



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rationale

The perception that the Naga creates the mysterious fireballs rising up from the Mekong River in the night of the end of Buddhist retreat day has been existed for the previous 15 years. However, there were no evidence points out that Phon Pisai people possessed such perception before. Prior to this perception, the mysterious fireballs were called '*Bungfai Phii*'. The interviews revealed that Phon Pisai people have known the mysterious fireballs for centuries. Some informants reported that these fireballs can be seen since their grandparents were children and they described it as '*Bungfai Phii*'; however, there is no evidence showing the connection between the '*Bungfai Phii*' and the term 'phenomenon of the Naga fireballs' (hereafter cited as *NGF*) which is used nowadays. Later on, the term '*Bungfai Phayanaak*' or the Naga fireballs can be found in books, magazines, newspaper, such as *Arts&Culture magazine*¹, *TIME Asia magazine*², and *a handbook for the NGF phenomenon watcher*³, *Siamrat sapdawijarn*⁴, et cetera. Finally, the term "Naga fireballs" becomes well-known and replaces the old term '*Bungfai Phii*'. Not only is the term *NGF* well-known among Phon Pisai people but also among Thais The term 'Naga fireballs' is used in calling the mysterious fireballs rising up from the Mekong River since then.

¹"Bungfai Phayanaak: Astrologer of the Mekong River," *Arts&Culture magazine* 16, 76 (November 1992) p.56.

²Jason Gagliardi, "Behind the secret of the Naga's Fire" *TIME Asia magazine*, (November 17, 2002) p.35-37.

³Seu dhamma. *A handbook for the Naga fireballs phenomenon watcher*, (Bangkok: Namfon) 1997.p. 1.

⁴"Bungfai phayanaak: Withee peunbaan song fang Khong," *Siamrat sapdawijarn* (15-21 November, 2003), p.10.

On the contrary, on the opposite site of the river, Lao people call these fireballs as 'Lukfai Nam', 'Bungfai Nam' or 'Dokfai Nam'⁵. The term 'Lukfai Nam' is still in used and not going to be replaced by the term *NGF*. Besides, some more beliefs have been added to explain the existence of these fireballs. For example, these fireballs are the breath of the Naga showing his admiration to the gratitude of the Lord Buddha gives to Buddha's mother. In fact, either evidence or testimonials of its true reason of the existence of the fireballs were found; however, the additional beliefs in explaining the fireballs can be found in many texts and they are diversified. For example, an informant said that the Naga creates fireballs to worship Phon Chan footprint⁶. Another informant believes that the Naga creates fireballs to mark the end of Buddhist retreat and to join the '*tam boon ook phansa*' ceremony.

In website, www.thaifolk.com has a different version to explain the story. This story tells that Lord Buddha is the reincarnation of Phya Kan Kark and Phya Nagi dedicated himself to be the servant in every lives of Phya Kan Kark. Therefore, Phya Nagi and his followers prepare fireballs as offerings and to welcome Lord Buddha⁷.

Nevertheless, the Naga belief has been rooted in Northeast people's perception for centuries. The Naga belief existed long before the belief in the *NGF* phenomenon as we can find the Naga belief in folklores such as the story of *Pha Daeng Nang Aii*⁸, *The Serpent King*⁹, *Urangkanithan*¹⁰. Besides, the Naga belief can be found in

⁵"15 kam doen 11 thee fang Lao ma boeng yang klai tae dokfai nam sue-sue," *Nation Weekend* 11, 545 (11 Nov. 2002), p. 12.

⁶Sattiyapan Khotchamit, 2003. "The Development of Naga Beliefs along the Mekong from the Urangkatad Period to the Contemporary Period" p.85.

⁷Kanokthai, "The story of the Naga fireballs", Article presented in www.thaifolk.com. 2004.

⁸Preecha Pinthong, 1981, Isan folktales "Phadaeng Nang Aii", (Ubonratchathani : Siritham)

⁹Kermit Krueger, 1981, *The serpent prince: folk tales from Northeastern Thailand*. (New York: The World Free).

traditions, customs such as the '*Lai Heu Fai*' tradition, the offerings at the shrine near the mouth of the river or the village reservoir, the Rocket festival, and in the Buddhist contexts as the Buddhist protector. For example, the Naga balustrade at the Buddhist temple, the Buddha image appearing as Lord Buddha sheltered by the Naga as the principal Buddha image or the votive tablets. In addition to the Buddhist protector, the Naga is believed to be the symbol of water and fertility. The focus of this thesis is to understand the development regarding the *NGF* phenomenon. The author aims to present the status of this belief and to present the perception of groups of local people who has related to the *NGF* phenomenon during 2005-2006 at Amphoe Phon Pisai.

Amphoe Phon Pisai was chosen to be the area of study because of the thesis's objective that focuses on studying the change in the perception regarding the *NGF* phenomenon during 2005-2006. According to the evidence, tourism is the primary assumption enhancing the change in the perception. The change in the perception should be resulted from the popularized of the *NGF* phenomenon to the nationwide. Moreover, explanations and several points of view are introduced thus they affect the perception that the *NGF* phenomenon is created by the Naga. The new explanation suggests that the *NGF* phenomenon can be explained and can be proved with the scientific methodology. Based on the scientific explanation, this phenomenon is either a natural phenomenon or man-made. It does not result from any supernatural powers definitely. The change in the perception has just begun recently which results from the immense interest. The marketing plan of Tourism Authority of Thailand (hereafter cited as TAT) causes the huge interest and arouses the *NGF* phenomenon trend to become popular in nationwide.

¹⁰Phra Dhammarachanuwat, *Urankhanithan (Phra That Phanom Legend)*, 10th edition, (Nakornphanom: 1994) p. 88.

The important evidence from the TAT is from the interview with the TAT official who reported that TAT chose Amphoe Phon Pisai to be the site for promoting the *NGF* phenomenon. This is the main reason to choose Amphoe Phon Pisai as the area of study. Because this thesis focuses on studying the change in the perception, thus Amphoe Phon Pisai is qualified despite the fact that it is not the area where most of the fireballs can be seen¹¹. As a result, Amphoe Phon Pisai is the most suitable for this research.

This research has two objectives; the first one is to explore the traditional perception of Phon Pisai people regarding the *NGF* phenomenon during the time frame of 2005-2006. The second one is to study the process of development in perception and the change in the perception which is an important result from the encounter between the external factor – Tourism that the government plays an important role- and the existing perception among local people.

What is the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs?

‘The Naga fireballs’ is a new terminology made-up by the local people of Nong Khai¹². ‘*Bungfai Phayanaak*’ is not the original term in identifying the small fireballs with the size of orange or egg that pop up out from the Mekong River at the end of Buddhist retreat every year. Some Phon Pisai people call it as ‘*Bungfai Phii*’ as they have no ideas where these fireballs come from. In addition, Lao call these fireballs as ‘*Lukfai Nam*’ as they emerge out of water¹³.

¹¹ The Naga fireballs can be seen along the shore of the Mekong River; especially in the area of Changwat Nong Khai. 747 fireballs is reported to be seen at Amphoe Rattana Waphi.

¹² Interview with Gomen Potawat, Phon Pisai, March 27, 2006.

¹³ “15 kam doen 11 thee fang Lao ma boeng yang klai tae dokfai nam sue-sue,” Nation Weekend 11, 545 (11 Nov. 2002), p. 12.

Every year at the end of the Buddhist retreat, many small pink-like fireballs pop up out of the Mekong River, attracting tourists to visit Nong Khai province. Both Thais and foreigners head to the Mekong shores to reserve places in order to witness the phenomenon that is about to happen at the dusk. In addition, staff from television channels set down their cameras and turn them to the Mekong River to get the best picture of the fireballs. Along the footpath, there are great numbers of stalls selling local food, clothing imported from China, and fried bugs and bamboo's worms (A local snack of Northeast people); moreover, photos and books about the Naga are widely sold. Ten thousand people heading to Nong Khai province at the same time cause a massive traffic jam and the parking lots are not sufficient. Those who come earlier get free parking lot in the Buddhist temple's grounds and those who are late have to pay to park in private lots. Everyone look forward to viewing the same phenomenon: the Naga fireballs or '*Bungfai Phayanaak*'. At present time the phenomenon is known among Thais as '*Bungfai Phayanaak*' and it is well-known with this name. Neither the official record of the first seen of the phenomenon be found nor the report on the person who started to use this term with the phenomenon. Its name can be the clue to understand the belief of local people and their idea regarding the Naga fireballs. '*Bungfai Phayanaak*' serves important psychological and social functions. '*Bungfai Phayanaak*' represents the belief in the Naga among local people. As the local people believe in Naga, so they believe that Naga creates the '*Bungfai Phayanaak*'. Because nobody can conclude its origin, this phenomenon creates a controversial atmosphere in Thai society and it draws wide attention from people all over the country. Many people from different background try to solve this problem by focusing on what causes the phenomenon - nature, man, or supernatural

power. The author found this story is the subject of a nation-wide debate and compelling. Before conducting this research, the author was inspired by the interview with Khun Jira Malikul - the director of a Thai film titled "*Sib Haa Kham Doen Sib Edd*" also known as "*Mekong Full moon Party*" where he stated his intent to challenge the local people's perception regarding the belief in the *NGF* phenomenon¹⁴. The author was also inspired by a phrase from a critical article published in a weekly newspaper about the Naga.

How come nobody studies the way of life of local people instead of trying to find the origin of the phenomenon.¹⁵

There, the author found the information gap on which to do research on this topic.

¹⁴ Surachai Chupaka, "Public opinion in Bungfai Phayanaak," *Ramkamhaeng Journal* 19, 4 (October-December 2002): p.8-18.

¹⁵ Buntoen Sriworapoj, "Bungfai Phayanaak," *Siamrath* (November 1-7, 2002): p 48.

Objective:

- To study the change in the perception and the understanding of Phon Pisai people regarding the *NGF* phenomenon during the time frame of 2005-2006.
- To study the process of development in perception and the change from the encounter between the external factor – tourism and the traditional perception.

Scope of the study

This research focuses at Amphoe Phon Pisai since it is the most famous area to witness the '*Bungfai Phayanaak*'. The field research was conducted during 2005-2006. This research is concerned with the attitude of the local people. It is a study of social and cultural contexts not only to better understand the local people but also to analyze the change in the perception of local people. The author collected related information including historical aspect to discuss and interview local people of different age groups in order to understand the change in their attitudes. However, the interviews were more open-ended to allow other evidence that came up while studying to show its impact on the transition process.

Limitations and assumptions

1. The author has limitation on local language spoken. Some people the author interviewed speak a local Northeast (Isan) dialect; however, they also can speak central Thai. For those who cannot speak central Thai, the author had an interpreter, which the author assumes provided her with the right information.
2. Time frame: the author was able to conduct the field research only during one period of time (2005-2006) when the term 'Naga fireballs' has been

established. As a result, the author cannot identify the transcending of the term '*Bungfai Phii*' to become the 'Naga fireballs'.

3. This change in perception is not limited to Amphoe Phon Pisai. The further study in the nearby areas should be conducted.

People's change in the perception is considered a high dynamic process. The traditional series of perception could not lead to another new one instantly. In stead, several series of perceptions within the 15 years has been mixed up which is difficult to understand. In fact, the belief in the *NGF* phenomenon is actually a new series of perception because there is the perception that existed before. However, the new series of the belief in the *NGF* fireballs has been changed, too.

Methodology

This study was based primarily on two types of information, from documents and field work which included questionnaires and in-dept interview. The questionnaires were launched to the young people (high school students and the informants the author found in the village) in Phon Pisai district to investigate the perception of young people towards the phenomenon. The author used the historical approach for explaining the development in the traditional perception of the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs. The author used this method because the change in the perception during each period of time is the main concern. As a result, the historical approach was used because it showed the development of the perception and how it was changed.

The information gathered from these questionnaires was interpreted along with the information collected from the in-depth interviews with the elderly local people and Buddhist monks who representing the traditional and the believers.

Literature review

The literature on the topic of the Naga is extensive and covers many different aspects of this important character in the life of Thai people. In this research, the author will group them into two groups: academic research on Naga and Naga fireballs phenomenon; popular responses and articles on Naga fireballs during 2002-2006 including the literature based on the scientific studies on the Naga fireballs phenomenon. These literatures raise some questions against the traditional perception on the *NGF* phenomenon.

1.1 The Academic Research concerning Naga and phenomenon of the Naga fireballs

This category of literature discusses the Naga belief and the belief on the *NGF* phenomenon which is from the study found out that these studies emphasize on Naga and the Naga belief among local people more than the *NGF* phenomenon.

The most outstanding academic research about the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs is Chitrakorn Emphan's thesis – *Naga, The King of the Mekong: Ritual and belief system in Northeastern Thai culture*. This thesis was written during 2001-2002. His work aims to analyze the role of Naga towards socialization and the social structure in the Mekong community and study the meaning of Naga as a symbolic

system¹⁶. Chitrakorn presents that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs represents ‘a system of belief and religion’, which reflects a form of human behavior in Thai society.

The Naga belief is a part of the Mekong community in the Northeastern region, which acts upon the belief system of the Naga as the ‘spirit of river’. The author found his work especially relevant to my research topic since the area of study is Nong Khai province. In addition, his presentation provides me with a strong background and encourages me to expand on his research. His work affirms that the Naga belief exists as the traditional belief in this area. Moreover, the discussion about the phenomenon of Naga fireballs presented here shows that the local people of Nong Khai have had a strong belief in this phenomenon for a long time.

Besides Chitrakorn’s work, I found a thesis written by Pichet Saiphan – *“Naga Belief” Esan Mekong River Basin: cultural life from contemporary rites*. He studies and analyses the meaning of the Naga in existing ceremonies worshipping the Naga. He presents the idea that the symbol of the Naga has spread all over the Mekong cultural community. These two anthropology theses have the common characteristic that the writers study the meaning of the Naga through ceremonies. They use symbolic anthropology as key concepts and interpret the symbols found in rituals. Especially Pichet presents the idea that the belief in the Naga is reflected in many different cultural aspects. The belief of Naga can be found in folklore, ceremony, architecture, handicraft, fine arts, et cetera¹⁷.

¹⁶Chitrakorn Emphan, “Naga, The King of the Mekong: Ritual and belief system in Northeastern Thai culture,” (Master Thesis Political Science Chulalongkorn University, 2002)

¹⁷Pichet Saiphan, “Naga Belief” Esan Mekong River Basin: cultural life from contemporary rites,” (Mater’s thesis Thammasart University, 1996)

From these findings, it may conclude that the Naga is the cultural mainstream of this region. The spreading and the diversified meanings of the Naga show that the Naga belief has been adapted to the local community according to different times and contexts. The meaning of the Naga appears in accordance with the perception of each group in a community and relates to the local history. This idea presented can be discussed later in the appropriate chapter of this study. Pichet studies rituals in order to understand the hidden symbolic meaning of the Naga in the ceremony; however, Chitrakorn analyses ceremonial worshipping of the Naga to uncover its influences on *Isan* culture. Pichet studies ceremonies having taken place in Nakornphanom province whilst Chitrakorn focuses on Aa Hong village in the province of Nong Khai. Their methodologies are documentary and field study in which participant observation and in-depth interview are inclusive.

In 1999, another interesting work about the Naga belief and involving the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs can be found. This academic work belongs to Supitchar Jindawattanaphom – *Legendary Beliefs in Naga of the Northeastern Thai communities Along the Mekong River*. The aim of her work is to study the belief of people in the Naga in the upper Northeastern region of Thailand comprising Nong Khai, Udonthani, Sakhonnakhon and Nakornphanom provinces¹⁸. A historical approach and analytical process are applied to her thesis in order to discover the key belief that brings pressure to bear upon people's minds and to make the Naga become an outstanding symbol in this area. Her time frame is from the late thirteenth century to the contemporary period. She finds that the source of this belief is rooted in the

¹⁸Supitchar Jindawattanaphom, "Legendary Beliefs in Naga of the Northeastern Thai communities Along the Mekong River," (Master's Thesis Srinakarinwirot University, 1999)

original snake-admiration practice found in the primitive societies of Brahmanism and Buddhism. She ends her work by presenting the idea that the influence of the belief in the Naga has expanded to the present activities, of which the most outstanding are marketing and tourism. Her work is beneficial to my research as I can link my present discovery to the findings from her work. Moreover, this point of view is relevant to my research question since tourism is a factor I will discuss in my thesis.

The latest academic research I found in this group is Sattiyaphan's work. His thesis – *The development of Naga beliefs along the Mekong from the Urangkata period to the contemporary period* – discussed the changing of the Naga belief in Nong Khai province. He applies the historical approach to describe the root of the Naga belief in Northeastern region of Thailand. The topic about the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs is discussed in the last chapter. Its content is about the role of tourism towards this phenomenon.

The last academic research from my literature review is the anthropology research of Boonyong Gatethet in 1996. He presents the idea that 80 percent of Nong Khai populace believes in the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs¹⁹. Nonetheless, this topic is arguable, as he does not address differences in belief among various age groups. In my field research, I will further address this concern.

¹⁹Boonyong Gatethet, *A study of cultural Anthropology in Isan Region*, (Mahasarakham: Faculty of Humanities, 1986), p. 125.

1.2 The Popular responses and Articles on Naga fireballs during 2005-2006

The scope of this type of literature is the literature presented during 2002 - 2006 as 2002 was the big year for the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs. It was the year that the Tourism Authority of Thailand launched the campaign on the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs. There are three types of popular responses presented here:

- 1.2.1 The popular responses and articles that support the *NGF* phenomenon
- 1.2.2 The popular responses and articles that anti the *NGF* phenomenon and challenging the belief on the *NGF* phenomenon
- 1.2.3 The popular responses and articles that aims to promote tourism

1.2.1 The popular responses and articles that support the *NGF* phenomenon

- Written materials

The first published material presented here is a pamphlet titled *The origin of the Naga fireballs story*²⁰ that was found at the public library at Phon Pisai district, Nong Khai province. The writer uses the pseudonym “Poo Isan Neu” meaning an old wise man of the Northern Isan region. He presents the story that in the past there used to be a young novice who devoted himself to serving the Arahants. The young novice pours out the spittoons of Arahants for 7 days and 7 nights. Finally, he achieves power and pure precepts and is reborn as the Naga. This Naga is waiting for Phra Sriariyamettraï – the Future Buddha to be born -- and worships the Triple gems by breathing out in fire every year at the end of Buddhist retreat. The next one is a book

²⁰Poo Isan Neu, The origin of the Naga fireballs story, (n.p.: n.d.).

titled *Kamchanod: Muang Phayanaak*²¹. It contains the story about the Naga, the local legends on the Naga, and the *NGF* phenomenon. The author presents that the Naga performs the phenomenon to worship Lord Buddha.

The issue of the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs is also presented in *Phayanaak* written by Winthai Sapphaya. He suggests that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs is debatable and comments that the Naga has a very close relationship to Buddhists. He also presents the scientific theory to explain the phenomena; however, this phenomenon is still a mystery.

Besides, I found the writing of Boontoen Sriworapoj, published in *Siamrath Sapdhawijarn*, which describes the atmosphere of the evening of the end of the Buddhist retreat day at Beung Konglong district before the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs occur²². This phenomenon, according to the writer, loses its truly meaning as the sacred phenomenon. Local people is in stead of performing their traditional customs, they set up the environment for tourism purpose. It implies that local people set the environment to welcome tourists. The last piece of popular responses in this category is published in *The Nation, weekly issue*, Waraporn Jewchaisak describes the Naga as the universal symbol of water among Asian nations such as Vietnam, Lao, Cambodia, including Thai. As a result, she proposes that it is not strange that Thai people connect the mysterious fireballs come out of the Mekong River to the Naga²³.

²¹Long Thara, *Kamchanod: Muang Phayanaak*, (Bangkok: Pailin). 2003.

²²Boontoen Sriworapoj, "Bungfai Phayanaak," *Siamrath Sapdhawijarn* (November 1-7, 2002), p.48.

²³"Naga : symbol of water," *The Nation*, weekly issue 10, 491(October 29- November 4, 2001), p.78.

- Audio visual materials

In this category, I found an explanation regarding the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs presented by DMC channel (*Dhammakaya* Channel).

DMC channel is a private television channel that belongs to the *Dharmakaya* temple. They present the idea that the fireballs are produced by the Naga living under the Mekong River. According to their presentation, these fireballs are from the puff of the Naga. The Naga uses these fireballs as the symbol to worship the Lord Buddha after descending from Tawatimsa heaven. Furthermore, there are many kinds of fire spitted out by the Naga. When the Naga gets mad, it spits fire furiously and its power of fire can devastate everything within its ambience. However, spitting the fireballs on the full moon of the eleventh month is different. The Naga is required to keep chastity during the Buddhist retreat.

Another significant and most influential popular response is a film on the *NGF* phenomenon titled '*Mekong Full Moon Party* or '*15 ค่ำเดือน 11*'. This film is directed by Jira Malikoon and produced by GMM Pictures Co., Ltd. It is about a group of Laotian Buddhist monks who have created the fireballs and put them under water before the full moon night of the eleventh month – as known as – the end of Buddhist retreat. However, at the end of the film, the audience is left with the mystery. The group of monk stops creating the fireballs but the fireballs still can be seen from the Mekong River. Nonetheless, it conveys the message to the audience that the phenomenon of Naga fireballs is a fraud because it is man-made.

As a consequence, the Nong Khai people disapproved of this film. There was a rally against this film, demanding that it not to be shown in the local cinema.

Referring to this situation, the village head said the impact of this film provoked

dissatisfaction among the local people²⁴. This reaction can be analyzed into two directions: the first direction is that they dissented against the film because it showed contempt toward their traditional belief; the second is that this presentation could bring a misunderstanding to the public that could affect tourism, which will result in the decreasing number of tourists in Nong Khai.

In addition, the television program from iTV provoked more rage to the local people by presenting the idea that Thais might be misunderstanding the gunfire of local Laotian soldiers as the Naga fireballs²⁵. This program was filmed at the village on the riverbank of the Lao Republic opposite the Phon Pisai district. This show was broadcast on November 1, 2002. As a consequence, Gomen Potawat, a local respected master, wrote a small book responding to this situation, titled '*Gae Roy iTV*'²⁶ meaning tracking down iTV. The writer tracked down the story presented by iTV and commented that the information presented by iTV was considered as an insult to the Nong Khai people. It made the Nong Khai people appear to be a fraud to the whole country and it destroyed the deep-rooted belief of the local people. Moreover, this documentary makes the audiences misunderstand the Laotian soldiers. As a result, the ambassador of Lao needed to make a speech over this issue to explain that the Laotian soldiers are not allowed to fire out the gun without the official permission and that the Lao soldiers do not have intention to misunderstand Thai people regarding the *NGF*.

²⁴Interview Sanit Salaibat, March 27, 2006.

²⁵iTV documentary broadcasted on November 1st, 2002.

²⁶Gomen Potawat, *Gae Roy iTV*, (n.p.: n.d.).

Similar to the content mentioned above can be found in an article written by Surawhit Weerawan in *Siamrath Sapdhawijarn*²⁷, mentioning the film “*Mekong Full Moon Party*”. He wrote that this film implied that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs was human made. Apart from this film, an iTV television channel broadcast a documentary presenting the idea that there is likelihood that Thai people have a misunderstanding that the fireballs shot into the sky by Laotian soldiers are the Naga fireballs. Of course, this provokes more rage to people: both the local people of Nong Khai province and the Lao people. However, the writer comments that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs has existed for a long time and it is a local belief. Surprisingly, he writes, the local people are not so excited about it, perhaps because they have been witnessing this phenomenon more than fifty years. The one who creates the popularity for the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs is the TAT (Tourism Authority of Thailand). Because of their marketing campaign, many people from throughout the country visit Nong Khai in order to witness this phenomenon. Surawhit also remarks that the TAT uses the local belief along with the marketing plan as a tool to give value to the traditional belief of the local people to attract tourists. He concludes that because of the belief, the faith, and the profit, there is no one who would like to find out the real cause of the phenomenon.

In conclusion, the popular responses and articles on the *NGF* phenomenon affect the traditional perception of the local people as it contributes another version of the perception of the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs. It offers the local people to consider this phenomenon as the tool for promoting tourism which can generate income.

²⁷“Marketing in Naga fireballs” *Siamrat Sapdhawijarn*, (November 8-14, 2002), p.89.

1.2.2 The popular responses and articles that anti the *NGF* phenomenon and challenging the belief on the *NGF* phenomenon

This group of literature review concerns the scientific studies on the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs. There is still an unresolved conflict regarding the scientific explanation.

The first man who revealed his idea to the public was Dr. Manus Kanoksilp. His research suggested that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs involves several forces of nature²⁸. He has an assumption that organic deposits lie on the bed of the Mekong River. As the sun warms the surface of clay or sand bed, organic matters decompose within 3-6 hours and begin to emit methane gas. Pressures build up and the gas rises to the surface of the water where the gas reacts with the oxygen in the air and abruptly lights. In general, Manus comments that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs is a natural phenomenon. Later on, in *Thai Day*, the writer shows the comment of Dr. Manus Kanoksilp, presuming that the reduction of the amount of the Naga fireballs is caused by the falling water level of the Mekong River. This can be attributed to the completed construction of the dams in China. In his most recent interview published in the *Bangkok Post*, Dr. Manus states that scientific discovery can be used as a tool to conserve this phenomenon.

To the contrary, Montri Boonsaneu presents that there is a small possibility that organic can lie down at the bed of the river since the current of the Mekong River is a turbulent flow²⁹. As a result, he concludes that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs is human made rather than natural. At this point, the controversy brings a

²⁸Manus Kanoksilp, *Bungfai Phayanak Thai and world heritage*, (Khon kaen, Phra Thammakham), p.93.

²⁹Montri Boonsaneu, "Anti-Manus's theory "Naga fireballs" is human made" *Arts&culture* (November 2002), p.86.

great deal of attention of people from all over the country to witness the phenomenon themselves.

This disagreement contributes to other scientific works concerning the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs. An article published in *Thairath* presents how to produce the Naga fireballs. A columnist interviewed an engineer from Kasetsart University about this phenomenon who suggested that he knows eight methods to create fireballs that are like the real Naga fireballs in the Mekong River. He also added that it is simple to make the fireballs.

In addition, the Ministry of Science and Technology conduct a research on the *NGF* phenomenon to encourage the scientific knowledge on the *NGF* phenomenon among local people and study the affect of the *NGF* phenomenon on local people. The research reveals that the *NGF* phenomenon *boosts* up tourism in the region.

In addition, there are three groups of people who have comments on the *NGF* phenomenon as following; 1) The *NGF* phenomenon is a natural phenomenon based on the scientific studies. These people are the young generation, 2) The *NGF* phenomenon is a supernatural phenomenon created by the Naga, and 3) No comment group. An interesting point of view that presented by this research is that the terrain of Nong Khai province is the area that has special characteristic called Tectonic Strain³⁰. This theory used in explaining the reason of the existence of the Naga fireballs.

Apart from the above article, a story in the *Daily News* discusses a group of inquisitive scientists who invented a robot in order to examine beneath the Mekong River on the night of the phenomenon, with the intention to solve this puzzle. This

³⁰ Ministry of Science and Technology, Dr.Prinya and Sommitr, "Research on the Naga fireballs," Articles presented in www.most.go.th. 2003

project belongs to the Ministry of Science and Technology. The research team collected soil and water samples using a developed submarine robot. They also set up eight gas collecting and gas monitoring stations in swamps and rivers where the phenomenon has been reported. After a two-year study, they concurred with Dr. Manus. The last research was conducted by scientists from Chiang Mai University. They recreated the fireballs by different methods and asked people who used to witness the Naga fireballs at the Mekong River to decide if their invented fireballs were similar to the real ones or not. The result showed that it is possible for humans to make fireworks that look similar to the Naga fireballs. However, the purpose of this research is not to justify the assumptions of how Naga fireballs happen; rather, the research team would like to develop the local fireworks³¹.

Despite several attempts to find the answer to this enigma through the scientific explanation, hitherto there is no conclusion. This lack of a resolution adds to the mystery of the phenomenon. The scientific studies are another step challenging the traditional perception of the local people regarding the phenomenon. These new studies create doubt about the phenomenon among the local people.

1.2.3 The popular responses and articles that aims to promote tourism

This type of literature is considered 'by product' of the popularity of the phenomenon of Naga fireballs.

The story of the phenomenon of the Naga fireball is published in the free tourist magazine, *Who's On This Week*. The writer – Steve Van Beek -- shows that the villagers claim that these fireballs are created by 'naak' mythical serpents. He

³¹ Somkid Phomma, A complete research on local fireworks development, Chiangmai University, 2003.

comments that this mythical serpent is an enigma in the same way that the phenomenon of the fireballs is. He adds that the debate over the formation of the phenomenon of the fireballs reflects a clash of cultures. Faith and tradition clash with science. This theme is also presented in *TIME Asia Magazine*³². Writer Jason Gagliardi describes his experience when he was amongst the plethora of witnesses waiting for the mysterious fireballs to bubble out of the water surface at Nong Khai.

From the website of tourism authority of Thailand, the phenomenon of Naga has been described as a natural phenomenon. In addition, according to the Northeast folk belief, caverns along the banks in this section of the Mekong River are in fact gateways leading from the Naga world to the world of human beings. These fireballs emerge to join the illuminated boats and the fireworks launched to celebrate the end of Buddhist Lent. Another story tells that these fireballs form the steps of the stairs for the Lord Buddha when he descends from heaven.

Narongsak Limphothong - Chumpol Mayor - commented in a pamphlet distributed to tourists who join the phenomenon of Naga fireballs festival at Phon Pisai that the belief in Naga truly exists; however, the Naga in physical form does not exist. Rather, according to him, it is a creature from imagination that we adopted from Hinduism.

From this general survey of literature on the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs, it is evident that this phenomenon has drawn attention from many people with different backgrounds: the local people, foreigners, the government – T.A.T., the media, the scientists from famous academic institutes, and the public. This widespread interest draws my attention towards the topic. In addition, the author

³²Jason Gagliardi, "Behind the secret of the Naga's Fire", *Time Asia* (Sunday, Nov.17, 2002).

noticed that most of newspaper articles the author found were published in 2002, which is the same year that the movie "*Sibha kam doen sib edd*" was launched. As a result, the popularity of the phenomenon reached its highest peak at that time. It causes an influx of tens of thousands of people to Nong Khai province at the same time to witness the event.