



HAL
open science

Social and spatial organization of the Thai deng of Mai Châu (Viêt Nam) before 1954

Bernard Formoso

► **To cite this version:**

Bernard Formoso. Social and spatial organization of the Thai deng of Mai Châu (Viêt Nam) before 1954. Mous-
sons : recherches en sciences humaines sur l'Asie du Sud-Est, 2018, 31, pp.117-134. <10.4000/moussons.4065>.
<hal-03063617>

HAL Id: hal-03063617

<https://hal.science/hal-03063617v1>

Submitted on 21 Mar 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - No
Derivative Works - International License



Moussons

Recherches en sciences humaines sur l'Asie du Sud-Est

31 | 2018

Recherches en sciences humaines sur l'Asie du Sud-Est

Social and Spatial Organization of the Tai Deng of Mai-Châu (Viêt Nam) before 1954

Organisation sociale et spatiale des Tai Deng de Mai-Châu (Viêt Nam) avant 1954

Bernard Formoso



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/moussons/4065>

DOI: 10.4000/moussons.4065

ISSN: 2262-8363

Publisher

Presses Universitaires de Provence

Printed version

Date of publication: May 31, 2018

Number of pages: 117-134

ISBN: 979-10-320-0165-3

ISSN: 1620-3224

Provided by Aix-Marseille Université (AMU)



Electronic reference

Bernard Formoso, "Social and Spatial Organization of the Tai Deng of Mai-Châu (Viêt Nam) before 1954", *Moussons* [Online], 31 | 2018, Online since 15 May 2018, connection on 21 March 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/moussons/4065> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/moussons.4065>



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Social and Spatial Organization of the Tai Deng of Mai-Châu (Việt Nam) before 1954

Bernard Formoso *

Aix Marseille Univ, CNRS, IrAsia, Marseille, France

In this tribute to Jean Baffie, a distinguished specialist of contemporary Thailand, I shall present some results of a survey I carried out in 2000 among the Tai Deng (“Red Tai”) of Mai-Châu, a rural district (*huyên*) of the province of Hoà-Bình, in the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam. These ethnographic data pertain both to the political system of the *muong* (chiefdom) prior to its abolition by the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam in 1954, and to the symbolic structuring of village and domestic spaces.

ORGANIZATION OF THE *MUONG* BEFORE 1954

Mai-Châu was historically the southernmost Tai *muong*¹ of the Black River Basin. It is now the southernmost rural district of Hoà-Bình, at about 60 km from the capital of the province, and 160 km from Hà-Nội. Covering an area of 520 km², it is contiguous with Thanh-Hóa Province to the south, and is located within a distance of 50 km as the crow flies from the Laotian border (Xam Nua Province). In 2003 the district had a population of 48,570, of which 30,000 Tai distributed between fourteen communes (*xã*). The rest of the population was divided between

* Bernard Formoso is a professor of social anthropology at Paris Nanterre University, and is affiliated to Aix Marseille Université, CNRS, IrAsia, Marseille, France.

the Kinh, most of them living in the town of Mai-Châu, the Muong located in five eastern and southern communes of the district, and the Hmong-Yao who lived in mountainous areas of the north (three communes) (Fig. 1).

According to Philippe Le Failler (2014: 45-6), Mường Mùn (Mai-Châu) was established during the 19th century as a district by the Vietnamese administration, despite its status of secondary chiefdom in the Black River political system. However, one of my informants, Mr Hà Văn Zhua, whose paternal grand-father had been a minister of the Chieng Sai palace, described the organization of this *muong* before 1944 as relatively sophisticated. It included several administrative levels, as well as the right/left bipolarity of power which is also observed in political systems of the Western Tai (Siam and Sipsong Panna notably²).



Fig. 1. Map of Mai-Châu with the location of the ethnic groups
© B. Formoso.

The Tai of Mường Mùn were divided into three social categories. At the apex were the *tào*, the hereditary lords. They were members of the Hà Công lineage in the case of Mường Thượng (“*muong* of the upstream”), which included the tributary chiefdoms of Chieng Sai and Chieng Châu. The Hà Công also ruled Mường Thứ (“*muong* of the downstream”, or “younger *muong*”), and its two tributaries: Chieng Pa and Mường Mai Hịch. The *tào* belonged to the Hà Văn lineage in the specific case of Mường Há, an independent chiefdom located between Mường Thượng and Mường Thứ (Fig. 1). The Hà Công call Hà Công *nó:i* (“little Hà Công”) the members of the Hà Văn lineage. Although the latter vigorously reject this qualifier,

they admit common ancestors with the former. According to the Hà Công family register as it was compiled by Bê Viết Đăng (1999: 41-45), the two lineages became rivals during the 16th century, when they took part in the conflict between the competing Lê and Mạc dynasties. The *tào* of Mường Há pledged allegiance to the Lê, whereas the lord of Mường Thượng was a supporter of the Mạc. It took more than a century for the tensions between the two groups to defuse. Since then, marriages between the two lineages have multiplied.

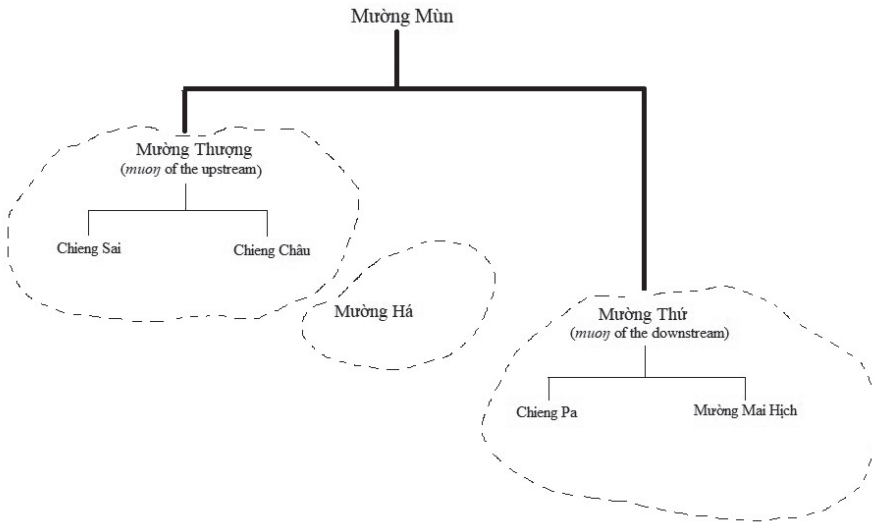


Fig. 2 The ancient Mường Mùn (Mai-Châu) and its tributaries

© B. Formoso.

Below the Hà Công-Hà Văn aristocrats, the commoners were referred as *phai* (“free men”). They were divided into six lineages: the *Vì*, the *Lộc*, the *Lò*, the *Bạc*, the *Ngoen* and the *Xà*. The *Ngoen* and the *Xà* were closely associated with the power of the nobles, to the extent that many of them took on the role of *tào pơ* (head of a cluster of villages) or of *tào bân* (village headman). Finally, the third social category consisted of *khon ?n* (“domestic servants”). They were slaves employed by the *tào* and by wealthy households of the Hà Công and Hà Văn lineages.

The *tào* were polygamous. One of the great grand-fathers of Mr Hà Văn Zhua had twelve wives at the end of the 19th century. Polygyny was also common among Hà Công aristocrats. The main wife was called *na:η muoη* (“Lady of the chieftom”). She was chosen from among ruling families of the Tai and Muong ethnic groups, or from “downstream” Hà Công settled in Thanh-Hóa Province. For their part, minor wives or concubines were called *mê:* or *mia nó:i* (“little mothers” or “little wives”). They could come from families of commoners providing to the chieftom a category of subaltern headmen called *kwan*. Minor wives could also be

taken among the Hà Công *hộ tể*. *Hộ* is a Vietnamese term for “household”, *tể* a Tai word for “support”. The expression Hà Công *hộ tể* applied to the lord’s clients. Fell into the category the households of commoners who had got marriage with Hà Công nubile girls for at least three successive generations. Petty officials such as *tào pơ*, *tào bả:n* or *kwan* had the status of *hộ tể* on condition to have proved to be faithful to the *tào*. Tai and Muong immigrants could also be included into the category, insofar as they had previously offered a great banquet of allegiance to the lord. Clear social boundaries were drawn between the Hà Công and the *hộ tể*. For instance, the latter could not wear straw mourning turbans at the funerals of members of the ruling family. If they could take a wife in the lineage of the ruler, they were not allowed to run for the *tào muơ* office. Finally, the status of *hộ tể* offered advantages to the *tào* by symbolically aggregating in-laws and loyal subjects to his lineage, thus strengthening his influence and manpower without threatening his political prerogatives.

A man from the descent line of the Mường Thượng *tào* told me that Chieng Châu was the place of residence of the lord. This small town had the status of right-wing city, as opposed to Chieng Sai (“left-wing city”). Each city had a domain of its own, under the lord’s supreme authority. Two dignitaries shared the administration of these domains. The *lân yá*³ was in charge of police and justice, while the duty of the second, the *ông sế:n*⁴, was to collect taxes and to organize the labor service within the *chie* (“city”). The *ông sế:n* was usually a son of the lord, while the *lân yá* could be a Hà Công or a Hà Văn. In payment of his duty, the *ông sế:n* received a domain of one thousand two hundred *hũa na*: (“head of rice fields»). *Hũa na*: was the area of rainfed or irrigated rice fields which could be transplanted by means of a sheaf of paddy (about ten square meters). The *ông sế:n* had *ông khwà*⁵ (“head of domain”) under his orders, *khwà* designating a cluster of villages. The *ông khwà* was overseeing in turn subaltern leaders, called *ông chủ* (from the Vietnamese *chủ* = “master”, “patron”), who collected taxes and organized duties at the scale of one or two villages. According to my informant, both *ông khwà* and *ông chủ* were notables chosen by the villagers among commoners. Other sources suggest that just as for the *tào bả:n* (village headmen), these charges were inherited from father to son according to the principle of primogeniture.

The whole population of the *muơ* was subjected to compulsory labor service. However, the time spent by the *ông sế:n*, *ông khwà*, and *ông chủ* to oversee commoners was deducted, so that they were exempts from physical chores. These officers were systematically invited to weddings and funerals of their dependents. On these occasions they were entitled with a place of honor and received a substantial share of the offerings. The commoners’ chore was calculated on the basis of the land they cultivated, i.e. one day for transplanting and another day for harvesting the lord’s rice fields when the *phài* owned a farm of 1,200 *hũa na*: (about one hectare). In addition, each household of commoners had to send by rotation a young man or woman to the domestic service of the lord for a period of two-three months. This latter did not levy tribute on the crops because he had rice fields, orchards and grasslands of his own, which were called *pơ nước* (from

the Tai *poŋ* = “share” and from the Viet *nước* = “state”). On the other hand, he received the rear leg of all large game hunted on his domain, while the *ông sễ:n* received half the breast of the animal. Furthermore, the *tào* was the master of the sources. In large communal fisheries, the deepest part of the river was called *?y:n tào* (“lord’s house”), and each household owed its biggest catch to the *tào*. As noted by Antoine Bourlet (1907: 614), the travel expenses of the lord within his *muong* were also supported by his subjects.

In addition to the labor service due to the lord of Mai-Châu, the *muong* inhabitants owed another duty to the Việt overlord, which was managed by both *ông khwàŋ* and *ông chủ*, and whose duration varied from year to year. Those who could not send a household member had to pay a substitute worker. Finally, village headmen, *ông khwàŋ*, and *ông chủ* also took advantage of the drudgery regime at the rate of one annual day per adult of their jurisdiction and for each hectare of rice fields that these notables put under cultivation.

The lowlands cultivated by Tai peasants were labeled *di:n nai* (“land within”), as opposed to the mountains enclosing the valley of Mai-Châu, which were called *di:n ti:n* (“land at the foot”). These mountainous marches of the *muong* were directly under the lord’s authority. Mainly populated by Hmong and Yao practicing slash-and-burn cultivation, they provided a pool of *khâ:* (“slaves”) likely to be punctured by the *tào* and other dignitaries. Highlanders owed to the lord a part of the forest products they gathered, and of the game they hunted. They also supplied a large proportion of the buffaloes sacrificed during the great rituals organized by the chiefdom, and had to provide the gongs and drums that ensured their musical accompaniment. At the funeral of members of the lord’s family it was their task to dig the grave.

To come to term with the socio-political organization of the *muong* of Mai-Châu, it should be noted that it complies with the system of nested *muong* described by Cầm Trọng about the Black Tai of northwestern Việt Nam; a system whose subordinate levels are often labeled *chieŋ*). As Cầm Trọng notices: “a *châu mường* groups together at least four small *mường*” (1987: 199). The high degree of social openness of Hà Công and Hà Văn aristocrats should also be underlined. Far from forming a small caste folded back on itself, they associated commoners with their exercise of power. A specific concern is raised on this point. On the one hand, the lineage of the *tào* had to display a clear symbolic distance with commoners, and to reserve certain political prerogatives for preserving its hegemony. On the other hand, it was partly dependent on commoners for its social reproduction and, through directed matrimonial strategies, to constitute a network of trustees enabling it to consolidate its power. If the *tào* and his close kin could reduce this dependence through alliances with ruling families of Tai and Muong chiefdoms, the other Hà Công and Hà Văn enjoyed less openings in this sense to satisfy the rule of exogamy. By multiplying marriages and delegations of power in favor of the Hà Công *hộ tể*, the lineage of the *tào* created an intermediary layer of non-hereditary ennobled which reduced the risks of rebellion to its authority. In such a context, the establishment and manipulation of kinship was an essential instrument of power.

SPATIAL ORGANIZATION

The Village

Mai-Châu villages are all oriented along an upstream–downstream axis referring to the nearest river. Upstream is called *tha:ŋ nũa*, and downstream *tha:ŋ tũu:* or *tha:ŋ koŋ* (“below”). The ridge purlins of most houses align along this axis. Upstream corresponds to the “head of the village” (*hũa bâu:n*), the extremity of which is marked by the shelter to the *thê:n phĩ: bâu:n*, the tutelary spirit of the community. As for downstream, which is the direction where the settlement expands, it is called “tail of village” (*hũa bâu:n*). Beyond the village, the upstream–downstream axis organizes the whole cosmology. The world from above, where live the *mê: baw* (“mothers who cast [the body]”) and the *phĩ: thê:n* (“heavenly spirits”), is called *bon nũa* (“the top, the upstream”), as opposed to the world from below, called *muoŋ tũu:* (“the downstream *muoŋ*”), which is populated by dwarfs and *ŋuək* ophidians.

Another component of the landscape which is essential to the symbolic structuring of Tai villages in Mai-Châu is a mountain or a hill, at the foot of which human settlement develops. As a general rule, the “head of the house”, which is called *hũa nũ:n* (“head – to sleep”) because it corresponds to the position of the sleepers’ head, should be turned towards this elevation, while the entrance of the house must be opposed to it. According to Cầm Trọng (1987: 234-235), a mountain overhanging the human settlement is necessary in the cosmology of the Tai of northwestern Việt Nam because it is the fulcrum (*minh-nén*) on which rests the *muoŋ* and the village to a lesser extent. Just as the spiritual components of the human person rest on an existential fulcrum named *minh-nén*, the mountain overhanging the central *muoŋ* is called *pom minh* or *pom nén muoŋ*, and is believed to be the “soul” of the *muoŋ*. At the village level, the mountain symbolizes the soul of the “lord of the earth” (*châu đin*), in addition with the upstream of the river which is identified to the soul of the “lord of water» (*châu ná:m*).

The cemetery

The “forest–cemetery” (*pà: hếw*), also named *muoŋ hếw* (“cemetery as a *muoŋ*”) is another important element of the human landscape. It is always located upstream, at a sizeable distance from the village and opposite the mountain. The location of the graves respects a very precise order, which is the reverse of that of the living. Whereas the upstream of the village symbolizes its head, the downstream is on the contrary the direction of honors in the cemetery, according to a reversal principle which symbolically breaks the links between living and dead. A proverbial expression in use locally perfectly sums up the antithesis: “*khon ta:i kin loŋ tha:ŋ ti:n, khon ùm kin khũn tha:ŋ hũa*” (“the dead eat by the feet, the living by the head”). This formula also summarizes the general idea that the feet of the deceased are a source of danger, for being an opening through which he can capture the

energy of others, either living or dead. Hence a number of positioning rules. Thus, tombs are never placed in the prolongation of one another. It is said that the dead whose feet overhang the head of the neighbor would eat for his own benefit what the latter might bring to his descendants, preventing their prosperity. Similarly, at funerals the members of the audience cannot point their feet towards those of the deceased.

The downstream being at the cemetery the direction of honors, lords are buried in a specific plot near the entrance (Fig. 3). In their case the place of burial is only marked by an erected stone whose size is a function of their position in the line of succession. At Chieng Sai, the oldest Hà Công lord of the place thus enjoys the largest megalith (Fig. 4). Apart from this plot reserved for the lords, the graves of the different lineages are arranged in rows perpendicular to the upstream–downstream axis in the following order. The row of the Hà Công is the most downstream and closest to the plot reserved to the lords. Then come in order the Lò, Lôc, Hà Văn, Bạc, Xà, Ngoen, and Vi. These rows are assimilated to long houses. At the southern entrance of the driveway that leads into each of them, there are small shelters which house guardian spirits of the gate: the *khon tu*. Lastly, slaves and bad dead are buried in a “small graveyard” (*hếw nớ:i*) which is oriented along the upstream–downstream axis and is at the greatest distance from the lords’ plot (Fig. 3).

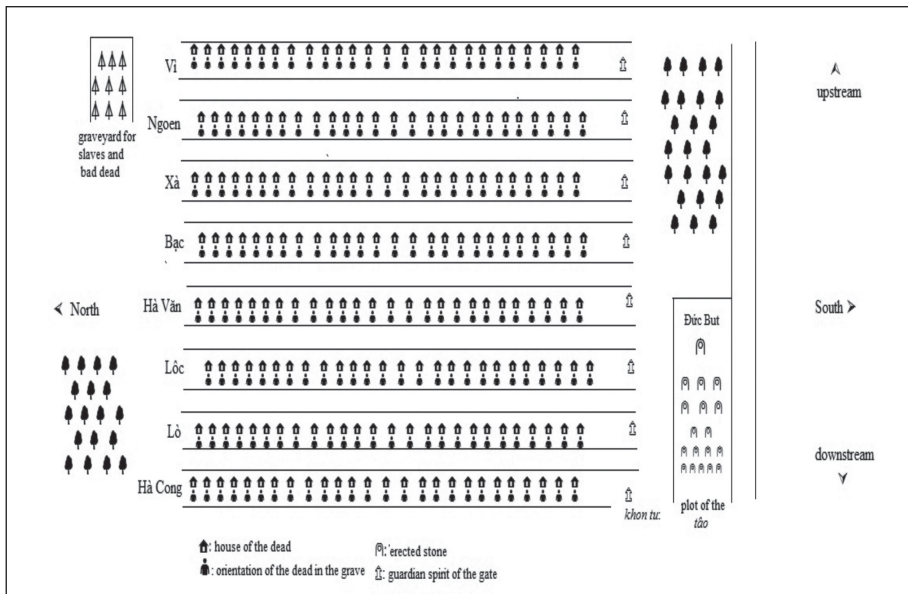


Fig. 3 Map of the Chieng Sai cemetery

© B. Formoso.

The dead is placed in a dugout coffin with his/her belongings. This coffin, whose material and shape are identical to those described at the turn of the twentieth century by Antoine Bourlet (1913: 40), is positioned in the tomb so that the dead man or woman's head is turned upstream. Apart from the *tâo* whose burial is indicated by a megalith, as well as the slaves and the bad dead whose grave is marked by two poles covered with a small roof, all the other tombs are located under a small house on stilts, the *ʔɻ:n hěw* ("house of the cemetery") which reproduces in simpler forms that of the living. Furniture (table, chairs) are arranged in this house, as well as sleeping facilities (mattress, pillow, blankets and mosquito net), kitchenware, hunting and fishing instruments, not to mention agricultural and craft tools (including a weaving loom for women). The elements that make up this equipment are all miniaturized reproductions, made of wood and bamboo, without recourse to metallic components which, according to the belief, could hurt the souls of the deceased. In the same way, the house is fully assembled with wooden dowels, without recourse to nails. The materials of the *ʔɻ:n hěw* are even in number, unlike those of the house of the living which are in an odd number, following the general idea that the worlds of the dead and the living are the mirror inverted one from the other. For example, the access ladder of the *ʔɻ:n hěw* has two, four, or six bars, whereas those of the house are in an odd number. When the dead corpse is taken from the house to be conveyed to the cemetery, the carriers of the coffin avoid stepping on the first step of the house's staircase in order to tilt the dead in the even numerology (i.e. the other world), and to prevent him from returning to his home. The Tai of Mai-Châu do not seem to know the Lao proverb for home access whereby "the even numbers [the ghosts] remain, the odd numbers they flee", but they clearly adhere to the belief that this adage expresses.

In addition to the aforementioned equipment, the Tai of Mai-Châu supply the cemetery house with bags of rice, of sorghum and of maize seeds, as well as with bottles of water and alcohol, tobacco, betel quid and salt. At the foot of the *ʔɻ:n hěw* is placed a drinking trough for the cattle that the dead man is supposed to raise. The cemetery house is bounded by small erected stones whose number is equal to that of the direct descendants of the deceased. The plot occupied by the tomb is surrounded by a bamboo fence. Inside, a small garden is arranged at the funerals, in which banana trees, sugar cane, and aromatic herbs are planted (Fig. 5). These arrangements are intended to ensure the complete autonomy of the dead in the afterlife, in accordance with the rupture process which is the guideline of funerals. At the turn of the twentieth century Antoine Bourlet noted that the trees, bamboos and bushes of the cemetery were cut only during a burial, to draw a path, and the rest of the time no cutlass would profane the place (1913: 43). In the same vein, the Tai no longer make offerings to their dead in the cemetery after the burial ceremony, except when the ancestor manifests himself by disrupting their life. In which case a shamanic ritual is performed to appease him. Due to lack of maintenance, the houses of the dead quickly degrade.



Fig. 4. Megalith of Đúc But, Chieng Sai

© B. Formoso.



Fig. 5. A Tai cemetery house, Mai-Châu

© B. Formoso.

It must be said that the cemetery is not the exclusive destination of the departed. According to Tai beliefs, the human being is animated by vital components, which are called *khwǎn* and whose quantity varies according to the ages of life. They are thirty for children and young people before marriage, of forty for the married adults, of sixty for those who are over sixty, and up to ninety for the very elderly. The *khwǎn* are divided into three categories which are invoked in the rites for recalling the souls or at funerals: the *khwǎn tòn*, les *khwǎn ka:ŋ* et les *khwǎn sò:t sê:w*. To describe their hierarchy and their interrelationships, an informant used the metaphor of the tree. According to him, the *khwǎn tòn* form the “trunk” (*tòn*) of existence, because they are the foundation of life. This category includes the *khwǎn* that operate the main organs (heart, lungs, digestive system, sensory organs). After death, they do not move to the cemetery but rally the domestic altar dedicated to the ancestors where they receive regular offerings. They then form a spiritual entity named *phĩ: khwǎn khon tai:i* (“spirit of the dead’s *khwǎn*”). The *khwǎn ka:ŋ* (“of the middle”) are for their part comparable to tree branches. They correspond to the skeleton and settle in the grave. Lastly, the *khwǎn sò:t sê:w* (“unattached *khwǎn* which flutter”) are considered as “small *khwǎn*”. In the tree’s metaphor they are assimilated to leaves. According to popular belief, they easily leave the body of the person they inhabit in case of nightmare and illness. During their movements they fly in zigzag like butterflies. Their role in the life process is the least well defined, as opinions vary on the topic. For some, they serve as an essential motor for mental activity; for others, they rather correspond to the carnal envelope. Until the 1950s they were guided after death by the shaman to a heavenly *muon* determined according to the social status of the deceased. However, after decades of communist propaganda against the religious beliefs related to the former feudal order, the existence of celestial chiefdoms where the souls would reproduce their terrestrial existence is hardly invoked, most informants considering now that the *khwǎn sò:t sê:w* accompany the *khwǎn ka:ŋ* to the cemetery.



Fig. 6. A dugout coffin in use among the Tai of Mai-Châu

© B. Formoso.

The House

At the beginning of the 2000s, the Mai-Châu Tai houses in rural areas were all wooden structures built on stilts, while their roof was either made of tiles or straw hay grass (Fig. 7). The poles supporting the house were not planted but posed on stone or concrete bases, this technique providing better resistance to seismic risks which are important in the region. During the building process the first pole to be erected is called *săw tà:w* (“pole–turtle”). This pole is a cosmophor, for it is conceived as the *axis mundi* of the domestic microcosm. A *sai*—a fish trap which is a phallic symbol of oblong shape—is tied to it, just as the Lao do for their *săw ?ɛ:k* (“first pole”) (Formoso 1987 : 150). In addition, the Tai of Mai-Châu tie around this pole a shirt of the household head. The fish trap and the shirt are believed to hold together the household members’ souls. They are symbols of social cohesiveness and are consequently indispensable to the performance of the ritual for recalling the lost souls, that the Tai of Mai-Châu significantly call *khwăn sai* (“soul–fish trap”). For its part, the *săw tà:w* is bound forever to the original owner of the house. It is also the place of residence of the *phĩ: fai*, the spirit of the hearth.

Once the *săw tà:w* has been erected, the other poles supporting the house are drawn up in a clockwise direction. The second pole to be erected is called *săw ông* (“lord pole”, literally: “Excellency pole”, by reference to the honorary term *ông* in Vietnamese). Its symbolic function is similar to that of the *săw khwăn* (“soul pole”) of the Lao house, insofar as it is the most important pole of the house, on which is fixed the altar to the ancestors and the altar to his auxiliary spirits in the specific case of the shaman (*mun*). It is also in front of this pole that are performed the rituals for recalling the souls of members of the household. Both *săw khwăn* and *săw ông* are associated with the “head” frontage of the house (*hũa ?v:n* in Tai Deng), which is turned towards the mountain in the case of the Tai of Mai-Châu. It is in this direction that the members of the household orient their head while sleeping. The rooms or otherwise the mattresses that are unrolled at night are placed on this side. Just like the *săw khwăn* of the Lao, the *sa:w ông* of the Tai of Mai-Châu corresponds to the “foot” frontage of the house, the *ti:n ?v:n*, which delimits its reception space. It is usually on this frontage that is located the access to the house (either staircase or ladder). There are, however, two differences between the “soul pole” of the Lao and the “lord pole” of the Mai-Châu Tai. First, the *sa:w ông* is not placed opposite the *săw tà:w*, but is always slightly offset from it in the upstream direction. Second, when the *săw ông* is erected, the household head does not attach a spinning wheel to it, as it is the custom among the Lao, but a gourd, which is another female symbol, conveying in addition the idea of fertility. Gourd is a major theme of the Tai cosmogenesis, for it is from it that emerged the various categories of mankind (Archambault 1973: 99). The Tai of Mai-Châu adjunct to this myth another one, which provides useful insights into the auspicious act of linking a gourd to the main pole of their house. According to a version of this myth I gathered in 2000, in ancient times, when men were hunting excessively, a delegation of wild animals went up to heaven to complain to *Phĩ: thễ:n lũaj*,

the supreme god. They asked him to intervene to ensure their survival. In response, *Phĩ: thẽ:n lũaŋ* decided to make mankind visually impaired. The primal gourd then interfered. In return for men's promise to reduce hunting to their strict needs, she restored their visual ability by giving them two of her seeds. Since then the Tai express their everlasting gratitude by tying a gourd to the most important pole of their house. This narrative establishes a causal connection between sustainable use of natural resources and human reproduction in the long run. The act of tying a gourd to the pole expresses these ecological necessities and their beneficial effects for the future of the household, in addition to the ideas of fecundity and prosperity traditionally associated to the cucurbitaceous in the Tai world.



Fig. 7. Tai houses of Mai-Châu in the 2000s

© B. Formoso.

Apart from the head/foot antinomy, Mai-Châu Tai house is also organized according to another opposition referring to the body, which applies to the gable frontages. The side wall that includes the entrance of the house is called “face” of the house (*nâ: ʔɿ:n*). It is opened on the outside by means of windows and clerestories. It corresponds in the domestic space to a place dedicated to the reception of visitors. The opposite gable is for its part called *lảŋ ʔɿ:n* (“back of the house”). It is on its side that are located the kitchen and the washroom (Fig. 8).

The domestic space is hierarchized along the upstream–downstream axis and by reference to the *sảw ông*. Thus, the household head and his wife use to sleep

in the most upstream resting space, close to the *sǎw ông* and the ancestors' altar. Their children sleeps on their left, the eldest to the nearest, the youngest to the furthest. If after marriage a son still lives with his parents, he and his wife will occupy the sleeping space that adjoins the kitchen, downstream. Similarly, men take their meal while sitting upstream, in the direction of the "face" of the house, and women are placed downstream, on the side of the kitchen.

Among the Lao, neighboring houses must respect a rule of mutual positioning which puts opposite either their "heads" or their "feet", so that their sleepers are never in the situation where their feet are oriented towards the head of others, which would place the latter in a position of inferiority towards the former (Formoso 1987). The Tai of Mai-Châu do not know this rule, but they comply with two prescriptions which have the same effect. They avoid building their houses facing each other when they are not separated by obstacles which neutralize their direct relationship (road, hedges of trees for instance). On the other hand, they never place the ridge purlins of two neighboring houses in alignment with one another, for the same reasons as those invoked for the "cemetery houses" (to avoid in this case that a household dries the good fortune of the other).

THE RITUAL OF VILLAGE CONFINEMENT

In Southeast Asia, rituals of village confinement are widespread (MacDonald 1957). They are aimed at ensuring the periodic regeneration of the social body, or of curbing a phase of misfortune suffered collectively. In Tai Buddhist context, this type of ritual is still frequently performed by the Lao and the Thai-Lao of northeastern Thailand. Among the Mai-Châu Tai, the last occurrence of such a ritual dates back to 1941. It was called *sên bân* ("thread [surrounding] the village") by reference to the cotton thread which made the tour of the village from the shelter of its guardian spirit. To perform this rite it was necessary to sacrifice three buffaloes, of which one albino. This latter was offered to *Phǐ: thě:n lǎaj*, the heavenly supreme god. Another buffalo was addressed to the local spirit of earth and water, the *phǐ: ɲuək*. The third one was sacrificed to the village guardian spirit, the *thê:n phǐ: bân*. The slaughter of buffaloes was taking place on the first day, after the placement of the cotton thread around the village. Intertwining bamboo splints, universally known in the Tai world as *ta: lě:w* ("eagle eye"), had been previously placed at the "head" and "tail" gates of the village to signify to outsiders that they were forbidden to enter it. The main celebrant of the *sên bân* was a *mǎ:* (priest) from the *Lô* lineage, who was specialized in rites involving the *tào*. Each household had to attend the ritual and to participate in the expenses incurred. The *sên bân* was patronized by the *tào*. In case of incapacity, he used to send one of his tunics to seat in front of the *thê:n phǐ: bân*. The clothing was placed on a mat, beside five trays of offerings and a buffalo shank addressed to the guardian spirit. Portions of meat were given to the priest in payment of his service. The period of three or five days of confinement ended with the sacrifice of a pig at the lord's house. This sequence, called *hôm sũa* ("to surround with clothes"), consisted in moving a

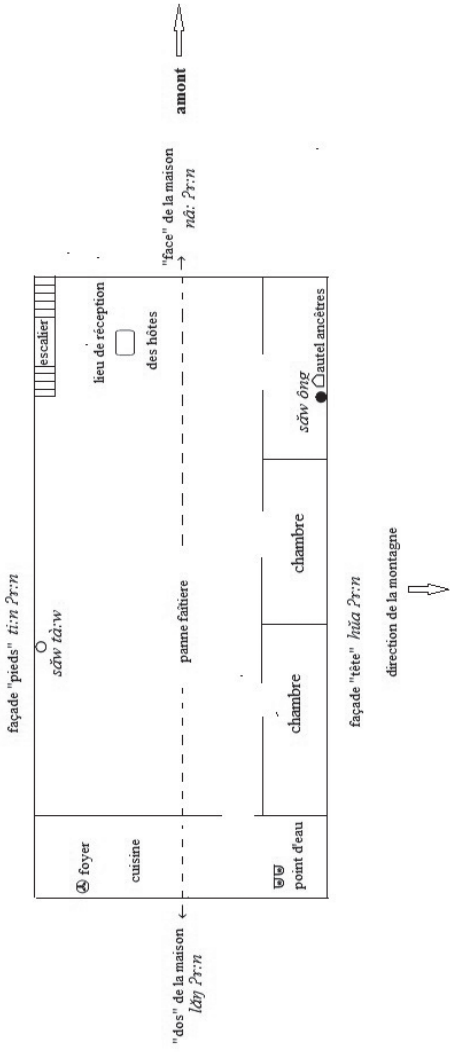


Fig. 8. Spatial organization of the Tai house in Mai-Châu

© B. Formoso.

tunic of the *tào* in front of the altars to the *phĩ: thê:n lǎn*, *phĩ: ɲwək* and *phĩ: bân*, in order to regenerate the prosperity of the *muoŋ* through the radiating charisma of the lord. Among the five food trays offered to the spirits for the occasion, the main one contained pork slices arranged in a fan-shaped form.

Although *sên bân* are no longer performed today, the collective disorders they were supposed to repair still remain of supernatural origin for many Tai. Hence the fact that some of them seek to restore transactions deemed effective with the spirits, despite the disavowal of the communist authorities. Shamanic healing was common practice in Mai-Châu in the early 2000s. For health troubles that could not be cured by the ordinary mediation of *mǎ: phĩ:* (“priest for spirits”) or of *mun* (shaman), some household heads reproduced for themselves the sacrifices that once characterized the *sên bân*. A shaman reported to me the case of a man who was suffering in the 1990s from transient hysteria. He consulted a diviner who told him that the disease was caused by his late father whose worship he neglected. Following the diagnosis, he made abundant offerings to his ancestor but without any result. He consulted another diviner who claimed that the illness was due to the abandonment of the *thê:n phĩ: bân* cult by his fellow villagers. He then begged the commune headman to authorize the construction of a shelter for the guardian spirit, but the latter refused. Bypassing this decision, he built a small aedicule at the “head” of the village and sacrificed his unique buffalo on the anniversary date of the guardian spirit. The other villagers then had no choice but to associate themselves to his offerings. According to the shaman’s narrative, after the sacrifice the man cured miraculously.



Fig. 9. A *thê:n phĩ: bân* shelter

© B. Formoso

CONCLUSION

Lucien Bernot rightly observed that the house “frequently represents one of the most dominant tangible and tenacious features of an ethnic group” (1982: 35). On closer inspection however, the observation is worth less for materials and architecture—both subjected to large spatiotemporal variations—than for the house’s symbolic structuring, that is to say the rules of placement and circulation which regulate the poles of activities and the statutory ordering of individuals within the house, according to different sets of symbolic oppositions. Tai ethnic groups display significant architectural differences due to external influences, natural resources and economic level. However, the comparison I have outlined here between the Lao Buddhists and the Tai Deng of Mai-Châu brings out a number of common features in the organization of space.

One of them, that Sophie Charpentier and Pierre Clément (1984: 41-42) were the first to highlight, relates to the orientation system. This system rests on the upstream/downstream opposition by reference to the nearest river, and on the body metaphor through the oppositions “head”/“foot” and “face”/“back” applied to the house’s frontages. These rules of orientation are respected by the Lao and the Tai of Mai-Châu. In both populations the upstream–downstream axis determines at the same time the direction of ridges purlins, the sleepers’ position according to the generational order, and the spatial development of the local community. Moreover, in the case of the Tai Deng this axis applies in a reversed mode to the cemetery, the downstream being then the upper part, where the lords rest, while the upstream is the place of burial for slaves and bad dead.

The opposition between “head” and “foot” frontages, which determines the layout of bedrooms and the position of sleepers, is also effective in both cases, even if it is associated with poles whose symbolism differs. While among the Lao the *sǎw ?e:k* and the *sǎw khwǎn* are gendered, since the former is masculine and the second feminine in relation with the rule of uxorilocality, among the Tai Deng who are organized in patrilineal and patrilocal lineages, the gender complementarity is subsumed in the symbolism of cosmological foundations. Thus, in Mai-Châu, the “turtle pole” symbolizes the dome that supports the domestic microcosm, by borrowing from Chinese cosmology, while the “lord pole” is associated with the gourd, which is the matrix element of the Tai cosmogony, as well as a symbol of fertility and abundance. In the Lao and Tai Deng cases, however, the principle of social reproduction is put forward, that it refers to the couple or to the genesis of mankind.

Finally, the two populations share a common pattern in the ritual performance of village confinement. They both use a cotton thread which, starting from the guardian spirit shelter, girdles and isolates the village. They both resort to *ta: lě:w* to signify the temporary prohibition of access of outsiders in the village. The general purpose of the ritual is also the same, namely to curb a phase of misfortune experienced collectively, to regenerate life, and to restore community order.

Notes

1. Tai terms are transcribed in this article according to the International phonetic system. For their part, official toponyms and lineage names, some of which incorporate Tai words, are written in accordance with the Vietnamese script.
2. Concerning the premodern political systems of Siam and of Sipsong Panna see respectively S.J. Tambiah (1976: 145-7) and Jacques Lemoine (1997: 177).
3. The compound is constructed from the Tai terms *ʔán* (“an officer who examines and judges”) and *yà* (“to compel”) (Minot 1940: 11, 231). According to Cầm Trọng (1987: 209), this title could derive from *ph’nhà* which was used in ancient times to refer to the Tai chief.
4. From the lao *sě:na:bodi*: which stood for the minister of the palace in charge of finances.
5. The term *khwàŋ* could be borrowed from the Lao language where it designates a meeting place or a domain, depending on the context (Reinhorn 1970: 277). It could also be derived from the Vietnamese *ông quan* which designates the mandarin (personal communication by Philippe Le Failler).

References

- ARCHAIMBAULT, Charles, 1973, “La naissance du monde selon les traditions lao. Le mythe de Khun Bulom”, in *Structures religieuses lao (rites et mythes)*, Charles Archaimbault, Vientiane: Vithagna, pp. 97-130.
- BERNOT, Lucien, 1982, “The House of the Swidden Farmers as a Special Object for Ethnological Study”, in *The House in East and Southeast Asia*, K.G. Izikowitz & P. Sørensen, ed., London: Curzon Press, pp. 35-40.
- BÈ VIẾT ĐĂNG, 1999, “La famille Hà Công. Étude généalogique (un lignage thaï de la sous-préfecture de Mai-Châu. Province de Hoà-Bình)”, *Péninsule*, 39: 35-54.
- BOURLET, Antoine, 1907, “Les Thay”, *Anthropos*, 2: 613-623.
- BOURLET, Antoine, 1913, “Funérailles chez les Thay”, *Anthropos*, 8: 40-46.
- CẦM TRỌNG, 1987, *Les Thaï du nord-ouest du Vietnam*, Paris: Cahiers de Péninsule n° 8.
- CHARPENTIER, Sophie & Pierre CLÉMENT, 1984, *Éléments comparatifs sur les habitations des ethnies de langues thai*, Paris: Cera/Cedrasemi.
- FORMOSO, Bernard, 1987, “Du corps humain à l’espace humanisé. Système de référence et représentation de l’espace dans deux villages du nord-est de la Thaïlande”, *Études rurales*, 107, 8: 137-170.
- LE FAILLER, Philippe, 2014, *La rivière Noire. L’intégration d’une marche frontière au Vietnam*, Paris: CNRS Éditions.
- LEMOINE, Jacques, 1997, “Féodalité Taï chez les Lü des Sipsong Panna et les Taï Blancs, Noirs et Rouges du Nord-Ouest du Viêt-Nam”, *Péninsule*, 37: 171-217.
- MACDONALD, Alexander, 1957, “Notes sur la claustration villageoise dans l’Asie du Sud-Est”, *Journal asiatique*, 245, 2: 185-210.
- MINOT, Georges, 1940, “Dictionnaire Tay blanc – Français”, *BEFEO* 40, 1: 1-237.
- REINHORN, Marc, 1970, *Dictionnaire Laotien-Français*, Paris: Éditions du CNRS.

TAMBIAH, Stanley J., 1976, *World Conqueror & World Renouncer. A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Abstract: From information collected in 2000, during a two-week stay in Mai-Châu, the present article describes the sociopolitical organization of this district and former *muong* of Hoà-Bình before the administrative reforms implemented by the communist regime in 1954. It also sheds light on the symbolic structuring of the human habitat (village, house, cemetery), in relation with the religious beliefs and practices of the Tai Deng.

***Organisation sociale et spatiale des Tai Deng
de Mai-Châu (Viêt Nam) avant 1954***

Résumé: À partir d'informations recueillies en 2000, durant un séjour de quinze jours à Mai-Châu, cet article traite de l'organisation socio-politique des Tai de ce district et ancien *muong* de Hoà-Bình, avant les réformes administratives imposées par le régime communiste en 1954. En complément, il décrit la structuration symbolique de l'habitat (maison, village et cimetière) en lien avec les croyances et pratiques religieuses des Tai Deng.

Keywords: Tai Deng, Mai-Châu, Vietnam, space, religion, cosmology.

Mots-clés : Tai Deng, Mai-Châu, Vietnam, espace, religion, cosmologie.