

**Title:**

Grace is incommensurability in commensuration: The semantics of *bwan* among three generations of Wa and Lahu prophets

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# Grace is incommensurability in commensuration: The semantics of *bwan* among three generations of Wa and Lahu prophets

## **Abstract:**

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, prophets have reappeared periodically among the Wa and Lahu ethnic groups of mainland Southeast Asia. Exceptionally talented, these men built on the syncretic cults of run-away soldiers, secretive Buddhist sects, and Christian missionaries and became leaders of millenarian movements. Typically, in the Wa language, these men are said to be very strong and blessed, or full of grace (*bwan*). The prophets might be understood as reincarnations of mythical ‘men of prowess’, or as the representatives of the peripheral situation. However, both interpretations fundamentally misread the semantics of grace in Wa and neighbouring languages: a kind of cunning and strength that is so radical that it cannot be measured or mediated. Grace, here, is neither a ‘mediative concept’ (as Pitt Rivers suggested), nor is it the consequence of Christian conversion. Instead, grace is the incommensurability that emerges at the margin of a world that is measured.

**Keywords:** grace; millenarianism; ritual; mediation; periphery; Wa

In conversations with Wa intellectuals and Wa Christians today, *ting bwanson* is perhaps the most frequently used expression. Literally ‘great fortune’, the combination is used as a polite interjection, to say goodbye, and to wish well. Basically, it’s used to say ‘thank you’, and the English, Chinese, and Burmese words for ‘thank you’ are the most common translations that Wa speakers give for *ting bwanson*. Originally, the roots *bwan* and *son* both mean fortune, blessing, and good luck, and that is still how those words are used by Wa speakers today when speaking of some specific object or interlocutor (as in ‘she is lucky’). But this meaning is distinct from the standard expression *ting bwanson*, where *bwanson* is not a specific property of someone but refers to great fortune as a general category. In that sense, the *bwan* in *ting bwanson* is very similar to grace in Indo-European languages; possibly the meaning of the word was just a specific ‘favour’ but when stated after the fact (‘this was a great favour’) it came to refer to a general category, and is thus the root of ‘thank you’ in all Roman languages.<sup>1</sup> What was a direct gift became an abstract one, and both grace and *bwan* also imply the sense of a favour that can never be returned and a blessing that is immeasurable.

Interestingly this change from direct *bwan* to abstract *bwan*, from noting someone’s fortune to a standard term for wishing fortune, did not happen among some Wa: the inhabitants of the central Wa hills, and specifically the Wa dialects of Ximeng (in today’s China) and Cong Simiang (in today’s Myanmar) do not use the term *ting bwanson*. There is no general term to say ‘thank you’ in those dialects. Their speakers belong to those Wa who remained autonomous for the longest time and never converted to Buddhism or Christianity. Our knowledge of Wa society and history today is obviously coloured and distorted by the

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<sup>1</sup> Latin *gratia*, Greek *charis*, Hebrew *chen* are all related to the Proto-Indo-European root \**gwere* ‘to favour’.

Christian missions active in the Wa hills since the 1920s: the bible translators used the same source of ‘*bwan*’ to translate ‘grace’; ‘asking for *bwan*’ (*rok bwan*) is the term for ‘pray’; and ‘*ting bwanson*’ is thus a typical phrase of the Wa pastors and others who are able to read and write the Wa script that was created by the Christian missionaries. By contrast, no script exists for the dialects of Aicheng and Cong Simiang.

However much the Christian influence might be distorting our understanding of Wa history, I think we can take it for granted that even before *bwan* was soaked in the semantic bath of Christian grace, there was a dynamic opposition between the concrete, relational, and immanent sense of *bwan* and the abstract, objective, and transcendent sense of the same word. Only the latter sense approaches the meaning of ‘grace’ if by that term we understand a favour, a blessing and a gift of such immensity that it can never be reciprocated. This opposition between two senses of *bwan* can be seen clearly in the histories of various generations of Wa prophets. At least since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, prophets have reappeared periodically among the Wa and Lahu ethnic groups of mainland Southeast Asia. Exceptionally talented and cunning, these men proposed ritual innovations and became leaders of millenarian movements. They reinterpreted the syncretic cults of run-away soldiers, secretive Buddhist sects, and later Christian influences. Typically, in the Wa language, these men are said to be very strong and blessed – ‘full of grace’ (*bwan*).

In the following I recount the stories of three generations of prophets among the Wa and Lahu: the Tongjin monks of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Tax Pacao Meng of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Tax Cao Tie of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. My arguments are mainly based on historical sources in Chinese and in Wa. They are complemented by the oral history and contemporary ethnography that I have collected during eighteen months of fieldwork in the Wa hills between 2014 and 2017, of which I spent more than one year in the village of Yaong Rai.<sup>2</sup> Everything we know about these prophets points to the fundamental importance of the term ‘*bwan*’ and to the possibility of an abstract, objective and transcendent meaning of the term that appeared in their millenarian movements. It appeared first in the personalities and deeds of the prophets themselves: charismatic leaders par excellence. Note that charisma comes from the Greek *charis*, that is, grace, and is commonly defined as ‘personal gift’. The charismatic quality of those leaders thus provided a model for the transition from concrete to abstract, from a direct gift to an immeasurable gift, from *bwan* as fortune to *bwan* as grace.

Similar prophets and millenarian movements appeared among the neighbouring Lahu, Chinese, and Shan at the same time. Anthropologists and historians have written about them as ‘men of prowess’, which are related to a specific constellation of kinship and power relations; or explained them otherwise as representatives of the ‘peripheral situation’. I will test both interpretations below. By bringing the prophets down to earth and fixing them to a social context, these interpretations tend to diminish the element of radical novelty in the grace of the prophet. Instead of the historical essence of charisma in Southeast Asia, or the social misery of the peripheral situation, the semantics of *bwan* speak of commensuration and measurement, or rather the confrontation between a world in which measurement is indexical and relational, and another world in which it is general and universal.

The same argument has wider consequences for our understanding of ‘grace’: the historical semantics of *bwan* allow us to unmoor ‘grace’ from its Christian anchoring. Even though

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<sup>2</sup> This name is a pseudonym for a village in the Northern Command of the Wa State of Myanmar. Elsewhere I describe the politics of militarism in this de-facto state at the border of China and Myanmar today (Steinmüller 2019; 2020; 2021).

*bwan* has become a Christian term, the characteristic paradoxes of the concept of grace appeared in the Wa hills long before the arrival of Christian missionaries, as we will see. *Bwan* as grace refers to a gift of such immensity that it can never be reciprocated: paradoxically, grace acquires this meaning of incommensurability only in contexts where commensuration has become routine. There are other contexts where commensuration – through tables, balances, and the lists - is rare or completely absent, and in these worlds grace also does not exist. Or rather, the terms which later came to mean grace only refer to concrete gifts and strength, rather than to incommensurable commensuration – and that is exactly what can be observed in the semantics of *bwan*.

The concept and its uses by several generations of prophets in the Wa hills thus show that grace cannot be understood as a timeless concept mediating values (as suggested by Pitt-Rivers 1992). That is so not only because values changed, but because grace as incommensurability in commensuration does not exist in certain worlds. The story we will see unfold begins in such a world, where *bwan* just meant fortune, where commensuration was uncommon, and where people did not usually say ‘thank you’. Our endpoint will be another world, where *bwan* means grace, where everything is being measured on an everyday basis, and where people say ‘thank you’ all the time. At the threshold of both worlds stand three generations of prophets.

## Three generations of prophets

### *The Lahu monks*

Everything we know about the local history of the Wa hills points to the long-term autochthony of the Wa. Sure, the Wa also had migrated into these mountains at some point, possibly after they were defeated by their neighbours in the plains. But that had happened much earlier than when the Lahu arrived in the same mountains. Those neighbours are always seen by the Wa as relatively weaker newcomers, mobile hunters who never built strong village units.

While the Wa practised patrilineal cross-cousin marriage and recounted long genealogies, Lahu kinship was bilateral, ‘non-lineal’ with little genealogical depth (Ma 2013b, 97ff), and focused on the conjugal unit of husband and wife (Du 2002). The Wa spirit world is a pantheon of capricious spirits without a high god (Fiskesjö 2017), whereas most Lahu worshipped the high god of Guisha (aka Xeul Sha). Both groups were mobile and membership fluid: over the centuries some outsiders became Wa – for instance Han soldiers and miners (Wang 2010). But Lahu group identity altogether seems to have been the result of a runaway movement of refugees, deserters, and secret societies (Ma 2011, 2013a). The Wa might be called the Catholics of the region, and the Lahu the Protestants – in the sense that the Wa world of autochthony, local tradition, and tightly integrated kinship networks contrasted with Lahu mobility, held together by the conjugal unit and small family units, and a spirit world governed by one god.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This comparison with Catholics and Protestants is supposed to emphasise the differences between Wa and Lahu sociality, and specifically the contrast between local traditions linked to a pantheon of unpredictable spirit-

Since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century C.E., a series of secret societies and millenarian movements formed in the region and became widely influential in Lahu communities, while only relatively few Wa took part. For instance, during the Ming-Qing transition of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese monks in the Jizu mountains far north of the Wa hills had established a syncretic cult that attracted many followers and eventually was suppressed by the Qing armies. Some monks escaped and arrived in the Wa hills, where they preached to the Lahu and built up a local following (Ma 2013b, 14ff.; Walker 2003, 322ff). These religious innovators established a kind of ‘charismatic tradition’ among the Lahu; their prophets propagated ritual innovation and in particular the message of the supreme deity called ‘Guisha’ (Telford 1937, 170ff.; Walker 1974, 2003) and a reborn living Buddha called E Sha. These millenarian traditions were central to a number of Lahu rebellions, often led by similar prophets (Ma 1997, 36–46), which connected local secret societies (Ma 2011).

However, it should be noted that there are many different Lahu groups in Southwest China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, and not all of them worship Guisha (Ma 2013b, 96). This is important to bear in mind when we assess the ritual practices of blessing, or *bo* in Lahu: basically, the same word as *bwan* in Wa. Blessing here refers to potency, power, and fortune. Blessings, among the Lahu, are given at all kind of occasions, to drive away evil spirits, at weddings and funerals, at the Lahu New Year (Du 1996, 57; Ma 2013b, 95). But perhaps the most common ritual to call for blessing is called ‘to take *bo*’ (*bo de*): if someone is at risk or in danger, for instance, after an accident or some misfortune struck, seven relatives and friends meet, and each of them contributes a piece of string. The seven strings are twisted together to create a ‘*bo* thread’, which is then tied around the upper arm of the ‘patient’, to pass on the power and protection of *bo* (Ma 2013b, 95).

Quite a different kind of *bo* ritual is the one that takes place at the New Year in Lahu communities: a candle-light ceremony that directly addresses Guisha, asking the god for well-being throughout the year. Focusing on the role of Guisha, especially in the New Year rituals, several ethnographers of the Lahu have written that the ultimate source of all *bo* is the high god. But is this God always present when *bo* is given and taken, for instance in the string-twisting rituals? The source of *bo* is significant, because it fundamentally changes the meaning of the concept: if it comes from Guisha, then *bo* becomes an immeasurable gift, something like the ‘eternal gift of life’ that can never be returned and thus is the basis of eternal debt. This is indeed the interpretation of Lahu blessing according to Du Shanshan:

Lahu blessing constitutes and sustains an absolute blessing giver/taker asymmetry, which is grounded in and, in turn, reinforces an absolute human humility before the Lahu supreme god and, thus, relative equality among Lahu themselves. (Du 1996, 74–75)

This is so because

The ultimate source of blessings is the supreme creator of the universe, who bears a symbolic parental bond to, and insurmountable authority over, humans. (Du 1996, 58)

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beings and mobility under the aegis of one god. But the comparison is far from perfect – the Wa lacked a centralised polity, let alone a catholic church organization, and they were definitely not monotheistic.

I do not doubt that there are specific myths of the high God that indeed confirm this argument. But the *bo* that is ‘delivered by others’ in ordinary exchanges is perhaps not subject to the eternal debt to Guisha. Take for instance an ordinary blessing – such as the seven threads of the ‘*bo* taking’ mentioned above, or blessings such as the following:

May you be blessed with chickens, pigs and cattle to the full capacity of your pens!  
May you be blessed with sons all over the mountains and daughters all around the valleys! (Du 1996, 58)

Much depends on the circumstances: a special occasion in the family (people meet a relative, an accident happened etc.), versus a more general occasion such as the New Year festival, for instance. Possibly we can relate those situations to two meanings of *bo*: the blessing given by particular others (such as elders and parents) and the blessing given by the supreme deity. If the latter approaches ‘grace’, the former is perhaps something quite different: maybe it does not produce any lasting and ‘absolute’ asymmetry? If this was the case, it would be more akin to the kind of blessing that has been described among neighbouring groups, such as the Akha; that is, blessings that are begged for from significant others, including elders and ancestors (Kammerer 1996). This is possibly the way in which those Lahu that do not worship Guisha would use the word *bo*.

I can say with more confidence that this is the way in which non-Buddhist and non-Christian Wa use the word *bwan*, in salutary exchanges and in ritual. Some Wa also tie strings around the arms of people who are weak or in danger, to wish them good fortune – not necessarily seven members (as in the Lahu *bo* ritual), but generally some elder gives a ‘blessing’ to the person in case. The word that is used for the ceremony is ‘*yuh bwan*’, that is, to make *bwan*. Here, *bwan* is given by one specific person to another specific person, and I’m not sure it is necessary to involve some high God to follow this custom.

While the prophets and their God Guisha were certainly important to many Lahu from early on, most Wa remained suspicious; some paid tribute to the monks who had installed their temples among the Lahu, some even joined the Lahu rebellions, but in general the Wa stayed away and nothing like the monks or preachers emerged among them. This would only change in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when several Wa prophets appeared, perhaps the most famous one being Tax Pacao Meng.

### *Tax Pacao Meng*

Ai Meng was born ca. 1880 in a Wa village near Aishuai and certainly had heard of the nearby Lahu monks. Around 1900 he started preaching similarly syncretic messages among the Wa of Aishuai. The religious movement he formed was based on Buddhist teachings and opposed to headhunting – then still common among many Wa communities (Fiskesjö forthcoming, 342; G. E. Harvey 1957, 131). He changed his name to ‘Tax Pacao Meng’, ‘the leader of the land’, and ‘proclaimed he knew magic, was invulnerable to rifles and swords, and started to raise troops’, as summarised in a Chinese source (Wa Han Da Cidian 2014, 486–87). Many local Wa followed his movement, even some Lahu leaders joined (descendants themselves of the earlier leaders in Nanzha). Pacao Meng eventually established a local militia that was soon suppressed by the Qing armies.

Numerous fantastic stories circulate about Pacao Meng, such as that he could make himself invisible and that he would give magic stones as presents. He would also name new villages, and crucially, pronounce rules for everyone how to behave well. According to a Wa schoolbook used today in the Wa State, those rules included: ‘do not kill people!’, ‘do not lie!’, ‘be upright and comply with agreements!’ In the schoolbook, Tax Pacao Meng introduces these rules with a typical greeting in a series of parallelisms:

The elders of the house, and the leaders of the village, Uppen and Samlaw, the gourd of stone and the cave below, those from the bamboo groove and those from the sigang cave, Sam Sai and Ai Nyi, younger brother and older brother: listen now!

It is difficult to assess what the historical Ai Meng really said to his followers.<sup>4</sup> But I think we can infer that his Lahu-Buddhist inspired religious reforms, his invocation of one God, and his setting of rules all met local opposition. The few sources we have about Tax Pacao Meng all say that he opposed headhunting and large-scale animal sacrifices: such sacrifices obviously related to concrete and personalised exchanges and not to one general standard of morality (such as ‘do not kill’), let alone one God. The fortune of a hunter and warrior, or the potency of sacrifice are never related to absolute standards. Many visitors to the Wa hills noted the abundance and frequency of sacrifice, and Communists and Christians never tired of complaining about the wastefulness of sacrifice.

In previous generations, local Wa communities had met Chinese soldiers and miners, as well as Shan traders and Lahu monks, but in general the communities in the central Wa hills remained relatively autonomous (Fiskesjö 2010). At the time of Pacao Meng, contact with outsiders possibly intensified, following the turmoil of several large rebellions (of Pantay Muslims and Lahu), as well as Chinese mule traders, and a large increase in the local opium trade. In this context, Tax Pacao Meng proposed that the Wa should have their own leaders and political unity. According to one Chinese source, he said:

The Wa really need a king! [And] this time I came to the world to be the first king. [...] If we have a king, we have our own country, and all the foreigners in this country will have to obey the rules of this country. (Anonymous 2015, 180).

Tax Pacao Meng did whatever possible to convince his fellow Wa to unite and build a ‘country’. To this purpose, he created specific rules that applied to all followers. ‘If someone doesn’t obey we will have to expel them’, he is reported to have said. The rules were actually quite general (such as ‘do not kill’) and justified by the personal authority of Tax Pacao Meng, responding to a situation where the Wa were not united, whereas other people had their countries and kings.

I do not know whether the followers of Tax Pacao Meng already used *bwan* in the way in which contemporary Wa Christians use it (including to say ‘thank you’). But it is safe to assume that the kind of *bwan* that was at the heart of Tax Pacao Meng’s authority was different from the blessing of specific individuals or the fortune of specific situations: in fact, in such situations, non-Christian and non-Buddhist Wa rather use words such as *son* (fortune, luck) and *khawn* (soul). For instance, to say that someone is lucky, the Wa of Aishuai commonly say ‘she’s got a lucky soul’ (*mhvam khwan son*), and the soul is imagined very

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<sup>4</sup> I suspect that the writers of these schoolbooks were Christians, and convinced that Tax Pacao Meng was a precursor to the American missionaries who finally brought the gospel to the Wa.

concretely sitting at the top of one's head. So this kind of soul is not at all separated from the body, and the concrete referents and meanings of such fortune – just like the favours, blessings, and powers of hunting, war, and sacrifice – could perhaps be described as 'exemplars' rather than 'general standards'.

By contrast, the *bwan* of Tax Pacao Meng related to an immensity in a world that was increasingly measured and commensurated. This was a time when, with the intensification of outside pressure and the opium trade, the significance of measurements and scales (e.g. numbers, weights, distances) in Wa communities rose. Tax Pacao Meng takes part in this movement by generalising rules – but also, paradoxically, invoking the grace that stands above all rules.

With Tax Pacao Meng, the Wa had their own prophet. In many ways similar to the Lahu monks, this Wa prophet proposed religious reforms which clearly had some political relevance. The stories about his wonders and talents were justification enough for his followers to submit to his 'charismatic' authority. Meng opposed the personal and concrete exchanges of hunting, war, and sacrifice, and instead promoted a 'generalised exchange' with one unified authority, embodied in himself. In the semantics of *bwan*, then, Meng proposed a change from the concrete dynamics of favour and fortune to the abstract measure of grace. This abstract measure corresponded to a world where scales and weights, numbers and money, had acquired lasting significance.

The life of the last prophet I will present here reaches almost into the present; he played a crucial role in the upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> history in the Wa Hills.

### *Tax Cao Tie*

In the summer of 1913, a child was born in the village of Yaong Rai, which belongs to the Pa Tiak circle of Wa villages, also called 'Sao Hin' in the Shan language.<sup>5</sup> Following local custom, the child was called 'Nyi Nap Ka': Nyi meaning the second son, Nap for the astrological date of his birth, and Ka being the name of his father. From a young age the child did indeed show very special skills. According to one story, when he was just 7 years old, he made tobacco pipes from clay and gave them to his friends. When the adults saw the children smoking pipes, they wondered and asked where they got the pipes from. The children said it was Nyi Nap who had made them, but when the adults asked Nyi Nap he shook his head and pretended he couldn't speak. Already by then, 'the spirit had entered his heart', people say, using the Wa word for spirit (*moeg*), which usually refers to concrete and particular spirits.

Soon Nyi Nap surprised everyone by saying 'I am Cao Tie, the Master Creator, master of the village and the master of the country' [*cao tie, cao tie man tie meng*], using Shan words for 'master, lord' (*cao*), creation (*tie*) and village, country (*meng*). We have no way of asserting the first reactions to his new name (my guess is that some people thought it was a joke). But what is reported and retold until the present day is that from then on, people ceased calling him Nyi Nap, and instead respectfully addressed him by the name he had given himself, 'Cao Tie', the 'Master Creator'.

Because of his exceptional skills and intelligence, many listened to and followed him. His message seemed disarmingly simple, yet always appropriate and new. For instance, he would

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<sup>5</sup> The following relies on various self-published accounts, including Xiao (2010) and Tax Nyi Pleek (2011), as well as many stories told to me during fieldwork.

use formulas to encourage clear thought, such as: ‘pull hard on the crossbow, and you can hit the target; think wide in your heart, and you can pacify the land’ (Xiao 2010, 59). His fame spread and more and more people came to follow him. He soon became known as the ‘Great Man of Pa Tiak’ and the ‘Ruler of Sao Hin’.

Tax Cao Tie’s youth was a time of great upheaval in local society. The Qing dynasty had recently collapsed, and Chinese warlords had filled the power vacuum. The Chinese, however, had never established long term rule in these regions; locally, the neighbours of the Wa of Sao Hin were Wa and Lahu, and local Shan rulers in the valleys. In the decades before Tax Cao Tie’s before, local opium production and the opium trade had grown exponentially, and with the opium trade, British Burmese silver coins entered the mountains. The British colonial administration of Burma never established long-term government in the hills either, aside from irregular expeditions and some mining operations.<sup>6</sup>

By the time the Communist armies arrived in the region, Cao Tie had built a wide following in many villages several days’ walks from Sao Hin. In the 1950s and 60s, most of his followers were broadly aligned with the marooned KMT (the Chinese nationalist army that had lost the China civil war) battalions in the region and fought against the Chinese communists, as well as against Wa villages supported by the communist armies.

What exactly was the ritual innovation he preached, and how did it connect with a political agenda? The base of Tax Cao Tie’s authority was his extraordinary intelligence, and his skills. First of all, he was a master orator, who could use language – especially Wa and Shan, but also Burmese and Chinese – like no one else. According to a popular saying, ‘the mountain soil caved in with torrential rain, the earth crumbled with the talk of Tax Cao Tie’ (Watkins 2013a, 35). Just like he had made tobacco pipes as a child, as an adult he could turn mushrooms into guns, and make bullets from mud. His blessings had the power to make his followers invulnerable to the weapons of their enemies.

Among his followers he preached a renovation of rituals, focused on syncretic Buddhism and orderly dancing to the sound of gourd pipes (W. *biang*, C. *lusheng*). Taking up elements of syncretic Buddhism common among his Lahu and Shan neighbours, he introduced the use of altars and candles. Instead of endlessly pouring of liquor when addressing the ancestors of their own lineages, Tax Cao Tie put up candles on boards: their flames shining for everyone, just like his speeches were for everyone to hear. While the elders only spoke to each other, or to the ancestors, Tax Cao Tie spoke to everyone present. He directly opposed headhunting and bull sacrifice, as they were linked to the spirit worship (*lih moeg*) of the past. One core item of contention had to do with the use of the y-shaped sacrificial poles (*sigang*). Traditionally, bulls were tied to these poles before they were killed in sacrifice. The poles themselves are called *sigang*, a word that is homonymous with the famous cave from which the first humans had emerged, according to a famous myth of the origin of the world (*sigang lih*); it’s also almost homonymous with the word for ‘gourd’ (*singaing*), from where the first humans had emerged, according to another legend (Watkins 2013b, 881–82). *Sigang* thus stood for the wet and dark origin of humanity, remembered in myth, as well as renewed in each sacrifice.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview, see Harvey (1933).

<sup>7</sup> The word was later used to translate the meaning of the gospel of Jesus, as *puk lai sigang: khri*, literally the book of the Sigang of Christ.

The followers of Tax Cao Tie, however, when they went to war with neighbouring villages, frequently knocked over the y-shaped poles. This was the most obvious sign of their disrespect for the customs of sacrifice and spirit worship: locals were afraid of even touching the sacrificial poles. In the recollections of many of those who participated in the low-scale warfare of the 1950s and 60s, the opposition is thus remembered as a ‘war of religion’, between the ‘worship of the spirits’ (*lih moeg*) and the new worship of Cao Tie (*lih Cao Tie*).

In this war of religion, another point of contention was the referents of core terms such as *sigang*, *simiang* and *bwan*: both parties used the words, but possibly meant quite different things by them. For the followers of the spirit beliefs, *sigang* could refer to concrete y-shaped poles, caves and gourds; for the followers of Tax Cao Tie it became a referent to a general idea of origin, separate from particular objects or places. Whereas local leaders would be called ‘*simiang*’ – in the same in which Tax Cao Tie had been called the ‘leader of Sao Hin’ (*simiang sao hin*) – now the prophet had become something else, the beginning of the country, the creator himself. Instead of the simple leader of one place, Tax Cao Tie used terms such as *Simiang Siyiex*, *Siyiex Siyaong* – spinning parallelism of local leaders higher into the unity of one leader, one God. And finally, *bwan*: the ordinary offerings and sacrifices were meant to protect souls (*khawn*) and well-being (*bwan*), in the sense of personal fortune; whereas the candles and public speeches of Tax Cao Tie referred to a kind of *bwan* that had become abstract grace and immeasurable mercy.

How can we understand the transformations of ‘grace’ (*bwan*) in the three generations of prophets here? Perhaps the grace of these prophets was essentially the same in each generation? Or perhaps, alternatively, it was a consequence of the social situation in each generation? The next section considers those two possibilities.

## Grace as historical essence and social consequence

The first one – the path of the historical essence that explains the present state – means that every prophet was essentially a reincarnation of the same mythical figure. In Southeast Asian history we can see this mythical figure most clearly in the arguments that have been made about prophets as ‘men of prowess’.

Rather than a repetition of mandala-structures, or the impact of an elite culture (‘Sanskritization’), historian Oliver Wolters found the unity of Southeast Asian history in what he called ‘men of prowess’ (Wolters 1982). Observing that many kinship systems in the region were cognatic and bilateral, and put little emphasis on genealogy and lineage structure, he extrapolated that every single generation had to struggle for authority, adapt to changing circumstances, and prove itself again. All this is done by so-called ‘men of prowess’, the mythical figures he invents and then finds in the protohistory of the region. Everything that happens later – most importantly the creation of mandalas and Indianization – is explained using this analytical device. The cosmologies of the mandala are adapted and re-invented easily in local society, while political rule remains relatively light-touch, given the elasticity and ephemerality of local rule by ‘men of prowess’. The borrowing of foreign ideas remains largely present-oriented, given the impermanence of local hierarchies, and hence Indian literature is quickly adopted everywhere, and even acknowledged as a universal measurement of distinction around the ‘single ocean’ that connects everyone.

From this perspective, the millenarian prophet might be just another re-incarnation of the ‘man of prowess’ that has lived in Southeast Asia for at least 2000 years. And yet the basis of the mythical figure can be only the historical record, including kinship relations and the rites of the succession of kings that are well-known. As such, Wolters (and others) attach the features of the kin and the kings they know to the very first man of prowess. The features of this mythical figure thus already show the same features of the future rulers, *chacravartin*, god-kings whose power is based on asceticism and constraint, or alternatively bestowed by the super-god Siva, when the king became a ‘portion’ of Siva himself. But can we assume that the first man of prowess really knew the constraint of behaviour, as well as the bounty of Siva?

The mythical approach thus reduces the prophet to the reiteration of a type. It makes it impossible to understand what was specifically ‘new’ about the prophet and his message in his time. The specific gift and grace of the prophet is that which no one had heard of: how Tax Cao Tie made bullets of mud, no one could understand. Rather than recognition of the same, there was wonder at the unimaginable. Everything that Tax Cao Tie did relied on an infinite and transcendent power that lay beyond anyone’s imagination. At the same time, this new power, which is best described as grace, corresponded to a world in which countless limitations and standardized measurements had been firmly established. And as I will argue below, it is in fact only against the backdrop of a measured world that the new concept of grace could emerge.

The second misguided approach to prophecy is to explain it in terms of present concerns. This is an approach typical of the functionalist anthropologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it is very common in the literature on the millenarian prophets of Southeast Asia. The prophet here gives a voice to the misery of the peripheral situation, and millenarian hopes echo the desperation of the colonised and oppressed. Dealing with the same Wa and Lahu prophets that are the topic of this article, Magnus Fiskesjö, for instance, writes: ‘prophets rise in the despair of the peripheral situation, declaring themselves in the possession of special powers to save the people from the sufferings of war and oppression’ (Fiskesjö forthcoming, 334).

Similar arguments emphasising the social context of prophets and millenarianism abound in the region (Chatthip Nartsupha 1984; Stern 1968). Millenarian movements frequently prepared the ground for Christianity, which found fertile terrain among non-literate ethnic groups in the highlands (Cheung 1995; Zeng 1995). Tatsuki Kataoka similarly argues that the neighbouring Lahu only became aware of their statelessness when confronted with neighbouring states: hence mythical accounts centre on their search for the state and king they had lost (Kataoka 2013). No matter whether millenarianism was seen as a ‘social innovation’ or a ‘social pathology’ (Bellah 1965, 184), according to social-scientific explanations, prophecy was an expression of the present social condition; ‘charismatic movements’ in the Weberian sense – in which the ‘gift of grace’ (which is precisely the meaning of the word ‘charisma’) was the same in each generation.

While the three generations of Wa and Lahu prophets certainly exhibited exceptional prowess and spoke to the condition of marginality of many of their followers, these features are not at the heart of the innovations the prophets announced and do not capture the semantics of grace that I have alluded to above. These semantics, instead, have to do with a fundamental novelty, and with the new limits of a world that is being measured.

## The immeasurable in the world of measurement

In the highland massif of Southeast Asia, the differences between the valleys and the hills have often been noted: rice paddies vs swidden agriculture, world religion vs animism, centralised polities vs stateless politics. One less prominent difference is that between the limitless potency of the highlands and the constrained resources and powers of the valleys (Tannenbaum 1989). In the valleys there are constraints imposed by the massive inequality between commoners and the valley elite, but also by borders and fences, and most importantly, by tools of commensuration – script, scales, weights, coins – which are not present in the highlands. Potential competitors in the highlands all had similar access to resources, and ‘the recipients of today’s generosity [were] likely to be the sponsors of tomorrow’s’ (Tannenbaum 1989, 81). But perhaps most importantly, the exchanges of blessing and merit in the mountains could not be measured in the way they could in the valley – annotated in books, carved in inscriptions, weighted by merchants, and counted by officials and soldiers. Without such limitations, all efforts at increasing potency in the highlands remained ephemeral and encountered their limits only in the fatigue of each agent. A particularly cunning and skilful agent – let’s say one of our prophets – might get very far, and in principle at least, faced no limits to his growing potency.

But in fact, prophets such as Ta Pacao Meng and Tax Cao Tie spoke very explicitly about measure and rules, and imposed them on their followers. In so doing, they propagated new measurements, mirroring the limited precincts of rulers and monks in the valleys, as well as the might of the valley elite (that always appeared unreachable to commoners). At the core of their teaching lay a new concept of the gift that cannot be reciprocated – that is, grace – which united their innovations both in terms of general rules, charismatic authority, and exceptional skill. This gift was absolutely new in the mountains, but at the same time, it mirrored already existing immeasurable gifts in the valleys: the Buddhist merit of the Shan/Dai traditions, the Chinese meanings of the immeasurable blessing received from the ancestors and from the emperor<sup>8</sup> and the blessing of the high God Guisha in some Lahu traditions (mentioned above). All these notions, in fact, oppose an idea of the ‘free gift’ to ordinary reciprocal exchange. The high God Guisha of the Lahu (according to Du 1996) is in this sense not so very different from Confucian seniority (ancestors, officials, and emperor): they all have been immeasurably generous to humankind, and thus the only possible attitude toward them is endless gratitude. These attitudes contrast very much with the everyday calculation of cost and benefit that governs the relations and exchanges between ordinary people. The separation of altruism and utilitarianism, particularly in the ideologies of gift-giving, corresponds to the emergence of world religions as well as the growth of market trade, as Jonathan Parry (1986) has argued: the main differences between the Maori gift as a ‘total social fact’ and the ideology of the ‘free gift’ in Indian society have to do with the differences between the religion and political economy of a small-scale tribal social order and a large-scale civilization. Only the ideology of salvation and transcendence common to world religions justifies the radical altruism of the ‘free gift’, embodied in alms given to the poor.

There are certainly major differences between India (Parry’s case) when compared with China and Southeast Asia, but this much is certain: a very developed ideological discourse, written down in sacred books and taught in schools, which stands in contrast with the

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<sup>8</sup> that is, the reciprocity (*bao*) and gratefulness/benevolence (*en*), see Wen 1982; L. Yang 1957, 1987.

ordinary calculations of commoners, favours the emergence of an abstract and transcendent measurement that is, however, always beyond reach, such as that represented in the idea of the 'free gift'.

This is precisely the discursive environment in which we can observe the emergence of the idea of 'grace'. One point that Parry doesn't discuss is the importance of measurement and equivalence for the emergence of the opposition between altruism and interest. The free gift and grace are end points at the horizon of a world that is being measured. Precisely because everything is being measured, the idea that some favours cannot be measured acquires more poignancy. Only in these worlds can 'grace' unfold its true mediative potential, and by invoking the immeasurable, validate everyday measurement. Enter Julian Pitt-Rivers:

Both honor and grace are mediative concepts; they interpret events in accordance with the prevailing values of society, putting the seal of legitimacy on to the established order. Together they constitute the frame of reference by which people and situations are to be judged. (Pitt-Rivers 1992, 244)

Pitt-Rivers is spot-on when he notes the immense importance of honour and grace. But he does not consider the origin of grace, let alone the possibility that worlds could exist without grace. He goes completely astray, finally, when he argues that grace is a concept 'of the same order' as (Maori) *hau*, (Islamic) *baraka*, or (Basque) *indarra* (Pitt-Rivers 1992, 237). Not only are the 'prevailing values' very different in each case, but everyday commensuration is almost totally absent in at least one case (Maori *hau*). Without everyday commensuration, however, there is no semantic opposition between calculability and immensity, and thus no grace! In Maori society, most likely, there was only very little everyday commensuration, little market exchange, and no hard separation between transcendent and immanent realms, and thus the idea of 'grace' as an irreciprocable gift providing a limit case for all reciprocity was inconceivable. Instead, *hau*, as the spirit of the gift, provided a form of entangling humans and objects in which commensuration played little to no role: it was thus a concept of an entirely different order when compared with grace.

The same is true for one half of the semantics of *bwan* in Wa: that part that expresses fortune, cunning, and soul; which is operative in hunting and sacrifice, and which is not measured by universal scales, but just indexically and relationally. This semantic field of *bwan* is very different from grace in the strict sense of the term, that is, grace as an immeasurable gift. The latter sense of *bwan*, paradoxically, emerges in contexts in which universal measurement has become common. That is, inventions such as standardized weights, lengths, and numbers, inevitably backed up by shared technologies (such as writing), which provide shared measurements and non-indexical benchmarks. The paradoxical effect of measurement in building a framework to imagine the unmeasurable is similar to the work of art in the time of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin famously described such effects as the emergence of an 'aura' (1969). At first sight, we might think that the mechanical reproduction destroys the aura of the work of art. Once it can be reproduced, it's no longer unique. But in fact, it is this possibility of reproduction which in turn produces a longing for the unique and authentic; only from this moment onward the aura of art emerges. Grace is very similar: at face value, measurement destroys the magic of 'grace'. Counting, by definition, is graceless. But without counting, there can't be grace; only once counting and abstract measurement are common, the concept of grace acquires its radiating force. Grace, therefore is the immeasurable end-point of a world of measurement, the limit case of reciprocity in which reciprocity has

become impossible. And it cannot exist in a world where there is only indexical and relational measurement.

The same is true for the semantics of *bwan* in the three generations of prophets discussed here. An earlier meaning of *bwan* refers to fortune and luck that is given by specific donors to specific recipients, and embodied in actions that are not measured or counted (and thus allow for limitless potency in Tannenbaum's sense): for instance, the well-being of a soul that is called forth in ritual; the luck of a hunter that is shared generously with his kinsmen; and the fortune of a lineage that is expressed in bull sacrifice.

This earlier meaning of *bwan* is transformed into a general and abstract term by the prophets – that is, concretely, first by the Lahu monks and their radical millenarianism. Later, similar prophets emerged in Wa society, prophets such as Tax Pacao Meng and Tax Cao Tie, who preached a radically new gospel, used ritual speech to promote common standards for their followers, and showed their 'charisma' through their daring and extraordinary skill. The 'religious war' between the followers of Tax Cao Tie and the Wa traditionalists was not only a proxy war between the Chinese nationalists and the Chinese communists. It was also a war over the meanings of core terms to do with local origins, leadership, and fortune-grace. For the traditionalists, these terms remained linked to the older sense of *bwan* as fortune. For the followers of Tax Cao Tie, *bwan* instead referred to the immensity of grace, using the genius of Tax Cao Tie to justify general rules of behaviour. Those rules themselves imposed 'measure' on individuals; they mimicked an environment crowded with new tools of measurement such as Shan numbers, Chinese inscriptions, iron weights and silver coins.

We could understand Tax Cao Tie as a reincarnation of Tax Pacao Meng and all the other prophets before him, or as a representative of the peripheral situation. But neither interpretation, I argue, addresses the semantics of grace that I have described here and how they are anchored in the problem of measurement. Grace, as the radical, absolute, and general interpretation of *bwan*, is neither the timeless charisma of 'men of prowess', nor the mirror of misery and oppression. Grace is not a 'mediative concept' everywhere, even though it might become such a concept in some places. Grace is not necessarily the consequence of Christian conversion – locally, possible inspirations for *bwan*-as-grace might have been Buddhist merit, Lahu *bo*, and Chinese *en*. But once the Christian gospel arrived, it started to overshadow all alternative readings of grace. It continues to do so up to the present day, especially in Wa texts about Wa history, which are mostly written by Christian literati. Even so, it is possible to distinguish a world in which *bwan* did not mean grace yet, that is, before grace appeared in Wa as the incommensurability at the margin of a world that is being measured.

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