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Indic Ritual Templates
and the Shamanic Substratum in Eastern Asia

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“Crossing the Seas”:
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and the Shamanic Substratum in Eastern Asia

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A B S T R A C T

High in the karst uplands of southwestern Guangxi and northern Vietnam, among Tai-speaking communities, both female and male religious practitioners perform a ritual segment called “Crossing the Seas” (*Khảm hải*). This ritual is a genuinely shamanic performance, being part of a journey to the sky. It stands out not only because it seems geographically out of place, but also because of its unusual music and dance. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate where it came from. I argue that this performance is Indic in origin, and reflects a view of the cosmos in which the world mountain, Mount Sumeru, is surrounded by seas, which separate Sumeru from the continent inhabited by human beings. The presence of this ritual in northern Vietnam and southern China is connected with the infusion of Vedic and brahmanic culture in the Red River region beginning in the early centuries of the common era. The presence of explicit, detailed ritual manuals in this cultural infusion led to the subsequent widespread occurrence of rituals based on Indic ritual templates in Chinese, Central Asian, and Southeast Asian religious ritual.

keywords: Tày, Zhuang, Tai speakers, Sumeru, Buddhism, Brahmanism, Brāhmaṇas, shamanic substratum, ritual templates, journeys to the sky, boats, ocean voyages, maritime route

"CROSSING THE SEAS": INDIC RITUAL TEMPLATES AND THE SHAMANIC SUBSTRATUM IN EASTERN ASIA

Far from the ocean, in the highlands of southwestern Guangxi and northern Vietnam, female spirit mediums and male vernacular priests among the Zhuang and Tày perform a ritual segment called "Crossing the Seas" (*Khảm hải*). Geographically, on the face of it, this particular performance seems out of place. How is it that ocean voyages and boats are found as cultural artefacts in mountainous regions so far from the sea?

As it happens, this topic has to do with the question of the "shamanic substratum" in East Asian culture generally. It is also a useful starting-point from which to explore the early southern transmission of Buddhism and widespread signs of Indic ritual templates in the ritual practices of local religion, both in South China and more widely in Southeast Asia.

SHAMANISM AND SPIRIT MEDIUMSHIP

An important reference point for many scholars working on East Asian religion and ritual is an article by Piet van der Loon first published in 1977, "Les origines rituelles du théâtre chinois." In this article, van der Loon used the phrase "shamanic substratum" to refer to the non-Confucian bedrock of Chinese culture instantiated in ritual and theatrical performance. Other scholars, like Edward Davis, drawing on the work of I. M. Lewis and others, have since pointed out that spirit mediumship is much more common than shamanism in Chinese popular religion, and that attempts to identify a shamanic substratum ended up confusing two forms of practice (Davis 2001, 1–3).

So what then is shamanism? In its archetypal form, found in Central and North Asia, and in China among the Tungusic, Mongolic and Turkic-speaking peoples, a shamanic ritual is structured as a spirit journey, in which the shaman journeys up into the sky, either by climbing the World Mountain or by climbing the World Tree. Alternatively, it involves spirit journeys down into the underworld, or out into the uninhabited forest or wasteland, in search of the bewildered souls of departed family members or the lost souls of the sick. The classic means by which the shaman undertook this journey was through trance, through what Mircea Eliade called "archaic techniques of ecstasy" (Eliade 1964).

There is of course a voluminous literature on shamanism, and many disagreements about how to describe the core features of the practice.¹ Not all scholars are happy, for example, with Eliade's insistence on the centrality of trance.² Trance, after all, is a feature of religious practice worldwide and is found in many parts of the world with no plausible historical connection with archetypal shamanism.³ For us here, the key feature of shamanic ritual, much easier to document than trance states, is that the ritual is structured as a spirit journey up into the sky, down to the underworld, or horizontally into the demonic wilderness, and then back home again.

In this regard, it is clear that the rituals of the Zhuang female ritual specialists (*mehmoed*) in Jingxi 靖西 County in southwestern Guangxi, as documented by Gao Yaning (2002), are properly speaking shamanic, as are the rituals of the practitioners called Pút or Then among the Tày people in the northern provinces of Vietnam and in Longzhou 龍州 and contiguous counties in southwestern Guangxi.⁴ Actually, the ritual practices of the *mehmoed* are very closely related to those of the Then and Pút — geographically they are just across the border from each other. Both make use of strings of metal bells on chains, held in the hand or tied to the foot and shaken to resemble the sound of a horse's bridle, to propel the retinue of the ritual practitioner skywards.⁵ Unlike other forms of religious practice, transmission of ritual knowledge to apprentice *mehmoed* and also to Then and Pút requires both a male and a female teacher. Finally, all three kinds of practitioners share a designation in common, which they use to refer to themselves and by which they are called by other people. In the

¹ For a discussion of definitional issues, see Max Deeg 1993, 95–144.

² Including eminent scholars such as Lauri Honko and Å. Hultkrantz, for example. See V. N. Basilov 1999, 23.

³ For example, among the San! bushmen in southern Africa, on which see the work of J. David Lewis-Williams, e.g. *A Cosmos in Stone: Interpreting Religion and Society through Rock Art* (2002).

⁴ Curiously, though, the ritual practices of the *mehmoed* in southwestern Guangxi are not generally recognized as a form of shamanism in Chinese scholarly literature, and the mostly female practitioners are referred to in Chinese by terms such as *wupo* 巫婆 and *mopo* 魔婆 (“ghost women”), while on the other side of the border the shamanic character of Then rituals is well recognized by Vietnamese scholars. See e.g. Ngô Đức Thịnh 2002; Nguyễn Thị Yên, “Yếu tố Shaman giáo trong Then,” in Nguyễn Thị Yên 2007, 170–189. The name “Then” in Tày and Vietnamese is pronounced like English “ten.”

⁵ This is called the “horse” (ma²³ in Jingxi Vahyaeng dialect) and the “horse carriage” (cộ ngựa in Tày). On this designation in Tày see Nguyễn Thị Yên 2010, 87.

case of the *mehmoed*, this is *pat*³¹, a direct equivalent of Pút. And the Then in many areas, including eastern Cao Bằng, call themselves Pút rather than Then.⁶ This designation, in turn, would seem to point to a Buddhist connection: the Late Han and Middle Chinese pronunciation of 佛 *fo* was /but/.

A BUDDHIST SUBSTRATUM

As is well known, there is an ethnic substratum throughout much of the southern part of China. Unlike the north, the ethnic layer-cake in the south is stacked the other way up, with Southwestern-Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese migrants as the most recent layer historically. Throughout this vast area, there was a congeries of different peoples or polities before the Chinese armies marched south. Identifying this non-Han substratum has proven difficult, given ongoing processes of sinification. However, there is also another kind of substratum in South China. Some years ago, when I was first analysing the ritual texts of Zhuang vernacular priests called *mogong* in Chinese (Zh. *bouxmo*), I came across the name Guanyin 光寅, listed as one of the deities to be called upon at the outset of a *mogong* ritual. I wrote at the time:⁷

The most likely possibility is that this name is a variant form of Guanyin 觀音, the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, commonly known in China as the Goddess of Mercy. Guanyin is also referred to as Guanshiyin 觀世音, meaning ‘she who observes the cries of the world’, and this name, in turn, is sometimes rendered as Guangshiyin 光世音, with the character *guang* 光 (‘brightness’) in place of *guan* 觀 (‘observe’). According to John McRae, Guanyin 光寅 is a very old rendering of the name of Guanyin into Chinese, which was used before it was superseded by the translations of

6 Nguyễn Thị Yên 2010, 85. This was true also in Jinlongdong in Longzhou.

7 Holm 2003, 71. More specific information is given by Jan Nattier (Nattier 2007, 187), who points out that the transcription of the name as Guangshiyin 光世音 is the standard rendering in scriptures translated by Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竺法護), fl. 265–309 CE. Rather than representing what later became the standard name for this bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara, this transcription represents an older form of the name, Avalokitasvara, where *ābhā* = “light,” *loka* = “world,” and *svara* = “voice, sound” (Nattier 2007, 189). I should have mentioned, of course, that the gender of this figure was male in early centuries.

Kumārajīva in the fourth century CE (personal communication, March 2000). Does this mean that the scriptures of the *boumo* incorporate very old strands of Buddhist material, or is the appearance of this particular name here a mere accident, the product of a more recent ‘copying error’ by priests with limited knowledge of literate traditions? It is not yet possible to answer this question.

At that time, I could not see how it might be possible for Buddhism to penetrate so deeply into southern China from centers of learning far away in the north. I think it may now be possible to suggest a possible pathway.

There were other traces of what might have been Buddhist terminology in the *boumo* scriptures, which are otherwise thoroughly Tai with an overlay of Taoism. Such for example are the names of the putative apical ancestors of the Zhuang, Baeu Rodo 布洛陀 and Mo Loeggyap 莫陸甲 (Holm 2003, 19–23). *Baeuq* is the usual Zhuang word for “grandfather,” and *mo* is an honorific title for *bouxmo*, but local stories that assign meanings in the local language to Rodo and Loeggyap were unconvincing, particularly in light of the fact that there is also a creator goddess Mi Luotuo 密洛陀 found among the Bunu-speaking Yao people of the northwest Guangxi area (see Zhang Shengzhen 2002). The characters 洛 *luò* and 陀 *tuó* are commonly used as transcription characters in Buddhist texts, and this name, shared across different ethnic groups, alerts us to the possibility that “Luotuo” (*r/lakda* or *r/lakdha*) is a Sanskrit or pseudo-Sanskrit designation, rather than a native word in either the Zhuang or Bunu language. Furthermore, in Guangxi Baeu Rodo and Mo Loeggyap are often instantiated by unusual rock formations in the shape of human sexual organs, male and female respectively.⁸ Shrines in the shape of sexual organs are found throughout the world, of course, but as is well known they are also a particular feature of Indic iconography and Śaivite worship.

We can be more certain about the Indic origins of some of the religious vocabulary found in the *boumo* scriptures of the Zhuang and Bouyei. Such for example is *bwi* (pui'), a borrowing from the Sanskrit term *pāthaka* meaning “Buddhist chanting,” corresponding to Chinese *bài* 呗. The Zhuang

⁸ Holm, fieldwork, Yufeng parish and Ganzhuangshan, Tianyang County, 1993 and 2006. Both of these locations are in west-central Guangxi.

term is usually found in the combination *bengbwi*, meaning “to obviate nefarious influences through chanting.”⁹ *Bwi* is usually written in these texts as *bèi* 貝 or *bài* 貝. The pronunciation of *bài* 貝 in Early Middle Chinese, by the way, is *baij^h(s)/bɛ:j^h*.¹⁰

Finally, there are Indic loan-words in the vocabulary of Tày, found in Tày ritual texts and in ceremonial songs. *Ná* 那, for example, is found in areas such as Lạng Sơn in northeastern Vietnam instead of the more usual *bǎu* 保 for “not”¹¹ For that matter, a Dravidian layer has been postulated for the Korean and Japanese languages as well, so these Indic borrowings may prove to be widespread throughout the littoral Indo-Pacific area.¹²

CROSSING THE SEAS

I first heard about the “Crossing the Seas” ritual segment in the 1990s. It was described to me as a quite distinctive segment within the repertoire of the *mehmoed*, both in narrative content and in musical style. Its distinctive melody immediately suggested that it had come from somewhere else, and was not the same as the rest of the recitation, which is performed in a narrative song genre called *lunz*. Kao Ya-ning witnessed a performance of this ritual in Jingxi, and reports that there are several different seas that the *mehmoed* may traverse, depending on the purpose of the ritual. She also provides excerpts from the lyrics of this ritual segment, and reports on speculations from scholars in China about its exotic origins (Kao 2011). So where does it come from?

⁹ Holm 2004, Glossary and Concordance section.

¹⁰ Sylvie Hureau notes in her “Buddhist Rituals” chapter (2010, 1225) that in early Buddhism chanting hymns was called *fanbai* 梵唄, while chanting sutras was called *zhuandu* 轉讀.

¹¹ Holm 2013, 482: “The common negative ‘not’ in Sanskrit, Pali and Gandhari is *na*, transcribed into Chinese since the fifth century as 那 *nà*.” The source for this information is Hirata Shōji 平田昌司, “Lüe lun Tang yiqian de fojing duiyin” 略論唐以前的佛經對音, in Zhu Qingzhi 2009, 216.

¹² The evidence is reviewed in Ho-min Sohn 1999, 25–29. For Japanese, there are some 400 pairs of lexical correspondences. For Korean, Sohn reports that M. E. Clippinger identified some 408 putative cognates and many syntactic similarities (pp. 28–29). Sohn concludes that in spite of disagreements, the large number of correspondences merits further investigation. In any case, contact with Tamil-speakers in early centuries would be likely to have taken place through Austronesian intermediaries, on which see further below.



Figure 1. “Crossing the Seas” icon, from the collection of Vi Hồng, Hòa An district, Cao Bằng (reproduced from Vi Hồng, *Khâm Hải - Vượt Biển*, 1993)

The “Crossing the Seas” ritual is also found in Vietnam among the Tày people, who, like the inhabitants of Jingxi, are speakers of a Central Tai language. South of the border, however, the religious practitioners called Pụt or Then have texts in the vernacular script, and there are both male and female Pụt and Then. Vietnamese scholars have assiduously recorded performances and collected texts of this remarkable narrative. “Crossing the Seas” is found in quite a number of Pụt and Then rituals, including rituals conducted in order to remove astral impediments from children and adults of certain ages. Perhaps its most important function is in the ordination rituals of the Then, called *Lầu pụt* (Wine of the Buddha). In Cao Bằng, the ritual menu is composed of twenty-one named sub-rituals, with Crossing the Sea (*Khâm hải*) in thirteenth place, just before the visit to the Domain of the Sky (*Mường bản*) and followed by Climbing the Peak of Xu Mi (*Tăng phya Xu Mi*) ([Hoàng] Triều Ân 2000, 659). In this ritual, *Khâm hải* is a song of offering, in which the Then leads an army of spirit soldiers

bearing tribute gifts up to the sky, and goes up to the Palace of the Jade Emperor (or the Great Buddha) in the Domain of the Sky to request ordination (Hoàng Triều Ân 2011, 11).

The Vietnamese scholar Vi Hồng, whose paternal grandmother and aunt were high-ranking Then in the Hòa An district of Cao Bằng, started collecting information on this ritual segment in the early 1960s. He found that it was performed across a wide area encompassing many of the northern provinces inhabited by the Tày, and that texts varied in length from around 200 to 1600 lines. No two texts were entirely the same, and in some areas there was more of an admixture of lyrics in Vietnamese (Vi Hồng 1993, 3–4). The ritual has been documented as far west as Vị Xuyên district in the central part of Hà Giang Province (Hoàng Đức Chung 1999).

Thus far I have analysed three texts in the Tày vernacular script: one from Trùng Khánh district in Cao Bằng Province, across the border from Jingxi in Guangxi; one from Ba Bể district in Bắc Kạn Province, further to the southwest; and one from Bình Gia in the western part of Lạng Sơn Province, to the west of Longzhou. The three texts have many lines in common, and a common narrative. In what follows I will use the Ba Bể text as a basis for discussion.

Readers can gain some idea of what a manuscript in Tày vernacular script looks like by consulting the text sample in the appendix. The layout of the manuscript is in Chinese style, and is read in columns from right to left. A sample page from another Tày manuscript, in color, shows a similar layout, with eight columns per page; line endings are indicated by punctuation marks in red, and important words are underlined as an aid to recitation.¹³

THE Ba BỂ TEXT

This text is part of a longer manuscript, totaling some 3030 lines, that encompasses the whole of the shamanic journey up to the sky and back (Bế Viết Đăng et al. 1992). The “Crossing the Seas” section is some 621 lines in length. Overall, the journey up into the sky is divided into clearly recognizable stages, and each section of the ritual manuscript is clearly labeled with a subtitle.

¹³ This text sample comes from a ritual segment entitled “Ascending Mount Su Mi,” part of a Then ritual text performed to Relieve Astral Impediments (Giải Hạn). Internal evidence indicates that this manuscript comes from Na Rí district in the eastern part of Bắc Kạn Province. For further information, see He Dawei, forthcoming. For the “Rowing the Boats” manuscript page, see the appendix of this paper.

The journey across the sea is structured as a foreign mission, on which the Pūt and the Pūt's entourage travel in a fleet of boats across dangerous waters, to arrive at the other shore of the Milky Way, and deliver tribute ("gifts") to the ruler of the Celestial Domain. Both the Jade Emperor and the Great Buddha are mentioned as the rulers in the Celestial Palace. The journey begins with a gathering of the boats and the armies of the Pūt on the shore:

I arrive at the place of the yellow waters of the sea,	2051
On the shore of the boundless sea.	
On four sides the sea extends so far as to be lost to sight.	
The boats go and come, rapidly,	
Like those which come for the fishing festival,	2055
Innumerable boats of colour green of the mandarin who governs the sea,	
The boats of the king's soldiers go and come along the length of the shore.	
The men stand in front of the boundless waters,	
The waters of the sea shine in all directions.	
The great princes descend from their dragons,	2060
The kings get down off their horses.	
Silken parasols protect their heads.	

After securing the four directions, the assembled army discusses the plan of action:

The princes emerge, and set to cutting the areca nuts.	2070
Each one chews betel and the areca nuts in his kerchief,	
The kings chew the betel of silver in their rose-coloured kerchiefs.	
And watch the princes smoke their water pipes which make a gurgling noise.	
They decide together to go to the bank of the river.	
They chew the betel and spit out the quids chewed up all red.	2075
The Pūt in the army make arrangements	
To write the orders to the Milky Way.	

The order is to row across the sea:

It is a matter of rowing to the South in order to cross the Milky Way.

Then the rowers are recruited and the fleet takes to the water. At one point the entire fleet is described:

The boats come down and fill up the crossroads.

One boat transports the flowers from foreign lands,

One boat transports the grilled rice, incense and flowers.

One boat holds beautiful objects made of agate.

One boat holds the rice and the wet-rice of the household. 2170

One boat holds all the beautiful women,

One boat holds the swallows and golden orioles,

One boat for the incense and the flowers,

One boat for the swords, the spears, the shields,

One boat for the carriages, the donkeys, the horses, 2175

One boat for the draperies with their phoenix patterns,

One boat for the young immortal maidens,

One boat for the boys and youth,

One boat for the queen and the royal concubines,

One boat full of objects belonging to the Great Buddha, 2180

One boat for the incense and the flowers for the Old Buddha,

One boat for the ancestral mothers of the land ...

The main dangers in the journey across the water come from the perilous nature of the terrain and weather:

One goes down the *sixth* set of rapids.

The pole does not find the bank,

The pole when sunk into the water does not reach the bottom.
 The prow throws itself down, following the rapid, 2600
 It falls into the abyss.
 The serpents and millipedes come up to take hold of the people on the water.
 The rowers propel the boats on the dark purple water to transport the beauty,
 The young girls and boys hold tightly onto the boat to transport the flowers.
 This pole is made of bamboo, 2605
 Without knots and without sections.
 We have crossed over seven abysses.
 This time, even if we wanted to return, this would be impossible.
 The girls and boys cry secretly.

At one point in the journey the entourage of the Pùt faces dangers of another sort, sex-starved immortal ladies:

On the other side is the water where one goes as an emissary, 2650
 The youth and young girls come in great numbers to engage in trade:
 “Do you have some flowers of which you can sell me one?”
 The generals have come from the earthly world:
 “You beauties are selling flowers of the earthly world.
 O beauties! Listen to me. 2655
 Your boat of Canary-wood is heavy when one rows,
 Your boat of mahogany goes slowly.
 Sell me some flowers, you cannot get across the rapids.
 At this meeting our love can only be platonic.”

In actual performance, “Crossing the Seas” stands out because of its musical style and because of the accompanying ritual dances, which have been described as whirling dances (lit. “chicken-

intestine dancing”), rather like dervish dancing.¹⁴ In Vị Xuyên district in Hà Giang Province, during this ritual segment one Then priest sings and plays the lute, while four others dance, dressed as rowers (Hoàng Đức Chung 1999, 66–67). Texts and performances like this are clearly worth a separate study on their own. Here however I wish to take the discussion in a different direction.

BUDDHISM IN JIAOZHI

Vietnamese scholars point out the strong connection between Pụt and Then religious practice and Buddhism (Bế Viết Đăng et al. 1992, 167). Interestingly, the names Pụt and Then are often both written with the same character in their texts: 𠵿, which is a demotic allograph for 佛 *fó* “buddha.” As mentioned previously, the Late Han and Middle Chinese pronunciation of 佛 *fó* was /but/. With the name Then, the character 𠵿 has been re-interpreted, so that 天 *tian* “heaven” is understood as indicating the pronunciation.

How is it that rituals that are uncontrovertibly shamanic came to be associated with Buddhism? Is there not a categorical dichotomy here? In this region, the Taoist elements in Pụt and Then ritual are thought to be of relatively recent provenance, but the Buddhist elements quite old (Bế Viết Đăng et al. 1992, 165–166). If that is so, then how old are the Buddhist elements? How old could they be? And, is this just another case of an indigenous set of religious practices taking on the protective coloring of a relatively powerful, organized religion, or is it something else?

Buddhism came quite early to the far south of the Han empire, along with Indian and Central Asian migrants who came to the Red River delta region by the maritime route from the south, mostly via Funan 扶南 in the lower Mekong Delta area. By the second century CE, Jiaozhi 交趾 was well established as a center of Indic learning. Shi Xie 士燮, the prefect of Jiaozhi from the 180s onward, had many Hu 胡 people in his retinue, and, during his forty-year-long reign, he promoted Buddhism and commerce with India. There came to be a large number of Indians settled in Jiaozhi, thanks to the prosperity and relative peace that prevailed in that part of the Han empire. This was around the time of the collapse of the Eastern Han.¹⁵ The names of a number of scholars from the Indian subcontinent

¹⁴ For a description of the artistic effects of this ritual in performance, see Hoàng Triều Ân (2011).

¹⁵ Trần Văn Giáp, “Le Bouddhisme en Annam,” 206, cited in Taylor 1983, 80. Jiaozhi at the time was fabulously wealthy. See

or outlying areas are recorded. Kang Seng Hui 康僧會 — Sogdian Buddhist priest Hui, whose father had settled in Jiaozhi — translated many scriptures from Sanskrit into Chinese. He later traveled north and in 247 converted Sun Quan to Buddhism, thereby introducing the new religion to the kingdom of Wu. Also in the third century, an Indo-Scythian called Kalyāṇaruci translated Buddhist scriptures into Chinese at Luy Lâu, the capital and center of learning in Jiaozhi. As Keith Taylor comments, “Giao-chi was at this time a center for the diffusion of Buddhism into China” (Taylor 1983, 80). The Buddhist tract *Mouzi* 牟子 provides a description of the cultural atmosphere in Jiaozhi at the time of Shi Xie’s regency. This development continued, and by the late fifth century there were over five hundred monks resident at Luy Lâu, and over twenty major temples and other buildings devoted to the new religion.¹⁶ Of course, one might add, maritime transport in ships enabled large numbers of people to reach southern China and Southeast Asia.

The historical geographer Paul Wheatley in his investigation into urban origins in Annam also notes that in the second and third centuries Indian and Indo-Scythian Buddhists were active in Luy Lâu,¹⁷ and that “within a few decades the city had become one of the main staging posts for Buddhist monks journeying between India and China, a role that it continued to play well into the 8th century” (Wheatley 1983, 381). By the seventh century it was customary for many Chinese monks to start their journey overseas to India from this southern center of learning: “In fact the wats of Tong-King may well have been the most likely places in which to find fellow monks competent in both Chinese and some other tongue ... perhaps Sanskrit, so that the region would have been a convenient halting point where a Javanese or Indian monk could have the intricacies of Chinese grammar explained in his own language.”¹⁸

Taylor 1983, 73, on the lavish tribute bestowed by Shi Xie on the Wu court.

¹⁶ Taylor, 85, and Trần Văn Giáp, 208–211. One of the main sources on which this account is based is the biography of Thông Biện 通辨 (?–1134) in the fourteenth-century biographical collection *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh Ngữ Lục* 禪苑集英語錄, now the subject of a monographic study and translation by Cuong Tu Nguyen (1997).

¹⁷ Wheatley 1983: 371. Wheatley mentions Khâu-đa-la 丘陀羅, the *upāsaka* Tu-định 修定 from Funan, Kang Seng Hui, the Indo-Scythian Kalyāṇarūci, who in 255–6 made a translation of the *Fahua sanmei jing* 法華三昧經 there, and the Indian Māraḥivaka who arrived in Chiao-chih from Funan in about 294.

¹⁸ Wheatley 1983, 371–372. Wheatley notes that the biographical collection *Da Tang xiyu qiu fa gaoseng zhuan* 大唐西域

These connections may not be widely known among students of Chinese Buddhism. Erik Zürcher in his classic study (1959, 3rd ed. 2007) puts Jiaozhi (Jiaozhou) on the map as one of the earliest centers of Buddhist learning in the Chinese empire, but his account concentrates on the northern centers, and the information he provides about this southern center is scant compared with his ample discussion of early Buddhism in Luoyang and other centers in north and central China. His map of the trade routes by which Buddhism spread in China (Map II on page 42 of Zürcher 2007) also does not include the southern maritime route (the southern margin of his map cuts off just south of Haiphong).

It is primarily Vietnamese, French and Indian scholars who have documented the early development of Buddhism in the far south.¹⁹ This literature needs to be reviewed, but in any case there is sufficient information to indicate that Luy Lâu in Jiaozhi developed into a major translation center separate from the other centers in the north of China.²⁰ The earliest and most powerful infusion of Indic learning among the Tày is likely to have come from there. Moreover, this may well also have been the source from which Buddhist missionaries and Indic learning spread among the other peoples in what is now southern and southwestern China.

Signs of a separate southern transmission in Buddhist iconography were noted by scholars such as Lo Hsiang-lin, who documented the spread of southern Buddhism in the Jiaozhi and Lingnan area. He pointed out that the iconography in the caves around Guilin dating from the Tang dynasty were much closer in style to the sculptures of Boro-Bodur in Java and other such Southeast Asian

求法高僧傳 of Yi Jing 義淨 (635–713) gives details of Chinese monks who either passed through Jiaozhi on the way to India or spent an extended period of time there, and also contains biographies of monks from Jiaozhi who made the journey to India.

¹⁹ An exception is Edward Schafer, who opens his discussion of Buddhism in what he called the Nam-Viet area by saying, "It would be strange if the first Chinese and foreign Buddhists had not been concentrated in Nam-Viet in early times, since this was an important stage in the propagation of that faith by the sea route beyond the Indies." (Schafer 1967, 90) He devotes the next few pages (90–93) to adducing evidence to show that the southern transmission of Buddhism was distinct in character from the northern transmission that came overland via Central Asia.

²⁰ An Shigao's teaching on *dhyāna* was originally based in the Han capital at Luoyang, but was transferred to Jiaozhi at the end of the Han period by An Shigao's disciples in order to avoid the increasing turmoil in the north. See Zürcher 2007, 36.

monuments than they were to the northern Indic style that characterizes the iconography of Dunhuang and other northern Chinese sites (Lo Hsiang-lin 1960, 2: 22–23).

These kinds of connections are often overlooked in accounts of the development of Buddhism in China that focus on the Central Asian land routes, and some scholars have questioned whether a separate maritime route even existed in early centuries (see e.g. Rong Xinjiang 2004). Indian sources however provide written evidence of seafaring from an early date, and descriptions of the hardships and dangers of maritime journeys started to appear in Indian literature from around the beginning of the Common Era onwards (Sengupta 1994, 4–5; Wheatley 1983: 265).

THE MARITIME ROUTE

The maritime route from India to the South China Sea was open at least from around the time of the beginning of the common era. The main ports of call between India and the southernmost ports of the Han Empire are documented in the *Hanshu Dili zhi* 漢書地理志 (*Hanshu* 8b, p. 1671). Indian written sources suggest a somewhat earlier date around the first and second centuries BCE. A listing of the different varieties of silk from China is found in the *Arthashastra*, a treatise on statecraft that is conventionally attributed to Kautilya, a statesman of the third century BCE.²¹ References to the eastern maritime route begin to appear in Indian Buddhist literature from the first century CE onwards (Chandra 1977, 141). Contrary to what is often assumed in Chinese scholarly writing on the Maritime Silk Road, however, it was not Chinese ships which opened the sea lanes and carried the cargo in the early centuries, but foreign ships. Actually the *Hanshu* does state that it was “barbarian merchant ships” (*fanyi guchuan* 蠻夷賈船) that were used on these voyages. But such references in Chinese sources are somewhat ambiguous, and have been interpreted in other ways: either that the ships were bound for foreign ports, or that the cargo they carried came from foreign countries.

In fact, it was only much later, in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, that the Chinese began to acquire the technology to make long sea voyages in their own ships. It is now well established, contra Needham and others, that China only began to build large ocean-going vessels after the establishment

²¹ Kautilya 1963, 120. According to Davidson 2002, 133, the text shows numerous signs of having taken final form in the first and second centuries CE.

of the Song dynasty in the tenth century, when the Song court embarked upon a deliberate policy of building up an ocean-going navy.²² Naval shipyards were established at Hangzhou and at Quanzhou on the Fujian coast (Jung-pang Lo 1969: 78). Details of ship construction such as multi-layered planking on the sides of the hull suggest that Chinese shipbuilders, such as those in Quanzhou, borrowed features of Austronesian trading ship construction (Manguin 1993, 272–273). The spectacular rise of Chinese sea power and merchant shipping in subsequent centuries, during the Southern Song, Yuan and Ming, has tended to obscure the previous lack of any Chinese ships on the high seas.²³

Ocean-going ships in earlier centuries were Austronesian, or possibly Indian later on. But here we must retrace earlier developments. Long-distance maritime routes between India and the Red River basin were the product of a slow development over several millennia. Austronesian peoples sailed south from Taiwan starting around 5,000 years BP (before present), first to the Philippines and then to islands further south (Manguin 2016: 53). Around 4,000 years BP there was a revolution in ship-building and navigation, which facilitated voyages out into the open Pacific as far as the Marianas (Bellwood and Dizon 2014, and Hung et al. 2011). By more or less the same time, societies around the more protected waters of the South China Sea had become interlinked by regular and intensive maritime traffic, leading Yves-Pierre Manguin to characterise the region as “another ‘Mediterranean’ in its own right” (Manguin 1993: 253). This interaction zone of course included the Red River basin area. Trade in high-value goods was well developed by about 3500 years BP. The seas between Indochina, the southern coast of China, the Philippines and Kalimantan became the scene of “lively maritime communication” during the third and second millennia BCE (Waruno Mahdi 1999: 169). As is well known, Austronesian voyages further afield onwards to the Pacific islands and on to the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and India led eventually to a spread of Austronesian speakers in a vast arc stretching between the Easter Islands in the Western Pacific, New Zealand in the South Pacific, and

22 See Pierre-Yves Manguin (1993), “Trading Ships of the South China Sea: Shipbuilding Techniques and their Role in the History of the Development of Asian Trade Networks,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 36:3, p. 269, drawing on the work of Lo Jung-pang (1955, 1969) and Jacques Dars (1973, 1979).

23 Moti Chandra (1977: 190) notes that the Chinese delegation to Siam by the sea route in 601 CE was “deemed as a great act of bravery,” and that overall the Chinese “had very little knowledge about the Indian sea-routes.”

Madagascar off the eastern coast of Africa. Large ocean-going vessels were developed by the first few centuries CE (Manguin 2016: 55).

Regular Austronesian maritime contact with India seems to have begun between 1000 and 600 BCE (Waruno Mahdi 1999: 155), primarily from Sumatra and the western part of Java. In India, although there is some earlier evidence of reed boats and coastal shipping, there was no evidence of maritime mobility before the first contact with the Austronesians. Indeed, Austronesian techniques of boat construction and navigation are now recognised as one of the principle contributions of the Southeast Asians to the culture of India (Ibid. 144). At first the Austronesian forms of boat construction were “taken over almost unmodified” (Ibid. 157). These were mainly at first for building canoes and double canoes; the technology for large trading vessels followed afterwards in the first centuries CE (Manguin 2016: 63). Transfer of this technology was abetted by the presence of Austronesian settlers in the Tamil-speaking south of the Indian sub-continent. Quite rapidly, however, the Indians started developing their own independent ship-building tradition, and soon became unreceptive to subsequent Austronesian technical innovations (Mahdi 1999: 161)

In other words, by the end of the Han dynasty or thereabouts, Indians had acquired or were developing the capacity to build ships capable of ocean-going voyages. In the main, however, Indian merchants and Buddhist and brahman priests heading eastwards continued to avail themselves of Austronesian shipping. In later centuries, Chinese pilgrims bound for India were also carried in Southeast Asian ships (Manguin 2016: 66). The development in Island Southeast Asia of complex polities, such as the kingdom of Srivijāya on Sumatra, seems to have played a pivotal role in the maintenance of maritime contacts and the regulation of exchange and trade networks in the Indian Ocean as well as in the South China Sea (Ibid. 52).

In Southeast Asia, the influx of merchants and priests from India by the maritime route was largely peaceful (the Han by contrast are known among the Zhuang and other peoples in the south as the “people of the army” *bouxgun*), and in early centuries did not involve conquest or the establishment of fortified compounds. The two primary aspects of the Indian presence were trade in rare and luxury goods, and Buddhism and brahmanism. In both spheres of activity, the Indians

established relations with the ruling families and attached themselves to the entourages of princes and governors, rather than proselytizing and trading directly among the general populace.²⁴

Additional evidence has come from Indian archaeologists and recent scholarship on trade routes and the early stages in the spread of Buddhism. Jason Neelis has documented the geographic spread of Buddhism from early cult centers in the northeast of India up through Kashmir into Central Asia, but has also devoted attention to the Southern Route (*Dakṣiṇāpatha*) within India itself, connecting to port cities on the western and eastern coasts (Neelis 2011, 205–228). As is well known, there is massive evidence of the opening of trade routes from India to Egypt and the Mediterranean early in the Common Era.²⁵ Himanshu Prabha Ray gives an overview of Indian boat-building technology, social organisation, and knowledge of the maritime geography of the Indo-Pacific from earliest times, and reviews archaeological evidence for early maritime contacts in the eastern sea route (Ray 2003, 245–274). She presents evidence that indicates there were Indian trade links with the Đông Sơn culture area in northern Vietnam dating to around the sixth century BCE (Ray 2003, 120–121). Such trade, we now know, would have been carried in Austronesian ships.

More recent archaeological research by Bérénice Bellina and her colleagues has corroborated this picture of early contacts. Excavating prehistoric sites located at the isthmus of the Thai-Malay Peninsula, with access to both the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal, Bellina and others have demonstrated that port cities developed “from the mid-first millennium BCE. These became meeting places for merchants, religious men and mariners staying there waiting for the change of monsoon. They also developed into large industrial centres,” producing goods for both the Indian and South China Sea littoral markets (Bellina 2018, 1). Goods found at these sites included glass beads, pottery, Indian-style incised pewter bowls, and Đông Sơn-style bronze drums (Pryce and Bellina 2018). Such finds confirm that maritime trade contact between the Red River valley and India began during the

²⁴ This much is clear from the descriptions of Jiaozhi during the regency of Shi Xie, found in official Chinese biographies. On Shi Xie, see e.g. Zürcher p. 51: “We read how this satrap and his brothers ... had undergone the influence of their non-Chinese surroundings; wherever they went, they were followed, like real nabobs, by musicians playing flutes, bells and drums and accompanied by several tens of ‘barbarians’ (胡人) who walked on either side of their carriages and burned incense.”

²⁵ Neelis 2011, 205. Hoards of Roman coins in India date from the first century CE.

Đông Sơn period, in or around the sixth century BCE. Of course, early contacts could have been indirect.

By the time the Chinese armies marched south and occupied Lingnan and the Red River region, they would have found a flourishing maritime trade, a rich area well-populated,²⁶ and a complex mixture of peoples. Their own presence in the area, by contrast, was for a long time confined to the immediate environs of fortified administrative centers, and along inland rivers connecting them with the Han capital.

THE BUDDHA IN JIAOZHI

One of the most important — indeed only — sources of information about early Buddhism in Luy Lâu is the account in the *Mouzi*. The authenticity and date of the *Mouzi* have been the subject of much scholarly argument over many decades, and the outcome of these debates has been inconclusive: that is to say, outstanding questions about authenticity and dating were regarded as serious, and could not be resolved one way or the other with any degree of confidence. Fortunately, there is new evidence from a different quarter. Béatrice L'Haridon has recently published a new annotated translation, and her detailed introduction demonstrates that the form of argument in the text is closely related to late-Han forms of disputation (*bian* 辯) among the Confucian literati.²⁷ In other words, the core of the text and its rhetorical intention relate to contemporary Confucian and Daoist discourse rather than to Buddhism *per se*. This provides strong support for the early date and authenticity of the text, which she dates to the late second or early third century, since later forms of disputation follow different protocols.²⁸ Apart from the description of Jiaozhi during Shi Xie's regency,

²⁶ Jiaozhi in the Chinese census of 2 CE reported 92,440 households, compared with 19,613 in Nanhai. Present-day Guangdong was sparsely populated at the time. See Li Tana 2011, 40–42.

²⁷ Specifically, texts such as the *Fayan* 法言 of Yang Xiong 揚雄 and the *Lunheng* 論衡 of Wang Chong 王充. See L'Haridon 2017, XI–XXI. See also L'Haridon 2013 for a separate presentation of the same argument. I am grateful to Frank Muryard for alerting me to this important publication.

²⁸ Contra among others Erik Zürcher, who dates the text to the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth, and presents a pessimistic appraisal of its authenticity (Zürcher 2007, 14). L'Haridon notes that this judgment was based on a range of evidence that was too narrowly confined to sources strictly designated as Buddhist (L'Haridon 2017: XXI).'

which can now be accepted as near-contemporaneous and genuine for the most part, what is most interesting for us — apart from the account of the birth and life of the historical Buddha, which describes how the Buddha was conceived by his mother after she dreamt of a white elephant — is the description of the powers of the Buddha in the second section . The following passage comes from John Keenan’s translation (Keenan 1994: 64; cf. L’Haridon 2017: 11–12):²⁹

The word buddha means awakened. Shadowy and indistinct, by transformations in different bodies and varied forms [he appears in diverse realms]. Sometimes he is present, sometimes absent. He can be small or large, heavenly or earthly, old or young, hidden or manifest. He can walk on fire without being burned, tread on swords without being hurt, be mired in mud without being defiled, encounter misfortune without injury. When he wants to travel, he flies through the air. When he sits, he emits light. This is what the title Buddha means.

Perhaps part of this description may be understood “poetically”, but as we shall see further on, other details link the powers of the Buddha with specific ritual acts, and with Vedic ritual in particular. In any case, the concept of a shape-shifting miracle-worker is at some considerable remove from that of later gentry Buddhism in China. What is being described here are the powers of an adept, Indian-style, of someone with extraordinary physical powers, with what are called in Chinese *teyi gongneng* 特異功能. A comment made by Leo Pruden may be pertinent here:³⁰

The real face of early Buddhism in all of its aspects cannot be gotten at only through its literature, but must also be obtained through archaeology, art and chronology ...

²⁹ *Mouzi* 牟子, by Mou Rong 牟融, Ping-Jin guan congshu 平津館叢書 ed., 3b. The original text reads: 佛之言覺也恍惚變化分身散體或存或亡能小能大能圓能方能老能少能隱能彰蹈火不燒履刃不傷在汙不染在禍不殃欲行則飛坐則揚光故號為佛也。

³⁰ Leo M. Pruden, “The Abhidharma: The Origins, Growth and Development of a Literary Tradition,” in Leo Pruden (1988–1990), pp. xl–xli. Pruden was basing these observations on the work of Louis de La Vallée Poussin, specifically his *Le dogme et la philosophie du Bouddhisme*, 1930, Chap. VII, and his *Nirvāṇa*, 1925.

Such a mass Buddhism was the Buddhism that preceeded the canon, “precanonical Buddhism” (*Bouddhisme precanonique*). Its contents were not only a *darśana*—a systematic school of Indian philosophy, a consistent world-view—but a faith concerned with spirits and the release of these spirits from the round of birth and death, having, according to scholars, little in common with the doctrines of *anitya*, *anātman*, and *duḥkha* so often stressed in the *Āgamas*.

Pruden (p. xli) goes on to note that this early Buddhism was not hermetically sealed off from other Indian religious practices either socially or doctrinally, but was syncretic in nature.³¹ It is some such kind of syncretic Buddhism that seems to be instantiated in this passage from the *Mouzi*. It is clear that it must also have been at least one component in the early transmission of Buddhism to the Jiaozhi region. A major component of this syncretism, however, was the Vedic and Brahmanic ritual tradition, and this was an elite rather than popular tradition.

THE VEDIC AND BRAHMANIC INCURSION

This infusion of Buddhism did not come on its own, but was accompanied by a wave of Vedic and Brahmanic scriptures, literature, rituals, and iconography, along with the requisite ritual specialists. The Vedic and Brahmanic infusion was if anything predominant in the early centuries. This is abundantly clear from the evidence further south, in Hinduized kingdoms like Champa (Mus 1975). In fact, this was the pattern almost everywhere among the Indianized states of maritime and mainland Southeast Asia. There is direct evidence too for the presence of ascetics and brahmins from India in the region of Jiaozhi (Taylor 1983, 81).³² This may also have been the situation in China as well, at least

³¹ Ibid. p. xli: “Buddhism also came to be changed ... by virtue of the influence of non-Buddhist religions, through the conversion to Buddhism of many non-Buddhists who brought their own ideas into the company of older believers. Popular Buddhist religion absorbed much of the pan-Indian pantheon of deities.” Here also Pruden was following de La Vallée Poussin (*Bouddhisme*, 1909). He goes on to note however that there was no fundamental divide between popular Buddhism and the *Āgamas* (traditions) of the scholarly elite.

³² See also Keith Taylor’s recent article (2018), in which he adduces abundant evidence for the proposition that much of the earliest infusion of Buddhism in the Jiaozhi area was in fact brahmanic.

for a time. For a slightly later period, Tansen Sen has documented the presence of brahman priests, medical practitioners, and other Indian specialists in China during the Tang (Sen 2003, 50–52). Sen's account concentrates on the activities of Ayurvedic medical practitioners, which is understandable given that his account is focused on India–China relations at the level of courts and diplomatic missions (the Tang court was preoccupied by the search for life-prolonging medicines for the Huizong emperor). Also for the Tang, Michel Strickmann has documented in some detail the Vedic and brahmanic accompaniments to the development of Tantric Buddhist practices in China (Strickmann 1996).

Indian sources indicate that it was not just Buddhist monks who accompanied the ships sailing eastwards, but Brahman priests as well. This was during the Gupta period (240–590 CE) (Chandra 1977, 69 ff.). Indian overseas commerce was well-developed by this time, and there was even provision for specialized training for merchants. The travel account of Kuvalachanda describes how the Vedas were part of the curriculum in the Indian college of commerce set up in Vijayapura (Chandra 1977, 198).

Paul Wheatley conducted a detailed review of the documentary and epigraphic evidence for the presence of brahman priests in mainland and maritime Southeast Asia during the first millennium CE (Wheatley 1983: 286–310). The evidence begins in around the third century and grows in volume thereafter. Early Chinese accounts document large concentrations of brahmans in some Southeast Asian kingdoms, over 1000 in the Kingdom of the Five Kings in the northern part of the Thai-Malay Isthmus, and a corps of "several hundred" in the Red Earth Kingdom in the same area (Ibid. 298–99). Epigraphic evidence bears witness to the role of brahmans at the royal courts, and the Sanskritization of royal titles from the early third century onwards. Brahmans played an irreplaceable role in the rites of royal consecration, and as advisors on the conduct of state cults.³³

The Vedic priests brought along with them a wealth of written texts, including the Vedas themselves, the Vinayas, the Brāhmaṇas, and the Upanishads, as well as Buddhist texts like the Jātakas. If the Vedas were primarily very ancient hymns, sung or recited at sacrificial rituals, the Brāhmaṇas

³³ "Epigraphy and literature both bear unequivocal witness to the role of brāhmaṇas at the royal courts of Southeast Asia as purveyors and conservators of the *siddhānta*, esoteric knowledge, necessary for stable government." (Wheatley 1983: 299–300).

were “collections of sacerdotal commentaries giving the minute description of ritual operations in the course of which the Vedic hymns were chanted and recited” (Mus 1975, 24). The Brāhmaṇas dated “from no earlier than the 7th century BC,” but this means that they were already well-established as part of the Vedic-brahmanic tool-kit by the date of the voyages from India to the east. Now what this means is this: there were available, as part and parcel of this great Indic cultural invasion, detailed instruction manuals for the performance of a range of classical Indic rituals.

This was truly an evolved ritual system. Nothing was left to chance. Every gesture, every pace of the priest’s foot, every manipulation of physical objects, every offering, was prescribed in high detail. The rituals subject to such brahmanical prescription included weddings, funerals, and a wide range of important sacrifices. Not only this, but the instructions were written down, and every possible detail was made explicit, along with the doctrinal reasons for each gesture and sub-procedure. This was quite unlike much of the cultural transmission of ritual knowledge in Chinese society, where important aspects of the teaching were either left unsaid or transmitted orally, and a great deal of teaching of practical tasks took place by demonstration on the part of the teacher and imitation on the part of the students. The “knack,” Zhuangzi tells us, the knowledge of how to do things just right, was something lying beyond words. Indic cultural logic was if anything the exact opposite.

Anyone who has dipped into the Brāhmaṇas could have good reason for being stunned (and appalled) at the detail in which Vedic ritual procedures are described. The length of these writings itself serves to indicate this. The instructions for the New and Full-moon Sacrifices (Darṣapūrṇamāsa-isṭi), routine sacrifices conducted in ordinary households, occupy fully 273 pages in English translation (Eggeling 1882–1900, I: 1–273).

Not only this, but these writings instantiate what was a completely different conception of ritual efficacy. As Paul Mus points out, the Vedic and brahmanic ritual system developed an extreme ritualistic ontology, in which ritual exactitude (*rta*) was seen as essential not only for accomplishing the specific aims of the ritual performance, but also for the orderly functioning of the natural order itself. It was the priest’s correct performance of the sacrifice at daybreak that made the sun rise. This exactitude was applied also to the recitation of the words of the ritual. In this way, the words (*brahma*) were seen to call into being that which they referred to. Buddhist concepts of the efficacy of recitation are connected to this priest-centered cosmogony. It is a cosmogony because it is the Vedic ritualist

who is seen as creating or re-creating the world through ritual action (Mus 1975, 25–26). Of course, it is hard for us to grasp the cultural power of this conception, or even take its existence seriously.

Now it seems to me that it is some such conception of the power of words that lies behind the ritual recitations of the *mogong* and other Tai ritual specialists, which otherwise seem hard to explain. In *mogong* rituals among the Zhuang and Bouyei, the recitation of texts is the primary guarantee of ritual efficacy, and there is very little dramatization or manipulation of symbolic objects. My previous attempts to explain this made reference to Buddhist concepts of recitation,³⁴ and also pointed out that ritual narrative found in *mogong* texts clearly had what Webb Keane called “meta-pragmatic functions,” whereby the words recited were understood as calling into being the reality of what was narrated (Keane 1997). Keane was describing a widespread phenomenon in ritual use of language, but the Vedic-brahmanic conception of ritual exactitude gives us a much more specific cultural-historical pathway, and a more trenchant and appropriate interpretation.³⁵ It is this conception, I would argue, that also underlies and gives force to shamanic journeys to the sky.

That said, the exact pathways of transmission of Indian ritual protocols to East Asia and elsewhere remain to be investigated. The Brāhmaṇas were not the only possible source of detailed ritual instructions in the Indian tradition. There were also other categories of texts among the “various appendices to the Vedic schools — the *vidhānas*, *pariśiṣṭas*, *grhyas*, ... *dharma* and *smārta-sūtras*” that may also have served such a purpose. Moreover, in India these other texts seem to have played a role in the transformation and re-valuation of what were originally strictly Vedic rituals, performed only by brahmins, to rituals that could be performed by persons originally not authorized to perform them (Davidson 2012, 91). Such texts also might have served as intermediaries between Vedic rituals and ritual performance in China, both in the courts and at the village level.³⁶

³⁴ Citing for example Jan Yün-hua 1977, 289–299. See Holm 2017a, 7.

³⁵ Compare, for example, the discussion about the power of words in Clifford Sather 2001, xii–xiv, which describes the author’s struggle with the dichotomies between text and performance in Western-style anthropology. Bringing brahmanical ritual ontology into the discussion would help to resolve many of these difficulties.

³⁶ In Southeast Asia, the situation was somewhat different. The children of brahman men who married indigenous wives also inherited the *varṇa* of their fathers, and men who were not themselves of the brahman caste (*brāhmaṇavarṇa*) could also perform Vedic rituals, including consecration rituals (Wheatley 1983: 301. See esp. footnote 200 on p.354).

Ron Davidson has also shown how Indian Buddhists in the early mediaeval period developed rain-making rituals for *nāgas* which incorporated disparate ritual components in order to deal with autochthonous spiritual forces and cater to local communities (Davidson 2017). Buddhists in India were accustomed to adapting and indigenizing their public ritual practices. This means in turn that there were many different strands to the Indian ritual practices that were exported overseas, and the process is likely to have been complex both through space and time. Brahmanical prescription coexisted with local innovation and indigenisation.

In this discussion I employ the term “Indic” to allow for the possibility that the transmission to the Red River area and South China came indirectly from other Southeast Asian kingdoms under Indian influence, as well as directly from India itself.

INDIC RITUAL TEMPLATES

There is actually quite a lot of evidence for the presence of early Buddhist or Indic ritual templates in the religious cultures of China and surrounding areas. These evidently came from the *Brāhmaṇas* or from similar kinds of Indian ritual manuals. Which *Brāhmaṇas* or other texts were translated into Chinese, and when and where, is still a matter to be investigated in detail, but the overall effects of this transmission can be seen from one end of China to the other, and equally among Han Chinese and minority peoples. Broadly speaking, this infusion of Indic knowledge entailed transposing holus-bolus entire Indic ritual segments together with explicit instructions for their correct performance into a wide range of different rituals.

To list a few:

- fire-walking
- climbing the ladder of swords
- buffalo sacrifice
- horse sacrifice
- goat sacrifice
- burning boats to expel pestilence
- ocean voyages to the land of the dead

Indeed, it may turn out that crossing the sea and shamanic ascents to the sky are also to be counted among these ritual templates. But let us first review the evidence for a few of these ritual segments one by one.

Fire-walking and climbing sword ladders are important because they are so widespread, and because they were documented so early.

FIRE-WALKING

Fire-walking is found all over China. Local scholars in China working on ritual theatre during the 1990s documented it in Zhejiang and many other places.³⁷ It is also found as part of the initiation rites of Manchu shamans (Eliade 1964, 112). Among the Bouyei, Tai speakers in western Guizhou, the sea of fire appears in day-long rituals conducted to rescue the souls of people who died violent deaths, as one of the obstacles the *mogong* and family members must cross in order to escape from the limbo-like underworld in which such souls are trapped.³⁸ This particular ritual comes from South India.³⁹ Alf Hiltebeitel in his *The Cult of Draupadi*, volume 2, provides a detailed account of how this ritual is currently performed in the Tamil-speaking southeastern part of India (Hiltebeitel 1991, 439–475). There is no convincing argument that can be made for transmission in the other direction — that is, regarding this as a Chinese ritual that was transplanted to India. As we have seen, the ability to walk on fire without being burnt is one of the attributes of the Buddha mentioned in the *Mouzi* 牟子.

CLIMBING THE LADDER OF SWORDS

Climbing the ladder of swords is well known as an initiatory rite for religious practitioners, and is widespread throughout East Asia and Central Asia. Among the Manchu-speaking Xibo in the western regions of Xinjiang, apprentice shamans are required to climb a ladder of swords (*aisin wan*) some ten metres high as the final act in their initiation. Only apprentices who are successful in mounting to the top of the ladder are regarded as fit to conduct shamanic ceremonies on their own; those who are not

³⁷ For Zhejiang see for example Xu Hongtu 1995.

³⁸ Holm and Meng Yuanyao 2015, 10–14, and especially pp.12–13.

³⁹ Rohit Jawahar, personal communication, October 2016.

successful remain “hidden” shamans (*hutu šaman*) until such time as they can scale the heights.⁴⁰ Among the Bouyei in western Guizhou, the ladder of swords is the final obstacle faced by the *mogong* and the eldest son of the deceased. It is constructed of twelve large butcher’s knives, tied onto bamboo runners with their edges facing upwards (Holm and Meng 2015, 13). The ladder of swords is also found among the Jingpo, Yi and Lisu in western Yunnan, the Karen in Burma, the Black Thai in Laos,⁴¹ and in various forms of vernacular Taoist initiation.⁴² The list could no doubt be greatly extended. Again, as we have seen, the ability to tread on knives without being cut is listed as one of the attributes of the Buddha in the *Mouzi*.

Eliade comments (p. 442): “The same initiation rite can be found in China, but probably in this case we have a proto-historical heritage common to all these peoples (Lolo, Chinese, Chingpao, etc.).” But this does not really bear examination. The commonalities in procedure of all these rituals are too striking. A more convincing explanation is that this is a Vedic rite of ascension, symbolizing or rather instantiating the successful practitioner’s ability to travel up to the sky.⁴³ In India, the ladder of swords in Vedic ritual is leant against a sacrificial post, which symbolizes the *axis mundi*. This rite (the *vājapeya*) is mentioned in the Vedas, and the ritual instructions for it are found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, including instructions for felling the tree out of which the sacrificial post is made.⁴⁴

BUFFALO SACRIFICE

I have discussed buffalo sacrifice among the Bouyei and Zhuang in *Killing a Buffalo for the Ancestors* (2003). I drew attention in that work to very similar practices among the Tai-speaking peoples and

40 Nala Erxi and Yong Zhijian 1992, 131–133. The shamanic ritual texts in this collection, by the way, are full of Indic loan-words and Buddhist references.

41 Eliade 1964, 442, 443, 455. Among the Lisu, a recent article reports that climbing the sword ladder and firewalking have become the centerpiece of a new-style festival. The observances themselves are explained as relics of “nature worship” and “ancestor worship” (Gao Zhiying and Yang Feixiong 2013).

42 J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, pp. 1248 ff, on the *to t’ui* of *sai-kung* (ritual masters) in the Fuzhou area.

43 Eliade 1964, 404; *Rg-Veda* III, 8, 5, tr. R. T. H. Griffith, II: 4.

44 Eliade 1964, 442–444; Eggeling 1882–1900, V: 2, 1, 10. See also Giovanni Torcinovich 1999, 237–249.

upland peoples of mainland Southeast Asia. It was clear to me however that buffalo sacrifice was or is widely distributed among non-Han peoples in southwest China, including the Hmong (Miao), the Yao, and the Maonam (on which see the monograph by Meng Guorong 1994). After the book was published, it was brought to my attention that the Bali Aga in the mountainous interior of Java had ritual procedures for buffalo sacrifice and its aftermath that were strikingly similar to those of the Bouyei, including the way in which the head, tail, hooves, body, legs, blood, and internal organs were arranged in relation to the altar.⁴⁵ Such strong similarities across such a distance, I thought, were unlikely to be the result of chance, or any recent cultural borrowing.

Buffalo sacrifice is found widely throughout the southern part of China, as well as maritime and mainland Southeast Asia. Local officials in southern Chinese provinces have been trying to stamp out the practice for centuries. Across the length and breadth of maritime Southeast Asia, buffalo sacrifice was widely practiced and has long been the subject of scholarly investigation.⁴⁶ On the mainland of South Asia and Southeast Asia, B. J. Terwiel has documented evidence for buffalo sacrifice among the Ahom, a Tai-speaking people in Assam, and also among other Tai groups such as the Lue, the Yuan, the Tai of northeastern Thailand, the Lao, the Tai Neua, the Black, White and Red Tai. He also surveyed accounts of similar practices among the Kachin, the Akha, the Karen, the Lawa, the Lahu, the Khmu, and the White Hmong in Guizhou, the Muong, and Vietnamese minority groups like the Rengao, Bahnar, and Stieng, and the Khmer and Pear (Terwiel 1981, 2: 95–111). He comments (p. 105): "The details of sacrificial rituals and divination practices correspond so neatly with those which have been established for the Tai, that some rather intimate contact at some point in history may be assumed." However, rather than localized diffusion between lowland groups and high-mountain peoples, as canvassed briefly in Terwiel's discussion, we are now in a position to propose a more compelling explanation.

Buffalo sacrifice is another Indic ritual, and it is widely distributed across the eastern and southern parts of the Indian sub-continent. Hildebeitel discusses its regional forms and distribution,

⁴⁵ Thomas Reuter, personal communication, 2004. For the Bali Aga, see his *Custodians of the Sacred Mountains: Culture and Society in the Highlands of Bali*, 2002.

⁴⁶ For example see H. van der Veen 1965; and Janet Hoskins 1993.

which he finds operating at three different levels: royal, regional (hero cults) and local (village buffalo sacrifices) (1991, 377–378). In contemporary India there is a welter of different local peculiarities in village-level buffalo sacrifice, but Madeleine Biarreau has shown how traces of ancient Vedic ritual practices can still be identified in contemporary ritual.⁴⁷

HORSE SACRIFICE

Horse sacrifice is found in China among the Bouyei in southern and southwestern Guizhou, where horses were sacrificed rather than water buffaloes or cattle at the funerals of women of aristocratic families.⁴⁸ The text for this rite was recited by *mogong* priests. Local people reportedly had no real answer to the question of why a horse should be sacrificed rather than a buffalo, but speculated that it may have been because buffaloes were more valuable, being more constantly in use for agriculture. There may well be other minorities in the Southwest that had similar practices. Horse sacrifice is a well-known and well-documented Vedic ritual, the *Aśvamedha*, found not only in India but also widely among the peoples of North and Central Asia, including Turkic tribes, Mongols and Tibetans.⁴⁹

GOAT SACRIFICE

James Wilkerson and I have observed goat sacrifice conducted in the context of the annual communal ritual (*saibaed*) to honor the ranking village deities in a Zhuang village in Dahua County, in the northwestern part of Guangxi.⁵⁰ At the time, I was puzzled by certain details of the ritual procedure.

47 See e.g. Biarreau 1981, 215–244. See also her *Stories about Posts* (2004) for descriptions of ritual practice in Orissa (pp. 58–73), Kongunad (pp. 155–231), Cennimalai (pp. 156–202), the Dhārāpuram region (pp. 203–222), etc.

48 Li Rubiao et al. 1998, 478. The text in Bouyei, entitled *Mo fanz max* “Recitation on cutting down the horse,” is found on pp. 478–512. Horse sacrifice was found in the counties of Changshun 長順 and Ziyun 紫雲 and parts of Huishui 惠水 and Guiding 貴定; in other areas buffalo sacrifice was the standard funeral practice for both men and women. After 1949 this ritual was discontinued in most areas.

49 Fuchs 1996, 38–52. Eliade’s discussion is based on Paul-Émile Dumont, *L’Aśvamedha*, Paris, 1927, cited on p. 79; see also Eliade 1964, 190–198. For the text of the brahmanic instructions, see Eggeling, tr., *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, V, 274–440.

50 D. Holm and James Wilkerson, fieldwork, Dahua County, Guangxi, February 1997. The *saibaed* ritual (*sai* = Ch. *zhai* 齋 and *baed* = Ch. *fo* 佛) is held in honor of the chief deities of the main village temple, the Tudai guanyuan 土代官員, who

Before the festival date the goat was allowed to range freely; it was then re-captured, and presented to the temple god. Then at the appointed time it was led to a spot outside the small temple enclosure, where a sacrificial stake had been set up. It was tied to the stake, purified by the recitation of mantras, and then killed by having its throat cut, with the blood being collected in a large bowl. The dead animal was then dismembered, presented again with the head facing the temple entrance and body parts splayed out on the ground in strict order, and finally cooked, re-presented, and eaten.

Goat sacrifice is not uncommon in the Han Chinese parts of China, and it is found mainly at the level of village ritual.⁵¹ This too is a Vedic sacrificial ritual. In Vedic ritual proper, the animal would be smothered or strangled to death, but as currently practiced in India the goat is frequently beheaded.⁵² Of course, China has its own very ancient traditions of animal sacrifice, and in this case it will be important to analyse the details of ritual procedure quite carefully in each local instance before making any judgment as to whether Indian influence may be involved.

BURNING BOATS TO EXPEL PESTILENCE

Paul Katz has documented the distribution of boat-burning rituals in China and in Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, citing cases from Fujian, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Hunan, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan as well as Zhejiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan.⁵³ He also cites sources for boat expulsion rites in Tibet and Korea. To these examples we can add that the ritual burning of boats to expel pestilence is also found in many quite out-of-the-way places, such as western Hunan and the mountainous interior of Hainan, among the Hlai people.⁵⁴ I myself have witnessed a village-level rite just after the New Year in the Zhuang-speaking part of northwestern Guangxi in which a boat made of

are three in number. These deities were the spiritual counterparts of the native chieftains, and hence were the spirit owners of the land.

⁵¹ See the photographs in the first volume of Dean and Zheng 2010, Images 8 and 25..

⁵² Hildebeitel 1991 documents numerous examples; see pp. 97, 101–3, 121, 125–6, 296–97, 373–75. For a full description see Biardeau 2004, 41–47. For a description of sacrificial procedure in the Brāhmaṇas, see Dumont 1962.

⁵³ Paul Katz 1995, 158–159. Katz's examples from Singapore and Malaysia relate to Chinese communities.

⁵⁴ For the Hlai in Hainan see Xi He 2017, 236–249.

straw was taken in procession around all the households in the village, loaded up with *maolang* 茛茀 figures from each household representing disease entities, and then taken back to a piece of flat land outside the village where it was ritually burnt. A chicken was killed and thrown up into the air in order to ascertain whether the expulsion had been successful.⁵⁵

These rituals are also found very widely in Southeast Asia. Eliade reports (1964, 356–357):

Annually, or on the occasion of epidemics, the demons of sickness are expelled in one of the following ways: they are caught and shut up in a box, or directly in the boat, and the boat is thrown into the sea; or, alternatively, a number of wooden figures, representing sicknesses, are prepared and set in a boat, which is left to the mercy of the waves. This procedure, which is widespread in Malaysia⁶¹ and Indonesia,⁶³ is often carried out by shamans and sorcerers. The expulsion of the demons of sickness during an epidemic is probably an imitation of the more archaic and universal ritual of the expulsion of “sins” at the time of the New Year, when the strength and health of a society are totally restored.

Eliade’s account is based on earlier ethnographic investigations on the Malays, the Nicobar Islands, and a range of different locations throughout the Indonesian islands (North Borneo, Sumatra, Java, Moluccas, etc.). These studies were conducted among local indigenous inhabitants rather than among Chinese immigrant communities.⁵⁶ The wide distribution of these rituals in areas that are known to have been subject to the incursion of Buddhist-brahmanic culture and ritual practitioners during the first millennium of the Common Era suggests that we would be well advised to look in that direction, rather than posit some “more archaic and universal” origin for them, as Eliade does. The fact that these rituals are found in Tibet, where the tradition must have come from India, makes the case for Indian origins all the stronger.

⁵⁵ Holm and Wilkerson, fieldwork, Nakang village, Dahua County, Guangxi, February 1996.

⁵⁶ Specifically, W. W. Skeat, *Malay Magic* 1900; George Whitehead, *In the Nicobar Islands*, 1924; and Alfred Steinmann 1939–40, 149–205.

BOATS IN THE SKY

Let us return to our "Crossing the Seas" ritual. Eliade has a general discussion of boat rituals. Apart from the boats used to expel pestilence, he cites evidence in Indonesia of shamanic journeys being undertaken as ocean voyages (p. 356):

[T]hree important categories of magico-religious practices ... involve the use (real or symbolic) of a ritual boat: (1) the boat for expulsion of demons and sicknesses; (2) the boat in which the Indonesian shaman "travels through the air" in search of the patient's soul; (3) the "boat of the spirits", which carries the souls of the dead to the beyond. In the first two categories shamans play the principal if not the only role ...

On the second of the above categories, shamanic journeying by boat, Eliade's account is based on Steinmann (1964, 357):

The idea of travelling through the air in a boat is only an Indonesian application of the shamanic technique of celestial ascent. From the fact that the boat played the essential role in ecstatic journeys into the beyond (land of the dead and of the spirits), undertaken either to escort the deceased to the underworld or to seek the patient's soul abducted by demons and spirits, it came to be used even when the shaman was to transport himself to the sky in trance.

Again, Eliade puts forward an explanation that appeals to the idea of "archaic and universal" origins. This is not really convincing. Admittedly for this particular kind of ritual we have yet to find any specific Indic archetype. However, maritime travel and boats certainly figure prominently as a motif in Indic ritual language. To quote again from Eliade on ascension rites (1964, 403):

We meet the same symbolism again in Brāhmanic ritual; it too involves a ceremonial ascent to the world of the gods. For the sacrifice, we are told, "there is only one

foundation, only one finale ... even heaven.”¹²³ “The ship fair crossing is the sacrifice”;¹²⁴
 “every sacrifice is a ship bound heavenwards.”¹²⁵

The quotations here (notes 124 and 125 above) are from the *Brāhmaṇas*.⁵⁷ Indeed, we can readily expand on these few short snippets. Metaphors equating sacrificial rituals with ships and ocean voyages are found in the *Brāhmaṇas* quite frequently. From the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*:⁵⁸

15. The Agnihotra, truly is the ship (that sails) heavenwards. The Āhavanīya and Gārhapatya are the two sides³ of that same heaven-bound ship; and that milk-offerer is its steersman.
16. Now when he walks up towards the east, then he steers that (ship) eastwards towards the heavenly world, and he gains the heavenly world by it. When ascending from the north it makes him reach the heavenly world; but if one were to sit down in it after entering from the south, it would be as if he tried to enter it after it has put off and he were left behind and remained outside.

And from the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*:⁵⁹

Like one who might get on board in order to travel on the sea, so do they embark, those who have a ritual session lasting one year or one lasting twelve days; but just as

⁵⁷ 124. *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, I, 3, 13 (tr. A.B. Keith); and 125. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, IV, 2, 5, 10 (tr. J. Eggeling, p. 311).

⁵⁸ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, II, 3, 3, 15–16 (tr. J. Eggeling, pp. 345–6). Footnote 3: according to the commentator the word here means “sides,” but another source suggests “the two rudders (or oars).” Indian ships followed the model of Austronesian ships in having two steering rudders, one on each side of the ship, rather than a single centrally-fixed rudder on the Chinese design. On this technical feature see Manguin 1980, 272.

⁵⁹ *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, XXIX, 5, 10, quoted in Sylvain Lévi 1898, 88.

one gets on board a vessel that is well provisioned when one wishes to arrive at the other side, so does one get on board the hymns.

And again from the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*.⁶⁰

In truth, the two melodies of *bṛhat* and of *rathaṃtara* are the two ships that carry the sacrifice across ... one should not abandon them both at the same time; if one were to abandon both of them at the same time, this would be like a boat that has broken loose from its moorings and floats sailing from bank to bank; it would sail thus from bank to bank if one were to abandon both of the two at the same time.

And finally again from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.⁶¹

10. The Bahishpavamâna¹ chant truly is a ship bound heavenwards: the priests are its spars and oars, the means of reaching the heavenly world. If there be a blameworthy one, even that one (priest) would make it sink: he makes it sink, even as one who ascends a ship that is full would make it sink. And indeed, every sacrifice is a ship bound heavenwards; hence one should seek to keep a blameworthy (priest) away from every sacrifice.

Such quotations, when taken together with the Indonesian evidence as well as references to early Indian literary sources on the dangers of sea voyages, suggest that we should look further in this direction for the solution of our mystery. Eliade suggests that boat rituals are "only an Indonesian application of the shamanic technique of celestial ascent," but there is reason to think that something other than maritime cultural ecology may be at stake here.

⁶⁰ *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, XVII, 7, 1–4, quoted in Sylvain Lévi, p. 88.

⁶¹ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 4, 2, 5, 10 (Eggeling pp. 310–311). Note 1 provides details of the poetic and musical form of this chant.

SUMERU AND THE CELESTIAL SEAS

This is particularly so because the concept of oceans in the sky is Indian. Mount Sumeru, the central world mountain, is described in canonical sources as surrounded by concentric seas and mountain ranges, which separate Sumeru itself from the continent inhabited by human beings, Jambudvīpa. The exact dimensions of this world, and the breadth and depth of the seas, are set out in considerable detail in the *Abhidarmakośa*. There were altogether seven mountain ranges surrounding Sumeru, with seas separating each of these mountain ranges, and finally the four continents including Jambudvīpa ranged round the outside. The whole of this cosmos rested on a circle of wind, a disc of water, all resting in turn on a disc-shaped layer of golden earth. Sumeru itself is described as having four faces composed of four different substances, each of which has a different color, which gives that particular quarter of the cosmos its characteristic hue.⁶²

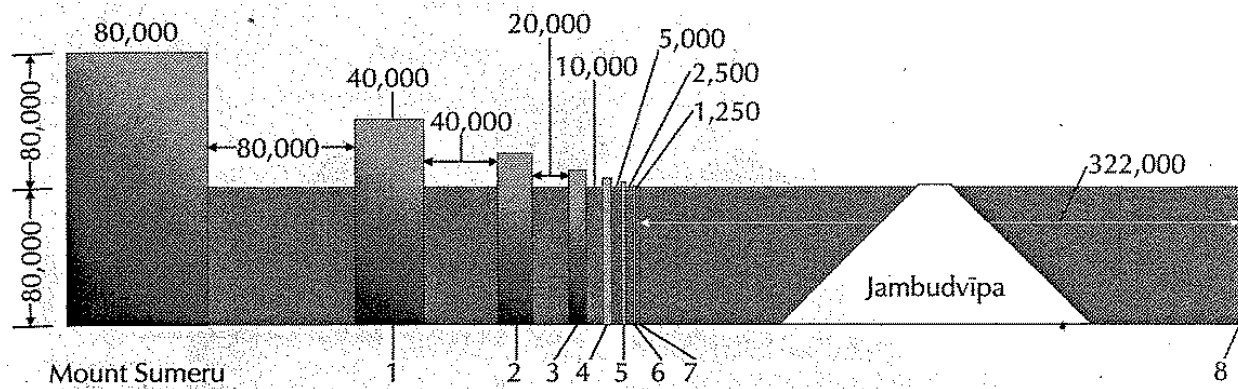


Figure 2. Sizes of Mount Sumeru and Surrounding Mountains and Seas. (Source: Sadakata Akira, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origins*, 1997, Fig. 7)

(1) Yugandhara (40,000); (2) Īśādhāra (20,000); (3) Khadiraka (10,000); (4) Sudarśana (5,000); (5) Aśvakarṇa (2,500); (6) Vinataka (1,250); (7) Nimindhara (625); (8) Cakravāḍa (312.5). (Dimensions given in *yojanas*.)

⁶² See Leo M. Pruden 1989, 2: 464 ff. Mount Sumeru is first mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, an epic compiled in the period between the fourth century BCE and the fourth century CE, and belongs to a wider Indian world-view, rather than being confined to Buddhism. See Akira Sadakata 1997, 26.

Thus, in order to reach the base of Mount Sumeru and begin the ascent to the realm of the higher gods, our shamanic retinue from the world of mortals would have to cross not one, but eight seas. It is this circumstance that explains the ubiquitous presence of “crossing the sea” segments in the rituals of the Then and Pụt in northern Vietnam. Not only that, but specific episodes in the narrative of crossing the seas in these ritual texts correspond to specific features of the canonical description in the *Abhidarmakośa*: the encounter with the circle of wind, the colors of the waters, and the description of Sumeru itself.⁶³

The name of the highest mountain in the texts of the Then and Pụt is 首眉 (Ch. Shǒu Méi), transcribed variously in Tày as Xu Mi and Ru Mi. We can be confident in identifying this mountain as Mount Sumeru.⁶⁴ In Chinese Buddhist texts Sumeru is given various renderings, the earliest being 須彌 (Xu-mi), but 須彌樓 (Xu-mi-lou), 修迷樓 (Xiu-mi-lou), 修迷留 (Xiu-mi-liu), and 蘇迷盧 (Su-mi-lu) are also found.⁶⁵ The existence of two-syllable renderings in Chinese such as 須彌 gives us a close counterpart to the rendering in Tày.

63 This is of course a matter that requires detailed exposition. Meanwhile, for the circle of wind, see lines 215–222 in the Trùng Khánh version of the Khảm Hải, pp. 40–42 in Hoàng Triều Ân 2011.

64 This identification is usually not made by scholars in Vietnam. The authoritative 2003 dictionary of the Tày vernacular script produced under the auspices of the Hán Nôm Institute in Hanoi lists Xu Mi under the entry for Tằng “ascend,” and says: “an artificial mountain set up during the ‘lầu pụt’ [wine of the Buddha] ritual of offering of the Then” (Hoàng Triều Ân 2003, 496–497). (As mentioned above, “lầu pụt” was another name for the ordination ritual of the Then.) Xu Mi is not separately listed in this dictionary.

65 The rendering 蘇迷盧 is found in the Chinese translation of the *Abhidarmakośa*, the 阿毗達磨俱舍論: see 慧琳音義 ch. 70. The *Abhidarmakośa*, a voluminous treatise with commentaries, was first brought to China and translated by the Indian monk Paramārtha (Zhendi 真諦) sometime in the first half of the sixth century CE. Knowledge of its contents, however, may have circulated earlier.

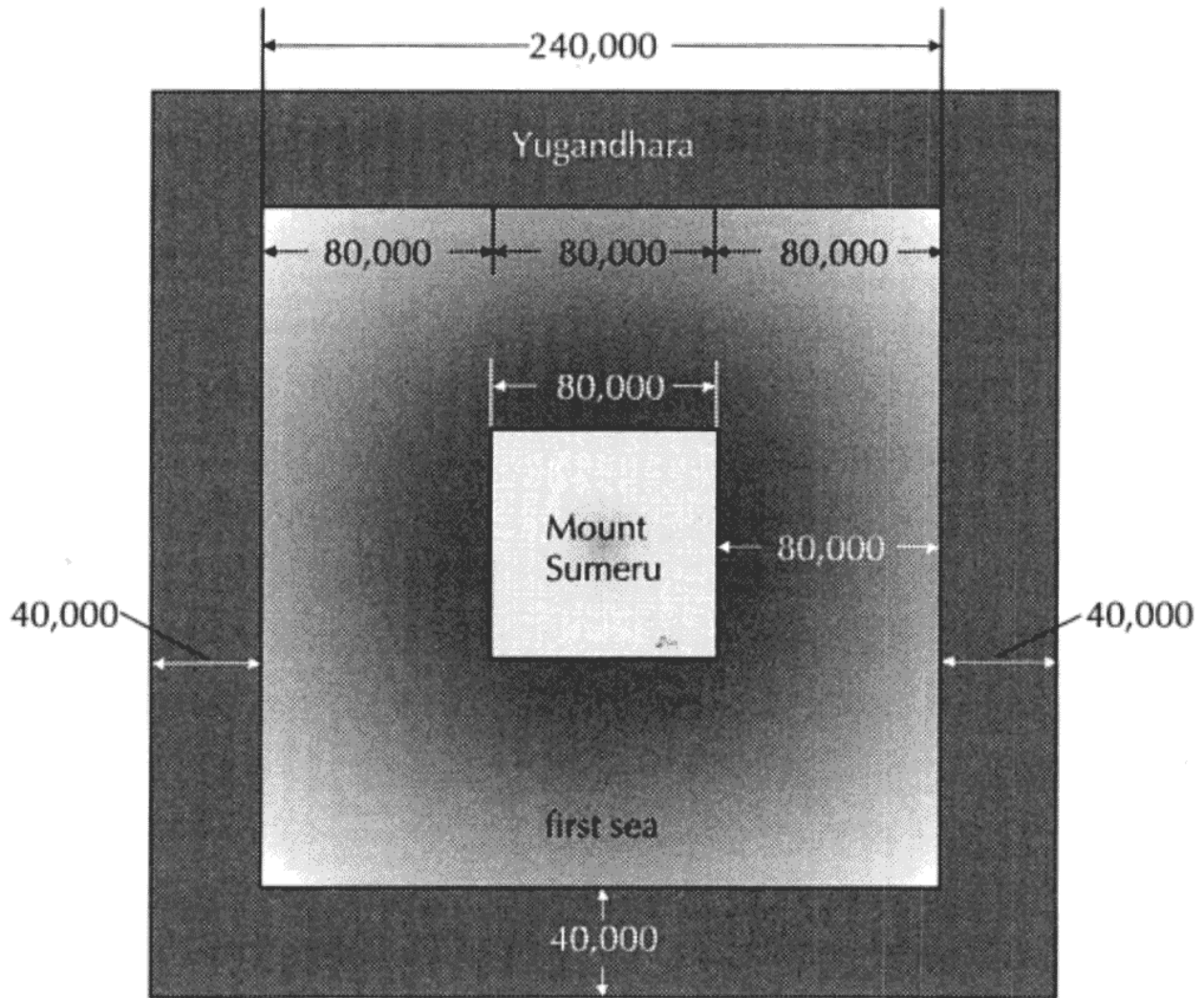


Figure 3. Top View of Mount Sumeru and Surrounding Mountains and Seas. (Source: Sadakata Akira, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origins*, 1997, Fig. 6)

Original caption: "The *Abhidharmakośa* says, "The width of the first of the seven seas [that between Sumeru and Yugandhara] is 80,000 *yojanas*. The length [of the sea] is three times [80,000 *yojanas*]. When measuring [one of the four sides that are] the seashores of Yugandhara, it becomes 240,000 *yojanas*."

It turns out that various forms of this name are found among Tai-speaking communities and indigenous ritual practitioners over a wide area of southern China. These names are sometimes heavily disguised, and overlain by layers of re-indigenized interpretation. The name takes on various

forms according to local dialect and local script traditions. In the Tianyang area of central-western Guangxi, the name Couhmiz 州眉 is mentioned in connection with a narrative about the primordial flood, and Couhmiz is understood to be the name of a high mountain. In a Bouyei version of the flood myth from Wangmo County in southern Guizhou, the name Cojmiz (written 索密) is given as the name of an old man who lives on the top of Bolangshan 播朗山, the only peak high enough to protrude above the flood waters during the great flood. Even further north, in Zhenning in west-central Guizhou, a near-homophonous name (站走煤, tɕiaŋ²⁴ ɬeu⁵³ mei¹¹) is mentioned in funeral texts as the primordial homeland of the Bouyei.⁶⁶ All of these variants point to a place-name or the name of a person associated with Tai flood myths, and hence also a place identified as the location from which the earth was re-populated after the flood — hence also the equation with primordial homelands. These names, and local interpretations, are all consistent with our identification of the mountain as Sumeru, the highest mountain in the world.⁶⁷

CONCLUSIONS

This exploration of a complex topic is very brief, and I hope that readers will be able to point out where I am wrong. However, if the proffered explanation is true even in broad outline, then we need to seriously re-think and re-draft important aspects of the religious history of East Asia.

Indic ritual templates are found not just in China, but also in the broader region of which China forms a part, including maritime and mainland Southeast Asia and contiguous regions in Central Asia. They are found distributed in all kinds of terrain — high mountains, hills, plains, and the river valleys of central states, in both littoral and inland locations, and in climates varying between sub-tropical and circum-Arctic. Their distribution also transcends ethnic boundaries, being found in majority populations like the Han Chinese but also among ethnic minorities dwelling in a wide range of habitats. If one were to ask what this phenomenon might have to do with the region that has been

⁶⁶ See Holm 2004, 170 for further detail. For discussion of the flood myth, primal incest, and the re-population of the earth, see Holm 2003, 192–199.

⁶⁷ It is worth noting that I did not recognize this connection at first. In a previously completed study, I identified this mountain with a stratum of “pre-Sinitic and pre-Vietic geography” (He Dawei forthcoming, 8).

called Zomia, as popularized by James C. Scott (Scott 2009), the answer would have to be that Indic ritual templates are indeed found among the self-governing high mountain dwellers discussed by Scott, but also equally in the central areas of traditional states, and in the Tai-speaking “valley-kingdoms” in between the central states and the mountains.⁶⁸

My use here of the term “Indic” may give some readers the impression that I have overlooked the broad shift in Southeast Asian Studies over the last several decades away from what were seen as the overly Indo-centric narratives of previous generations (see e.g. Wolters 1999). Such is not the case. In the previous pages, I have made reference wherever appropriate to forms of indigenous agency and indigenous etiologies. Still, by the same token, it makes no sense to look at the responses and not look at the stimulus, as often happens these days. It is often forgotten that, lying at the heart of many forms of cultural transmission from generation to generation cross-culturally and world-wide, there are individual master-disciple relationships and schools, with all their attendant loyalties, compulsions and constraints. And in some traditions, most notably the Vedic and brahmanic traditions, exceptional care was taken to preserve the integrity of cultural contents from one generation to the next.⁶⁹

In the “Crossing the Seas” ritual segment itself, we can find ample evidence of indigenization at every level. To give just two examples, the narrative is partly re-cast so that it can be understood as referring to river transport rather than an ocean voyage: as we have seen, there are rapids, raging torrents, and so on. And the narrative is not only in Tày (or rather a mixture of Tày and Vietnamese), but cast in the form of Tày-style seven-syllable verse, complete with waist-and-foot rhymes characteristic of Tày poetics, and instantiating what I have called elsewhere “pervasive parallelism” (Holm 2017c). And of course, as we have seen, many of the names and place-names in the text have been indigenized to the point where their origins cannot easily be traced back to Indian archetypes.

My analysis here also entails a re-evaluation of what is meant by the term “shamanism.” It is worth pointing out that neither van der Loon nor Zürcher were very specific about what they meant by the term “shamanism.” Scholars of that generation seem to have used this term in a broad sense to

68 On “valley kingdoms,” a concept which emerges quite clearly in *mogong* ritual texts, see Holm 2004, 6.

69 See esp. Michael Witzel 1997, 257.

refer to "magico-religious" practices that were either primordial, indigenous, or, in Zürcher's usage, outside what was held to be the mainstream of religious thought.

The shamanic substratum posited by earlier scholars turns out to be more of an Indic infix, rather than something that has existed from primordial times. I include here Eliade and his classic account of shamanism, which needs to be revised in light of these connections. Doubtless there is a primordial element in many of the practices understood to be shamanic, or incorporated in the ritual practices of shamans. But if classic shamanism can be shown to be distributed geographically in regions that were directly subject to Indic incursions in the early centuries CE — namely southern China, mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, and Central and North Asia, then the Indic connection may prove to be much more than accidental. Eliade himself was aware of this possibility, and noted that "both [regions] have seen their religious traditions definitely modified by the radiation of higher cultures" (Eliade 1964, 279). He declined, however, to give an "historico-cultural" explanation (Eliade, same page).

What Eliade seems to have missed was the precise mechanism whereby complex ritual procedures were propagated across this wide region. That is to be identified, following the pathbreaking analysis of Paul Mus, in the *Brāhmaṇas*. The detailed, explicit instructions for the correct performance of rituals in the *Brāhmaṇas* and other ritual manuals underlie many of the striking similarities in ritual procedure that are found across such vast distances. The presence of the Vedic and brahmanic transmission along with Buddhism is readily documented for the classic Indianized kingdoms of Southeast Asia, and is plainly visible in the epigraphic and archaeological record there, but its presence in China and Central Asia has been obscured by subsequent historical developments.

Paul Mus here provides us with a baseline narrative that may be useful for East Asia as well. His discussion begins with a detailed and insightful discussion of the pre-Indic cults of the spirit owners of the soil, forests and mountains. For this prehistoric or primordial period, there were broad commonalities in the religious practices of local communities across the entire Indo-Pacific area, including the southern half of China. Then came the Indian incursions, which led to syncretic amalgamations of existing practices with their complex Indic counterparts, centered largely at least in Southeast Asia on the royal and aristocratic strata in society. The fact that southern China during the

Eastern Han also had a society in which land was concentrated in the hands of rich families meant that there was some commonality in broad social configurations during this period. Mus documents in particular the overwhelming dominance of the Vedic-brahmanic component within this cultural transmission. Then, after the long period of intense Indian presence receded — in China around the end of the Tang period — local societies (or their ruling families) re-indigenized their religious practices, often to the point where the Indic structural elements were more or less totally obscured.

Admittedly this is a very broad-brush depiction, but this three-stage scenario may be something that can be productively applied to China and the northern part of Vietnam as well. In actuality, the process was doubtless much more complicated, with indigenization taking place at the same time as Indic intrusions, to varying degrees in different periods and different situations. Nevertheless, for a certain period, perhaps as long as half a millennium or somewhat longer, and to a greater extent than has previously been realized, the Sinosphere was part of the Indosphere.

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APPENDIX. THEN TÂY GIẢI HẠN SU MI TEXT SEGMENT: MANUSCRIPT

色金連洋雄兵志氣藏萬善天景表

上層首肩砲車

勿離從山野攻敵那首肩仍笑

88
 毋派將諸軍叫以歸敵乘東韜寸各安太
 月仙盛旺化吏添利而利方連沃身陰陽天地
 平安富足天扯冷
 軍兵獲天地買衣怡受欺藏所叫首肩以祿
 退浪連罰每林襲三百和餘味敢息辭砲
 三千以庄請軍叫泣棟堆進
 會叫莊朱平軍驢匹消粘逐毛各考呼景
 景了時莊

APPENDIX. Then Tày Giải Hạng Su Mi TEXT SEGMENT: INTERLINEAR TEXT AND TRANSLATION

The first line below represents the original manuscript, reproduced above, the second line a transcription into Tày, the third line a transcription into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), and the fourth line word glosses in English. An English translation follows.

上	層	首	肩	礎	章	[subtitle]
thượng	tàng	Su	Mi	phya	chương	87:8
tʰuɔŋ ²¹¹	taŋ ²¹	ɬu: ⁵³	mi: ⁵³	pʰja: ⁵³	tɕuɔŋ ³³	
ascend	climb	Su	Mi	karst.peak	chapter	
勿	虧	礎	山	野		1
vượt	lòng	phya	sơn	rạ		88:7
vurɔt ²¹¹	lo:ŋ ²¹	pʰja: ⁵³	ɬɔn ⁵³	za ²¹¹		
transcend	descend	karst.peak	mountain	wild		
坎	虧	那	首	肩		2
khảm	lòng	nả	Su	Mi		
kʰa:m ²¹³	lo:ŋ ²¹	na: ²¹³	ɬu: ⁵³	mi: ⁵³		
cross.over	descend	face	Su	Mi		
首	肩	仍	啖	且	[]
Su	Mi	nhằng	hại	thả	[chan	chan]
ɬu: ⁵³	mi: ⁵³	ɲaŋ ²¹	ha:i ²¹	tʰa: ²¹³	tɕan ⁵³	tɕan ⁵³
Su	Mi	still	still	await	broad	extensive

(line missing on margin of manuscript)

魚[]	𩺰	𩺰	派	𩺰			4
tò	lòng	là	phải	giặng			88:2
to: ²¹	lo:ŋ ²¹	la: ³²	p ^h a:i ²¹³	zǎŋ ²¹			
turn	descend	is	right.side	stand.up			
諸	軍	𩺰	𩺰	𩺰	嚴	莊	5
chư	quân	kéo	khẩu	giặng	ng nghiêm	trang	
tcu: ³³	ku: ³³	keo ²¹³	k ^h a:u ²¹³	zǎŋ ²¹¹	ŋiem ³³	tza:ŋ ³³	
whole	army	call.up	enter	stand.up	strict	serious	
東	𩺰	寸	各	𩺰	太	𩺰	6
đông	nả	thuốn	các	quan	thay	thấy	
to:ŋ ⁵³	na ²¹³	t ^h uo:n ²¹³	ka:k ⁴⁴	k ^w a:n ³³	t ^h aj ⁵³	t ^h aj ⁵³	
many,crowd	face	all	PL	official	one.after	another	
習	摩	遵	了	帝	除	安	7
tấp	mừ	độn	lếu	đầy	giờ	an	
tấp ⁴⁴	mu: ²¹	ʔdo:n ²¹	le:u ²¹³	ʔdaj ²¹³	zɤ: ²¹	ʔa:n ³³	
press	hand	prognosticate	PTL	get	hour	peace	
了	帝	除	月	仙	盛	旺	8
lếu	đầy	giờ	nguyệt	tiên	thịnh	vượng	88:3
le:u ²¹³	ʔdaj ²¹³	zɤ: ²¹	ŋ ^w ie:t ²¹¹	tie:n ⁵³	t ^h in ²¹¹	vurŋ ²¹¹	
finish	get	hour	month	sky.god	full	flourishing	

化	吏	添	利	向	利	方	9
hóa	lại	thêm	lợi	hướng	lợi	phương	
hwa: ⁴⁴	lai: ²¹¹	tʰe:m ⁵³	lɿ: ²¹¹	huɔŋ ⁴⁴	lɿ: ²¹¹	fuɔŋ ³³	
transform	one.more.time	in.addition	benefit	direction	benefit	quarter	

連	沃	身	陰	陽	天	地	10
lại	các	tạ	âm	dương	thiên	địa	
lai: ²¹¹	ka:k ⁴⁴	ta: ²¹¹	ʔɔm ³³	zuɔŋ ³³	tʰie:n ³³	ʔdi:ɛ ²¹¹	
one.more.time	PL	thank	Yin	Yang	Heaven	Earth	

𪔐	垺	仍	户	米	𪔐	𪔐	11
bân	đin	nhằng	hộ	vệ	then	quan	
ʔbɔn ⁵³	ʔdin ⁵³	ɲăŋ ²¹	ho: ²¹¹	ve: ²¹¹	tʰɛn ⁵³	kʷa:n ⁵³	
sky	earth	still	protect	guard	Then	official	

强	所	仍	平	安	富	足	12
gường -	sở	nhằng	bình -	an	phú	túc	88:4
kuɔŋ ²¹	ʔs: ²¹³	ɲăŋ ²¹	pɲɿ ²¹	ʔa:n ³³	fu: ⁴⁴	tu:k ⁴⁴	
mirror	-	still	Peaceful	-	Riches	Sufficiency	

天	地	𪔐	应	𪔐	光	明、	13
thiên	địa	gỏi	ứng	xuất	quang	minh	
tʰie:n ³³	ʔdi:ɛ ²¹¹	ɣoi ²¹³	ʔuɲ ⁴⁴	suɔt ⁴⁴	kʷa:ŋ ³³	mɲɿ ³³	
Heaven	Earth	then	respond	produce	bright	light	

帝	欣	恬	奔	垠	扶	户、	14
đầy	hăn	điểm	bân	đin	phù -	hộ	
ʔdai ²¹³	hăn ⁵³	ʔdie:m ²¹³	ʔbɤn ⁵³	ʔdin ⁵³	fu: ²¹	ho: ²¹¹	
get	see	select	sky	earth	Protect	-	
該	強	寸	各	主	惻	叶	15
cái	gường	thuôn	các	chúa	mãng	đổm	
ka:i ⁴⁴	kuɤŋ ²¹	t ^h uo:n ²¹³	ka:k ⁴⁴	tɕu:ɐ ⁴⁴	mɤŋ ²¹³	zo:m ²¹³	
CLF	mirror	all	each	lord	delighted	behold	
界	仍	帝	高	軍	兵	權	16
rà	nhằng	đầy	cao	quân	binh	quyền	88:5
za: ²¹	ɲăŋ ²¹	ʔdaj ²¹³	ka:u ³³	ku:ɤn ³³	piŋ ³³	k ^w ie:n ²¹	
we	still	get	high	army	soldier	authority	
天	地	買	应	恬	沒	欺、	17
thiên	địa	mại	ứng	điểm	một	khi	
t ^h ie:n ³³	ʔdi:ɐ ²¹¹	mai: ²¹¹	ʔuŋ ⁴⁴	ʔdie:m ²¹³	mo:t ²¹	xi: ³³	
Heaven	Earth	forever	respond	select	one	period	
載	所	呌	首	肩	呌	祿、	18
sặm -	sửa	kéo	Su	Mi	khẩu	lộc	
lăm ⁴⁴	lũa ²¹³	kɛu ²¹³	lɔ: ⁵³	mi: ⁵³	k ^h a:u ²¹³	lo:k ²¹¹	
prepare	-	call.on	Su	Mi	enter	Emoluments	

号	令	粘	扮	逐	匹	軍、	19
hiệu	lệnh	tổng	gióng	giục	ba	quân	
hie:u ²¹¹	le:ŋ ²¹¹	to:ŋ ²¹³	zɔŋ ⁴⁴	zuk ²¹¹	ʔba ⁴⁴	ku:ʔn ³³	
signal	order	drum	sound	urge.on	three	armies	
討	退	金	退	根	遑	罰、	20
tháo	thói	kim	thói	ngần	lên	phát	88:6
tʰa:u ⁴⁴	tʰɔi ⁴⁴	kim ⁵³	tʰɔi ⁴⁴	ŋɯn ²¹	le:n ⁴⁴	fa:t ⁴⁴	
release	pull.out	gold	pull.out	silver	ascend	issue	
每	林	隸	三	百	和	餘、	21
mọi	lâm	rì	sam	pác	hoa	dư	
mɔi ²¹¹	lâm ²¹	zi: ²¹	la:m ³³	pa:k ⁴⁴	hua ⁵³	zu: ⁵³	
each	tree	long	three	hundred	flagpole	left.over	
味	𠵿	[]	息	𠵿	礎	碑、	22
mốc	cảm	[nho]	khín	thua	phya	đán	
mo:k ⁴⁴	ka:m ²¹³	ɲɔ: ⁵³	kʰim ²¹³	tʰu:a ⁵³	pʰja: ⁵³	ʔda:n ⁴⁴	
belly	dare	send.forth	ascend	head	karst.peak	cliff	
退	金	肩	三	萬	𠵿	𠵿、	23
thối	kim	mì	sam	vạn	khâu	lắc	
tʰɔi ²¹³	kim ⁵³	mi: ²¹	ʈa:m ⁵³	va:n ²¹	kʰa:u ²¹³	la:k ²¹³	
pull.out	gold	have	three	ten.thousand	enter	drag	

討	根	肩	三	千	叭	庄	24
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thỏi	ngần	mì	sam	xiên	khẩu	chẳng	88:7
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tʰɔi ²¹³	ŋɤn ²¹	mi: ²¹	ʎa:m ⁵³	sie:n ⁵³	kʰa:u ²¹³	tɕǎŋ ⁴⁴	
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pull.out	silver	have	three	thousand	enter	look.after	
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諸	軍	抖	泣	棟	堆	边	25
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chư	quân	kéo	khẩu	toổng	đôi	bên	
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tɕu: ³³	ku: ^ə n ³³	kɛo ²¹³	kʰa:u ²¹³	tɔ:ŋ ²¹³	ʔdo:i ⁵³	ʔbe:n ⁵³	
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whole	army	call.up	enter	encamp	pair	side	
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ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE CHAPTER ON THE ASCENT OF MOUNT SU MI

We cross and go down the wild mountain peak,
We cross over and descend in front of Mount Su Mi.
Su Mi still waits, broad and extensive,
(missing line)
Turn round and descend and it stands up on the right,
The army is ordered to enter and stands up strict and serious, 5
The crowd of faces are all officials row after row.
Pressing thumb against fingers, prognosticate and obtain the Hour of Tranquillity,
Afterwards get the hour and month in which the sky gods are flourishing.
Change once again and add the Direction and Quarter of Profit,
Once more we thank Yin and Yang, Heaven and Earth. 10
The sky and earth still protect and guard the Then official,
The mirror still shows Tranquillity, Riches and Sufficiency,
Heaven and Earth then respond and produce Brightness.
One gets to see the selection of sky and earth to provide Protection,
All the mirrors each lord is delighted to behold. 15
We still get the high-ranking army and the military authority,
Heaven and Earth forever respond by selecting a single time period,
Preparing to call on Su Mi to bring in the Emoluments.
The signal orders the drum to sound, urging on the three armies,
Pulling out the gold and silver and going up to issue it. 20
Each tree is over three hundred flagpoles high,
We have the stomach to send forth and ascend the head of the limestone cliff.
We pull out the gold and have thirty thousand to drag inside,
Pull out the silver and have three thousand to take in and look after,
The whole army is ordered to enter and set up camp on two sides. 25

Source:

Hoàng Triều Ân, ed., *Tổng tập truyện thơ Nôm các dân tộc thiểu số Việt Nam, Tập 12: Then Tày Giải Hạn* [Compendium of works in Nôm of the minority nationalities of Vietnam, vol. 12: *The Release from Impediments of the Tày Then*] pp. 112–113, 267–268, 423–424. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội, 2012.

HOLM, "CROSSING THE SEAS"

PHOTOS

許約江呈吟貼戶公道鼻保安
 女不安陽世冬年有一礼上功秋約未
 行通大路官隘欣許粟慧高連礼江
 大邦玉母小玉以須粟吾王主粟侯上方
 玉皇速急連起往縣慧玉母媛去歸方地
 迎卡新許登敢信各主連何兵沃送燕吟
 牢諸將百官得崇朕接育坎啟
 招下啟連臺玖所城蛟弄江東舉几蛟蟠

Photo 1. Page 1b from Tày text sample. "Rowing the Boats" (Chèo lùa). (source: Sino-Nôm Institute, Hanoi, manuscript no. ST.2199)



Photo 2. Then priests at a Praying for Good Harvest (Cầu Mùa) ritual, Longzhou, February 2016. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 3. Then priests at a Praying for Good Harvest (Cầu Mùa) ritual, Longzhou, February 2016. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 4. Then priests at a Praying for Good Harvest (Cầu Mùa) ritual, Longzhou, February 2016, showing row of offerings tables, and "world tree" in the foreground. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 5. Close-up of offerings-tables at a Praying for Good Harvest ritual, Longzhou, showing paper flowers, wine, cooked chickens, rice dumplings, and popped rice. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 6. Then priest reciting from a ritual manuscript at a Praying for Good Harvest (Cầu Mùa) ritual, Longzhou, February 2016. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 7. Close-up of Then priest at a Praying for Good Harvest (Cầu Mùa) ritual, Longzhou, with string of bells attached to foot. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 8. Domestic altar of a Then priest in Longzhou, with lute hanging on wall and curtain of metal foil flowers Vietnamese-style. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 9. Then priest conducting domestic ritual for Releasing Impediments of a sick child, Longzhou. (photo: D. Holm)

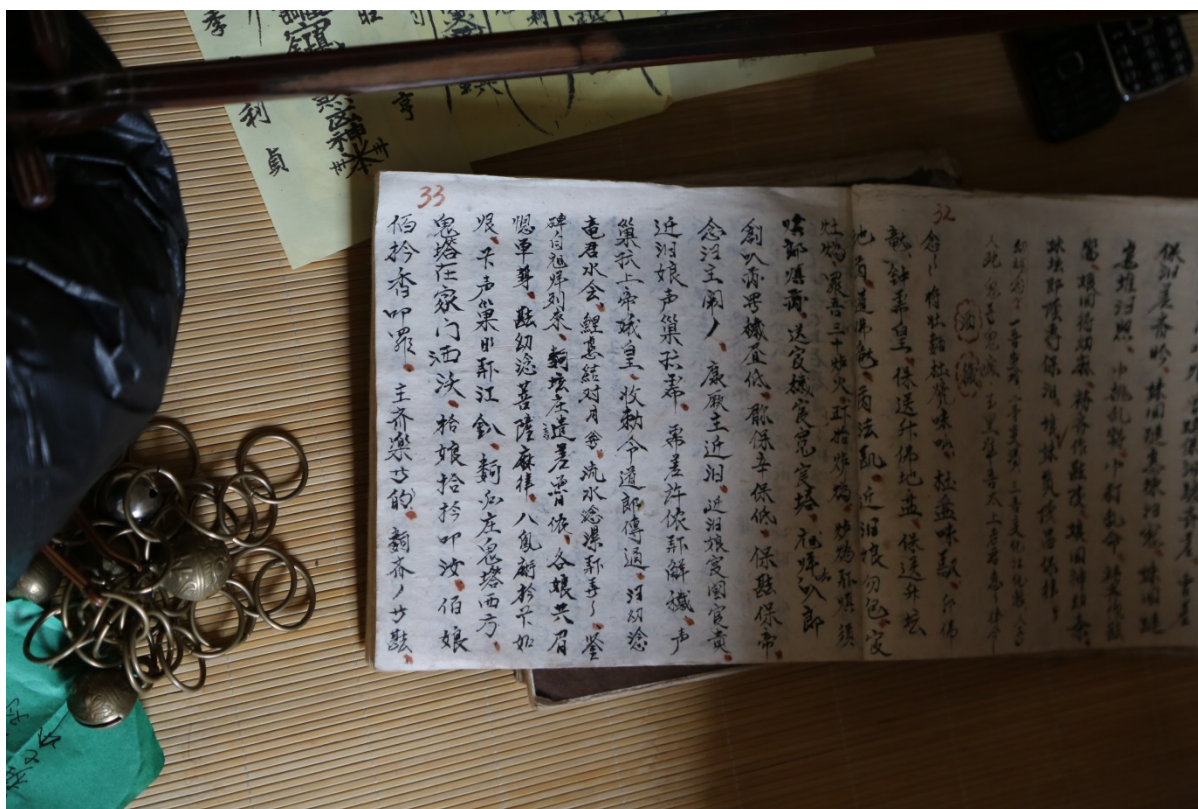


Photo 10. Close-up of ritual manuscript in Tây recited by Then priest conducting domestic ritual, together with string of metal bells, Longzhou. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 11. Then priest conducting domestic ritual for Releasing Impediments of a sick child, Longzhou. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 12. Then priests of the Nùng Châu sub-group performing at home, Văn Quan district, Lạng Sơn, July 2017, playing the lute and string of bells. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 13. Then priest of the Nùng Châu sub-group performing at home, Văn Quan district, Lạng Sơn, showing domestic altar. (photo: D. Holm)



Photo 14. Close-up of the interior of the domestic altar of Then priests, Văn Quan district, Lạng Sơn, showing papercut "soldiers and horses". (photo: D. Holm)

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