

From Prosperity to Decline: The Transformation of the Bai Pala Ritual among the Dai People in Mangshi along the China-Myanmar Border from the Perspective of Religious Pluralism

Guirong Chen¹, Yan'e Yu²

¹ Southwest Frontier Minority Research Center, Yunnan University, Kunming, China

² Faculty of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Kunming University of Science and Technology, Kunming, China

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Corresponding Author

Guirong Chen

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Abstract

This study explores the mechanisms by which religious pluralism influences individual beliefs among the Dai people in Mangshi, with the transformation of the Bai Pala ritual as a case study. Data were collected through anthropological participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that since the 1940s, the Dai community in Mangshi has undergone profound transformations in social institutions, economic life, and cultural exchanges. The influx of diverse values during the modernization has exerted a significant "cognitive contamination" effect on the traditional beliefs of the Dai people, contributing to the decline of the once-prosperous Bai Pala ritual. The results show that while the "relativization" effect of religious pluralism has undermined the "certainty" of Theravada Buddhist beliefs at the cognitive level, individual religious participation exhibits salient differentiation. This suggests that the "plausibility structure" of Theravada Buddhism belief system possesses a degree of resilience, enabling its continuity in practice by adopting strategies including institutional attachment and functional adaptation, even when its cognitive certainty is compromised.

1. Introduction

Peter L. Berger, in his work *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*, advanced the paradigm of "religious pluralism" as a framework for understanding the interplay between modernity and religion. Berger posited that this paradigm is better equipped to address two distinct forms of pluralism: the co-existence of different religions and the co-existence of religions and secular discourses, both in the minds of individuals and in social space (Berger, 2014). This paradigm shift is inextricably linked to Berger's critique of secularization theory, a once-dominant paradigm in religious studies that posited "modernity necessarily brings about a decline of religion" (Berger, 2014: IX). Berger argued that

modernization gives rise to diversity, and diversity enhances the individual's ability to choose between different worldviews. However, he critiqued secularization theory for its assumption that these choices would inevitably lean towards secularism, overlooking the possibility of religious choices (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009). In essence, the "relativization" effect of pluralism undermines the taken-for-granted status of individuals' identification with specific religious concepts and value systems, allowing for a conscious selection between religious and non-religious worldviews (Berger, 2014). While the paradigm of religious pluralism provides a new analytical lens on the impact of pluralism on individual belief, its analysis remains largely at the level of macro-theoretical conceptualization, necessitating empirical validation (Cao, Y. K., 2022). Consequently, there is a need for empirical research and critical reflection, informed by diverse cultural and social contexts.

This research investigates the Bai Pala ritual among the Dai people in Mangshi, selected as a case study for the following reasons: Firstly, Mangshi, situated in the Dehong Prefecture on the China-Myanmar border, serves as one of the primary settlements for the Dai people. Within the Theravada Buddhist tradition of the Mangshi Dai, the Bai Pala ritual is regarded as the preeminent form of devotion to the Buddha and the most effective way to accumulate merit. As demonstrated by Ju-Kang Tien's pioneering fieldwork conducted in the 1940s in NM Village, this ritual plays a crucial role in reinforcing both individual religious commitment and social integration through shared practices (T'ien, J.-K., 1986). A diachronic examination of the Bai Pala ritual's transformations since the 1940s offers insights into the evolution of local individual beliefs and collective values. Secondly, prior to the 1950s, the Dai region of Mangshi was under the direct governance of Tusi (local chieftains), exhibiting a distinct social structure compared to inland China. Furthermore, geographical limitations and transportation challenges historically rendered the region relatively isolated (Liu, H. Y., 2018). Since the 1950s, the Dai area of Mangshi has experienced significant shifts in social systems, economic life, and cultural exchange due to modernization, transitioning from relative isolation to openness and diversity. This provides a unique vantage point for analyzing the impact of pluralism on individual religious beliefs.

Building upon the established ethnographic context, this study offers an empirical examination of the diachronic shifts of the Bai Pala ritual, specifically addressing these central questions: (1) What are the observable transformations in the Bai Pala ritual since the 1940s, and what are the underlying social, economic, and cultural influences driving these changes? (2) How does religious pluralism driven by modernization affect the religious beliefs of the Dai people in Mangshi? (3) What factors mediate individual agency in cognitive reframing and religious participation?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Karma Buddhism and the Bai Pala Ritual

In the 1960s, Melford E. Spiro investigated the transformation of Theravada Buddhism within Burmese society, differentiating between two expressions of Buddhist practice within the Theravada ideological framework: Nibbana Buddhism, representing a transcendental orientation, and Karma Buddhism, which is oriented toward worldly concerns. Nibbana Buddhism is primarily the domain of a small cadre of monastic practitioners, whereas Karma Buddhism is the practice of the majority of lay Buddhists. Karma Buddhism does not seek liberation from the cycle of rebirth (Nibbana), but rather emphasizes the accumulation of merit through practices

such as almsgiving and adherence to precepts, thereby improving one's status within the samsaric cycle (Spiro, 1970). The Dehong region is home to four distinct Buddhist sects. It is hypothesized that the Pòitsǎṅ, Tsoti, and Tole sects were introduced from Myanmar between the 11th and 19th centuries, while the Yon sect was introduced from northern Thailand in the 15th century (Jiang, Y. L., 1983; Zhang, J. Z., 1992). The tradition of merit-making within Karma Buddhism has exerted a significant influence on the Dai areas of western Yunnan (Wang, H. T., 2001). Consequently, the Dai people prioritize merit-making, almsgiving, the observance of religious precepts, and the performance of labor for temples as means of accumulating merit, which is understood to determine one's future rebirth (Santasombat, 2001).

The adoption of the appellation "Flower of the Pure Land" emerged subsequent to the introduction of Theravada Buddhism within the Dehong Dai region. This distinctive tradition is not only prevalent in Dehong but also widely practiced among the Shan people in Myanmar. The attainment of the title "Flower of the Pure Land" is believed to be a prerequisite for rebirth in the "Buddha Land" (Cai, X. H., 2009). Certain scholars interpret the "Flower of the Pure Land" as a lay Buddhist rank, stratified into four tiers: Tan, Paga, Paga Ti, and Paga Luan. These levels denote the accumulation of merit and necessitate sequential progression (Zheng, X. Y., & Liang, X. F., 2015). Within the Dehong Dai region, numerous ritualistic activities are categorized as "Bai" (Buddhist festivals), yet only the Bai Tan and Bai Pala rituals confer the title "Flower of the Pure Land" (Cai, X. H., 2009). Compared to the initial Tan title, conferred through the Bai Tan ritual, the Paga title, attained via the Bai Pala ritual, is perceived by the Dai people as the paramount expression of devotion to the Buddha and the optimal means of merit accumulation (T'ien, J.-K., 1986; Cai, X. H., 2009). Bai Pala, a significant ritual involving the offering of Buddha statues, originated as a unique religious rite and precept of the Pòitsǎṅ sect. Due to the Pòitsǎṅ sect's considerable influence, other sects, including Tsoti, Tole, and Yon, which subsequently disseminated within the Dehong region, adopted analogous practices (Zhang, J. Z., 1992).

The Bai Pala ritual's significance within Theravada Buddhist practices among the Dehong Dai people was initially investigated in the 1930s. Yingliang Jiang initiated fieldwork in the late 1930s, succeeded by Ju-Kang Tien, who conducted research in the Dai village of NM in Mangshi in the early 1940s. Their research highlighted the Dai people's enthusiastic engagement with the Bai Pala ritual prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China. At that time, there were three main reasons that motivated the Dai people to hold the Bai Pala ritual: First, the Bai Pala ritual was perceived as the paramount act of merit in making offerings to the Buddha; second, the host would ascend to the Pure Land after death, and their parents would also gain entry by association; third, the Paga title obtained afterward symbolized elevated social status and honor. Consequently, the Bai Pala ritual represented a significant economic undertaking for the Dai people (Jiang, Y. L., 2003; T'ien, J.-K., 1986).

After the 1980s, anthropological fieldwork in the Dai region of Mangshi explored the ritual's performance, symbolic import, economic dimensions, age demographics, and social cohesion (Chu, J. F., 2005; Nagatani, 2007; Zhang, Z. W., & Zhang, M. N., 2022). However, these studies, while examining the Buddhist beliefs and the economic and social dimensions of the Bai Pala ritual, have overlooked the intrinsic relationship between the ritual's transformations and individual beliefs, as well as the broader shifts in the Dai people's economic, social, and cultural spheres. This study seeks to address the following research questions: What transformations have occurred in the Bai Pala ritual itself and in the attitudes of the Dai people in Mangshi towards this ritual since the establishment of the People's Republic of China? What are the underlying mechanisms driving these changes?

2.2 The Impact of Religious Pluralism on Individual Religious Belief

Berger's analysis of the impact of religious pluralism on individual belief primarily emphasizes two key dimensions. Firstly, the "relativization" effect of religious pluralism engenders an awareness of the multiplicity of worldviews, thereby destabilizing the taken-for-granted assumptions of one's own (Berger, 2014). Secondly, religious pluralism reconfigures the locus of religion within individual consciousness, transitioning it from a deep-seated certainty to a more contingent and mutable level of opinion (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009). In essence, religion is no longer perceived as self-evident but rather as a product of individual agency (Berger, 2014). To explicate this phenomenon, Berger introduces the concepts of "cognitive contamination" and "plausibility structure." "Cognitive contamination" refers to the alteration of perceptions and beliefs due to continuous dialogue and interaction among different individuals or groups in a pluralistic social environment, leading to cognitive conflict and relativization, which in turn undermines the certainty of existing beliefs and values (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009). "Plausibility structure," a concept from the sociology of knowledge, denotes the social environment that underpins the credibility of any given definition of reality. In pre-modern societies, "plausibility structures" were characteristically robust and stable. However, with the advent of modernity, relativization has rendered them progressively fragile and transient (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009). "Cognitive contamination" and "plausibility structure" are intrinsically linked. On the one hand, pluralism leads to "cognitive contamination" becoming the norm, which challenges the original "plausibility structure" of society by increasing the number of various "plausibility structures" in an individual's social environment, compelling individuals to navigate a landscape of religious and secular options. On the other hand, in response to "cognitive contamination," society adopts two primary strategies—fundamentalism and relativism—but most individuals occupy an intermediate position, maintaining cognitive equilibrium through selective denial or reconstruction of information (Berger, 2014).

An analytical framework of religious pluralism offers a crucial lens for examining the effects of religious pluralism on individual religiosity, a perspective that has been subsequently augmented and refined through empirical investigation. For instance, Pollack's empirical analysis of religious pluralism in the United States and Germany reveals that the specific impact of religious pluralism is regionally contingent. In the United States, religious pluralism correlates with a decline in individual religious participation and belief intensity. Conversely, in European contexts such as Germany, the influence of religious pluralism on individual religious belief is less pronounced, and in certain instances, may even be associated with its intensification (Pollack, 2016). Schmidt-Leukel posits that interreligious hermeneutics, predicated on mutual understanding and comprehension, can mitigate the potentially corrosive effects of religious diversity on shared fundamental religious tenets, potentially reinforcing them (Schmidt-Leukel, 2017). Furthermore, the research of Woods and Fernández suggests that patterns of belief and doubt are mediated by the congruencies and incongruencies between an individual's pre-existing worldview and newly encountered worldviews. Individuals construct the plausibility of belief through the active identification of a "common denominator," with only those beliefs that are shared across both existing and new worldviews remaining unproblematic (Woods & Fernández, 2023).

The aforementioned scholarship underscores the multifaceted influence of religious pluralism on individual belief formation. Berger's seminal work has catalyzed further inquiry into the dynamics of individual religious choice. Woodhead's investigation into religion and values in

Britain revealed that religious pluralism fosters a heightened degree of flexibility and diversity in religious identities. Individuals often selectively appropriate meaningful elements from their inherited religious traditions, integrating them with alternative sources of meaning. This process of "picking and choosing" is mediated by factors such as exposure to diverse religious traditions, as well as socio-demographic variables including ethnicity, class, education, and social networks (Woodhead, 2016). Kalsky's research on "flexible believers" in the Netherlands similarly highlights the agency and creativity individuals exhibit within a pluralistic religious landscape. These individuals transcend the confines of a single religious tradition, drawing upon diverse sources to construct novel belief systems tailored to their personal experiences and needs (Kalsky, 2017). Woods and Fernández's study of youth in Britain and Spain further elucidates the responses to religious pluralism, identifying both reconstruction and resistance as salient modes of engagement. Some participants synthesize unique religious or spiritual orientations by incorporating elements from disparate religious worldviews, while others reject newly encountered worldviews based on epistemological or moral grounds (Woods & Fernández, 2023).

These studies suggest that the ramifications of religious pluralism on individual faith, as well as the responses of individuals when encountering religious pluralism, are intricate and multifaceted. While the concepts of "cognitive contamination" and "relativization," as posited by Berger, furnish crucial theoretical perspectives for comprehending the impact of religious pluralism, these investigations are nonetheless encumbered by the following limitations: Initially, extant research predominantly concentrates on Western cultural contexts, thereby precluding a comprehensive examination of the influence of religious pluralism within non-Western social and cultural contexts. Secondly, existing studies are primarily predicated on cross-sectional comparisons, thereby neglecting the diachronic dimension of the impact of religious pluralism. Furthermore, extant research tends to concentrate on the "relativization" effect at the level of belief, yet the investigation into how this "relativization" influences individual religious practice remains insufficient.

Given these parameters, this investigation will employ the Bai Pala ritual of the Dai people in Mangshi as a case study. Through an examination of the ritual's diachronic evolution, this study aims to elucidate the specific trajectories of transformation in individual beliefs and religious participation influenced by religious pluralism. Furthermore, it seeks to delineate the factors that impinge upon individual agency within the domains of belief and religious practice.

3. Methodology and Procedures

Building upon prior anthropological investigations, this study revisits the village of NM in Fengping Town, Mangshi, drawing on the research methodologies of Ju-Kang Tien (1940s) and Jianfang Chu (2002). To broaden the comparative scope and enhance the study's heuristic value, fieldwork was expanded to encompass the villages of LM and JT in Fengping Town, MH village in Mangshi Town, and the XNL community in the Menghuan Subdistrict. The XNL community is situated in Mangshi's urban core, MH village in a suburban locale, and NM, LM, and JT villages in rural settings.

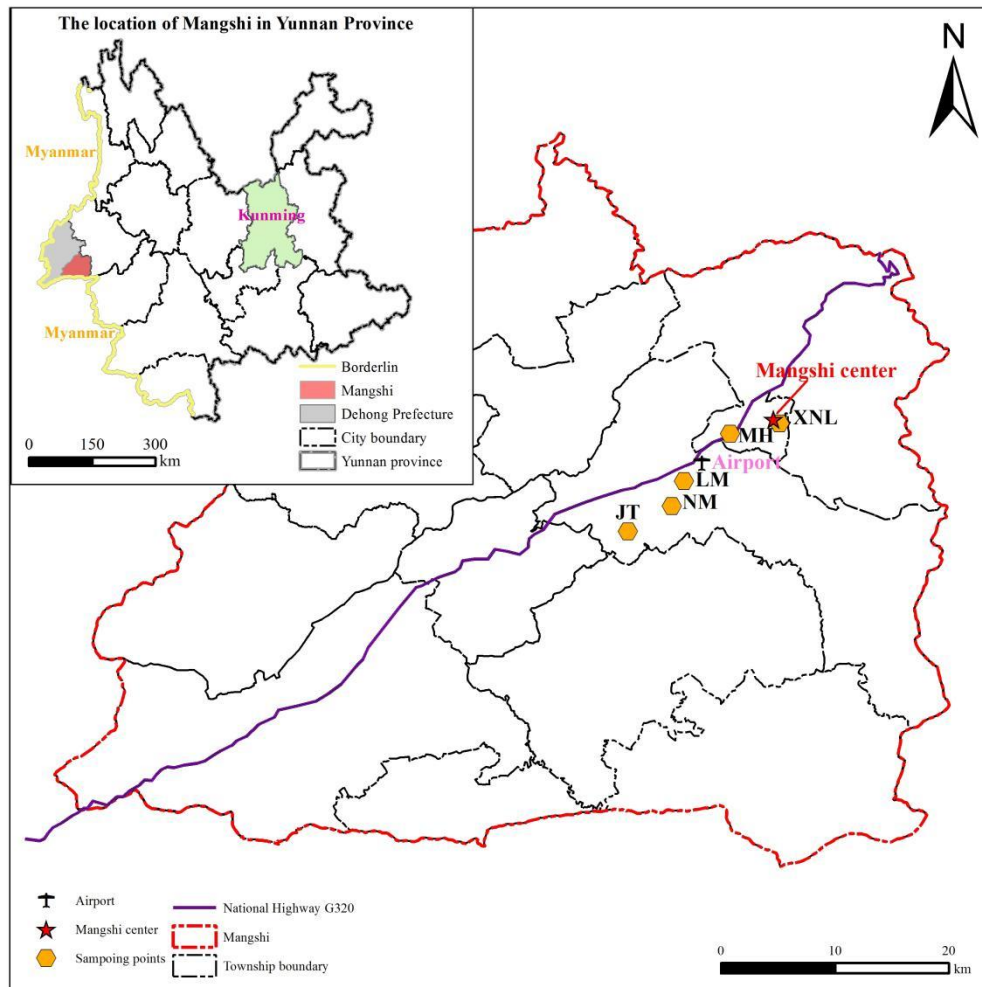


Figure 3.1: Field Sampling Sites Map

NM village, known in the Dai language as "Man Lamu," has historical roots dating back to 1680, and was under the jurisdiction of the Mangshi Tusi (local chieftain). Prior to 1936, Luxi County (renamed Mangshi in 2010) lacked formal townships, with administrative directives emanating from the Tusi's office. Under the Tusi system, the Dai region was divided into "Gangs," approximating township-level governance, with village-level administration subordinate to the Gang. NM village served as the administrative center for the Namu Gang (Editorial Committee of Luxi County Annals [ECLCA], 1993). Currently, NM village is administered under Fengping Town in Mangshi. Fengping Town is strategically located on a major transportation artery, encompassing the Mangshi Airport. National Highway 320, 80 kilometers southwest, connects to Jiegao in Ruili City, facilitating access to the northern Myanmar towns of Muse and Namhkam (Party History Research Office of Mangshi Municipal Committee, 2019). As of late 2020, NM village had a population of 4,254 individuals across 848 households. The demographic composition is predominantly Dai, with a minority presence of Han, Jingpo, Achang, and Yi ethnicities, making it the largest Dai settlement in Dehong Prefecture. Consistent with other Dai villages in Mangshi, NM village features a Buddhist temple (tsəŋ) affiliated with the Pəitsəŋ sect of Theravada Buddhism.

The data presented in this paper is derived from a cumulative total of 10 months of fieldwork, primarily conducted between August 2018 and December 2021. Preliminary observations were undertaken in February 2018, with supplementary investigations between 2022 and 2024. During the fieldwork, the author resided within a household in NM village. Communication was

conducted in Dehong Dai and Yunnan Mandarin dialects, contingent on the specific context. Data collection methods primarily involved participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Initially, the research focused on the livelihoods, kinship systems, religious beliefs, ritual practices, and the conduct of the Bai Pala ritual among the Dai villagers. Subsequent to the initial phase, a more in-depth investigation was conducted on the transformations in the ritual since the 1940s, particularly concerning its organization, expenditure, and the criteria for conferring the Paga title. In order to elucidate the specific perspectives and attitudes of the villages toward the Bai Pala ritual, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with a cohort of 56 married villagers, wherein marital status served as a prerequisite for the title of Paga. The background information of the interviewees is presented in Table 3.1.

Table3.1: Interviewees' background information

Dimension	Classification	Proportion (%)	Dimension	Classification	Proportion (%)
Gender	Male	46.43	Age Group	80 years and above	5.36
	Female	53.57		70-79	12.50
Education Level	College (Associate Degree) and above	3.57		60-69	17.86
	High School / Vocational School	26.79		50-59	19.64
	Junior High School	23.21		40-49	23.21
	Primary School	12.50		30-39	16.07
	Did not complete primary school	25.00		20-29	5.36
Proficiency in Mandarin and Chinese Characters	Never attended school	8.93	Employment Status	Agriculture	42.85
	Proficient in listening, speaking, reading, and writing	30.36		Manufacturing	1.79
	Able to listen, speak, read, and write	23.21		Transportation	3.57
	Has some listening and speaking ability, but cannot read or write	28.57		Construction	5.36
	Basic listening and speaking ability	5.36		Catering	8.93
Observance of Buddhist Precepts	Unable to listen, speak, read, or write	12.50		Retail	3.57
	Observing the Eight Precepts	5.36		Education	1.79
	Observing the Five Precepts	46.43		Public Sector	7.14
	Not observing any precepts	48.21		Retirement	25.00

4. Results

4.1 The Symbolic Significance and Process of the Bai Pala Ritual

The Bai Pala ritual, originating within the complex cosmological framework of the Dai people in Mangshi, syncretizes indigenous beliefs with Buddhist doctrines. At the core of their worldview lies the concept of the immortal soul, ancestor veneration, karmic retribution, and reincarnation. The Dai people believe that individuals possess 120 "Huan" (similar to "souls"). Upon death, these souls transcend physical decay, embarking on a post-mortem journey contingent upon the deceased's actions. Souls of those who experience a peaceful death are believed to return to their ancestral abodes, becoming ancestral spirits. Conversely, souls of those who die prematurely or violently transform into malevolent spirits, becoming wandering entities. The advent of Theravada Buddhism facilitated a fusion of the Dai's indigenous beliefs in the immortal soul and ancestor worship with Buddhist concepts of karma and rebirth. The most desirable post-mortem destination is the paradise of Meng Liban, while the least desirable is the hell of Meng Anai. The soul's ultimate destination is determined by the accumulation of merit and demerit during one's lifetime. The "Guide Sutra" elucidates, "Every deceased person hopes that the merit accumulated during their lifetime can resolve disasters and receive the blessings of the Buddha" (Dao, C. H., 2012: 69). Consequently, the deceased's meritorious deeds during their lifetime, coupled with the rituals performed by their descendants and relatives to transfer merit and accrue positive karma, are crucial for the soul's favorable transition.

In contrast to the Buddhist-based festivals common among the Dai region in Mangshi, the Bai Pala represents a merit-making ritual undertaken by individuals or families to attain the title of "Moya Meng Liban" (Flower of the Pure Land) (Chu, J. F., 2005). The objectives of the Bai Pala ritual among the Dai in Mangshi are largely consistent: to accrue merit for oneself and deceased kin, thereby improving their future rebirths and soliciting blessings for the departed. Firstly, the hosts are able to achieve varying levels of the Moya Meng Liban title. Secondly, through offerings to the Buddha and the performance of rituals for the deceased, the accumulated merit contributes to the deceased's improved status in the afterlife. Simultaneously, in accordance with the principle of merit transference, the organizers' own merit is correspondingly augmented.

The Bai Pala ritual can be performed repeatedly, with each iteration symbolizing a deepening devotion to the Buddha, the accumulation of greater merit, and the host's closer proximity to the paradise of Meng Liban. The title of Paga, conferred during the ritual, denotes the degree of merit accrued by the host. According to the elders, if a lay believer can attain the highest-level title of Paga Ti through multiple Bai Pala rituals, it signifies the completion of their merit and their souls' potential ascension to the paradise of Meng Liban post-mortem.

The most salient feature of this ritual is the profusion of offerings, meticulously prepared by the organizers on behalf of themselves and their deceased kin. These offerings, which include essential elements such as Buddha statues and scriptures, are supplemented by items contingent upon the hosts' resources. The magnitude of these offerings directly correlates with the accumulation of merit for the organizers and their ancestors. During the offering ritual, these items are presented to the Buddha and the deceased, a process overseen by celebrants who provide detailed descriptions.

Table 4.1: Offerings for the Bai Pala Ritual at the Yue Family in JT Village

Offering	Quantity	Offering	Quantity
Big Buddha Statue	1	Offering Table	1
Small Buddha Statues	2	Alms Bowl	1
Buddhist Scriptures	34 volumes	Buddhist Banners	34 pairs
Chime Bell	1	Buddhist Pillows	10 pairs
Palace Lanterns, Hanging Lanterns	1 pair each	Small Kasaya	1000
Long-handled Buddhist Fans	8	Gold and Silver Mountains	1 each
Buddhist Umbrellas	30 pairs	Small Paper Flags	2000
Peacock Feather Buddhist Ornament	1	Long Buddhist Banner	1
Buddhist Curtain	1	Bedding and Mats	10 sets
Flowers, Potted Plants	7	Cooking Utensils	1 set
Paper Horses, Paper Elephants	1 each	Sheet Metal Wardrobe	1

The ritual unfolds in three distinct phases. The initial phase encompasses preparatory activities, including fundraising, procuring Buddha statues from Myanmar, assembling offerings like Buddhist scriptures and prayer flags, selecting an auspicious date, constructing an offering pavilion, arranging the offerings, and ensuring ample provisions for the attendees. The second phase constitutes the ritual's core, featuring the offering to the Buddha, the public display of offerings, the provision of a feast for the guests, the bestowal of the Moya Meng Liban title certificate upon the organizers, a procession of the offerings throughout the village, culminating in their placement within the Buddhist temple for veneration, and the erection of a towering Buddhist banner in the temple courtyard. This banner serves as a symbolic conduit for the deceased's ascent to Meng Liban. Villagers then participate in the ritual by offering congratulations and seeking blessings. The final phase involves the ritual's conclusion, including expressions of gratitude to the celebrants who presided over the ritual, followed by the ceremonial burning of Buddhist banners, umbrellas, and other offerings after their period of display.

4.2 The Changes of the Bai Pala Ritual

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, which included direct observation of the Bai Pala ritual hosted by the Yue family in JT village in November 2020, and supplemented by extant video data from the Bai Pala rituals conducted by the Li lineage in NM village in 2000, the Mo family in FP village in 2016, and the Pa family in MH village in 2017, alongside semi-structured interviews with local villagers, this investigation demonstrates that, in contrast to the Bai Pala ritual as initially documented by Rukang Tian, the ritualistic procedures have experienced negligible modification since the 1940s. The primary transformations are principally manifested in the ritual's format, the role of the officiant, ritual expenditure, and the criteria for conferring the title of Paga.

Table 4.2: Diagram of Transformations in the Bai Pala Ritual

Time	Form of Observance	Officiant	Expenditure	Conditions for Conferring the Title of Paga
1940-1941	Individual /Household	Monk	5,800 to 8,530 in national currency	Having obtained the title of Tan, generally over the age of 40, and adherence to the Five Precepts of Buddhism after receiving the title of Paga
1999	Clan-based	Holu	Around 30,000 CNY	Married, no age restriction, and no requirement to observe the Five Precepts of Buddhism after receiving the title of Paga
2016-2018	Village Collective		100 CNY per person	
2020	Household		Around 93,000 CNY	

(Source: the 1940-1941 data were procured from the treatise compiled by Rukang Tian; the 1999, 2016-2018, and 2020 data were obtained through the author's original fieldwork)

During the 1940s, the Bai Pala ritual was distinguished by its considerable financial outlay. Research by Rukang Tian elucidates that in 1940, seven households within NM village concurrently effectuated the Bai Pala ritual, engendering expenditures that fluctuated between 5,800 and 8,530 yuan in national currency. This sum was commensurate with two to three years of a family's sustenance. Those who attained the Paga title via the ritual were not only revered as "great benefactors" and experienced an elevated social standing but also formally adopted Buddhist precepts, thereby signifying a transition in their religious life (T'ien, J.-K., 1986). Nevertheless, the prohibitive costs served to constrain participation. In 1940, NM village comprised a total population of 1,482, with a mere 70 individuals, aged 40 to 60, having successfully achieved the Paga title (Tian, R. K., 2016: 128).

The Bai Pala ritual experienced a period of disruption from the 1950s to the 1970s, precipitated by the sociopolitical transformations engendered by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. The Dehong Prefecture Buddhist Association's "Decision on Maintaining Normal Buddhist Activities," promulgated in January 1983, enabled the normalization of religious practices, thereby fostering the gradual resurgence of the Bai Pala ritual within select villages. Between 1980 and 1989, an estimated 200 households in Luxi County independently effectuated the Bai Pala ritual (Zhang, J. Z., 1992). The post-1980 restoration of the Bai Pala ritual evinced significant alterations in its ritualistic form, the role of the officiant, the associated expenditures, and the criteria for the conferring of the Paga title.

In terms of the ritual's form, there has been a transition from an "individual/family style" to a "clan style" and subsequently to a "village collective style." This shift has been correlated with a significant reduction in ritual expenses. Clan-organized rituals have substantially lowered the average cost per household. For example, the Bai Pala ritual conducted by the Lang clan in NM village in 1999, which involved 33 families, incurred a total cost of approximately 30,000 yuan, with each household contributing around 900 yuan. In village collective rituals, married individuals can attain the Paga title by contributing a nominal fee of 100 yuan. In contrast, family-based rituals are more expensive, yet still considerably less costly than in the 1940s. For instance, the Yue family's Bai Pala ritual in JT village in 2020 cost about 93,000 yuan, with 15

individuals receiving the Paga title, resulting in an average expenditure of about 6,200 yuan per person, a marked decrease compared to the 1940s.

Since the 1990s, the cessation of monastic residency in Mangshi's Dai villages has led to a transfer of custodianship of the Bai Pala ritual from monks to "Holu," lay Buddhist specialists. These specialists now play a central role in reciting Buddhist scriptures during village rituals and devotional offerings (Kojima, 2012). Concurrently, the criteria for attaining the Paga title have been considerably relaxed: the previous requirement of prior ordination (the Tan title) has been abolished; married individuals are now eligible regardless of age; there is no obligation to observe the Five Precepts of Buddhism after receiving the Paga title; and, due to the increasing number of Paga titleholders, the associated social prestige has declined.

According to the elders, in the past, the cost of holding the Bai Pala ritual in the family unit was expensive, and few families could afford it, but the title of Paga had a high social reputation, and those who obtained the title of Paga were highly respected in the village and surrounding villages. Nowadays, one only needs to donate 100 yuan as merit at the temple to obtain the Paga title, making it almost universally accessible. As a result, the social value of the title has greatly diminished. (LHG, 71 years old, male, "Holu" of NM Village)

Furthermore, the frequency of the Bai Pala ritual has undergone a marked decline. Chiyoko Nagatani's research indicates a flourishing of the ritual from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, particularly in the old town of Mangshi; however, a gradual decline commenced in the late 1990s, with only sporadic instances observed in the Mangshi suburbs (Nagatani, 2007). Our fieldwork reveals that since 2000, NM village has not hosted any family- or clan-based Bai Pala rituals, and other Dai villages similarly conduct only a limited number of rituals annually. Between 2019 and 2021, we documented only seven instances of the Bai Pala ritual. In summary, the family- and clan-based Bai Pala rituals in the Dai areas of Mangshi have experienced a sustained decline since the late 1990s.

4.3 Changes in the Attitudes of the Dai People towards the Bai Pala Ritual

Ju-Kang Tien's research indicates that in the 1940s, the Dai people of Mangshi exhibited a widespread aspiration to perform the Bai Pala ritual. Their labor and frugality were oriented towards achieving a paradisiacal afterlife, with the Bai Pala ritual serving as the "most important orientation" in their lives (T'ien, J.-K., 1986:111). However, subsequent investigations revealed that the opening of the Burma Road precipitated an influx of a large number of people from inland China, increased employment opportunities, and economic transformations. These changes instigated shifts in the Dai people's social values, leading to the questioning of long-held beliefs and a decline in the centrality of the Bai Pala ritual. This, in turn, resulted in a waning enthusiasm for its performance (T'ien, J.-K., 1986).

Since the 1940s, and particularly following the Reform and Opening-up, the Bai Pala ritual has undergone a significant transformation, marked by a shift in attitudes from enthusiastic endorsement to widespread indifference or even rejection. To explore the underlying changes in individual beliefs and values among the Dai people in Mangshi, this study employed semi-structured interviews with 56 married villagers. The findings reveal intergenerational disparities in attitudes toward the Bai Pala ritual. Of the 56 respondents, only 6 elderly individuals, aged over 70 (10.71%), expressed continued enthusiasm for the ritual. These individuals share common characteristics: long-term adherence to Buddhist precepts, low educational attainment (no formal schooling or only one year of primary education), monolingualism in the Dai language,

limited exposure to external influences, and the maintenance of a relatively devout Theravada Buddhist faith. Despite their continued desire to perform the Bai Pala ritual, its realization is hampered by their lack of productive activities and the absence of support from their offspring. Conversely, the remaining 50 respondents (89.29%) demonstrated indifference or outright rejection of the Bai Pala ritual. These respondents are characterized by their formal education, proficiency in Mandarin (some at an advanced level), engagement in diverse occupations (including catering, retail, transportation, and community management), and frequent exposure to mass media such as television and smartphones, as well as diverse social groups. They generally perceive the Bai Pala ritual as wasteful, consuming significant resources with little practical value. Further analysis indicates that their diminished enthusiasm for the Bai Pala ritual is primarily attributable to shifts in their understanding of merit, karma, and religious consumption patterns.

Initially, interviewees characterized by modern educational attainment, fluency in Mandarin, and prolonged exposure to mass media and diverse social groups demonstrated a pronounced preference for scientific and rationalistic interpretations of natural phenomena. This cohort exhibited a corresponding skepticism towards the existence of Meng Liban, the Buddhist concept of paradise. Interview responses frequently reflected sentiments such as "No one knows where people go after death," "The existence of the Meng Liban has yet to be substantiated through empirical observation," and "Meng Liban constitutes a superstitious belief." One elder, a devotee of the Five Precepts for over three decades, even invoked a "scientific" perspective: "Our country and other countries have launched so many satellites, but they have not found where Meng Liban is, so it does not exist at all." This questioning of the ontological status of Meng Liban eroded their faith in the doctrines of reincarnation and rebirth, thereby fostering skepticism towards the traditional practice of attaining the Paga through the Bai Pala ritual, which promised rebirth within the paradise of Meng Liban.

Furthermore, the advent of a market economy and the concomitant rise of rational consumption paradigms have demonstrably shaped the pragmatic consumption orientations of the majority of respondents. This is evidenced by their disinclination towards the substantial expenditures associated with the Bai Pala ritual, instead favoring the allocation of familial resources towards investments with productive yields, the education of their progeny, and the augmentation of their overall quality of life, all of which proffer tangible benefits. A representative perspective is articulated by a 58-year-old villager: "Holding a Bai Pala ritual costs at least fifty to sixty thousand yuan, and various offerings must be prepared. People who come to the ceremony eat and leave, and the fifty to sixty thousand yuan is spent in two or three days, which is too wasteful. Those Buddhist umbrellas and banners are eventually burned, which is meaningless." A prevailing aphorism among the villagers of NM, "Hosting the Bai Pala ritual to obtain the title of Paga won't make others give way to you, but buying a motorcycle or a car will," reflects a significant transformation in the consumption concept of the Dai people in Mangshi: from religious consumption aimed at pursuing well-being in the afterlife to secular consumption focused on practical benefits in the present life.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Transition from Relative Isolation to a Pluralistic Environment in the Dai Region of Mangshi

Since the 1940s, the Dai region of Mangshi has undergone profound transformations in its social institutions, economic life, and cultural exchanges. The acceleration of modernization has

shifted the area from relative isolation to openness and diversity, significantly increasing the breadth and depth of interactions and collisions between heterogeneous cultural systems (Cao, Y. K., 2022). Consequently, the traditional beliefs of the Dai people have been exposed to an environment of religious pluralism.

5.1.1 Changes in Social Institutions and Power Relations

During the 1940s, the Dai society in Mangshi was structured by a rigid hierarchical system under the rule of the Tusi (local chieftains). The Tusi family and their relatives constituted the aristocratic class, while the rest of the population was classified as commoners. This hierarchical distinction deeply permeated all aspects of social life (T'ien, J.-K., 1986). To fortify their political standing and authority, the Tusi and their bureaucratic apparatus strategically leveraged the influence of Theravada Buddhism. Within their sphere of control, the Buddhist temple network was structured into three tiers: the main temple, the central temple, and the village temple, mirroring the administrative divisions of Meng, Gang, and Village. The monastic hierarchy comprised four ranks: novice monk, bhikkhu, senior monk, and high-ranking elder, with the appointment of high-ranking elders requiring the recognition and endorsement of the Tusi (Zhang, J. Z., 1992). This theocratic power structure (Chu, J. F., 2014) rendered Theravada Buddhism a critical pillar of social cohesion and a formative influence on the value systems of the Dai society in Mangshi.

The Bai Pala ritual, a significant manifestation of Theravada Buddhist practice, was highly valued by the Tusi and their bureaucratic elite. The Tusi not only actively participated in the rituals conducted by the villagers but also sponsored these rituals, often including their families (Tian, R. K., 2016). Given the considerable expense associated with the ritual, ordinary villagers were often precluded from hosting it, while those who could afford to do so multiple times were typically village officials appointed by the Tusi, such as village heads and administrators, who enjoyed elevated social status within the community (T'ien, J.-K., 1986). They engaged in competitive displays of ritual sponsorship, as the Bai Pala served not only as a demonstration of their economic prowess but also as a means to uphold or augment their sacred identity and social prestige among the commoners. From an anthropological perspective, the Bai Pala ritual exhibits parallels with the "potlatch" phenomenon (Chu, J. F., 2005), functioning as both a practical expression of Theravada Buddhist tenets of merit and karma and a product of the confluence of political power and social authority.

In October 1955, the feudal land ownership system and the Tusi governance in the Dai region of Mangshi were abolished (ECLCA, 1993). The Tusi and their associated privileged class were eliminated, and religious beliefs were no longer subject to manipulation by the feudal lords, leading to the complete collapse of the theocratic power structure. The Communist Party of China and the government subsequently initiated a policy of religious freedom (Zhang, J. Z., 1992). The formerly monopolistic position of Theravada Buddhism in Dai society in Mangshi was destabilized, a shift that directly resulted in a significant diminution of the Bai Pala ritual's role in maintaining the traditional social order.

5.1.2 Changes in Economic Life and Wealth Consumption

Prior to the advent of the Burma Road in the 1940s, the Dai society in Mangshi relied primarily on rice cultivation as their main livelihood, with very few artisans and merchants, and the economy remained in a state of natural subsistence for a long time (Yunnan Provincial Editorial Committee, 2009). On the one hand, restricted by natural geographical conditions and

transportation barriers, the economic activities of the Dai people in Mangshi were extremely limited. In addition, the prevalence of malaria and the widespread fear of it created a relatively independent and closed social space in the region (Liu, H. Y., 2018). Furthermore, due to the backward rice cultivation technology and insufficient grain storage facilities, the Dai people in Mangshi were unable to use their surplus wealth for commercial investment or to expand their cultivation scale. On the other hand, restricted by factors such as the class hierarchy, the church hierarchy, and the underdeveloped social division of labor, the Dai people, especially the commoners, found it difficult to use their savings to improve their living consumption, such as housing, clothing, and transportation (T'ien, J.-K., 1986), leading to a very limited overall consumption level.

However, with the completion and opening of the Burma Road, the restrictions on transportation imposed by natural geographical conditions were broken. At the same time, the development of medical and health technology effectively controlled malaria, and the closed state of the Dai area in Mangshi was gradually broken. After the Reform and Opening-up, the economic life of the region underwent a rapid transformation. From the perspective of consumption structure, the productive consumption of households increased significantly. The implementation of the household responsibility system promoted the prevalence of multi-cropping patterns. In addition to rice, villagers widely planted cash crops such as sugarcane, watermelon, spice tobacco, and sweet and crispy corn. Many households also engaged in various household sideline businesses, and some households even specialized in rice processing, fertilizer and pesticide sales, transportation, or construction. Furthermore, the trend of young and middle-aged people working outside the village became increasingly common. The diversification of livelihoods not only increased economic income but also led to a reduction in villagers' leisure time. As the villagers said, "Now everyone is busy earning money and doesn't have much time to host the Bai Pala."

Table 5.1: Employment Statistics of NM Village, 2020 (Unit: Persons)

Industry	Number of Employed Persons	Industry	Number of Employed Persons
Agriculture	1771	Accommodation and Catering	53
Industry	66	Transportation, Storage, and Postal Services	190
Construction	110	Migrant Workers	202
Wholesale and Retail Trade	31	Other Sectors	83
		Total	2506

(Source: Statistics provided by the Village Committee of NM Village)

In addition, the living consumption of households also increased significantly. At this stage, the daily life expenses of Dai families are primarily focused on building new houses, buying cars, children's education, purchasing clothing and jewelry, and traveling. Among them, building new houses has become the most important expenditure for household wealth. According to data provided by the NM village committee, in 2020, 187 out of 848 households in the village applied to build new houses, accounting for 22.05%. The cost for villagers to build a 2-3 story house is

about 500,000-1 million yuan. In contrast, religious consumption has decreased dramatically. As they no longer support monks and hold Bai Pala rituals, most households spend only 1,000-2,000 yuan per year on religion, mainly for small expenses related to the elderly in the family who observe precepts and offer sacrifices to Buddha.

Analyzing the shifts in economic paradigms, the Dai community in Mangshi's propensity to allocate substantial resources to the Bai Pala ritual during the 1940s did not stem solely from the hegemonic influence of Theravada Buddhism. The prevailing societal insularity, coupled with rigid class stratification and limited legitimate avenues for investment and consumption, rendered the Bai Pala seemingly an "optimal" selection. However, the advent of the Burma Road, and subsequently, the Reforms and Opening-up policies, dismantled the insular character of the Dai region in Mangshi. This transformation led to a proliferation of investment and consumption modalities. Consequently, the Bai Pala ritual faced formidable competition, its former status as an "optimal," if not "monopolistic," choice was significantly undermined, leading to a marked decline in the populace's inclination to commit substantial capital to the ritual.

5.1.3 Cultural Exchange and the Influence of Mainstream Values

Within the Dai communities of Mangshi, the advent of Theravada Buddhism during the late Yuan Dynasty precipitated the gradual institutionalization of temple education. This established a customary practice wherein young men would undertake instruction in the Old Dai script within the temple during the Vassa retreat. Temple education mainly focused on reciting and copying Buddhist scriptures, providing an important foundation for the dissemination of Theravada Buddhist thought and the cultivation of believers (Luxi County Education Bureau [LCEB], 1993). However, it was not until the first primary school was founded by the Tusi of Mangshi in 1932 that school education in the Dai region of Mangshi achieved a breakthrough, with most students coming from upper-class families. According to the "Luxi County Education Chronicles," in 1932, only 6.8% of the population in Luxi County could read and write. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the proportion of illiterate and semi-literate people in the county was as high as over 90% (LCEB, 1993: 180). This dearth of mass education, compounded by a limited proficiency in the Chinese language and characters, led to a lack of shared linguistic and written communicative tools between the Dai populace of Mangshi and other ethnic groups. This linguistic isolation, coupled with the constraints imposed by the natural geographical environment, significantly impeded extensive cultural exchanges with external entities.

Following the 1950 establishment of the Luxi County People's Government, a concerted effort was made to expand educational infrastructure and implement literacy programs. Consequently, by the 1982 third national population census, the rate of illiteracy and semi-literacy had decreased to 34.83%. This figure further declined to 25.42% by the 1990 fourth national population census (LCEB, 1993: 5). The advent of the 21st century, marked by increased population mobility and the proliferation of mass media, including radio, television, the Internet, and smartphones, has fundamentally altered the previously insular character of the Dai region in Mangshi.

In the context of the pluralism engendered by modernity, a growing number of individuals have cultivated a more profound comprehension of diverse ideologies, value systems, and lifestyles, thereby augmenting their capacity to interpret and engage with the realities of existence through alternative cultural frameworks (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009). On the one hand, with the popularization of school education and the widespread dissemination of mainstream media, the

atheistic values based on "science" and "rationality" have been accepted by more and more young and middle-aged people and the elderly. On the other hand, after the Reform and Opening-up, the market economy demonstrated its role in promoting social economy and material production, stimulating people's inner pursuit of interests, and then promoting people's pursuit of utilitarian and practical values (Zhang, C. H., & Han, S. S., 2021). This shift has precipitated a challenge to the established religious consumption paradigms within the Dai community of Mangshi. The allocation of substantial resources to the Bai Pala ritual is increasingly perceived not as an optimal strategy for augmenting future well-being and attaining social prestige, but rather as a form of extravagance and imprudence. Conversely, the investment of accumulated wealth in productive endeavors and the enhancement of living standards have gained ascendancy as a more widely accepted mode of consumption.

5.2 The Impact of Religious Pluralism on the Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Dai People in Mangshi

The concepts of "cognitive contamination" and "plausibility structure," as articulated within the theory of religious pluralism, provide a potent theoretical framework for analyzing the impact of religious pluralism on the religious beliefs and practices of the Dai people in Mangshi. The central dynamic of "cognitive contamination" entails the modification of individuals' perceptions of reality and beliefs through sustained dialogue and interaction. This process precipitates cognitive dissonance and a "relativization" effect that undermines the certainty of pre-existing beliefs and values (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009). Conversely, the "plausibility structure" operates as a social environment that sustains the credibility of specific realities. It employs institutional configurations, patterns of social interaction in everyday life, and mechanisms of meaning reproduction to formulate defensive strategies against the challenges presented by pluralism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In exploring the transformations in the religious practices of the Dai people in Mangshi within the context of pluralism, our analysis will focus on three interrelated dimensions: cognitive shifts, practical differentiation, and institutional adaptation.

At the cognitive level, the influx of diverse values during the modernization process has induced profound "cognitive contamination" within the traditional religious beliefs of the Dai people in Mangshi. This "contamination" primarily permeates through three main channels: the disintegration of the Tusi system and the transformation of economic life, which has created a fertile ground for diverse secular consumption; the scientific rationality and atheistic values disseminated by the modern education system and mass media, which have shaken key beliefs of Theravada Buddhism, such as the paradise of Meng Liban and reincarnation; and the utilitarian and pragmatic values fostered by the market economy, which have deconstructed the sacred significance of the Bai Para ritual, prompting individuals to re-evaluate the value of ritual expenditures. It is important to note that this "cognitive contamination" induced by religious pluralism does not disseminate homogeneously; rather, it exhibits a gradient diffusion pattern. The elderly demographic, characterized by lower educational attainment, a limited social network, and a more protracted adherence to Buddhist precepts, experiences a comparatively attenuated degree of "contamination." Conversely, the younger and middle-aged cohorts, distinguished by higher educational levels, greater occupational mobility, and frequent exposure to mass media, are more profoundly affected. This disparity elucidates why the attitudes of the middle-aged and young adults towards the Bai Para ritual are comparatively more apathetic than those of the elderly.

On a practical level, cognitive restructuring has led to a clear differentiation in individuals'

religious participation. On the one hand, individuals have a high degree of autonomy in choosing whether to hold the Bai Pala ritual initiated by individuals or families themselves, based on their own preferences. On the other hand, despite growing skepticism towards the concepts of merit and karma, individuals are still required to participate in collective Buddhist rituals organized by the village, such as collective ordination rites and communal meditation during the Vassa period. These rituals are considered vital for community cohesion and the preservation of ethnic traditions. This phenomenon indicates that the choice of individual religious participation behaviors does not entirely depend on one's own "religious preferences and opinions" (Berger, 2014), but is also constrained by community norms and cultural identity.

At the institutional level, the Theravada Buddhist tradition has formulated adaptive strategies to navigate the exigencies of religious pluralism, thereby preserving its original "plausibility structure." This defensive strategy sustains the continuity of traditional religious practices through two primary mechanisms. Firstly, core ritual activities, such as ordination and meditation, are embedded in the life course of individuals and the collective life of the Dai community in Mangshi, leveraging age-based organizations with attendant social constraints (Zhang Zhenwei & Zhang Mingnan, 2022). This reinforces the group norms governing individual religious participation. Secondly, the core values of almsgiving and precept observance have undergone a transformation, shifting from being primarily driven by individual faith to being sustained by collective cultural identity. These values are perpetuated through ethnic cultural inheritance mechanisms.

As theories of religious pluralism posit, relativization is not an inexorable, linear process; rather, it leads to a dialectical process (Berger & Zijderveld, 2009). The diffusion of "cognitive contamination" continually destabilizes the boundaries of established "plausibility structures," which subsequently trigger defensive mechanisms that mitigate these challenges through institutional affiliations and functional adjustments. This dialectical interaction is crucial for understanding the complex and dynamic nature of changes in religious practices among the Dai people in Mangshi. In the context of an increasingly pluralistic society, the Theravada Buddhist traditions of the Dai in Mangshi have not been entirely supplanted by secular values. Instead, through the reconstruction of their religious practices, they have attained a new equilibrium between the religious and secular spheres.

6. Conclusion

This study takes the transformation of the Bai Pala ritual in the Dai region of Mangshi as a case study. The key concepts of "cognitive contamination" and "plausibility structure" from the theory of religious pluralism are employed to analyze the impact of religious pluralism on the religious practices of the Dai people. The findings reveal that since the 1940s, the Dai community in Mangshi has undergone profound transformations in social institutions, economic life, and cultural exchanges, thus shifting from relative isolation to openness and diversity. The influx of diverse values such as atheism and pragmatism during modernization has deeply "contaminated" the traditional religious beliefs of the Dai people, which has undermined the certainty of the Bai Pala ritual as a central practice of Theravada Buddhist faith, leading to the decline of the once-prosperous ritual. The diachronic evolution of the Bai Pala ritual corroborates the explanatory power of the central arguments of the theory of religious pluralism. That is, the "relativization" effect of pluralism means that individuals no longer take their identification with specific religious concepts and values for granted. Instead, they have more opportunities to choose among multiple worldviews, both religious and secular (Berger, 2014).

On this basis, this study yields two additional insights. Firstly, "cognitive contamination" does not disseminate homogeneously. Its "relativization" effect is contingent upon the frequency and depth of an individual's engagement with heterogeneous cultural values. Nevertheless, cognitive reconstruction at the individual level can catalyze shifts in majority opinions, thereby precipitating transformations in collective value systems. Secondly, there is a degree of differentiation between faith reconstructions induced by "cognitive contamination" and an individual's religious participation. Regarding the Bai Pala ritual initiated by individuals or families, individuals have greater autonomy. However, for collective ritual activities like communal ordinations or meditation retreats organized by the village, individuals are not entirely free to choose based on their "religious preferences and opinions," but are subject to social constraints stemming from community norms and cultural identification. This divergence indicates the resilience of the "plausibility structure" of Theravada Buddhism. Specifically, when the cognitive certainty of traditional beliefs is no longer sustainable, they can still persist at the practical level through strategies such as institutional adherence and functional adaptation.

To sum up, the theory of religious pluralism transcends the limitations of the binary "sacred-secular" analytical framework and provides a crucial analytical framework for this study. The key findings of this research indicate that the impact of religious pluralism does not manifest as a simple linear substitution relationship but rather presents differentiated responses at the cognitive and practical levels. This "cognitive-practice" hierarchical response strategy not only enriches the cross-cultural applicability of the theory of religious pluralism but also provides empirical evidence for understanding the contemporary transformations of traditional religious beliefs and religious governance in the ethnic minority regions of China. In the context of deepening pluralism, the following strategies could be adopted for religious governance in ethnic minority areas: First, actively establish a dialogue mechanism between traditional beliefs and modern values to facilitate the modernization of the traditional belief system through cultural adaptation. Second, promote the organic integration of traditional religious rituals with ethnic culture and collective life to enhance their adaptability in contemporary society. Finally, leverage the social integration functions of traditional institutions, such as age-based organizations and village communities, to sustain group cohesion within belief systems.

Given this study's limitation to a single ethnic case, the universality of its conclusions requires validation through more cross-cultural comparative investigations. Future research should further explore the specific manifestations of the impact of religious pluralism across diverse social contexts, with a particular focus on the interaction mechanisms between traditional religious beliefs and secular values, lifestyles, and social institutions.

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