



## Uniqueness of Lue Temples in Nan Province

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### Abstract

This paper aims to explore traditional architectures in type of Lue temples which are spiritual centers of the Lue as one of the ethnic groups living in Nan province located in the Northern Region of Thailand. The paper presents distinctive features and spiritual spaces of the Lue group and how they maintain cultural identity from generation to generation. The Lue temples in 72 villages across 7 districts in and around Nan were investigated to reflect unique characteristics of the Lue temples which are located in 7 districts, predominantly in Pua District (6 Sub-districts: 25 villages) followed by Tha Wang Pha District (6 Sub-districts: 14 villages), Santisuk District (1 Sub-district: 10 villages), Song Kwae District (3 Sub-districts: 10 villages), Thung Chang District (2 Sub-districts: 7 villages), Chiang Klang District (2 Sub-districts: 5 villages), and 1 village in Chaloem Phra Kiat District. The paper presents distinctive characteristics of Lue temples includes Nong Bua temple and Anumoon temple in Tha Wang Pha District; Hia temple, Ton Laeng temple, Rong Ngae temple, Nawong temple, and Beng Sakat temple in Pua District; Nong Daeng temple in Chiang Klang District; and Huay Khon temple in Chaloem Phra Kiat District. The analysis of roof reveals 2 and more than 3 tiers with certain building ornaments; for example, gable apex of viharns in Lue temples installed with the statues of Hasadilink birds, swans, and peacocks with their bodies running along the roof ridges, and the tails in the shape of Naga head at the top corner of the roof. At the front stairs are round-relief statues of Singha and Naga before the entrance of Lue temples. These features remain Lue temples unique.

**Keywords:** Wisdom heritage, Lue architecture, Nan province

### Introduction

Lue is a group of people living in the Sipsong panna region, in the People's Republic of China and many of them were used as labors during the wars resulting in some immigration in Southeast Asia including Thailand. Some of Lue ethnic group was settled down in the northern parts of Thailand, particularly in Phayao, Chiang Rai, Lamphun, Lampang, Chiang Mai, Phrae, and Nan provinces. Nan is surrounded by mountainous of Phi Pan Nam and Luang Prabang ranges. Its terrain is partly lowland crisscrossed by the Nan River, the Sa River, the Wa River, the Samun River, the Haeng River, the Lae River, and the Pua River. Nan has its territorial connection to Phrae Province and Uttaradit Province in the south, Phayao Province in the west, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic in the north and east. This border areas allows both neighboring lands to exchange of culture, people, knowledge, trading, including mobility and immigration. Nan province is rich in diversity of ethnic groups including Hmong, Mien, and Khmer. Mumlabri, Muser, Tai Lue, Tai Phuan, and Tai Yuan or indigenous people living together in a large number making Nan tourist destinations for Thais and foreigners (Nan National Museum, 1987, pp. 39-40). After immigration to Nan province, the Lue people have continued to live along the river valley as mostly found in Pua, Tha Wang Pha, Song Khwae, Chiang Klang, Thung Chang, and Chaloem Phra Kiat Districts.



The distinctive culture of the Lue ethnic group in Nan includes language, clothing, temples, and residential architecture. Lue people has well adapted their ways of living and livelihood in many ways. They built houses in similar to those original ones which become changed over a period of time. Their art and architecture are prominent cultural heritage of wisdom being embraced all along between new contexts with their own identity (Wanida Phuengsunthorn, 2021, p. 9). However, preservation of local arts and crafts is quite difficult due to short of Lue's historic records. The researchers determined the locations of Lue communities in Nan province in order to explore Lue temples' unique architectural characteristics and relevant cultural identities.

## **Literature Review**

The Dai or the Tai Lue ethnicity (Zhu Liangwen, translation by Ngamphan Vejjajiva, 1994, p. 1) is one of the 56 ethnic groups in China with a long history and its own customs and traditions that have been well inherited and preserved until now. Tai Lue people live densely in many areas of Yunnan province. The word of Lue (Encyclopedia of Northern Thai Culture, Volume 12: 1999, p. 6019) refers to a Tai-speaking ethnic group as "Dai Lue" or "Tai Lue" originally live in Sipsong panna province. Typically, Tai Lue preferred to set up their houses along the river valleys including Mekong river which was called as "Nam Khong" by the Tai Lue; while Chinese called this same river as Lanchang and named Tai Lue as "Li" or "Sui Pai Yi". The culture, traditions, beliefs, way of life of Tai Lue are similar to Thai people in Lanna and Lao people in Lan Xang who also consume sticky rice as their main food and practice Theravada Buddhism. In anthropology, ethnic group refers to a group of people who speaks the same language, shares the same socio-political unit and the same kinship system, goes through common historical experiences, and has similar cultural patterns (Yos Santasombat 2013, p 153). For this reason, the history of language describing each group of people who spoke certain language. The territory of Sipsong panna (Bunchuay Shrisawat, 2014: p 1) is located in southern Yunnan and it is home to Thai people who called themselves "Lue" and sometimes "Tai". Songsak Prangwattanakul (2008) argued that the word Lue is still a mystery and no one can define its meaning. In Tai Lue language, the word used to call its tribe is "Khon Lue" or "Khon Tai Lue". Similar to the city was called as "Muang Lue" in general and the language spoken was called "Lue language".

## **Methods and Materials**

The investigation on the context of the Lue in Nan province was divided into 2 parts. The first part explores relevant documents, books, journals, and research studies pertaining to the Lue. The second part explores among the Lue community leaders and its association in Nan province; especially the abbots of certain Lue temples, namely, Nong Bua and Don Mun temples (Tha Wang Pha District), Hia, Ton Laeng, Rong Ngae, Nawong, and Beng Sakat temples (Pua District), Nong Daeng temple (Chiang Klang District), and Huay Kon temple (Chaloem Phra Kiat District). There are 11 people recruited by purposive sampling along with from the Tai Lue association of Nan province.

The data collection used for further design are involved with these followings.

- 1) Primary data was collected directly from the data sources as community leaders to acquire basic information and from inquiry and interview with experts. The data obtained was analyzed, classified, and stored in categories.



2) Secondary data was collected through various sources of documents includes pamphlets, books, researches, records and other relevant papers which were brought to the data synthesis.

Data gathering made through 1) interview, 2) inquiry, and 3) observation. These instruments were employed for data analysis and investigation based on qualitative research approaches for both documentation and fieldwork. Additionally, content analysis was conducted based on organizing techniques for the concept, description, categorization, classification of groups and issues to be investigated, including data triangulation.

## Results

General investigation of the basic information of Tai Lue in Nan province, made through interviewing forms to collect data from the leader of Tai Lue association in each district to capture historical information about the Lue culture in Nan province. The guidelines of questions made about the districts of Lue culture in the present time, the guideline for finding evidence in ancient sites remained with original identity of the Lue, and the guideline for creating new products to reflect Lue identities in Nan.

Stage 1: Students was trained to interview the President of Lue Association in Nan (Vitoon Inya, 2021: Interview) to capture information about Lue villages in Nan province suggesting that there were 72 villages across 7 districts as follow;

1) Thung Chang District: 7 Lue villages in 2 Sub-districts, namely Ngop Sub-district consists of six villages (Ban Ngop Nuea, Ban Ngop Sala, Ban Ngop Klang, Ban Ngop Tai, Ban Tai Rom Pho Thong, and Ban Thung Sun); and Pon Sub-district consists Hlai Thung village.

2) Chiang Klang District: 5 Lue villages in 2 Sub-districts, namely Chiang Klang Sub-district consists of three villages (Ban Sri Udom, Ban Chiang Khom, and Ban Ngiu); and Phra Phutthabat Sub-district includes two villages of Ban Lao and Ban Khwaeng.

3) Pua District: 25 Lue villages in 6 Sub-districts, namely, Pua Sub-district consists of two villages (Ban Khon and Ban Pa Lan); Sila Laeng Sub-district includes six villages (Ban Hia, Ban Don Chai, Ban Tin Tok, Ban Hua Nam, Ban Fai, and Ban Hua Doi); Sila Phet Sub-district includes eight villages (Ban Na Kham, Ban Thung Si Bunyuen, Ban Patong, Ban Don Kaew, Ban Don Chai, Ban Thung Rattana, Ban Patong Don Sai Thong, and Ban Patong Phatthana); 4) Woranakhon Sub-district includes four villages (Ban Ket, Ban Mon, Ban Rong Naeng, and Ban Don Kaeo); 5) Sathan Sub-district includes two villages (Ban Na Pan and Ban Santisuk); and 6) Chedi Chai Sub-district includes three villages (Ban Sop Pua, Ban Sala, and Ban Wang Muang).

4) Tha Wang Pha District: 14 Lue villages in 6 Sub-districts, namely, Pa Kha Sub-district consists of two villages (Ban Nong Bua and Ban Ton Hang); Si Phum Sub-district consist of Don Mun village; Yom Sub-district includes three villages (Ban Thung Kong, Ban Siao, and Ban Nong); Saen Thong Sub-district includes two villages (Ban Huak and Ban Hae); Chom Phra Sub-district includes five villages (Ban Thon Moo. 1, Ban Thon Moo 9, Ban Yu Moo 5, Ban Yu Moo 10, and Ban Yu Moo 11); and Tha Wang Pha Sub-district consists of Don Chai village.

5) Song Khwae District: 10 Lue villages in 3 Sub-districts, namely, Na Rai Luang Sub-district includes five villages (Ban Pang Puk, Ban Hang Thung, Ban Mai, Ban Song Kwai, and Ban Pang Hai); Chon Daen Sub-district includes Pang Kom village; and Yod Sub-district includes 4 villages (Ban Pha Lak, Ban Pang San, Ban Pha Sing, and Ban Yod).

6) Chaloeam Phra Kiat District has 1 Lue village in 1 sub-district which is Ban Huai Kon in Huai Kon Sub-district.

7) Santisuk District: 10 Lue villages in 1 sub-district), namely Pa Lao Luang Sub-district includes 10 villages (Ban Pa Lao Luang, Ban Aphai Khiri, Ban Don Aphai, Ban Pa Oy, Ban Sop Yang, Ban Don Chai, Ban Nan Mankong, Ban Kaeng Sopha, Ban Luang Charoenrat, and Ban Phana Phrai).



**Figure 1** Location of Lue people in Nan province  
(Adapted from a tourist map of Nan Province. 2020, Online)

The structured interview form with predetermined questions was conducted to interview with Lue leaders to investigate the guideline for exploring historical information about the Lue in each district of Nan province. The questions consist of three parts, which are 1) general information of respondents, 2) their opinions about Lue historical information in relation to Lue language, Lue traditions, costumes, written evidence, historic sites including original identities of Lue, and antiques remaining original identity of Lue; and 3) opinions on other issues related to the Lue. The interview results suggest that every district in Nan continues to preserve the Lue language by passing it down from generation to generation. However due to the influence of local or international culture, its dialects and accent have been gradually altered and some vocabularies were no longer used. For preserving this, it is important to begin at home to allow new generation to learn and use the language in their daily dialogue; online communication are imperative media at present day. The written evidence is still preserved at the village temples including Khoi notebooks, book palm, foreign records, as well as murals paintings. The ancient remains maintain original Lue identity as appeared inside viharns or chambers of the temples. Interestingly, there are some renovation made by integrating original with technology to reduce deteriorations. These can be seen in viharns, ancient city walls, and pagodas to preserve these spiritual spaces for carrying on their traditions. There are some antiques (principal Buddha image,



small wooden Buddha image and sacred objects) that maintain original identity of the Lue. Additionally, utensils were found only in the museum of each village and their functions were modified to suit urban society. Unfortunately, jewellerys cannot be located in the study areas and they made by high skill silversmith to serve for people with higher social status.

The contexts of Song Kwae, Santisuk, and Chiang Klang Districts had been assimilated with the local culture in terms of clothing and art. More remains of architecture, customs and traditions can be seen as described below;

1) Tha Wang Pha District has viharns or chambers at Don Mun and Nong Bua temples that embrace unique identities of Lue passed down for a long time. There is a ritual of worshipping Chao Luang Mueang La (Kam Mueang) who is respected since the Lue migrated to the current location. This ritual is held every 3 years by three villages (Ban Don Mun, Ban Nong Bua, and Ban Ton Hang). The monument of Chao Luang Mueang La in Tha Wang Pha District was built at Ban Don Mun and Ban Nong Bua for a purpose of the worship.

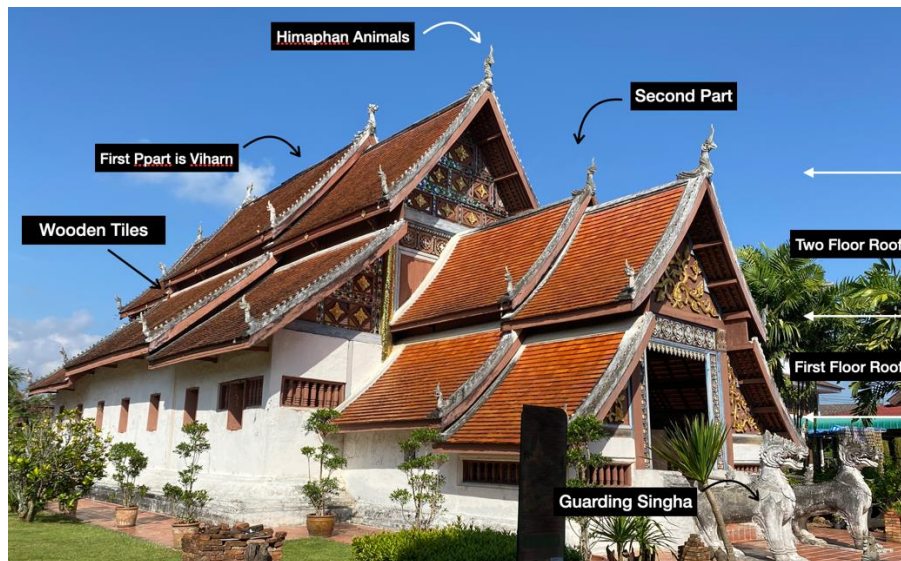
Regarding the traditional dressing style, men did not wear shirts and they inscripted Yantra tattoos on the body, including ink tattoos over the upper legs looking superficially like wearing pants. Men wore pants made from woven fabric. Women in the early time did not wear blouses; but they wrapped woven clothes around their shoulders, and wore pha sinh, including white cloth strapped around their heads. Later, women wore cardigans and woven cloth, strapped white cloth around their heads. Some women covered their shoulders with cloths and carried shoulder bag. It was assumed from the interview that different dressing styles might depend on assigned duties in line with different governing roles. In addition, body decorations were usually found only among those who were descendants of the rulers. For written evidence, Pubsa (record books) were still preserved in the village temples. Mural paintings were appeared at the viharn of Nong Bua temple. The paintings were appeared on the wall of Don Mun village meeting hall telling stories from the past to the present. The houses have deteriorated over time; but there are ancient houses models displayed at Nong Bua and Don Mun temples.



**Figure 2** Viharn of Don Mun temple in Tha Wang Pha District, Nan province

The viharn of Don Mun temple in Tha Wang Pha District in Nan was characterized by 2 overlapping roof tiers sloping downwards and covered with wooden tiles. The gable apex was installed with statues of Naga heads at the front on the east and at the back on the west

of viharn, with their bodies leaning along the roof ridge, and their tails tangled up in the middle of the ridge. On each side of the lower roof tier are statues of Kinnon, Hasadeelink bird, and swan. There are 2 Naga statues on the left and the right sides of the front entrance.

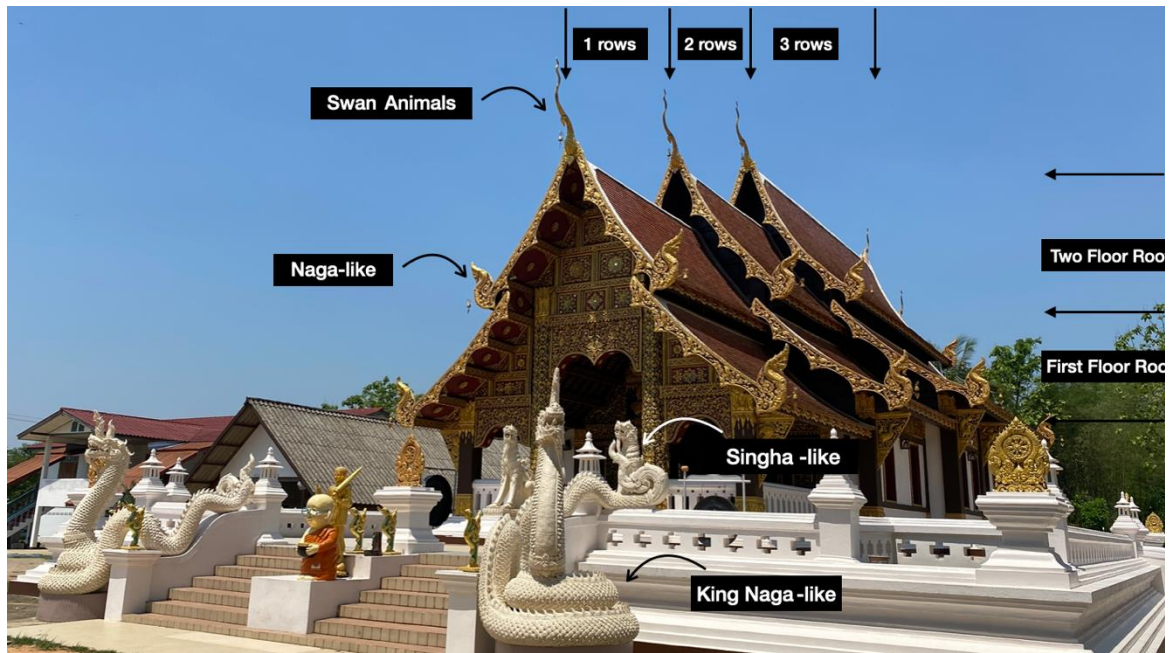


**Figure 3** Viharn of Nong Nua temple in Tha Wang Pha District, Nan province

Nong Bua temple in Tha Wang Pha District is divided into two parts. The first part is viharn and the second part is a building covering upstairs of both entrances (the front entrance is typically larger than the side entrance). The roof is characterized by the two overlapping tiers with a low slope. At the top shows a Naga-like statue with Garuda-like mouth and swan-like body appearance. Its body runs along the roof ridge. On the gable apex is a statue of Hasadeelink bird. At the front entrance, there are two guarding Singha statues, one on each side of the leading-upstairs; however, there are no statues on the sides of viharn.

2) Pua District is also home to another group of people descended from the Lue which is believed to be forcibly herded into Nan city. They now still preserve the original traditions with some change in lifestyle to suit the current era. Men and women initiated the use of patterned stripes to decorate the cardigan edges, still strap white cloth around their heads, cover shoulders with white woven cloth, and wear woven fabric clothing. Later development was the use of silver jewelry for body decoration. The traditions that have long been passed down includes the rituals for worshiping Phaya Kaew Shrine, worshiping Thao Saenhan, and worshiping Thao Saen Mun. Most of their traditions are organized according to local customs. Written evidence appeared on Khoi books and inscription on ancient objects that are preserved inside the temples, with the records in the Lue scripts similar to the Lanna ancient letters. The largest number of Lue ethnic population live in Pua District where their temples still remain the Lue's uniqueness as seen in those viharns of Nawong, Rong Ngae, Bengsat, Hia, and Ton Laeng temples.





**Figure 4** Viharn of Nawong temple in Pua istrict, Nan province

The viharn of Nawong temple is characterized by its three overlapping roof tiers decorated with the statues of swans at each top corner of the gable apex. Their Naga-like bodies laid downward along the roof edge on both left and right sides, and the tails are statues of Naga heads attached to every corner of the roof. The first step at each side of the front stairway was decorated with a statue of King Naga. The entrance area are statues of Singha at both sides.



**Figure 5** Viharn of Ton Laeng temple in Pua District, Nan province.

The features of viharn at Ton Laeng temple include three overlapping roof tiers; the gable apex have a statue of swan with Naga-like body lying along the roof ridge and the tail of woodcut in Naga head; the statues of Naga heads located at each corner of the upper tier, two at each corner of the middle and the lower tiers; two statues of Singha, one at each side of the front entrance and none at the left and the right entrances; but only the side raises along the same level of stairs.



**Figure 6** Viharn at Rong Ngae temple in Pua District, Nan province

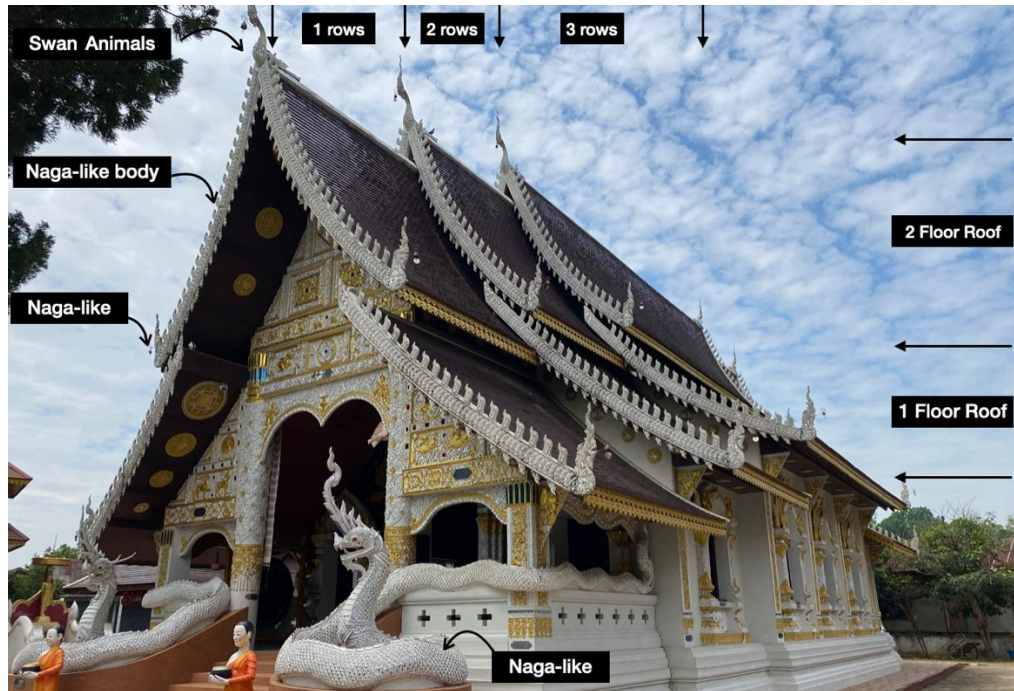
The viharn at Rong Ngae temple in Pua District of Nan province is characterized by its two roof tiers in three rows, a swan statue on top of each gable apex with the body running downward and the tail of woodcut in Naga head at each corner of the roof, the entrance of the 3 sides of viharn looking like lotus leaves with stems running along in length of stairway.



**Figure 7** Viharn of Ben Sakut temple in Pua District, Nan province

The viharn at Ben Sakut temple in Pua District of Nan province has two roof tiers in two rows; a swan statue on the top of each gable apex on both tiers with its Naga-like body lying downward to every corner and the tail of woodcut in Naga head; the front stairs having an angel-like statue on top of the post at both sides of the stairway, the left and right entrances looking like lotus leaves with stems running along in length by the size of stairway.





**Figure 8** Viharn of Hia temple in Pua District, Nan province

The features of Viharn at Hia temple in Pua District of Nan province include three roof tiers with a swan statue on the top of gable apex lying its Naga-like body down to every roof corner with the tail in the shape of Naga heads for all three tiers; and one Naga-like statue on each side of the front stairs running its body up to the second level in front of the entrance.

3) In Ban Huai Kon, Chaloe Phra Kiat District, the Tai Lue here originally lived in Sipsong Panna and immigrated to settle down in Muang Ngern of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Their spoken accent and written language are slightly different from those in other cities. The inheritance of written language in forms of ancient writing make it difficult to pass down, and only spoken language that carries on though with a slight variance from the original modern time. The characteristics of the dressing among Lue people at Ban Huai Kon might be somewhat different; but with highlights on the use of prominent colors to decorate for beauty, wearing silver accessories, and carrying shoulder bags, with the styles changed fashionably. The traditions of the Tai Lue are obviously different as in the funeral ceremony that may take 3 nights and 3 days. A small model house is offered for dedicating merits to the deceased. A preaching is given on the first and second day, and 13 chapters of Mahajati preaching on the third day as the last day. Lue community at Ban Huai Kon respects Chao Por Makhao as their God for a very long time and performs regular sacrifices. Regarding the Lue antiques, most of them are preserved at Huai Kon temple and because of travelling difficulties in the past, the Lue people thus brought with them only the items to make a living. Ban Huai Kon has a temple of Lue identity with its construction started in 2017. The interior of the temple is decorated with woven fabrics which has high potential for locals and next generation to learn as fabric learning center at Ban Huai Kon. The ancient Khoi books are also preserved there.



**Figure 9** Viharn of Huai Kon temple in Chalerm phra kiat District, Nan province

The Viharn at Huai Kon temple in Chalermphrakiat District is characterized by 4 descending roof tiers. It is a mixed open and close temple. On each gable apex of every tier is a statue of peacock with Naga-like body and the tail with peacock spreading wings broader than its body at the corner of every tier. At the top are two peacock statues in back-to-back position lying along the length of roof. The lowest tier serves to cover the passageways around viharn. On each corner of the front roof is a statue of peacock laying its tail along the roof ridge. There are 2 Singa-like statues at both sides of the front of stairway. At the left and right sides of the front entrance are 2 guarding Naga-like statues with their bodies running in length to the entrance. The left and the right doors both have tall platforms in length of the stairs size.

5) Ngop Sub-district in Thung Chang District of Nan province also has another group of Lue descendant as the very first group of immigration from Sipsong Panna. They still now preserve the original customs and traditions, for example, they retain the ritual to worship the spirit of Phi Luang and they respect ancestors as spiritual anchor. Lue traditions are mostly performed upon the local traditions in general; but with a slight difference in details depending on their own original culture where they migrated from. Regarding their clothing, men wear shirts and pants and carry shoulder bags, while women wear cardigans, strap white cloth around their heads, cover shoulder with white woven cloth, wear pha sinh and carry shoulder bags. Later they use patterned stripes to decorate the cardigan edges and still strap white cloth around their heads, cover shoulder with white woven cloth, and wear woven fabric clothes. For body accessories, tree branches commonly used to make bracelets for body decoration which later made by silver jewellerys. Now their dress is increasingly influenced by modern fashion. Written evidence was appeared in Khoi books, inscribed on ancient objects, and preserved inside the temple, with the record written in the Lue script similar to the Lanna ancient letters.





**Figure 10** Viharn of Nong Daeng temple in Chieng Klang District, Nan province

The viharn at Nong Daeng temple in Chieng Klang District is characterized by its two descending roof tiers, the gable apex at the front and the back having statues of Hasadikink birds with Naga-like bodies lying along and the tails as woodcuts in Naga heads at the four corners, the lower roof covering the front hall, without any animals of traditional belief at the front entrance.

## Conclusion and Suggestions

The researchers explored the location of the Lue people who live in Nan province and also explored Lue uniqueness from viharms or the chambers at the temples across 7 districts in and around Nan province, namely: Pua, Tha Wang Pha, Santisuk, Song Khwae, Thung Chang, Chiang Klang, and Chaloem Phrakiat Districts. Results of the investigation show unique characteristics of viharms at the Lue temples as described briefly here. *Don Mun temple*: the interior of viharn presents paintings on the pillars, doors, and ceiling. *Nong Bua temple*: the interior of viharn reflects paintings depicting the stories of the Lord Buddha, the stories of Chankad Jataka, including paintings on the pillars, doors, and ceilings. *Nawong temple*: the interior of viharn illustrates paintings with new paints restored on the pillars, doors, and ceiling. *Ton Laeng temple*: the viharn presents paintings on the pillars, doors, and ceiling. *Rong Ngae temple*: the interior of viharn shows original paintings on the pillars, doors, and ceiling, with painting restoration on the walls telling stories of the Lord Buddha and community way of life. *Beng Sakat temple*: Inside the viharn presents paintings on the pillars, doors, and ceiling. *Hia temple*: Inside the viharn displays paintings on the pillars, doors, and ceiling with painting restoration. *Nong Daeng temple*: inside the viharn presents painting on the pillars, doors, and ceiling depicting the stories of the Lord Buddha and morals. *Huai Kon temple* is newly constructed based on the identity and culture of the Lue from Muang Ngoen, and the appearance according to the belief of Lue people in the community.





Regarding viharns' roofs at Lue temples in Nan Province are mostly decorated with the statues of Hasadilink birds, swans, and peacocks on the top of gable apex, with their bodies running along the length of the roof ridge and their tails in the shape of Naga head at the corner of the roof. Round-relief figures of Singha usually stand at the front stairway, and Naga at the front entrance of Lue temples. There are two types of roof tiers: typically, 2 roof tiers created in similar to the original temples before immigration, and roofs with more than 3 tiers influenced by local contexts. This paper agrees with Sirodom Sueklai's comparative study of development of Dai-Lue viharn in Nan, Thailand and Xixuangbanna, Yunnan, China (2015). The study noted that the viharns of Lue temples in Nan province has 2 distinctive features: one is a group of viharns adhering to the traditional style, and the other is a group of viharns with further improvements merged between new and original characteristics.

According to the investigation of the Lue cultural heritage in Nan province, it pointed out that technology plays an important part in maintaining the original appearances. It is a new challenge to find new materials to replace original materials for achieving high quality and durability of building to reduce disaster and climate changes impacts in more sustainable for our future generation to preserve legacy of the Lue.

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