively bounded geographical arena – usually labelled the local, the urban, the regional, the national and so forth” (Brenner 2001: 599). Here, the ‘politics of scale’ refers to the differentiation processes of space into self-enclosed geographical units.

The second meaning refers to “the production, reconfiguration or contestation of particular differentiations, orderings and hierarchies *among*

geographical scales” (Brenner 2001: 600). Therefore, each of the self-enclosed geographical units of different sizes are embedded and positioned in relation to each other into a “hierarchically configured geographical scaffolding” (Brenner 2001: 600).

The region where I conducted my fieldwork, the Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Xishuangbanna in Southwest China, can illustrate the scalar dimension of territory as well as the changeability of scales through history. Until the mid-twentieth century, Xishuangbanna was under indirect Chinese imperial rule (Giersch 2006; Herman 2006; Sturgeon 2005). Chung (2010: 3) explains that most Chinese dynasties adopted a three-level administration system in which the “county [*xian*] had been the lowest level of local administration that the powers of the imperial court were able to reach effectively”. In parallel to the Chinese hierarchical organisation of territory, the Dai ethnic group aristocracy had constructed a socio-spatial organization of territory that reached effectively into villages, far lower than the Chinese emperors did.

After the 1950s, Xishuangbanna was anchored in the People’s Republic of China. The socio-spatial hierarchical organisation of Xishuangbanna constructed by the Dai aristocracy was replaced by a new one; however the old one did not completely cease to exist. Since then, the Chinese Communist Party has reconfigured the hierarchy of local administration several times and transformed it into a complex multilayered system. The central government expanded its control below the county level (Chung 2010: 5), into townships and administrative villages; which constitute the lowest levels of China’s local administrative system.

The introduction of a social dimension allows us to see territory as more than just an abstract concept even though it can also be understood in this way. By putting back the “social, historical, cultural, political and conceptual phenomena” (Delaney 2005:33) into the meaning of the word ‘territory’ we can therefore see that “[t]erritoriality ... is much more than a strategy for control of space. It is better understood as implicating and being implicated in ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world – ways of world-making informed by beliefs, desires, and culturally and historically contingent ways of knowing. It is a much metaphysical phenomenon as a material one” (Delaney 2005: 12). In parallel, the concept of scale allows us to understand the articulation of social relationships (Smith 1992: 74). At each level of the geographic scale, different groups produce different meanings of territory; thus, there are overlapping conceptualizations of territory. Geographic scale determines how these differentiated meanings generate tensions among these groups, and how these tensions unfold.

Territory is also a tool that allows state officials to project a political vision spatially. I now turn to Sack to examine how territory can be used as an instrument by which a political vision can be materialized by deploying a strategy for the control of space: territoriality.

3.1.2 Deploying the territory: territoriality and territorialization

Sack (1986: 19) defines territoriality as “the attempt by an individual or a group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area”. Like territory and scale,

territoriality is socially constructed and provides insight into how society and space are interconnected. In addition, territoriality is the spatial expression of social power (Sack 1986: 5) and allows us to understand the relationship among different levels of power and the evolution of this relationship in time; territoriality is the product of a particular socio-historic context and is therefore not fixed in time.

The theory of territoriality elaborated by Sack “is both empirical and logical” (Sack 1986: 28) and is presented in two parts. In his *Theory* (1986: 28-51), Sack identifies ten ‘tendencies’ (1986: 32-34) which interact with each other in fourteen ‘primary combinations’ (1986: 36-40). The ‘tendencies’ described by Sack are not independent; some are self-evident and serve a mere definitional purpose; some are more innovative and abstract. Because “[n]ot all of them need be used in any particular territorial instance in history” (1986: 34) I will therefore look only at the ones that are relevant to my research. First, I explore the tendencies; I will then look at how they can be combined. The term for each tendency and combination is in bold and italicized.

In the first part of his theory, Sack identified ten ‘tendencies’ of territoriality. For the purpose of my thesis I will only use seven of them. On a definitional level, territoriality entails a form of ***classification*** by location in space. It involves a clear ***communication*** of boundaries which provides a strategy for ***enforcing control*** over people and resources in space and time. These first three tendencies are derived from the definition of territoriality; the following

tendencies, while not directly derived from the definition, are nonetheless logically interconnected with it (Sack 1986: 28).

Classification, communication and control enforcement therefore constitute a means for **reifying power** within the territory. Territoriality thus makes power explicit and real by making it visible. Reification of power is sometimes disguised through **displacement**. By assigning legal and conventional behaviour to territories, territoriality can therefore be used to displace attention from the relationship between the controller and the controlled (Sack 1986: 33).

Territoriality makes the territory act as a **container** or **mold** for spatial properties or events. Here, territory is an object to which properties and attributes are assigned. This contributes to a view of territory as a **conceptually empty space**; indeed, when the things that are to be contained are not present, territory is conceptually empty and can be filled. Consequently, territoriality “conceptually separates places from things and then recombines them as an assignment of things to places and places to things” (1986: 34).

Concluding on these tendencies Sack explains that they are not independent. They provide a framework for the analysis of how territoriality occurs. Territoriality occurs in a specific socio-historic context and each of these contexts is bound to a specific socio-spatial organization. This explains variations of degrees in territorialisation through space and history.

In the second part of his theory, Sack examined “the logical interrelations among the tendencies ... and their general import within social hierarchies” (Sack

1986: 34-35). The theory on the 'politics of scale' (Smith 1992) had not been developed at the time Sack wrote his *Human Territoriality*. It is however evident that production of territoriality is connected with production of scale, for "[m]ost of human behaviour occurs with hierarchies of territorial organizations" (Sack 1986:34). It is also evident that the three concepts of territory, scale and territoriality are interconnected and mutually constructed. In this second part, I refer to the aforementioned tendencies in italic, while the terms corresponding to the combinations in Sack are in italicized bold font.

The combination of *classification*, *communication*, *enforcement*, and *reification* can be "important components of complex and rigid **hierarchies** ... [which] allow hierarchical circumscription of knowledge and responsibility ... and strict channels of communications, all of which are essential components of **bureaucracy**" (1986: 36). Complex hierarchies coupled with *enforcement* and the *molding* function of territory allows for the distribution of knowledge and responsibility from the highest to the lowest territorial levels. This entails a planning function; the authority at the highest level lays claims to the widest **scope of knowledge and responsibility** and develops policies, which are implemented at the lower levels. The scope of knowledge and responsibility decreases at each level of the hierarchy.

In higher echelons of the hierarchy, territories tend to be seen on an abstract level (i.e. void of their social, cultural and historical perspective). According to Sack, *classification*, *enforcement* and *molding* are used to define subordinate relations between the different levels of the hierarchy. At this stage,

Sack makes a distinction between the ***social definition of territory*** found among pre-modern societies and ***territorial definition of social relations*** found in modern societies. In the pre-modern societies, membership of a community enables one to belong to a particular territory, whereas in modern societies, “living within a territory ... enables one to be a member of the community” (Sack 1986:15). The difference between the two is only a matter of degree (Sack 1986: 36). Here I argue that the hierarchical state uses territoriality to organize and define relations between territorial levels. The example of China shows that the central leadership has classified the first layer of administrative divisions into four different types of political entities; this classification defines the relation each of these political entities has with the central government. There are centrally administered municipalities (*zhixiashi*), ethnic autonomous regions (*zizhiqu*), and provinces (*sheng*); and the last category of special administrative regions (*tebie xingzheng qu*) was created after the retrocession of Hong Kong and Macau. Through this classification the central leadership defines the relations and the degree of control it has over and interactions it has with the four different types of administrative entities (see Donaldson 2010: 14-39; Lai 2010: 62-85; Leng 2010: 39-61; Yep 2010: 86-110).

Chung (2010: 3) explains that, since the 1950s, the complex development of China’s local administration enabled the Chinese Communist Party to expand and gain effective control over rural areas. Chinese central rulers thus increased “the number of supervisors per supervisees” (Sack 1986:37). Through this complexification of the organizational structure of the Chinese territory, the

central leadership successfully enlarged its *span of control* which is “[a]n important quantitative index of the degree of supervisory efficiency” (Sack 1986: 37). After the 1950s, state policies decided in Beijing were rapidly implemented throughout the country including rural and remote areas; in addition, labour and grain production were carefully monitored. However, misinformation from supervisors at the lowest level can skew the scope of knowledge and responsibility of supervisors at the highest level (see Friedman et al 1991: 231-233).

Sack argues that the combination of reification and displacement can lead to what he calls “a *magical* mystical perspective” (1986: 38). Indeed, the reification of power is disguised; by means of displacement, territoriality makes “the visible territorial manifestations as the sources of power”, which “often occurs within religious uses of space” (Sack 1986: 38). The Dai holy hills of pre-1950 Xishuangbanna were an example of displacement. Religious beliefs and rituals associated with the holy hills displaced attention from the Dai elite’s political power to the misfortunes that *devata* can cause; the latter therefore became the source of power and the principle that structured Sipsongpanna socio-spatial organization. Today, they still are an example of displacement; however, in the 1950s, the Chinese leadership reconfigured the socio-spatial organization of Xishuangbanna and eliminated the Dai aristocracy, which had been the source of political and religious power until then. Since the 1950s, as my thesis shows, Dai holy hills have evolved. Today, they still structure conventional local behaviour (e.g. it is forbidden to log trees on holy hill ground)

and cultural practices (e.g. rituals must be performed every year); these cultural practices have recently been re-worked by village elders who re-organized local religious authorities. It seems then, that displacement works even when the primary source of political power (the Dai aristocracy) has ceased to exist.

This thesis focuses on two main periods of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous prefecture, Yunnan Province in Southwest China: the pre-1950 and the post-1950 period. The explanation about how control over land and people was enacted for each period will highlight the fact that territoriality occurs at different scales and that these scales are articulated differently at different times. Indeed, territoriality occurs to varying degrees in different socio-historical contexts and one of its most familiar forms is ownership of land (1986: 5). Ownership of land and sacred space are central themes throughout my paper. I will now turn to the concept of property.

3.2 Property

One of the main objectives of this thesis is to examine property rights at the intersection of sacred and profane. One of the issues I am looking at in this thesis is whether shifting policies for property rights and land use in Xishuangbanna have contributed to the secularization of sacred space. Later in this chapter, I will define the notions of sacred space and secularization; for the moment, I want to highlight the fact that sacred space is not an 'unowned' space; this is why looking at the concept and meaning of property will help me explain the secularization of sacred space. In this section, I draw on Macpherson's conceptualization of property (1978). Because the concept of property is

embedded in a particular cultural and historical framework (1978: 3) I will then look at how the concept of property rights in humans and in land have evolved in China. Finally, in a subsequent section I will look at the link between property rights and sacred space, or in other words, how the sacred is owned.

There are three main themes in Macpherson's theoretical discussion. First, he describes changes in the meaning of property; second, he emphasizes the fact that property is a right, not a thing; and finally, he highlights that property is usually understood as private property and explains the differences between state, common and private property.

A crucial feature of the concept of property is that its meaning changes over time. Property is both a concept and a man-made institution. The institution of property serves a purpose, usually the purpose of the dominant class and elite; hence differently positioned people understand it differently. "The changes are related to changes in the purposes which society or the dominant classes in society expect the institution of property to serve" (1978: 1). It will become clear in my discussion of Xishuangbanna's historical background and in my research findings that the meaning and purposes of property shifted several times over the past century.

Macpherson explains that property is a right and not a thing. Property is "a right in the sense of an enforceable claim to some use or benefit of something... property is a claim that will be enforced by society or the state, by custom or convention or law" (1978: 3). This implies that "property is a *political* relation between persons ... [f]or any given system of property is a system of rights of

each person in relation to other persons” (1978: 4). Property theorists distinguish two types of property arrangements: *de jure* and *de facto*. *De jure* refers to “property rules... allocated and protected by the state, while *de facto* property arrangements are enforced by customary sanctions” (Sturgeon 2005: 37).

As Macpherson points out, the fact that property is an enforceable claim *of a person* does not mean that property is *necessarily* private property. Private property is created by the state to guarantee that an individual has the right to exclude others from using or benefiting from something. That property is an enforceable claim *of a person* does not rule out common property, for common property is the right of individuals to use things that have been declared common by the state or the relevant institution. In the case of rural areas, common property can be created and backed up by customary law.

Although common property is a right created by the state it is not the same as state property. According to Macpherson “[s]tate property is to be classed as corporate property, which is exclusive property, and not as common property, which is non-exclusive property. State property is an exclusive right of an artificial person” (1978: 6), and both state and corporate property have the right to exclude.

3.2.1 Property rights in humans

According to a census taken in 1920, there were fewer than 170,000 people living in Xishuangbanna (Liew-Herres 2007: 54). With Xishuangbanna covering an area of 19,700 Km², there was a population density of 8.6 per

kilometre square. Feeny (1989: 285-296) explains that property rights in humans can occur in land-abundant, labour-scarce economies where the control of work force is the key to the power of the ruling elite. Slavery and serfdom are two different types of property rights in humans. Feeny (1989: 286) explains that slavery “is favoured in a market economy ... when important economic activity enjoys reasonable costs of supervision and economies of scales”, whereas “[s]erfdom is favoured when product and factor markets are poorly developed” (Feeny 1989: 286). However, slavery and serfdom can coexist. In this system, slaves and serfs owe *corvée* labour as well as other services (construction of public works, military tasks) to the lord. Feeny (1989) explains that in nineteenth century Siam, there were different categories of slaves and commoners and each category owed different types of *corvée* labour. Slaves could be bought, sold and exchanged. Commoners only owed *corvée* labour as a form of tax, and because of the abundance of land, serfs could also invest their labour in land clearing and cultivation therefore gaining usufruct private-property rights in land (Feeny 1989: 290).

Property rights in humans therefore provided the lord “a means for appropriating the scarcity rents of labour” (Feeny 1989: 287). Since the foundation of Xishuangbanna in the eleventh century and until the early 1950s, the Dai aristocracy had controlled labour; I will analyse property in humans and in land in pre-modern Xishuangbanna in chapters 4 and 5. Feeny (1989) argues that economic, social and political motives can lead to the abolition of property rights in humans. The Chinese Revolution of the mid-twentieth century brought

tremendous changes for Dai people; however, as I explain in the following section, property rights in humans did not disappear during the Mao era.

3.2.2 Property rights during the Mao era (1950-1976)

In rural areas, during the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC) between 1950 and 1954, land seized from landed proprietors and rich peasants was redistributed to poor peasants and agricultural workers, making everyone a small landowner (Gernet 1996: 665). Mao Zedong (1893-1976) wanted to get rid of feudalism and destroy local landlords' power; peasants were to unite in peasants associations (*nonghui*), which were to be the only organ of power (Mao 1979: 19-20). In the context of class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat, property rights in land were allocated to everyone during the early years of the People's Republic of China (Gernet 1996: 666). Therefore, political motives led to the abolition of property rights in humans and their replacement by property rights in land. All land became property of all the people, that is to say, state property. In 1955-1957, central leaders aimed at the rapid industrialization of China (Gernet 1996: 666). In the central view, "grain was needed ... to help finance the industrial development" (Sturgeon 2004: 145). Land was collectivized, peasants were organized into communes and production teams and became labourers for the state (Sturgeon 2004: 145); the collective period (1958-1984) shows a shift from property rights in land to property rights in humans. During this period the "state exploited labour as a limitless free good" (Friedman et al. 1991: 227).

Property rights in humans ceased with the death of Mao in 1976. In the early 1980s, a profound change occurred when central leaders' focus shifted from labour to land (Sturgeon 2004: 146). In the following section, I examine property rights in land in post-Mao China.

3.2.3 Property rights in land in post-Mao China

Property in land is particularly important. In capitalist economies, land is the symbol of status and power, and the vehicle for capital accumulation (Blomley 2007: 2). In this theoretical background on property, I now want to turn to property in land and to its legal framework in post-Mao People's Republic of China (PRC). In this section, I draw upon the revised Land Management Law (*Tudi Guanli Fa*) of 2004 in order to illustrate how property is enacted in today's PRC.

The territory of the PRC is divided into provinces (*sheng*), prefectures (*zhou*), counties (*xian*), townships (*zhen* or *xiang*) and in natural villages (*ziran cun*). The latter is the lowest echelon of administrative divisions. This classification of Chinese territory enables state institutions and departments centralized in Beijing to implement state policies throughout the country. Corresponding institutions and departments exist at each level of the administrative division of the territory (province to township). The Land Management Law emanates from the central government in Beijing and is passed down to the lower levels for implementation. The purpose of the property system established by the current law is to use land in a rational way to promote the sustainable development of the Chinese economy and society.

The Land Management Law is elaborated and backed up throughout China by state institutions centralized into the Ministry of Land and Resources (*guotu ziyuan bu*). Article 5 stipulates that the relevant state departments are responsible for the management and supervision of state land (*fuze quanguo tudi de guali he jiandu gongzuo*). Those state departments fix the basic principles of the law which is implemented by the lower levels of the administrative division; based on the national law, provinces can also formulate laws that are relevant to them. There are therefore state laws that are implemented nationwide and provincial laws that are elaborated in accordance with the state laws; these provincial laws are relevant to a particular province only and implemented within its boundaries. Prefectures (*zhou*) and counties (*xian*) can also elaborate and implement laws that are relevant locally; these laws have to comply with the legal framework fixed by the higher levels.

Article 2 stipulates that China is a socialist republic in which all land is publicly owned. Publicly owned land is held and managed by two kinds of property systems: people's property (*quanmin suoyou*) and collective property (*jiti suoyou*). People's property is State property (*quanmin suoyou, ji guojia suoyou*) and is therefore held and managed by the relevant state institutions (Article 2). Collective property rights are created by the state for individuals; collective property is "created by the guarantee to each individual that he will not be excluded from the use or benefit of something" (Macpherson 1979: 5). In China, collective property is managed and enforced locally at the township (*xiang* or *zhen*) level (Article 10).

Article 9 makes it clear that there is no individual land ownership; however, use rights (*shiyongquan*) to state or collective land are granted to work units (*danwei*) or individual persons (*geren*). Article 11 stipulates that use rights to state land are granted at levels above the county, while use rights to collective land are granted by the relevant institutions at the local level below the county. It is explained in Article 15 that use rights and management rights (*jingyingquan*) are contracted out (*chengbao*) for a period of time that is determined by the contract (*chengbao hetong*).

The application of the Land Management Law relies on and is interrelated with several other laws. Indeed, the contracting out of use rights to grazing land, forest land, or bodies of water, has to be done according to the relevant laws i.e. the Grassland Law, the Forestry Law and the Fishery Law respectively (Article 11). Moreover, the contracting out of state or collective land requires registration with the relevant authorities so that a use right permit (*shiyong zheng*) can be issued. This contributes to increasing the bureaucracy at every level of the hierarchy. This bureaucracy and its functioning is encompassed in the 'Rules and Ordinances on the Implementation of Land Management' (*tudi guanli shishi tiaoli*), and 'Measures for Land Registration' (*tudi dengji banfa*). In addition, the contracting out of rural land (*nongcun tudi*) is structured by the 'Contracting out Rural Land Law' (*nongcun tudi chengbao fa*).

The way property is enacted at the natural village level does not always comply with the *de jure* arrangements and often follows *de facto* property rules. Indeed, "[w]hen state agents implement new property regimes in rural areas, they

are often unaware of customary property rules, but state-allocated property rights by no means eliminate customary practices. Often, local people rework formal property rights, ignoring or choosing selectively among them, or turning them to their advantage” (Sturgeon 2005: 37). In rural areas, informal property rights sometimes contradict Beijing’s central government law.

3.2.4 Property and sacred space, property of sacred space

In this section, I start with the notion of sacred and use Freud (1913), and Van Der Leeuw (1963) to explain the relation between the notions of sacred and property. Then I draw on Chidester & Linenthal (1995) to define the term ‘sacred space’. After that, I turn to Durkheim (1969) whose theorization of property stems from the sacred. I conclude with an explanation of the relation between sacred, political, and hierarchical control in Xishuangbanna.

To call any territory “sacred” or “holy” is an act of classification. Van Der Leeuw (1963: 43-51) links the term sacred with taboo, power, or potency. Here power does not refer to the power one uses to enforce control; it refers to the supernatural force that emanates from supernatural beings. Freud explains (1912: 21) that something ‘taboo’ is ‘uncanny’, ‘dangerous’, ‘forbidden’ and yet at the same time ‘sacred’ and ‘consecrated’. The taboo and the violation of taboo prohibitions are contagious; indeed, Freud (1950: 32) says that “[a]nyone who has violated the taboo becomes taboo himself because he possesses the dangerous quality of tempting others to follow the example.” The violator by becoming taboo himself also becomes ambivalent (he is human, but also the recipient of something superior to himself). Therefore the violation of taboo

represents a danger for the community, because as Freud explains (1950: 32-33), other members of the community might be tempted to emulate the act of the violator which would lead to the dissolution of the community. The violation of the taboo must consequently be punished.

At the same time, declaring that something is taboo is a powerful means to appropriate something and exclude everyone else from using or having access to it. Only people with a high rank in the social hierarchy and who are taboo themselves can declare that some things are taboo. Van Der Leeuw (1963: 50-51) explains that declaring a piece of land *taboo* is a powerful means to enforcing control. Macpherson (1978: 4) defines property as a political relation between persons; however, for Van Der Leeuw, ownership of sacred space is “a ‘mystical’ relation between owner and owned, the possessor is not the *beatus possidens* [the fortunate possessor], but the depositary of a power that is superior to himself.”

Freud’s conceptualization of the word ‘taboo’ is embedded in the cultural framework of the Pacific islands; and not all the aspects of this conceptualization fit into the cultural framework of Xishuangbanna. Durkheim (1969) uses Freud’s notion of taboo but he mainly draws on ancient Romans *sacer*, the concept of sacred, and declares that the difference between the two is only a matter of degree (1969: 173). Both the Polynesian concept of taboo and the Roman conception of sacred constitute powerful means to appropriate and assert property over something (1969: 173).

Chidester & Linenthal identify “sacred space as ritual space, a location for formalized, repeatable symbolic performance” (1995: 9). As they explain, rituals are a particular type of spatial practice performed in a set-apart symbolic space. The performance of rituals consecrates the sacred space and therefore produces it. Rituals are usually associated with the maintenance of purity (1995: 10-11) and the maintenance of purity depends upon control over bodies and people. Religious authorities perform rituals and political power endorses religious authorities. Rituals therefore constitute a means to reify political power and enforce control over people.

Sacred space is also “a significant space, a site, orientation, a set of relations subject to interpretation because it focuses crucial questions about what it means to be a human being in a meaningful world” (Chidester & Linenthal 1995: 12). Sacred space situates human beings in relation to supernatural beings who must be worshipped, and contributes to the constitution of a person’s identity. Sacred space works like the territory as described by Delaney. It is a human construction that shapes and is shaped by collective identity. It carries a meaning that is backed up by social power. Consequently, sacred space is a contested space entangled in politics, “a site of contests over the legitimate ownership of sacred symbols...[S]acred space is claimed, owned, and operated by people advancing specific interests” (1995: 15).

For Durkheim (1969) the profane is carved out of the sacred. Indeed, Durkheim cites the origins of the notion of property in religion. “Human property is but religious or divine property put within human’s reach by means of a number

of rituals” (1969: 188). He bases his argument on the fact that there was a time during which everything was in the sphere of gods: “Πάντα πλήρη Θεών, everything is full of gods” (1969: 183). From this vantage point, all land belongs to divinities. The soil and its products were divine and filled with the power of gods. Like Freud, Durkheim explains that the taboo, the sacredness ‘contained’ in a thing is contagious. A clear delineation between sacred and profane is therefore necessary. The sacred needs to be isolated so that it does not contaminate the profane and therefore lose its sacred character through dissemination. The field is sacred and belongs to the gods; for this reason it cannot be ploughed, and the harvest cannot be consumed safely by humans. This is why, by means of rituals, the field is emptied of its sacredness so that it can be used safely by humans; however, sacredness is indestructible and must be transferred somewhere else. Durkheim (1969: 185) concludes that “[m]an’s property right is but a substitute to gods’ property right. It is because things are naturally sacred, that is to say appropriated by the gods that they could have been appropriated by the profane [man]”².

Durkheim’s argument shows that ritual practices do entail a political relation between human society and the sphere of divinities. For Durkheim this first relation between men and gods is the germ of the very institution of property. Indeed, these rituals and sacrifices were the first form of taxes. They were first paid to the gods, then to the priests who perform the sacrifice, and then to the customary institutions that regulate a certain society (Durkheim 1969: 190).

² “ Le droit de propriété des hommes n’est qu’un succédané du droit de propriété des dieux. C’est parce que les choses sont naturellement sacrées, c’est-à-dire appropriées par les dieux, qu’elles ont pu être appropriées par les profanes.”

Therefore, political institutions and hierarchical control of society stemmed from and developed in relation to the sacred.

“Everything ‘here below’ has its analogue ‘up above’” (Berger 1967: 34); this split is necessary to organize dogma and control over people (Gauchet 1997: 135) and territory. The appropriation of the land by mankind, and its compartmentalization follow a divine and human pattern. Chavannes (1910: 437) explains that in ancient China “each piece of land had its own god to which it belonged; division of land was determined by the human groups that occupied it. Therefore division of land varied according to the extension of human group; to these varying divisions of territory corresponded to a hierarchy of gods of land”³. Chavannes explains that in ancient China, at each level of administrative divisions, there was a god of the land to which sacrifices were performed by a person or an official of matching rank. At the lowest level we find the household head and at the top the emperor himself (Chavannes 1910: 438 – 444). The divine organization of territory thus matches the feudal organization; each level of the hierarchy must perform rituals at a given time of the year, so that the territory is blessed by the corresponding divinities and therefore ensures its prosperity. Rituals sanctioned and performed at each level of the social hierarchy give the territory its meaning; they also hold the society together as well as legitimate the role of the elite. Maspero (1929: 25) explains that this corresponding human –

³ “ [c]haque parcelle de sol a son dieu qui lui appartient en propre ; mais la division du sol, étant déterminée par les groupements humains qui l'occupent, varie selon l'extension de ces groupements ; à ces répartitions diverses du territoire correspond toute une hiérarchie des dieux du sol”.

divine hierarchy of functions and territories can also be found among some feudal societies of Southeast Asia, including the Dai of Xishuangbanna.

Until the mid-20th century, Xishuangbanna was a loose confederation of political entities called *meng* (Liew-Herres 2009: 52-55). Villages (*ban*) constituted sub-units of the *meng*. Each level had a lord of the domain who was appointed by the higher echelon. The ruler of Xishuangbanna appointed the ruler of the *meng* who appointed the ruler of each village. At all three levels of these administrative divisions there was a sacred space in which guardian spirits of the territory dwelled. Maspero (1929: 20-22) has explained that these guardian spirits were 'gods of the land'; they and the rituals devoted to them helped to maintain the unity and prosperity of the territory. Maspero (1929: 20-37) has also shown that the Dai guardian spirits have their Han-Chinese counterparts in the *shè*; moreover, both Dai and Han-Chinese guardian spirits functioned according to the same pattern (Maspero 1929: 23).

The Chinese character for *shè* (社) is made up of two components. On the left side is the altar 示 (simplified as 礻), and on the right side is the character for soil, earth, or land (土). In modern Chinese, it means 'society'. In pre-modern Chinese, *shè* had at least three different meanings (CH 1979: 1527): first, 'god of the land'; second, 'the altar where sacrifices to the god of the land were performed'; and third, *shè* was also a territorial unit which corresponded to twenty-five households. As Maspero explains (1929: 24) there was a hierarchy of *shè*: each hamlet and village had its own *shè*, the feudal principality had its

guoshè and the territory of the Middle Kingdom had its *gongshè*, literally 'common' *shè* (1929: 24).

The word *shè* does not have an equivalent in Dai language; however there is in Xishuangbanna a similar system of guardian spirits who protect territorial units. Their jurisdiction, or protective power, is limited by the boundaries of the territory they guard. The hierarchy of guardian spirits corresponds to the hierarchy of administrative divisions. These guardian spirits are the spirit of the ancestors and kin of the living ruling elite in the afterlife. Sacrifices are periodically performed during ceremonies, which require the sealing off the territorial unit. The performance of these rituals is aimed at appeasing the guardian spirits of the territory and asking for their protection; rituals were ordered by the elite and required the active participation of the whole population. In pre-1950 Xishuangbanna, Dai holy hills were a particular classification of territory within the territory. They gave meaning to the territory and Dai society and legitimated the elite's position in the hierarchy.

3.3 Sacred space and exercise of power

Sacred space is a special classification of territory. Like any territory, sacred space is located within a web of overlapping territories (Delaney 2005: 31), and is connected with the production of social hierarchies (Sack 1986: 34).

Sacred space is also a site of production of meaning, which is orchestrated by both political and religious authorities. They contribute to structuring a worldview of the 'up above', and of the 'here below'. Sacred space

therefore is an expression of social power. In pre-1950 Sipsongpanna, Dai holy hills were fundamental to the exercise of power for they not only legitimated and consecrated the political and religious elite, but also strengthened power relations among the different level of the hierarchies, as well as distinguishing insiders from outsiders (Chidester & Linenthal 1995: 15-16). Dai holy hills therefore contributed to reinforce property rights in humans and in land, for they were a means to reify political and religious power. This reification was disguised through displacement (Sack 1986: 33); holy hills acted as the source of power. Consequently, property, and the meaning of sacred space were and still are crucial matters, for whoever owned the holy hills could and can enforce control and therefore define power relations among different groups.

Production of sacred space thus is deeply political. Sacred space, the socio-spatial organization and meaning it generates are social constructions that stem from particular historical and social conditions (Delaney 2005: 16); therefore, they are not fixed in time and subject to change.

4: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, I use the Dai word ‘Sipsongpanna’ to refer to the Dai polity that was established on the peripheries of the Chinese empire and various Southeast Asian principalities at the end of the 12th century. Sipsongpanna paid tribute to China until the Chinese Revolution of the mid-20th century. Since the 1950s, Sipsongpanna has been under direct Chinese rule and formally known as the ‘Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Xishuangbanna’ (*Xishuangbanna Daizu Zizhizhou*).

First, I give a brief overview of the role played by imperial China in the history of Sipsongpanna. This quick review of history will help explain how the territory of Sipsongpanna that was once beyond the Chinese border became borderland China. I then examine the political and social control asserted by the Dai aristocracy within the territory of Sipsongpanna and the role played by the Dai holy hills. I follow with a discussion of the term ‘holy hills’ and close the chapter with a brief overview of the policy towards religion in China, including a section on the process of secularization.

4.1 Indirect Chinese rule over Sipsongpanna

Sipsongpanna was founded in the 12th century. It was a loose confederation of small political entities nominally ruled by a monarch: the *zhao pianling*. The territory was divided into twelve (*sip song* in Dai language) political

entities called *panna*, hence the name. Each *panna* was divided into smaller political entities called *meng*. The *zhao pianling* granted land in each *meng* to his kin, called the *zhaomeng*, who in turn granted village land to the *bolang ban*, the village head. “Domain rulers [*zhaomeng*] generally had full authority in their domains, but paid tax to the head of state or “lord of the earth” [*zhao pianling*], who theoretically owned the land of his entire polity” (Giersch 2006: 28).

Sipsongpanna was established in a liminal zone between the Southeast Asian realm and the Chinese one. The neighbouring Shan states (in what is now Burma), and Lanna states (in what is now Northern Thailand) were all small Dai polities that formed what scholars have called ‘galactic polities’ (see Tambiah 1977). In each polity, the power of the ruler emanated from the centre and diminished with distance from the ruler; small polities paid tribute to larger principalities. On the periphery were indistinct Dai polities that could be called “independent tributary polities” (Sturgeon 2005: 65 - 66), for they maintained diplomatic ties through a tribute that was periodically sent to more than one principality. In the 18th and 19th centuries, for example, Dai aristocrats sent tribute to Burma, Siam and China (Giersch 2006: 36-37).

The Mongol conquests of the 13th century anchored Central and Western Yunnan in the Middle Kingdom, thus moving the border of China farther south. The Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) created the Native Chieftain System (*tusi zhidu*) which allowed the emperors to exert an indirect rule over the southwestern borderlands, including Sipsongpanna. China and its borders can be conceptualized as three concentric rings in which imperial rule was exerted to

various degrees. There was first China proper or interior (*neidi*) which was a zone under direct imperial rule, then came the line of defence (*fanli*) which was controlled by native officials and subject to indirect imperial rule through the Native Chieftain System; finally, beyond this buffer zone came the states which were not subject to imperial rule (Giersch 2006: 51).

The Native Chieftain System served to manage the second ring as a buffer zone and protect the territory of China proper. Hermann (2006: 135) argues that it also contributed to transform Southwestern China from what was seen as an economically underdeveloped area, inhabited mainly by non-Han Chinese ethnic groups, into a territory that Han Chinese immigrants were going to dominate. The presence of Han Chinese, however, was limited and related to the seasonal tea trade (see Hill 1989). In addition, Chinese officials and immigrants “were not working together to transform frontier indigenes, as is often assumed” (Giersch 2006: 7). From the Chinese vantage point, the Native Chieftain System was the means by which emperors reified their power in borderland China, including in Sipsongpanna. However, the fact that Sipsongpanna paid tribute to Burma and Siam also shows that Dai rulers did not see themselves under indirect Chinese rule; in effect, Dai rulers were focusing on internal affairs (Giersch 2006: 41). In addition, important decisions concerning borderland policy made by Chinese “remained on paper only” (Giersch 2006: 41-42).

The imperial court conferred upon Sipsongpanna’s *zhao pianling* in Jinghong the civilian title of Pacification Commissioner Chieftain in 1386

(XSBNGK 2008: 74). The *zhao pianling* was expected to keep the peace and administer the territories under his control as well as pay tribute to the Ming court; the frequency of the tribute was fixed by the imperial court (Ma & Miao 2001: 15). The *zhaomeng* were conferred the title of military native chieftain and placed under the direct supervision of the Ministry of War (Herman 1997: 50). In each *meng* the military native chieftain “enjoyed a high degree of institutional and spatial autonomy from China . . . , and he was expected to command a sizable military force in order to assist in the protection of China” (Herman 1997: 50-51). Both titles were inherited patrilineally (Hermann 1997: 51, Hill: 1989: 329).

The Native Chieftain System was the embodiment of a state vision and the expression of the reification of imperial power; it was also a tool used to regulate China’s borderlands. This tool could be reformed and adapted to different state visions. The Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing dynasty (r.1723 – 1735) decided to abolish the Native Chieftainship system and to replace it with the existing official bureaucracy in order to extend direct control over previously autonomous areas. This policy known as the *gaitu guiliu* was selective; its aim was not to extend direct control over the entire Southwestern borderlands, but only in certain areas. The *gaitu guiliu* was implemented in Eastern Sipsongpanna. By doing so, Qing officials did not aim at managing the internal political affairs, but at gaining direct control over the growing tea industry and the taxation of salt wells so as to secure financial support for the army (Giersch 2006 : 44-45). The implementation of the *gaitu guiliu* was short-lived, but it was the first

attempt to gain direct control over Sipsongpanna in order to control and tap its resources.

The Native Chieftain System ended with the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911. Restructuring of administrative divisions in Sipsongpanna by the Republican government (1911-1949) weakened the Dai political system (Song 1984: 77); however, the Dai aristocracy continued to rule over the region until the Chinese revolution of the mid-20th century. The Republican era was a period of disunion during which several political systems coexisted throughout China. In 1949, Mao's Chinese Revolution put an end to internal dissensions and brought a *Pax Sinica*. Sipsongpanna came under direct Communist rule and its name was formally changed to Xishuangbanna, the pinyin transliteration of Sipsongpanna.

4.1.1 Property rights in land and in humans

All land of Sipsongpanna was owned by a monarch, the *zhao pianling* whose title meant 'ruler' [*zhao*] of the vast land' (Ma & Miao 2001: 31). He ruled from the political centre of Jinghong. The *zhao pianling* granted land to the *zhaomeng* whose title means 'ruler [*zhao*] of the *meng*'. The *zhaomeng* was kin of the *zhao pianling* either directly or by alliance; he managed the *meng* land and its labour. The *zhaomeng* delegated the management of village land to one of his kin, the *bolang ban*, whose function was to administer village land and to supervise commoners' corvée labour. Each *meng* was a self-contained political entity with its own set of rules. The *zhaomeng* had to pledge allegiance to the

zhao pianling; however, the latter could not interfere in the affairs of the *meng* (Giersch 2006: 28).

This socio-spatial organization of the Dai polity of Sipsongpanna allowed the Dai aristocracy to control resources and people. In each *meng*, the *zhaomeng* managed land and labour with the help of a group of appointees who constituted the ruling elite of the *meng*.

The inhabitants of Sipsongpanna, both exploiting and exploited classes, relied on the cultivation of rice field in the lowlands; “[c]ommoners (subdivided into different status levels) worked village rice fields and owed tribute, land tax, and labour service, and they paid these levies through village headmen to the aristocratic domain ruler [*zhaomeng*]” (Giersch 2006: 28).

Sethakhul (2000: 324) argues that in Sipsongpanna, “landownership provided rulers ... with political and economic power over their subjects whose subsistence relied heavily on the cultivation of fertile valley land” . Allocation of property rights over and use rights to fields (*na* in Dai language) followed a hierarchical pattern. One’s position in society determined the type of property and use rights one had. However “due to scarcity of manpower, rights to farm land were not sufficient to ensure obedience of the people” (Sethakhul 2000: 326). In Siam, rulers “sought to control labour rather than land” (Sturgeon 2005: 47). Feeny (1989) explains that in nineteenth century Siam the different categories of commoners and slaves owed the ruling class different types of corvée labour. I argue that both Siam and Sipsongpanna were land-abundant and labour-scarce economies where property rights in humans contributed to upholding the ruling

class. Rulers (*zhao*) of Sipsongpanna had property rights in humans and in land (Ma & Miao 2001: 43); and these property rights in humans and in land were managed and negotiated on behalf of the rulers (*zhao*) by a group of appointees who constituted part of the ruling class. For the rulers, it was crucial to control the labour not only of commoners and of slaves, but also the labour of the group of appointees who managed and organized corvée labour. I argue that in pre-1950 Sipsongpanna, rulers (*zhao*) controlled the labour of two different classes of people, an arrangement that can be understood as property rights in humans. The first class is commoners and slaves, who owed the rulers physical labour in fields. The second class is part of the ruling class who owed administrative tasks.

4.1.2 Managing commoners for the Dai aristocracy

The *zhaomeng* managed his domain's land and labour with the help of a group of appointees. These appointees were hierarchically organized and performed specific tasks. Together they managed commoners, land and labour on behalf of the rulers.

Paya were high-ranking members of the aristocracy of the *meng*. They were the *zhaomeng*'s right hand, his first assistants. They represented legislative power, and assisted with the administration of the land. They were in charge of fixing tax rates, managing the labour force constituted by commoners, and mediating disputes. They formulated articles of law that were subject to the approval of the *zhaomeng*. *Paya* were kin of the *zhaomeng*; their function was hereditary and passed down patrilineally. They also were granted access and use rights to fields, and they had the harvest at their disposal. If there was not

enough labour inside the *paya*'s families, they could pay commoners to work the fields.

Hunhan were armed men in charge of enforcing law and implementing policies decided by the *zhaomeng*. They also had to collect taxes and settle disputes among commoners. When special circumstances arose, *hunhuan* were to meet with the *zhaomeng* and discuss the issue before the latter made any decision. *Hunxiet* worked closely with the *paya*. They were secretaries, or scribes, whose function was to keep records and write messages, which were addressed to the elite of nearby *meng*. People who performed these two roles, *hunhuan* and *hunxiet*, provided services to the aristocracy (*zhao meng* and *paya*) and were paid for their tasks.

Paya, *hunhuan* and *hunxiet* provided non-physical labour; they constituted nonetheless a work force for the Dai aristocracy. They assisted the *zhaomeng* in the management of corvée labour. Two categories of people owed corvée labour: the commoners and the slaves.

The commoners owed corvée labour to the *zhao pianling*, the *zhaomeng* and the village head (*bolang ban*). They were also free to open land for cultivation. A certain amount of the production was taxed according to the size of the field.

Guhemzhao were slaves. Ma & Miao (2001: 49 -53) explain that the word '*guhemzhao*' literally means people (*gu*) attached to the household (*hem*) of the ruler (*zhao*). The *zhao pianling* and the *zhaomeng* owned *guhemzhao*; the latter were either people who committed a crime, people captured as booty of war with

upland ethnic groups, or people who escaped from regions outside Sipsongpanna. Consequently, these slaves constituted a multiethnic group, which was divided into five categories; each category was assigned a particular type of labour (see Ma & Miao 2001: 50-51).

Some people did not owe corvée labour because they held a special position in the social hierarchy. In each *meng* and in each village, there were, and still are *bomo*. There were, and there still are, two kinds of *bomo*: the *bomo* healers or medicine men and the *bomo* 'shamans' who regulate the relations between the world of human beings and the supernatural world of the *devata*. My thesis looks more closely at the role of the *bomo* 'shamans'.

The *bomo* healers' passed down their knowledge from generation to generation to any young person, male or female, who wanted to assume this role. The *bomo* 'shamans' had an important function in the *meng* and in the villages. The *bomo meng* was in charge of performing sacrifices to the *devata* that protected the territory of the *meng* and the *bomo ban* was in charge of the sacrifices to the *devata* that protected the territory of the village. They were independent, but worked closely with the elite (*zhaomeng* and *paya*) so that the animals and other items such as betel tree branches, rice, and money that were required for the rituals were provided. Informants emphasised that *bomo* had no control over people and resources; however, because they were able to interact with the *devata* they had a crucial position in Dai society.

4.1.3 Reinforcing property over people and land: the holy hills

The religion of the Dai minority of Sipsongpanna is a blend of Theravada Buddhism and polytheistic beliefs (Sethakul 2000: 326). Before the introduction of Buddhism in Sipsongpanna, there were two main supernatural entities called *phi* and *lak*. The *lak* were spirits of the lineage of the chief or of the family, and the *phi* were guardian spirits of the territory. Like the *shè* of the Han-Chinese (Maspero 1929: 23-24; Formoso 1996: 119), both the *lak* and the *phi* were ordered into a hierarchy that matches the administrative division of the territory into *meng*, village and household. The word '*devata*' along with the concept was introduced with the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia (Zhu 1994: 30-33). In Sipsongpanna, Buddhism was introduced between the sixth and eighth centuries, and spread after the eleventh century (Dao et al 1984: 113). Formoso (1996: 120-125) explains that Buddhism transformed the conception the Dai people had of the afterlife and blended with the pre-existent polytheistic system. Over time, the two supernatural entities, the *phi* and the *lak*, merged with the concept of *devata*.

Devata is the generic term for the spirits of the ancestors who act as guardian spirits of the territory. In addition, "[t]hese spirits played a crucial role in controlling people and reinforcing the political and economical interest of the ruling class" (Sethakul 2000: 327). Each territorial unit has its own *devata*; consequently, there are guardian spirits of the entire Sipsongpanna, of the *meng*, of the village (*ban*), and of the household (*hem*). Dai holy hills and the hierarchy of *devata* embody the merging of Buddhism and polytheistic beliefs. These

practices are different from the Buddhist temples and the religious activities associated with them. Buddhist temples are built outside the gates of the village. They are conceived as spatially and religiously differentiated from the holy hills, so that *devata* have no sway over monks.

The *meng* “territory was marked by gateways at the cardinal points and protected by spirits... In most [D]ai domain, the dominant guardian spirits ... were considered the ancestors of the aristocracy. Each year, officials symbolically closed the domain’s gates, thus sealing the territory from the outside, and made offerings such as slaughtered buffalo to the domain spirits” (Giersch 2006: 198). Each village had its own guardian spirits and performed the same sealing of the village territory from the outside every year as well. The administrative classifications of the territory matched a hierarchy of human rulers and *devata*. The village head and the village level priest sanctioned rituals to the *devata ban* (guardian spirits of the village); the *zhaomeng* and the *meng* level priest sanctioned rituals to the *devata meng* (guardian spirits of the *meng*).

Formoso (1996: 120) explains that rituals linked to the guardian spirits of the *meng* are “public and immutable rituals, since rituals are performed as long as the local community exists”; these rituals were performed at the *meng* and village (*ban*) level and followed the same pattern. These rituals were more than an archetypal act of devotion and submission to guardian spirits, but a complex politico-religious ceremony, a “particular type of spatial practice” (Chiederster & Linenthal 1995: 9) whose purpose was to protect the territory and maintain social

order. Therefore, control over and ownership of sacred space was crucial to the aristocracy and to political power.

During my conversations with informants, I tried to understand their conceptualization of *devata*. Several informants explained to me that the soul of the deceased *zhaomeng* and his kin become *devata meng* (i.e. guardian spirit of the *meng*), the soul of the *bolang ban* becomes *devata ban* (i.e guardian spirit of the village), and the soul of commoners becomes *devata hem* (i.e. guardian spirit of the household). During my fieldwork, I noted a triple ambivalence of the *devata*. First, they can be benevolent as well as malevolent. Then, some dwell in a particular place (e.g. forest, hill, cave, stone) while others are wandering spirits; the former is identified and has a name whereas the latter is not and therefore is potentially dangerous. An informant explained that the *devata* that dwell on the village's holy hill appears (*chuxian*) on some days of the Dai religious calendar. During these days, the *devata* is particularly dangerous. Finally, some *devata* are simultaneously one and multiple. One informant explained to me that a *devata ban* is the spiritual embodiment of all the souls of all past *bolang ban* (village heads); consequently when a village head or someone who had been a village head passes away, he becomes a *devata ban*.

Agrarian rituals devoted to the *devata* had two main purposes. First, they were designed to appease the *devata*, to ward off natural disasters or disease, and to ask for protection of the territory and everything within it (i.e. land, livestock, paddy fields, and the local population that exploited the resources of the territory). Second, they served to reinforce and legitimate the political and

social hierarchy. For instance, the entire population of the *meng* participated in the rituals to appease the *devata meng*, which were the spirits of the ancestors of the *zhaomeng*. The whole population of a village participated to the rituals to appease the *devata ban*, which were the spirits of the ancestors of the *bolang ban*. Key participants were the *zhaomeng* and his kin, whose presence during the rituals was crucial to the prosperity of their domain, the maintenance of their power, and their control over land and people. Finally, the legitimation of the ruling class through these rituals helped to maintain the social order and to enforce social control over commoners.

4.2 Sacred space and 'holy hills'

Central to my thesis is the space on which these rituals were performed, the space on which the guardian spirits of the ancestors lived (i.e. holy hills), and the question of ownership of this space. I am also looking at how these rituals have evolved and been transformed over time.

The term 'holy hill' was coined by Pei Shengji (1985: 321 - 337) and used in scholarly literature in the English language. Pei defines a holy hill as “a kind of natural conservation area founded with the help of the gods, and all animals, plants, land and sources of water within it are inviolable” (Pei 1985: 332). Pei also explains that 'holy hills' are forested hills where the gods and the spirits of great and revered chieftains reside (Pei 1985: 332). “Gathering, hunting, wood-chopping, and cultivating are strictly prohibited activities” and violations would bring punishment upon villagers. Every year, villagers gather on the holy hill where sacrifices are performed by a priest, or *bomo* in Dai language (Pei 1985:

334). Pei explains that one must distinguish 'holy hills' from cemetery forests. He also states that there is a classification of holy hills. First there are the village level 'holy hills' (*nong ban*) and then the *meng* level 'holy hills' (*nong meng*), the latter usually occupying a larger area than the former (Pei 1985: 332). According to Pei (1993: 123), 'holy hill' or '*nong*' is a Dai traditional concept. '*Nong man*' belongs to the village and the '*nong meng*' belongs to the community of villages (Pei 1985: 332). While Pei uses the spelling '*nong*', I prefer to use the spelling '*ḍong*' [ḍ] (pronounced [d] with simultaneous glottal stop) since it is closer to the pronunciation in Dai language. In addition, the word and concept of '*ḍong*' is used in the name of two holy hills I surveyed (Ḍong Shé and Ḍong Gam). Holy hills have been "partly disturbed or totally destroyed ... by modern development interventions" (Pei 1993: 124). During my fieldwork, I used Pei's definition to find holy hills in Menglun Township. I have used the term 'holy hills' in my thesis; however, I do not consider that this term fully represents the meaning of the Dai word '*ḍong*'. In addition, I believe that the term 'sacred forested hills' would be more adequate.

Chinese scholars explain that "[t]he conservation of nature is an essential part of the Dai's traditional culture" (Pei 1993: 121); as a consequence, 'holy hills' are the manifestation of traditional environmental knowledge (*chuantong huanjing zhishi*) and they have been purposively created and managed by Dai people to conserve biodiversity (Cui 2002: 123). During fieldwork, informants have challenged this view. They explained that holy hills are the physical

manifestation of religious beliefs and that their contribution to the conservation of biodiversity is a by-product that Chinese scholars discovered recently.

Dai holy hills are part of the local sacred landscape; however Dai sacred landscape is not limited to holy hills. Indeed, there are other sites that can be classified as sacred. During my fieldwork I visited Buddhist sacred sites (which include temples, pagodas, and other sites that informants linked directly with the Buddha's peregrination in South East Asia), and non-Buddhist sites (which includes 'holy hills', and burial grounds). Informants told me that there were other sites forbidden to humans, for they were the dwelling areas of demons (*phi phong* in Dai language).

Dai holy hills are a particular type of sacred space. My thesis examines how shifting policies for land use and property rights over the past century have contributed to the transformation of holy hills. In the following section, I define the concept of secularization and examine changing policies towards religion in China. In chapter five, I will assess the extent to which we can apply this concept of secularization to the destruction and conservation of Dai holy hills.

4.3 State policies towards religion in China 1898 – 2008

Gauchet wrote that “[t]he religious factor in history has a constant, if not invariable, quality making it a necessary precondition for the existence of human society” (1997: 21). Religion is a universal and constant phenomenon; no society has escaped from it. In addition, it provides a lens through which people interpret and shape their environment, as well as a means to assert control over people

(Gauchet 1997: 135). Through a process of secularization, however, religion can cease to structure people's socio-spatial organization. The term and process of secularization is usually associated with the Christian West.

Berger (1967: 106) explains that the term 'secularization' was employed in the wake of the Wars of Religion that took place in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. 'Secularization' denotes in part "the removal of territory or property from the control of ecclesiastical authorities". Secularization, therefore, can be a spatial phenomenon. This early definition of the term does not mean that "the worldview in which sacred forces are continuously permeating human experience" (Berger 1967: 34) has ceased to exist.

Secularization has spatial and social implications. Berger defines it as "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols" (Berger 1967: 107). Consequently, broad masses of society stop interpreting the world and their own lives from a religious vantage point (Berger 1967: 107-108).

In order to assess the extent to which Dai holy hills have been secularized, I define secularization as the process by which sacred space is removed from the control of religious authorities and the subsequent loss of religious interpretation.

4.3.1 Republican era (1911-1949)

In the late nineteenth century, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Daoism, Confucianism, and folk religions cohabitated and shaped China as a society with

multiple religious practices. Throughout its two millennia long history, the religious life of Chinese people was deeply embedded in the social, economic and political context (Goossaert 2006 : 309).“Up to the end of the nineteenth century the most serious risings against the imperial dynasty were inseparably religious and political” (Feuchtwang 2001: 15). Yet, the word and concept of ‘religion’ (*zongjiao*) were introduced relatively late in Chinese history. The word arrived to China via Japan at the end of the nineteenth century and became an essential element of the modernization process for which intellectuals were striving. Embedded in the concept of religion was its post-Renaissance European definition which entailed the idea of a churchlike institution distinct from society (Goossaert 2006 : 309). The introduction of the word and concept of religion is fundamental to understand the destruction of temples that was initiated at the end of the nineteenth century in China (Goossaert 2003: 429-440).

In 1900, there were one million temples in China; half of them were ‘destroyed’ before the Japanese invasion of 1937 (Goossaert 2003: 436). Here ‘destruction’ does not mean physical destruction, but rather a re-assignment of the temples’ purposes to non-religious activity, entailing the removal of property from the control of religious authorities (Berger 1967: 106), one step towards secularization. Yet this ‘destruction’ of temples was uneven. While in some areas a few temples were confiscated, in others public religious life was brutally stopped. The purpose was to transform temples into modern schools in which ordinary citizens and officials were educated (Wong 1992: 529). Here the process of secularization was intertwined with the modernization of China. This

first step in the secularization of sacred space did not affect Xishuangbanna, but it put in motion a process that eventually affected Xishuangbanna after the 1950s.

The introduction of the concept of religion also allowed for the introduction of the notion of superstition. This religion/superstition dichotomy permitted the Chinese reformists to make the distinction between what was acceptable and what was unacceptable, or what could remain and what was to be destroyed. Religious activities and practices that had been written into a defined corpus of scriptures (or canon) became religion, and therefore acceptable. What was left out of this canon became superstition, and therefore unacceptable (Goossaert 2006: 309-310).

The Republican state was trying to separate religious and state institutions. It was also trying to control and regulate religion through the creation of churchlike institutions for the purpose of modernization (Goossaert 2006: 311).

4.3.2 Mao era (1949 – 1976)

In his 1957 speech on the *Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People*, Mao Zedong first stated that “religion cannot be abolished by administrative decree or by force”⁴ (Mao 1979: 1127). Religion and class struggle were irremediably linked together. Class struggle was reflected in religion because it “involved both a struggle against imperialist and reactionary forces using religion for counter-revolutionary activities (antagonistic contradictions),

⁴ “我们不能用行政命令去消灭宗教，不能强制人们不信教。”

and a strategy for dealing with non-antagonistic contradictions between the proletariat and the 'religious patriotic elements' [religious professionals] within the people's united front" (MacInnis 1972: 51). For Mao and the central leaders, persuasive education was the key to the resolution of the contradiction among the people. By raising the level of education, the exploited class would become aware that religion was the ideological device used by the exploiting class to exercise control. Education was the means by which the exploited class would gradually free themselves from religion and therefore from the exploiting class (MacInnis 1972: 58). However, this "class struggle, reflected in religion, would continue throughout the period of transition from capitalism to pure communism – a period that Mao himself has said may take generations" (MacInnis 1972: 50). Nonetheless, from this historical materialist vantage point, religion was bound to disappear.

Theorists in China exposed their views on class struggle and religion in a series of essays. While some advocated a moderate line, others were more radical. The debate intensified and a few months before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, religion became "a wrong political ideology serving the interests of antirevolutionary forces" (Yang 2005: 21). Theorists explained the reactionary nature of religion and proclaimed that religion and superstition were identical (MacInnis 1972: 75). The notion of superstition was still a synonym for 'unacceptable' and 'feudal'. With the campaign against the 'Four Olds' (old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits) that marked the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), it became evident that religion/ superstition had to be

eradicated (Yang 2005: 22). A radical and militant atheism was adopted, allowing for the destruction of religious artefacts, temples, mosques, monasteries, churches, and sacred places including Dai 'holy hills'. Although destruction was systematic and organized, it was also uneven, and “the bonds between believers perhaps even strengthened by the common risks of professing belief” (Feuchtwang 2000 : 164).

4.3.3 Post-Mao era

While China used to appear as “the most secularized country in the world” it has become “[a]t the turn of the twenty-first century ... one of the most religious countries in the world” (Yang 2005: 19). This coming back of religious practices on the public scene is one of the results of the economic reforms.

A document titled “Basic viewpoints and policies on religious issues during China’s socialist period”, also known as ‘document 19’ (Potter 2003), issued in 1982 by the central leadership became the official guideline for the handling of religious affairs in post-Mao China. This document issued during the economic reforms of the 1980s criticized the attacks directed against religion during the Cultural Revolution. Indeed the document states that the handling of religious issues during that period of Chinese history was a ‘reckless trampling of Marxism-Leninism’. The violent attempt to eliminate religion through policy not only betrayed Marxism’s view on religion, but was also extremely harmful⁵; furthermore the violence deployed against religion seriously undermined the unity

⁵ “那种认为依靠行政命令或其他强制手段，可以一举消灭宗教的想法和做法，更是背离马克思主义关于宗教问题的基本观点的，是完全错误和非常有害的。”

of the nation, a unity which was essential to the success of the economic reforms.

At the core of the document, the historical materialist's premise that religion will become extinct has not disappeared. Nonetheless, the central leadership does acknowledge that religion will still be around for a long time and consequently expresses the will and the need to adequately legislate and regulate religion.

The Chinese leadership seeks through education to shape believers (and non-believers as well) into law-abiding patriots who protect socialism and the unity of the motherland as well as the national unity of the people (Wen 2008: 7). They do this in order to prevent any kind of religious fanaticism that can undermine the unity of the country and promote separatism (*Ibid*). Under these conditions, freedom of religion, which means the freedom to believe as well as the freedom not to believe, will be respected and maintained.

Consequently, the Party's policy towards religious affairs is a rational handling of religious activities. Such policy is thought to be needed to achieve social stability, but also to prevent much labour, material and financial resources being diverted into religious activity and the building places of worship, which hinders the construction of socialism. The legal framework to control and regulate religious activities and places of worship was laid out in 2004 in the 'Laws and Regulations on Religious Affairs' (*Zongjiao Shiwu Tiaoli*).

Decades after deliberate repression of religion, high-ranking Chinese officials had to deal with the 'difficult issue of socialism and religion' in a

pragmatic way. Leading Chinese officials have highlighted a trinity of features characteristic of religion: its permanence (*changqixing*), its pervasiveness among the masses (*qunzhongxing*) and its peculiar complexity (*teshu de fuzaxing*). Socialism and religion present a peculiar complexity because religion and politics, economy, culture, society, and ethnicity are inextricably intertwined (Wen 2008: 7). Therefore, religion and its spatial manifestation (e.g. sacred space) cannot be understood nor analysed separately from their political, economic, social, and historical context.

The document promulgated in 2004, 'Laws and Regulations on Religious Affairs', especially articles 12 to 26, legislates places of worship. Article 12 defines 'places of worship' as Buddhist and Daoist temples, mosques, churches and any other space on which regular religious activity takes place. Relevant religious associations must register in order to be legally recognized by the state and able to practice religious activities in the aforementioned place of worship (Article 6). From a legal point of view, Dai holy hills are at risk. The first problem is that there is no legal association recognized by the central state that supervises them. The second problem is that because Dai holy hills are now considered village collective forest land and they are under the supervision of the local village committee. Dai holy hills are therefore not recognized by the state and are managed by local secular government, which can potentially lead to further secularization.

4.4 Conclusion

Before the 1950s, the rulers (*zhao*) and religious elite (*bomo*) dominated power relations in Sipsongpanna. Through displacement, Dai holy hills provided rulers with a means to reify their power and reinforce property rights in humans and in land.

After the 1950s, the inclusion of Sipsongpanna into the People's Republic of China brought change through the reconfiguration of the socio-spatial organization within Xishuangbanna. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) is usually understood as a period when sacred spaces were destroyed. While the Cultural Revolution did have an impact on Dai sacred landscape, the reasons why certain sacred sites were destroyed are to be found earlier in history. I argue that the introduction of the word and concept of religion during the early twentieth century contributed to the transformation of the understanding of sacred space in China. In addition, the concept of religion was and still is associated with modernization and education. The two case studies I present in the following chapters help to explain physical transformations of the landscape as well as changes in beliefs and customary practices associated with Dai holy hills.

5: HOLY HILLS BEFORE 1950:THE CASE STUDIES OF MANJING AND MENGXING XIAZHAI

In this chapter, I present the data I collected during fieldwork between May and early August 2009 in two study sites. I first introduce the geography and history of each site and its holy hills. I then describe the political and social control for the pre-1950 period. This description of local institutions is followed by an explanation of shifting property rights for three different holy hills as well as a description of the rituals linked to these holy hills. I then turn to the post-1950 period and describe the process each holy hill went through as property rights changed. This section about post-1950 transformations is divided into two distinct periods: the Mao era from the early 1950s to 1980, and the post-Mao era that started with the economic reforms of the 1980s. Finally, in the concluding section I explain the point of view that villagers from different age groups have towards the transformation of their holy hills.

5.1 The study sites

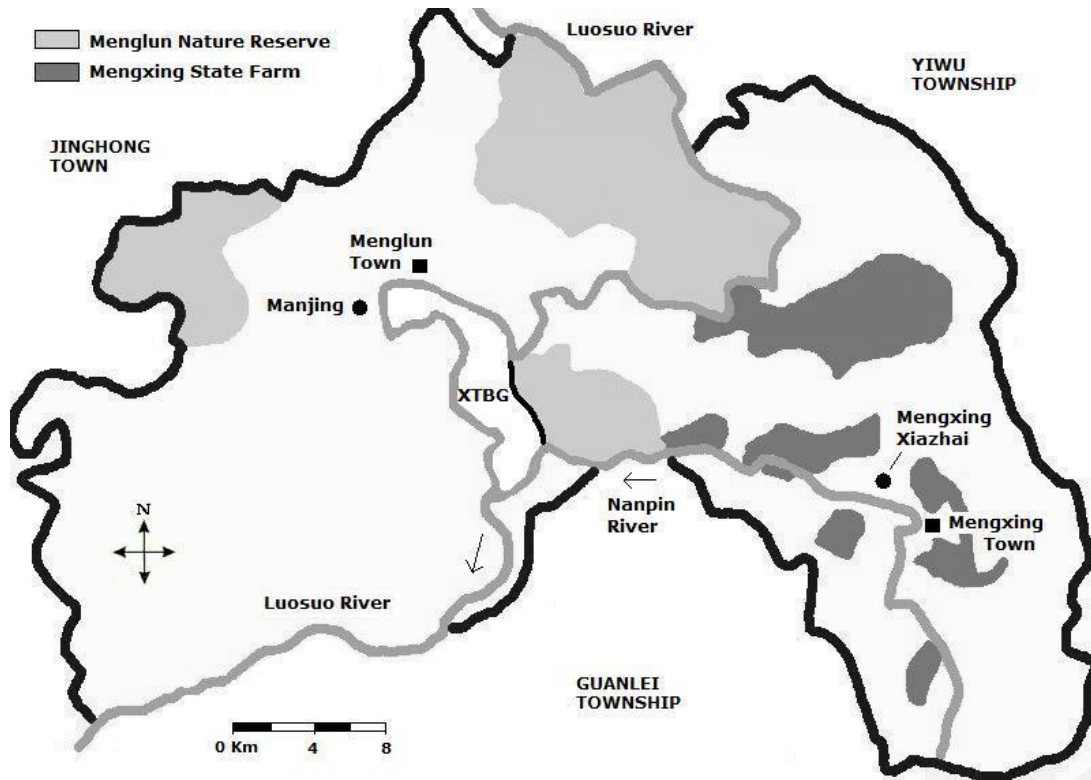
I reached my study area by bus. From the capital city of Yunnan province, Kunming, the bus headed south towards Xishuangbanna on the 'Kun-Mo' highway (ZFGCYN 2008: 6). 'Kun' stands for Kunming, which is the starting point, and 'Mo' stands for Mohan, which is the town at the Sino-Lao border where the highway enters Laos.

Six hundred kilometres from Kunming, this newly built Kun-Mo highway has cut the village of Manjing in half. Manjing is my first study site. It is situated to the west of Menglun Township (near the town of Menglun) on the west bank of the Luosuo River, which winds through the township from north to south.

In order to get to my second study site, I had to take a mini-van from Menglun town coach station. After a twenty-minute ride, I would arrive on the north bank of the Nanpin River, a tributary of the Luosuo River, in the village of Mengxing Xiazhai.

During my research, I learnt that the towns of Menglun and Mengxing had been established after the 1950s. They bear the name of two former Dai administrative divisions, the *meng* of Lun and the *meng* of Xing. Therefore my study sites, which are now located in the same township, used to belong to two different administrative entities in the former Dai polity of Sipsongpanna. This explains why, even though it is a short distance between my study sites (less than 30 kilometres), I discovered different narratives and regional histories in the two places.

Menglun Township is home to 11 ethnic minorities (Liu W. et al 2006: 246). Most of my informants were Dai; however, I also interviewed Han Chinese people as well as participants from the Hani ethnic minority.



Map 4 Location of research sites in Menglun Township

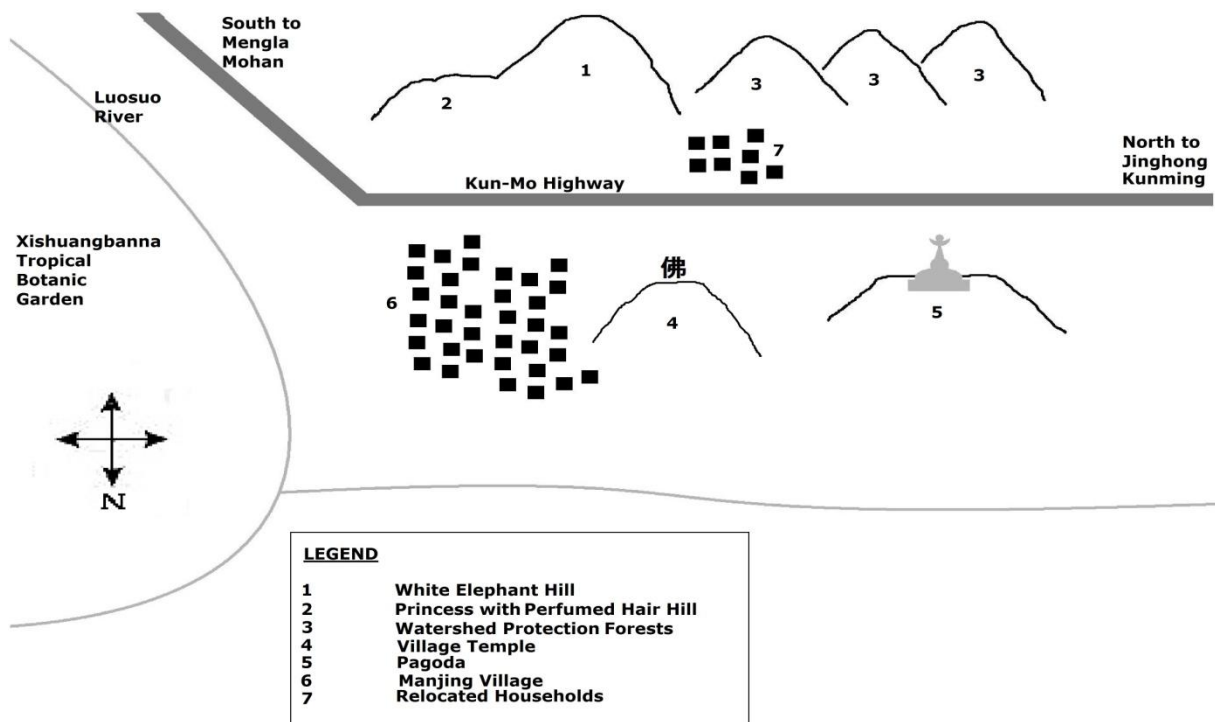
5.1.1 Geographical location and surrounding landscape

Manjing village and the White Elephant hill

The narrative of the White Elephant hill is a story of loss of sacred space. Manjing village has 225 households. During the construction of the expressway, twenty-five households were moved to the foot of the White Elephant Hill. To the east of the village, the Luosuo River flows southward and carves out a triangular-shaped peninsula where ceremonies were performed until the 1950s.

North of the White Elephant hill are two smaller hills. On the top of one, the village's temple was built; on the other, a pagoda overlooks the paddy fields. They are both part of the sacred landscape of the village.

West of the Luosuo River, the White Elephant Hill (*Baixiang Shan*) dominates the landscape. On the East side, a smaller hill, the 'Princess with Perfumed Hair' hill (*Xiangfa Gongzhu*) is geologically linked with the White Elephant hill. Both form a large hill that informants estimate has an area of 350 to 400 *mu*. While the hilltop remains covered in dense forest, approximately 70% to 75% of the hill was deforested over the past two decades and recently planted in rubber. West of the White Elephant hill, there are three watershed-protection hills, which also have been claimed for planting rubber trees and pineapple.



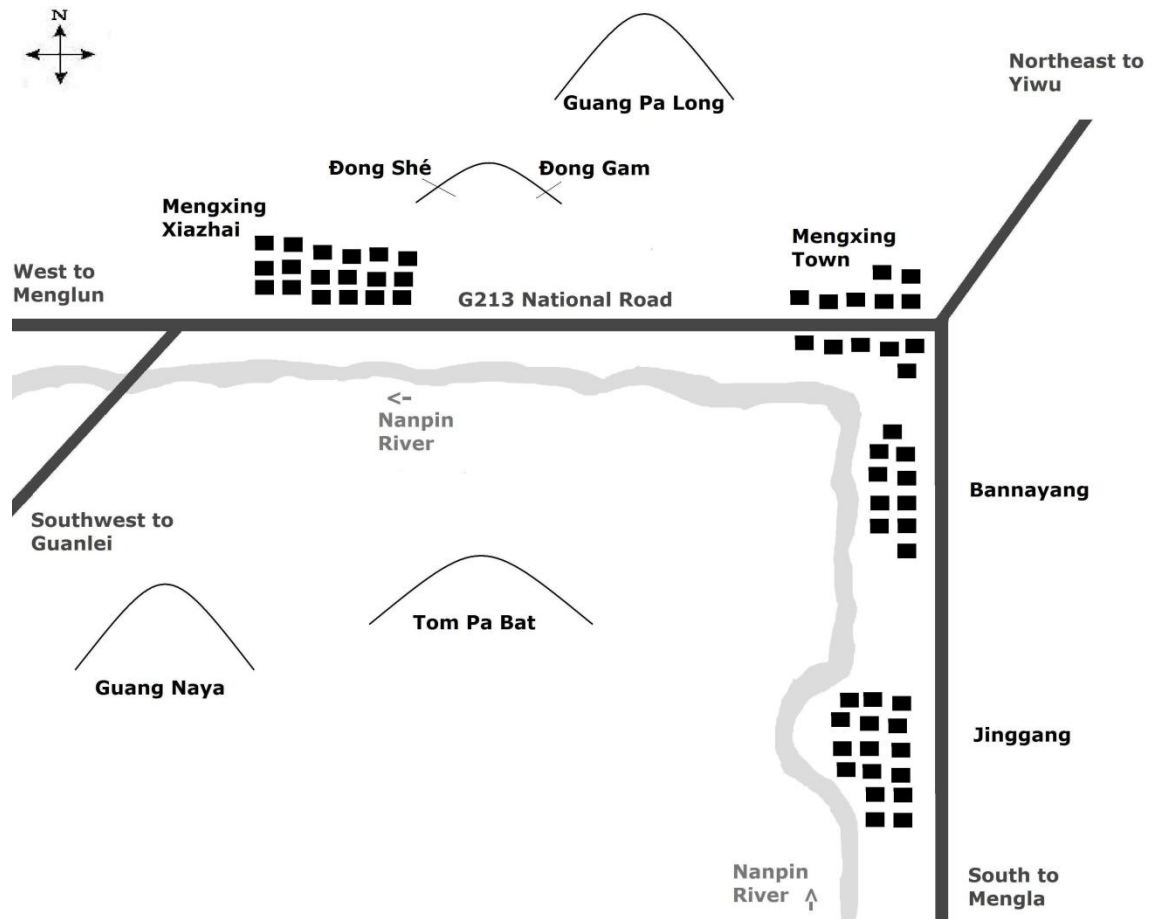
Map 5 Sketch map of the Manjing area

Mengxing Xiazhai : Đong Shé and Đong Gam

The narratives of Đong Shé and Đong Gam are stories of the destruction and re-creation of sacred space. The village of Mengxing Xiazhai has 130 households and is situated in the southeast of Menglun Township, approximately 25 kilometres from Menglun town, on the north bank of the Nanpin River, a tributary of the Luosuo River. The village is located between kilometre 2903 and 2902 of the G213 national road that links Mengla in the south to Simao in the north. The road was built in the late 1950s and allowed the establishment of Mengxing State rubber farm, which eventually claimed a large area of village land and literally surrounded the village. The Mengxing area remains an important crossroads for traffic linking Mengla, Yiwu, Menglun and Guanlei; however, the completion of the expressway in 2006 diverted much of the Jinghong- and Mengla-bound traffic.

There are two small patches of sacred forest on a hill on the east side of the village. Đong Shé holy hill protects the village of Mengxing Xiazhai only, and Đong Gam holy hill protects both Mengxing Xiazhai and the nearby village of Bannayang, which has 70 households. Altogether they cover an area of less than 20 *mu*. Both were established in the early 1840s. Đong Shé has been situated where it is since its creation and remained untouched until 2004. It covers an area of 12 to 13 *mu* and is part of a larger forest that covers approximately 35 *mu*. Đong Gam was originally situated half way between Mengxing Xiazhai and Bannayang, but was destroyed in 1967 during the Cultural Revolution. In the

mid-1980s a patch of forest situated next to Đong Shé was consecrated as Đong Gam.



Map 6 Sketch map of the Mengxing Xiazhai area

5.2 Background history until 1950

Early settlement in the Meng of Lun

Manjing village was home of the *zhaomeng* and the political centre of the *meng* of Lun. ‘*Meng* of Lun’ refers to the political entity within the pre-1950 Dai

polity of Sipsongpanna, and gave its name to 'Menglun', which is the town that was established after the 1950s three kilometres east of Manjing village.

Menglun is now the political centre of Menglun Township.

When I asked how the *meng* of Lun came to be and how Manjing became its political centre my participants pulled from their bookshelf a history book written in Dai language. The story goes that, in the mid-eleventh century (Dao 2006: 335), the *zhao pianling* in Jinghong sent his kin to explore the land of Sipsongpanna. When the *zhao pianling*'s kin arrived in the region, they discovered a fertile plain near a river. The place suited human settlement, yet there was no sign of human activity. They went back to Jinghong and reported the news to the *zhao pianling*. Dai people from Jinghong started moving to this newly discovered land and several villages were founded. For some time, the *meng* of Lun remained under the direct supervision of the *zhao pianling*. The latter eventually appointed a *zhaomeng* who settled in Manjing and ruled over the domain.

Late settlement in the Meng of Xing

Place names and landscape features are rooted in the legendary journey of Buddha Sakyamuni as well as local myth. The name of the *meng* of Xing was given in an episode of Buddha's peregrination in Southeast Asia and increases the sacred nature of certain sites.

During his journey, Sakyamuni rested one night in a cave of the hill of 'Guang Tom Pa Bat'. In the Dai language, 'to rest' is pronounced '*him*', which is transliterated as '*xing*' in pinyin. The name of the *meng* of Xing hence means 'the

meng in which Sakyamuni rested'. The story also tells that two female demons (*phi phong* in Dai language) tried to kill Sakyamuni when he was bathing in the river; however, Buddha transformed them into a mountain now known as 'Guang Naya'. Even today, monks from Mengxing Xiazhai temple go once every two weeks to the cave on the hill of 'Tom Pa Bat' and play drums to remember the passage of Buddha and to defend the region against the two female demons. The hill of 'Tom Pa Bat' is also linked with another hill, 'Guang Pa Long', which is situated behind the two sacred forests. According to villagers and Buddhist monks, it is the dwelling place of the spirit of an eagle. From time to time, the spirit of the eagle flies back and forth to Tom Pa Bat, leaving behind it a trail of light. Informants old and young confirm this story. They also told me Guang Pa Long is a sacred mountain and nobody goes near it. This may explain why no land was claimed on it; however, it is a limestone mountain and therefore its soil cannot sustain rubber trees.

In the *meng* of Xing, until the 1840s, settlement was scarce and sometimes non-existent. The region was a corridor for the transportation of goods, and attracted bandits who plundered the region from time to time. Therefore, population numbers had gone up and down.

In the late 1830s and early 1840s, two clans who migrated from different regions of Sipsongpanna established three villages in the *meng* of Xing. The first clan fled Menghai, east of Jinghong, because of internal conflicts and arrived in the *meng* of Xing. A week after the first clan founded the first village, a second clan that had left the northeast corner of Sipsongpanna arrived in 1838 following

a conflict with Chinese Muslims. The two clans decided that people from the first-arrived clan would move southward and found another village. That village was named Jinggang and became the political centre of the *meng* of Xing. The second-arrived group stayed in Mengxing Xiazhai and also founded the village of Bannayang.

During this time, the settlers allocated space for holy hills. One holy hill named Đong Shé was created near Mengxing Xiazhai to protect the village. The other holy hill was named Đong Gam and was created half way between Mengxing Xiazhai and Bannayang and protected the two villages. Another holy hill was created near Jinggang and protects the entire *meng* of Xing. For my research, I focused on Đong Shé and Đong Gam.

5.3 Repartition of land and labour

Feeny (1989: 285-187) explained that eighteenth century Siam was a land-abundant, labour-scarce economy and that the ruling elite appropriated labour through property rights in humans. Dai society of Sipsongpanna was highly hierarchical and Dai rulers enforced property rights in humans to manage labour and production of grain. The overall organization of society and labour was homogenous throughout Sipsongpanna (Song et al 1984: 104).

Dai society was divided in three main categories. First, there was the Dai aristocracy constituted by the ruler of all Sipsongpanna (*zhao pianling*), and by direct family members and family members by alliance. Then, there were the servants of the Dai aristocracy who constituted a privileged class or nobility. In

the last category, we find the commoners and slaves. The position of each one in the society determined property rights over humans as well as access or use rights in land. As I will show later in the chapter, rituals that consecrated holy hills and the guardian spirits that dwell on them confirmed and legitimated each position in society.

One's position in the social hierarchy determined access to labour and land. In each *meng*, the *zhao pianling* possessed his own field called the *na long zhao*. The *zhaomeng* also possessed his own field called the *na zhao meng*. Both types of fields were exclusive individual property and they were passed on from one generation to the next. Commoners owed corvée labour and worked these fields with their own tools.

Paya were given fields called *na dao hun* which served as their wage. They were worked by the *paya*'s household; if, for any reason, there was a lack of labour force in the *paya*'s household, commoners were invited to work the field and the harvest was shared. The *bolang ban* or village head was granted village land by the *zhaomeng*. Therefore, in each village, the *bolang ban* possessed the *na bolang* and administered another type of field called *na ban*. Commoners owed corvée labour to *na bolang* and had use rights to the *na ban*.

Commoners or *daimeng* were allowed to open land for cultivation. These fields were called *na hagun* and commoners had exclusive use rights to them, but they were ultimately the property of the *zhaomeng*. This type of land tenure was different from today's freehold private property; the commoners' position within the Dai hierarchy allowed them to have this type of access rights.

Commoners also owned livestock (buffalos, pigs and chicken). When they killed animals for subsistence, the *daimeng* had to give certain parts to the ruling class of the *meng* (i.e. *zhaomeng*, *bolang ban* and the *paya*) according to the *zhaomeng*'s rules. In addition to corvée labour in the fields, the commoners also had to build roads, canals for irrigation and males could be drafted to serve as soldiers. The *guhempzhao* were on the lowest echelon of the hierarchy. They were servants of the aristocracy and had a slave-like status.

5.4 How the holy hills came to be

The guardian spirits (*devata*) associated with the holy hills are spirits of the ancestors of the community. In this section, I tell the story of how one *meng* level and two village level holy hills came to be.

5.4.1 White Elephant hill

Two different yet related narratives describe how this hill became a sacred space known as the 'White Elephant hill'. These two tales also explain how the hill became the dwelling place of supernatural beings, or *devata*.

The first narrative is an epic, which tells the story of the 'Princess with Perfumed Hair' ('*Xiangfa Gongzhu*' in pinyin). According to one of my informants, the full story (200 pages long) was recently published in New Dai Script in Mengla County. In this epic, the 'Princess with Perfumed Hair' was born after her mother drank water from an elephant footprint. She lived in the forest with her father who was the king of white elephants. She eventually married the son of the *zhaomeng* of the *meng* of Lun. When they arrived in Manjing the fragrance of her

hair grew stronger and spread well beyond the border of the *meng* of Lun. Soon *zhaomeng* from all over Sipsongpanna gathered near Manjing. They all wanted to kidnap and marry her. A Sipsongpanna-wide civil war ensued. The Princess was hidden in a hole in the hill that now bears her name. As everyone was busy fighting, she was forgotten and died on the hill. Today, the hill bears her name, 'Princess with Perfumed Hair' (*Xiangfa Gongzhu*). According to the legend, her father, the king of the white elephants, rests on the nearby hill; hence the name 'White Elephant hill'. While most of the villagers, young and old, know that there is such an epic, only a few people know the whole story. An 80-year old man of Ban'e village told me this epic. Older Hani villagers also know the story as well as villagers from Mengxing Xiazhai and Bannayang. Before the 1950s, this epic was sung during rituals in Manjing. It was part of a collection of tales and stories that were sung in a verbal sparring fashion by two professional singers during rituals, wedding, and funerals. This sung verbal sparring is known as *zanhap* in Dai language. Performing the *zanhap* allowed knowledge to be transmitted from generation to generation and constituted an important part of the youngsters' education. Today, *zanhap* as a means to transmit knowledge has virtually disappeared.

The second narrative is shorter, and is rooted in the civil war mentioned above. According to another informant, an outstanding guard (*hunhan*) defended the *zhaomeng*'s life during the war and was killed. The *zhaomeng* proclaimed him a hero and his soul was to rest on that hill, later known as White Elephant hill. This narrative's interpretation does not provide an explanation for the name

of the hill itself. Nevertheless, the hill is the dwelling place of the *devata* of the White Elephant.

According to informants, one can go to the hill, but it is forbidden to desecrate it (i.e. emit bodily fluid, log trees, touch or move anything). This *devata* is particularly powerful on specific days of the Dai calendar. If one is exposed to this power, one will get sick and may die if the proper sacrifices are not made. Therefore, on one hand, if one trespasses on the *devata* of the White Elephant's dwelling place, the *devata* can be malicious and hurt or even kill people. On the other hand, the *devata* is also benevolent, for it protects the entire territory of the *meng* of Lun when proper and regular rituals are made. These rituals were supposed to appease the *devata* of the White Elephant and all the *devata* that dwelled in the *meng* of Lun. Parts of my research objectives were to analyse the role played by these rituals and look at their transformation in Dai society.

5.4.2 Đong Shé and Đong Gam holy hills

Đong Shé was and still is the dwelling place of two kinds of *devata*: *devata* Shé and *devata* Hosai. *Devata* Shé protected and still protect the elite of the village and *devata* Hosai protect the village territory, including its inhabitants, cattle, and land. The holy hill was established on the northeast end of the village by the first settlers in the early 1840s.

Đong Gam was and still is the dwelling place of two other types of *devata*: *devata* Ban and *devata* Nabanlong. *Devata* Ban protected and still protect village land and people of both Mengxing Xiazhai and Bannayang. *Devata* Nabanlong

protect the soul of the deceased, guide them in their journey in the afterlife, and reward or punish them. In short, *devata* Nabanlong protect the living against wandering souls. The holy hill was established half way between the two aforementioned villages in the 1840s.

According to informants, both holy hills protected and still protect village territory, its inhabitants, land, and cattle. The reason why the first settlers established the holy hills in these specific locations is unclear; their place and their size do not matter. What matters was to allocate space for holy hills on the outskirts of the village, so that *devata* could have a dwelling place.

Devata can cause misfortune for two kinds of wrongful behaviour: defiling the territory on which they dwell and failing to perform rituals due to them. Such behaviour can cause death and natural disasters, for the *devata* will cease to protect the territory and its inhabitants. In Xishuangbanna, *devata* have therefore influenced social behaviours and structured spatial practices.

Informants explained that when their clan settled in the area in the 1840s, space was allocated to the *devata*. *Devata* moved with, or were 'moved' by the villagers who allocated space for them. In addition these *devata* were and still are the same as is in their village from northeast Sipsongpanna.

Both Đong Shé and Đong Gam holy hills have been sacred and ritual spaces simultaneously. The ritual practices that consecrate the holy hills have been performed on the holy hills themselves. Since they are ritual spaces, people can trespass on them; however, it is forbidden to log trees. The *bomo* of each village has the right to enforce these interdictions.

Đong Shé was the property of Mengxing Xiazhai village only, while Đong Gam was owned in common by both Mengxing Xiazhai and Bannayang. In addition, each holy hill was also owned in common by the *devata* and the community of villagers.

Đong Shé and Đong Gam have been village level holy hills, owned in common by the community of villagers. The White Elephant hill has been a *meng* level holy hill, owned in common by the community of all the villages of the *meng* and supervised by *bomo meng*. We therefore see similarities between the different levels of administration and how they are related to governance.

Since both *meng* and village level holy hills are associated with spirits of ancestors, they mark the foci of unity of the community, either at the *meng* or village level. They also delineate different villages of the same *meng* and among different *meng* (see Gluckman 1965: 226-228).

Each community engages in a property relation with the guardian spirits of the ancestors (*devata*). This property relation entails a process of inclusion within or of exclusion from the community. As I explain below, the performance of rituals makes this process visible.

5.4.3 Sacred space, ritual space and rituals

Chidester & Linenthal (1995: 9) have explained that sacred space is the space on which rituals are performed; rituals consecrate and make the space sacred. Li Benshu (2008: 83) has explained that holy hills are a sacred space, but not always the location on which rituals are performed. From my fieldwork, I

learned that Manjing's White Elephant hill has not been the site for the performance of rituals. In contrast, in Mengxing Xiazhai, rituals were and are still performed on holy hill ground.

In Manjing, rituals used to take place on the east bank of the Luosuo River on the triangular-shaped peninsula. The space was lost to the village and now belongs to the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden. According to informants, the last ritual was officially performed in 1957. In Mengxing Xiazhai rituals ceased in the late 1950s as well.

In Dai language, rituals for the *devata* have been called '*gam*'. The word *gam* in Dai language means 'to present to somebody superior and respected'. *Gam meng* were rituals devoted to the guardian spirits (*devata*) of the *meng* and the *gam ban* for the village (*ban*). Consequently, in Manjing, I documented rituals called *gam meng*, whereas in Mengxing Xiazhai I documented *gam ban*. Whether it was *gam meng* or *gam ban*, rituals followed the same archetypal pattern. It is not in the scope of this thesis to give a detailed account of these rituals; therefore, I explain both rituals in general terms. During my fieldwork, I found out some valuable details about the *gam meng* rituals of Manjing. These details shed a new light on how the *zhaomeng* controlled people and labour in his domain.

5.4.4 Rituals to *devata*: the archetype of *gam meng* and *gam ban*

Rituals (*gam*) for *devata* were performed every year until 1957. These rituals were designed to appease the *devata* and request their protection. They

were spatial practices, which consecrated holy hills. Re-worked rituals are still performed today and they still consecrate holy hills. In this section I focus on pre-1950s rituals only; I examine re-worked rituals in a later section.

There were two kinds of *gam meng* : the *gam meng long* ('long' in Dai language means 'big') and the *gam meng noi* ('noi' in Dai language means 'small'). The former was held every three years and lasted two weeks; the latter was held in years with no *gam meng long*, and lasted two to three days. *Gam meng* were usually performed in May or June, after rice was planted, and were designed to protect territory of the *meng* and its inhabitants. *Gam ban* were also performed every year to protect village territory. The *gam meng* and *gam ban* were performed under the supervision of the *bomo meng* and *bomo ban*, respectively.

The *bomo* calculated the exact date the ritual was to be performed and informed the *zhaomeng* (for the *gam meng*) or the village head (for the *gam ban*). Before the rituals were performed, the territory that the *devata* protected needed to be sealed off physically with a rope made by villagers. Each household was assigned a length to make. In the case of the *gam meng*, the *zhaomeng* ordered the *hunxiet* to send messages to the authorities of the nearby *meng* to warn them that rituals were going to be performed. In addition, signs (see Figure 1) were posted on the road, at the boundary with the other *meng* (for the *gam meng*) or at the gates of the villages (for the *gam ban*). Before the signs were posted, outsiders had to leave the territory. Once the signs were posted, nobody was allowed in. This sealing off of the territory of the *meng* or the village was coupled

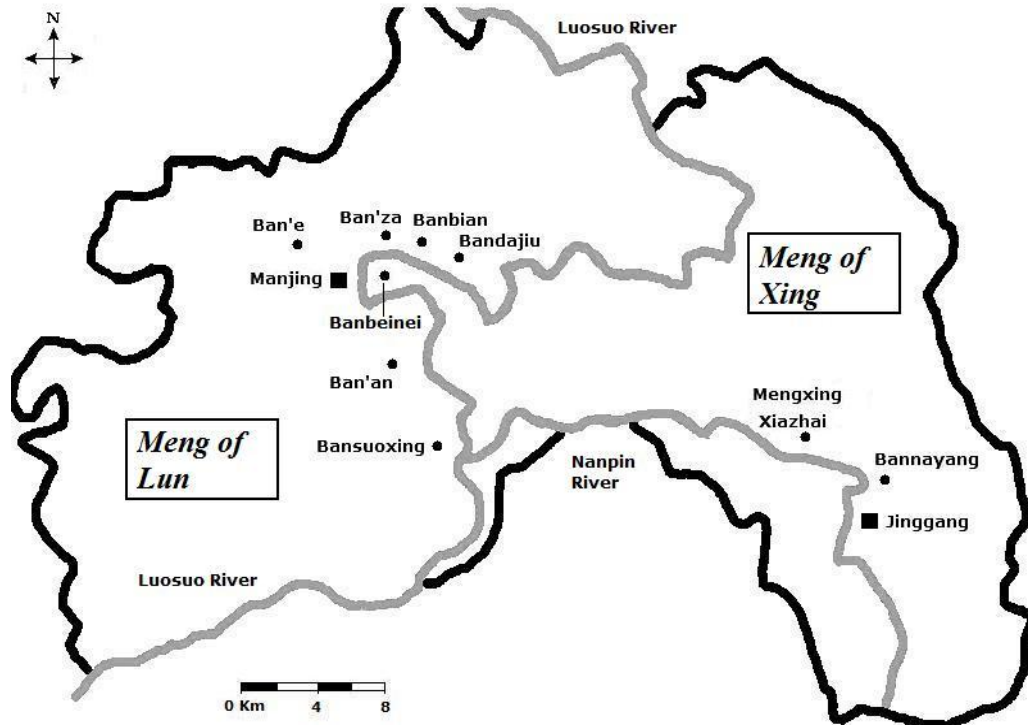
with a sealing in of livestock, confined to the households. Fishing and hunting were also forbidden activities for the time of the ritual. Once the territory was sealed off, the death of any living creature was a bad omen.

The *zhaomeng* and the elite assisted the *bomo* in levying livestock that were going to be ritually killed (buffalos and pigs) as well as other items such as betel tree branches, eggs, rice or grain, alcohol, and money. Before the sacrifice took place, the *bomo* conjured the *devata* to come and participate in the sacrifice. For the *gam meng*, all the village heads as well as the whole population of the *meng* had to be present. After the buffalos and pigs were sacrificed on the altar, the *bomo* performed divination by 'reading' the entrails of the slaughtered animals. Later in the day, each household had to sacrifice two chickens.

The territory remained sealed off for fifteen days (two or three for the *gam ban*). People and animals were to remain confined. If anything unusual happened during this period of time (natural disasters, someone's death and so forth), the *bomo* ordered other animals to be sacrificed and he extended the period of time during which the territory was to remain sealed off.

The sealing off showed the delimitation of the geographic area controlled by the *zhaomeng* (for the *gam meng*) and village head (for the *gam ban*); it therefore marked geographical differentiation according to administration levels. Moreover, during the periodic performance of the rituals, displacement of attention from the relationship between the controller (the Dai aristocracy) and the controlled (the commoners and the slaves) was made more intense (Sack 1986: 33). The holy hills and the *devata* that dwelled on them became the

sources of power. Rituals were spatial practices that consecrated the *devata* and the holy hills; they also legitimated the socio-spatial organization within the territory. Indeed, the performance of rituals reminded everyone of his or her place and role within Dai society. In addition, rituals reminded people of who belonged to the community, and who did not. Indeed, people who did not belong to the place (either the territory of the *meng* or the village) had to leave temporarily. The sealing off of the *meng* and the village territory during the *gam* rituals excluded people who did not belong to the community. Conversely, they also included outsiders (e.g. spouses from outside the *meng* or village territory, slaves) into the community. According to social definition of territory (Sack 1986: 36), membership in the community enabled people to belong to a particular *meng* or village.



Map 7 Location of villages in the *Meng of Lun* and the *Meng of Xing*

5.4.5 Specificity of the *meng of Lun's gam meng*

Collecting data on the *gam meng* was no easy task. One of my informants, a 72-year-old very knowledgeable man, argued he was too young to be able to answer my questions about the pre-1950s rituals. He kindly redirected me to two other older men who were living in villages twenty kilometres apart.

Interviews with these two senior informants shed new light on the *zhaomeng's* control over land, resources, and people as well as on governance and property rights in humans and in land. Unfortunately, they did not remember the exact details; nevertheless, they both explained that in the *meng of Lun*, the

zhaomeng assigned specific tasks to villages and when rituals took place, one person from each village had to perform this task. The villagers of Bandajiu, which is located east of Manjing on the Luosuo River, were in charge of canoes and boats. All year long, when the *zhaomeng* requested a boat to pay a visit to another village on the river, a villager of Bandajiu was to take him. During the *gam meng*, a villager of Bandajiu was in charge of taking the *zhaomeng* from the west bank of the Luosuo River to the east bank, where the rituals took place. In the villages of Ban'za and Banbian some people were in charge of playing music; professional singers skilled in the *zanhap* were to be found in the village of Ban'an. In the village of Ban'e people were to raise livestock and during the rituals one villager was to kill the first buffalo. Inhabitants of another village were responsible for deploying the rope made by villagers, sealing off the *meng* of Lun during the rituals, and hanging the signs on the rope (see Figure 1).

The two senior informants did not know the rationale behind assigning specific tasks to specific villages. The power came from the *zhaomeng* and was implemented by the villages' headmen. Informants also explained that couples who had been married for less than twelve months and who gave birth to an infant before the *gam meng* was performed had to pay a fine, and sacrifice one buffalo. A senior informant from Mengxing Xiazhai explained that such a measure was not applied in the *meng* of Xing. Again, informants were not able to tell me about the rationale behind this measure. It seems it is linked to control over purity and therefore does not originate from the *zhaomeng* himself; nonetheless, it shows an attempt to control bodies and sexuality. This system of

assigning specific tasks to villagers and controlling bodies and sexuality thus manifested the *zhaomeng's* control over land, resources, and population through the villages headmen. The tasks that villages were responsible for all year long were performed during the *gam meng* and therefore reflected the structure of Dai society. The rituals reflected the divisions and hierarchy of Dai social and political life. The ritual performance reminded everyone of their position in society, either in the hierarchy or in geographical space. The rituals thus reinforced and legitimated one's social identity as well as reified the *zhaomeng's* rule. The production of social and sacred space was reflected and legitimated in the *gam meng* rituals.

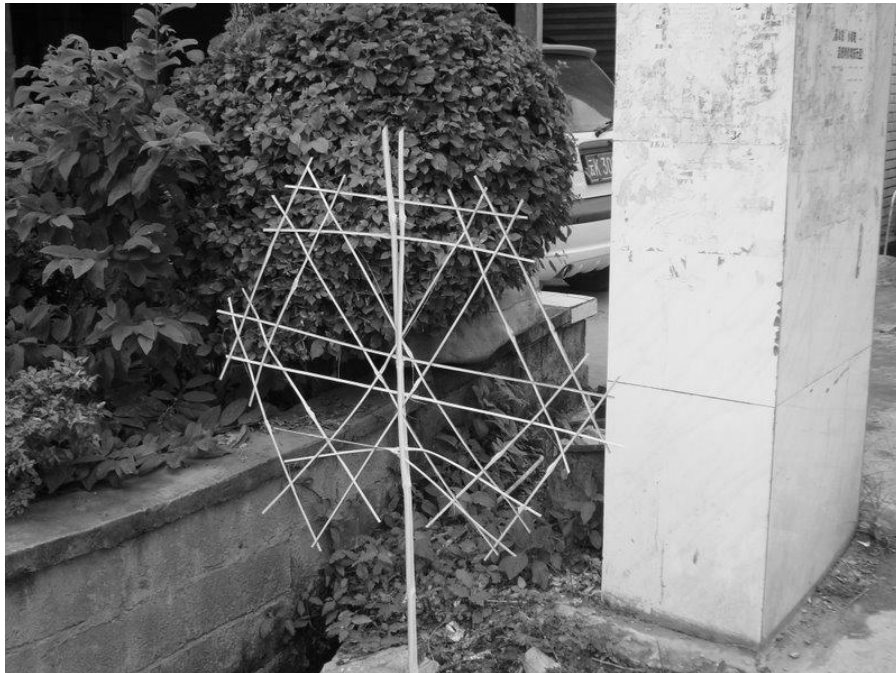


Figure 1 Example of sign used to seal off the territory when rituals are performed, Mengxing Xiazhai, June 2009

Level of administrative division	Devata :level, name dwelling place	Title of bomo	Name of rituals, Frequency and duration	
<i>Meng</i> level	Manjing	<i>Devata Meng</i>	<i>Bomo meng</i>	<i>Gam meng noi</i> (every first and second year) 2-3 days
		<i>Devata</i> of the White Elephant		
		White Elephant Hill (protects the whole territory of the <i>meng</i> of Lun)		
<i>Ban</i> (village) level	Mengxing Xiazhai	<i>Devata Ban</i>	<i>Bomo ban</i> (one for Đong Shé holy hill)	<i>Gam ban</i> (every year) 2-3 days
		<i>Devata</i> Shé <i>Devata</i> Hosai		
		Đong Shé holy hill (protects the territory of Mengxing Xiazhai)		
	Mengxing Xiazhai Bannayang	<i>Devata Ban</i>	<i>Bomo ban</i> (one in each village for Đong Gam Holy hill)	<i>Gam ban</i> (every year) 2-3 days
		<i>Devata</i> Ban <i>Devata</i> Nabanlong		
		Đong Gam holy hill (protects the territory of both Mengxing Xiazhai and Bannayang)		

Table 1 Holy hills, *devata* and *gam* rituals before the 1950s

5.5 Holy hills and property rights

When talking about the spirit of the White Elephant, informants explained to me that: “We can say that White Elephant hill belongs (*shuyu*) to the spirit [of the White Elephant]” (*baixiangshan shi shuyu baixiangshen de*). Concerning Đong Shé and Đong Gam, both holy hills were sacred space allocated to the *devata* on the outskirts of the village by the ancestors of the settlers who arrived in the area in the 1840s. According to informants, both holy hills have been owned by the two *devata* that dwell on them.

Durkheim argued that all land used to belong to divinities (1969: 183) and that by means of rituals people were able to appropriate land (1969: 185). Rituals allowed humankind to appropriate land, and give a part of the product of the land to the divinities (1969: 190). Consequently, rituals are part of a system of rights that helps define the relation between humans and divinities. Macpherson (1979: 4) explained that “property is a *political* relation between persons ... [f]or any property relation is a system of rights of each person in relation to other persons”. We can therefore say that there is a political relationship that links *devata* and Dai people. Dai people must manage and protect holy hills, the dwelling place of *devata*. Rituals must be performed to the *devata*, who in return protect the territory.

Devata are everywhere, and humans have rights to land because they perform rituals to the *devata*. Consequently, we can say that *devata* and humans own the territory or parts of the territory in common. The holy hills therefore have multiple layers of ownership. Indeed, as informants explained, the holy hills first

belong to the *devata* that dwell on them. It is not in the scope of this thesis to discuss the concept of *devata*; however, as *devata* constitute the first layer of ownership, I would like to highlight a few facts about the nature of this non-human owner. The concept of *devata* encompasses a range of supernatural entities that can be place-based (they dwell in a specific location) as well as non-place-based (they are wandering spirits). An informant told me that *devata* are 'nowhere and everywhere'. *Devata* can be either one single entity or a collection of supernatural entities that villagers refer to with one name. Informants explained to me that, for example, *devata ban* is the collective entity of all the generations of deceased village heads. Finally, *devata* can be benevolent as well as malicious. Every human being is a potential *devata* and every *devata* is a former human being.

In the past, holy hills were owned in common by *devata* and humans. All land of Sipsongpanna was owned by the *zhao pianling* in Jinghong, and management of *meng* and village (*ban*) was delegated to the *zhaomeng* and the *bolang ban* (village head). Consequently, *meng* level holy hills were administered by the *zhaomeng* and village level holy hills were administered by the *bolang ban*. At each level, it was the *bomo*'s duty to perform rituals that consecrated the holy hills. In addition, because the territory of the *meng* or the village (*ban*) was protected by the *devata* that dwell on holy hill, it was each villager's responsibility to respect this sacred space. Therefore, I argue that *meng* level holy hills were held in common by the whole community, while village level holy hills were held in common by the villagers.

Two events in Chinese history, the collapse of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) in 1911 and the Chinese Revolution of the mid-nineteenth century contributed to put Sipsongpanna under direct Chinese rule. In the following section, I give a brief historical overview of the Republican Era (1911-1949) and of the Chinese Revolution (early 1950s) and the impact of these two periods on Sipsongpanna.

5.6 The Republican era and the rise of Mao (1911-1950)

The Native Chieftain System ceased when the Qing dynasty collapsed in 1911. Chinese troops invaded Sipsongpanna in the 1930s; nonetheless, the *zhao pianling* ruled over his domain until 1950 (Liew Herres 2007: 53-54). In the early 1950s, after the Chinese Revolution of 1949, Sipsongpanna was integrated into the People's Republic of China. The changes in policies for property rights and land use have contributed to transformation of holy hills. They also contributed to create a gap in Dai people's cultural tradition (Hasegawa 2000 : 4).

5.6.1 Republican era (1911-1949)

After the imperial regime collapsed in 1911, a period of political disunion ensued. At the turn of the twentieth century, foreign nations had established their own spheres of influence in Chinese territory (Gernet 1996: 630). This political breakup favoured the ascendancy of warlords, local military governors whose armed forces consisted of peasants equipped with Western weapons (Gernet 1996: 630- 631). Chiang Kai-shek and his armies successfully pacified Northern China in 1927 and established the Republic of China the same year. Warlords

and the Communists troops of Mao Zedong challenged Chiang Kai-shek's authority until 1937 (Gernet 1996: 643).

In 1937, Japanese armies invaded eastern China. Chiang Kai-shek's government fled to the interior. He also sent his troops to Sipsongpanna to protect the border against a possible Japanese offensive from Burma (Sturgeon 2005: 74-75). When the Japanese troops were defeated in 1945, a civil war ensued between the Republican armies of Chiang Kai-shek and the Communist troops of Mao Zedong, in which the Communists were victorious.

5.6.2 Foundation of the People's Republic of China (1949)

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was established on October 1, 1949 in Beijing. However, at that time, not all parts of China were under Communist rule. It took a few years for the People's Liberation Army to oust the armies of Chiang Kai-shek from China, including in Sipsongpanna. The Dai polity was officially 'liberated' and incorporated into the PRC in 1953. The Dai polity of Sipsongpanna became the Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Xishuangbanna (*Xishuangbanna Daizu Zizhizhou*).

After the Chinese Revolution of the mid-twentieth century, major changes occurred in Sipsongpanna. The *zhao pianling* abdicated his throne in 1950 (Liew Herres 2007: 55). In the early 1950s, the new central leadership under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reconfigured the socio-spatial organization and all land became people's property managed by the state. The rule of the *zhao pianling* ceased and was replaced by a complex, multilayered state hierarchy

organized by the CCP. Between 1949 and 1954, “nationwide land reforms coupled with fierce political struggles against landlords ... expanded the effective reach of communist party state down to the townships, allowing central rulers effective control below the county level for the first time in Chinese history” (Chung 2010: 3). In Sipsongpanna, however, the Dai aristocracy had effectively reached to this level all along.

In Chinese language, this period is called ‘liberation’ (*jiefang*). According to the prevailing Chinese Communist ideology, the CCP ‘liberated’ farmers of China from feudalism. Although it seemed like a promising liberation from property rights in humans, the evidence shows the contrary. The CCP did not abolish property rights in humans, but reconfigured them. Dai commoners did not work for the rulers (*zhao*) in Jinghong, but for the CCP which ruled from Beijing. Gernet (1996: 663) explains that right from the foundation of the CCP, the party had “utopian aspirations” of a “classless, unanimous society in which everything belongs to everyone”. This hope was nourished by old popular traditions and a strong belief in the power of the will (Gernet 1996: 663). Party leaders believed that China could achieve rapid industrialization, financed by grain production. The control of labour and peasants thus became the cornerstone of central leaders, since control over peasant labour was needed to produce grain.

From the 1950s onward, a series of policies and campaigns contributed to transform the landscape, and also to transform the vision Dai villagers had of their landscapes. On one hand, the traditional institutions and administrative divisions were dismantled. They were replaced by the Communist bureaucracy

and the Chinese divisions of the territory into provinces, prefectures, counties, townships and administrative villages. On the other hand, the evolution of the role of religion among Chinese thinkers had an impact on the landscape of the region. In addition, the number of Han-Chinese who settled in the region increased significantly. They settled mainly in the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden and in the state-owned rubber farms.

Institutional and Administrative changes

In Mao Zedong's new China, peasants were to assemble in peasant associations to 'overthrow local tyrants and evil gentry' (Mao 1979: 19). By doing so they freed themselves from feudalism. It was supposed to be a radical turnover (*fanshen*) in peasants' lives. Consequently, the *zhaomeng* and the Dai elite were overthrown and replaced by a village committee, which was and still is the lowest echelon of the communist bureaucracy. The *meng* of Lun and the *meng* of Xing became one administrative entity known as Menglun Township (Menglun zhen). Menglun Township was divided into village committees (*cunweihui*), whose members were in charge of implementing the central leadership policies in their administrative villages.

All the land and resources in China, including in Xishuangbanna, were declared to be owned by all the people, which effectively meant state property. With the first agrarian reform of 1956, natural villages were further divided into production teams and the people under collectivist rule cultivated all the fields. Everyone had to produce grain for the state. For the Dai commoners, this reform did not change their lifestyle much; the radical turnover (*fanshen*) promised by

Mao did not happen. In fact, according to some informants, the situation improved only slightly under the communist rule. Indeed, under the *zhaomeng*'s rule, the labour available in each household did not matter. Each household had to work the fields of the *zhao pianling*, the *zhaomeng* and the *bolang ban*. Consequently, some households with limited labour had no time to open their own fields for cultivation, causing much distress. Informants who experienced the collective period (1954-1982) explained that it did not matter if one was planting the grain well, that as long as one was working one had something to eat. They also explained that even though the surface of land under cultivation was much larger than today, there were still periods of time during which grain was scarce.

In pre-1950s Sipsongpanna, labour was managed and administered by the Dai aristocrats for whom property rights in humans constituted their power. Corvée labourers had to cultivate the fields of the aristocracy and were used for military and civilian tasks. In addition, commoners had the possibility to open their own fields and dispose of the products of their labour. After 1950, the new Communist leaders in Beijing successfully set up a multilayered organizational structure that enabled them to gain effective control over rural areas (Chung 2010: 3). During the collective period, (1954-1982) labour was organized for grain production. In the central leaders' view, grain produced in rural areas was needed to feed urban populations and to finance the economic development of the new socialist society, and consequently "farmers were organized into teams to produce grain for state goals" (Sturgeon 2004: 145). As a result, Mao and the central leaders did not really abolish property rights in humans during the

collective period (1954-1982). Property rights in humans were not really abolished until the beginning of economic reforms in the early 1980s when communes were dismantled.

With all land becoming state property, the central leadership could claim any part of Xishuangbanna's territory. Menglun Nature Reserve was created in 1958 (XSBNGK 2008: 405); the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden (XTBG) was established in 1959 on a triangular-shaped peninsula carved by the Luosuo River. The XTBG encroached on Manjing ritual space and destroyed a Dai village. Before 1959 on this peninsula there was a village named Banbeinei. Informants in Manjing explained that when the XTBG was established, Banbeinei villagers were given the choice to either help the Han-Chinese or move out to surrounding villages. All the families but one moved out; the village and its temple were torn down and gave way to office buildings. When asked about the XTBG, some informants expressed disdain as a result of this takeover. Near Mengxing Xiazhai, the Mengxing State Rubber farm was established in 1962 and claimed much of the land belonging to the village. While informants regretted that fertile land was lost to the rubber farm, others explained that they worked for the state farm authorities until the Cultural Revolution. An informant who worked for the rubber farm joined his hands together and explained that, at that time, both Han Chinese and Dai people started working together for the benefit of the nation (*minzu tuanjie*), and that both ethnic groups were helping each other out (*huxiang bangzhu*).

6: TRANSFORMATION OF MANJING AND MENGXING XIAZHAI HOLY HILLS AFTER 1950

6.1 Evolution between 1950 and 1980: loss and conservation

In the following section, I tell the stories of the transformation of Manjing and Mengxing Xiazhai's holy hills. Changes occurred over two periods: the Maoist era (from 1950 to 1980) and the post-Mao era, or the period of economic reforms (from the early 1980s). Reconfiguration of the socio-spatial hierarchy and shifting property rights over these two periods have had different implications for the three holy hills of my case studies. Manjing holy hill was partially destroyed during the Mao era; what was destroyed was planted in rubber during the post-Mao era, and became a secularized space. One of Mengxing Xiazhai's holy hills was untouched until 2004; another one was destroyed during the Mao era and re-created in another site during the post-Mao era.

6.1.1 The White Elephant hill

Loss of Ritual space

On the triangular-shaped peninsula, the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS) established the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden (XTBG) in 1959. Consequently, Manjing lost the ground on which rituals to the guardian spirit of the territory were performed. The White Elephant hill however was not desecrated until the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976).

The rituals to the *devata* of the *meng* stopped after 1957 because the village lost its ritual space, and also because, due to the increasing presence of Han Chinese, villagers were afraid to perform the rituals. Finally, rituals required the territory of the *meng* to be sealed off and outsiders to leave the territory. An informant said that at that time, due to the settlement of Han Chinese in the area, it was inconceivable to ask them to leave during the period of the rituals and therefore rituals could not be performed. Although the ritual space was lost, the White Elephant hill remained a sacred space. In theory, the interruption of rituals for a long period might upset the *devata*, which, in return, might withdraw protection over territory and its inhabitants. A senior informant explained that the level of the river was sometimes unusually low or high, causing either drought or floods. He implicitly linked these natural phenomena with the interruption of the rituals. Interviews with other informants do not show strong evidence that the *devata* withdrew protection. Informants explained that during the collective period the low quantity of grain due to bad harvests was human-made.

Cultural Revolution

The Dai aristocracy had been abolished by the early 1950s; however, visible signs of “feudalism”, that is, religion still existed in Xishuangbanna. The Communists introduced class struggle, part of which is reflected in religion because it “involves both a struggle against imperialist and reactionary forces using religion for counter-revolutionary activities” (MacInnis 1972: 51).

In 1966, Chinese Communist theorists declared that “religion and superstition is entirely one and the same thing” (MacInnis 1972: 75). The

outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 brought a radical and militant atheism which aimed at abolishing religion. Quickly, the campaign against the 'Four Olds' (old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits) spread throughout China and did not spare rural Xishuangbanna (Davis 2005: 22).

During the Cultural Revolution in Xishuangbanna, destruction was uneven. Some religious buildings were burned to the ground while others were left intact. The number of temples dropped from 574 in 1950 to 145 in 1980 (Davis 2003: 191). In addition, "the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) caused deep cracks in the continuity of [Dai people's] cultural traditions" (Hasegawa 2000: 4).

The White Elephant hill was not destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, but the belief linked to it was severely undermined. Indeed, during interviews about the power of the spirit of the White Elephant hill, informants reported that during the Cultural Revolution, some villagers stopped acknowledging the hill as sacred. They let their livestock graze on the holy hill. The same informants reported that some of these farmers came out of the sacred forest badly burnt and died afterwards, suggesting that the *devata* was still powerful.

This story is an example of what can happen when one transgresses the taboo of the hill. Informants never explicitly linked deaths of a villager who desecrated the hill to revenge of the guardian spirit. The link was always implicit; moreover, many added that in the village, everyone knows these stories, but people never openly discuss this story (*zhe xie gushi, mei ren gongkai de shuo*). This story, among others, helps explain how state policies and national campaigns have had an influence on people's belief, how changing beliefs have

shaped new patterns of behaviour among villagers, and how these villagers have transformed the landscape.

The 'More Land for Grain' Campaign of the 1970s

Mao Zedong gave absolute priority to the development of heavy industry; “[a] tremendous effort was demanded of the peasantry, which had simultaneously to change its habits and feed towns..., [and] pay for the machinery sold by the U.S.S.R.” (Gernet 1996: 665). With the beginning of the collective period in 1958 all the energy of farmers was mobilized to produce grain. Farmers were organized into teams, and teams into communes (Sturgeon 2004: 145). The Communist regime endeavoured to increase agricultural production rapidly “by utilizing every piece of land” (Gernet 1996: 667).

Informants explained that the quantity of grain produced locally during the collective era was low and sometimes not sufficient. The central leadership needed to compensate for low production; in the central view “[t]rees were seen as an unproductive and inefficient land use, and ... forests were often classified as ‘wasteland’” (Sturgeon 2004: 145). In 1970, in order to compensate for low production, the central leadership initiated the ‘More Land for Grain’ campaign, which was part of nationwide movement to extend cultivated area. Several slogans were coined: “Strive for Plentiful Harvest, Extend the Area in Grain” (*‘duo feng shou, guang shi liang’*), “Claim Wasteland to Plant Grain” (*‘xiang huangshan yao liang’*), or “Take Grain as the Key Link” (*‘yi liang wei gang’*).

In Manjing, the White Elephant hill was claimed to plant grain. Local village committee members implemented the policy; they ordered four villagers to

climb the hill with torches and burn the forest down. A strong wind blew the torches out as the four villagers ascended the hill. According to my informants, this was the manifestation of the power of the White Elephant hill spirit. The second attempt was successful and the fire consumed the entire forest, except for its top part. Senior villagers explained that fire mysteriously stopped and left the top part intact. According to my informants, the four villagers whom local village committee members ordered to burn down the hill died soon afterward. Two of them died of diseases, and the two others died in an incident involving shotguns.

Soon after the hill burnt down, village elders stepped forward and declared that the intact top had to remain untouched. The hilltop that remained intact became the new limit to the sacred space; the part that was lost and claimed for grain ceased to be sacred space, meaning that the area of sacred space decreased. Removal of territory from religious authority (see Berger 1967: 107) is a step towards secularization; however, elders stepped forward as the religious authority and asserted their role by declaring the hilltop sacred space. For all the villagers, at that time, the hilltop became the White Elephant hill. The religious authorities lost control over the part of the hill that burnt down, but they still had control over the hilltop. The part that burnt was secularized; indeed, as I will explain later, the local village committee decided to allocate property rights on that part of the hill at the beginning of the 1980s. In the meantime, villagers planted grain on the hill. A non-native species of tree, *cassia siamea* started to grow back. In four to five years *cassia siamea* can grow to a height of 15 metres

with a diameter of 10 to 15 centimetres. Informants explained that *cassia siamea* was very important because the tree was used as firewood.

6.1.2 Đong Shé and Đong Gam holy hills

The holy hill of Đong Shé, which protects the village of Mengxing Xiazhai, was established in the 1840s by the first settlers and has remained untouched until very recently. The Mengxing state rubber farm was established in the 1960s. Older informants recall that a few old-growth Bodhi trees (*ficus religiosa*) that had belonged to the village were cut down, but the state rubber farm, which claimed much fertile village land and virtually surrounds the village today, did not claim land on Đong Shé holy hill. As in Menglun, villagers were afraid to perform rituals on the holy hill; consequently, religious activity stopped during the Cultural Revolution with the destruction of the village Buddhist temple.

While Đong Shé was spared from destruction during the Cultural Revolution, Đong Gam, which protects both Mengxing Xiazhai and Bannayang was burnt down in 1967. The holy hill originally covered an area of 4 to 5 *mu*. According to interviews conducted in both Mengxing Xiazhai and Bannayang, a state transportation office building (*jiaotong ju*) was built on the previously sacred ground. The original building was torn down and replaced by residential housing. The only remnant of the original Đong Gam is a mango tree, which still stands at the northern end of Mengxing town. Post-1967 Đong Gam became a secular space, but for villagers the mango tree has marked the location of pre-Cultural Revolution Đong Gam. Today villagers still interpret this location in religious terms. One villager from Bannayang explained that “Han Chinese destroyed it

[Đong Gam]; it was right there where the mango tree is standing. We [the villagers] ‘moved’ it to Mengxing Xiazhai (*ba ta bandao Xiazhai*)”.

6.1.3 Does destruction of sacred space mean secularization?

Before the end of the collective period, the sacred space of the White Elephant hill had been reduced. In the 1970s, village elders had declared that the part of the forest that was burnt down was no longer the dwelling place of the *devata*; however, the forest that had remained intact was and still is sacred and has remained untouched until today. During the Cultural Revolution, Đong Gam had been destroyed as well. Property rights and changes in governance since the pre-1950 period have contributed to the partial or total destruction of these two holy hills. The central leaders in Beijing reconfigured the social hierarchy and set up a complex organizational structure that reached deep into rural areas. In addition, all land became people’s property, that is to say, state property. Central leaders could dispose of land and labour to achieve their state vision based on utopian aspirations (Gernet 1996: 663). With the Cultural Revolution, ‘sacred’ was not a valid form of classification of territory. This change allowed for its intentional destruction, as in Đong Gam, or non-intentional destruction, as in the White Elephant hill, which was destroyed to free up space to plant grain, not because it was sacred.

Berger explained (1967: 107) that secularization means more than the removal of property and territory from the control of religious authorities; secularization is the process by which broad masses of the population stop using religion as a source of interpretation. The pre-1967 location of Đong Gam and

the part of the White Elephant hill that burnt down in the early 1970s became secularized space.

I already explained how territory was removed from religious authorities. I want now to examine what happened to these religious authorities and their control over sacred space and what happened to the villagers themselves.

In pre-1950 Sipsongpanna, control over holy hills was operated by either the *zhaomeng* (for *meng* level holy hills) or by the village head (for village level holy hills); in addition, the *bomo meng* or *bomo ban* negotiated the relationships between the humans and the *devata meng* or *devata ban* respectively. The binaries *zhaomeng* – *bomo meng* and village head – *bomo ban* were at the core of what could be called a ‘Dai religious authority’. In the early 1950s, the Communists dismantled the mode of governance set up by the Dai aristocracy; however, *bomo meng* and *bomo ban*, as people, still existed and their function has survived. In addition, village elders have stepped up as religious authorities.

Acts of desecration occurred during the Mao era. If beliefs in the *devata* and the misfortunes they can cause were undermined, these beliefs did not however disappear, nor did they cease to be a source of interpretation. At the end of the Mao era, Đong Shé was still sacred and Đong Gam was secularized; Manjing holy hills was partly secularized. As I explain in the following section, allocation of state-property rights during the period of economic reforms confirmed and deepened secularization of Manjing holy hill. In the same time, the economic reforms contributed to re-create Đong Gam in a new location.

6.2 Post- Mao era and the economic reforms

The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 put an end to ten years of turmoil. Deng Xiaoping took over the leadership of the central government and focused on reforming the Chinese economy. The new regime “abandoned the previous system of collective production, diversified rural economy away from grain production and turned to economic incentives to spur growth” (Oi 1999: 617).

In the early 1980s, the objective of the new regime was to transform a poverty-stricken country into a well-off society under the leadership of the Communist party (Li H. 2008 16-17). Property rights in humans were abolished and replaced by property rights in land. Farmers did not provide labour for the state anymore; instead, they became household entrepreneurs.

In Xishuangbanna, the lives of Dai farmers and their landscapes were transformed by the implementation of the Household Responsibility System (HRS) and the Three Fixes of Forestry (*linye sanding*). Both policies allowed for the allocation of property rights on sacred space and contributed to rubber becoming a smallholder crop. They also devolved responsibility to the village level in managing village collective land. Therefore, the viewpoints and decisions of the village committee members were determinant in the loss or conservation of holy hills. As my research shows, in Manjing, local officials confirmed the partial destruction of the White Elephant hill and allowed for the allocation of household property rights on it, therefore contributing to its secularization; the hilltop, however, has remained sacred until today. In Mengxing Xiazhai, on the contrary, local officials have helped recreate Dong Gam holy hill.

The HRS had no impact on the White Elephant hill. Indeed, the introduction of the HRS granted households access and use rights to plots of land, but only for paddy fields. The introduction of the Three Fixes of Forestry, however, allowed for the division of the White Elephant hill into individual plots of land which were contracted out to households. The three main objectives of this policy were to (1) determine the boundaries between state forests and collective forests, (2) determine the ownership of freehold forestland, and (3) determine the rights and responsibilities of owners (Xu & Ribot 2004: 160).

The Three Fixes of Forestry was implemented in two steps between late 1982 and early 1984. The policy allowed for the introduction of rubber as a smallholder crop. Implementation of the Three Fixes of Forestry and introduction of rubber had different impacts in my research sites. In Manjing village, both policies brought new incentives to allocate household property rights on the White Elephant hill (except of the hilltop). Villagers gradually planted rubber on the hill. In Mengxing Xiazhai the implementation of the Three Fixes of Forestry contributed to the allocation of a new space for Đong Gam; introduction of rubber had limited impact on the village's holy hills.

6.2.1 The 'rubber factor'

At the time the economic reforms were first implemented (1982-1984), rubber was only cultivated in state-owned rubber farms. The Deng Xiaoping era contributed to make rubber a smallholder crop and to transform the landscape dramatically.

From the 1950s, asserting and enforcing control over the territory of Xishuangbanna became essential to the central leadership. In the mid-20th century, after the Chinese Revolution, the central leadership was determined to achieve self-sufficiency in rubber; in addition, Beijing was fighting in Korea and had to deal with an embargo on raw materials. Consequently, the introduction of rubber plantations in state-owned farm became a strategic necessity to attain self-sufficiency in rubber (Sturgeon & Menzies 2006: 25; Xu 2006: 254).

Sack (1986: 34) explained that territoriality makes territory act as a container for spatial properties. Territory becomes an object to which properties and attributes are assigned. This contributes to a view of territory as a conceptually empty space. When the things, in this case rubber trees, that are to be contained are not present, territory is conceptually empty and can be filled. Consequently, based on state conceptions of a territory that could be filled according to its plans, regions of southern China, including southern Guangdong province, Hainan Island as well as Xishuangbanna became the territory of rubber (Chapman 1990: 40).

In Menglun Township, rubber was cultivated in two state-controlled institutions: the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden (XTBG) and the Mengxing state-rubber farm. Both institutions played an important role in the recent histories of the villages.

The XTBG was established in 1959 by the Chinese Academy of Sciences. It was first designed as a research centre on tropical plants and a site where Han Chinese bred rubber trees adapted to the climate of Xishuangbanna. The

Mengxing state-rubber farm was established in 1962 near the village of Mengxing Xiazhai. Dai informants explained that Han Chinese built the National Road 213 to allow for the setting up of the rubber farm on their village land.

The development and expansion of Mengxing state rubber owed much to the contribution of the 'sent-down youth', educated young people from urban areas who were sent to rural areas to teach peasants revolutionary thinking and to endure the hardship of a farmer's life. Tens of thousands of them were sent to Xishuangbanna during the 1960s and the 1970s to extend the area of rubber (Sturgeon & Menzies 2006: 23). By the end of the 1970s, the majority of educated youths had returned home, leaving the state rubber farms with a shortage of labour (Yang 2009: 401). Minority farmers were considered backward and most state farm authorities refused to hire them, but since rubber production had to expand, in the 1980s state agents encouraged minority farmers to plant rubber trees on their household lands (Sturgeon & Menzies 2006: 23).

Dai farmers explained that, at first, they were reluctant to plant rubber trees. They were used to plant the crops they could eat (*yi liang wei zhu*). Nonetheless, some villagers did plant extensive areas of rubber trees in the mid-1980s, and even contracted bank loans to buy more seedlings, not knowing whether this bold move would pay off one day. Those who did so explained they were afraid, but trusted the government. In the 1990s, farmers started to tap their rubber trees. They realised that tapping rubber provided a steady source of income and an alternative to hard work in the paddy fields. In 1994, China opened the natural rubber price to the global market. Informants explained that

prices went up and plummeted with the Asian financial crisis of 1997. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, virtually no land was planted in rubber.

In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). The early years of the twenty-first century brought new incentives. First, the price of natural rubber was increasing again; it increased steadily until the global financial crisis of 2008. Second, in 2001, household forestland contracts were renewed and extended for a period of thirty years. Dai farmers were thus ensured they had use and access rights to forestlands until 2031. Finally, local officials planted large areas in rubber trees and therefore showed it was safe to plant rubber again. For these reasons, land planted in rubber increased dramatically over the past decade. With the global financial crisis, the price of natural rubber fell by fifty percent. An informant explained, while driving to the local rubber-processing factory in his SUV, that while the price has dropped significantly, people still make a comfortable living. Rubber remains an attractive cash crop.

6.2.2 Impact of state policy implementation on the White Elephant hill

The introduction of rubber trees as a smallholder crop in the mid-1980s was a watershed event in the life of Dai villagers. The XTBG and the Mengxing state rubber farm supplied seedlings to nearby villages of Manjing and Mengxing Xiahzhai. Both institutions also provided training, which helped Dai farmers learn to plant and tap rubber trees.

In Manjing village, the implementation of the Three Fixes of Forestry created household access rights to the White Elephant hill. During the first step

of the Three Fixes of Forestry in late 1982, with the differentiation between state-owned and collectively-owned forest, forested hills were allocated to the village as collective forests. The collective forests became the first site of rubber tree plantation for the village of Manjing. People were obligated by law to plant a minimum area in rubber trees based on household size. Each household had to plant at least one *mu* for each adult, 0.8 *mu* for each elder, and 0.5 *mu* for each child. The amount in labour determined the area the household had access and use rights to; later, the area planted was contracted out to the household for a twenty-year period.

In 1984, the second step of the Three Fixes of Forestry policy sought to establish some kind of balance between those households that planted a large area, and those households that planted a small area. Therefore, land that was not claimed on the collective forest was measured and allocated to households with small areas of rubber.

Until the second step of the Three Fixes of Forestry there was a collective forest that the villagers had used to collect *cassia siamea* for firewood. This collective forest was situated at the foot of the White Elephant hill, behind the village temple and the pagoda. After the White Elephant hill was burnt down in the early 1970s, *cassia siamea* grew back, but the density of trees varied. Both the collective forest and the White Elephant hill were treated as one large collective forest. Five trees were allocated to each household, independently of the area covered. Therefore, during the second step of the Three Fixes of Forestry in 1984, uneven areas were granted to households on the White

Elephant hill. However, while most of the area of the White Elephant hill was allocated to households, the south-western part of the hill, which covers several dozen *mu*, was not allocated and was to remain an unexploited village collective forest.

6.2.3 Beliefs, policies and property

At this stage of the implementation of the Three Fixes of Forestry, the belief in the spirit of the White Elephant hill became important. First of all, there was a gap in experience between older villagers, who grew up before the 1950s and believed in the power of the guardian spirit, and the generation born after the 1950s who did not. Villagers who believed in the power of the White Elephant hill spirit did not want a plot on the hill itself, but the village was overcrowded and people looked for ways to acquire a plot of land to build new houses. A period of informal land exchange ensued, in which plots on the White Elephant hill, plots on the collective *cassia siamea* forest and plots of paddy fields were exchanged, sold or bought among households. Consequently, villagers built houses on the plots allocated or acquired on the collective *cassia siamea* forest behind the temple and the pagoda, and the area of the village expanded southward, to the foot of the White Elephant hill.

One of my informants was born during the Cultural Revolution. He acquired a plot of land on the former collective forest at the foot of the White Elephant hill and built a house there in the mid-1980s. He told me that first he and his wife did not believe in the power of the guardian spirit of the hill. They had heard about it, but to them, it was superstition, stories to scare children. He

and his wife explained to me that one morning they woke up blind. After two days they decided to go to the village of Banlun and see a *bomo* healer. The *bomo* told them that the spirit of the hill was angry at them and that it made them blind; however, they could recover eyesight if they sacrificed two chickens to the guardian spirit. They did so and recovered sight.

Concerning plots allocated on the White Elephant hill, I heard different stories from other informants. Some went to see a *bomo* and performed sacrifices before starting to plant grain on their White Elephant hill plot. Some planted only a small area of their plot to see if anything would happen to them; a year later when had nothing happened, they planted the entire plot.

By the end of the 1980s, villagers had planted crops on most of the area of the White Elephant hill; though no rubber trees were planted at first. Indeed, as many villagers explained to me, they were wary of these trees they knew nothing about and that produced nothing they could eat. However, local officials, village committee members, and some other villagers had planted extensive areas in rubber trees under the first step of the Three Fixes of Forestry. A rubber tree takes seven to eight years before one can tap. Then it can be tapped for thirty to forty years.

During fieldwork, I noticed that villagers had different points of view on their holy hill. Some do think that the part that burnt in the 1970s is not part of the holy hill since it is beyond the reach of the *devata* and the religious authorities. Therefore, it is a secularized space. For others, the village committee members who allowed for the allocation of use rights on the part that burnt did wrong.

Therefore, these villagers tend to see that part of the hill as a de-sacralised space.

6.2.4 'Illegal' exploitation of White Elephant hill collective land

After the implementation of the Three Fixes of Forestry in 1984, the southwestern part of the White Elephant hill, as well as the three watershed-protection forests situated west of the holy hill, had not been allocated; these forests were village collective property and were to remain untouched.

Over the past five years, some villagers have claimed land to plant rubber trees on the southwestern part of the White Elephant hill, as well as in the three watershed –protection forests. Local authorities, namely the village committee and the Menglun Township forestry department, deemed this exploitation illegal because it contravened the *de jure* property arrangements; however, this *de facto* appropriation of land by villagers may illustrate the appearance of new customary practices.

Recently villagers lost several hundred *mu* of agricultural land to the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden and to construction of the 'Kun-Mo' expressway. Surfing on the wave of tourism, the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden bought land from villagers on the north bank of Luosuo River to build a brand new entrance and a museum. The Kun-Mo expressway, which was completed in 2006, cut the village of Manjing in half; twenty-five households were moved to the foot of the White Elephant hill and villagers lost paddy fields. The state was supposed to give financial compensation to the villagers who had to

move and to the villagers who lost land to the expressway; however, compensation has not yet been paid. From my interviews, it appears that loss of cultivated land and non-payment of financial compensation are the reasons why some villagers claimed land on village collective property. Villagers as well as local authorities explained that the rubber planting and forest clearing began slowly and unobtrusively. They first planted rubber tree seedlings in the forest, and at the same time they cut two or three trees each month. Slowly but surely the local authorities were presented with a *fait accompli*.

During my fieldwork, I often crossed the 'Kun-Mo' highway on my bike, following the road that leads to the newly-relocated cluster of houses. From the road I could see the different plots of land that were allocated during the Three Fixes of Forestry. Beyond the cluster of houses, the muddy road stretches towards the south and then east on what remains of the three watershed-protection hills. From the first hill I had a clear view of the landscape. I could see rectangular clearings that have been recently claimed on the southwest part on the White Elephant hill. These patches form regular shaped plots that are larger than the ones allocated during the Three Fixes of Forestry. The hilltop still remains covered in forest. Once when I was on the first watershed-protection hill, I met a group of male and female Hani farmers wary of the presence of a foreigner; some could speak Mandarin and explained to me that they were planting pineapple. They had an informal agreement with some Dai villagers, which was later confirmed by Dai villagers themselves. Rubber trees had been recently planted among the pineapples. Since it takes eight years for rubber trees

to mature; this mixed plantation allows farmers to exploit other crops while waiting to tap the rubber trees.

For the local authorities this *de facto* appropriation of land is illegal; indeed, the southwest part of the White Elephant hill and the three watershed-protection forests are village collective property and were not to be claimed by anyone. From the local authorities' point of view, this illegal claiming of land highlights the shortcomings of the local system of governance, and their limits in enforcing the law. Villagers are well aware of these shortcomings and take advantage of them.

Interviews with both the local authorities and other Dai farmers point to the fact that people who lost agricultural land to the state are still waiting for compensation; moreover, it is these people who 'illegally' claimed land. They did not act blatantly; since they knew that their *de facto* claiming of land was seen as illegal from the vantage point of the local authorities. Consequently, farmers had to think of a subtle and thoughtful way to plant rubber trees; therefore, 'illegality', somehow, gave rise to new land claiming practices. These new practices took the shape of a multiethnic enterprise, for both Dai and Hani villagers, according to their informal agreements, manage some areas of this newly claimed land. Intercropping, it seems, is a new practice of access and land use that benefits both ethnic groups.

These new practices are an ongoing process; at the time of fieldwork, local village committee members explained to me that they wanted to settle the problem of 'illegality'. There are two possible ways to tackle this issue: either the

land that was claimed on village collective property is contracted out and managed by the villagers concerned, or the land remains village collective property and is managed collectively.



Figure 2 View of the southwest side of the White Elephant Hill, July 2009

6.2.5 Impact of state policy implementation on Đong Shé and Đong Gam

As in Manjing, the implementation of the Household Responsibility System has had a limited impact on Đong Shé and Đong Gam mainly because the policy aimed at dividing existing paddy fields among village households and was not directed at forested hills. With the implementation of the Three Fixes of Forestry

between 1982 and 1984, village forestland, which included Đong Shé holy hill, became part of village collective land.

The economic reform also brought state-allocated property rights to villages and households, and fewer restrictions on religion. Since its destruction in 1967, villagers had not been able to go to Đong Gam and perform rituals as they used to. Some older informants told me that lightning struck and destroyed several houses during the mid-1980s. Because of that, the villages of Mengxing Xiazhai and Bannayang were uneasy about the lack of sacred protection. The council of elders of both villages therefore decided to find a new space and 're-create' Đong Gam. The elders decided to relocate Đong Gam to the patch of forest located right next to Đong Shé. In 1985, a villager cut *cassia siamea* on a patch of forest located right next to Đong Shé. The elders met with the villager who cut *cassia siamea*; the latter was granted two *mu* of paddy fields and could not use that forestland for personal use. That patch of forest became the new Đong Gam. Consequently, Đong Shé and Đong Gam holy hills are now a cluster of two holy hills that covers an area of 18 *mu* in a wider patch of forest. Boundaries are clearly delimited by natural features and a man-made pathway.

Unlike the White Elephant hill, Đong Shé and Đong Gam are both sacred *and* ritual space; in addition trespassing on these holy hills is not forbidden. It is, however, forbidden to touch and remove anything from the forest or defile it with human waste. *Bomo* play a crucial role in the enforcement and the performing of rituals. One *bomo* is in charge of Đong Shé and two of them are in charge of Đong Gam, one from Mengxing Xiazhai and one from Bannayang. At the time of

fieldwork, the actual *bomo* of Đong Shé had received the knowledge required from his father in 2004. The eldest son of the family, who became a monk for eight years and is knowledgeable in both Old and New Dai script, will be the fifth generation of *bomo*. Concerning Đong Gam, the *bomo* of Mengxing Xiazhai passed away without a male heir and the council of elders still has to deal with this issue. According to informants from Mengxing Xiazhai, the *bomo* of Bannayang has inherited the title from his father, but the latter did not pass down the required knowledge to his son.

In 2004, a man claimed two *mu* of land on Đong Shé holy hill and planted rubber trees. According to villagers, he did so because during the Three Fixes of Forestry, his household lacked labour and he was able to claim only a little land for rubber. In the village, the story goes that his son died a couple of weeks after he logged trees on Đong Shé. After his son's death his wife fell sick. He went and met the *bomo* who charged him a fine for each tree logged. The *bomo* also charged him money in order to perform a new ritual.

The *bomo* told me that the villager had to replace the trees he cut. They were replaced by rubber trees. The *bomo* told me it did not matter what kind of tree was planted; the most important thing was that the trees that were cut had to be replaced. The older villager can tap the rubber trees, but he cannot cut them down once the 30 to 40 years tapping period is over. Consequently, for the next 30 to 40 years, that part of the hill will temporarily be 'not sacred'; however, once the trees do not yield rubber anymore, they will become part of Đong Shé again. In this case, we cannot talk of 'secularization' of sacred space. First, because the

relevant religious authority of the village has not lost control over the holy hills, second because the death of the senior villager's son has confirmed the belief in the *devata* and their power. Belief in the *devata* and the misfortune they can cause still structure most villagers' behaviour. In addition, a new ritual followed the act of desecration committed by the senior villagers.

This episode shows several things. First, the Three Fixes of Forestry caused inequalities in the partition of access to forestland. According to villagers, inequalities arose from a lack of labour coupled with lack of diligence and hard work. The rubber rush of the 1990s and the high prices of raw rubber until the 2008 financial crisis made rubber trees an attractive cash crop. Second, villagers explained that, for local people, the beliefs linked to the holy hills, whether in Manjing or in Mengxing Xiazhai, are legends (*chuanshuo*) or superstitions (*mixin*); whatever they called it, they do reckon that they have to believe in them (*suiran shi mixin, women hai de xin*). While most of them respect the customary law, a few prefer to follow the law of the market. Third, village committee members I interviewed in Manjing and Mengxing Xiazhai explained that law enforcement and policy implementation are a challenge for them. Village committee members are elected for three years and are in charge of the roads, water supply, electricity, education, public sanitation, and conflict settlement among villagers. Village committee members I talked to said that the scope of their duty is too large. Moreover, everyone is related to everyone (direct or indirect family link). When a villager does not fully respect the law, committee

members are not prompt to take proper legal actions so as not fuel enmity with their fellow villagers. Villagers know this fact and take advantage of it.

6.2.6 Rituals to the *devata* : re-worked ceremonies

Even if the rituals stopped before the end of the 1950s, and despite the destruction that occurred during the collective period, the guardian spirit of the villages and the *meng* have not completely ceased to “produce Dai consciousness” (Hasegawa 2000: 4). The economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping era brought increased religious freedom, and state-allocated property rights. Both have played a role in the re-working of the rituals to the *devata meng* and *devata ban*.

During the mid-1980s, the increased religious freedom allowed villagers to re-work the rituals devoted to the *devata*, and to perform them publicly and without fear. Before the 1950s, buffalos and pigs were sacrificed during the official ritual and each household had to sacrifice one or two chickens. With the introduction of rubber trees and mechanization, villagers progressively sold their buffalos and few families kept raising pigs. Consequently, the only animals they can sacrifice today are chickens.

The *gam meng* performed in Manjing and the *gam ban* performed in surrounding villages and Mengxing Xiazhai follow the same pattern. Today, in Manjing area, the ritual space is a bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*) and when rituals are performed, the space surrounding the tree is enclosed by a rope. In Mengxing Xiazhai, the rituals are performed on the holy hills. The *bomo meng* or *bomo ban*

chooses the date of the ceremony two or three days in advance. As each village has its own sacred space, the sealing off of the sacred place varies. In both cases the villages are symbolically sealed off by a sign made of bamboo that is planted at the gates of the villages. During the time of the ceremony, nobody is allowed in or out of the village. Chickens are ritually killed and the *bomo* reads the entrails of the animals; prayers selected from Buddhist scriptures written in Dai script are chanted by the *bomo*; then the chickens are cooked and consumed on the spot. The ceremony lasts only a couple of hours; however, it still functions as a way to protect the territory of the *meng* or the village.

While few people participate in these re-worked rituals, an informant explained that their performance allows for the protection of the territory against natural disasters. In Manjing, the re-worked rituals protect the *meng* of Lun, and in Mengxing Xiazhai and Bannayang, they protect the territory of both villages.

The increased religious freedom of the Deng Xiaoping era (see Ostrov 2005; Overmyer 2003; Potter 1994), brought about the nomination of a new *bomo meng* by the Council of elders of Manjing village in 1984; in addition, *gam meng* and *gam ban* rituals reappeared in Manjing, Mengxing Xiazhai and surrounding villages by 1986-1987. State-allocated property rights and the introduction of rubber as a smallholder crop gave the rituals a new shape. Villagers sold most of their buffalos, and stopped raising pigs, so that chickens became the only animal to be sacrificed. Moreover, the dismantlement of communes, and the shift in property rights had reconfigured the relation between peasants and the state; indeed farmers became 'entrepreneurs' instead of

labourers for the state (Sturgeon 2004: 146). The sealing off of the territory is an important component of the *gam meng* and *gam ban* rituals; it has to be respected. In order to accommodate the new entrepreneurs' rubber tapping schedule, the length of the rituals had to be reduced.

Through these rituals, the territory of the *meng* and the villages is protected; I argue that the protection required of the *devata* has changed. Pre-1950 rituals 'protected' villagers against tigers. In Mengxing Xiazhai, an informant explained that villagers killed many tigers in the mid-1980s, when they were opening forestland for rubber plantations. Since tigers and wildlife have almost disappeared, a *bomo* told me that *devata* protect rubber trees against pests.

White Elephant hill

Manjing lost its ritual space in the late 1950s. In the early 1970s, during the collective era, its holy hill was state property and was partially destroyed to expand the area of grain cultivation.

The economic reforms allowed villages to acquire forestland. In the early 1980s, village committee members contributed to secularization of the holy hill. Indeed, they deliberately created household state-allocated property rights on the White Elephant hill. The hilltop was not destroyed when the hill was burnt down in the 1970s. At that time elders declared that what was left became the new limit to the holy hill and no land should be claimed on it. In the 1980s, villagers and village committee members acknowledged the hilltop as being the dwelling place of the spirit of the White Elephant hill, which still had the power to protect the territory of the *meng* of Lun. The hilltop has remained untouched ever since.

From the interviews I conducted during summer 2009, it was clear that old and young villagers believe that something bad would happen to anyone who claimed land on the hilltop. Some informants even said that if these superstitious stories about the White Elephant spirit did not exist, the hilltop would be planted in rubber by now. The hilltop is still recognized as being owned or tenanted by the spirit of the White Elephant hill.

With the integration of Xishuangbanna into the People's Republic of China at the beginning of the 1950s, the rule of the *zhaomeng* and his kin who constituted the Dai aristocracy ended. In addition, in Manjing's case, the *bomo meng's* lineage ended; however the position was filled in 1984 when the council of elders elected and formed a new *bomo meng*. They also chose the location of a new ritual space. This new ritual space is a bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*) situated on the outskirts of the village, in an undisclosed location.

In pre-1950s Xishuangbanna, the landlord of the *meng* (the *zhaomeng*) and his kin, including the village heads, assisted the *bomo meng* in collecting the items required for the rituals. Their presence as well as the presence of all the villagers was mandatory; however, today, while the ritual is still performed every year, only a small circle of people are aware of and participate to it. After a thirty-year gap, the council of elders has organized the revival of the ritual to the *devata meng*. The fact that villagers still perform these rituals today shows their importance for the local community notwithstanding the recent socio-political transformation. It also shows that the *devata* still hold a significant place in these

villagers' worldview; in addition, the rituals still consecrate the holy hill as sacred forest.

Dong Shé and Dong Gam

In Mengxing Xiazhai, a group of villagers celebrate the gam ban directly on Dong Shé. In Bannayang, the gam ban devoted to the devata of Dong Gam is performed on the altar of the village. The ceremony is performed in the morning and lasts two to three hours.

In both Mengxing Xiazhai and Manjing, the duration of the ritual has dramatically shrunk, from 2-3 days to a couple of hours. The introduction of rubber during the Three Fixes of Forestry in the early 1980s has changed villagers' way of life and the time of the day they work. Today, villagers tap their rubber trees everyday from March to November. My informants explained that the sealing off of the village during the performance of the rituals is observed by most villagers. They argued that it would be impossible to extend the sealing off to more than a couple of hours, since it would draw labour out of the rubber plantations and result in economic loss. The economic factor therefore provides a motivation for this change.

Notwithstanding the change, the *bomo* and villagers still perform a re-worked *gam ban*. During the performance of the rituals, the sealing off of the village is strictly enforced by the *bomo*'s kin who stand by the gate and stop outsiders like me from entering. People who are in the village are not allowed to go out, and outsiders or foreigners are not allowed in.

The introduction of rubber had another effect on the rituals. In pre-1950 Xishuangbanna, buffalos and pigs were sacrificed first; after that each household had to sacrifice two chickens. In both Mengxing Xiazhai and Manjing informants explained that they were concerned that buffalos would feed on the newly planted rubber trees. As a result villagers massively sold their livestock during the 1980s and 1990s. None of the households I visited owned any buffalos; few of them raise pigs, but most of them have chickens.



Figure 3 Altar used during the re-worked *gam ban*, Đong Shé holy hill, July 2009

6.3 Villagers' point of view

In this last section, I examine villagers' points of view on the loss and conservation of their holy hills. I first explain the differences among generations, and then I treat separately the loss of Manjing holy hill and the conservation and re-creation of Mengxing Xiazhai's holy hills.

Some farmers see the loss of holy hill land to rubber plantation as part of a broader loss of Dai culture. Some informants explained that their culture has been superseded by 'foreign culture', which is being brought by Han Chinese. According to a senior informant, this 'foreign culture' is having an insidious influence on young people and the surrounding landscape.

Through my interviews, I noticed that two parts of Dai culture have been shaken up. These two vectors are the *zanhap* and the Dai script. A senior informant described the *zanhap* as being stories, tales, and epics that are sung by two professional singers, male and/or female. According to the description of my informant, the singers draw on a written collection of local stories, tales and epics, and 'challenge' each other's knowledge; the *zanhap* was therefore a form of sung verbal sparring that took place publicly during rituals, weddings, and funerals. It functioned as a vehicle through which young people were educated in rules of social behaviour and their history. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), part of this collection of texts was either lost or hidden. According to my informant, even though *zanhap* competitions are still organized yearly in Menghai, this skill has been lost and does not function as a way to educate the young generation about local culture. The loss of *zanhap* from my informant's

point of view, is a reason why the young generation knows so little about Dai culture and traditions.

Before the 1950s, Dai people had their own writing system; Davis (2003: 190) explains that nonetheless, after 1953, Dai and Chinese scholars invented a new Dai alphabet. The old Dai script (see Figure 4) was banned and a new one (see Figure 5) was “promoted as an improvement that would increase literacy rates – although in fact Dai literacy had always been high” (Davis 2003: 190). Although the old alphabet was banned, manuscripts had been hidden and passed down. Today, copies of books written in old Dai script can still be found.

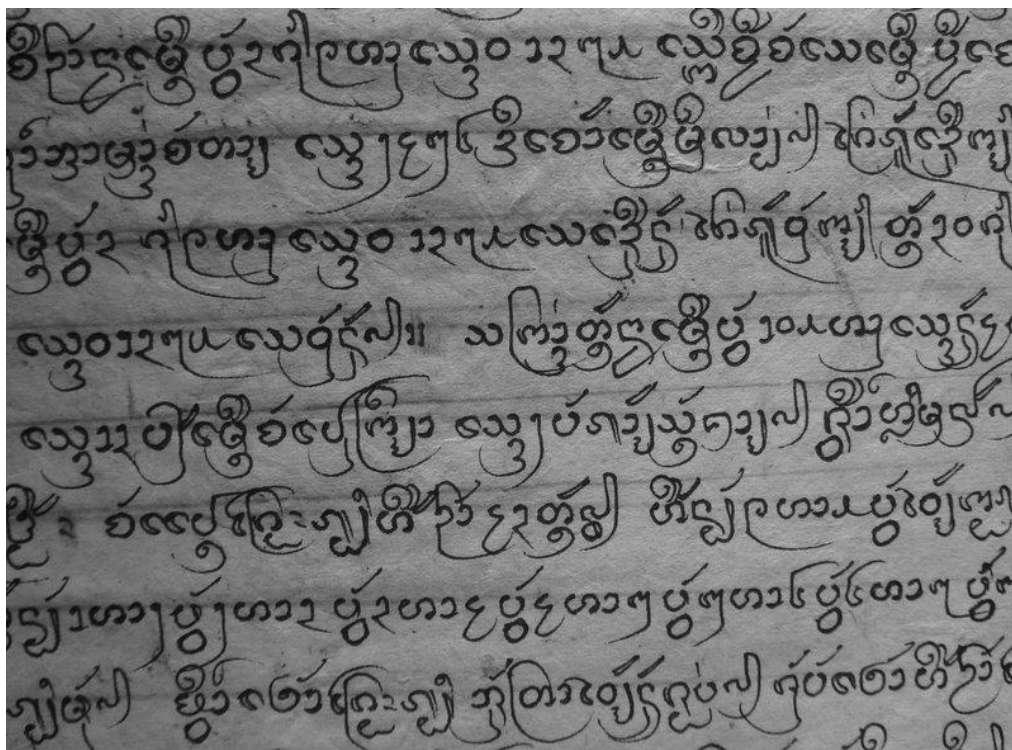


Figure 4 Example of Old Dai script

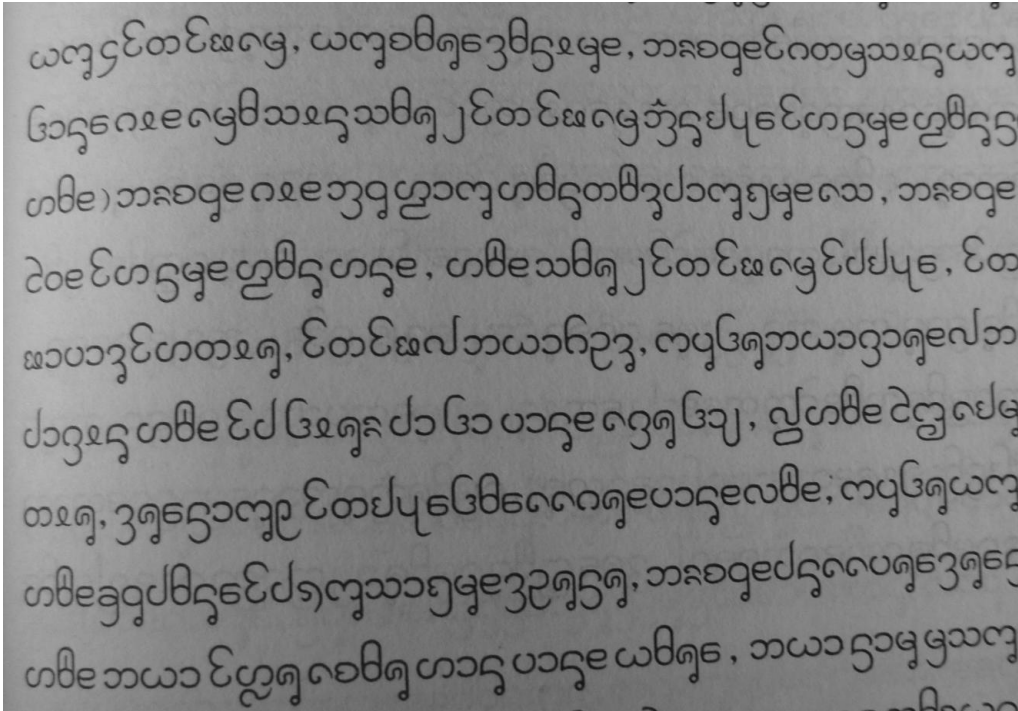


Figure 5 Example of New Dai script

Old and New Dai script are one of the vehicles by which knowledge has been passed down; however, the young generation as well as key people who hold important functions do not master Dai script anymore. New script is taught at primary school to both female and male students in a bilingual Dai/Mandarin Chinese school program. Then they switch to Mandarin Chinese only. The literacy level in Dai script amongst adults is low.

Females in their mid-twenties cannot read Dai script at all. Young males usually go to the village temple to become monks for a period that they determine themselves. During this time, they learn both the Old and New Dai

script. Once they have mastered the new script, some of them also learn the old script; however, only a handful of monks have mastered both. During fieldwork and regular visits to the Buddhist temples of several villages (Manjing, Ban'e, Banbian, Mengxing Xiazhai, Guanzhai), I saw monks re-transcribing Buddhist texts written in Old Dai script into New Dai script. In the temples I visited, between 50 and 100 percent of the monks were not native to the region, but were invited from Menghai. Being able to read Dai script, Old and New, is crucial for performing the rituals for the *devata*. Indeed, an important part of these rituals consists essentially of a psalmody of Buddhist sutras. During fieldwork, I noticed that people who hold important functions (*bomo*, monks) have lacunas in their understanding of Dai scripts. Some officials (village committee members) are illiterate in both Dai and Chinese Mandarin.

Learning Dai script is essential for performing rituals and crucial for the culture's survival. Today, village temples are the only places where young males can learn Dai script; however, most males are not interested in submitting to the constraints inherent in monastic life. Tapping rubber trees and earning money to buy a motorcycle, a car, a mobile phone; to hang out in the karaoke, to build a new 'modern' house – all these divert young males out of village temples to the rubber plantations.

"Tradition is lost. They want money, not life" is a sentence that I heard a lot while interviewing older informants. Here, 'they' refers to the young generation. I sensed anger in these old men's voices as they accompanied their words with a gesture that expressed resentment towards the ignorance of the

young generation and their lack of motivation to learn about their own culture. Elders' authority is undermined. Today, senior villagers are also worried about the fact that in the past the young generation listened to the decisions made by the elders. Now it is the opposite (*yiqian laoren shuole suan; xianzai shi nianqingren shuole suan*). Elders are worried about this loss of authority and about the consequences of the young generation's money-driven decisions. While conducting interviews with senior villagers about *devata*, the institutions that controlled life before the Chinese revolution, the holy hills and the rituals linked to them, these senior villagers would ask me why a young foreign man would come such a long way to ask about these subjects in which local youngsters show little interest.

During group interviews with males and females in their mid-twenties to early thirties, I noticed a straightforward lucidity about this loss of Dai culture, and a different point of view on this gap between generations. First, the younger informants admit that due to lack of education, low to no literacy level in Dai script, and the omnipresence of Chinese language in their daily life, somehow they are losing part of their culture. Second, they grew up helping their parents plant the first rubber trees; they saw the radical change and material benefit brought by the cash crop. These events brought a major change in their daily routine; getting up in the middle of the night, riding their motorcycles to get to the rubber plantation, tapping rubber trees, collecting the precious liquid that they dry in the yard. They have to endure the smell of rubber, and make the regular trip to the rubber-processing factory; all this is part of their lifestyle. For many

informants, rubber trees have become a distinctive feature of the Dai and an integral part of their way of life.

In this age group, informants usually use the word 'superstition' to refer to the interdiction of logging trees on holy hills. They believe in the superstition, in spite of using this word. In Manjing, Mengxing Xiazhai and the surrounding villages, informants from this age group would not log trees on their respective holy hills. Some of them also said that they believe in *phi pong*, or demons, which dwell at some specific location. An informant told me that he would make a detour to get to his rubber tree plantation to avoid a *phi pong*, since the superstition is linked to real deaths.

6.3.1 Manjing

There were two major steps in the loss of the White Elephant hill. The first was its destruction by fire in the early 1970s; the second was its compartmentalization into individual plots during the second round of the Three Fixes of Forestry.

There were three ways that villagers conceptualized this loss. First, senior villagers see it as a loss; however some of them did say that a new boundary was created. Indeed the top of the hill did not burn as if, according to informants, the spirit of the White Elephant hill was trying to protect its domain. At that time, there was nothing they could do, but proper rituals to ease the *devata* were performed. Next, villagers who were born during the Cultural Revolution, who were too young to understand what was happening when the hill was burnt

down, do not see it as a loss. They know that the top of the hill is the dwelling place of the *devata*; the 'superstition' casts its shadow and informants told me that because of this nobody will ever claim land on the hilltop. A small number of informants said that the village committee members who allowed for the creation of individual access rights during the second round of the Three Fixes of Forestry were fools who did not understand Dai culture. They should not have done that, and instead they should have let the forest grow back. Finally, the young generation is not aware of what happened; nonetheless, they do acknowledge that the hilltop is the dwelling place of the spirit of the White Elephant hill. Informants from all age groups said that if there were no superstition linked to the White Elephant hill, the hilltop would be already covered in rubber trees.

Tourism in Menglun: an alternative to rubber?

The income of most villagers relies on rubber tapping and they are planting rubber trees on every piece of land available; a few days before I left Xishuangbanna, villagers had cut the trees of the hill on which the village temple is located. Despite the 2008 financial crisis, the price of rubber is still very high, which contributes to making it an attractive and lucrative cash crops. Reliance on one crop makes villagers financially vulnerable, and the increase of the area in rubber threatens biodiversity and in the long run jeopardizes rubber cultivation in the area. Villagers are aware, to different degrees, of these two major shortcomings of the monoculture of rubber. Some of them are looking to diversify their sources of income.

The nearby Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden (XTBG) is an important touristic site; the newly built expressway makes daytrips to and from Jinghong fast and convenient; in addition, the town of Menglun is expanding, and a five-star hotel was recently completed. Menglun Township is marketed as the new touristic destination (*menglun lüyou zhen*). Some informants have worked or are currently working as staff members for the XTBG. An informant has built a large concrete house and is planning to run a guesthouse. Finally, since concrete houses are more modern, another informant has set up a building material business. In Manjing as well as in the nearby villages, the number of concrete houses is gradually increasing. At the same time, the government of Mengla County is exhorting villagers not to build concrete houses because tourists want to see typical Dai ethnic housing.

6.3.2 Mengxing Xiazhai

As mentioned before, the re-location of Đong Gam holy hill was a necessity. Senior villagers are glad, even relieved, that space could be allocated for the sacred forest. For them, it was the only logical thing to do, for it is the only way the well-being of villagers, and the safety and prosperity of village land can be ensured.

Villagers of the 20-30 year age group do not express strong opinions. They do acknowledge the fact that both Đong Shé and Đong Gam are the dwelling place of *devata* and that no one can cut trees on this forest. They use the word superstition (*mixin*) and explain that if one does not believe in this superstition and desecrates the holy hill, then one will die. They link the

superstition with the event of 2004, when a villager's wife died after he cut trees on Đông Shé to plant rubber. They also talk about other forbidden places such as Guang Pa Long, the cave of Tom Pa Bat. For them, the so-called superstition is real. Villagers of the 30-40 year old age group and older tell the same story.

What alternative to rubber in Mengxing Xiazhai?

Like in Manjing, villagers of Mengxing Xiazhai are aware of the shortcomings of the monoculture of rubber. Alternatives to rubber, however, are not easy to find. According to informants, the completion of the Kun-Mo expressway has had a negative impact of the region. Before the expressway, the national road that goes through the town of Mengxing and passes by the village of Mengxing Xiazhai absorbed most of the traffic between Mengla in the south and Jinghong. An informant explained that he opened a restaurant; business was good until the completion of the expressway. A few other villagers opened small businesses in the nearby town of Mengxing while others work for the Mengxing state rubber farm. In effect, there are few alternatives to rubber.

6.3.3 Holy hills and the secularization process

Secularization is a concept that stems from the social, historical, political and economic context of the Enlightenment. Secularization emerged from of Western European context, and is articulated around the Christian religion. Hadden challenged the concept and argued that, in the Western context. He explains “there is no substantive body of data confirming the secularization

process. To the contrary, the data suggest that secularization is not happening” (1987: 608).

In the Dai context and drawing on Berger (1967) and Hadden (1987), I define secularization as a historical process that articulates first the removal of territory and property from the control of religious authorities, and second the loss of religious perspective among broad masses of the population. Both lead to the disappearance of religion.

In both villages, Manjing and Mengxing Xiazhai, the *zhaomeng*, the *bolang ban*, and the *bomo* represented religious authorities; they existed because religion was political and because religion reflected and legitimated the socio-spatial hierarchy. They also existed because there was a community of believers whose souls and bodies could be controlled. The *zhaomeng* disappeared in the early 1950s. The *bolang ban* (village head), as a position, has persisted, but under the new rule of the Communists. *Bomo* still exist in both villages and so does the community of believers. In addition, village elders have gradually stepped forward. Re-organized religious authorities have thus persisted and they helped the re-working of *gam meng* and *gam ban* rituals; today rituals are not linked with the pre-1950 Dai political power anymore, but they are still linked to the beliefs in the *devata*. Indeed, Dai villagers still believe that *devata* can cause misfortune if one defiles the territory on which they dwell or if the community does not perform the rituals due to them.

In Manjing the area of the holy hill receded, but there is still a sacred space. The hilltop is still under the supervision of the *bomo* and the community of

believers; from interviews with informants of different age groups, it is clear that the belief is still alive. A religious perspective thus still structures the vision people have of the hill. The part that was destroyed can be seen as a secularized space because it has been removed from religious authorities. In addition, some villagers do not even know that before the 1970s this secularized part was holy hill ground. Nonetheless, villagers who know and remember history said that allocation of use rights on the White Elephant hill was a mistake.

In Mengxing Xiazhai, Đong Gam was destroyed in 1967; only one mango tree, still standing today, was left. Villagers did not use the word 'sacred' (*shensheng*) when talking about this mango tree; instead, they used the word mysterious (*shenmi*) because they cannot explain why the tree was not destroyed when Đong Gam was burnt in 1967. In that case, sacred space became secular space; however, the mango tree still marks the location of what used to be a sacred forest. Space was allocated for the re-creation of Đong Gam in 1986; this shows that a secular space can become a sacred space.

Concerning Đong Shé, villagers implicitly said that the man who defiled the holy hill was punished by the *devata*. In addition, he had to pay a fine to the *bomo* who re-consecrated the holy hill by performing another ritual. The *bomo* did not see it as a loss; it will be a holy hill with rubber trees on it.

Holy hills, the *devata* as well as the re-worked *gam meng* and *gam ban* rituals, are but one side of the Dai religious beliefs. Buddhism, temple life and Buddhist festivals still structure people's daily way of life. Both are changing in relation to shifting property rights, and to a new socio-spatial organization of the

territory. To some extent, Dai holy hills have been partly secularized. What used to be sacred is now secular, but the case of Đong Gam shows that what used to be secular space can become sacred space. Chinese scholars have explained that Dai holy hills have contributed to biodiversity conservation in Xishuangbanna; some also argue that the concept of holy hills could contribute to protect larger areas of forest, therefore suggesting that previously secular space could be made sacred.



Figure 6 Last mango tree remnant of Đong Gam in Mengxing Town, July 2009

7: CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I put the Dai holy hills at the centre of my argument. My discussion of these sacred forests has combined fieldwork and a theoretical framework constituted of three main concepts: territory, property, and sacred space. One of the goals of my research was to place sacred space, a special classification of territory, in relation with the profane and explain how sacred space contributes to socio-spatial organization within Xishuangbanna. Another goal was to assess the extent to which and how shifting property rights and policies for land use have allowed for a secularization of Dai holy hills. The Dai sacred forests I have examined in this thesis are the product of the blend of polytheistic beliefs and Buddhism; as a sacred space, they are different from village Buddhist temples. Therefore, my analysis of secularization process focused on one side of Dai people's religious beliefs.

In chapter three, I developed the three main theoretical concepts that I used to articulate my thesis. On an abstract level I have shown that sacred space is a particular classification of territory and a social construct. I have also explained that society, territory and geographical scales are mutually constructed. Sacred space can therefore be more than a religious classification of territory; it can also be instrumental in the construction, and the legitimating of a particular socio-spatial organization in a specific historical context. I have also described the link between sacred space and property and explained that

deeming something sacred constitutes a powerful means to assert claims to something; conversely, asserting property over sacred space is a powerful means to control socio-spatial organization of territory. In my discussion of property, I highlighted the fact that the meaning of the concept of property is not stable and that it changes over time. One of the main focuses of my thesis was precisely to examine the changing meaning of property at the intersection of sacred and profane.

The historical background I gave in chapter four provided the starting point from which I assessed recent change. I first explain how the Chinese emperors exerted indirect rule over Sipsongpanna and how the rulers (*zhao*) of Sipsongpanna controlled land and people. I demonstrated how Dai holy hills have structured society and spatial organization of Sipsongpanna between the thirteenth century and the early 1950s. Dai holy hills were, and still are, the dwelling place of *devata* or spirit of the ancestors. I explained that the beliefs in two misfortunes that *devata* can cause (trespassing on their territory and failure to perform rituals due to them) have structured social behaviour and contributed to the conservation of Dai holy hills. They were also conserved because they protected territory and people. In addition, I explained how the rituals associated with the holy hills were, for the rulers (*zhao*), instrumental in the maintenance of power and control enforcement. Rituals not only helped reinforce socio-spatial organization within each village and administrative division (*meng*), but also legitimated property rights in humans and in land. Dai holy hills were thus part of an apparatus that contributed to define social relations among different levels of

the hierarchy, and an instrument to assert and enforce control over people, land, and resources. In addition, they played an important role in reproducing social behaviour and socio-spatial hierarchies. Because of their crucial role, holy hills were the property of the rulers (*zhao*); at the same time, they were the property of the *devata* who dwell on the sacred forests. In addition, holy hills acted as foci for the community and contributed to define one's membership to and social position within a particular village and a particular *meng*; therefore, to some extent they were also owned in common by the community associated with them.

In chapter five, I presented and analysed the data I collected during my fieldwork. Two events of Chinese history have contributed to loss, conservation and re-creation of Dai holy hills: the integration of Sipsongpanna into the People's Republic of China in the early 1950s and the implementation of economic reforms, including the introduction of rubber as a smallholder crop, in the early 1980s. The transformation that ensued from these two events in Chinese history illustrates the fact that sacred space, society, politics, and property rights are intertwined. My thesis contributes to show the importance of understanding the intricacies of religious classification of forests in order to assess the impact of policies motivated by secular motives for sacred forests. Indeed, my analysis explores the significance of Dai holy hills for the people associated with them, and how Dai people have reacted to implementation of secular policies.

In the early 1950s, the Dai polity of Sipsongpanna became formally known as the Dai autonomous prefecture of Xishuangbanna when it was integrated into

the People's Republic of China. Communist leaders reconfigured the socio-spatial organization; they wanted peasants to be freed from feudal rule. The pre-1950s land tenure was erased; however, in a sense, property rights in humans did not cease. In the post-1950 Xishuangbanna, Dai farmers continued to produce grain, this time for the Communist state instead of for the Dai rulers (*zhao*). Along with all land in China, Dai holy hills became the people's property, that is to say, state property. In addition, rituals stopped. Notwithstanding the disappearance of the Dai aristocracy, holy hills were still intertwined with politics, although in a different manner than during the pre-1950 period. According to Communist theorists, religion was the means through which the ruling class maintained control over land and people; religion had to be eliminated. The campaign against the 'Four Olds' (old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits) initiated at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) marks the pinnacle of this thought. Dai holy hills were totally or partially destroyed during that period and beliefs associated with them were undermined. The Cultural Revolution undeniably caused a discontinuity in customary practices as well as a change in attitude towards practices associated with the holy hills; notwithstanding, beliefs in the *devata* were not entirely lost and practices have been re-worked.

The economic reforms that Deng Xiaoping initiated during the early years of the 1980s brought yet another radical change. During this period, Dai holy hills were irremediably linked to the implementation of new policies for land use and property rights. Between 1982 and 1984, the implementation of the Household

Responsibility System and the Three Fixes of Forestry policies contributed to make households entrepreneurs. According to these policies, local village committees decided which part of village land, including forestland, was to be contracted out to households and which part of village land was to remain collective land. In my thesis, I have shown that the decisions taken by village committees had different impacts on Dai holy hills. In the early 1980s in Manjing village, the local village committee allowed for allocation of use rights on the partly destroyed holy hills. In Mengxing Xiazhai under the direction of village elders, forestland was allocated to replace the holy hill that was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

In this thesis, I have documented transformation of holy hills and the practices associated with them over two periods of Xishuangbanna's history. Transformation of holy hills shows that they are spatially flexible. Indeed, holy hills and the *devata* can be moved. In addition, the re-working of the *gam* rituals demonstrate they can be adapted to a new way of life. This remarkable flexibility and this capacity of adaptation contribute to their persistence.

In today's Menglun Township, sacred forests are visible oases of forest in the middle of paddy fields and rubber plantations. The dramatic increase of area planted in rubber is not without consequences. The change in forest cover contributes to regional climate change, which in the long term may jeopardize rubber production in the area; it also contributes to a loss of biodiversity. By customary rule, it is forbidden to log trees on holy hill ground; this has contributed to make holy hills visible forested islands, sites of biodiversity conservation. My

thesis provides an indirect response to Chinese scholars who have argued that Dai holy hills have been created and managed to conserve biodiversity. My research shows that the establishment of Dai holy hills was not motivated by a Dai eco-consciousness or a will to protect biodiversity.

Until the mid-1950s, the Dai holy hills were focal points for the community and legitimated the socio-spatial organization of territory; holy hills were instrumental in territoriality. In my thesis, I have explained the importance of control over holy hills by Sipsongpanna rulers (*zhao*) in their strategy to enforce control over people and land. Today, while holy hills still structure, to some extent, social behaviour, they are not part of a strategy to enforce socio-spatial organization anymore. In spite of the reorganization of administrative divisions within Xishuangbanna by the Communists in the 1950s, the holy hills still materialize pre-1950s divisions into *meng* and villages. Moreover, the re-worked rituals are designed to protect village and *meng* territory and therefore remind of pre-1950s administrative divisions.

I have shown that changing purposes of property have had different implications. First, for the pre-modern period, there was no distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* property arrangements since holy hills legitimated property rights in land and in humans. Indeed, during this period, holy hills not only sanctioned everyone's position within a complex social hierarchy but also everyone's access and use rights to land and/or people. Second, from the 1950s onwards, entanglement with the profane and state-allocated property rights have allowed for the creation of a distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* property

arrangements. I showed in my analysis that on one hand, *de jure* state-allocated property rights have allowed for secularization of Dai holy hills. On the other hand, secularization of holy hills has allowed for the appearance of new practices for land tenure or *de facto* property arrangements. Most importantly, my thesis contributed to show how changing property rights have allowed for loss of sacred forest in Manjing and, conversely, how they have allowed for re-creation of sacred space in Mengxing Xiazhai.

With the economic reforms, and implementation of new policies for land use and property rights, freedom of religion increased. I explained how the rituals associated with the Dai holy hills have been re-worked by villagers. While *gam* rituals do not legitimate and reinforce a social order anymore, their persistence after a thirty-year interruption highlights their necessity for villagers; village and *meng* territories still need the protection of *devata* notwithstanding socio-political change. *Devata* still exist and still dwell on holy hills, whether they have been recreated or diminished. In addition, villagers still believe that *devata* can cause misfortune if one trespasses on their domain to log trees or if the community that is associated with them does not perform the rituals that are due. Both holy hills and *gam* rituals have withstood change and their pervasiveness demonstrates their importance for Dai villagers of Xishuangbanna.

Over the past few decades, shifting policies for property rights and land use have allowed for secularization of sacred space and for transformation of customary practices associated with Dai holy hills. Surely, the central leadership in Beijing will continue to implement new policies for property rights; undoubtedly,

these measures will have implications for Dai holy hills and for the practices associated with them. As I have shown, it is also likely that, whatever happens, Dai holy hills will not go away.

In my thesis, I have shown first, that sacred space has implications beyond religion, and second, that sacred space has its place in the conceptualization of property and political power. The analysis of Dai holy hills has allowed me to show that they were instrumental in asserting and legitimating property rights over land and people. Until the 1950s, ownership of the holy hills was determinant for Dai aristocracy. My thesis therefore contributes to the literature on sacredness and sacred space. My research also contributes to include sacred space within property rights theory and in the mechanisms for control over territory.

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