

Research Notes:  
Life on Wheels: Women's Hair,  
Ears Piercing, and Cradle Rocking (Part II)

บันทึกภาคสนาม:  
ชีวิตติดล้อ: เส้นผมของผู้หญิง นางจีหู่ และไกวอู่  
(ตอนสอง)

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## Abstract

Life on Wheels Part II deals with my discovery of how Tai women play an important contribution in Tai religious life as follows. One Tai woman donates her long spool of hair instead of money she does not have to make merit. A few mothers of young daughters get their daughters' ears pierced and get them dressed up in Nang Chii Hoo costumes during the Poi Sang Long/ Novice ordination rite. Their presence offers protective measurement for all novice candidates before they all are ordained as novices. Moreover, I also discovered the presence of Tai's mother during one 57-year-old Tai Meun Chao/Monastery Abbot's presence in the cradler rocking ritual of his coffin for his safe journey to reach his next birth.

**Keywords:** Female Hair, Pre-puberty Girls Ears Piercing Practising/Nang Chii Hoo , Protective Measurement, Mother's Cradle Rocking Ritual, Northern Shan State

## บทคัดย่อ

ชีวิตติดล้อ ตอนสอง เน้นความเชื่อพลังของแม่หญิง ผ่านเรื่องเล่าการสิ้นชีวิตของ นางหมีแหงะ อายุ 45 ปี แม่หญิงยากจนจากหมู่บ้านในรัฐฉานตอนเหนือตัดผมเพราะไม่มีเงิน ทำบุญงานบวชเณร เพื่อได้บุญให้หายเจ็บในปัจจุบัน และพบแม่ไต่ที่ให้ลูกสาววัยก่อนมี ประจำเดือนแต่งกายชุด “นางจี่หู” ที่ เข้ามาร่วมพิธีบวชเณรในวัด โดยเชื่อว่านางจี่หูมีพลัง ในการปกป้องความปลอดภัยให้สว่างก่อนเสร็จพิธีบวชเป็นเณร และท้ายที่สุดได้เสนอพลัง ของแม่ผ่านการตกแต่งโลศพของเจ้าอาวาสโตอายุ 57 ปี ด้วยอยู่ โดยผ่านพิธีกรรมที่รู้จักว่า พิธีไกวอู่ ก่อนจุดเพลิงศพ เพื่อการเดินทางไปสู่โลกหน้าด้วยความปลอดภัย

**คำสำคัญ:** เส้นผมผู้หญิง, สาววัยแรกรุ่นจี่หู, มาตรการป้องกัน, พิธีไกวอู่ของแม่, รัฐฉานตอนเหนือ

## Poi Sang Long/novice ordination rite

During the Poi Sang Long/novice ordination rite, I observed a customary practice of young maidens' ear piercing/ Nang Chii Hoo.

### Arrival at Sipo's native village with a warm welcome

It was a good trip to Sipo's native village on the first regular air-con bus from Mandalay to Kyaukme. I arrived at Sipo's native village around noon on March 26, 2015, after being on the mountainous highway since 6:30 am. I followed a Tai Khao lady who got off at the Kyaukme Junction Highway Bus stop. She invited me to follow her after she had learned that I was heading to a family in her village too. She did not recognize the name of the family, because she moved to live with her husband in a gold mine town, far away from Mandalay. As we walked on, I took note of the right-hand side of the one concrete two-story building, mid-way down the village alley. I saw two manual regular gas and diesel gas pumps in front of the building. I told the lady that I would ask the owner of this village gas station how I would be able to find the house of Sipo's divorced mother. She went on her way. I stopped and talked to the lady who was there. She listened and looked at the name and phone number of Sipo's younger brother. She said that she would call him up. She went inside her store got her phone out and dialed. Her call was immediately answered. She informed the person who answered that I was looking for him and I was in her store. She hung up and smiled before saying that the gentleman, Sipo's younger brother, would be picking me up shortly. She explained that his house was not too far and that he should be arriving soon. She told me that she and her Burmese husband were in Chonburi Province working in an ice cube factory for many years. After their two young children were born and raised there, they decided to return home to raise them. They opened their business, buying and selling local cash crops and operating rice mill services and other businesses.

Her open friendliness was interrupted by the arrival of Sipo's younger brother who was driving a motorcycle. They exchanged rapid-fire talk in Thai and they turned to me. I thanked her for her help and asked how much I owed her for the phone call. She smiled and said that it was in the house. They felt that they owed it to Thailand to be hospitable for allowing them to work and earn enough for years so that now they have their agro-business. She told me to stop by to talk more any time. She would introduce me to her big Thai patron who had helped them to start their business. He lives with his Thai wife and family in a nearby village. I thanked her again and said that I would be stopping by. Sipo's younger brother helped me to climb onto the back seat of the motorcycle and slowly drove on a narrow, bumpy, and dusty red clay alley. This quick ride took about 10 minutes before he pulled to a full stop in front of Sipo's family home. He helped me get off and got my bag out of the front space between the seat and the bars of the motorcycle. He walked me into the front door of the house. He introduced me to his wife and small first daughter. After we exchanged our pleasantries, I handed him my Xeroxed copies of my passport and visa. I explained to him that Sipo told me to explain to him that he must take these papers to the village headman who must understand my presence in the village today, March 26 to April 2015. He took the papers, rode on his motorbike, and left the house. He must have gone for about 20 minutes before he returned. As soon as he came into the house, he returned all the papers to me and said that the headman acknowledged my stay with his family from today until April 19, 2015. I should keep all the papers with me at all times going around in this area. Sipo's brother told me that I would be sleeping in this house tonight. His two nephews were out and would be back in the evening. It would be best to get them to move me into their house tomorrow morning. They came in for their evening meals with his family and slept there. I said my thanks and said that I would like to walk around the village if it would be alright. He said that it would be okay and I decided to leave the house.

### **Getting to know Sipo's native village**

I walked to the main entrance of the compound and decided to leave by taking the right turn along the rough dirt alley. Since I was brought home from the left, I decided to explore the right part of the alley. The rough, dusty, and bumpy reddish clay alley road had so many big chunks of hard rock in the middle path all the way. The two narrow stripes on both sides seem to indicate the frequent use because it is used so often by motorbikes. I stayed on the left side of the alley for my safety. There are a few two-story houses of brick-cement with modern roofing tiles houses among old two-story houses of wooden framed with split bamboo weaved walling with rusty corrugated iron roofs. As I was passing home, I was greeted by a very friendly lady. I smiled at her and said that I just got in and that I had come from Chiang Mai, Thailand. She called a man who was in the house to come out to meet me. She repeated to him what I just told her. He said to me that his older brother lives in Chiang Mai too. He is here with the family and will be leaving for Mandalay early tomorrow morning. I asked him what the name of his older brother was. He said that his older brother's name is Sang Kham. I said that I knew Khruu/teacher Sang Kham in Chiang Mai. He is a well-known Tai teacher. I wonder whether he is his brother. I said that I would like to meet him. He said that he went to town and would be back in the evening. I said that I would come by then. The lady said to him that he should call his older brother now. The man got his cell phone out and began to dial. The call was picked up and he spoke and listened, then hung up the phone. He said that I must stay to meet his older brother from Chiang Mai who would be home in a few minutes. We all chatted while we were waiting for his arrival.

### **A surprise meeting with the Chiang Mai Khruu Sang Kham**

It was a huge surprise for me to see the well-known Chiang Mai Khruu Sang Kham getting off a motorbike and walking into the house. We

greeted each other and I explained to him that I just got to this village and would be staying with one family for about 25 days. He said that he would be leaving early the next morning. He came here as a tour leader for a special interest group of students and professors on Tai music from one famous Bangkok Thai University and they left for Bangkok two days ago. He stayed behind and would be leaving for Chiang Mai tomorrow early morning for Mandalay. He will be taking the plane from Mandalay back to Chiang Mai tomorrow afternoon. He explained to the lady and her husband that he met me many times in meetings on the Chiang Mai University Campus. He also saw me using my red bike biking all over the city of Chiang Mai. We all had a happy talk. I wished Khruu Sang Kham a good trip home. I thanked all of his younger brother and his village family members and took leave. That was such a good introduction to my presence in the village. I understood that this family would be telling their neighbors who I was after they would be seeing me walking and talking to the villagers from now on.

### **Finding a Tai soy eatery and the village monastery**

I walked around the village and found one shop selling Phoo Oun/hot and thick glue-like tofu, Phoo Chor/deep fry tofu, Phoo Kadang/gell-like tofu, and Khao Soi/Shan noodles, which sells those soy products for morning and noon meals. This place is located just across the village large junction close to the Lak/Chai-ban/heart of the village. I was so happy to locate this Tai soy product eatery because I no longer eat meat due to health reasons. I stopped to talk to the lady operator whose oldest daughter has been working in Bangkok for over one year as a Tai transnational migrant worker and she is very happy with her Bangkok working life. I decided to walk towards the village monastery compound, down another short rough dirt and rock alley that met with another much longer and similar-looking alley that I was traveling on the back of a motorcycle. I returned to Sipo's family home where I was staying tonight by tracing through my first earlier ride into the village, and I

arrived in no time. I was happy to see some parts of the village that I would be exploring during my less than 30-day- stay.

### **Settling in and setting up common rules for Sipo's two maternal nephews for our daily living together**

I was told by Sipo's younger brother that I would be staying with his family tonight because his two nephews would not get home in time for me to move into their parents' home. Their parents were working in a factory in Guangdong, China. The two grown-up nephews lived in their parent's home because it was stocked with enough rice supply, cooking oil, and money for daily fresh food supply. They did not cook for themselves but came in to eat all daily meals with the family and slept there too. They went out after eating breakfast and returned home when they were hungry. This evening, after they returned home to eat their dinner, and before they went to bed, they were told that they would have to move back to their own home tomorrow with me and stay there with me. His mother was still visiting her family in her native village, somewhere in China. Unfortunately, someone in her extended family died. His mother must observe one hundred days of mourning according to the tradition. She would be able to return to her present Tai family afterward. She would be able to meet me afterward. His wife fixed dinner for all of us on my first evening with Sipo's family. I was told to eat my dinner alone. He showed me the open door where I would be able to bathe by using bathing water from the big Ong/jar. He also showed me the bamboo walling and a tiny corrugated iron roof toilet. He said that I would be sleeping on the living room bamboo bench for tonight. There was a low tea table in between the bamboo two benches, which were next to two sides of bamboo walls, partitioning the kitchen on one side and the family bedrooms and family living quarters on the other side. I did not take a bath because of the chilly cold bathing water in the big water jar, and the weather was very cold. I went to bed but did not fall asleep all night because the freezing

wind seemed to come through the bamboo-woven thin wall all night long. I gladly got up after they got up. They told me that he and his two nephews would move me to their home after breakfast. Again, I ate breakfast alone. I got ready and was led out of the house on foot with the three of them in the lead. They took the right alley to get from there to the nephew's home. The oldest nephew, Mong, who was 15 years old (as of 2015) unlocked the gate and the front door of his family home. We all went inside to clean up the spacious living room. They put my handbag on the wooden platform on the floor which is underneath the family Buddha altar. There was a small curtain door on the right-hand side plywood wall. I, later on, learned that their separate bedroom and their parent's bedroom were on the opposite sides of the door. They told me that I would sleep on the wooden platform below the Buddha altar. They were able to locate a thick cotton comfort to be used as my bed. They managed to find one cotton pillow for my use and a mosquito net was also found. I would need to make my bed before I go to bed after I set up the mosquito net. In the morning, I would need to get the mosquito net down and the mattress rolled up to clear the wooden platform. There was one set of tea tables with four wooden chairs, placed against the left-hand side, all facing the open wooden platform and right-hand-side plywood wall. I thanked all of them for helping me to set up for tonight and every night of the rest of my village stay. They also took me to see the separate one-story brick kitchen building. It was equipped with one Chinese-made electric wok, an electric rice cooker with enough rice supply, cooking oil, and other cooking condiments. They also showed me a small wooden enclosure toilet and an open bathroom space where laundry could be manually done. Cloth lines were on the kitchen wall and in the open space in front of the kitchen. There was an electric water pump, drawing daily water supply for the kitchen, toilet, bathing, and laundry. The uncle left me with the two boys, afterward.

## **Re-introduction as Ajarn Poo/paternal grandfather to the two maternal nephews of Sipo**

We were left to get to know each other. I began to say that they could call me Ajarn Poo because of my advanced age of 72 (2015) and my academic career. I hope to learn about the villagers in this village and other villages nearby from today until April 19, 2015. I would get up early in the morning and cook them some breakfast. Since I do not eat any kind of meat, I would cook whatever meat they would like to eat. I would cook them enough food for breakfast and lunch. They must cook enough rice for all of us. In the evening, again, I would cook dinner for all of us too. They again must see to it that there would be enough rice for all of our dinners daily. They must help wash our plates, bowls, spoons, and all cooking utensils, and sweep and mop the kitchen floor. I would like to have one set of house gate keys and house keys so that I would be able to get in and out in case I need an afternoon rest. Usually, I would leave home after breakfast in the morning and would be home in the late afternoon. They must take care of themselves at lunch. Of course, there would be enough fresh eggs in the kitchen for lunch if they would prefer. They would cook and clean after themselves. No dirty dishes are left around in the kitchen. Yes, of course, I would pay for Khao Soi/Shan noodles from the nearby shops for lunch if they prefer and that is only when I would be around during lunchtime. They all must be home before dark. They must lock up the house gate and lock it before leaving home. They all listened pensively. It was great that they understood my Thai due to their daily Thai television re-run programs which they had been watching for years.

## **Getting to know the village with my new village grandsons**

I began to walk around the village by myself and with five honorable tour guides, namely, Mong (15), his youngest brother, Myint (10), Onn (15) Mong's friend, Ong (15) Mong's friend, and Kham (14) Mong's friend (as of 2015). These boys were friends who had preferred to raise fighting cocks. Did they

come around to show off their pet-fighting cocks all the time, in the mornings, afternoons, and evenings? They came on their motorcycle and foot. They would be able to leave their fighting cocks at home. They decided to show me where the village's San Chao Muang/village shrines were located. Mong sketched for me first all the detailed buildings with figures of Chao Muang and his consort, their stable for horses. There were elephants and tigers in another separate building too. Mong has also sketched the location map of his father's mining town, Muang Khang in Kachin State. He sketched one digging tractor that his Burmese father operated. He was a good draftsman for his age. Myint also sketched a remarkable car and motorcycle that he wished very much his father would be able to buy for the family. They were able to show me the village section where the Chao Muang caretaker and his family lived. They did have remarkable knowledge of only 5 years of living in this village. They maintain their fluency in Tai's speaking ability because Tai's mother, Sipo's younger sister spoke to them only Thai since birth at home. They of course spoke Burmese with their Burmese father at home and school in Muang Khang before moving back to live in this Tai village. Their schoolmates in Muang Khang spoke Kachin because they were from Kachin families.

### **Learning my village's daily routine**

I walked everywhere I went in the village and other nearby villages. I got to take some local Tong Peng/three-wheel motorcycle/skylab, local motor tricycle public transportation to Kyaukme market town sometimes. I got to know one Tong Peng/three-wheel motorcycle driver very well. He had become my key informant on local cultural events. He was a Tai transnational worker in Bangkok, Thailand for a few years before his return home to take care of his parents and subsequent marriage. He had to return home to raise his family and take care of his elderly parents. He mistook me for a Japanese tourist when he first saw me walking to and from my village to the Kyaukme market town. He understood my intention in walking around so

that I would be able to talk to the villagers about what was going on along the way. He told me that I must mark on my daily calendar for his village three days of Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual for young boys from April 1 to 3, 2015 at the Wat/KM Monastery, 3 km on the highway from my village. He would be busy helping his monastery committee to keep the grounds clean. I would be seeing him there, on March 28, 2015. I thanked him for the information and a free mid-way ride from Kyaukme market to my village.

### **Learning of the upcoming Poi Sang Long Event in another nearby village**

I was lucky enough to learn about the village of KM's 3-day celebration of the Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual from April 1 to 3, 2015 from my village's KM key informant. That was on the afternoon of March 28, 2015. As I walked from the village highway junction, I was walking on the right-hand side of the alley, I stopped by to say hello to the family who ran the gas manual pump. The Tai wife of the Burmese husband stopped working to chat with me. She told me that tomorrow morning, her Burmese husband would be going to deliver their monetary donation envelope to two hosts of the Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual in the village of KM. I must join him because he would be driving the family van over. Her husband would introduce me to one family whose Thai son-in-law came from Chiang Mai, Thailand too. He was considered our family business patron. He was with the Thai agribusiness giant, the Thai CP. This Thai giant CP got a Burmese corn-growing concession under the Thai son-in-law of one Tai Nua KM family. He had left Thai CP and had been living with his Tai mother-in-law's family ever since. It would be nice for me to meet my fellow Chiang Mai son-in-law of a local Tai family. I thanked her for her kind invitation and said to her that I would love to get a ride to the KM village with her husband tomorrow for sure. Besides, I would attend the Wat KM Poi Sang Long 3-day celebration from the 4 to 6, of April 2015 right after the 1 to 3 April 2015 individual village

host and hostess home celebration on my own. I had learned about that event already. I will be coming tomorrow morning for sure, please inform your husband for me. I said thank you and left for home on foot.

### **Exploring a new village with an honorable host**

I returned to her home early in the morning and got a ride from there to the first Tai sponsor of the Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual. It was a short ride. The Tai Nua family compound was on the left-hand side of the highway before the location of the Wat/Monastery KM which was on the right-hand side, just one km further. We were received by the mother-in-law of the Chiang Mai Thai ex-CP country representative. We were greeted by her daughter, the wife of the Thai husband. Sorry, her Thai husband was in the village of NT at the moment. “Yes, my mother would come to meet the two of you, do make yourself comfortable, and thank you for coming to join our merit-making today.” She left and her mother came to greet us right away. I was introduced to her by the Burmese husband. She listened and directly talked to me as follows. “It was an honor for the family to receive an elder Ajarn from Chiang Mai.” She would inform her Chiang Mai son-in-law of my visit. “Please come back to visit us again at any time so that you would be able to meet my Chiang Mai Thai son-in-law.” My Burmese host handled the family envelope. It was received by the hostess with a profuse thank you. The Burmese host took leave because he was on a mission to go on to the second Thai family host of the Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual. The hostess sent her thanks back to his Tai wife who later on would be joining the joyful event too. We decided to leave and saw lots of cooking activities in a separate open temporary kitchen space. I asked my Burmese host about it. He said that they were cooking meals and various kinds of Tai rice-based desserts for the guests who would join the luncheon around noon and dinner during the three-day event. The days’ celebration would end when all local hosts would parade all Sang Long/novice candidates onto the Wat/monastery

ground for another three days (April 4 to 6, 2015) of celebrations to all villagers from far-away villages. They all would come today and evening entertainment of stage performance by a Chat Tai trope/Likay. I told him that I would join the daily events but not the night program. He got to the second and last host that he was on a family mission to drop off the merit-making envelope. He got out and invited me to go along. We met the host lady and were seated and pleasantries were exchanged. His Tai wife was not able to join the event personally since it was a busy time at home as the harvest was completed. "Please excuse us, we would have to take leave. Yes, I was from Thailand. I came along to learn about the Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual. Of course, I will be joining the KM monastery celebration next week too." We left the event.

### **On my own for the Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual of the KM Monastery**

On the morning of April 1, 2015, I walked from my village along the highway to the KM monastery ground and I was early. I walked around the ground and met my KM village key informant who was inspecting all trash black bags that were secured on the bamboo post with a clear Tai directive request sign. This was the monastery grounds clean by dropping all litter into the black garbage bags. I walked further and saw the Chat Tai Troupe/Likay stage for the nightly stage performance, various kinds of Thai rice base traditional desserts, such as Khao Taen/deep fry rice crackers, Khao Khob/rice chips, Khao Larm/roasted sticky rice in bamboo tubes, Khao Neuk Nga/pounded sticky rice with black sesame with salt and so on. Chinese textiles of various kinds were available. Ready to wear for children from China were there too. Chinese sewing pieces of equipment were available. Some hot season crops such shallot, white garlic, and sesame seeds were available too. It was too early for the big crown to welcome the Sang Long/novice candidate possessions from the KM village to arrive at the monastery grounds. However, the monastery

center kitchen was at full house cooking capacity. A huge quantity of rice was soaked and ready to be steamed. The meat of various kinds was washed and cut up. Chili paste of various kinds was pounded and ready to be used in various kinds of curry. It was noisy and full of the laughter of the large crowd on the monastery ground. I decided to stay at the replica hut of the KM village Royal household/San Chao-Muang. I was invited to stay there with the assistant of the caretaker of the KM village spirit house caretaker, an elderly man with a hard-of-hearing problem. His younger assistant was a former Tai transnational migrant worker, who spent some years working in Lamphoon province in Northern Thailand. He was happy to help explain to me to understand what was happening on the ground once the entire Sang Long/novice candidates' possessions came into the monastery ground. The entire possession would walk three complete rounds around the main two-story Viharn/ ritual hall. Then they all would climb up onto the second-floor main ritual hall where the official ritual would take place. I was grateful for giving me his complete procedural procession information before the overwhelming actual event took place. It was an extremely crowded procession of 21/22 Sang Long/novice candidates, who would be riding on the shoulders of the individual young men, who were their private Phau-sang/private assistants/horse-men. They were all followed by members of each candidate's private Mae-sang/female private assistants, members of their immediate family entourage, and so many other merit makers from all over who joined this most important Tai ritual of the merit-making event for the year. I took lots of photographs on the ground before the entire Sang Long/novice candidates went to change from the crown jewel dress-up attires into all plain white shirts and white pants with a complete cleansing of all facial make-up and removing all finger and neck jewelry. This was part of their last dressed-up jewelry according to the story of the last period of the luxurious lifestyle of Lord Buddha before he entered into an ascetic life in search of Buddhahood. Yes, he left behind his royal princely life and practiced Dhammic for a very long time before

reaching Buddhahood, Nirvana, finally. This is how this Sang Long/novice ordination ritual replication is shown. It took all of them, Sang Long, to be seated in the Viharn/ritual hall for their transforming ritual into San Long/Buddhist novice candidates. They were directed to line up to take their place kneeling and facing in front of each Phra Uppacha/principal Buddhist monk receptor/teacher-trainer in their daily life as Buddhist novices of the entire Sang Long/novice monastery life. They occupied the front space next to the main Buddha altar of the ritual hall. Their immediate members of their family, relatives as well as other merit-making audiences were seated behind them, occupying the entire ritual hall.

### **Taking note of a long spool of hair in the ritual hall**

I was lucky to locate a space on the left side of the front part where male elders were seated. I got to have a good location to observe the entire ordained ritual procedures that took place. I could also walk the entire length of the ritual hall to go over to the right side of the ritual hall if I had to take photographs from that side. Just before the official ordination procedure took place, one long spool of hairy thing, tied underneath one white umbrella that was tied up behind one wooden armchair of one high-ranking monk seat, got my attention. It was the only white umbrella among many other colorful umbrellas. I wished very much to have a closer look and to ask any monk and/or elder man whether it was a long spool of human hair, whose hair, how and why, it was there, and so on. What is it signifying in that position? I watched the entire ritual procedures which were officiated by a chapter of senior monks who were authorized to perform ordination officially by the Tai Sangha/Buddhist monk authority. I had to be patient and wait until the end of the official ordination ritual. Once it was over, the entire audience was allowed to move around. I followed some men who were in front of both the left and right sides. They had to get the newly ordained novice/Sang Long to join the Buddhist monk space, separating them

from the lay space. I was able to reach out to the abbot whom I met once before, I paid him my respect and asked him about the long spool of hair. He went closer to read a small tag on the white umbrella. He said that the tag had the donor's name written on it. He asked other monastic lay officials whether they knew the hair donor. No one knew. Then a young man came to my rescue, he asked why I wished to know whose hair it belonged. I explained to him that I am a retired Thai teacher/Ajarn, and wish very much to learn more from the hair donor. He talked more to the abbot and all the male elders, who were there. Finally, an elderly female audience member told the abbot that she knew the hair donor was Nang Mii-ngae, who could be located in the village's residential section of this village but on the other side of the highway, beyond the monastery compound. I wrote down the name after asking the young man to slowly repeat the name to me. I thanked all of them for their help, especially the young man. He told me that he was glad to help me. He was a Tai dealer of Thai second-hand cars. He went to Mai Sai to get his Thai used cars for his customers from Myanmar all the time. Yes, he was a Tai University graduate secondhand car dealer and could speak English too. I switched to English to carry out further talks. He thought that I was a Japanese tourist when he first saw me in the ritual hall much earlier on. In his job, he would deal with some Japanese car dealers in Thailand too. I again thanked him for his valuable help. We left the ritual hall separately. He rejoined his folks. I went down to the first floor and left the monastery grounds.



**Picture 1:** Nang Mii-ngae's Hair, Poi Sang Long Ritual, KM Monastery/Wat, KM Village, Northern Shan State.

### **On the way to search for the owner of the hair**

I began to walk on the right side of the highway moving towards the section of the village where I would be able to locate the house of Nang Mii-ngae. I walked one-half kilometers away from the monastery ground along the right side of the highway. In a fast record time walking, I caught up with one female group of seven. They were two mothers with all five teenage daughters. One mother gave me a big smile and asked where I was heading. Oh, yes, she recognized seeing me earlier in the ritual hall during the ritual process. I explained to them that I would try to locate Nang Mii-ngae whose house could be found in the village, but on the left-hand side of the highway which I need to go across when I see the next exit village lane. I would very much like to locate the lady, Nang Mii-ngae, to learn from her how she had cut her long spool of hair that was tied under the only white umbrella that was used in this ritual. I did not see it until we went into the ritual hall for the official and ordination ritual process, and I lost her. She turned to talk to

her entire entourage. They all talked in rapid Tai and finally got the matron to smile broadly. I was lost in their torrent Tai noisily exchange. The matron turned to face me and addressed me directly as follows: “You just follow us on this side of the highway. We would go across the highway to the left side soon. We would deliver you to Nang Mii-ngae’s home and would be on our final stretch home.” I smiled and thanked her and the rest of her family members and friends. Quietly, I followed them. They walked on and finally stopped to wait until there was no traffic going on both sides of the highway. They went across the highway with me closely walking on their heels. They further walked down the entire length of one short stretch of a village alley road until they reached a three-way junction. The matron called out towards the left-hand side of the one-story bamboo house with a corrugated iron roof that was on the opposite side of the alley. They were kind enough to deliver me and stay inside the compound of Nang Mii-ngae house, instead of turning right into another alley leading them to their homes. One small, dark-thin lady with noticeable short hair came to greet all of us. They all exchanged rapid Tai which I did not follow. Finally, the hostess broke into a smile and led all of us to the open space next to the bamboo walling of the house, next to the alley front. She sat down on her heels and the entire entourage sat on their heels too, facing the hostess. I put my field notebook down on the dirt floor, away to the left side of her, and asked her whether I could take one photograph with all of them. The hostess said yes to my request, and I quickly took the only photograph of our meeting. Again, I took note of her short hair which was held together with one rubber band. I sat on my heels and said my thanks for her kind consent to see us. I explained to her my main purpose in trying to talk to her. I saw one long spool of hair that was tied underneath one white umbrella in the KM monastery ritual hall. I was wondering whether it belonged to her. She said that yes it was her hair! She had to thank her neighboring patron of Sang Long/novice candidates of this ordination ritual, who allowed her to make merit by offering her long

spool of hair instead of money to the Lord Buddha through the village Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual of 2015. She was sick and could not join the monastery ordination procedural ritual at the village monastery. I said I was grateful for her kind consent to allow me to talk to her at the moment. Would it be alright for me to ask her a few more questions about her very poor health condition? She gave a small smile and said yes because she was all right for the moment. The following narrative came from our only short encounter.

### **Brief life history of Nang Mii-ngae, the owner of the hair**

“I, Nang Mii-ngee, am 45 years old. I did not go to work with my husband today because my Pang/left side spleen has been hurting me so badly lately. My husband and I worked as daily laborers for our neighbors. We lived on our daily labor earnings and were poor. I wanted to join the village monastery Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual but did not have enough cash to donate and had decided on my own to cut one long spool of hair of mine to make merit for the village Poi Sang Long/novice ordination event. After having it cut by one female neighbor who was the younger sister of her Sang Long host family, I washed that long spool of my hair, and it was dried in the sun, and finally, I combed it. I asked my neighbor’s patron sponsor of a few Sang Long/novice candidates whether they would allow me to tie my long spool of hair underneath their white umbrella for Sang Long/novice candidates. They were very kind to allow me to do it and I was able to make merit. I prayed to gain enough Mangkhala/merit so that I would be less painful in my everyday existence now and hopefully in my next life. Living with a painful pang/abnormal spleen is miserable like it has been for more than a few days this time. I am in pain and in bed every moment. My daily life existence is a torture.”

My entire entourage was speechless as I stopped my note-taking and was able to gather enough strength to thank her with a Wai/Thai two-hand

gesture of paying respect and thanks. We all got up and told her to rest more until she would be able to feel better from her Pang painful reaction. We then took leave and were in the alley in total deep silence. I again gave my thanks to all of my newfound local hostesses. I began walking and turned right into the same village alley that brought all of us there. Once I reached the highway, I stayed on my right-hand side and kept on walking back to Sipo's native village in much deeper silence. I lost my normal strength but with low energy managed to reach my village homestay. I skipped any more observations on what was going on at the monastery ground for the rest of the day and night because I was so mentally drained.

### **Searching for more information on women's hair**

That was the only brief interview that I had with Nang Mii-ngae. Before my April 19, 2015 departure from the village stay, I managed to ask my KM male interlocutor to buy two dozen farm-fresh eggs for her. I gave him enough Kyat for them. On March 10, 2017, I went over to my village key informant and was informed that Nang Mii-ngae had passed away sometime in April 2015, which was right after my Chiang Mai departure. This is my 2017 re-visit of the area, and I decided that I did not wish to see her widower. This is why I have been honoring her by using her real name and photography when I present her brief life history and life course through my narrative. I use the way she used her hair asking so many Tai females whom I meet in the Northern Shan State and the city of Chiang Mai, whether they have ever cut off their spool of long hair and offered it to the Lord Buddha in their life. It is amazing to receive almost 100 percent positive responses. I thank my lucky stars that I met Nang Mii-ngae, my first Tai teacher on how hair is used in the biggest Buddhist Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual of the year in her life. However, Tai monks in all of Tai monasteries in one area of northern Shan State, do not know the real names of female hair donors when I ask them about whose long spools of hair belong as I am allowed to look for

them behind the main Buddha altar of each of their monasteries. They remember seeing them during the Poi Sang Long/ordination rituals that take place. Yes, they collect those umbrellas that they put away, but they do not know where those spools of long hair would end up. I talked to one local beauty shop owner who displayed a few long spools of highlighted hair in the display window in the market town of Kyaukme. She said, “Yes, it was real hair.” It is bought from Tai women who came to use the service. Yes, those highlighted hairpieces are sold to female Tai customers too. No, we do not have the names or addresses of their owners. “Yes, I cut my hair and offered it to Lord Buddha when I was about 16 years old. That was under the guidance of my mother. She thought that I was not too healthy during that year. We just made our offer at the village monastery. I have been healthy ever since. No, I will work in this shop after I complete my training in hair care, hairstyle, and so on. The owner of the shop was not in at the moment.” I thanked her for her help and left that beauty shop.

### **The KM Monastery Poi Sang Long ritual and Nang Chii Hoo in 2015**

At the KM Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual ceremony, I also witnessed about 6 young girls, who were all dressed up in two-piece Tai angelic white-blue Tai long-sleeve dresses with separate head-gear pieces. They participated in the KM Poi Sang Long/novice ordination rituals as Nang Chii Hoo/ears pierced angelic maidens with their mothers in close watchful eyes. The headgear pieces are in high arch tier style which are worn with long sleeves white satin blouses also blue satin trimming. They also wore long light blue satin Sinh/skirts with long-tail covering up to their feet. They were candidates for the Nang Chii Hoo/ears-piercing young maiden ritual. This young female ritual is a recent reinvention of this tradition as an additional part of the Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual in this area. However, they returned home after the afternoon activity was completed. They also did not stay overnight at the monastery. All Sang Long/novice ordination candidates

would have to stay at the monastery as novice candidates. I had a brief talk with one mother in the presence of the father. She told me the following:

#### **More information on Nang Chii Hoo in the KM Monastery ritual hall**

“We were from this area. We came to join this Poi Sang Long/novice ordination event this year. We live in Thakhielek, close to Mae Sai. We have an electric appliance shop there. We get our supply from Mae Sai Thai suppliers. We worked in Thailand as Tai migrant workers for a long time. We saved enough money and have maintained our ties with our Thai former bosses who have helped us financially to open our present shop. Yes, we are lucky and busy, taking care of our store all the time. This year we decided to have our oldest daughter become a candidate for the Nang Chii Hoo/ear-piercing ritual. Why did we decide to subject our daughter to this ritual? It is a long story, Ajarn. However, it is okay to share with you our heartbroken story, Ajarn. We lost our oldest son a long time ago. We were so busy with our business. We did not think much about entering him as a Sang Long/novice ordination candidate then. So he died with no chance of being ordained as a Sang Long/novice candidate. We regretted both our losses of losing him as our son and our son’s loss of being ordained as a novice. We have decided to have no more children. We have now decided to enter our oldest daughter as a Nang Chii Hoo/ear-piercing ritual candidate this year. She would be protected by having good health. As for our youngest daughter, we would get her to enter the Nang Chii Hoo/ear piercing rite next time. We were so very happy to join the Poi Sang Long/novice ordination event this year with our family and village friends.” I thanked both of them for sharing their personal story with me. I left them to enjoy their time with their kinfolks. I, later on, discovered that there is a rental of Nang Chii Hoo/ear piercing Tai customs in the Kyuakme market town. It seems that the Nang Chii Hoo/ear piercing rite may be a popular counterpart of the Poi Sang Long/novice ordination ritual. Maybe the Nang Chii Hoo/ear piercing rite will become a permanent feature of the

pre-puberty rite of passage for young Tai girls. I was told one time that Nang Chii Hoo's ear piercing is part of the Poi Sang Long as a protective measurement of candidate/Sang Long. Ghosts and evil spirits cannot penetrate their female powerful protective measurement. So, all Sang Long/novice candidates are all saved. Traditionally, the family matron would do the actual ear-piercing rite for all young girl candidates at home. She would give young girl candidates her blessing through her kind Muangkhal/Phorn/blessing with having good ears (to hear only auspicious news)/Hoo Dii for healing and good eyesight (to see only auspicious things)/ Ta Dii for seeing in their young life ahead of them.



**Picture 2:** Three of Nang Chii-hoo and their mother. Poi Sang Long Ritual, KM Monastery/Wat, KM Village, Northern Shan State.

## The Funeral Rite

### The funeral rite for a 57-year-old Tai Meun Chao/Monastery Abbot, known as Kuai-Ou

My KM village key informant informed me that I should go to observe one funeral ritual of Meun Chao/abbot of one monastery, at the Wat/LK Monastery on April 9-11, 2015, especially at night when Chat Tai Troupe. (In Thailand, it is compatible with Likay) that puts on a nightly performance with a live Tai local orchestra. However, this monastery is about 6-7 km and on the hilly part of the highway towards Sipo, the historic town of Tai kingdom. I thanked him and was trying to get more specific information on this event. I did learn from one novice of my village monastery that he would be going to the LK Monastery after teaching his nightly Tai language teaching duty on the night of April 10, 2015. He would also plan to spend the night there so that he would be able to attend the cremation ritual on April 11, 2015. I was welcomed to take the back seat on his motorbike. However, the abbot would be leaving after breakfast tomorrow too. He would be driven by another novice, his colleague. He was sure that the abbot would make an announcement offering and encouraging any other lay villagers to have the ride with him and to attend the cremation too. I thanked him for the information and told him that I would try to get a ride the next morning with the abbot. That was the morning of April 10, 2015. In the early evening, the abbot announced his tomorrow morning departure time for the April 11, 2015 cremation ritual of the LK Monastery Abbot. Anyone would need to show up before his 9:00 am departure time for the ride. He encouraged the villagers to join this event. That is how I got a ride with the abbot of Sipo's village monastery. So, it turned out that I was the only rider from the village for the LK Monastery Cremation. We took off on time after I showed up at the monastery. He directed his novice driver to make a few stops on the way. The first stop was to buy some ready-to-eat Tai fermented tea leaves snack,

known as Miang. The abbot would like to have a large pack that would be shared among other monks who would be attending the event. The second stop was at one monastery which was located close to the Kyaukme market town. However, he found out that the senior monk of this monastery had left already. The third stop and the final stop was at another monastery further away. One young monk joined our group. After another short drive, we finally got to the ground of the LK Monastery. He instructed me to meet him back in the late afternoon after the cremation would be finished. I thanked him and confirmed to him that I would appreciate a ride back to our village with the group. I followed him and his fellow monks heading to the ritual hall of the LK monastery. However, I was told that I must go over to the special stage where the coffin of the late abbot of the Wat/Monastery LK was lying in state for the last rite before being taken to the special crematorium ground. I thanked him for the information left them, and headed towards the special separate thatched-roof stage, on the ground temporarily of the specific functioning structure.

### **To participate in the LK Monastery Abbot's funeral rite and to learn about his life history**

I was able to find the fully decorated coffin in the middle of the big wall-less stage. It was hoisted by two strong and decorated large sizes of synthetic pieces of slings from both ends of the decorated coffin dangling from the wooden beam of the structure. That strong wooden beam ran the full length of the width of the stage. The entire stage's wooden floor was covered by grass-woven mats. I spotted one food tray on one end of the decorated coffin. There was one small glass, filled with sand. Lighted joss sticks were planted in the middle of the sand-filled glass. Two special kinds of Tung/banners were tied on the top of bamboo poles. They would be ready to pick up to lead the coffin procession on the way to the crematorium ground. In a closer look at the highly decorated coffin, I had no sense of the colorful

decorations. I walked to the back and saw colorful bamboo framed rice paper of two types of good-sized airplanes. One was a replica of a helicopter while the other was a military airplane. There were other replicas of furniture and household cupboards and so on. I walked around the mat-covered dirt ground floor about less than the one-meter high raised-up stage. Villagers began to come in. I began to observe what they did as soon as they got in. They sat on the ground and held both palms of their hands upward, putting them at their foreheads, low down their hands, and flattened them on the front ground three consecutive times/Krab Sam Khreung. They then pulled on the greenish robe/synthetic twine carefully and slowly with very pensive facial expressions and in complete silence. Their eyes were focused on the gently moving coffin. They stopped and got out of the way to make room for other new worshippers to repeat similar procedures as were described. The four sides of the ground were filled up with so many worshippers.

### **The life history of the late LK Monastery Abbot is performed on the stage**

The Chat Tai/Thai Likay stage performers took the stage with live music, playing on the ground floor on the side stage. The male master of the ceremony announced that the last performance on life history and the life course in brief of the Meun Chao/abbot would be presented. The live band began playing and suddenly, all eyes shifted to the left-hand side of the ground of the stage. A young boy dressed as an ordinary village boy of 10/11 years old walked onto the stage. He carried one huge bunch of green bananas on one end of the bamboo stick that was balancing on the other end of the stick that was holding a few huge sizes of fruits such as one entire bunch of green coconuts and so on. He was heading home after spending the entire day working on his family's orchard. He was greeted by his elderly parents upon reaching his stilled open-deck wooden thatched roof house. His concerned parents also offered him a cup of drinking water. They encouraged

him to rest before taking a bath and having dinner. The narrator switched to his time at the age of being ordained as a Sang Long/novice. He had found his true calling in the monastic life as a Sang Long/novice. He enjoyed studying Dhamma studies. He went away to study beyond what his village monastery could offer to his desire to further his Dhamma studies. He finally went on to study more advanced Dhamma studies in one monastery in Mandalay. He spent enough time studying until he had nothing else there to be studied. He returned to take up his monkhood residency at his birthplace in his native village. He served as a monk to all his parents, relatives, and fellow villagers for all of his life. Then Sung-khan/Sung-khara/Life Destiny caught up with him. No one would be able to intervene. Period. All Thewa-da both male and female/angels came to plead for his life on his behalf but would not be able to negotiate with Sung-khara/life's destiny. All of these long narrative scenes were performed by male and female actors and actresses, who all dressed up according to the assigned character parts they were assigned to perform in accompanying the living Chat Tai orchestra. There were a lot of tears on stage among all the performers and the mercerized audience. All acts of tug-of-war among family members and all Thewa-da/angles were stopped and the last flood of tears ended. Yes, Mara/god of death on behalf of Sung-khan/life destiny finally has caught up with the abbot. No one escapes this destiny. We all must let go. Yes, the body of the Meun Chao/abbot would be released by fire after this afternoon's cremation.

### **Last preparation for the final funeral rite**

The last rite on the stage took place after all Chat Tai Troupe performers left the stage. Chairs were set in front of the decorated cradle coffin for a large chapter of senior monks with their ritual fans to be seated. Once every monk was seated, one short Buddhist chant was carried out. They got up and left the stage, and laymen went up the stage. They began dismantling the cradle-decorated coffin which was transferred down onto the waiting decorated

chariot. They removed all other colorful offered objects which were put back around the decorated cradle coffin on the waiting chariot. There was a huge size of color vinyl photographic portrait of Meun Chao/abbot on the front of the long possession. Next, all traditional funeral banners were carried by laymen who were on foot. They were followed by the chariot carrying the decorated coffin of Meun Chao. Slowly, the possessions began to leave the monastery's main gate. It was heading towards the highway. It had to go across the highway and went into a village dirt alley. It went through the entire length of the village alley before it took the left turn on one last stretch of another village dirt alley. The entire possession finally reached the huge pyre with a very high-up Pha- phi-darn/ceiling cloth of the white canopy made of raw cotton. The four ends of the white canopy were tightly tied on all four tips of the very tall four bamboo poles. The white canopy signifies a special crematorium of the senior-ranking abbot. It also would have to be way high above the intense flame of fire from the pyre. Fuel wood was set and ready to be lit up by a traditional Tai Bung Fai fire starter known as Noo Fai. Again, the cradle-decorated coffin was completely dismantled and reassembled on top of the pyre by laymen. All other offered objects were put into the lower deck of the high pyre. Once everything was in place and all laymen were at a safe distance from the fire, the firing signal was given. The Noo Fai of Bung Fai/rocket fire starter started running from the ground moving up onto the pyre. It penetrated the layers of fuel wood that radiated the cradle-decorated coffin. There was the last chanting from the chapter of senior monks during the high flame of the pyre consuming the coffin and everything on it. All of the attendees fixed their last and final gaze with their special prayers for the Meun Chao/abbot.

I did not realize until I saw the abbot portrait for the last time what Khon Phiak/albino man was. I realized then that the common knowledge of him was that he was a British soldier who came to rule Burma, a very long time ago. He was in love with Tai's race. After the colonial rule ended, he

went back to live in Britain until he died. He then was reborn as a good son of an LK family, had been ordained as a Sang Long/novice and a monk, and finally became the late abbot of the LK Monastery, his native monastery. To help him return to Britain, they made a model of two types of airplanes for him to use in case he ever wished to return to his afterlife journey to his last life's birthplace, Britain. He was born and raised among his beloved Tai race in the monastic and ascetic of his present life and died as the Buddhist monastery abbot/Meun Chao of LK. This is impermanence.

There was one six-wheel truckload of Tai women who were serenading off his last journey from the monastery down to the crematory ground and for sure his life beyond wherever he was destined. The six-wheel truck was the last part of the long line of fellow mourners in possession. Their singing should remind him of the lullabies, that his mother sang for him after she first had put him in his cradle and all of his cradle life. He would not feel lonely on his last journey listening to the Tai mother's most familiar cradle lullabies. I paid him my last humble respects and quickly returned to the grounds of the LK Monastery as the last rider of the anxious Buddhist monks was waiting. As soon as I got into the vehicle, the Buddhist novice driver took off. We were all quiet for the entire trip back to our village monasteries.



**Picture 3:** The Cradle Rocking Decorated Coffin, Last Day of Funeral Ritual for the Abbot of the LK Monastery/Wat, LK Village, Northern Shan State.  
All three photographs belong to Suriya Smutkupt.