



# Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden

Newsletter Nr. 8 - October 2012

## PHA TAD KE - THE CLIFF TO UNTIE AND RESOLVE

Welcome to our 8th newsletter, this time we will also publish for the first time a version in Lao. Whereas the French and English editions were mere translations, the Lao version has a different focus and content that is designed to better communicate with the local community. This 8th Newsletter is dedicated to the bamboos that we admire, cut, use for building, cook, eat, chant and paint about.

RIK GADELLA, PHA TAD KE BOTANICAL GARDEN

## Content

- 1-4 Friends of Pha Tad Ke
- 5-8 News from Pha Tad Ke
- 9-18 Botanica of Laos by Elisabeth Vilayleck  
*Banmboo - A Tree like a Reed*
- 19-23 Chroniques by Baj Strobel  
*Le bambou dans la peinture Chinoise*
- 24-28 *Portfolio: Kongngern Sengdee*
- 29-31 Some Books & Other Affairs we Love
- 32-35 Project Space • Luang Prabang

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## **Friends of Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden**

In January 2010 the Friends of Pha Tad Ke Association was created in France followed in July 2011 in the Netherlands and September 2011 in Laos. Each of these non-profit associations helps the creation of the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden with scientific support, fund raising efforts and educational projects. In addition the Luang Prabang Fund for Culture and Conservation that was created in 2011 in the USA accepts donations that are tax-deductible for the benefit of Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden or other cultural and conservation projects in the Lao PDR.

Helping the Friends of Pha Tad Ke will allow you to follow the day-to-day evolution of the garden, look behind the scenes of its operations and participate in the Pha Tad Ke adventure !

**Information: [www.friends-pha-tad-ke.com](http://www.friends-pha-tad-ke.com)**

**When you become a member for the creation phase, your 5-year (2010-2014) membership will entitle you to:**

**Member - € 100:**

- Our newsletter (3 times a year, english/french) contains news about the garden, on-going work and actions, and articles about the flora, arts and culture of Laos.

**Friend Member - € 300:**

- Private visit to PTK, including boat trip and picnic (for 2 pax, booking required)
- A 30% reduction on the garden's publications and products (except Folies)
- Access to our favoured travel agent in Laos, reductions on hotels and restaurants etc. (see list of the partners of the Friends)
- Mention of your name on our website
- An invitation for two people to the official opening.

**Support Member - Institutions & Companies - € 2,000:**

- Mention of your name on our website with your logo
- Discount of 10% on one of our editions « Folies »
- A private reception at the pre-opening for a group from your institution/company.

**Donor Member - € 5,000 €, or more:**

- Discount of 10% on two of our editions « Folies »
- Inclusion of your name on the donor plaque at the entrance to the garden.

**Members can increase their involvement in the creation of Pha Tad Ke by supporting one or more of our individual projects:**

• **Adopt a tree: from € 50 to € 2,000**

Buying and planting a tree is only a beginning. It must then be fed, cared for and pruned. This takes time, money and care. Love your tree and adopt a seedling or a mature tree.

• **Sponsor a Bookparty: € 400**

Guided visits to the gardens for groups of children or students, who will spend a day learning about Pha Tad Ke's work and plants. The package includes transport to the garden and lunch. At the end of the day, every participant will receive a copy of our specially published books.

• **Sponsor a student: € 4,400 for 4 years**

In conjunction with three institutions, PTK has set up a grant for the best first-year student. At the end of the first year of study, the winning student will be offered a scholarship that will allow him or her to continue his or her studies. In exchange, the recipient will be required to do a two-month work placement at the garden during summer recesses and to work at the garden for one year at the end of his/her studies.

• **Sponsor a research post: € 1,800 for one year**

Given the heavy workload at the university and the very low salaries in Laos, there is little time left for building research projects. With this grant PTK will enable a post doc to do a year's research on a topic chosen in consultation with PTK.

• **Sponsor a field trip: € 10,000**

In conjunction with the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, we have set up a three-year partnership to train our horticultural team and to carry out an ambitious program of monthly field trips to gather specimens for a collection of living plants that will be unique in Laos. At the same time we will collect specimens for a herbarium. Each trip will require a substantial investment in time and money but this work is imperative as it will form the very foundations of our garden and its collections.

• **Sponsor a building: from € 15,000**

Several buildings will be required to house our collections and staff, and provide facilities for visitors. These buildings will include: Nurseries (€ 15,000), Orchid House (€ 27,000), Butterfly Farm (€ 32,000), Reception area (€95,000), Restaurant (€ 95,000), offices for research staff (€ 130,000), Traditional Medicines House (€ 135,000) and Library or Herbarium (€ 190,000).



US Ambassador Karen B. Stewart visited Pha Tad Ke in September and also announced the Embassy's support for our upcoming publication on *Ecology and Biodiversity in Laos* by Prof. Toulaphone Keokean



*Lai Heua Fai*, the most beautiful festival in Laos, Pha Tad Ke Staff made this beautiful fireboat

## Planting Trees in the Arboretum

Herve leGoff, a journalist from Paris, made a short movie during his visit in October look on youtube

Visit from Souphannouvong University Students





Axel Dalberg Poulsen, director of the Botanical Garden at the University of Oslo and expert on Gingers paid us a short visit on his way to Sumatra.



Some of the Garden is on steep hillside  
that machinery cannot access  
so everything has to be carried by hand



## Bamboo, a Tree Like a Reed



*Birtbed by the rain,  
Bamboo stands tall  
Contemplating the moon.*  
Basho, 17<sup>th</sup> Century Japan

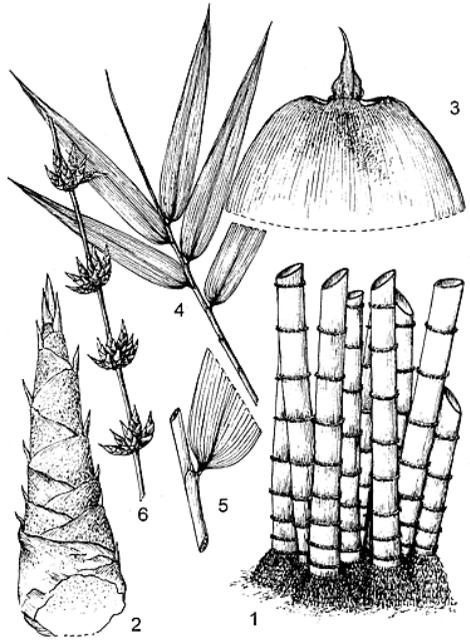
Bamboo has the strength of a tree and the suppleness of a reed. La Fontaine has the bamboo say “*I bend, but I do not break.*”, and this is the way Lao people who use bamboo talk about this astonishing plant, as much because of its unique botanical characteristics as for its apparently unlimited uses. Europe does not have any indigenous bamboo, although fossilised bamboo dating from the Tertiary Era has been found, having been wiped out by the Ice Ages. America and Africa have a few native species, but the great majority of the existing species are found on the Asian continent.

### **A Random Flowering**

Bamboo is a herbaceous and ligneous plant, two contradictory properties, but this actually makes sense. It can have widely varying dimensions from a few centimetres to a height of many tens of metres. All bamboos have underground stems that are called rhizomes from which come the roots and also



*1 In the bamboo forest 2 Bamboo flowering*



the buds which produce other rhizomes, either a shoot or an aerial stem or culm. But the rhizomes can be very different. There is a distinction between pachymorph (clumping) bamboos with short, thick rhizomes which produce dense clusters (genus *Bambusa*) and leptomorph (running) bamboo of which the rhizomes are long and thin and can run many metres under the ground and grow culms that spread out over a large area.

Shoots form on these rhizomes with a growth rate that can be very fast - between 30 centimetres to a metre in a day, so a twenty-metre stem takes eight to ten weeks to reach full size. Bamboo is the fastest growing plant. The buds come up out of the ground in their definitive diameter and those of the next year are bigger than those of the preceding year, so the older stem are the smallest ones.

These buds will transform themselves into hollow culms, partitioned at the level of the nodes, which protrude where the sheath is attached. These sheaths have many different shapes and colours and are essential for the identification of the species. Depending on the species, bamboos have different leaves carried by the branches which develop from the buds which are found at the level of the nodes.

- 1 The principal organs of a bamboo, here for *Dendrocalamus* sp.
- 2 The big diversity of bamboo leaves
- 3 The bud appears in the node when the sheath opens



VOULOU BAMBOU.

The flowers mainly appear at the axile of the leaves, forming long, hanging spikes. But the flowering of bamboos presents three characteristics which have not yet been thoroughly studied or explained. Flowering is not regular and can sometimes be separated by decades. The record is held by a bamboo with black culms, which last flowered in 1932. Each given species produces flowers simultaneously throughout a region, even all over the world, no matter how old the plant is. Indeed, one can speak of bamboo as having a genetic memory. Eventually, having flowered, the culms dry out and die.

In the absence of flowers, it is difficult to identify a plant and the taxonomy is still not well established. It is based most of the time on observation of the culm and particularly the sheath, but also by the thickness of the nodes and the length of the spaces between them. In the eighteenth century the genus *Bambusa* was created to classify this extraordinary plant which the Europeans had just discovered. The name was derived from the Portuguese *bambu* via the Dutch language, a word which itself came from a language from somewhere between the coasts of Malaysia and India, the usual route for the boats of explorers and merchants of the time. With the great diversity of bamboo types that were gradually discovered, no fewer than 75 new genus developed into about 1200 new species. It is thought that, in southern Asia 200 species, and in Laos, 52 species, divided into 15 genus exist.



One can find almost this number with the common names since Vidal recounts 43 of these in Lao, but the difficulty is matching the scientific names with the common names. This is true in general and even more so in the case of bamboos which are so polyvalent that people who use them don't always make the distinctions themselves. Also, Lao people often speak of male and female bamboo, a distinction that is refuted by botanists. The general term for bamboo, or at least the most current is *mai phai*, with a domestic and a jungle species which are the same 'green bamboo' colour. I cannot in this article go through all the bamboos named by local people and identified by botanists, so I have chosen to describe briefly about ten of the most commonly utilised and look at how they are used.

1 Descourtilz, *Antilles*, 1823 2 Tabel and stool



*Mai phai ban*, *Bambusa blumeana*: “village bamboo” which is often found around populated areas. It can reach a height of 12 metres and a diameter of 10 cm.

*Mai phai pa*, *Bambusa arundinacea*: “forest bamboo”, is smaller than the former, has a habit that is less straight, has spines and can form an impenetrable thicket. Widely distributed, it is the principal constituent of bamboo forests in areas where the forest cover has disappeared.

*Mai bia*, *Schizostachyum virgatum*: A medium sized bamboo, long and slender with thin wall and elegant leaves which is found in mixed forests in the north.

*Mai pouak*, *Dendrocalamus sp*: A large, beautiful bamboo of 15 to 20 meters and 20 cm in diameter, characterised by its brown culms.

*Mai sangkeham*, *Bambusa vulgaris*: An ornamental bamboo with yellow stems striped with green, which reaches about 7 or 8 metres and a diameter of 7 to 8 cm.

*Mai bong*, *Bambusa tulda*: A dense forest bamboo with thick clumps of 30 or 40 culms which can reach from 5 to 7 metres forming thick walls of grey-green culms.

*Mai sot*, *Oxytenanthera parviflora*: A medium sized bamboo with very dense, decorative foliage, 4 or 5 metres in height and 5 cm in diameter, it colonises deforested areas.

*Mai phang*, *Dendrocalamus lonoifimbriatus*: Made up of thick clumps of 50 culms it can reach 15 metres and is found at mid-level elevations throughout Laos. Interestingly, the last known flowering was in 1990.

*Mai khom*, *Indosasa sinica*: Culms of 7 to 12 metres. The flowering of this bamboo is unknown, but shoots appear from December to May on many of the slopes in hilly areas of northern and central Laos.

1 *Mai phai pa* 2 *Mai pouak* 3 *Mai sot* 4 *Mai phai namtao*





### **The All-Purpose Plant**

In India, bamboo was known as “*poor man’s wood*”, for the Chinese it was “*the people’s friend*”, for the Vietnamese “*the brother*”, and for Raquez, who visited Indochina at the beginning of the 20th century, it was “*the providence of the Orient*”. These metaphors are still a reality as, despite the recent massive introduction of things made of plastic into Lao villages, bamboo is still omnipresent in daily village life. Not only are a wide range of traditional tools made from this plant, but bamboo is always the solution to new problems that arise within the home and outdoors.

Because it is solid, light and flexible, it is quite widely used, requiring only a quick stroke of a bush knife to transform it into something useful. But even without cutting it, bamboo provides shade, makes pleasant sounds as the wind rustles through the culms, and makes an effective barrier against all kinds of invaders. A village near Vientiane is called *ban pai lom*, “*the village surrounded by bamboo*”.

Once cut, the transformation of bamboo can be extremely simple or quite sophisticated but every part of the plant has a particular use.

### **A Good Stout Stick**

Bamboo is used whenever one needs a good stout stick - collecting fruit, poling a canoe in the current, hanging out the washing - and this useful tool is called *mai sao*. Sometimes it also has a ritual role to play in the games of boys and girls

**Bamboo rockets are shot to the sky**

where they pull the bamboo. Sewn in the skirts of the women, a bamboo cane defines the area for some animistic rituals. In the bamboo dance, the dancers leap over moving bamboo poles manipulated by their fellow dancers at ground level. Bamboo canes are sometimes floated as transport on the water, and five or six canes lashed together make a great raft. They also provide posts for light buildings for grain storage or temporary housing in the rice fields. Usually it is stems of *mai sang kham* which are used for these little buildings. The culms of *mai phang* can be used to build ladders, shelves, balustrades, light bridges and even scaffolding.

### **A Hollow Stick**

The culm is a segmented stem which is hollow, and this characteristic is utilised in several ways. One of the simplest is piping which carries water to one point or another after the nodes have been removed. Also, peashooters which children make out of bamboo can be made to shoot with a loud bang with the aid of a piston. And the fireworks for *boun bang fai* (Rocket Festival), are simply bamboo stems filled with gunpowder and shot into the sky to bring the rain.

By cutting the stem between two nodes, you can create a useful receptacle for carrying water, honey found in the forest or a gift of home-made whiskey. In former times some foods like fish were fermented in a tube of bamboo. And again from Raquez, he recounts how rice is cooked in the forest in a bamboo tube lined with wild ginger leaves so the rice

does not adhere to the inside. A little water is added, leaves are used to close the end and the whole thing is turned over a fire. This is still the method for cooking the delicious *khao lam*, sticky rice mixed with sugar and coconut milk for some festivals, preferably using *mai phai ban*, cooked over a fire.

When properly cooked, the bamboo can simply be peeled off to enjoy the contents. In the area around Houai Xay sticky rice, once it is cooked, is not served in a woven basket as it is in most of Laos, but in two bamboo trunks fitted together, using the bamboo known as *mai pouak*.

### A formidable weapon

Some bamboos have an outer wall, which, when cut on the bias can be used as a weapon, or in making traps for larger animals and ... for humans. A blade made this way is used to cut the umbilical cord (some people call a boy, a male bamboo) and the placenta is then put into a bamboo tube before being buried.

### Pipes and flutes

Being hollow, bamboo forms a resonating chamber for a number of musical instruments. Tambourines, xylophones, rhythm sticks beaten together or against a hollow log.

The most emblematic instrument in Laos is certainly the *khèn*, a mouth organ made of *mai hia*. It is constructed of pieces of bamboo of different lengths arranged in two rows of three to eight pipes pierced with holes. These flutes are inserted in a casing of wood which acts as a mouthpiece.

Another instrument in the north of the country is made of a gourd into which fine stems of holed bamboo are inserted. From *Bambusa ventricosa*, which Europeans rather disrespectfully call “*Buddha’s Belly*” and Lao people call *mai phai namtao*, or gourd bamboo, they make pipes, but for opium and water pipes, they prefer *mai phai* for the small ones and *mai pouak* for the larger ones.

### Printing

And finally, bamboo provides a hard, smooth and durable surface for various types of printing and thus is some of the first writing material, such as the Annals of Bamboo, inscribed Chinese bamboo culms dating from the 3rd century B.C. In Laos long ago some ethnicities with no system of writing were able to use this material to make note, using notches, of the conditions of a contract, of a command or a summons. In the latter case, a feather attached to the bamboo indicated to the recipient that he should hurry, and if a chilli was attached, it was an indication that danger was imminent. (*France-Asie*, 1954).

In the Paklay region, they made horoscope canes from bamboo etched with fire on which were inscribed the auspicious and inauspicious days of the week with their corresponding animals.

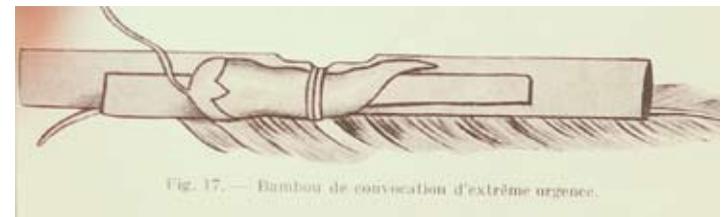


Fig. 17. — Bambou de convocation d'extrême urgence.



## Basketwork

Another way to use the culms is in strips of different sizes, sticks or strings.

In Laos the walls of the houses are made of woven bamboo, often *mai sot*. They are slit lengthwise, folded to make them supple, then flattened and put to dry, and the lengths made this way are woven into the desired pattern. The panels, called *caiphen*, a Vietnamese name, is then ready to be edged with a border of wood. The same idea is used with *mai hia* to make tiles, fences or thicker walls, but the strips are placed directly without being woven.

Culms that have been cut into finer strips, woven or not, can be used to make an infinite number of household items, from a *thip kbao* (rice basket) to a chicken coop and all kinds of nets, baskets in all shapes. This basketry is usually characteristic of different ethnicities. Sometimes bamboo and rattan are used together to make the low tables (*pha kbao*), a sort of floor tray on which are presented different dishes and meals.

A *talè* or *talèo*, “eagle eye” is made using a quick, rough weaving style to mark a forbidden zone when, for example, a spirit

festival is held in a village to warn outsiders to keep their distance. It can also be a barrier in case of a serious illness, but the more modern usage is to warn of the danger of a nasty wasp nest that has been discovered in a forest.

After even finer slicing, ties are made to hold things together, including wristbands and heavier cordage can also be made to tie together several culms for fences, rafts, or pieces of wood during construction.

1 Bamboo bridge in north Laos 2 Blessing ceremony in a Laos house with bamboo walls 3 Roof with bamboo shingles 4 On the cart of the hawker everything is from bamboo



### Ritual Games

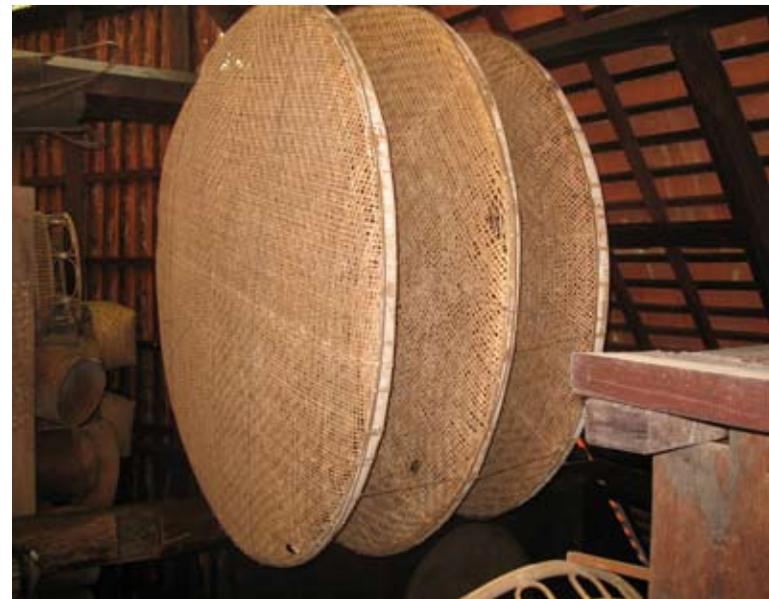
The rhizome is undoubtedly the least-used part of the plant, except occasionally canes are made from the long underground stems of running bamboo. When a rhizome is clumping it is very dense and is used with the root of a male bamboo to make a ball for the game *ti kbi* which is played between opposing teams at the time of the festival of *That Louang*. Another use is medicinal and a decoction of the roots of *mai phai ban* is given in the case of chest problems with skin rashes.



### Light Leaves

The elegance of bamboo leaves has not escaped the Lao who in traditional riddles, of which they are very fond, see them as fish which swim in the current, saying in effect, "*Bai phai pen pa lot*" or "*the bamboo leaves are like the Lot fish*" (a long flat fish, *Macrogathus siamensis*) that undulate in the current like leaves in the wind. These leaves are used when one has nothing else to hand to wrap up various items such as tobacco. Elephants are also very fond of these leaves but they also like, as people do, the shoots and even the stems.

- 1 *Mai bong* is used to make sticky rice baskets
- 2 Baskets woven from bamboo
- 3 Blessing of the *ti kbi* ball before the game
- 4 Fine wickerwork for fans





In the pharmacopoeia, the leaves are often associated with female problems, those of many types of bamboo are added to the steam bath water prescribed for women giving birth and menstrual problems are treated with a decoction of *mai phai pa*.

### Decoction

Bamboo manna is a rather mysterious product mentioned in ancient texts and which has many virtues. It was known to the Chinese and the Indians and well-researched by Europeans. It had to do with silicium crystals or powder found

- 1 *Khao lam* is cooked in bamboo
- 2 *Mai khom* shoots, peeled and half peeled
- 3 Bamboo shoots, cooked, peeled and sliced

in the culms. When Lao people recommend a decoction of bamboo nodes, it seems clear that they know empirically about this product, which is given for menstrual problems, rheumatism, bronchitis and skin rashes.

### Cooking

The vigorous thrust with which the bamboo shoots emerge from the soil is quite spectacular; the beauty of their colours and the strength of the growth is impressive, especially when one thinks about the famous Chinese torture widely reported by chroniclers. Happily, they grace our plates as a crisp vegetable with the taste of an artichoke or a nut, according to Europeans. But you need to be Lao to choose the best shoots (*no mai*) at the right moment and in the right place. While theoretically all are edible, some contain toxins which are eliminated in cooking, the non-connoisseur should always boil them before eating. The general rule is to wash them, pull off the first layer, put them into boiling water for some time and then remove another layer before preparing them. Freshly cooked, they can be eaten with a spicy sauce or a shrimp paste sauce, cut into long strips they are put into a salad, they can be stir-fried with meat and other vegetables, and they are very popular in a soup, especially the famous *kèng no mai* whose green colour and slightly gelatinous texture comes from *ya nang* (*Tiliacora triandra*).



The shoots of *mai kbom*, among the most commonly eaten, are called “bitter”, despite being quite sweet! Those of *mai bia* are collected in August and September, dried in the sun and can be eaten year-round.

Both a food source and a gourmet delicacy, bamboo shoots are preserved in a variety of ways - fermented, in brine and dried, so they are easily commercialised.

### Symbolism

The importance of bamboo in the material life in Laos is such that you would think it also plays a spiritual role. But this is not so. In the temples in the towns, for instance, there is no bamboo at all. Only in the jungle are temples sometimes guarded by a few clumps of this plant which seems more wild than civilised.

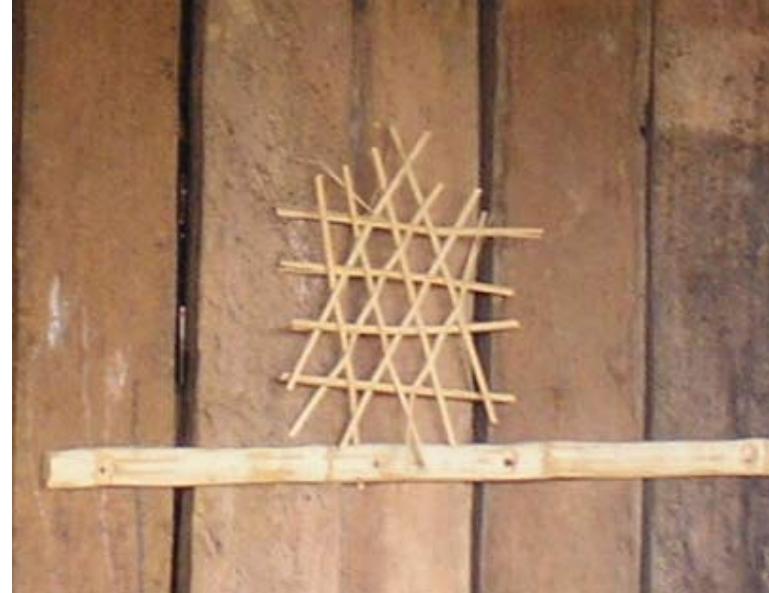
In his book on Lao habitation, Clement says, “*The Lao seem to refuse bamboo the right to be a sacred material.*” Although bamboo is used for making the *ta lèo* and ritual bracelets, for cutting the umbilical cord and also for interring the placenta, it is only required to perform practical functions, not spiritual ones.

I have only found one symbolic use for bamboo and this is not among Lao people but among some ethnicities in Northern Laos (*Hmong, Lanten-Yao*) who make paper from bamboo fibre which is only used for religious purposes, including texts for exorcism, curative recipes, altar decorations and special fumigations.

### The Civilising Plant

These few examples show clearly that for the Lao, bamboo is an indispensable plant. And I have said nothing of its “modernity” in terms of cultivation methods and rules used in the commercial exploitation of the culms and shoots, the possible danger to this resource, the sophisticated methods, often inspired by foreigners, in which it is used in construction and handicrafts - concrete strengthened by bamboo, textiles, furniture and household goods... etc.

In the same way Gourou speaks of “*a civilisation of rice*”, one can also speak of bamboo as a “*plant of civilisation*” because of its important practical impact for Laos and its neighbours. This plant is a best friend, always there but without ostentation, discreet, loyal, familiar, never forgetting its purely practical role as the “*all-purpose plant*”.



1 *Talèo* on the wall of a house 2 Some ethnic groups use paper made from bamboo for sacred texts

## CHRONIQUES PAR BAJ STROBEL : LE BAMBOU DANS LA PEINTURE CHINOISE

« *Comme il est digne d'être aimé !* » dit un lettré chinois du 18<sup>ème</sup> siècle ! En effet combien le bambou, qui n'est ni un arbre ni une herbe, se prête à merveille à l'écriture et à la peinture chinoises. N'est-il pas surprenant que dans un même élan, en un geste prolongé par le pinceau maculé d'encre, soient rendus force, droiture ainsi que la subtile danse des feuilles animées par le vent ? Le bambou réunit mieux que tout autre végétal l'alliance intime entre peinture et écriture qui fait l'originalité fondamentale des arts graphiques en Chine.

### Art pictural en Chine

« *Il faut chercher un accomplissement au-delà de la ressemblance formelle. C'est là une chose difficile. Les peintres, s'ils parviennent à introduire dans leurs peintures les souffles harmoniques, la ressemblance formelle viendrait de surcroît, tout naturellement.* »

Hsieh Ho (vers 849)

Selon l'expression de François Cheng, les arts en Chine, et en particulier les arts graphiques, ont poussé comme un immense arbre qui plonge ses racines à la fois dans l'écriture idéographique (grâce au pinceau en bambou) et dans une faculté particulière à transformer les éléments de la nature en signes. (Cheng, 2006 : 12).

La cosmologie qui sert de base à cette conception de l'art repose sur l'idée qu'un souffle primordial, dérivé du vide originel, auquel s'ajoutent les souffles vitaux Yin et Yang, régit une relation ternaire entre Ciel, Terre et Homme.

L'esthétique chinoise repose sur une vision organiciste de l'univers où prime en effet le « *souffle-esprit* » et où le vide même est le noyau d'origine de tous les réseaux de transformation du monde créé. L'œuvre artistique est ainsi mêlée aux métamorphoses continues de la création. C'est pourquoi, pour les non-connaisseurs, il est très difficile de percevoir des évolutions, des ruptures ou même des périodes spécifiques dans les arts picturaux chinois. N'est-il pas vrai que les peintures de bambous semblent se ressembler du 7<sup>ème</sup> siècle à nos jours !

Ce thème pictural important fait partie du genre dit de la « *Peinture Lettrée* » dont tous les thèmes sont porteurs, comme par exemple les arbres et les rochers, d'un sens emblématique et incarnent les vertus attribuées aux lettres.



Lin Kan

*Bambous et rochers*, Dynastie des Yuan, 185 x 153 cm



### La peinture de Lettré

Elle s'oppose à celle du professionnel qui se rapproche de l'artisan. Le terme qui désigne l'art, *YI*, signifie planter, cultiver, se développer, et ne renvoie pas à une habileté particulière. Ainsi l'activité créatrice n'est pas le résultat d'une volonté ni même d'une technique mais de la disposition du cœur et

des sentiments de l'artiste. L'art est une forme d'accomplissement de soi et sa pratique une expérience de vie. Le lettré, qui a passé les examens impériaux, se confond avec le sage ou le savant qui œuvre pour son loisir et son pur plaisir, dans le seul but de croître en sagesse. La peinture est véritablement devenue un art sous la dynastie des T'ang (7<sup>ème</sup> - 8<sup>ème</sup> siècle) en étant perpétuellement comparée à l'art de l'écriture à qui elle emprunte d'ailleurs les matériaux : l'encre, le papier ou la soie, le pinceau et la pierre à encre. Sa technique est fondée sur la pratique du coup de pinceau et son esthétique sur l'appréciation du tracé. L'encre noire incarne le principe yin, c'est-à-dire l'ombre, la féminité, l'humidité, la souplesse, la terre, alors que le support blanc, papier ou soie, correspond au principe yang ou à la lumière, la masculinité, la sécheresse, la dureté du ciel. Néanmoins Yin et Yang ne sont pas complémentaires mais ils ne peuvent pas aller l'un sans l'autre, ils sont en interaction.

### Le geste, le tracé

« Le moine Chueh Hin des Yuan disait : 'J'ai l'habitude de dessiner les orchidées avec l'esprit de joie et les bambous avec l'esprit de colère'. En effet, les orchidées avec leurs longues feuilles gracieuses et élancées, leurs fleurs tendrement écloses, sont bien habitées de joie ; alors que les bambous, aux tiges pointues et enchevêtrées, pareilles à des épées et des lances entremêlées, sont l'expression même de la fureur. »

(Li Jih Hua, fin 16<sup>ème</sup> siècle)

Quel que soit le trait pictural ou calligraphique, il comporte obligatoirement une attaque, un développement et une fin. Le contrôle du tracé est absolument essentiel dans la manœuvre du pinceau autant que la maîtrise du geste, d'ailleurs.



A gauche:  
Bian Jingzhao  
Bambous et grues  
XV<sup>ème</sup> Siècle  
180 x 118 cm

A droite:  
Ke Jiusi  
Bambous à l'encre pour le Qinghige  
1338, 85 x 33 cm

Un bambou, par exemple doit être tracé de bas en haut : la tradition estime que si on les peint du haut en bas, on n'obtient pas de bambou mais seulement des sections mortes de bambou. Le tracé des feuilles de bambou quant à lui, obéit au précepte d'un auteur du 13<sup>ème</sup> siècle, Zhao Mengfu, qui stipule que les feuilles sont figurées à l'aide de la technique de la calligraphie à l'encre dense et au trait tendu jusqu'à l'extrémité. Voici ce que dit, dans un colophon, ce même auteur : « *L'écriture des bambous doit respecter les huit règles de la calligraphie. Celui qui est capable d'y arriver sait que calligraphie et peinture partagent une commune origine.* »

(cité par Yolande Escande, 2000 :16)

Si la peinture emprunte à la calligraphie, l'inverse est également vrai. Un des plus célèbres peintres de bambous, Wu Zhen (1280-1354), insère des jeux d'encre picturaux à des inscriptions calligraphiques. Les bambous sont souvent associés aux rochers. Si Wu Zhen est devenu un grand maître des bambous c'est qu'il a beaucoup étudié les nombreuses œuvres attribuées à un de ses prédécesseurs, Weng Tong (vers 1018-1078). On s'aperçoit ainsi que la peinture et l'art en général sont fortement marqué par l'étude des traditions propres et de l'apport successif des générations d'artistes.

### Le principe interne constant

« *Je me suis levé tôt pour contempler les bambous. A travers branches éparses et feuilles serrées scintillent, intimement mêlées, ombre du soleil et lumière des brumes. Je sens monter en moi le désir irréprensible de peindre. Mais je ne tarde pas à comprendre que les bambous jaillissent*

*mon cœur ne sont pas ceux que j'ai devant les yeux. Une fois l'encre prête et le papier déployé, je me mets à dessiner mais cette fois, je constate que les bambous surgis de ma main ne sont pas non plus ceux qui ont jailli de mon cœur. Ah ! Que l'esprit doive précéder le pinceau c'est la règle ; que l'accomplissement doive dépasser la règle, voilà le mystère de toute vraie création ! »*

(Cheng Hsieh, 17<sup>ème</sup> siècle).

Wu Zhen a vécu toute sa vie en ermite, pratiquant la divination et s'est nommé lui-même « le taoïste de la fleur de prunier ». Cette dernière qui fleurit sous la neige, incarne la résistance à la dynastie des Mongols. Pour comprendre la portée méditative de son talent, il faut avoir à l'esprit que l'art ne sert ni à représenter une chose existante, ni une chose belle ou étrange, mais avant tout à transmettre au spectateur l'esprit de la chose représentée. De même ce n'est pas la forme qui importe, mais ce qu'elle transmet et véhicule. Transmettre l'esprit signifie faire en sorte que l'objet représenté soit vivant. (Escande, 2000 : 34). Autrement dit, la perfection de l'art est le moment où il devient la réalité du passage, du chemin, qui marque la coïncidence entre ce qui est représenté par l'image et la réalité au-delà des apparences appelées par cette image. La vérité picturale se base ainsi sur un emprunt à la création naturelle, à son processus. Il s'agit d'une création fidèle non aux formes naturelles mais à leurs principes, dont le plus important est le principe interne constant qui s'op-

Wu Zhen

*Bambous et pierre, 1347, 91 x 43 cm*



pose à la forme et correspond à l'intentionnalité de l'univers et au sens de la vie. Seuls les artisans se contentent de peindre ce qu'ils voient, le lettré lui représente ses connaissances, sa culture, les traditions poétiques et littéraires qu'il poursuit à partir de ses études et méditations suscitées par les œuvres de sa tradition.

Le peintre Wen Tong, peintre des bambous, était justement célèbre pour son respect du principe interne constant. C'est ainsi que le décrit son biographe Su Shi :

*« Lorsque Wen peignait des bambous, il voyait des bambous et ne voyait plus l'homme qu'il était. Non seulement il n'avait plus conscience de lui-même, mais comme en transe il oubliait son propre corps. Il se transformait lui-même en bambou, d'une fraîcheur et d'une pureté inépuisables. A sa naissance, le bambou, lorsqu'il n'est qu'une pousse de quelques centimètres, possède déjà nœuds et feuilles. Comme une cigale se dépeignant de sa chrysalide ou un serpent faisant sa mue, le bambou se défait de ses écorces pour atteindre une hauteur de plusieurs mètres, développant seulement ce qu'il enferme en lui. Or les peintres aujourd'hui le dessinent en ajoutant nœud après nœud, feuille après feuille. Comment cela pourrait-il donner un bambou ? Car avant de peindre un bambou, il faut qu'il ait déjà poussé dans le cœur-esprit. Alors, pinceau en main, regard concentré, on voit surgir ce que l'on désirait peindre. Il faut saisir son pinceau aussi promptement qu'un faucon qui fond sur le lièvre prêt à bondir ; un instant d'hésitation et la vision s'évanouit. »*

(Su Shi, Notes sur Wen Tong, cité par Ecande, 2000 :65).

### Le bambou tel qu'il est peint

*« Par son vide intérieur, le bambou incarne l'humilité ; par son port droit et élancé, il incarne l'élévation d'esprit. Demeurant toujours vert, il conserve durablement ses vertus. Comme il est digne d'être aimé ! »*

(Ching Nung, 18<sup>ème</sup> siècle)

Il fait partie de la catégorie des trois amis du froid avec le prunus, et le pin. Il exprime la droiture, la simplicité et le jeûne du cœur, c'est-à-dire le détachement des poussières du monde. Le pin, la droiture dans l'adversité, le prunus qui fleurit sous la neige et les frimas, la pureté et la loyauté malgré les épreuves.

Le bambou, écrit Tai Hsi, 18<sup>ème</sup> siècle, *« n'est ni un arbre, ni une herbe, il ne donne ni fleur ni fruit. Il recèle en lui le pur souffle qui anime le ciel et la terre, qui incarne à la fois les vertus de droiture et d'humilité. Il détient la clé d'un mystère qui n'est qu'à lui. »*

Aucune plante, selon François Cheng, ne possède aux yeux des Chinois un tel prestige. Devenir bambou, tel est le rêve de l'homme juste comme celui de l'artiste en quête d'harmonie. Sur diverses peintures que voit-on en effet ? Des tiges de bambou, certaines brisées, fragiles, parcourent le support de papier, le mouvement semble suggéré plutôt qu'affirmé, la composition laisse toujours de larges pans non peints, déséquilibrée parfois mais les sceaux rouges et les colophons participent bien à la scène. Les feuilles pointues, striées parfois

Zhen Xie

Bambous et rocher, Dynastie des Qing, 170 x 90 cm



semblent frissonner sous l'effet du souffle d'air. La vision de l'artiste devient lisible pour le spectateur, il participe au moment de la création et se laisse porter par l'énergie dégagée de ce végétal, ni arbre, ni herbe qui ne porte ni fruit ni fleur mais qui enchante les sens.

« Je peins les bambous simplement pour exprimer le souffle qui demeure en moi... Lorsque le cœur n'est ni emprisonné, ni bloqué, il se guide et grandit chaque jour sans limites. »

(Shen Zongqian, 18ème siècle)

Les principes de l'art pictural chinois, entre-aperçus ici par le biais d'une brassée de bambous, semble associer deux tendances qui nous semblent a priori contradictoires. La première est imprégnée de grande sensualité, d'émotion et du langage subtil des sensations tactiles, et en même temps ces principes énoncent des interprétations fort abstraites. Il en est ainsi du lien entre écriture et peinture, entre écrit et image : ce lien ne se fonde pas sur une représentation de la réalité mais sur son interprétation abstraite.

L'appréciation de l'œuvre repose également sur les connaissances, la culture et l'intérêt idéologique ou spirituel du spectateur. La peinture n'est en rien une projection d'une sensibilité d'un artiste, mais le fruit d'une interaction entre une sensibilité et une chose existante, une plante, tel le bambou. Ce qui importe avant tout dans l'œuvre réalisée ce sont les valeurs qu'elle véhicule et la qualité de sa transmission.  
(Escande, 2006 :119)

« Je suis allé au-delà des bambous. Lorsque je vivais en ermite sur les pentes du mont Chong, je me suis installé dans un bois de hauts bambous et je les observais et les écoutais tranquillement sans laisser mon cœur se troubler. Le matin, les bambous étaient mes amis, le soir, mes compagnons. Au début, je les observais et les appréciais, puis je les appréciai sans savoir que je le faisais. Soudain j'oubliais le pinceau dans ma main et le papier sous mes yeux, je me dressais aussitôt et réalisais quantité de bambous... »

(Su Che, 11ème siècle)

Aller au-delà des bambous signifie avoir dépassé leur apparence. Le peintre ne cherche pas à concurrencer la nature, ni à essayer de la reproduire mais se met en une disposition telle qu'en se mettant à leur écoute, il « laisse les arbres pousser en lui ».

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*Chu Ta*, Phoebus Paris, 1986.



Gai Qi

*Beautés sous les bambous*, Dynastie des Qing



## Portfolio by Kongngern Sengdee

Kongngern Sengdee is 25 years old and studied with Professor Joy Southammagasan at the Sibounheung Art College in Vientiane. Since 2 years he works and lives at Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden where he has made the illustrations for the three children books we have published. He has taught himself graphic design and is now preparing the lay-out for our next children's book on the Medicinal Plants of Laos. In this portfolio we are pleased to present the more elaborate drawings he has made the last months on the wild orchids of Laos.



*“I have never had formal training in botanical drawings and would like to learn more, any suggestions and comments are very welcome. I hope that one day soon I can work with a botanical artist to learn more and improve my work because to be an artist is for me the way to express myself and be socially responsible.”*









## SOME BOOKS AND OTHER AFFAIRS WE LOVE



*In our last Newsletter we talked about sacred tattoos here is another great book on the topic*

### SACRED TATTOOS OF THAILAND

*Text by Joe Cummings, Photography by Dan White*

Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2011

ISBN 978 981 4302 54 8, 220 pages, 42\$

Sacred Tattoos of Thailand: Explore the Magic, Masters and Mystery of Sak Yan is the first illustrated book in English to trace the history and origins of the Tai hand-inked tattoo tradition. While Thailand remains the centre of the cultural form's conservation and development, similar traditions exist today in Cambodia, Laos and parts of Vietnam, China and Burma. The product of 18 months of field research

and photography, Sacred Tattoos of Thailand brings the world of this fascinating and commonly misrepresented tradition to light.

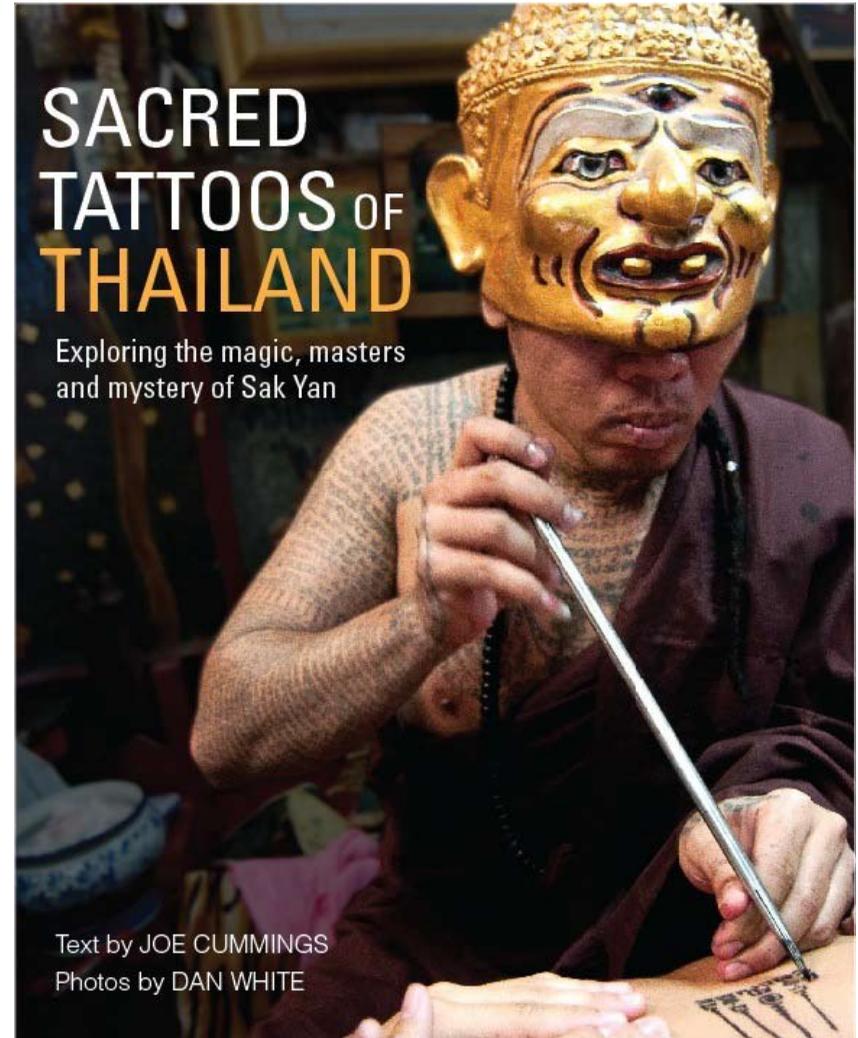
Rather than sensationalise sak yan and popularise the misconception that the tradition is the stuff of gangsters and bad boys, Sacred Tattoos of Thailand sheds light on the tradition's spiritual roots and how it combines into a single belief system elements of Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism, all of which are underpinned by a strict moral and ethical code that is passed from master to disciple.

While masters range from monks to laymen, the "sak yan people" featured in the book come from all walks of life, from New York rock drummer Ming Roth, Singaporean deejay Chris X'Ho and Thai actress Jan Yousagoon, to nightclub bouncers, wandering monks and an officer from the Department of Special Investigations.

Joe Cummings expert text traces the development of the tradition in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.

While sak yan is in decline in neighbouring countries, the narrative shows how Thailand remains the safe harbour of this vibrant cultural form which otherwise would be at risk of dying out.

Beyond bringing the life stories of the various ajarns and their predecessors to light, the author explores the magic and symbolism of the various tattoo traditions, including primary research into the little



## SACRED TATTOOS OF THAILAND

Exploring the magic, masters and mystery of Sak Yan

Text by JOE CUMMINGS  
Photos by DAN WHITE

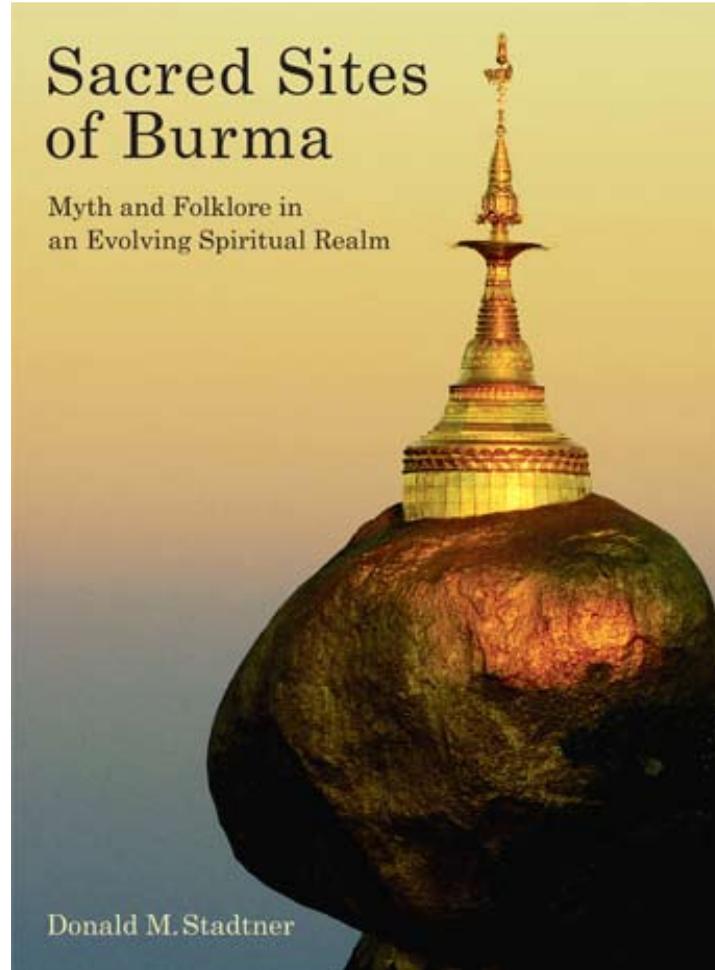
known Lanna script from Northern Thailand.

Visually, Dan White's reportage-style photography takes readers into the salas of the sak yan ajarns, shedding light on their daily lives, the preparations and rituals that give the tattoos their power, and the deep relationships that are formed between master and disciple. Rather than opting for posed "artistic" portraits the photographer has taken great effort to show the people and places featured in the book in their everyday lives, making them the story.

#### About the Authors

**Joe Cummings** originally came to Thailand to study Buddhism, and soon afterwards began research on Southeast Asian art history for a master's degree at the University of California at Berkeley. He has written more than 30 guidebooks on countries in Asia and North America, and authored several books on Buddhist art and architecture, Thai design and other related topics, including *Buddhist Stupas in Asia*, *Lanna Renaissance*, *Burmese Design and Architecture* and *Chiang Mai Style*.

**Dan White** is a British photographer with two decades of experience producing features for magazines, newspapers, and book publishers, including *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Observer* and the German *Rolling Stone*. He has also worked on in depth, long term photographic assignments for NGOs and international organisations. Previously based in London and Paris, he now lives in Bangkok, Thailand.



#### SACRED SITES OF BURMA : MYTH AND FOLKLORE IN AN EVOLVING SPIRITUAL REALM

*Donald M. Stadtner*

River Books, Bangkok 2012

ISBN 978 974 9863 60 2, 348pp. \$ 35

The sacred sites of Burma are amongst the most beautiful and spectacular in all of Asia. However, the fame and sacredness of these holy places rests almost solely on the myths and legends that surround their founding and the origins of their relics. These Buddhist tales can arise and evolve with

astounding speed and creativity drawing on a variety of sources ranging from local folklore to Sri Lankan chronicles. The author uncovers the evidence for and traces the development of these intricate myths across a wide spectrum of sacred sites ranging from Yangon and the Mon State in Lower Burma to Pagan and Mandalay in Upper Burma as well as considering the areas of Shan influence around Inle lake.

The book demonstrates how sacred sites can emerge with remarkable frequency in our own time with only those that possess myths catching the imagination of the Buddhist faithful having any chance of long term survival. *Sacred Sites of Burma* is an essential read for anyone interested in the development of Buddhism in its many aspects, be they its art, archaeology, history or belief.

**CHRONICLE OF SIPSÒNG PANNA:  
HISTORY AND SOCIETY OF A TAI LÜ KINGDOM  
TWELFTH TO MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY**

*Foon Ming Liew-Herres, Volker Grabowsky, & Renoo Wichasin*  
Mekong Press, Chiang Mai 2012  
ISBN 978-616-90053-3-9, 436pp. THB 995

The Tai Lü are a Tai speaking group closely related to the Khon Müang or Tai Yuan, the dominant ethnic group in Northern Thailand. According to their own historical tradition, the ancestors of the Tai Lü migrated from what is now northwestern Vietnam into the southern part of Yunnan, where they founded their own kingdom in the twelfth century. Through various waves of voluntary migration as well as forced resettlement, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, they have spread over a large area in the upper Mekong region - roughly one million people living in the four nation-states of China, Thailand, Burma, and Laos. In pre-modern times their petty states, particularly the Sipsòng Panna polity, were zones where the spheres of influence of greater powers overlapped. Now, in the so called “Economic Quadrangle” of the Upper Mekong, which plays an increasingly significant economic and geopolitical role, the Tai Lü are the most important population group.

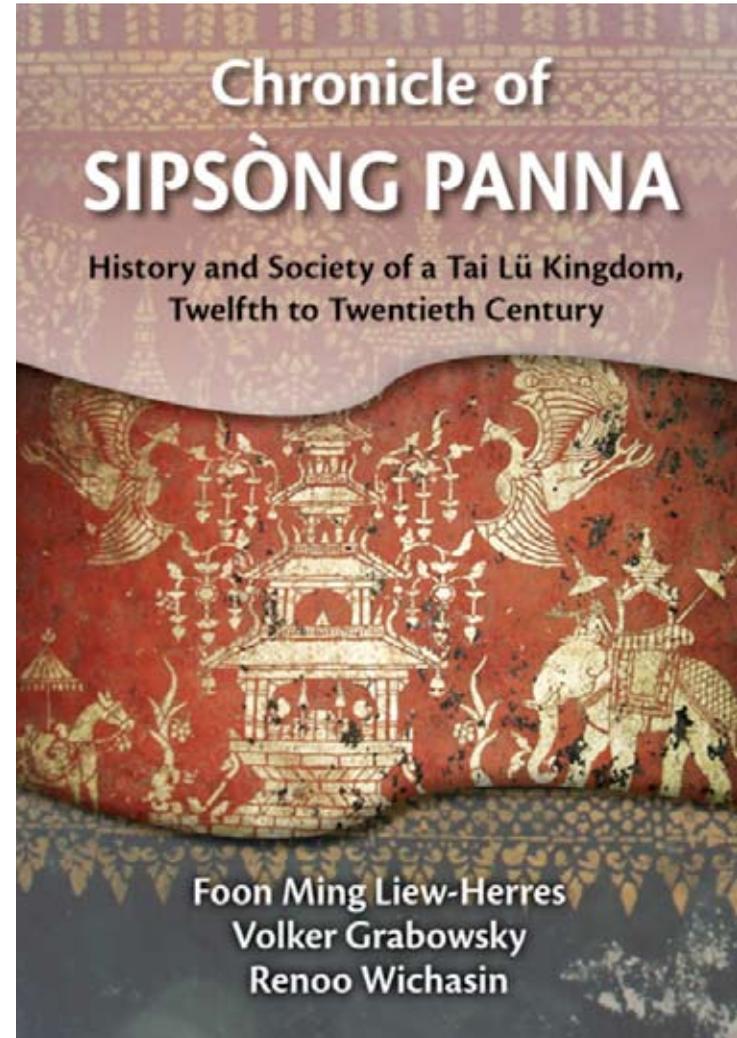
Chronicle of Sipsòng Panna offers the first English translation of four different versions of the Chronicle of Moeng Lü (also known as Sipsòng Panna) from the oldest extant manuscripts. Along with extensive annotation, this volume provides a comprehensive analysis of Tai Lü historical sources and, based on these sources, a valuable introduction to the history and society of the Upper Mekong region. It will appeal to scholars of Thai/Tai history, society, culture, and philology, and to general readers who are interested in this region.

**About the Authors**

**Foon Ming Liew-Herres** is a Sinologist specialising in the history of the Ming dynasty and Ming historiography, and the author of the *Treatises on Military Affairs of the Ming Dynastic History* (1998). Her field of research has in the last decade extended to Sino-Tai relations in Yunnan and mainland Southeast Asia.

**Volker Grabowsky**, Professor of Thai Studies at the University of Hamburg, has published extensively on the history of the Tai polities in the Upper Mekong basin.

**Renoo Wichasin** was Associate Professor of Thai Philology at Chiang Mai University. She is one of the leading experts in Tai manuscript cultures. Together with Volker Grabowsky she has co-authored *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng: A Tai Lü Principality of the Upper Mekong* (2008).





## Project Space • Luang Prabang

**Project Space • Luang Prabang** is a multifunction nonprofit space for producing exhibitions and events. The building with three floors, and a rooftop terrace with stunning views, is in the centre of Luang Prabang and will host several exhibitions per year and collaborate with other cultural institutions in Luang Prabang and elsewhere, on joint events and projects.

**Project Space • Luang Prabang** is an initiative of Jean-Pierre Dovat and Rik Gadella.

### **Project Space • Luang Prabang**

Kitsalat Road 6 (Opposite Dara Market)

Luang Prabang, Lao PDR

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[www.projectspace-luangprabang.com](http://www.projectspace-luangprabang.com)

**Exhibition: November 10<sup>th</sup> - December 29<sup>th</sup> 2012**  
**PRASERT YODKAEW**

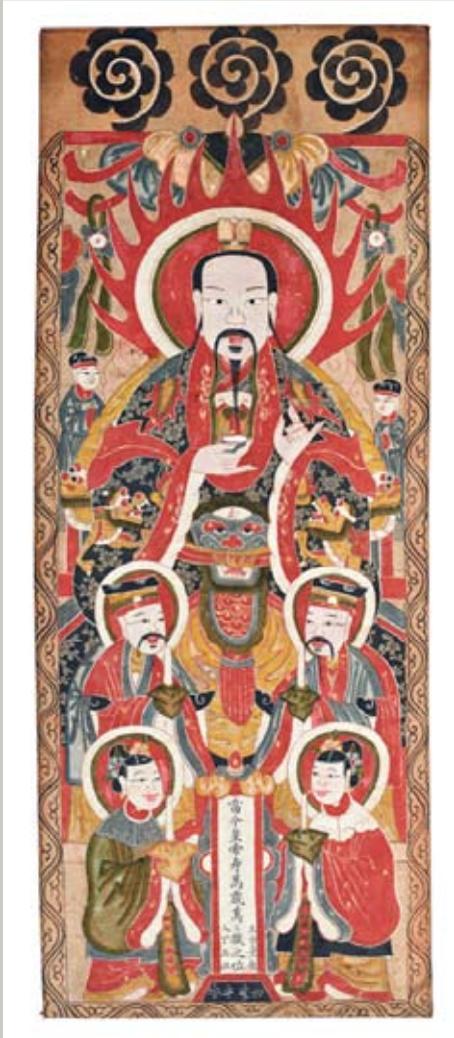
***“SCIENCE-FAITH”***

In an age defined by technology with its foundational core of scientific beliefs, where does one find a place for a dream, a myth, a lyrical fantasy ?

Prasert Yodkaew confronts his audience with design sketches for unfathomable devices, detailed catalogues of otherworldly creatures in motion, three dimensional models of flying implements, decompositions of traditional architecture interspersed with biological specimens. The blend of mostly Western science-and-engineering drawing with mostly Thai fantastic and decorative elements highlights once again the many cultural variables involved in the game.

The artist claims that he has no intention to provide reliable answers, but rather prefers to stimulate the viewer in a Zen-like manner with his paradoxes of style. What realizations shall the viewer find?

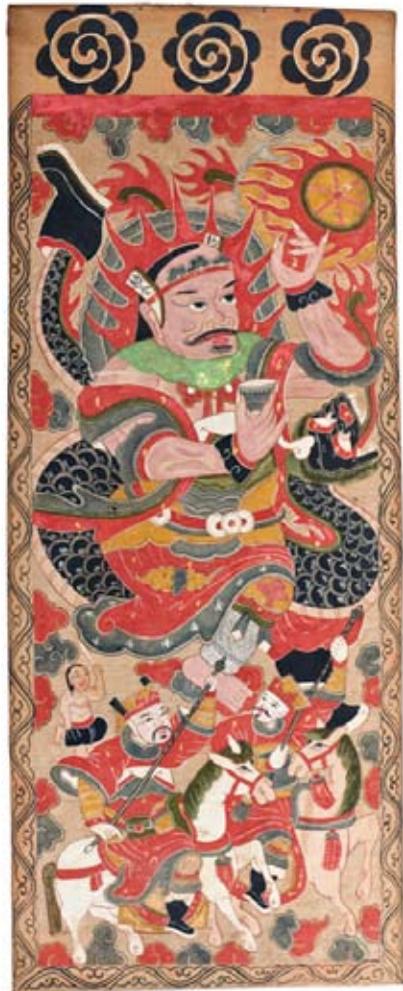




**Exhibition: December 15<sup>th</sup> 2012 - February 15<sup>th</sup> 2013**  
**MIEN FANG - YAO MIEN PAINTINGS AND TEXTILES**

We are very pleased to bring you this exceptional exhibition of Yao Mien Ceremonial Paintings. The Mien are a branch of the Yao tribal family that live in South China, North Vietnam, Laos and North Thailand, they adhere to a School of Southern Chinese Taoism that goes back many centuries. The ceremonial paintings from this popular art tradition are rare and little has been written about them. A set of these *mien fang* paintings is central to the Yao Mien belief, and they are an essential piece of religious paraphernalia used in their rituals of purification and the righting of wrongs. The Yao revere these icons quite literally as the abode of the gods, each set contains specific deities that have their own ritual function and are displayed in specific parts of ceremonies; if a piece is not required, it is not shown. There is often confusion about the number of paintings in a full set because the owner of a set on sale might have decided to keep three or five paintings to be able to perform basic rituals.

The works are painted on vertical scrolls, on average 140 x 50cm, and depict deities from the Taoist Pantheon and a full set should contain 17 pieces. At the summit of the Yao pantheon there are the “Three Pure Ones” the *fam t’sing* (To Ta, Yen Si, and Leng Pu), they are assisted by the “Jade Emperor” (Nyt Hung) and the “Master of the Saints” (Seng Tsiu). Under these powerful figures there is a series of lesser celestial beings, these include nature divinities, various warrior gods and the lords of hell.



Besides these larger works there are also a few smaller scrolls, about 50 x 25cm, the number of which might vary in a set. These depict the Enforcers of fasting and chastity. And finally there is a large horizontal scroll that can be 20 x 250cm and that shows the whole Pantheon in procession – *Tom To Luang Tsiau*. A painter might take one or two months to complete a set of paintings and during this time he will work in an atmosphere of religious devotion and ceremonial purity. At the end of this period the painter himself will “open the eyes” of each deity as is customary with religious Taoist icons. But the Yao Mien traditions also require a shaman to introduce the gods to these paintings in a special ceremony. When an owner wants to part with his set, because they are “worn out”, a shaman will perform another ceremony in which the gods are politely invited to depart from these paintings, a set that will be for sale will thus have been de-consecrated.

For more information we highly recommend “*Yao Ceremonial Paintings*” a wonderful publication by Jacques Lemoine from 1982.

We would like to thank the following people who have made this exhibition possible: Linda S. McIntosh for her enlightening text about the paintings and textiles in this exhibition; Stan Fradelizi who has photographed the pieces; Selena Sourignosack and John Medairy, who collected the paintings and ceremonial robes and have made this exhibition possible.

*Jean-Pierre Dovat & Rik Gadella*