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# Symbolism in the Construction of the Dai Traditional House

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## Introduction

The Dai, Chinese people of Dai ethnic origin, live in integrated communities in the Yunnan Province of China. The majority of the Dai (830,000) live in the Sipsong Panna and Dehong Prefectures of Yunnan. The same ethnic people (around 300,000), who are called the Tai or Thai, live in villages dotted throughout some thirty countries, such as Thailand, Burma, Assam, and Laos. In China, many other stilt houses were transformed and built on the ground, but Dai house is still one of the types of stilt-bamboo house that exist until now in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup>

For the Dai in South China, the ritual of building a new house confirms the relationships between the household and nature, the supernatural, and the Dai society. There are three points worth discussing.

First, by deciding the auspicious site of the house, the ritual confirms the picture of the universe in terms of Dai understanding of space, time, and matter. To the Dai, this space is quadrilateral, each cardinal direction is associated with a life-stage, an animal, a planet and a colour. Some writers view the meanings of the cardinal directions in Thai village culture as systems. S. J. Tambiah considers the east-west axis as purity and auspiciousness<sup>2</sup> and analyses the plan of a Thai house according to the cardinal directions.<sup>3</sup> H. L. Shorto, in his analysis of Burma, connects the life-stage, the cyclic process of the cosmos and the order of the society with the meanings of the cardinal directions.<sup>4</sup> The Dai calendar serves to determine fixed dates for rituals and Buddhist rites and, most importantly, to determine the auspiciousness or inauspiciousness of any given day for the performance of various types of activity.<sup>5</sup> The Dai believe there is a corresponding association between heavenly bodies, days of the week and deities. In a Dai

village, the horoscopes of deciding the auspicious site of a house is in accordance with the householder's 'fatal' time to decide his microcosmic point in an auspicious cosmic order. This matter will be dealt with in greater detail later.

Secondly, two other points need to be considered. On the one hand, the involvement of various deities in the ritual shows that the householder is treating the universe as a ordered system. As R. B. Davis writes about the Tai of Thailand in the ritual of the construction: "What [the Tai] are really saying is: 'I understand the nature of the universe and submit to its governing principles'".<sup>6</sup> The spiritual concept and the concept of deities for the Dai, taken from the basis of a classification, both unite man with and separate him from the rest of creation in an orderly way. The abode of man is the most civilised and controlled area in nature. Building a house is an important statement about status in the physical locus as well as the social structure, it needs to gain and maintain the co-operation of the rest of creation. On the other hand, the erection of the main post of the house connects the householder with his ancestral spirit, which is believed to occupy the main post and own the first house. When the Dai became settled as rice cultivators and began their farming culture, this relationship between the householder and his ancestor enabled him to claim the right to own the land of the territory, and the prestige allowed him to mediate with the spirit on behalf of the community. This relationship ensures the householder's right to the ownership of the cosmos, which was recreated in the first house.

In a Dai legend, Pa Ya Shangmudi, an ancestral hero who created the first Dai village and the first Dai house with the aid of the villagers and the deities, has no supernatural power himself. In all the legends, he is described as a man. Towards the thirteenth century, the teachings of Buddhism, which were in conflict with the beliefs of the original religion, became the fully established religion of all Dai societies. Since then, in Dai legends, Buddha, *pa tsau*, is treated as the great benefactor who gave the world to humans. However, in the important Dai song 'celebrate the new house', Pa Ya Shangmudi has always been described as the creator of the Dai house. As an informant said: 'The house is not like a temple. It is not an object of sacrifice'. In a Dai text entitled *Dai Poetry*, the author, a senior monk, says "Somebody thought it was Buddha who gave us Dai houses. If my son thinks so, after my death, he will not allow my spirit to occupy the post of the house which was built by myself, I can not tolerate it".<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, the process of the construction ceremonies helps to create the sort of harmony between the human being and the cosmos. H. L. Shorto writes of

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the Tai of Burma: "The microcosm, apart from proclaiming a comforting view of where the centre of the world is, helps to create the sort of harmony that will make the world go on".<sup>8</sup> Because the attitude of the Dai culture towards the cosmos, like that of China and India, lies in the harmony between our cosmos and macrocosmos as a whole, the analogy between the house, the village, the *muang* (Dai traditional state), the outposts of civilization and even nature is important for understanding the constructional process. Similarly, there is a symbolic analogy between the main house-post, householders, house spirit, owner of the lands, king of the nagas and even the earth itself.<sup>9</sup> The building of a house supports a man's potential as a microcosm. There are some connections here between this and the building of a palace or a city, the making of a microcosm used as a measure for keeping the kingdom under control. Thus, the fact that the house spirit occupies the main post is necessary for the society. M.E. Spiro, writing on Burma, refers to "...a perfect fit between the *nat* (spirit) structure and the social structure", and again: "Together with Buddhism, the cults of the house *nat* is a instrument par excellence of political integration".<sup>10</sup>

### The Ritual of Construction

The Dai choose the most auspicious days to go into the woods to fell trees, usually, in the late rainy season, about October, when they can transport the timber in rivers. The rituals for cutting trees in the forest and bringing the timber into the village are very important. Partly, this is because felling a tree is an invasion to the spirit who occupies the tree, and partly because a forest is the opposite of a village in that it lies outside the constructed cosmos of the villagers.<sup>11</sup> Bringing the timbers into the villages is a violation of the definition of places. The ritual held before the felling of trees intends to propitiate the spirit and remove it to another place, and also to transform its potentially harmful influence into a benevolent power in the world of man.

Great caution has to be taken especially when trees are chosen to become the two main posts, which are believed to be occupied by the ancestral spirits. The trees should be fully grown and should not be twisted by wisteria. The timber must be made from trees felled on auspicious days, i.e. a day which corresponds to serpent. The householder makes the first cut on the tree, and then fells the tree with the help of a few kin groups.<sup>12</sup> Over the succeeding several months, while getting together the materials for building the house, the householder notifies the headman of the village and prepares an offering for him.<sup>13</sup>

Timber removed from an old house cannot be used to build a new house, even if the new one is to be built on the same site. However, in Manghuan of Sipsong Panna, one month after the old house has been pulled down, the old spirit that used to occupy the timber is believed to transform into a safe spirit, then the old timber can be used.<sup>14</sup>

When the dry season comes, the construction of the building begins. The choosing of the site, the breaking of the earth, the erecting of the pillars, the setting of the ridge pole and the final completion are all surrounded by rituals.

Choosing the auspicious site can begin only on certain auspicious days or times, determined by consulting the Dai almanac. In Dai astrology, a person's auspicious site is defined by association of the day with a particular stellar asterism at the moment of his or her birth. Similar rules exist in Tai astrology about which R.B. Davis writes: "assigning the moon to a particular *rksa* (auspicious moment) at any time requires a degree of astronomical finesse beyond the capabilities of *muang* (Tai traditional state) soothsayers". Instead of the more empirical methods of astrology, the Dai soothsayer, *pho mo*, uses the following formula to determine a person's auspicious direction. The space of the inhabited district is divided into eight cardinal directions by quarters, and each of the directions has a particular meaning which characterises the person's 'fatal' area (Fig. 1). The eight different meanings are as follows: Happiness, Health and Long Life, Strength and Status, Prestige, Wealth, Lost Prosperity, Gossip, and Quarrel. Although these eight meanings are always in the same order and need to be given by comparing to the eight directions in a clockwise direction, the direction corresponding to the first meaning is different according to different people. The first direction is crucial to the whole pattern of the eight meanings. For a particular man, the direction is decided by his name, and his name is given by reference of his birthday. For example, for the first son in a family, the formula to determine his auspicious direction is as illustrated in Figure 2. According to the eight meanings, the Northeast, East and Southeast areas are the best choices for him to build a new house. The South area could be chosen for living. The Southwest area could be chosen when there is no other better selection. And the West, Northwest and North areas can not be chosen for living. But for the second son in the family, the formula to determine his auspicious direction is different: the first meaning - happiness - is given to the East, therefore, the East, Southeast, and South are the best areas for the second son to build his house (Fig. 3)<sup>15</sup>. As the result, the auspicious site of each person is the result of grabbing his 'fatal' time, which serve as apt illustrations of the place he occupies in the cosmic order.

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After choosing the site, another ritual is performed in order to ask for the Earth Goddess's permission. The ritual of examining the selection is as follows: peg four sticks at the four corners of the chosen site, and enclose the site with a white thread. Now, erect one post in the middle of the site, and put eight pieces of rice around it. If, after three days and three nights, the pieces of rice are still stuck on the middle post, the Earth Goddess is considered to have given permission. Following this, a table of food is offered to the Earth Goddess, the earth around the site is ploughed by an ox, claiming the beginning of the breaking of the earth.

If a new house is to be built as a replacement of an old one at the same site, a small spirit house must be set near the site before pulling down the old house. This serves as a shrine for the house spirit that may be disturbed by the clearing of the site.

When all this is done, the erection of the two main posts, the most important step in the building of a house, begins.

At dawn of the chosen day, the two principal posts are washed and laid out in parallel over the side of the holes. Leaves with auspicious names are placed in the holes to receive them. There is a Dai legend related to the name of the main column, *sau dag*, meaning The Dropping Down Column. It is said that, when Pa Ya Shangmudi was building the first Dai house, he erected this column and put it in the hole, but the column suddenly dropped down and sunk into the ground and struck the palace of a dragon, who kindly returned it back to Pa Ya Shangmudi. So, the ritual of placing *dong dao* or *dong mong* leaves at the bottom of the holes, aims at preventing the same accident.<sup>16</sup>

These two main posts are called *sao sautsaw*<sup>17</sup> and *sao nang*, or 'prince' and 'princess', respectively. *Sao sautsaw* is said to be male and the chief of all the other posts. The house spirit of the family is believed to occupy this post. *Sao sautsaw* is also closely associated with the house ancestors. The frequently encountered belief that ancestral spirits are present in the house should perhaps be regarded as a factor contributing to the vital force of the house especially since ancestors are associated with fertility.<sup>18</sup> In a finished house, *sao sautsaw* stands to the right hand side of the foot of the householder's bed in the bedroom, which is regarded as the most important room in the house. *Sao nang* is female and makes up a pair with *sao sautsaw*. It is related to the soul of the house. *Sao nang* stands near the hearth in the living room (Fig. 4).

The tops of these posts are fixed by large clusters of young coconuts, bananas, and sugar-canes or with red, white and black cloth and the old

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clothes of the householder. At this stage of the building process, a ritual is performed to tie the soul of the two posts. The offerings must be made to the beam at the four corners of the house, and the four corners of the site are sprinkled with water. A specialist describes the reasons for building the new house to the rulers of heavenly kingdom, to the Earth Goddess and to the four guards at the four corners and ask for their blessings. As Andrew Turton writes in his article about the ritual of house building in Thailand "This is said to call all six as witness to the good intentions of the ritual act which follows. It can be seen as a device for creating a microcosmic point of reference for placing the ensuing ritual within an auspicious cosmic order".<sup>19</sup>

It takes a few days to erect the framework and fit the walls and the roof on. For the Dai in Sipsong Panna, as described in *The Survey of the Sipsong Panna Vol.10*,<sup>20</sup> the houses are built with the aid of communal labour, supervised by the village elders, religious leaders, and a master builder, *chang heng*. Now it can be said that the house spirit, the village spirit, the tree spirit and so on have been asked for their permissions for the householder to built a new house.<sup>21</sup> Once the house is ready to be inhabited, the next item of the ritual is the celebration of the new house.

The owners of the house and guests gather at the front of the new house and there are gun-shots fired and horns blown. First, the householder who carries the treasure bag and a knife, goes up into the house, and his wife follows carrying the tripod of the hearth and cooking stuff. Then, the leader of the young men of the village, *nai mao*, brings the sacrifice for the celebration, normally the head of a pig, and the leader of the girls of the village, *nai chou*, brings the bedding. In the living room, *nai mao* puts the sacrifice in front of the main post, *sao sautsaw*. At the same time, the house wife lights the fire in the hearth and begins to cook. The householder also puts his treasure bag and knife in the front of *sao sautsaw* and fixes a white cloth and two bamboo tubes at the top of the column. These two tubes, which hold rice and sugar, are offered to the house spirit.<sup>22</sup>

Following them, the householders offer four tables of foods; one to the village spirit; one to the house spirit; one to the supervisor of building; and one to the headman of the village.

Then, senior kinsmen and the headman circle the white thread around the hands of the householder.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, they recite a long chanted blessing, invoking happiness from all spirits concerned. which include all village spirits and house spirits of the guests and present the village rules to the householder.<sup>24</sup> This means that the highest authorities of the village are

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granting the house, the legal, and economic rights that go with it to the new occupants.

After this symbolic climax, the householders offer food to their guests. The Dai singer, *chang ha*, sings the songs 'celebrate the new house'. These songs have three parts. The first is about the origin of the ceremony of the new house. It says that when Pa Ya Shangmudi built the first house, he felled two trees in the sacred jungle outside the village, and used them as the two main posts of the first house. By doing this, he enraged a couple of serpents who lived in the sacred jungle. They entered the house and twined around the two main posts. There was no way to drive them away except by means of the songs of the Dai singer and the big noise of people shouting: 'Water, water, water'. The serpents were frightened and left the house. This is 'water again water' just as they used 'fire against fire'.

The next part of the songs report the reason for building the new house to all spirits concerned, the elders in the village, and the senior monks. It says that the former house of the householder was so small and broken that the family members could not sleep and eat at the same time, so the householder negotiated with his wife, with their parents, with the rulers in the heaven and the Earth Goddess, with mountain spirits and village spirits to build a new house. Everyone agreed to his asking, thus the villagers from his village and nearby villages came to help. Then, the song describes the process of building and emphasises the fact that the feast offered to the guests, in which they all drink and eat together, is to keep the Dai united as one, which is the rule which Pa Ya Shangmudi had set.

The last part of the song is a blessing: "May the new house be solid and stable as a rock in the middle of a river, that the host's and the hostess's good fortune and happiness be as long as a river, and that their prosperity be as constant as the flow of its waters".

There are moments of happiness, there is eating, drinking, singing, and water-throwing.

The wealthy families have yet another ritual. At noon of the next day, monks are called to recite a long, chanted blessing, against all evil and invoking all happiness.<sup>25</sup>

Why is it that building a bigger house requires so many permissions from the spirits of heaven and earth? And what is the symbolism of the relationship

between Pa Ya Shangmudi and the serpent? Pa Ya Shangmudi is the ancestral hero who led the Dai to settle down as rice cultivators, established the first human settlement and built the first Dai house. In all the myths, Pa Ya Shangmudi is described as a man or a symbol of the man. In the myth, the serpent, whose kingdom is under the earth, is a symbol of nature. It fought for the post against the man. The post is at the head of the social and symbolic hierarchy within the house and household, it establishes the householder's right of ownership. When the Dropping Down Column is absorbed into the earth, ostensibly it presents a conflict between man and the serpent who wanted to keep its pillar, but then it gives *sau dag*, the Dropping Down column, back to Pa Ya Shangmudi. The implicit meaning in this legend is that nature captured the emblem which validates and makes possible the status of the householder in the ordered society. When the serpent returns the column, the latent meaning is the post is by permission of serpent, that is, nature gives legitimacy to the household. There are some connections here between this and the myth, recorded and analysed by S. J. Tambiah in which after a struggle between human and *naga* (serpent) princes, human habitations specifically and political regalia are absorbed into the earth by *naga* kingdom, which Tambiah considers it represents the union of man and nature.<sup>26</sup>

### Notes and References

1. The Yunnan editor group, *A Survey of Dai Society and History*, Vol. 10, The Nationality Press of Yunnan, Kunming, 1987. This series of books gives the most important basic knowledge of Chinese ethnic in investigation. So the fieldwork, on which this article is based was conducted in Sipsong Panna and Dehong in South China, from 1950 to 1960.
2. Tambiah, S. J. "Animals are good to think and good to prohibit", *Ethnology*, 8, 1969, p. 423-459.
3. Tambiah, S. J. *Buddhism and the spirit cults in Northeast Thailand*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970, pp. 20-22.
4. Shorto, H. L. "The planets, the days of the week and the points of the compass: orientation symbolism in Burma" in *Natural Symbols in South East Asia*, Milner, G.B.(ed.), University of London Press, London, 1978, pp. 152-163.
5. From "Dai calendar, *su ting*, *su ya li*, *si than* and Dai calendar and astrology, *pop bktwn*"; cited in Zhang Gongjing & Cheng Jiujing, Dai calendar. In *The Culture of Palm Leaves-Buddhism Sutra*, Wang Yeti & Yang Shiguang (eds.), Yunnan People's Press, Kunming, 1990, pp. 203-226.
6. Davis, R. B. *Muang Metaphysics: A study of Northern Thai Myth and Ritual* Bangkok, Surawongse Rd. Bangrak, 1984, p. 435.
7. Gu Ba Mong. *Dai Poetry*, Yan, Wenbian (ed. and tr.), Chinese Folk Art Press,

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Kunming, 1615, pp. 75-77.

8. Shorto, H. L. "The planets, the days of the week and the points of the compass: orientation symbolism in Burma" in *Natural Symbols in South East Asia.*, Milner, G. B. (ed.), University of London Press, London, 1978, pp. 152-163. See also: Keyes, C.F. *The golden Peninsula*, Macmillan, New York, 1977

9. See, for example, Endicott, K. M. *An Analysis of Malay Magic*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, and Spire, M. E. *Burmese Supernaturalism: A study in the Explanation and Reduction of Suffering*, 1968.

10. See Spiro, M.E. op. cit., p. 229.

11. Davis, op. cit., pp. 80-83.

12. Yunna Investigator Group of Yunnan Minorities. *The Survey of The Dai in Sipsong Panna*, Vol.9, Yunnan editor group of the Chinese Ethnology Institute, The Nationality Press of Yunnan, Kunming, 1984, p. 246.

13. Ibid., Vol. 3, pp. 126-7.

14. Ibid., Vol. 10, p. 28.

15. Zhang, Hongwei. *The Structure Study on Dai Li Settlement in Xishuangbanna*, Thesis for Master Degree, Yunan Technology University, Kunming, 1991.

16. Yunnan Investigation Group of Yunnan Minorities. Op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 74.

17. Addition to *sao sautsaw*, the post could be called *sao huang*, *sao dol* or *sao dui wa heng* in different region in Sipsong Panna and Dehong.

18. Waterson, R. *The Living House - An anthropology of architecture in South-East Asia*, Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1990, pp. 118-122.

19. Turton, A. "Architecture and political space", in *Thailand in Natural Symbols in South East Asia*, Milner, G.B. (ed.), University of London Press, London, 1978, p. 115.

20. Yunnan Investigation Group of Yunnan Minorities. Op. cit., Vol. 10, p. 246.

21. There are also some taboos in the process construction which include rules about marital relations; about animal categories; about wild and civilised zones; about spirit categories, they represent the status and prestige of the household in the social and cosmic order.

22. Yunnan Investigation Group of Yunnan Minorities. Op. cit., p. 246.

23 It is a ritual for trying the soul of the person, which is performed in many important occasions, especially in marriage.

24. The Dai believe that every person is protected by the house spirit, the village spirit and the muang spirit when he or she goes out for a trip. So in the chants the specialist should mention all the spirits associated with all guests.

25. Yunnan Investigation Group of Yunnan Minorities. Op. cit., Vol. 9, p. 246.

26. Tambiah, S. J. *Buddhism and the spirit cults in Northeast Thailand*, University Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 229.



Fig 1. A Dai house in Sipsong Panna.

	Northwest	North	Eastnorth
	West	Village heart	East
	Southwest	South	Southeast

Fig 2. The eight areas in the Dai village. Based on the literary descriptions in the thesis of Zhang Honwei. *The Structure Study on Dai Le Settlement in Xishuangbanna, 1991: 78-85.*

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Gossip	Quarrel	Happiness
Lost Prosperity	Village Heart	Health Long Life
Wealth	Prestige	Strength Status

Lost Prosperity	Gossip	Quarrel
Wealth	Village Heart	Happiness
Prestige	Strength Status	Health Long Life

Fig 3. Dai formula for determining the first son's auspicious site to build his house.

Fig 4. Dai formula for determining the second son's auspicious site to build his house.

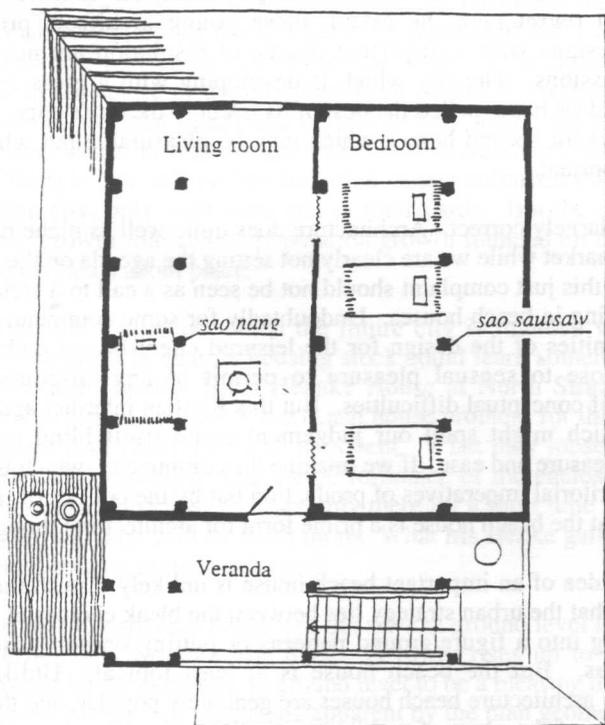


Fig 5. The *sao sautsaw* and *sao nang* in the first floor of a Dai house.