

***Salong* Discourses and the Cultural Capital Contributions to Communities in Northeast Thailand**

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Abstract: *Salong* Discourses are literary works of arts created by communities in Northeastern Thailand and Laos. Their origins come from Buddhist teachings of the Tri-Pitaka or 3 Teachings texts. *Salong* scriptures are written in prose that received influence from Buddhist verse teachings and recorded on palm leaves, inscribed on stone slates and engraved on pillars. The prose includes examples and passages that are easily understood and encourage listeners to do good deeds. *Salong* Discourses are events that take place at the Temple and Monastery. Priests and Monks will perform the Discourses with rhetoric tones and gestures. Explanation and clarification of the passage is thoroughly explored on the advantages and rewards for doing good deeds and merit making. *Salong* Discourses play an important role in Northeastern Thailand and Lao communities from past to present. It is the primary motivational influence that encourages and persuades individuals and communities to contribute cultural capital. Communities in Northeastern Thailand express their commitments by engaging in the construction of Buddhist architectural structures, material substances and activities. These structures or substances include Chapels, Sermon Halls, Parsonages, Stupas, Water wells, Amulets, Textbooks, Statues, rituals and ceremonies. By contributing these cultural capitals, communities also receive value added benefits which include Economic, Social, Cultural, Aesthetic, Creativity and Pride.

Key words: *Salong*, discourse, cultural capital, scripture, Northeast Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Cultural Capital is the single most important factor in the prosperity of any country. The reason behind successful nations is the accrued wealth of cultural capital (Tony, 2004).

Northeast Thailand or Isarn has a rich cultural background. Archeological evidence suggests that Northeast Thailand was an agricultural community from prehistoric era (Pisit, 1983). During the 13th-14th century emerged 3 kingdoms named Sukhothai, Lan Chang and Lanna. The communities in Lan Chang believed in Animism and Spirits. While Sukhothai and Lanna kingdoms believed in Buddhism. The Lanna kingdom had many senior monks that were highly disciplined in Buddhist teachings. They formed the royal clergy and were responsible for the revision of the Tri-Pitaka (Buddhists texts). In 1457, Lanna completed the 8th revision of the Tri-Pitaka at Chiangmai City and the neighboring kingdom of Lan Chang sent an invitation and requested 60 scriptures of the Tri-Pitaka and staff

from the royal clergy and royal academy of Lanna to institute Buddhism in Lan Chang (Laos Ministry of Education, 1957). Both countries cooperatively transcribed the stories from the Tri-Pitaka by using Dharma and Thai Noi alphabet (Lao Alphabet). The scriptures were recorded on palm leaves, stone pillars and slates. Communities in Lan Chang and the Mekong basin adopted Buddhism and as communities prospered, *Salong* scriptures emerged.

There is no evidence to the creator of *Salong* scripts. But research analysis has concluded that *Salong* Discourses were created by urban philosophers interpreting Buddhist teachings of merit making and doing good deeds. The language and phrases are simple and easy to understand which made the scripts popular. The texts encourage and persuade communities to contribute Buddhist cultural capital. Therefore, communities in Northeast Thailand and Laos accepted the *Salong* scriptures and performed them as discourses supplementing Buddhism sermons and preaching. Monasteries and Temples utilized *Salong* Discourses as

an instrument for encouraging the community to make Buddhist cultural capital contributions. Therefore, it was necessary for each community to have a Monastery as a cultural center. The Monasteries and Temples were created by rural communities influenced by *Salong* Discourses and did not rely on the local government (Tambian, 1970).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research area: The research data was purposively selected from 3 Provinces in Northeast Thailand. Three hundred and sixty one temples from the Provinces of Maharakham, Ubonratchatani and Sakonakorn were included in the field research. Interviews of informants, practitioners and supporters of *Salong* Discourses and scriptures were documented from 80 people. A total of 67 comprehensive *Salong* scriptures were identified and analyzed.

Research method: The research examined *Salong* Discourses and scriptures towards cultural capital contributions in Northeast Thailand. This was done by analyzing the main contents from *Salong* Discourses and linking to the resulting phenomena of contributing cultural capital. The research was conducted during April 2006-December 2007. Goals included the locating and preservation of existing *Salong* scriptures. Then analyzing the level of impact that *Salong* discourses have on communities. The final goal is to identify what can be done in the future to preserve and promote these ancient scripts. The final data was analyzed by using Data Triangulation and the results presented using Descriptive Analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Salong discourses: *Salong* Discourses are a local Northeast Thailand or Isarn tradition. The scriptures received important concepts from Buddhism manuscript the Tri-Pitaka. Original texts were written as verses and inscribed on palm leaves, stone pillars and stone slates using ancient languages of Palawa, Bali, Sanskrit, Lanna Thai, Dharma, Thai Noi and ancient Kmer alphabets (Ampai, 1983). *Salong* Discourses are supplements to sermons and preaching that Buddhist priests utilize as instruments in cultivating Buddhist faith. When the audience becomes enlightened by the message, they will show their commitment by contributing Buddhist cultural capital for their communities. *Salong* Discourses encourage the construction of Buddhist related projects. Therefore it is natural that most of the construction projects reside within the Monastery. This includes

structures such as Chapels, Parsonages, Sermon Halls, Food halls, Stupas, Tri-Pitaka Storage Towers and Sacred water wells (Suwit, 2002).

Currently 12 types of *Salong* Discourses exist. These texts are divided into 3 categories. The 1st are scriptures that encourage the construction of architectural contributions which include Chapels, Parsonages, Sermon halls, Stupas, Tri-Pitaka towers and Sacred water wells. The 2nd are *Salong* Discourses that inspire and promote the creation of Buddhist cultural objects and substances of worship such as Buddha images, Amulets, Buddhist texts and Ceremonial candles. The last group is *Salong* Discourses that promote Buddhist festivities and rituals, namely The Katin and Bangsakul festivals. Described below are the names of *Salong* Discourses and a summary of the persuasive passages that have inspired contribution to cultural capital in Northeast Thailand.

Architectural structures

Salong Phra Ubosot, Salong Sim (chapels): Those who construct chapels will never be reborn in despair. You will always be born in heaven. Your wishes will always be granted. By building chapels you will receive unlimited merits and good deeds. You will receive more merits than the counted grains of sands in the world.

Salong Kuti (parsonages): Those who build parsonages will receive castles of silver and castles of gold. You will be provided with transports, vehicles, weapons and musical instruments. Upon death you will be reborn in Heaven and you will meet the Arreyametrai Buddha.

Salong Haw Jaek, Haw Chun (sermon halls): Those who construct Haw Jaek Haw Chun will be reborn in the afterlife as an emperor. You will receive castles of crystals, castles of silver and have many female servants, transportation and vehicles. You will have many houses. You will have money and lots of gold. Upon death you will not be born in a condemned family. You will have an absolute perfect body. You will be free from diseases and illnesses. You will receive happiness on earth. You will receive happiness in heaven. You will receive happiness in Nirvana.

Salong That (stupa for holy relics): Those who build Stupas will have supernatural powers. You will have no enemies and be complete with riches, power and rank. You will not be handicapped. You will be healthy, dedicated, polite and auspicious. You will be complete with nourishment, silver, gold, transportation, wife and children. You will also have many servants, male and female.

Salong Haw Phra Tri Pitohk (tri-pitaka storage towers):

Those who build Tri-Pitaka Towers will receive three types of happiness. You will be happy on earth. You will be happy in heaven and you will be happy in Nirvana. When you are reborn you will never be impoverished. You will become a wealthy person and be born with lordship. You will not be born to a wicked family. You will not be deaf. You will have good hearing and have good vision. You will have a good wife that is beautiful. When you die you will not be reborn as a beast.

Salong Naum Saung (water wells): Those who dig water wells and ponds will receive continuous merits in their next lives. You will never be in despair. You will always be happy. You will be reborn a lord complete with wealth and have many subordinates. You will be brave and will receive respect from angels and humans alike. You will eventually reach Nirvana.

Cultural objects and substances of worship

Salong Phra Patimakorn (buddha images or amulets):

Those who have contributed energy and material to the construction of these sacred items in what amount what so ever will never be poor and impoverished no matter how many lives or incarnations may become of you. Upon reincarnation you will be handsome and pretty. You will be complete with riches, wealth and have many servants. Eventually you will find the true meaning of life and Nirvana.

Salong Pitohk (buddhist texts): Those who engage in the creation of Buddhist scripts will be reborn in the next life as a god with powers greater than angels that dwell in the land or fly in the air. You will be reborn in a righteous family, a good family and a wealthy family. You will be capable of spending as much as you desire. You will be born in a graceful and respective family. You will have a good wife and will always be in the company of righteous people.

Salong Tien (worshipping candles): Those who have bought candle, or brought candle, those who have participated in the molding or engraving of candles, will always be reborn in the high levels of heaven. You will be rewarded with sacred food and drink and have many angels to command. After life in heaven you will be reborn to an affluent family. You will be beautiful you will be handsome. You will have radiant skin and be loved by all angels and humans alike. You will also have many riches and treasures and never receive an injury or harm from your wealth.

Salong Pasat Pueng (wax castle): Those who build wax castles will receive merit for 30 eternities. When you die; you will be reborn as an angel and goddess. After heaven you will be reborn as a mighty king accompanied by mighty subordinates and servants. You will receive treasures such as one hundred thousand gold castles and one hundred thousand silver castles and one hundred crystal castles.

Customs and traditions

Salong Katin (katin merit making festival): Male or Female alike, those that are here together to participate in Katin merit making will receive 9, Ten million virtues and Nine million nine hundred thousand eons of merits. Those who have gathered firewood and nurtured a fire and those who have prepared the pot, dyes, prepared scissors, prepare offerings and cloth will always receive merit each act and occasions. When you die you will be born in heaven and have powers greater than angels. When you are reincarnated on earth, you will be complete with troves of treasures, silver and gold. You will reach Nirvana.

Salong Bangsakul (sacred robe merit making festival):

Those who offer robes will be reincarnated with unlimited granary storehouses that are always full. Those who invite merit makers and donors, whether it be food, clothing or items of charity will receive one hundred thousand eternities of merits. You will receive castles of gold, castles of silver. You will receive the sacred 7 colored crystal. And you will have two hundred thousand servants of male and female each.

Value added benefits: The cultural capital contributed by *Salong Discourses* also provided the community with many value added benefits. They include Economy, Social, Cultural Benefits, Aesthetic, Creativity and Pride (Suphon, 1990).

Economy: When the economy is bad, the community and Monastery turn to *Salong Discourses* to generate capital in the form of cash donations and materials. Rural communities in Thailand were able to help their own government during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. *Salong Discourses* united rural communities and together they accumulated donations of capital in currency and gold to help the Thai government pay back IMF loans. When communities did not have enough budgets for educational projects such as schools and clinics, *Salong Discourses* were capable of contributing and paying for the construction.

Social: *Salong* Discourses have reminded communities to do good deeds and make merit. It also nourishes unity, dedication, honesty and sacrifice.

Cultural benefits: *Salong* Discourses provide the community with buildings and structures that are useful and capable of serving many purposes. Annual festivals, parades and religious activities are carried out by utilizing Temples and Monasteries centers.

Aesthetic: The contribution of cultural capital provides the community with works of art. The beauty of the structures, the designs and decorations create serenity in the minds and harmonizes the spirit. The artistic style and expression also gives distinction to the community.

Creativity: Creativity is constantly applied. These range from square lotus roofed chapels, crystal clear ceilings, striking arrangements of bells and ornaments, floating chapels and parsonages built from recycled bottles. The purpose is to produce cultural capital that maximizes usefulness, be in accordance to Buddhist philosophy and exquisitely unique.

Pride: Those who participated in the contribution are proud that it symbolizes self-righteousness and dignity. Many are proud to say that theirs was the first and the envy of others.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Salong Discourses contribute cultural capital to communities Northeast Thailand is a proven fact. This cultural contribution system has influenced rural communities since historic times, but very little research and importance has been provided to study these works and cultural guidelines (Chuhttip, 2004). ²Wat Ming Muang Temple, Selapoom District, Roi-et 441 20, Thailand

Salong Discourses is just one of many literary works that exist in Northeastern Thailand. Other types of scriptures include Nung Sue Gohm which includes works on Law, Order, Governing, Magical powers, Rituals, Medicine and Fortune telling. Nung Sue Lum consists of books on Fairy Tails, Myths and History. All these scriptures should be explored, researched, preserved and promoted to the general public. So that these time tested messages can be applied and used to guide communities throughout the world.

The proficient understanding of *Salong* Discourses and scripts can be achieved by following the three teachings of Buddhism which is Morality, Concentration and Wisdom. It is necessary that these guidelines be followed with strict dedication because *Salong* Discourses have their origins from the Tri-Pitaka. To understand it you must follow the Buddhism way of learning.

Those who study *Salong* Discourses must apply them with good intentions. Fairness and honesty must accompany your every action. You must behave yourselves and perform your duties diligently. It is important for you to be an example of trust and dignity. If you are sincere, others will not doubt your intentions. Together you will bring prosperity to yourself, your family, your community and to your country.

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