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Thai Yai, Shan, and Tai Long: Political identity across state boundaries

Nicola Tannenbaum

While “Thai Yai,” “Shan,” and “Tai Long” ostensibly refer to the same group of people, each term reflects a different political identity. Thai Yai and Shan are terms outsiders use while Tai Long is how they refer to themselves. Thai Yai is the Thai term while Shan is used in Burma and Western academic writing. In this paper, I examine the political religious structures of Shan communities and groups of communities in the recent past and go on to explore how these structures have changed through interaction with the British colonial state, the current Burmese regime, and the modern Thai state. I then discuss the ways these different regimes have affected how Shan see themselves as political actors and as a kind of “people” in these multi-ethnic states.

Shan, Tai Long, and Thai Yai ostensibly refer to the same cultural, ethnic, or political group. Thai Yai is the Thai (Siamese) translation of Tai Long which both mean the great T(h)ai. Thai academics use “Thai Yai,” which is often translated as Shan, to refer more narrowly to Tai Long. Tai Long is how the people I study refer to themselves. Of the three terms, “Shan” has the widest range of meaning and can refer to all Tai people except the Siamese. It is a Burmese term which the British introduced to a wider audience and which is used academically.

The state boundary between Burma and Thailand and the politics and policies which it implies have had a larger impact than simply different labels for the same “people.” The British and the Thai governments followed different policies vis-à-vis the ethnic groups within their territories. These policies helped create a politically active ethnic identity, “Shan,” in Burma and a muted, at least until relatively recently, Thai Yai or Shan identity in Thailand.

Tai Long, the term of self reference, does not serve as a marker of political identity.

Here I explore the policies and politics that led to these different outcomes. I first discuss British colonial and ethnic policies and their consequences for “Shan” and then do the same for Thai policies. I conclude with a brief comparison of the two policies and their consequences for the formation of political ethnic identities.

**British in Upper Burma**

The British appropriated the Burmese term “Shan” as they acquired an interest in and, in 1886, control over the area known as the Shan States (Scott, 1932: 202). At its broadest Shan can mean all Tai peoples, Scott’s (1900: 188; 1932: 225) discussion of what the term includes can be shown:

Shan identifies both a specific group and serves as the larger cover term. The larger Shan category is in contrast to other groups such as the Wa, Kachin, and Karen each with their own subgroups. But Scott (1900: 187, 195) recognizes some Tai groups that are not Shan so we get:

It is also a political-territorial term so that there are British Shan States, Chinese Shan States, and Siamese Shan States. In fact, the British concern was initially political-territorial. They saw their colonial responsibility as extending to all domains that once paid tribute to Burma (Crosthwaite, 1968: 212). Assuming Burma’s political and territorial responsibilities led to a debate over whether
Britain should pay triennial tribute to China as the Burmese did. Ultimately the Colonial Office decided this was unnecessary but that this was even considered suggests the legalistic framework the British brought with them (see Woodman, 1962: 265–7, 323–31).

To determine the extent of Burma’s domain, they relied on local historical sources such as court chronicles (Scott, 1900: 187–209). The concern for history further increased the referential ambiguity of the term “Shan” since Shan people and Shan polities were projected back in time and space in an effort to determine the origin of the Shan. They wanted to pinpoint the date when Shan principalities began paying tribute to other powers since this was a sign that they were no longer independent political entities (see discussion in Scott, 1900: 187–209).

The British quest for territory created Shan as a cover term that, initially, did not have much political reality—at the time there were no “Shan” but rather Tai Khun, Tai Long, Tai Loi, etc., and assorted states such as Yawngwhe, Mawk Mai, and Hsenwi. This same colonial process created divisions such as Siamese Shan or Chinese Shan that were not there prior to the colonial presence. A single state may have paid “tribute” to a number of different “overlords” without losing any political suzerainty, something that clearly bothered both the British and French (Thongchai, 1994: 95–112). Without modern nation states and the modern nation state’s concerns for boundaries and the contents within those boundaries, minority political identity was not an issue. This is not to say that ethnic differences were not recognized or groups did not have different political agendas and identities but rather that these two did not come together as political ethnic identities (see Jonsson, 1998).

British colonial policy in Burma tended to reify ethnic diversity. The British were concerned with separating ethnic groups and maintaining ethnic groups although there was also recognition that small groups or “hybrid” groups would disappear (Scott, 1932). One of the virtues of the British conquest of upper Burma, from their perspective, was the saving of Shan from the twin pincers of the Burmese extending north and the more aggressive hilltribes, especially the Kachin, expanding south which would have squeezed the Shan out of existence (Scott, 1932: 159).
British policy in the Federated Shan States was to rule indirectly through traditional leaders, locally known as *saopha* but referred to by the Burmese term *Sawbwa*. Cushing (1914: 170) translates this as “an hereditary prince, a Shan prince,” but Scott (1900: 289, 290, etc.) and others (Crosthwaite, 1968: 74, 124; see Dufferin and other English officials cited in Woodman, 1962: 425–6) give it as “chief.” The only time Scott recognizes Shan as princes and kings is in his discussion of the history of the Shan prior to submission to Burma (Scott, 1900: 187–209). I do not know if this is a conscious attempt to downgrade Shan principalities and their leaders, a consequence of not wanting to enter into separate treaty relations with princes as they did in India (Scott, 1932: 308), or merely that they were not seen as princes.

After the British removed the Burmese King, they saw their task as extending their authority into the Shan states and other areas of upper Burma. This was a military and political enterprise. Conditions in the Shan states were confused, at least from the British perspective. Some of the states had broken away from Burma as the King’s rule was increasingly ineffective, others continued to fight among themselves, and assorted uplanders, in particular the Red Karens, persisted in attacking lowlanders. All this confusion made it possible for “bandits” from lower Burma to hide out. Whether their actions are seen as banditry, a last ditch attempt to establish relative autonomy from the Burmese, or as part of an early anti-colonial uprising depends on the author’s perspective. Nonetheless, the British viewed this as banditry, ill-advised attempts at autonomy, and so on (see Crosthwaite, 1968: 112).

British suzerainty was established relatively easily following two marches in the cold and dry seasons of 1887–88 and 1888–89 through the Shan States where *Saophas* were encouraged to recognize British authority. At the time the British did not intervene in disputes over who was the rightful ruler, they just confirmed whoever was in charge. In the case of Hsenwi, where two different contenders were in control of the state, they simply divided it (Scott, 1900: 297–8; Woodman, 1962: 433).

According to Scott (1900: 302–3) the goal of British governance was “to maintain order and to prevent private wars between the several States, while at the same time allowing to each
Chief independence in the administration to the fullest extent compatible with the method of civilized government.” The devil lay in the details of “civilized government.”

When the British confirmed a ruler in his position, they issued him a sanad listing his obligations to the British government. These obligations included paying an annual tribute, initially fixed at the same amount paid to the Burmese throne; no longer raiding other states but rather submitting disputes to the Superintendent of the Shan States for settlement; at the request of the colonial government, delivering up criminals who took refuge in the state; and not exporting opium or distilled alcohol into lower Burma. Additionally the British government controlled all rights to forests, mines, and minerals. If the Sawbwa was allowed to work these, he had to pay a royalty to the British government (Mengrai, 1965: xxxi–xxxii; see Appendix VII: xxxi–xlvii for the full texts of a number of sanad).

In 1890 the Superintendent of the Shan States changed customary Shan law to affect the way criminal trials were held. In 1890–91 and 1891–92, systematic investigations were made to enumerate the population and determine the revenue paying capacities of the Shan States (Scott, 1900: 308). Initial tribute levels were established in 1887 and 1888 for five years and were revised in 1893. Theoretically the British were less interested in the income from the Shan states and more interested in improving the quality of local governance. According to Scott,

> The sums demanded were purposely small with the object of assisting the development and repopulation of the States and with the same object the Sawbwas were instructed to submit rough budgets to the Superintendent showing their proposed receipts and expenditures for the coming year (1900: 311).

This seems a little ingenuous since the colonial government kept rights to minerals and forest products as well as taking measures to determine the revenue capacities of the Shan states (Scott, 1900: 308). Scott’s statement does resonate well with the sense that the British saw themselves as improving the quality of life for the peoples they ruled.

In spite of their stated goals of allowing the “chiefs” to rule independently following Shan customs, British colonial policy
served to recreate Shan polities in the British image (see Crosthwaite, 1968: 124–5). By collecting annual taxes in cash rather than kind (Scott, 1900: 300), by revising Shan “traditional law” to fit with British practices, by imposing budget restrictions on the princes, and by controlling the mineral and timber rights in the states, the British re-formed Shan polities.

The colonial government had less ability to intrude into villages and rearrange villagers’ relations with each other and with their political leaders. Nonetheless, British colonial rule remade the larger context within which these villagers operated. Taxes were collected more regularly and systematically. In their interaction with British colonial officers and colonial rule, Shan princes changed how they saw themselves, their relationships with their people, and with the broader world. Princes sought western education for their children and modern consumer goods as status symbols. And they were encouraged to rule in a “rational” manner, supporting projects to improve the social welfare for their populations such as schools, access to western medicine, and so on. One consequence was the need for regular stable tax income. This reorientation of the ruling elites parallels changes among the Northern Thai elite as Bangkok increased its control of this area. The Northern Thai elite entered into status competition within the larger Thai realm, thus increasing the separation between rulers and peasants and increasing the rulers’ need for income (Bowie, 1988; Calavan, 1975; Ratanoporn, 1989). I do not know if the changes in the Shan ruling elite had a similar effect.

Nonetheless the British saw their actions as only minimally changing the way things were done while benefiting the population at large. Here is Rev. Wilbur Willis Cochrane’s laudatory summary of the consequences of British rule:

At the time of British annexation every part of the Shan highlands west of the Salween was ravaged with war. Shans against Shans, and Burmese against them all. To bring peace and an era of prosperity, put an end to feuds, settle the disputes of princes, re-establish the people in their homes, and organise out of chaos a helpful and strong government, was no easy task. That it was accomplished with so small a force, so quickly, with so little opposition, was due to the energy, ability, and tact of the British officials upon whom the Government had placed responsibility.
Immediately after the annexation began the era of improvement... A mother with her little child can travel alone from Moguang to the border of Siam, and from Keng-tung to Rangoon, with comfort and perfect safety. (Cochrane 1970: 29–30)

The British assumed national identities and governed based on them. There were different government structures in lower Burma where the British ruled directly and upper Burma with more indirect rule (cf. Furnivall, 1948). The outcome of the British colonial processes was to create a sense of national ethnic and political identity within the diverse populations of Burma. Now it makes sense to talk about Shan as a political identity that crosses principalities. Shan has become a label that people use, at least in English, to identify themselves and their political organizations: Shan State Army; S.H.A.N. the Shan Herald Agency for News; book titles such as *The Shan of Burma* (Yawnghwe, 1987) and *Twilight over Burma: My Life as a Shan Princess* (Sargent, 1994).

**Thailand**

The Thai national concern in response to British and French territorial designs was a belated recognition of the need for clearly defined boundaries and a concern for the “Thai” identity of the people contained within those boundaries (Thongchai, 1994). Regional identifications such as Northeastern Thai or ethnic names such as Thai Yai were replaced by the broad cover term, “Thai” (Vella, 1978). This parallels the way the British used the term “Shan” to include a broad range of peoples. Here Thai government officials were using the term “Thai” to create the sense that Siam was an ethnically homogenous nation state with a single people, language, and culture. Vella suggests that this was a self-conscious government practice begun during Chulalongkorn’s reign (1868—1910). This is approximately the same period the British were conquering Burma and the French consolidating their rule in Laos and Cambodia.

The Lao of the Northeast and the Thaiyai of the North could have been regarded as separate from the Thai of the Chaophraya Plain on historical and, to some extent, cultural grounds.... [i]n any event and for obvious reasons the Siamese government, even
before Vajiravudh's time (1910–1925), had decided on a policy of treating all these peoples as Thai and using the term “Thai” for all of them (Vella, 1978: 199).

Reynolds (1991: 21–4) extends this argument to the Phibun era, 1938–45. Ethnic minorities, particularly the Chinese, were seen as improper contents for the container (Vella, 1978: 188–95). Now some sorts of ethnic identity are seen as appropriate, but Chinese and uplander identities remain unacceptable (Jonsson, 2005). To see how this has played out, I discuss Maehongson Shan and their political identity inside Thailand.

Maehongson

Maehongson was settled only relatively recently—some sources suggest 1831 (Renard, 1980: 129) or 1865 (Tannenbaum, 1996). Both dates refer to Chao Keawmungma who was sent by the Chiang Mai prince to collect elephants, and in the process of training the elephants founded the village of Maehongson (Ministry of Education, 1983; Samay, 1996). However, local histories suggest village settlements were in existence prior to the foundation by Chao Keawmungma (Tannenbaum, 1996). In 1874, Chao Kawilorot of Chiang Mai appointed Phaya Sihanatraja to found the principality of Maehongson. There is considerable disagreement between popular histories in which Chiang Mai has the political authority and ability to act, and a surveyor’s report, translated by Wilson (1985), which identifies Tsao Kolan of Mawk Mai and local Shan as the major actors. The surveyor’s narrative is congruent with the local histories since it, too, assumes the existence of villages prior to Chao Keawmungma’s actions.

The survey was made in 1890 as part of delimiting the Thai–Burma border. The establishment of the western border and the continuing reorganization of the administrative system placed Maehongson firmly in what was fast becoming Thailand (Thongchai, 1994). In 1900, Maehongson and the communities of Mae Sarieng, Khun Yuam, and Pai were incorporated into Western Chiang Mai. The ruling prince was pensioned off and replaced with regular Thai officials (Anusansasanakorn, 1977; Durrenberger 1977). Maehongson became a province in 1907 (Samay, 1996: 10).

The recent history of Maehongson falls into three periods:
princely rule, 1875 to 1900; early Thai administration, 1900 to 1984; and the tourist boom, 1985 to the present. During these periods, local Shan had different political and economic relations with the national government just as the national government had different ideas about the political-ethnic nature of the population.

Princely rule, 1874–1900

Villages existed as organized units with headmen (Wilson, 1985; Durrenberger, 1977). An 1889 census list of villages in Maehongson suggests a relatively long period of occupation with some villages having twenty-five or more households (Durrenberger, 1977: 3). The headman’s compensation was not a salary but access to land and labor. In return for organizing corvée, the lord provided lands for the headman; in return for protection, villagers provided labor service.

People’s responsibilities to their lords were quite limited, at least in outlying communities. If a household made irrigated fields they were obliged to serve as porters when the prince traveled. However, if a household chose not to make irrigated fields, they had no corvée responsibilities. This service was onerous enough or irrigated fields were not that productive so that some households chose not to make irrigated fields (Durrenberger, 1977; Durrenberger and Tannenbaum, 1990).

Market connections were primarily with Burma. Locally produced sesame oil was sold to buy clothes, shirts, salt, and manufactured goods imported from England or Germany (Durrenberger, 1977; Milne, 1970).

The Siamese surveyor’s report of 1890 provides an account of the political organization of Maehongson and Thailand’s western border. In it, the official gives a brief history of Maehongson, Mường Mai, Mường Tha, and Mường Mawk Mai and the relationships among these states and with both Burma and Chiang Mai. His information comes from an interview with Nang Mia, the ruler of Maehongson at the time of his visit (Wilson, 1985).

In 1865, prior to the British conquest of upper Burma, Tsao Kolan, a prince from Mawk Mai state, along with approximately one thousand followers, entered the Maehongson area. Before this, he had disputed the right of Mường Nai officials to collect Burmese
head taxes in Mawk Mai, spent some time in a Burmese prison, and escaped, going first to Mường Mai and later to Mawk Tsam Pe (Ban Mokcampaen). At that time Mường Mai was a small principality ruled by an official appointed by the Chiang Mai prince. Tsao Kolan took over and the Chiang Mai appointed official fled. Tsao Kolan left a son to rule Mường Mai while he and most of his followers went to Mawk Tsam Pe, an established village with connections to Pang Mu, another large Shan village (Wilson, 1985: 34–5).

According to the Siamese report, Tsao Kolan was a bandit, harassing the people in the area by demanding food and goods and displacing the officials appointed by the Chiang Mai court. Nonetheless, the Chiang Mai court agreed to the appointment of his son as the official in Mường Mai; eventually appointed his nephew-in-law to rule in Khun Yuam; and in 1873, gave permission for Tsao Kolan’s niece and nephew-in-law to found Maehongson town.

Tsao Kolan and his followers made themselves leaders of existing Shan communities. Villages were the units of political and religious identity. Households were incorporated ritually and politically into the village through the annual repairing the village ceremony (mae waan) held at the heart of the village (tsan waan) and through continuing to pay respect to the cadastral spirit, the Tsao Mường, on Buddhist holy days. The Tsao Mường is a principality-level spirit—one who presides over a mường rather than a village. Shan differ from other lowlanders in having a Tsao Mường rather than a Chao Thi (lord of the place). In addition to the Tsao Mường and the heart of the village, Shan villages also have a Buddhist temple that serves as the locus for village-wide ritual events and allows the village as an independent unit to host other villages at festivals (Tannenbaum, 1990; 1994; 1996).

Conceptually, ritually, and politically, Shan villages form independent autonomous units with their Tsao Mường and rituals that reinforce their autonomy. In practical terms, these villages were never politically or economically autonomous but were linked to other villages through the exchange of festivals and marriages. They were linked to larger political entities through the relationships that the headman or local “big man” maintained with officials and...
through the villagers’ obligations for corvée, taxes, registration, and so on.

The career of Tsao Kolan’s nephew-in-law, Cakamongsan, who, in 1874, became Phaya Sihanatraja, the founder of Maehongson, provides some insight into the kinds of relationships which linked people and villages to larger polities. At the time Tsao Kolan came to Mawk Tsam Pe, Cakamongsan was an assistant to the headman of Pang Mu. According to the Siamese surveyor, “He placed himself under Cao Kulan [Tsao Kolan]. Cao Kulan displayed many favors toward him” (Wilson, 1985: 35). Cakamongsan married Tsao Kolan’s niece and Tsao Kolan gave him permission to live in Khun Yuam. It is not clear from the report what official role, if any, Cakamongsan had in Khun Yuam. The northern Thai eventually sent an army, and Tsao Kolan retreated to Muong Mawk Mai. According to Mangrai (1965: 228), he received a Burmese pardon and so could return. In 1869, the Chiang Mai prince sent an army to investigate the situation in Khun Yuam and brought Cakamongsan back with them. Tsao Kolan’s niece, Cakamongsan’s wife, stayed in Khun Yuam but later joined him in Chiang Mai and then remained there for three years after the Chiang Mai prince appointed Cakamongsan as Phaya Sihanat and sent him back to Khun Yuam, and then in 1874 appointed him to found Maehongson (Wilson, 1985: 36).

Cakamongsan went from being an assistant to the headman of Pang Mu to eventually prince of Maehongson by affiliating himself first with Tsao Kolan and then with Cao Kawilirot of Chiang Mai. The report does not say anything about how Cakamongsan became an assistant to the headman or his position in Mawk Tsam Pe prior to his relationship with Tsao Kolan. I assume that he was a Mawk Tsam Pe person with some local power and following. This is plausible in terms of his role as assistant to the headman of Pang Mu, his ability to “place himself under Tsao Kolan,” and his value to Tsao Kolan.

*Early Thai administration, 1900–84*

Once the ruling prince was retired and Maehongson was incorporated into Thai administrative structures, Maehongson remained marginal to the developing Thai nation-state. Its
population is ambiguously “Thai.” Shan differ from the Central Thai in language, alphabet, and Theravada Buddhist practice. Similar linguistic and religious differences between Bangkok and Northern Thailand led to the suppression of Northern Thai practices (Ishii, 1986; Kamala, 1997; Keyes, 1971). However, this did not occur in Maehongson because it was too isolated and irrelevant for its variant forms of language and religion to be seen as rallying points for opposition to the increasing centralization from Bangkok.

Under the Thai system, headmen and subdistrict (tam bon) headmen retained their lands, but had to pay a nominal tax on them. Villagers were no longer required to do agricultural work for them. The system of salaried headmen began. Headmen attended monthly meetings at which officials of the central government would tell them what they should be doing. On their return to the villages, headmen would call village meetings to pass on the officials’ directives. The government did not disperse any funds to the villages, but headmen organized villagers for common projects such as digging new wells and constructing new temples (Durrenberger, 1977).

Local officials had a difficult time during World War II when the Japanese directed them to send large numbers of men to build the airport in Maehongson town and build and maintain roads. These demands were greater than normal and the government offered little to motivate either the corvéed men or officials to cooperate, relying instead on its coercive power.

The government seldom intervened in internal village affairs. Orders were conveyed indirectly through the headmen, and often the headmen served as intermediary when villagers had to interact with the government. On the infrequent occasions when government officials appeared in the village, they dealt only with the headman (Durrenberger, 1977).

The headman and the subdistrict headman kept the first level of household registration information and recorded births and deaths. Villagers had to deal directly with district-level officials to pay land taxes, register land, and get identity cards. The national draft sometimes removed individual men from their villages for a two year period, although it was possible to avoid this if one had a
patron.

Villages received little from the government and few people had relationships with any government officials. In the early 1960s schools were located in each village and village headmen often made alliances with the schoolteachers. Through these connections, some people had access to higher education and government positions. Most of the individuals who were able to take advantage of these opportunities now live outside the area, but they serve as potential connections for their village relatives. Since the alliances followed the recognized power of individuals as headmen and teachers, this did not alter the nature of the villagers' relationships with the government.

**Modern times, 1985 onwards**

I am somewhat arbitrarily defining the break between early Thai administration and modern times at 1985.

Around this time, Shan and Thai Yai began to appear as ethnic labels, unlike the earlier period where they were subsumed under the larger gloss as "Thai." Thailand's borders were secure. The internal unrest, which occurred in the mountainous periphery of Thailand and was often labeled "communist" and identified with uplanders and other non-Thai populations, subsided in the mid 1980s. During the unsettled period, ethnic variation and the celebration of ethnic differences were discouraged. Now however, with less concern over national security, local traditions are acceptable and, in fact, encouraged.

Part of the creation of Thailand as a modern nation state was assumption of a "geo-body" that has persisted through time. Thailand, Thai language, Thai culture became a "natural" unit, the "geo-body" (Thongchai, 1994). Once this was securely in place, and the internal and external threats had disappeared, the contents of that "geo-body" no longer had to be homogenous. One result was the creation of "regional Thai" groups defined and identified in terms of their geographic relationship to the center, Bangkok (see Thongchai, 1994: 165 for a discussion of Northeastern Thai). These terms stress regional differences within Thailand rather than marking different ethnic groups.

Regions and provinces are now seen as sub-units with histories.
Thai Yai, Shan, and Tai Long

that reflect their places within Thailand. These parts cannot threaten the Thai nation as they are constituted as parts of Thailand, and defined in terms of it—Northern Thailand, Northeastern Thailand, Southern Thailand. They exist only so long as Thailand does. This regionalism defined in reference to the Thai nation-state is also reflected in the names of the Thai dialects—Northern Thai, Central Thai. It now becomes possible to develop markers of difference which highlight the cultural diversity and creativity contained within the nation—as long as this diversity is on a provincial and not ethnic level.

Provinces were directed to hold traditional festivals in honor of the 200th anniversary of the Ratanakosin dynasty in 1986. Maehongson's "traditional" festival was a large-scale ordination of novices. This tradition was established around 1984 by monks from the monastic university, Mahachulalongkorn. The normal time for ordinations is just before the three-month rains retreat. However, because of the school year, few boys were being ordained and there was concern that they were no longer learning Buddhist values. Summer-vacation ordinations, held all over Thailand, were seen as a way to compensate for this. Ordination festivals tend to be picturesque. Tai Long ordinations, where the boys are dressed up as princes, are particularly picturesque and different from ceremonies held elsewhere in Thailand. A Tai Long cultural event was put to service as a provincial event, in the same way as the statue of the "Shan" founder was (Tannenbaum, 2002).

Provincial-level festivals are for both internal and external consumption, celebrating "Thai" history and culture for Thai and Western tourists. These festivals, like the ordination ceremony, help reify provinces as cultural and historical units at the same time that they provided colorful ceremonies for tourists. While local cultural traditions are being celebrated, local is defined with reference to its place in the Thai geo-body. This shifts attention to regional histories and away from the center, especially from Bangkok, as the locus of all history and culture. However, centers still play an important role in determining history and creating events.

Maehongson also became a focus of national and international tourism. Around 1985, the Long Neck Karen were featured in a French fashion magazine. These women, whose heavy neck rings
bend the shoulder blades, had been settled on the Thai-Burma border to provide income for the Karen Army fighting in Burma. The then governor of Maehongson had them resettled into two villages inside the Thai border. The *bua thong* flowers which bloomed in November, the large scale ordination festivals in March, the Long Neck Karen, and the general rustic air of the province made Maehongson attractive to both Thai and international tourists.

While regionalism was being celebrated, there were some indications that Maehongson was becoming less isolated from the political and economic processes of the nation. The Thai government presence was expanding with new provincial government offices built to the south of the town center. The range of government activities expanded to include a province-wide cooperative, animal health projects, and local income-generating projects aimed to keep villagers from migrating to Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Businesses also expanded; most major Thai banks have a branch in Maehongson town and there are now a number of department stores that provide goods not available in the market. The new shops include a number of stores selling tourist goods as well as international chains. A 7-Eleven opened in 1995 and a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in 2008.

There is an increasing awareness of Maehongson as a Shan province; welcome signs are given a Shan decorative twist, the airport displays posters about Shan festivals and customs, and a statue to Phaya Sihanatrāja was erected in 1990. The impetus for this celebration of “Shan” comes from a number of sources, most of them outsiders. The Phaya Sihanatrāja statue was built because the provincial level abbot, a Northern Thai but a long-time resident of Maehongson, thought it was a good idea (Tannenbaum, 2002). The person behind the Shan motifs on signs is also a Northern Thai who is quite taken with Shan things.

While this is going on at a town or provincial level, there are other pressures, national and provincial, which create an increased sense of being Thai rather than Shan, at least in the capital district. Maehongson now gets Thai television. Villagers, who may not be able to read or speak Thai, begin to acquire an understanding of the national language. Schools have been in place for the past thirty
years which means most people under the age of forty-five are at least familiar with Thai language and Thai writing. Having gone to school enables villagers to enter the larger Thai world because also it teaches Thai manners, customs, civics, history, and proper respect for and responses to authority (Wyatt, 1969; Keyes, 1991).

On the international level, the political chaos in Burma has created a large influx of Shan from the Shan State. Maehongson Shan see themselves as more civilized, with better manners and a higher quality of life, in contrast with the refugees. This sense of civilization and manners, expressed in the Thai term marayaat, identifies Maehongson Shan with Thai in contrast to the Shan refugees. Within Thailand, Shan now has become a term that connotes illegal immigrants and, as such, has a negative meaning. Shan in Maehongson have not yet dealt with this shifting in the meaning of Shan.

Within in these rural communities, access to refugee labor means that villagers can hire people to do their agricultural labor while they take better paying jobs outside their communities, furthering their involvement in the larger Thai community. This option may have disappeared in the current economic crisis.

There is increased government intervention in the villages. The Forestry Department now enforces laws against making hill fields. One consequence is that poorer villagers without access to irrigated fields often have to leave to take menial work elsewhere. They disappear into the mass of poor urban Thai and may no longer identify themselves as Shan, but rather as Thai, relying on their education and identity cards.

There are now numerous workshops and training courses that bring government officials into the villages but also bring people from a number of villages together. The government, rather than having a single entry point into the village—the headman—has a number of other possibilities. The agricultural health officer contacts the villagers he trained to vaccinate animals; the medical officer has direct contact with the village volunteer health workers; and so on.

Ritually the villages still celebrate their autonomy, however, the political and economic reality of this autonomy, never all that real, is declining further. Villagers now buy tractors and the fuel to
operate them, often borrowing the money from the agricultural cooperative. Their ability to repay the loans depends on the national and international markets for their cash crops. This in turn depends on national political and economic policies, something which villagers have little ability to influence.

The term “Tai Long” has disappeared from the discourse on identity. The people of Maehongson who refer to themselves as Tai Long are written and described in Thai as Thai Yai or Shan, and academically they are discussed as Shan. Local identities as Tai Long or as members of a particular state such as Yawnghwe have been absorbed into the terms, Shan and Thai Yai.

Political identities across state boundaries

Only within a framework of modern nation states does it make sense to talk about political ethnic identities. Prior to the colonial presence, the Burmese, Siamese, and Chiang Mai courts had a range of relations with individuals from different ethnic groups (Renard, 1980; Terwiel, 1989). These were not, however, relations with ethnic groups per se but rather with a particular person and his followers or a particular localized community (see Jonsson, 1998).

The creation of the modern nation state has the potential to transform ethnic identities into political ones. The British assumed races or nationalities and governed based on them. The outcome of British colonial processes was to create a sense of national ethnic and political identity within the diverse populations of Burma. Shan as a political identity is an outcome of this process, as are Kachin, Burmese, Wa, and other political identities within Burma. Ethnic policies in post-colonial Burma have only reinforced the political nature of ethnic identity.4

The reification of politicized ethnic identities is not, however, a necessary outcome of modern nation states’ minority policies. Thailand appears to have successfully supplanted assorted Tai ethnic identities by placing them within larger regional identities. However, ethnic politics are not absent from Thailand. Uplanders and Chinese remain non-Thai elements within the Thai geo-body, and Thai policies towards uplanders seem to be creating ethnic groups as political groups where they were not before. Various Thai
identities like “Thai Yai” or Northern Thai are now acceptable but they are not political while uplander’s ethnicities are not acceptable but are political (cf. Jonsson, 2005).

Notes

1 This is Scott’s term (1900: 38), and it is problematic since it assumes that “the Shan” existed and that one could identify “Shan customary law.”
2 This is a description of Shan villages and their political ritual organization in the 1970s. Projecting this organization back in time may not accurately represent village organization in the past in either Thailand or the Shan States. However, it is the best I can do now.
3 Periodically border disputes flare up between Thailand and Laos and Thailand and Burma.
4 The Burmese government asserts that this is a consequence of British colonial policies which fostered the political nature of ethnic identities. The British held the Burmese throne as responsible for the political and economic chaos in upper Burma because of the throne’s policy of divide and conquer, but this was statelet against statelet and not ethnic groups against ethnic groups per se.

References


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