History and geography of identifications related to resource conflicts and ethnic violence in Northern Thailand

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Abstract: *Resource conflicts often intensify ethnic violence and vice versa. However, in specific cases situations can be more complex than they appear. To understand this phenomenon, this chapter takes incidents of violence in Northern Thailand as a point of departure to explain how the historical construction of ethnic identification is tied to the spatial division of highlands and lowlands. I argue that these incidents of violence are not just about resource scarcity but also about notions of forests and highlands as places of wildness and lowlands as the source of civilisation. The current adoption of a nature conservation discourse among Thais puts forests and hills into a battlefield of perceived resource degradation. Some situations have been aggravated to the point that violence has been perpetuated against ethnic highlanders by lowlanders who have adopted orthodox science and nationalist sentiments drawn from a history and geography of ethnic identification. Taking a political ecology approach, this article highlights the interplay among resources, access rights, identity, history, polity, and space to unveil the complexity and specificity of ethnic violence.*

Keywords: *cultural politics, ethnic identification, forest, Northern Thailand, political ecology, resource conflict*

Introduction

'*If I could choose, I would not have been born a Hmong,*' was the sentiment of Hmong hill tribe members of Pa Klang village after a violent raid on the Hmong's lychee orchards by lowland villagers in Nan Province (*Bangkok Post*, 4 September 2000: 2). On 21 August 2000, nearly 5000 lowland villagers from the Chiang Klang district of Nan Province staged a rally and blocked the road leading to the Hmong village. Another group of protesters raided lychee plantations in Pha Daeng forest at Doi Phu Kha National Park and cut down some 50 000 lychee trees and torched 20 houses which belonged to Hmong (*Bangkok Post*, 23 August 2000: 5). This was the second time the lowlanders raided and destroyed Hmong lychee plantations. In mid-June, some 500 villagers felled 2000 lychee trees and burned seven houses.

Lowland villagers accused Hmong people of encroaching on watershed forest to grow lychee, cabbage, and ginger, and blocking and contaminating the streams. Meanwhile, the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) said that it would not intervene in the dispute between the Hmong and the lowlanders. The RFD viewed the raid as a point-scoring dispute rather than an environmental issue. The chief of the RFD was quoted as saying, 'They were just getting even because the Hmong had felled trees planted under the reforestation program.' The previous year, on 21 August 1999, the RFD chief, Plodprasop Suraswadi, led the lowlanders and government officials to plant trees as part of the department's reforestation program within these lychee orchards. During that time he said that if the Hmong failed to keep his trees well, they would lose their lychee trees: 'It is one lychee tree for one of our trees.'

The above incident epitomises resource conflict and ethnic violence born out of the specific history and geography of the region. The event is by no means an isolated one, but is indicative of

the racial oppression that stretches between the lowlands and highlands of mainland Southeast Asia, where valley-based states have regularly attempted to repress hill-dwelling ethnic minorities (Lohmann, 1999). This paper describes the forest as an embedded arena of resource conflict and ethnic violence in Northern Thailand that is linked to the history and geography of ethnic identification. The notions of forest not only reference the material resource but also represent ethno-spatial classifications and connote a spatial division of power dating back in a history of regional polity. Contests over power and rights as demonstrated in the community forest movement reflected the ethno-spatial identifications of people in a specific space and time. Resource conflicts and violence against ethnic highlanders are partly produced out of the historical construct of valley and hill identifications and partly orchestrated by the changing view of Thai people about forest and civilisation with the help of science in the guise of system ecology.

In this paper I use a political ecology approach as optics to view conflicts and struggles engendered by the form of access to and control over resources. In this sense, natural resources and the environment are seen as an arena of contested entitlements, a theatre in which conflicts or claims over property, assets, labour, and the politics of recognition play themselves out (Peluso and Watts, 2001). In particular, political ecology takes the conjunctures or convergences of culture, power, and political economy as analytical starting points and attempts to integrate discourse with 'historical geography of material practice' (Harvey, 1996: 183, quoted in Peluso and Watts, 2001: 25). This is useful in deepening and widening the understanding of the theoretical and empirical relationship between natural resource conflict and ethnic violence. It provides accounts of how specific resource contests and processes, and webs of social relations are central to the way ethnic violence is played out and escalated to a certain level.

Also, the concept of territoriality – which is defined as an attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationship by delimiting and asserting control over a geographical area (Sack, 1986) – is used here to understand the associa-

tion of geography, identity, ethnicity, property, and violence. For instance, in the case of Thailand, Vandergeest and Peluso (1995) conceptualised the way the Thai State, through a so-called internal territorialisation, asserted control over people, land, and forest by registration, cadastral survey, demarcation of respective resources, and increased surveillance. This has become instrumental to the policy of selective inclusion and exclusion that led to the resource conflicts and ethnic tensions that resulted in violence (to be discussed later in this article). Elsewhere in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, concepts of territoriality, ethnic identity, resource access, citizenship, and cultural politics have been traced to ethnic war between Dayak and Madurese during 1996–1997 (Peluso and Harwell, 2001).

This article is divided into two parts. The first part reviews previous scholarly writings about the geography of identifications in Southeast Asia. These conceptual dialogues help the author to understand how official identifications play out in specific political, economic, and regional contexts and how local people vernacularise their own identification to contest hegemony imposed by the State. Three case studies of ethnic enclaves in Thailand are presented to illustrate the interaction of theory and empirical observations. Arguments and empirical data are discussed in length to shed light on the political ecology of resource conflict and ethnic violence in Northern Thailand. The second part documents the incidents of resource conflict and ethnic violence that testify to the historical and geographical trajectory of ethnic identification and resource use in Northern Thailand.

History and geography of ethnic identifications

This article assesses the Tai Lue, Lao Puan, and Khamu ethnic groups to understand and illustrate the interplay of ethnic identifications of people located in different geographical space and historical context and the emergence of resource conflicts in contemporary Thailand. These ethnic enclaves have been resettled in Northern Thailand (also known as Lanna) during the historical period so-called among the Lanna historians as '*Keb Pak Sai Sa, Keb Kha Sai Muang*', which literally means 'collect the veg-

etables into the basket, collect the people into the city'. This historical period was marked by great social dislocation inflicted by warfare and forced migration in the 18th century when the Northern Thai Kingdom rebuilt the cities after liberation from more than 200 years of Burmese occupation.

These minorities are among various groups of people who make up the ethnic mosaic of the valley and hill landscape of Nan Province, and Northern Thailand in the larger context. They are located well inside the bounded territory of modern Thailand. Over time, through the making of the modern Thai nation-state, the identification of these three ethnic minorities have been shaped by official identification, which often operated through state simpli-fication projects such as racialisation, ethno-spatial categorisation, internal territorialisation, national security pretensions, development dis-course, natural resource management regimes, environmentalism, and so on (Scott, 1998). The exclusionary issues of these three groups are not about citizenship but rather about identification of Thainess.

Mainland Southeast Asia in general, and Northern Thailand in particular, is geographi-cally characterised with hill and valley ecosys-tems. The geographies of identification often give the image of the valley as the centre of civilisa-tion (J. C. Scott, unpubl. data, 1999). The valley people are portrayed as wet-rice cultivators and Buddhists who settled near the river with histori-cal development of political and spatial organi-sation centred at the Muang.[1] In contrast, hills carry images of the wild and marginal. Hill people are perceived to be nomads, animists, uncivilised, stateless, and shifting cultivators. Spatial organisation based on land elevation and its association with ethnic classification has long been investigated in mainland Southeast Asia (i.e. Leach, 1954) and (recently) Thailand in particular (i.e. Jonsson, 1996; Thongchai, 2000; Vandergeest, 2003). An important notion has been the intersection of history, ethnic identifi-cation, and ecological settings. For instance, Jonsson (1996) indicated that the natural envi-ronment was shaped by cultural politics resulting in social differentiation between hills and low-lands in various dimensions. Lowland people developed a social and political relation with the court based on a tribute and corvee system; hill people on the other hand had a different social and political system.

In terms of geography of identification, it is useful to draw attention to Thongchai's notion of ethno-spatial differentiation of Siamese (Thai) subjects in 1885–1910. He named this sort of identification a pseudo-ethnic categorisation by geography and/or ecology. It has nothing to do with the inner qualities of the people or cultural attributes or historical development. It was similar to the Western colonial project to for-mulate and control the 'Others'. It is simply an ethnic classification by powerful outsiders based on geographic location. It is the aftermath of the construction of geo-body of the nation (Thongchai, 1994) or an imagined national community (Anderson, 1991) that makes the nationhood an integrated body that looks homogenous. Thongchai maintained that the differentiated ethno-body of Siam (later Thai-land) emerged in response to, and as a result of, this geo-political context. Thongchai investi-gated the Siamese's knowledge over their sub-jects, which he called the 'Others Within' in the late 19th and early 20th century. Thongchai's account is drawn from elite Siamese travellers' and ethnographers' descriptions of *Khon Pa* or forest people such as Khamu, Lua, Karen, Hmong, Lahu, and so on, and *Chao Bannok* or the people of the outer villages who are mainly Lao, Tai-Lue, and Shan whom he called the 'Docile Others'. The latter are not wild people because they are considered to be as civilised as the Thai. He underlines the significance of this discourse (Thongchai, 2000: 41):

> Arguably, this ethno-spatial discourse has been more influential, on Siam's policies and treat-ment of ethnic minorities, than scholarly attri-bution of ethnic identification. It has certainly been more prevalent among Thai people, from those times to the present, than any scho-larly discourse. The concept and taxonomy echoed both the indigenous perception of non-Buddhist, primitive people, and colonial discourse of tribes and peasants. . . . More importantly, this ethno-spatial ordering and relationship gave the Siamese elite a sense of its superior place within Siam and in relation to the world beyond. In other words, since its inception Siam has always been a hierarchical domain, differentiated not only by class and status, but by ethno-geography as well.

Applying the above notions to the case studies, all Tai Lue, Lao Puan, and Khamu are the Others Within, in which Tai Lue and Lao Puan are characterised as *Chao Bannok* and Khamu are obviously the *Khon Pa*. According to Thongchai, the descriptions of wild people in the early ethnographic writings of Siamese rulers documented uncivilised and un-Thai attributes as strangeness. These characteristics included physical appearances such as colour of skin, curliness of hair, length and quantity of body hair, and thickness of lips. These wild or forest people are marginal subjects in every sense. The notion of *Pa* (forest) was deemed to be marginal space and *Khon Pa* to marginal people in this space (see also Stott, 1991, about the spatial organisation of *Muang* and *Pa*; and Sahlins, 1994, on similar notions in rural France). The categorisation seemed to place Khamu and *Kha* people as inferior to Lua and Karen, and needless to say to the lowland Thai.

The Docile Others or *Chao Bannok*, especially Tai Lue and Lao Puan, unlike the wild people, are valley people having their own history, yet have been part of Siam for a long time. They were portrayed as normal villagers who begged to live under the shadow of protection of the enlightened Siamese overlords. These people were capable of accepting civilisation and domestication although they might not be Thai. Descriptions of the *Chao Bannok* were mainly about towns and villages, landscape and nature, and temples and historical sites. The most important contrast to the characteristics of the wild people is the absence of strangeness and the presence of familiarity. In the eyes of Siamese rulers at that time, the outer lowlands and its people were worthy of attention in terms of economic productivity and potential resources. In the making of the modern Thai nation-state through internal territorialisation, the space of *Chao Bannok* was administered, domesticated, and exploited for natural and human resources. The *Pa* (forest) space, nonetheless, has just recently been included into a civilised Thai space through the disguise of *Thammachat* (nature) influenced by the wilderness discourse of the West and the infiltration of system ecology. Unfortunately, only forest space has been included into civilised Thainess while forest people or *Khon Pa* have been excluded.

Hierarchy and order seem to be the rule for the discourse of ethno-spatial relation in Thai society. The *Chao Bannok* has never been able to negotiate on an equal basis with the Siamese (Bangkok) elites, even less so the subordinate *Khon Pa*. Interestingly, Thongchai (2000: 56) linked this historical trajectory to current politics concerning environmental issues such as dam projects, reforestation schemes, and natural resource management debates within contemporary Thai environmentalism. These are the terrains where the tensions of differentiated ethno-spatial politics are fiercely contested in modern Thailand. Summarily, civilisation and modernity can be depicted from the lowest to the highest end of the spectrum as *Chao Khao* (hill tribes), *Chao Bannok* (villagers or peasants), *Chao Krung* (city people), and the *Farang* (Westerners). In terms of space, the order ranges from mountain forest, rural areas, Bangkok, and the West respectively.

In a similar vein, Vandergeest (2003) suggests the concept of racialisation to understand the situations where ethnicity has become a focal point of struggles over resource access. Racialisation often builds on ethnic differences, by stereotyping people and subjecting them to discriminatory practices such as the association of hill tribes with swiddens and lowland Thais with paddy fields. To a larger extent in Mainland Southeast Asia, racialisation of ethnicity is often linked with notions of lowland versus upland peoples and their natural resource practices, producing stereotyped versions of the environmental impacts of different land-use practices. Consequently, environmental policies are formulated in such a way that upland peoples are overly disciplined by lowlanders' perception of environmental degradation (Forsyth, 1995).

Vandergeest (2003: 22–23) argues further that the production of ethnic categories continues to be tied to the production of territorial space. In this case, swidden fields are socially produced spaces in association with the racialisation of ethnic minorities. Ethnic classification in Thailand is associated with elevation, which also has been used for mapping forests, protected areas, and watershed classification. This simplification produced exclusive boundaries between hill tribes associated with upland forest space and the Thai (including Tai-Lao ethnic groups) associated with lowland cadastral

space. Karen, Lua, and Khamu have been categorised as hill tribes, partly because of their identification as the practitioners of swidden agriculture in upland forests.

The following case study narratives are drawn from local history, vernacular identification, and resource conflicts in the contexts of geographical and social constructions of hill and valley ecosystems. The investigation was set forth by revisiting the assumption of hill and valley identification in Southeast Asia put forward by James Scott. The Tai Lue, Lao Puan, and Khamu case studies illustrate in part the geographies of identification, valley and hill identifications, and also inclusions and exclusions. These cases show how vernacular identifications have negotiated and contested with the ethno-spatial categorisation of the Thai State and the racialisation of forest space, resource rights, and farming practices. Linkages among constructions of local history, fluid identifications, and resource struggles are specifically investigated in the context of growing concerns about environmental degradation in modern Thailand.

Tai Lue – the almost Thai[2]

Tai Lue belong to the Tai-Lao ethnic family. Tai Lue in Nan Province and other places in Northern Thailand migrated from Xishuanbanna (Sibsong Panna in Thai), Yunnan, China. Waves of migration of Tai Lue to Northern Thailand occurred many times in Lanna history. The latest migrations occurred when Yunnan fell under Chinese rule after the 1949 communist revolution, and later when the Red Guard ravaged the country during the Cultural Revolution. In fact movement of people from Xishuanbanna to Northern Thailand dates back many centuries to a pre-modern state of mainland Southeast Asia. The major displacement was during the period of *Keb Pak Sai Sa, Keb Kha Sai Muang* in the 18th century as mentioned above. Tai Lue ethnic communities in this research were displaced from Muang La, a small city in Xishuanbanna, and settled in the Thawangpa district, Nan Province. They formed three villages, namely Nong Bua, Don Moon, and Ton Hang. Their oral history says that they voluntarily migrated here because of war and famine in their homeland, unlike other ethnic enclaves who were mostly war captives.

Tai Lue people have not considered themselves and have not been considered by others to be inferior to the Thai majority. They have not experienced any discrimination like the Lao Puan, Khamu, and other ethnic groups despite their distinctive culture and identity. This is due, in part, to the social position of Tai Lue in the hierarchical Thai society which is relatively equivalent to the Northern Thai. This close affiliation was evident in Thai national history and official identifications. For instance, the ethnographic record of tribal groups in Thailand written by a Siamese official in the 19th century did not classify Tai Lue and Lao Puan as tribal ethnic groups. They were instead counted as Thai. Vernacular history of these Tai Lue communities related the close relationships with the centre and Siamese court. In a primordial point of view, Tai Lue have long been included as part of the Tai race, especially with the Tai prefix, which is sometimes connoted as being Thai. Differences in the political connectedness of the Tai Lue in comparison with the Lao Puan were apparent in the lived experiences and official identifications of these two ethnic communities during the making of the modern Thai nationstate orchestrated by nationalism.

Tai Lue communities have been coherently articulated with the centre of the Thai State throughout Thai history. Earlier, they managed to maintain a special relation with King of Nan in the settlement period thanks to their history of not being war captives but voluntary immigrants comprised of lords, nobles, soldiers, and peasants uprooted from their place of origin. They were not considered as Kha (slaves) like other ethnic enclaves. The close relationship between Tai Lue and Tai Yuan (Northern Thai) dates back to the ancient regime of Yonok and the Meng Rai dynasty of Northern Thailand (Ratanaporn, 1998). Tai Lue people have always been treated by the Northern Thai as kin or family, when compared to the Mon-Khmer and other hill tribes who are deemed Kha (slaves). Tai Lue and Northern Thai also share the same ecological settings, political organisation, production systems, and cosmology.

During the development era under the patronage of the modern Thai nation-state, the Tai Lue communities established the familiar connection with Thainess through the Tai prefix, which helps dilute the ethnic boundary with

Thai people. Moreover, geographies of identifications of being lowland people who are usually settled on the banks of rivers make them similar to the Northern Thai. Having Muang (city-state) style political development, being Buddhist, and practicing wet-rice culture in valleys like the Tai Yuan, these Tai Lue communities had no difficulties engaging in the development process of the mainstream Thai society. Thus the Tai Lue have always been viewed as good citizens and included as Thai people in official eyes.

Also, Tai Lue communities in Nan Province have never been considered to be like other ethnic minorities in Lanna because of the long relationship throughout history between Lanna and Xishuanbanna. This is especially true in the case of Nan. Besides being part of the same Tai-Lao ethnic family, the Tai Lue political system – the Muang – has the same power and spatial structure as that of Lanna. The feudal system of Tai Lue was built on a hierarchy corresponding to the law of Nan. Trade relations between Xishuanbanna and Nan Province continued over land routes for many centuries.

With the advent of global capitalism, distinctive cultures and identities have become commodies in contemporary Thai society. Tai Lue communities seized this opportunity to revive their culture and to vernacularise their identification, both materially and symbolically, through retelling oral histories of their communities. The statue of the overlord of Muang La was erected and a sacred ceremony to worship the guardian spirit of the Muang, once kept secret and exclusively attended by members of Tai Lue communities, was opened to outsiders who paid a fee. The schedule of the ceremony was changed to accommodate officials who were invited to preside over the ceremony. This event also became a marketplace for Tai Lue products such as textiles and was promoted as a tourist attraction. This turn of events has not gone unnoticed from a discontented Tai Lue village, the Don Moon, which did not economically share in the event. A challenge to the authenticity of Tai Lue identifications derives from the fact that the commoditisation of Tai Lue culture has transformed communal resources into a privatised benefit for one community and generated unequal distribution.

Economic differentiation caused discontent among Tai Lue villages as the Nong Bua village became more prosperous than Don Moon. This conflict led Don Moon village to build its own statue of the Muang La overlord and to organise its own ceremony since 1996. These cultural politics have resulted from the combination of resource endowment, ecological changes, and economic disparities. Don Moon villagers retold the story of the Anuparb Chai-art Songkram overlord, a resident of Don Moon, as a descendant of the Muang La overlord to legitimise their claim to be the centre of Tai Lue culture. Don Moon villagers argued that the modification of the ceremony organised by Nong Bua villagers to garner economic benefits was sacrilegious. Both Nong Bua and Don Moon villages have concomitantly reinvented Tai Lue culture and vernacularised Tai Lue identifications to cash in on the commoditisation of culture for the tourism industry.

Lao Puan – on the way to being Thai

Going right to the question of identity, who are the Lao Puan and where does the name comes from? Indeed, Puan is the name of Muang Puan (Puan Principality). It also gets its name from the Puan River, now in Chiang Kwang Province, Lao PDR. Meanwhile 'Lao' is the name of the country, the nation, the state, and ethnic group. It is quite common that people identify themselves or are identified by the place they belong or come from. What may later become Lao Puan or Thai Puan is clearly a constructed identity.[3] In Thai historiography, the people of Lao Puan are the Tai-Lao ethnic group living in the Puan principality. The geo-politics of Muang Puan put it in the middle of the three powerful states at that time, i.e. Siam,[4] Vientiane, and Vietnam. The status of Muang Puan as a tributary state depended on the rise and fall of the regional powers, especially Lanna and Luang Prabang. Sometimes, Muang Puan had to send tributes to all of these regional Muangs. This type of Muang is known in Thai history as *Muang Sam Suay Fa* which literally means three-tribute Muang. Sometimes it is called *Muang Sam Fai Fa* which means Muang under three paramount rulers (Wijeyewardene, 2002: 130). Muang Puan became the battleground of the regional powers, especially Siam and

Vietnam. The people of Muang Puan were periodically captured and forced to resettle by the stronger states. In the past, warfare in this region was about capturing manpower rather than territorial control (Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995).

Waves of Lao Puan migrated to Thailand from the late 18th century until the early 19th century (1778 until 1834). The Lao Puan of Ban Fai Mun, Pa Kha sub-district, Tha Wang Pa district, Nan Province, migrated there around 1834. To the eyes of a passer-by, the natural and social landscapes of this Lao Puan village may seem no different from that of any other rural Northern Thai village situated in the valley of a valley-hill ecosystem. However, the village's history is told in the national Thai historiography. Moreover, its vernacular history is filled with the processes of transforming from between being Lao to Thai and negotiating officially for access to natural resources and development projects, as well as for citizenship rights. The villagers adopted Thai official identification to integrate themselves with the local Northern Thai, but distinguished themselves as Lao Puan to assert their identification with other Lao Puan communities in Thailand and across the border.

The local historical account of Lao Puan begins with oral histories of inter-city-state warfare and being forced to contribute labour to the construction of an irrigation system (known in Northern Thai as *Mueng Fai*, which literally means canal weir). This traditional water resource management system is essential for wet-rice cultivation in lowland valleys in Northern Thailand. Lao Puan together with Tai Lue and surrounding Tai Yuan villagers were the corvees working in the paddy fields of the King of Nan. The people called the canal the 'decreed canal' because it was built according to the decree of the king. They also used this canal for their own paddy fields. The Lao Puan of Fai Mun village have since been recognised for their great contribution in building the weir and canal. Lao Puan men have expertise as blacksmith, especially in making knives, plows, axes, machetes, hoes, and all kinds of steel equipment needed for digging and cutting the canal through rocky hills.

Village livelihoods were based mainly on wet-rice cultivation in the lowlands and swidden agriculture in the uplands. In fact, especially in Nan, upland swidden fields were the main livelihood source of lowland villagers who had no paddy fields. Land-use patterns of the Lao Puan are divided into two major types: wet-rice cultivation and upland swidden. Both types of land use were equally important for the livelihood of the Lao Puan. Limited lowland and irrigated paddy fields forced more than half of the households in the village to engage in swidden practices. It was also widely accepted that a lot of lowland Thai in Nan were involved with swidden agriculture (Judd, 1977). However, swidden agriculture in Northern Thailand has often been racialised with hill tribe ethnic minorities such as Khamu.

Like other Tai-Lao ethnic groups the Lao Puan cosmology and political structures are spatially divided between the city (*Muang*) and forest (*Pa*). The guardian spirits of a Muang protect the members of the Muang from the devil spirits of forest. In this particular Lao Puan village, the people worship the ancestral spirit of the Moey Fah overlord, the legendary hero of Muang Puan. Lao Puan people, wherever they live, worship a guardian spirit. It is one element of their self-identification. It is noteworthy that this Lao Puan village is not the only ethnic enclave in the locality. Various ethnic villages such as Tai-Lue and Tai-Yuan, differentiated by local dialects, history, and other ethnic markers, dot the cultural landscape of this area.

The Lao Puan village, like other communities of peripheral Northern Thailand, was incorporated into Thailand in the process of making the modern Thai nation-state in the 19th century. A series of state-led development schemes accelerated the presence of state power in the village, or 'the state in the villages' era (Hirsch, 1993). In many cases, these processes were simultaneous and incomplete. The increasing presence of state agencies in the village was intensified by the state-perceived threat of a communist insurgency in rural areas, and in Nan in particular, where the long border was shared with the Lao PDR.

Since 1983 a number of villagers have abandoned swidden cultivation and opted for non-agricultural work both inside and outside the village. Many of these villagers invested in using the limited amount of lowland paddy fields they possess more intensively. A national concern with perceived degradation of watershed forests was the explicit reason why villagers gave up

swidden cultivation. However, part of the reason was also that swidden cultivation was seen as being backward and a primitive mode of production. Shifting cultivators in the village were labelled as underdeveloped and poor. They became the targets of poverty eradication measures of the government. These villagers were pushed by official identification and discursive practices of development to seek new means of livelihood elsewhere. Besides, swidden agriculture has often been singled out as a cause of deforestation in the uplands resulting in environmental degradation in the lowlands such as sedimentation and water shortage. A surge of environmentalism in modern Thailand added more pressure to the Lao Puan to abandon their swidden lands. Nevertheless, they managed to negotiate to keep control of their former swidden lands by turning them into community forests instead of losing them to state reforestation efforts.

During the period when Thai nationalism developed, the Lao Puan considered transforming into being Thai and upholding Thainess to be the safest route to secure their niche in Thai society. Their Lao cultural identities were kept inside for their own consumption. Being Lao, whether by dialect, costume, belief system, or ritual, was considered relatively inferior and hidden to outsiders. Nonetheless, some characteristics of their culture such as being valley dwellers, wet-rice growers, devout Buddhists, occupying sedentary settlements, and being recognised in Thai national history as a people with a nation-state of their own (Lao PDR), gave this Lao enclave the wherewithal to coexist within the larger lowland Thai context. Identifying with lowlanders, a representation of the civilised Muang people, has helped reduce the differences between the Lao Puan and lowland Thai. The Lau Puan eventually became Thai Puan distancing themselves from their Lao history. According to Thongchai's ethno-spatial categorisation (2000), they were simply the Docile Others, as civilised as the Thai.

Lao Puan in contemporary Thailand are enjoying a more open and plural society. The fluid identification of being Thai Puan and/or Lao Puan has become a cultural asset and a source of social capital in globalisation discourse. The present is a time flourishing with the reinvention of culture and reconstruction of

identities and history in both material and symbolic forms. It is also a time of participatory development and community-based natural resource management. Lao Puan villagers erected a statute of the overlord Moei Fa, their legendary hero, on 1 July 2000. This statute has since kept the history of Lao Puan alive by constituting the collective memory of the villagers. It tells the story and reifies the identity of Lao Puan dating back to the ancient Puan kingdom. Local history is also reinforced by the construction of an 'ancestral wall' painted with pictures depicting Lao Puan identity and history. The ancestral wall also symbolises and constitutes protection of Lao Puan cultural and ethnic identities from the invasion of urban popular culture. With concern for disappearing lifestyles, villagers rebuilt a Lao Puan-style house to collect and display daily Lao Puan ways of life. Livelihoods such as blacksmithing and hand weaving have been revived and commercialised as the expertise of the Lao Puan.

Vernacular identification of Lao Puan became concretised when the villagers established the Council of Thai Puan Culture in 1999 and became a member of the Association of Thai Puan of Thailand in Bangkok. Identification with Thai Puan, instead of Lao Puan, reinforced the inclination to Thainess as an official identification rather than Laoness, particularly in terms of modernisation in contrast to neighbouring Lao PDR. Simply being more Thai and less Lao implied modernised in the development discourse of modern Thailand. Thai Puan is a production of social space of the Lao Puan in the national sphere. They are able to link with other Lao Puan diasporas scattered all over Thailand. The Association of Thai Puan of Thailand led by the former Supreme Commander of the Thai military forces also provides them wider political space in Thai society.

Khamu – no way to be Thai

Khamu, a Mon-Khmer linguistic group, is one of nine official ethnic hill tribes of Thailand. A large number of Khamu people are found in Lao PDR. Some scholars maintain that the Khamu were the autochthonous of lowland mainland Southeast Asia and that they fled to the mountains after the advent of Tai-Lao ethnic groups – a flight from valley to hill in Scott's (1999)

account. The history of the Khamu is ambiguous and less known but they have been depicted as slaves and subordinate to the Tai[5] in the history of mainland Southeast Asia. Their history tells a story of struggle and negotiation to persist under the geographies of identification – the valley and hill, the Muang and mountain. In Lao, Yunnan, and Vietnam, the Khamu were categorised derogatorily as *Kha* or slave.

In Thailand, the Khamu have stereotypically been viewed as the labour class always working for other people including Thai, European loggers, and other ethnic minorities. The majority of Khamu in Thailand are believed to have moved from Laos to work in the logging industry of the French and British companies in the 19th century. Previously, some Khamu were war captives. Today, the Khamu have scattered across Northern Thailand and secured employment opportunities in the tobacco industry, rice mills, and all kinds of manual labour.

In this case study, the Khamu of Nan were captured from Xishuanbanna, Yunnan Province, China. They stopped over shortly in Chiang Saen, an ancient border town, before being taken to Nan to help build the city wall. There were also a number of Khamu who migrated to Nan escaping the tax levied by the Chinese; their route was probably the same as that of Tai-Lue who migrated to Nan during the same period. Khamu sometimes transformed their ethnic identification to Tai Lue to evade capture or to receive better treatment by the Thai army. As noted earlier, being Tai Lue was thought to be a better social position than being Khamu, an enslaved people (Condominas, 1990). Transformation of ethnic identification was not uncommon in the history of mainland Southeast Asia. The often-cited cases included a change from Kachin to Shan in a seminal work by Leach (1954) , a change from Tai Lue to Northern Thai in Moerman (1965) , and from Khamu to Tai Koen in Izikowitz (1951, cited in Jonsson, 1996). This was because the Tai were the ruling class who occupied the Muang as the centre of the power in the lowland valleys of major river basins.

Oral histories of the Khamu in Nan suggest that they were rescued from the brutality of the Haw (Yunnan Chinese) by the King of Nan. They praised and accepted the King of Nan as their lord for life. They worked as porters for the troops and helped the King of Nan in his battle with the Shan rebels who ravaged the city. As a reward they were allowed to settle near Nan City. Later they had conflicts with local Chinese traders concerning their settlement. Given their previous experience with Chinese domination in Yunnan, they decided to move out of the city to settle in the outer forest. They moved around two times until they found a suitable place to settle at Huey Puk, which is their present village. To find the right place to settle is crucial for Khamu because they believe that every place has a spirit. The spirit can inflict bad luck and illness on the people. Many Khamu are animist. Inducement toward Buddhism by the Thai State and towards Christianity by missionaries caused some tensions among the villagers.

Khamu livelihood is based mainly on swidden cultivation like that of Karen and Lua. This practice is currently renamed as rotational cultivation. It is often said among local communities in Northern Thailand that '*Khamu hed hai, Tai hed na*', which literally means 'Khamu do swidden, Tai do paddy field'. It relegates the Khamu to the hill area and the Tai to the lowland valley, a kind of ethno-spatial categorisation of the people since the pre-modern state (Thongchai, 2000) or the racialisation of resource uses in Northern Thailand in modern days (Vandergeest, 2003). In fact, this Khamu village is situated in an intermediate zone between valley and hill, in terms of geography and ecology. In 1985, agricultural extension officials encouraged villagers to convert their upland swidden field to wet-rice field. The officials assured the villagers that the high-yield variety would be more productive, and they did yield better for the first five years. However, after 1992, the villagers were not interested in wet-rice cultivation any more and went back to their swidden practice. This event firmly proved the old saying, '*Ya Ao Khamu Hed Na*' which literally means 'don't make Khamu to do the paddy', particularly in the eyes of the lowland officials and folks.

The process of modern nation-state making and development discourse, the so-called 'villages in the state and the state in the villages', affected the Khamu in the same way as peripheral communities elsewhere in Thailand. The presence of a threat from the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in rural areas and mountains

promptly placed Khamu villages under surveillance of the state security forces despite no insurgency active in the Khamu area. This resulted from the distrust of the Thai State of ethnic minorities and partly from a historical division between the Muang and the mountain and the Thai and non-Thai discourse.

Increasing resource competition in rural Thailand has driven this Khamu community to marginality. Unlike the lowland Tai Lue and Lao Puan, Khamu are often marginalised in the development processes and wrongly victimised by conservation discourse. This situation was illustrated by a contest over a reservoir project. The Royal Irrigation Department proposed to build a medium-scale reservoir to store excessive water in the rainy season to irrigate the rice fields of 24 lowland Thai villages. The site of the reservoir is in the middle of Samun stream, an upper-middle watershed area. If the reservoir is built the entire Khamu village will be inundated. The Khamu are facing displacement once again since all lowland villages and state officials support the reservoir project.

The Khamu viewed the threat of displacement from the reservoir project as the most formidable crisis in their history. In the past, their ancestors had to relocate the village two times for the reason that the guardian spirit was not happy. The spirit punished the villagers by causing famine, illness, and death until they found their present home where they have lived since 1899. This collective memory of displacement is shared among community members. The present village is not just a place to live but it is an identification of being Khamu. Further up the hill, the Khamu of Huey Puk village, face resource enclosure instigated by reforestation and the expansion of National Park boundaries. Hill tribes who live within state forests face constant threat to their access to natural resources. Anxiety and fear of displacement has engulfed the Khamu daily life in Huey Puk village. To comprehend their suffering one needs to look at the history and identity of the Khamu.

At one point, the crisis involving the reservoir project brought villagers together to resist relocation. They turned to their culture to cope with this eminent threat. The old Khamu retold the history of their village to the young. The history, although of life suffering, revealed the identification of the Khamu in relation with others. An

elderly Khamu told a legend of the Khamu as a big brother of all humankind and a story about why the Khamu do not have a script. 'No reasons to be ashamed of being Khamu as the word Khamu means "human",' they said in an effort to convince themselves against a false historical consciousness of slavery. In other words, they were put in the position of having to *misrecognize* themselves (Bourdier, 1990: 16, cited in Yos, 2003, emphasis is in original). The construction of local history, vernacular identifications, and all kinds of cultural resurrections became the repertoire of resource struggles of the subaltern Khamu.

Resource conflicts and ethnic identifications: A synthesis

Geographies of identification in modern Thai society are situated in the long historical process of mainland Southeast Asia. Official identifications are often reinforced by the construction of history and spatial differentiation. Power relation is closely related to political and spatial organisation of Muang. Power is concentrated at the Muang and radiated according to the distance from the centre. The power of the Muang fades out at the forest. This power structure is made legitimate by religion and belief in a guardian spirit. The Muang polity is commonly identified with the Tai-Lao ethnicity. Hierarchy, distance, spatial division, and spirit embodying the Muang polity are likened to a system of emboxment – boxes of different sizes encapsulated in a large box (Condominas, 1990). Guardian spirits command different amounts of power in the same way as Muang rulers. The guardian spirit of a Muang is at the top of the hierarchy followed by the spirit of the village and household respectively. This belief system has been embedded in the spatial, ethnic, and power relation between Muang and Pa (forest) in the sense of civilisation and wildness informed by religion and geography (Stott, 1991). The collective actions in community-based resource management in rural Thailand are also underlain by this Tai cosmology (Shigetomi, 1992).

In Nan Province, Davis (1984), in the book *Muang Metaphysics*, detailed the power of Muang rulers and the Muang guardian spirit that concentrated at the centre of the Muang (inside

the wall) and radiated spatially. The power of the ruler and the power of the spirit gradually lessened according to the distance from the centre like the light of a candle that is brightest at the centre. Stanley Tambiah called this political system a galactic polity much influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism. This power system also represents the superiority of the Tai-Lao ethnic of the lowland valley people who worship the Muang guardian spirit over the Mon-Khmer ethnic and the hill people who worship the spirit of the forest. The interrelationship of belief system, power relation, spatial division, and ethnic identification has persisted in modern Thailand. Modern nation-state making often goes hand in hand with this historical narrative to construct development discourse and ethnicity. This official identification, however, is not complete as it is often challenged by vernacular identification such as local history and resource struggles.

The valley identifications of Tai Lue and Lao Puan are attached to the civilised images of wet-rice cultivators, sedentary villages, peaceful followers of Buddha, and a people having a nation-state and nationhood of their own. The hill identifications of Khamu, in contrast, are associated with uncivilised images of swidden practitioners, nomadic lifestyles, animism, and stateless hill tribes. All of them are the products of historical specificity, a simplification project, and official identifications of modern Thai nation-state. The Tai Lue have enjoyed the privilege of Tai identification and geographies of identification reinforced by history and cosmology of the Tai people. Tai Lue have used official identification to prosper economically. However, the commoditisation of Tai Lue identification is not without cultural contestation. This challenge is not from powerful outsiders or the Thai State but instead from differentiated individuals within Tai Lue communities. Cultural politics within Tai Lue communities have originated from the economic inequality resulting from the transformation of public resources, in this case the Tai Lue culture, to individual benefits.

In the case of Lao Puan, their place in hierarchical Thai society has not been smoothly secured like that of Tai Lue. In a certain historical period, their Lao identification put them under the nationalist gaze. Nevertheless, they

were able to transform from a subordinate ethnic enclave community to become a culturally distinctive community, well identified with a valley civilisation in contingent with emerging pluralism in Thai society. The reinvention of local history and re-construction of cultural identities to suit the state's imagination has allowed the Lao Puan to gain benefits from changing politics of identification. The iconography of the statute, the ancestral wall, the Lao Puan-styled house, and other aspects of the cultural landscapes illuminate the shifting vernacular identification of the Lao Puan and Thai Puan. Maintaining a fluid identification between Lao and Thai axes provides the Lau Puan with space to alternate and enjoy the nourishment from both identifications over time. This identity-based mechanism can be used as a discursive means to gain access to natural and economic resources (Ribot and Peluso, 2003).

The identity and the vernacular history of the Khamu are filled with stories about oppression, marginalisation, suffering, and the struggles to free themselves from the fixed official identification of being hill tribes. Under the threat of displacement and resource enclosures, they have turned to their culture and constructed their ethnic identities and history to mobilise collective forces and consciousness in negotiating and resisting the state and the dominant lowland Thai. Belief in spirit power and the practice of sorcery has been used as a weapon to fence off the outside threat of displacement. The place where they are living now is important to being Khamu because it satisfies the guardian spirit and their ancestral spirit lives there. Uncertainty about displacement has traumatised the villagers' life and caused suffering. Re-invention of Khamu traditions was instrumental to dispel both the outside (reservoir project) and inside (fear, anxiety, and alienation) enemies. Crisis of resource contestation has led to cultural revitalisation. Reproduction of identity and history has become a symbolic struggle for resource and place. The common identity of the Khamu in this particular case is rooted in an attachment to place. A community sense of attachment to place and to each other is maintained, even consolidated, when the community is facing the threat of displacement from its geographical referent, a direct result from struggle over access to, or control over,

resources. Displacement here means both physical eviction and sociological and psychological instability that result from the loss of familiarity. When threatened by displacement, it is common that members of the community come together to consolidate their symbols and boundaries of self-definition. It becomes what Yos (2003) called the 'politics of location'.

To illustrate the interaction of resource control and geographies of ethnic identification, the community forest negotiated by the Lao Puan to retain their control over the former swidden areas resonated of *Chao Bannok* representation. And the fruitless resistance to the reservoir project by Khamu reflected the voices of the disenfranchised *Khon Pa* in the past. The only difference is that the Khamu are now categorised as *Chao Khao* (hill tribes) who are further stigmatised as being the source of national security concerns, drug problems, and environmental issues. More troubles for Khamu also follow the changing views of the Thai Muang people towards the uncivilised *Pa* in which the untamed forest has transformed to civilised nature (*Dhammachart*) embraced by the Muang people (Stott, 1991). This can be seen in the expansion of National Park and the reforestation program in Khamu area.

Forests: An arena of resource contest and ethnic violence

Thailand has had one of the highest rates of forest decline in Southeast Asia and the Thai government is pressured to retain the remaining forests of the kingdom. The National Forest Policy strives to maintain 40% of the country's area under forest cover, of which 25% is designated as protected forest and 15% as economic forest. Protected forests include National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, and Watershed Protection Forest. Because less than 25% of the country is actually covered with forest, all remaining land under the control of the RFD will eventually become protected under one or another category. The establishment of National Parks and Wildlife Reserves by the Thai elite, under tutelage of the United States and other international conservationists, has helped to entrench further the crude ethnic identifications discussed above.

Northern Thailand, where the most forested areas remain and millions of ethnic minorities make their living in these forests, has become an arena of fierce resource contestation and ethnic violence. The Department of National Park, Plant and Wildlife has currently increased law enforcement in protected areas by allocating more staff and budget to the tasks. Forestry officials, equipped with the National Park Act 1961, Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act 1992, and other lesser forest laws, have stepped up the exclusion policy. The potential exclusion measures include restricted control of land uses, cutting off government's social services, banning development program, and eviction respectively.

The RFD has been successful in rallying support for its exclusionary conservation policy from the conservationists, elites, urban-based middle classes, and the politically powerful media. This public approval provides the legitimate reason for the RFD to deny the proposal to allow human residency in protected forests. State officials continue to use myths of swidden agriculture, misperception of water shortages, and severe flood in the Central Plain to propagate the urgent need to keep people out of watershed forests. The perception of upland agriculture as the most important cause of environmental degradation reflects the urban (*Muang*) people's attitudes towards the ethnic forest dwellers rather than the scientific knowledge of environmental changes (Forsyth, 1995, 1996).

A number of cases of resource conflict and ethnic violence demonstrate the arguments made above. For example, on 19 May 1999, Thai authorities resorted to the use of force to end the peaceful 'Rally for Rights' co-organised by the Northern Farmers Network (NFN), the Assembly of the Tribal People (ATP), and the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand. The rally at its peak had over 10 000 people participating and calling for the most basic human rights – citizenship, a secure place to live, and access to the resources their livelihoods depend on. The Rally for Rights was one of a series of peaceful demonstrations, actions often employed by the disenfranchised rural and urban poor in Thailand in order to focus attention on their issues and concerns, which have long been neglected by the authori-

ties. The use of force was disproportionately severe, excessive, and in contravention to the Thai constitution. This incident served to bring to the forefront the relationship between two fundamental but complex issues in Thailand – the rights of citizenship, and the rights of individuals and communities to participate in the sustainable management of their local natural resources (Chayan and Aquino, 1999).

In the highlands of Northern Thailand, despite continuous encroachment and resource exploitation in pursuit of national economic growth, many ethnic communities have been able to sustain traditional, dynamic and adaptive resource management regimes, and agricultural systems appropriate to the highlands. Highlanders such as Karen have been living in harmony with the conservation of forest in the mountainous North. But without citizenship, highlanders are denied access to land and forest resources. They are further deprived of political rights, freedom to travel, and employment opportunities and are vulnerable to official harassment and extortion.

The power of vested interests and the intransigence of the Thai State can be illustrated by looking back to the historical struggles of the Community Forest Bill. The first draft of the community forest law written by NGOs and academics in 1990 was quickly countered by another draft written by the RFD. Conflicting views were clearly polarised, with community participation, decentralisation of decision making, and sustainable use and conservation on the one hand, and recovery of 'degraded forests' through reforestation on the other. Since then, it has been over 15 years with too numerous versions of community forest acts to count. The community forest movement has dramatically evolved with the changing political economy of Thailand.

The community forest movement is not only a struggle for control of forest resources but is also increasingly becoming a constitutive struggle for power to govern themselves by the local and ethnic communities. The community forest movement has evolved from a contest to gain access and control over material resources to a contest for self-determination of local people in the periphery. Struggles over control of forest resources represented in the community forestry movement are also played out in many social

and political landscapes. In addition to being counter to official and scientific discourse on forest management, the community forest movement has been instrumental in ridding the yoke of colonial mentality in forest resource management in Thailand. The community forest alliance has incessantly called for an overhaul of forest laws by arguing that they were supplanted from the British colonial management of forest in its former colonies, i.e. India and Burma.

The community forest movement is often associated with the ethnic Karen identity in terms of forest stewardship. The community forest movement has constituted a space for indigenous knowledge and a repertoire of protest of powerless ethnic minorities. It is endowed with and enriched by various forms of symbolic resistance and cultural meaning. For instance, the community forest networks in Northern Thailand has aimed to ordain 50 million trees in contest with the government plan to plant 50 million rai of forest (8 million hectares). The government reforestation scheme is in a way intended to reclaim the degraded forest lands occupied by local villagers. Ironically, both claimed to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the king's accession to the throne.

The debates over the Community Forest law have become a battlefield of resource rights, values, ideologies, class, and ethnic conflicts deeply rooted in Thai dualistic society – urban/rural, centre/periphery, and lowland/highland. The conflicts were clearly reflected during deliberation of a bill in the senate dominated by former high-ranking bureaucrats. The 'dark green' alliances who oppose the community forest in protected areas represented the views, values, and ideologies of the urban-based middle class and the powers-that-be. Community forest is undeniably seen as a peripheral view on forest management and a class struggle.

An even more dangerous trend in Thai environmentalism has been an attempt to link science to authoritarian policy devoid of historical, social, and political context. There has been a failure to examine science and the ways in which scientific ideas and the choice of scientific problems are influenced by social and political-economic ideas and interests. The supposed 'objective' measures of science are

indeed heavily influenced by such ideas and interests (see further debates in Alford, 1992; Enters, 1995; Forsyth, 1996; Schmidt-Vogt, 1998). Forsyth (2003) argued that all statements about ecology have to be assessed for their political construction as environmental statements produced by 'science' that may justify particular policies in preference over others. Another related trend has been the exploitation of nationalistic sentiments for repressive purposes. For instance, in attempting to disperse the Rally for Rights in Chiang Mai in 1999, politicians and provincial authorities resorted to delegitimising the demonstrators' demands by claiming that the ethnic minorities were not Thai, and that they were demanding citizenship and resource rights for foreigners or illegal immigrants.

An incidence of resource conflict and ethnic violence in Chom Thong district in Chiang Mai province was a case in point, where disputes over water and forest resources pitted lowland Thai villagers against the accused ethnic Hmong. The partnering of scientific rationale and racial discrimination in support of state control of forest has exacerbated resource conflicts and dramatically escalated the potential for violence (Lohmann, 1999). For instance, in March 1998, lowland Thai villagers and RFD officials removed Buddha images and vandalised the temple in the Hmong village of Khun Klang in Doi Inthanon National Park. Lowland villagers organised by the Chom Thong Conservation Group have occasionally blocked road access to highland villages without any official interference. It was the same Chom Thong Conservation Group that employed personal threat and intimidation through tactics such as storming the Chiang Mai University campus and burning effigies of three social science professors whom they accused of lending support to the community forest movement and citizenship rights for tribal people. This lowland conservation group was also reportedly involved in the raid on lychee plantations in the Nan Province.

Doi Inthanon National Park was established in 1972, as the first National Park in the northern region. The park was expanded in 1978, enclosing a total of 39 villages. These highland settlements were suddenly illegal. Restrictions were placed on traditional agricultural systems and other uses of resources. Villages were continu-

ously facing the threat of eviction. Highlanders have experienced constant harassment and threats by armed officials. The trinity of the RFD, the Chom Thong Conservation Group, and the Dhammanart Foundation (a rightist Buddhist style environmental NGOs) have embraced questionable science in attempts to legitimise their discourse of conservation and reinforce state power. All types of swidden agricultural systems were lumped together, stigmatised as irrational, destructive '*rai luean loi*', which literally means drifting dry land agriculture, and claimed to be an invention of an abstract group called 'hill tribes' (Pinkaew, 2001). Highland systems of rotational agriculture are said to threaten watersheds and cause soil erosion. Highlanders are blamed for everything from flooding to water shortages. Increased water uses in the lowland due to, for example, intensive double cropping and the expansion of fruit plantations onto mountain slopes go unexamined.

Racial oppression can come in different forms ranging from physical exclusion to conceptual exclusion. In the case of the Chom Thong conflict, the Dhammanart Foundation set up an 18-kilometre, 10-strand barbed-wire fence around the mountain ridges to prevent Hmong villagers from destroying the forest. In discourse, the moral standing of the Hmong highlanders is undercut by identifying them as foreigners, hence justifying treating them as high-priority targets for action on forest destruction which has varied and complex origins. This became more evident when the Dhammanart Foundation erected another barbed-wire fence dividing mountain communities from nature (forest) in June 1998 in Ob Luang National Park, painting the fence posts in red, white, and blue – the colours of Thailand's national flag. The message was both unmistakable and provocative: Those on one side of the fence belonged to the Thai nation; those on the other side did not (Lohmann, 1999).

There have been increasing incidents of forest resource conflicts, which often involve ethnic minorities as the victims. One case worth mentioning here is the Pang Daeng village in Chiang Dao district. This village was raided by the combined forces of the RFD, local polices, Border Patrol Police, and the Special Task Armed Forces in the morning of 23 July 2004. Forty-eight villagers were arrested for violating forest laws.

The villagers are mainly Palaung ethnic group who recently migrated across the border from Burma to escape repression from the Burmese military regime. What is distinctive about this village is that it has been raided and villagers arrested three times previously since 1989. The second time was in 1998. They are the people without ID cards showing Thai citizenship. Without citizenship, these people become an easy target of harassment by the authorities. Arbitrary arrests and physical threats are not uncommon experiences among these ethnic minorities.

With one exception, ethnic people have responded to conflict peacefully. Mien ethnic villagers in Ban Huey Kok, Pong district, Phayao province, burnt down the Doi Pa Chang Wildlife Sanctuary Unit on 30 September 1998. They confessed to this illegal act. Two years later, the same groups of villagers shot and killed an official from this unit. They challenged the authorities to arrest and imprison all the villagers for the crime they claimed to commit collectively. The investigation revealed that the villagers were frustrated and under pressure from the RFD since the Wildlife Sanctuary was established in 1981. Ban Huey Kok village became an enclave in the protected forest despite being officially registered as a village since 1900. All Mien villagers have had Thai citizenship since 1950. The villagers have been restricted in forest uses. They have been denied development, i.e. paved road, electricity, school, health service centre, and agricultural extension. From time to time, the villagers have been physically harassed and extorted of money by the forest officials stationed there. The villagers have attempted to adapt their livelihood to the restrictions imposed by the forest laws. However, what they often encounter is illegal logging and poaching by forest officials. These villagers have resorted to violence to send a strong message to the authorities. Wildlife conservation is inherently conducive to violence as the state-directed control of wildlife resources often employed paramilitary-style park rangers to do the jobs (Neumann, 2001).

Conclusion

This article attempted to place the issues of Thainess within the context of resource conflict and ethnic violence. The concept of Thainess is tied to the history and geography of ethnic identification of mainland Southeast Asia. It is argued that understanding resource conflict and ethnic violence in modern times requires a look into the historical and geographical constructions of ethnic identifications in the face of modern Thai nation-state making. Corresponding to Escobar's (1999) political ecology approach, it specifically looks at the manifold articulation of history and geography and the cultural mediation through which such articulations are necessarily produced. The issues are also embedded in the pattern of resource use, political economic transformation, and the discourses of development and environmental conservation. Official identification of ethnic differences are often reinforced and reproduced by social construction of history and spatial differentiation.

Particularly relevant is the case of Northern Thailand, where spatial divisions between valley and hill ecosystem have shaped and reshaped the spatialities of polity and cosmology of society in both geographical spaces. Power is concentrated at the centre of the Muang and radiated to the surrounding areas before fading out according to the distance from the centre. It ends at the foot of the hill, the forest. Hierarchies and orders in society are organised along the spatial divisions. Guardian spirits command different amount of power and space in the same way as hierarchical rulers. The belief system has played a part in the spatial, ethnic, and power relation between Muang and forest in the sense of the binary of civilisation and wildness. Cooperative action in local resource management is also underlined by this belief system. The power and spatial systems also represent the superiority of Tai-Lao of the lowlands who worships the guardian spirits over the Mon-Khmer and the hill people who worship the evil spirits of the forest.

The interrelationship of belief system, power structure, spatial division, and ethnic identification has well persisted in modern Thailand, and in this case played out in natural resources conflict and ethnic violence. Forest space has transformed from the uncivilised and untamed domain to become the battlefield of resource contest since Thailand emerged as a modern nation-state. Environmental conservation poli-

cies were crafted on an exclusionary basis. Exclusion of human space from nature space has been implemented along the spatial division of valley and hill ecosystems. Notion of Thainess based on the historical narratives of Muang polity in conjuncture with development discourse and the hegemony of scientific forestry has intensified natural resource conflicts and exacerbated the violence against ethnic communities and rural villagers. The Thai State has been inept solving these problems. To make it worse, it has reaped benefits from the conflicts by pitting the lowlands against the disenfranchised highlands to maintain its political and economic power over natural resources.

Embracing the broader concepts of identity, territoriality, property rights, and access, the political ecology optics help unveil the complex, yet interconnected resource conflict and ethnic violence by situating the events in the context of history and geography of the regional arena. It also explains the limited scale of ethnic violence in Northern Thailand by pointing to the democratisation of resource conflict and environmental politics demonstrated in the community forest movement and legislation. Initiatives of more decentralised and participatory resource management, although a mere tokenism, have provided some spaces for negotiation and protest that keep the conflict and violence from spurning into ethno-nationalism, at least for now.

Notes

1 Muang literally means city. It is a kind of principality or mini-state in the pre-modern state of Southeast Asia. Wijeyewardene (2002: 131) defined a Muang as 'the river valley bounded by mountains, which was the essential unit of political community, an ecological, agricultural unit in which the watershed and catchment provided the irrigation for wet-rice agriculture, and the mountain passes and the rivers articulated relations with the outside world'. Hans Penth (1977: 180–181) gave a simplified understanding of Muang in Northern Thailand as 'a populated geographic area the borders of which are formed by the surrounding mountains; it is a state in a valley. A Muang can have several villages or settlements, one of which would be the principal place with the seat of the local administration. If the Muang were important enough for a member of aristocracy to rule it, it had a fortified settlement called *Wiang*'. A detailed account of Muang was also given by Richard B. Davis (1984) in his ethnographic work in Nan published as *Muang Metaphysics*. Bangkok: Pandora. The extrapola-

tion of Muang polity in contrast to the *Pa* (forest) is interestingly discussed by Philip Stott (1991) .

2 I borrow this analogy of identification from James C. Scott when he referred to ethnic identification in China where the Han is at the top of hierarchy. The minority nationalities are differentiated in the process of Hanification. In the same manner, Thai-isation produces the hierarchical position for different groups of people in Thailand.

3 The socialist state of Lao PDR classifies its citizens into three categories according to geographical identification, Lao Lum, Lao Toeng, Lao Soong, which literally means lowland Lao, upland Lao, and highland Lao, respectively. Accordingly, the Lao Puan is lowland Lao. However, these geographies of identification are on their way out as the Lao government is considering going back to the original ethnic identifications. This change is a result of vernacular identification of local people who insist on their ethnic identity.

4 Thailand was called Siam before 1939.

5 I use Tai for the Tai ethnic groups to distinguish from the Thai people of Thailand.

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