

The analysis of the relationship between Theravada Buddhism and the cultivation of Chinese national community consciousness

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Abstract: Theravada Buddhism, also known as Southern Buddhism or Hinayana Buddhism, significantly influences the Dai ethnic group in China, primarily in the border regions of Xishuangbanna, Dehong, Pu'er, Lincang, and Baoshan. Although the precise timing of Theravada Buddhism's introduction to Dai society is debated, it is generally accepted that by the 5th century AD, it had reached Xishuangbanna. The 6th century marked its difficult establishment period, while the 7th and 8th centuries saw its consolidation and development among the Dai. Over its historical evolution, Theravada Buddhism has shown remarkable adaptability, integrating deeply with Dai traditional culture and becoming central to their social and cultural life. Theravada Buddhism permeates various aspects of the Dai people's daily lives, profoundly shaping their values and behaviors. For the Dai in border regions, it serves as a moral foundation and reinforces societal cohesion, contributing to the stability of Dai society. This religion affects not only the Dai but also other ethnic groups in the region, such as the Blang, De'ang, Achang, Wa, and Yi, who share similar religious and cultural practices. Understanding the relationship between Theravada Buddhism and the cultivation of Chinese national community consciousness is crucial for maintaining social stability and promoting ethnic unity in these border areas.

Key words: Theravada Buddhism; Dai ethnic group; Chinese national community consciousness

1 The uniqueness of Theravada Buddhism in cultivating Chinese national community consciousness

Karl Heinrich Marx posited that religion is a fundamental means through which humanity comprehends the world. Historically, religion has offered not only spiritual solace but also a framework for understanding and describing the world. In contemporary China, religions have evolved into a new era marked by diversity in distribution and practice, reflecting the complexities of ethnicities, regions, and social strata. The formation and evolution of religious beliefs, practices, organizational structures, and their societal roles have undergone significant transformations [1]. Theravada Buddhism exhibits complex characteristics that transcend time, culture, and ethnicity. As a foreign religion, it has pursued localization and Sincization, aligning with patriotism, public welfare, and social stability. Through its doctrines and ethics, it fosters civic and national consciousness among minority ethnic groups in border regions. Within the multi-ethnic integration framework of the Chinese nation, Theravada Buddhism integrates diverse ethnic cultures, fostering affinity among different minority groups through shared religious and cultural practices. Consequently, its unique role in nurturing national community consciousness among the Chinese is evident.

1.1 Locational uniqueness

The primary adherents of Theravada Buddhism in China are the Dai ethnic group, residing in Yunnan's border regions along the Lancang River basin. This includes areas from Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, southwards to Baoshan, extending to various counties in Lincang and Pu'er, and culminating in the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. Xishuangbanna borders Laos to the south and Myanmar to the southwest, positioning it strategically as a gateway to Southeast Asia under the "Belt and Road" initiative. Dehong Prefecture, bordering Myanmar on three sides, serves as a historical stronghold and a crucial entry point for major passages such as the Yunnan-Myanmar Highway, the Stilwell Road, and the China-India Oil Pipeline, providing a key land route connecting China with Southeast and South Asia. The locational advantages of these regions, rich in natural resources and serving as pivotal points for economic and cultural exchanges, underscore their strategic importance. Ensuring border security and stability is crucial for fostering national community consciousness and ethnic unity. Additionally, these regions facilitate multicultural integration and enhance the cultural confidence of the Chinese nation. Despite different national citizenships, ethnic groups like the Thai in Thailand, the Shan in Myanmar, and the Lao in Laos share common ancestry, languages, customs, and religious beliefs with China's Dai ethnic group. Theravada Buddhism acts as a cultural link, enriching religious and cultural exchanges and enhancing cultural soft power. However, this cross-border cultural affinity also poses risks of infiltration. Strengthening education and management in Dai ethnic areas is imperative to safeguard stability and harmony while respecting traditional cultures and beliefs.

1.2 Adaptability: the Sinicization path of Theravada Buddhism

Before Theravada Buddhism's introduction, the Dai society was characterized by primitive and Wicca religion worship. Initially, Theravada Buddhism had limited acceptance, with believers known as "Paba" (mountain monks) hiding in forests. Over time, Theravada Buddhism absorbed elements of indigenous religions, allowing continued worship of primitive spirits and incorporating indigenous practices into Buddhist rituals. This integration facilitated its acceptance among the Dai, leading to a coexistence of ghost and deity worship with Buddhist culture in Yunnan [2]. By integrating its doctrines with traditional culture and aligning with ruling class interests, Theravada Buddhism received political support, exhibiting a top-down dissemination characteristic [3]. The saying "Two laws must not be violated, one is the Buddhist law, the other is the royal law" encapsulates the political alignment of Theravada Buddhist believers with the ruling class, fostering a stable political environment and a harmonious society. The Sinicization of Theravada Buddhism has been a gradual process of cultural integration. Its inclusiveness and promotion of social stability have served both the ruling class and the Dai people's desire for a settled life. Advocating equality and coexistence, Theravada Buddhism promotes cultural integration and mutual reinforcement of Buddhist and traditional Dai cultures. This adaptability has fostered a religious view aligned with China's national conditions, providing a model for building a Chinese national community and promoting religious Sinicization.

2 Interdependence and interlocking: the cultural system of symbiosis between Theravada Buddhism and the border Dai ethnic group

The historical origins and deep-rooted interactions between the Dai ethnic group and Theravada Buddhism encompass a wide array of aspects, including politics, economics, cultural customs, and belief systems. Through localization, Theravada Buddhism has absorbed traditional Chinese culture and become a symbol of Dai culture, forming a mature cultural symbiosis with Dai society in border regions. As Ferdinand Tönnies noted, human communities naturally form based on kinship, geography, or religious beliefs, sharing a collective consciousness and living together organically as a cohesive whole. The Dai ethnic society exemplifies such an entity, bound by a shared religious and cultural system,

contributing to Chinese national culture and fostering a strong sense of identity and cultural recognition.

2.1 Historical evolution and cultural transformation of the Dai ethnic group

The history of the Dai ethnic group is ancient, dating back to the Neolithic period. Their ancestors migrated from the north to the south, creating Neolithic culture in areas such as Jinghong, Mengla, and Menglian [4]. According to linguistic and archaeological evidence, the Dai ancestors originated from two primary sources: the 'Dian people' from central Yunnan and the 'Yue people' from Guangxi and Guangdong [5]. The Dai ethnic group has close historical connections with other ethnic groups of the Zhuang-Dong language family, such as the Zhuang, Gelao, Dong, and Shui, all stemming from the 'Baiyue' group. Historically, the Dai have coexisted with multiple ethnic groups. Today, they primarily inhabit Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Gengma, and Menglian counties, with smaller populations in over 30 other regions [6]. The Dai live alongside Han, Hani, Yi, Lahu, Blang, Jinuo, Yao, Miao, Hui, Wa, Zhuang, Jingpo, Lisu, and Achang people, forming a unique culture. Dai cultural customs in architecture, diet, clothing, ethics, marriage, funerals, and festivals are distinct, with Theravada Buddhism at their core. As an inclusive cultural carrier, Theravada Buddhism promotes multicultural exchanges and integration in China's border regions, forming a unique cultural symbol.

2.2 Assessment of cultural interpenetration

The symbiosis between the border Dai ethnic group and Theravada Buddhism can be evaluated through cultural heritage and practical life. The Dai's astronomical calendar, medical system, and literary and artistic expressions show strong Buddhist influences. For instance, the Dai astronomical calendar, originating from the Toungoo Dynasty in Myanmar, is a significant part of Dai heritage, with temples overseeing its calculation and promulgation. Dai medical knowledge, as seen in the "Gayashan Haya," is deeply intertwined with Buddhist teachings, mirroring the "five aggregates" theory in Buddhist scripture [7]. Literary and artistic forms also reflect Theravada Buddhism's influence. Before Buddhism, Dai art was primarily oral. After Buddhism's introduction, the creation of the Dai script facilitated the recording and dissemination of Buddhist texts, transitioning Dai literature from oral to written forms, often centered around Buddhist themes. In daily practices, Dai people's lives are closely linked with Theravada Buddhism, with religious customs intertwined with secular life. In the context of Dai cultural practices, the lifecycle of males is intricately entwined with Buddhist traditions. At birth, the ritual of invoking a Buddhist deity to bestow a name upon the newborn is observed. During periods of ailment, recourse to Buddhist rituals, including scripture recitations and prayers to divine entities, is customary. Typically, around the age of ten, boys are initiated into monastic life, assuming the role of novice monks, wherein they engage in the daily tasks of learning and transcribing Buddhist scriptures, primarily in the Dai language. Should they choose to remain committed to monasticism, progression to full monkhood typically occurs by their mid-teens, with further advancement contingent upon their religious devotion and ethical conduct. Conversely, if they opt for secular life, Buddhist customs continue to permeate significant life milestones such as marriage and home construction, persisting until their passing, wherein Buddhist rites, including scripture recitations and water blessings by ordained monks, are observed. Major life events, such as marriage and house construction, involve Buddhist blessings. Religious festivals like the Water-Splashing Festival, the Opening and Closing Door Festivals, and the Offering Scriptures Festival see the entire community engaging in religious activities, reflecting the deep integration of Buddhism into Dai society. Economic activities in Dai society are also influenced by Theravada Buddhism. Donations to religious causes enhance social status and networking capabilities, transforming religious observance into a motivational force for economic behavior [8]. Religious events facilitate social interactions, strengthening community bonds through shared practices and mutual support. The symbiotic cultural system of Theravada Buddhism and the border Dai ethnic group thus forms a highly interconnected

network, shaping various aspects of life practices and creating a complete and mature cultural system. American cultural anthropologists A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn described culture as encompassing behavior patterns acquired and transmitted through symbols [9]. In this context, Theravada Buddhism has become a symbolic cultural core, shaping internal behavioral logic and constraining social actions.

2.3 From cultural identity to cultural practice

Samuel Huntington emphasized that cultural identity is often the most significant aspect for people, defined by ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. Before becoming the core of Dai culture, Theravada Buddhism coexisted with indigenous religions and collectivism in Dai society. Through storytelling and integration with local traditions, Theravada Buddhism internalized its teachings within Dai society, establishing values and behavioral standards. The core tenets of Theravada Buddhism, such as the Middle Way, Dependent Origination, Impermanence, No-self, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path, influence Dai beliefs about the afterlife and moral conduct. Dai people believe that virtuous deeds lead to a blissful existence in the Pure Land, while wicked deeds result in suffering. This belief system promotes ethical behavior, with activities like reciting scriptures, praying, hosting feasts, and building temples as ways to accumulate merit. Observing the Five Precepts (abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxication) forms the ethical foundation of Dai society. The integration of Theravada Buddhism into Dai culture has led to a peaceful and cohesive society, where religious teachings guide behavior and cultural norms. The symbiotic relationship between Theravada Buddhism and the Dai ethnic group highlights the role of religion in shaping cultural identity and practices, fostering a strong sense of community and cultural heritage.

3 Mutual benefit: Theravada Buddhism and the strengthening of Chinese national community consciousness

First, with regard to historical perspective, Theravada Buddhism has played a reconciling role between the ruling class and the masses, unifying their positions. This not only consolidated the power of the ruling class and political regime but also allowed people to live peacefully in a stable political environment. This unity and harmony were particularly evident in Yunnan's ethnic minority areas. Theravada Buddhism respected and combined the original culture of the Dai ethnic group with its teachings, innovating in the localization process and creating a Sinicized path. Consequently, Theravada Buddhism endowed the border areas inhabited by the Dai with unique cultural connotations, education systems, and ways of life, preserving traditional and religious cultures of ethnic minorities. Second, since China's reform and opening up, friendly exchanges between the Dai ethnic group and Southeast Asian countries have expanded. The Buddhist Association of Xishuangbanna Prefecture established a Buddhist college, where some teachers returned after studying in Myanmar and Thailand. China also sends young monks to these countries for studies, making them cultural ambassadors. Large-scale religious activities frequently invite Southeast Asian monks and scholars for exchanges. The Sinicized Theravada Buddhism in China's border areas has developed a unique Yunnan Theravada Buddhist culture, distinct from Southeast Asia. These interactions enhance China's cultural soft power through religious cultural output. Third, Theravada Buddhism acts as a bridge promoting unity among border ethnic groups and fostering multicultural integration. Ethnic groups such as the Dai, Achang, Blang, and Wa, sharing Theravada Buddhist beliefs, develop common folk customs and spiritual cores. This shared cultural system enhances mutual affinity and multicultural integration. Temples become centers for friendly exchanges, accelerating social network establishment among multi-ethnic societies and enhancing social cohesion. This common sense of belonging stabilizes ethnic relations in border areas, strengthening the consciousness of the Chinese national community.

In conclusion, the integration of Theravada Buddhism with the Dai ethnic culture and its Sinicization process highlights the dynamic relationship between religion and national identity. By enriching religious connotations with traditional Chinese culture, Theravada Buddhism not only preserves and promotes ethnic cultures but also strengthens the consciousness of the Chinese national community. This symbiotic relationship demonstrates how religion can serve as a powerful tool for cultural integration, international relations, and social cohesion, ultimately contributing to a more unified and harmonious society. Building the consciousness of the Chinese national community requires a grand interactive network. Harmonious relationships and coexistence are crucial for maintaining cultural ecology balance and consolidating the social foundation. Theravada Buddhism weaves an interactive network that strengthens this consciousness in border areas. Future research should focus on effectively utilizing religion's power in cultural confidence, cultural output, and promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of ethnic minority cultures in the new era.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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