

Focus on the Tai Village:

Thai Interpretations of the Shan
along the Thai-Burma Border



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และ
อาจารย์
ทุก
ท่าน

“Over the past decade or more there has been an awakening amongst academics in Thailand concerning studies of the Tai ethnicity that live outside Thailand”.

Somsong Burustpat, "Tai Sueksa = Tai Studies", *Pasar laew Wattanatam = Journal of Language and Culture* 17, No. 1 (1998): 5

“Implicit in these ethnographic writings is also a search for primordial meaning, an attempt to construct the distant past by studying the geographically distant. The construction/discovery that the Tais too have an authentic culture – just as exotic and primitive as any tribal society in the anthropological literature, that we too have supernatural beliefs, rituals, tales and legends susceptible to structural analysis, all of which can be found in the ordinary life of our Tai neighbours who share with us a common ancestry – represents intellectual movements which are meaningful at present to the Tai nation as a whole”.

Yos Santasombat, *Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identity in Daikong*, Canberra: Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies; in conjunction with the Thai-Yunnan Project, 2001:16

“Other people, other nations cannot overlook the importance of the Tai and will study them for many reasons. Thus it is not proper for us to do nothing; from now on more and more things will be discovered. Through all this, at the very least, we will always be proud that a land stands as the Tai nation. The only disappointment is that we could have united as a bigger Kingdom than this”.

Narimon Thepchai, "Kon Tai Kam Tai Kae Wan Tai = Tai People and Tai Language before a Tai Day" *Sinlapa Wattanataam = Art & Culture* 9, No. 5 (1988): 58-71

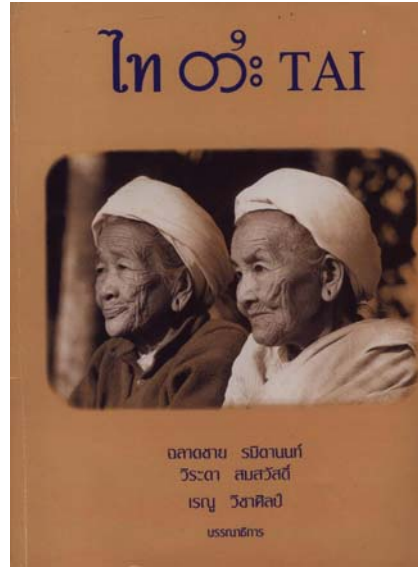
“Historical and cultural knowledge about the Tai has importance and meanings of significance. It will help to understand the original characteristics of all the Tai and understand the special characteristics of the various Tai groups. It makes for improved understanding of the Thai in Thailand especially rural society and culture because villager culture in rural Thailand is similar to the culture of different Tai groups that are outside the country”.

Sompong Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*, Bangkok: Thailand Research Council and Chulalongkorn University, 2001: 11

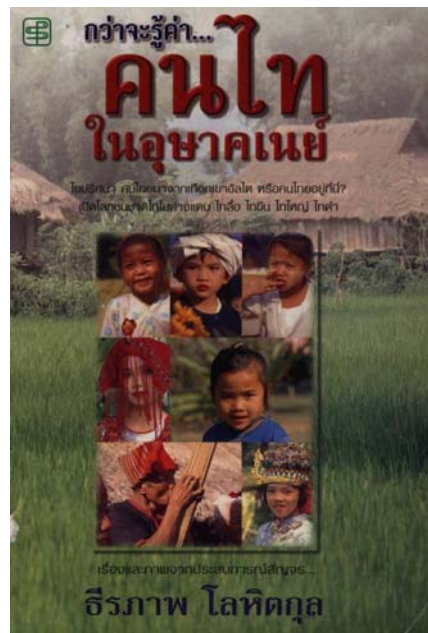
The covers of some Thai books about the Tai



Sompong Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*, Bangkok: Thailand Research Council and Chulalongkorn University, 2001.



Shalardchai Ramitanondh, Virada Somswasdi and Ranoo Wichasin (eds), *Tai*, Chiang Mai: The Toyota Foundation and the Women's Studies Centre, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University, 1998.



Teeraparp Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanai = The Tai in Southeast Asia*, Bangkok: Praphansarn, 1994.

ทำอย่างไรที่ไทยเรา
จะคิดพัฒนาสี่เหลี่ยมเศรษฐกิจ
พร้อม ๆ กันกับ
สี่เหลี่ยมวัฒนธรรม
ให้เหลี่ยมทั้งสอง
พัฒนาหนุนส่งกัน
ที่สำคัญที่สุด
คือผลประโยชน์สูงสุด
ของสังคมไทย
และการพัฒนาคุณภาพชีวิต
ทั้งทางเศรษฐกิจ
และวัฒนธรรมของคนไต

What can we do to make the Thai
think to develop the Economic Quadrangle
simultaneously
with the Cultural Quadrangle.
To make both Quadrangles
develop side by side.
Most important
is gaining the highest benefit
for Thai society
and a better quality of life
in economic terms
and culturally for the Tai peoples.

Tanet Chareonmuang, *Thai-Pamar-Laos-Jeen: Seeliam Sedikit Seeliam Wattanatam*
= *Thailand-Burma-Laos-China: Economic Quadrangle, Cultural Quadrangle,*
Bangkok: Kobfai, 1994: Back Cover

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Introduction: From Bangkok to the Village and Back

This study begins in the cities where Thai wealth and power reside. Of all the cities of Thailand, Bangkok is home to the wealthiest and the most powerful.¹ The megalopolis is the engine for Thailand's recent economic transformation, the home of its revered Royal Family, and the place where Thai modernity is most extravagantly paraded. Bangkok is the dominant intellectual and cultural hub of Thailand and has come to symbolise *the centre*. It has played host to a bubble economy, generations of political violence, and a saga of palace intrigues. Along with other Thai cities, Bangkok plays a pivotal role in producing knowledge and wielding influence.

From within the ranks of Thailand's urban-based elite, dissatisfaction with the country's current political and social structure has emerged. A new generation of culturally influential, well-educated, well-remunerated critics is expressing its dissent. Whether fuelled by resentment against foreign financial clout, or against the erosion of Thai cultural values, *the centre* is producing a cacophony of critical voices. This disharmony is fuelled by a range of activist, media and academic ruminations that introduce and propagate ideas about a different kind of future for Thailand. From universities, research institutes and the non-government sector, proposals for reform and re-prioritisation have come thick and fast. Even H.M.

¹ The full name for Thailand's capital city is: กรุงเทพมหานครอมรรัตนโกสินทร์มหินทราวุธยามหาดิลกภพนพรัตน์ราชธานีบุรีรมย์อุดมราชธานีเวศมहाสถานอมรพิมานอวตารสถิตสีกะทัตติยวิมญกรรมประสิทธิ์. The English language rendering of "Bangkok" is used throughout this thesis.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej – the nation’s devotional focus – has advocated a change of tack by promoting his “theory of self-sufficiency”.² These visions challenge the way Thailand’s society, ecology, and economy are structured. Discontent about the country’s current situation presents itself as opposing the status quo of urban and state power.

Bangkok’s propensity for ignoring environmental sustainability, social justice and economic equity is one explanation for the rise of this dissent. Even though dissent is expressed in the language of the city – the Central Thai language – using urban financial and intellectual investments, the dissenting voices argue in such a way that the city cannot hold all the answers. Disillusioned with the outcomes of *their* modernity and development, Thailand’s critics promote a return to local wisdom and community values. Although voices of protest originate from urban centres, and particularly Bangkok, they look for their meaning in villages and amongst the nation’s marginalised peoples. With rural development activists and Thailand’s anthropologists showing the way, this dissent is nostalgic for past simplicities and comforts. This return to the values of the village is important, for it signals an attempted renaissance of the periphery.

² To read about the King’s philosophy for Thailand’s development see: Various, *Trisadee Mai Nai Luang: Cheewit Tee Por Piang = The King's New Theory: A Life Which Has Enough* (Bangkok: Ruam duay chuay gan, 1999). For a discussion of the influence that this “new theory” has on Thai academic and activist thought see the excellent discussion in: Chapter 8, “Walking Backwards into a *Klong*: Thinking Social Alternatives” in Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Crisis* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000).

That movement to the periphery has involved the acquisition of the rural poor and village dwellers for study and activism. Distancing themselves from the centre and its “development” and “hegemony”, Thailand’s critics deploy the social and ecological *habitus* of agrarian life. Their agendas stress self-sufficiency, human and environmental synchronization, and the preservation of pre-modern traditions. Their goal is to advance an integrated economic, environmental and social agenda. This agenda emphasises a unity between ecology and humanity. Such unity, they assert, is *already* a part of village life.³

Such Thai interpretations of village life are not confined to Thailand’s borders. Spread throughout Southeast Asia are communities – often ethnic minorities – that have been acquired for this research and activism.⁴ Many Thai look to the

³ Some examples of village studies within Thailand are: Polepa and Galaya-Wirasak Yodraban, *Kon Pakayeor = the Karen* (Bangkok: Current Publishing, 1994); Sittechai Singhasakares, Kuppin Simbolon, and Ricky Alisky Martin, *A Community Forestry Program for the Lisu Settlement Ban Tung Ku Village, Prao District Chiang Mai Province, Thailand* (Bangkok: Regional Community Forestry Training Center, Faculty of Forestry, Kasetsart University, 1988); Tanet Yuwongsri, *Garn Priab Tieb Garn Unarak Pa Mai Kong Gasetagorn Chao Khao Pao Mong Laew Pao Kariang Nai Ked Sun Pattanakrong Garn Luang Intananon, Changwat Chiang Mai = A Comparison of Forest Conservation between Hmong and Karen Hill-Tribe Farmers in the Royal Project Highland Development Area at Doi Inthanaon, Chiang Mai Province* (Chiang Mai: The Graduate School, Chiang Mai University, 2002)

⁴ The divide between academia and activism is often blurred. Many Thai academics also see themselves as social and political activists, and many activists present their ideas in academic idioms. This is natural and to be encouraged. The term “academics and activists” is used in this thesis to include the different types of Thai theoreticians and practitioners who present their ideas as social commentary and critique.

peripheries of Southeast Asia for their social and ecological revival.⁵ Such places are distant from Bangkok and Thailand's most despoiled environments. Going to the edge is a way of trying to escape the policies and ideologies that, they argue, are destroying Thailand. It is there, far from Bangkok's perceived problems and impurities, that researchers and activists use other societies and ecologies to give legitimacy to their vision for a better Thailand.

While many groups have been studied in the search for examples of alternative social and ecological systems, the Tai peoples have emerged as a comforting and convenient focus for Thai interest. The Thai ethnographic focus on the Tai peoples for purposes of research and politics is not new. However, its recent incarnations – from the 1980s onwards – have emerged to capture significant influence and prestige. Tai languages and cultures are “related” to those of the T(h)ai⁶ of Thailand and are thus an accessible point of reference. More importantly, Tai peoples outside Thailand often live in relatively remote areas as national political and linguistic minorities. Their isolation and disenfranchisement make them a glamorous subject – deserving of attention, charity and empathy.

⁵ For example, the region's social and ecological diversity provide particularly fertile ground for claims about the relationships between human culture and environmental conservation. In Thai interpretations this relationship is described from the perspective of “peripheral” peoples. See: Teerayut Bunmee, *Kwarm Lark Lai Kong Cheewit Kwarm Lark Lai Tarnng Wattanatam = Life's Diversity: Cultural Diversity* (Bangkok: Saitarn); Yos Santasombat and others, *Garn Tong Teow Cheng Niwet Kwarm Lark Lai Tarnng Wattanatam Laew Garnjadgarn Sapagorn = Ecotourism, Cultural Diversity and Natural Resource Management* (Chiang Mai: Panpaburi, 2001); and also S. K. Borthakur, *Conservation of Biological Diversity: A Cultural Tradition of the Tais* (London: 5th International Conference on Thai Studies-SOAS, 1993)

⁶ The ambiguity of “Tai-ness” (ความเป็นไท) and “Thai-ness” (ความเป็นไทย) is occasionally indicated in this thesis by the ambiguous designation of “T(h)ai”.

The Tai are also seen as ripe for mobilisation and empowerment. Thai preoccupations and aspirations are now commonly applied from the Chuang of southern China⁷ to the Tai Ahom in Assam. Tai studies and village studies are a popular way of trying to understand the predicaments and options of people throughout Southeast Asia.

In Thai interpretations, those predicaments and options are focussed on Thailand but are not confined by its national boundaries. Thailand's malcontents do not necessarily respect nor recognise national boundaries. They sometimes argue that such boundaries are merely the legacy of colonialism and a way of disrupting and marginalising traditional and communal lifestyles.⁸ The trans-border Tai community may be at the edge of the nation but is, in Thailand's activist and academic psyche, deserving of a more central position. The Thai connections to Tai peoples who live outside Thailand are, they argue, not constrained by national boundaries. This type of research and activism necessarily encounters checkpoints and minefields along the way.

One place where checkpoints and minefields dot the landscape is the northern intersection of Thailand and Burma. In the valleys of this border zone lie the

⁷ Sumit Pitpat and Semosai Pulsuwaan, *"Tai" Laew "Chuang" Nai Kanot Yunnan Satanarat Prachachon Jeen Bot Wikraw Jark Komul Park Sanam = "Tai" and "Chuang" in Yunnan, People's Republic of China: Analysis of Field Information* (Bangkok: Institute for Tai-Kadai Studies, Thammasat University, 2000)

⁸ Prasit Leepriha, "Kreuayart Karm Promdaen Rat Chart: Gorani Glum Chartpan Mong = Families across National Boundaries: The Case of the Hmong," *Sangkomsart = Sociology* 15, no. 1 (2002): 167-169

southernmost parts of the Shan peoples' settlement. The Shan straddle the border - at the frontier of the Burmese and Thai worlds – as a politically disenfranchised and often insecure group. A valley-dwelling *majority* throughout this part of the Thai-Burma border region, they constitute a *minority* within the two national polities. For a Thai academic or activist looking for ideas and projects far from the centre of Thailand's problems the Shan are very appealing. Perhaps this appeal comes from their widespread opposition to the Burmese junta, their poverty, their Buddhism, or their capacity to endure.

The Shan are appealing because they also allow for the blurring of research and activism. This thesis therefore attempts to document and analyse the challenges that arise when political objectives are indistinct from research and interpretative programs. Understanding and challenging the presumptions and interpretations of Thai academics and activists is a necessary and important task. This thesis asks, how are the Tai peoples, particularly the Shan, described in Thai language sources? How is their village life interpreted? How are the ideas of Thai academics and activists reflected onto the Shan?

To answer these questions, Chapter 1 begins by examining the emergence of significant Thai interest in areas beyond its northern borders. This discussion is underpinned by a description of the Thai discourse which targets the societies, cultures and histories of the Tai peoples. This particular Thai discourse – the “Tai studies project” – almost uniformly describes the Tai by three distinctive yet inter-

locking discursive elements. The Tai peoples are lauded for their *authenticity*, evaluated for their *similarity* and proudly displayed for their *community*. For many Thai researchers and activists these three elements demonstrate a Tai nation or siblinghood, writ large in society and culture. The emphasis, in these Thai descriptions, is simple histories and ecologically benign lifestyles.

In Chapter 2, these histories and lifestyles are examined in the specific context of the Shan. The Shan of Southeast Asia represent a diverse mixture of histories and cultures. In Thai interpretations they are presented as a *particular type of Tai*. They are used to critique Thai modernity – through their similarity, authenticity and community – and are also used to oppose Burmese authoritarianism. The Shan are used to great effect by Thai academics and activists to challenge the nation-state and the status quo of Southeast Asia's development.

The Thai interpretations of the Shan are examined in the more specific context of Thailand's northern border region in Chapter 3. Thai interpretations describe border demarcation and control as a way that the state asserts its power in peripheral areas. Studies of borders have become increasingly widespread in Thailand and are a way that the Thai attempt to subvert the nation-state and its power. In the specific context of the Shan a selective *anti-border* is used to challenge the national discourse of *the border*.

The specifics of Thai interpretations of Shan life along the Thai-Burma border are discussed in Chapter 4. In this chapter it is argued that Thai interpretations of the “social reality” of the “Shan village” are best understood as a “discursive category”. This is part of a Thai yearning for simplicity and self-sufficiency which is disappearing from today’s Thailand. The Thai nostalgia for the “Shan village” is found to be a particularly narrow conceptualisation of environmental and social structure. The creation of the discursive “Shan village” is, this essay suggests, part of a deeply held Thai desire to reshape Thai society with examples from other Tai groups. The Thai nostalgia for such examples is part of a reaction against the centre and a growing enthusiasm for a more “periphery-centred” Thailand.

A Note on Sources, Languages and Interpretations

This thesis is not sourced from any Tai village: it is a product of Bangkok and Thailand’s other big cities. The interpretations and texts produced in these cities are the foundation for this thesis. It is built on an examination of intellectual discourses and arguments and investigates some of the preoccupations of recent Thai anthropology and social theory. The sources, languages and interpretations that underpin this thesis do not come from Tai villages. Very few Shan or other non-Thai are quoted. I have no extensive fieldwork at the Thai-Burma border, no vast list of village-based informants, and have made no attempt to deliver anthropological rigour.

This thesis scrutinizes the ideas of Thai academics and activists who write about Tai and Shan life. These academics and activists work in a variety of contexts but have tended to congregate in some of Thailand's most prestigious Universities: particularly Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University in Bangkok, and Chiang Mai University in the north. While these are the major centres for the Tai studies project, there are academics and activists studying the Shan and other Tai groups in universities, research institutes and non-government organisations across the country.⁹

Educated in the Central Thai language (ภาษาไทยกลาง) these academics and activists use a written form based on the T(h)ai dialect spoken in Bangkok and surrounding provinces. Even in Chiang Mai – a place that often proudly displays its own written and spoken language – Central Thai hegemony might be criticised but is still accepted.¹⁰ This language is now spoken and written in all parts of Thailand and is the language of the education system and the bureaucracy. Some people in Thailand, like those in Chiang Mai, who speak other languages, may rail against this “linguistic colonialism” but they do so from a position of weakness and

⁹ For example, there are Thai academics and activists writing about Tai peoples from Mahasarakham University in Northeastern Thailand. The University offers a “Doctor of Philosophy in Tai Studies”. However, the rejection of Bangkok and the values of “hegemonic” development are broadly similar regardless of location.

¹⁰ A language map of Thailand notes a huge number of languages spoken in the Kingdom. The Central Thai language is, however, the official, school-taught language. For an overview of Thailand's linguistic diversity see: Christopher Mosly and R.E. Asher, eds., *Atlas of the World's Languages* (London: Routledge, 1994): “South-western Thai languages” (including Thai) are described on 164-165 and there are maps of the area on subsequent pages.

acceptance.¹¹ The Thai language gains strength from the power – political, intellectual and commercial – that underpins its output.¹²

That political, intellectual and commercial strength has facilitated the production of an abundance of Thai language material about the Tai and the Shan. This is a notable international academic field where a non-European language dominates. There are, of course, studies of Tai peoples in English, Chinese and other languages but those languages do not define the field of activist and academic work examined in this thesis.¹³ The Tai studies project is a fundamentally Thai language undertaking. In this thesis non-Thai language studies have been consulted, but they are rarely quoted at length. The interpretative mandate of the Tai studies project exists in the Thai language.

That interpretative mandate has been constructed in the terms of Thai academia and activism but the reality of Thai society is that everybody has their own opinion. As such, as well as dealing with the academic project of Tai and village studies, this thesis incorporates references, ideas and comments from Thai in the

¹¹ That weakness is exemplified by the fact that arguments against “Central Thai hegemony” are written in Central Thai: Tanet Charoenmuang, *Kon Muang = The Northern Thai* (Chiang Mai: Local Administration Project, Faculty of Sociology, Chiang Mai University, 2001): 97-103

¹² The Central Thai language has been referred to, in English, as “the prestige dialect of Thailand”: Herbert C. Purnell, "Toward Contrastive Analyses between Thai and Hill Tribe Languages: Some Phonetic Data," in *Tai Phonetics and Phonology*, ed. Jimmy G. Harris and Richard B. Noss (Bangkok: Central Institute of English Language, Mahidol University, 1972): 115.

¹³ Bai Chun, *Taisueksa Nai Meaung Jeen: Grabuan Garnsarng Rangong Kwamruu Geow Gab Tai Sueksa Kong Nak Wichargan Jeen Tang Tae Tosawat 1930-1990 = Tai Studies in China: An Analytical Study of the Process of Constructing Knowledge of Tai Studies by Chinese Scholars from the 1930s-1990s* (Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund, 2001); Ratanaporn Sethakul, *Community Rights of the Lue in China, Laos and Thailand: A Comparative Study* (Bangkok: Local Community Rights in Asia Project - Comparative Studies, 2001)

media, in markets, and at the Thai-Burma border. There is no reason that these sources should not be incorporated into a study of Thai interpretations because they do not express themselves in the idioms of academia or social commentary. Their insights into the Shan are included, not as a counter-point to the intellectual interpretations, but as a way of more accurately portraying broader Thai thinking about various issues. There is no universal interpretation and the diversity of views and ideas must be recognised.

Thai interpretations of the Tai have received scant attention from non-Thai academics and activists. There is a tendency for the Thai and non-Thai literatures about the region to develop a level of parallelism and divergence. While Thai academics are generally quite open to reading and commenting on non-Thai interpretations there seems to be little motivation among some non-Thai writers to engage with Thai material. Perhaps the relative impenetrability of the Thai language to many non-Thai is a barrier to wider dissemination of Thai interpretations. However, Thai material is crucial to gaining better understandings of the Tai peoples and the way that the region represents *itself*. For this reason, this thesis engages in a process of translation that takes Thai interpretations and endeavours to make them understandable in a non-Tai language.¹⁴

¹⁴ In this thesis all translated quotations are written in full in the original language. Unfortunately the limitations of bibliographic software made it impossible to write references in the Thai language script. As is common in English language “Tai studies”, the titles of sources have been transliterated and also translated. The translations are indicated by the symbol “=”. This is an imperfect but functional compromise.

To facilitate the broadening of non-Thai understanding of the Tai studies project and Thai interpretations of the Shan this thesis includes many translations, which are written in the foot-notes. Also included as an appendix is a full translation of the “Project Statement” for the *Tai Social and Cultural History Project* (โครงการประวัติศาสตร์สังคมและวัฒนธรรมชนชาติไท). This longer translation is included because it is an important example of the interpretations which underpin Thai understandings of the Shan and their villages. This “Project Statement” is regularly referred to in the text of the thesis and it is appropriate that a full translation, attempting to retain the substance and style of the originals as much as possible, be included.

The translation and quotation in this thesis emphasise that the Thai language account is a reflection of Thai preoccupations and agendas. The political, ecological and social ideas displayed are reflections of Thai issues and understandings. Without detailed field research it is not possible to say whether or not these ideas accurately reflect the preoccupations and agendas of the Shan or other Tai peoples. However, engagement with the material remains critical because the interpretations have political and cultural significance separate from their claims of accurate representation.

Chapter I: The Tai to the North

The Geometric and Geographic Context

In writings about Southeast Asia, connections are often made between the people of Thailand and their northern neighbours. The complexities of these trans-national linkages are often crudely expressed by geometry. Where China, Laos, Burma and Thailand come together, geometric analogies define the way the region is described.

From Northern Thailand, linkages exist with the Golden Triangle (สามเหลี่ยมทองคำ)¹, the Economic Quadrangle (สี่เหลี่ยมเศรษฐกิจ)², and the Cultural Quadrangle (สี่เหลี่ยมวัฒนธรรม).³ Each expresses a particular interpretation of the relationships between

¹ Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Karani Ruang Thai Yai: Plik Tamnan Nithan Thet Kong Samliam Tongkam = the Shan Case: Outing the Myth of the Golden Triangle* (Mae Hong Son: Shan Human Rights Foundation, 1994); Volker Grabowsky, "Meuang Chiang Kaeng Meua Pee 1893/96: Garn Yaeng Anajagorn Tai Lue Nai Boriwen Lum Man Nam Kong Ton Bon Rawang Angrit Gab Faranset = Chiang Kaeng 1893/96: A Lu Principality in the Upper Mekong Valley in the Focus of British-French Rivalry," in *Garnsueksa Prawatisart Laew Wattanatam Kong Glum Chartpan Tai = Studies in the History and Literature of the Tai Ethnic Groups*, ed. Sarawadee Ongsakul and Yoshiyuki Masuhara (Chiang Mai: 2002): 258. The term "Golden Triangle" has also been used in other languages, for example: Alain Robbe Grillet, *Souvenirs Du Triangle D'or = Recollections of the Golden Triangle*, trans. J.A. Underwood (New York: Grove Press, 1986); Fo Shih, *An Exposure of Chinese Communist Drug-Dealings in the Golden Triangle* (Taipei: Hseuh Hai, 1978); Stephen F. Worobec, *International Narcotics Control in the Golden Triangle of Southeast Asia* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1985)

² Siripetch Engkaviboonpun, "Garnpattana Seeliam Sedikit: Sueksa Goranee Kwarm Sampan Tang Sedikit Rawang Thai - Jeen Nai Tosawat 1990 = The Development of the Economic Quadrangle: A Study of the Economic Relationship between Thailand and People's Republic of China (PRC) during the 1990's" (Chulalongkorn University, 1996); Mom Luang Pansun Sadarwal and Siripong Sadarwal na Ayuthaya, "Pongratob Kong Krong Garn Seliam Sedikit Tor Prathed Thai = Consequences for Thailand from the Economic Quadrangle Project," *Sangkomsart = Sociology* 12, no. 1 (1999): 169. This description has also been used by non-Thai scholars, for example: Donald M. Seekins, "Burma-China Relations: Playing with Fire," *Asian Survey* 37, no. 6 (1997): 531

³ Tanet Chareonmuang, *Thai-Pamar-Laos-Jeen: Seeliam Sedikit Seeliam Wattanatam = Thailand-Burma-Laos-China: Economic Quadrangle, Cultural Quadrangle* (Bangkok: Kobfai, 1994): 3

Thailand and its northern neighbours. The shape of these border regions, defined in these descriptions by the number of “member” sides, is messier than the certainties offered by equi-angular geometry. Each description has its own implications for the broader region and Thailand’s engagement with it.

The Golden Triangle – often prefaced by the word “infamous”⁴ – has developed a mystical cachet in Thai and Western descriptions of Thailand and its northern neighbours.⁵ According to an internationally recognised authority on the area’s politics and societies, “for decades it has been one of the world’s most important suppliers of illicit narcotics”.⁶ More descriptively, the Golden Triangle has been called the region’s “gate which opens to sell opium and heroin to the outside world”.⁷ It is, however, “not only a global drug producer but is also the site for the independence struggle of the people who call themselves Tai - who do not want to

⁴ For example: Deborah E. Tooker, "Putting the Mandala in Its Place: A Practice-Based Approach to the Spatialization of Power on the Southeast Asian 'Periphery' - the Case of the Akha," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 2 (1996): 326

⁵ The currency of that “mystical cachet” can be seen in the names of businesses and organisations in northern Thailand. Many have derived their “brand” of guest-house, rafting expedition, orphanage, jewellery shop or restaurant from the name “Golden Triangle”.

⁶ Bertil Lintner, *Cross-Border Drug Trade in the Golden Triangle (S.E. Asia)* (Durham: Boundaries Research Press on behalf of the International Boundaries Research Unit, 1991): 1; The notoriety of the region is noted in another book by Lintner where he describes that “although the Chinese Triads are still the biggest players, other syndicates have begun cashing in on the Golden Triangle, including the Russian mafia, Nigerian smugglers, North Korean agents, and Japanese thugs”: Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994): Preface

⁷ “เป็นประตูของการค้าฝิ่น-เฮโรอีนที่เปิดออกสู่โลกภายนอก”: Chamlong Thongdi, *Khun Sa: Sarakhadi Haeng Khwamching Kanmang Roang Fin Lae Heroin = Khun Sa: A True Tale of Politics, Opium and Heroin* (Bangkok: Phunam Kanmang, 1995)

unify with Burma”.⁸ These people “who call themselves Tai” are, by another name, the Shan. Their involvement in the Golden Triangle’s illicit trades is a consequence of a long history of ethnic insurgency and the complex political situation of Burma’s border regions. The Shan are one of many groups heavily involved in illicit trade and insurgency. Together with these groups, the Shan play a part in defining the Golden Triangle in terms of narcotics, politics, poverty and prostitution.

While the term “Golden Triangle” is widely used in regional promotion and marketing, it is now often relegated to the status of tourist cliché. On the Thai side of the border, at least, it has become increasingly difficult to profit from traditional opiate-based drug production.⁹ The poppy fields of northern Thailand are now largely gone. The “tradition” of Golden Triangle drug production has moved further into Burma, away from prying eyes.¹⁰ Nowadays, rather than opium it is

⁸ “มีดินแดนสามเหลี่ยมทองคำ ที่ไม่เพียงแต่ผลิตยาเสพติดระดับโลกแต่ยังพัวพันลึกซึ้งกับการต่อสู้เพื่อเอกราชของคนที่นี่เรียกตัวเองว่า ไต ไตที่ไม่อยากจะร่วมแผ่นดินกับประเทศพม่า”: Chareonmuang, *Thai-Pamar-Laos-Jeen: Seeliam Sedikit Seeliam Wattanatam = Thai-Burma-Laos-China: Economic Quadrangle, Cultural Quadrangle*: 16

⁹ For an overview of Thai efforts to outlaw and replace opium as the crop of choice in one area along the Thailand-Burma border see: *Satarni Gaset Luang Ang Kang = Angkang Royal Agricultural Station* (Chiang Mai: The Royal Project Foundation, 2000): 12-13 and 57-59

¹⁰ According to a Lisu villager from the Golden Triangle quoted in early 2003, “We did not know that the Burmese government is trying to lower the area planted to produce drugs because no officials came to tell us. What we have heard, from the Burmese soldiers stationed at Chieng Tong (across the border from Chiang Mai province), is that we can plant as much opium as we like....but they ask that we plant opium away from major roads, so that people passing don’t see it, that’s all” (พวกเราไม่รู้เลยว่า รัฐบาลพม่ากำลังลดพื้นที่ผลิตยาเสพติด เพราะไม่เห็นมีเจ้าหน้าที่คนไหนมาบอกเราเรื่องนี้เลย สิ่งที่เราได้ยินจากทหารพม่าประจำเมืองเชียงตอง (ตรงข้ามจังหวัดเชียงใหม่) คือ เราสามารถปลูกฝิ่นมากเท่าไรก็ได้ตามที่เรากำลังต้องการ...แต่ขอให้ปลูกฝิ่นห่างจากถนนใหญ่ คนที่เดินทางผ่านไปมาจะไม่เห็นเท่านั้น): Anonymous, "Songkram Ya Ba: Kwarm Jing Tee Pud Mai Mod = The Amphetamine War: Unspoken Truths," *Siam Rath* 2003: 12

amphetamines and other synthetic drugs that are the Triangle's major export.¹¹

These shifts and their associated problems – particularly in Burma – have led to enthusiasm for different ways of labelling the Golden Triangle region.

For many people, the “Economic Quadrangle”¹² is a less tainted and more optimistic designation.¹³ It describes the 9 provinces of Upper Northern Thailand, the 7 provinces of Northern Laos, the Kachin, Kayah and Shan States of Burma, and Yunnan in China.¹⁴ The foci of the economic quadrangle are transport, trade, tourism, human development, hydroelectric production and communications.¹⁵ It is a designation based in optimism about the potential integration of national

¹¹ The extent to which the Burmese section of the Golden Triangle continues as a major site for drug-production was underlined when a government source said that Thailand was willing to “sort it out for them” (จัดการให้), if the Burmese government did not control drug producers: Anonymous, “Deud Wa Daeng Mai Lerk Plid Ya Ba = Anger That the Red Wa Continue to Produce Ya Ba,” *Matichon*, 21 August 2003

¹² This region has also been called the “Golden Quadrangle”: Ralph A. Cossa and Jane Khanna, “East Asia: Economic Interdependence and Regional Security,” *International Affairs* 73, no. 2 (1997): 228; Jeffrey W. Jacobs, “Mekong Committee History and Lessons for River Basin Development,” *Geographical Journal* 161, no. 2 (1995): 146; Khampheng Thipmunthali, “The Tai Lue of Muang Sing,” in *Laos: Culture and Society*, ed. Grant Evans (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1999): 159.

¹³ An important discussion of this “popular motif” is: Andrew Walker, “Regional Trade in Northwestern Laos: An Initial Assessment of the Economic Quadrangle,” in *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social & Cultural Change in the Border Regions*, ed. Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton, and Kuah Khun Eng (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Sadarwal and Ayuthaya, “Pongratob Kong Krong Garn Seliam Sedikit Tor Prathed Thai = Consequences for Thailand from the Economic Quadrangle Project,” 189; A collection of essays focussing on this intersection is Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton, and Kuah Khun Eng (Eds), *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social & Cultural Change in the Border Regions* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000)

¹⁵ Sadarwal and Ayuthaya, “Pongratob Kong Krong Garn Seliam Sedikit Tor Prathed Thai = Consequences for Thailand from the Economic Quadrangle Project,” 190

economies through regional investment and interaction.¹⁶ There are many aspects to this optimistic vision. One project that is currently making headlines is a new bridge to facilitate greater links between Northern Thailand and the other parts of the Quadrangle. The *Myanmar Times* reported that Ittidate Kaewluang, an MP for Thailand's Chiang Rai province said that:

*we would like to increase imports from Myanmar and we also look forward to having trade with southern China...I hope the bridge will bring about trilateral trade among Myanmar, China and Thailand.*¹⁷

This economic aspect continues to enthuse those looking beyond Thailand's boundaries. They see opportunity in this Quadrangle and to capitalise on such opportunity, a less business-like designation has also been introduced.

Referring to the "cultural" qualities of the Quadrangle makes it more palatable for many people. They can, like Patrick Jory, then assert that the Quadrangle "is reviving ties between minorities split by arbitrary national borders".¹⁸ The Thai are well placed to capitalise on the perceived cultural unity of people in the region because perhaps the most easily extrapolated unity exists between the Tai groups - the Shan, Lao, Lue, and Thai. This Cultural Quadrangle is, by another name, the *Tai Quadrangle*. At each corner of the Quadrangle the dominant lowland

¹⁶ It is often repeated in English and other languages that "during the 1990s, the adjacent border regions of Vietnam, Laos, Burma and China were the focus of much speculation, planning, and enthusiasm regarding cross-border trade, which extended also to nearby Thailand": Hjorleifur Jonsson, "Book Review: Where China Meets Southeast Asia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 1 (2003): 200

¹⁷ Nwe Nwe Aye, "Business Set to Rocket by \$150m with New Bridge," *Myanmar Times*, 25. 6. 2003

¹⁸ Patrick Jory, "Multiculturalism in Thailand?: Cultural and Regional Resurgence in a Diverse Kingdom," *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* 4, no. 1 (2000): 20

population are Tai. It is this cultural aspect to trans-national relationships that is most important for this thesis. Thai academics have used these trans-national linkages as a way of propagating their visions for Thailand and Southeast Asia.¹⁹ The Shan and their villages are part of an expansive and expanding vision of culture and society which is described by the Thai but which exists outside Thailand.

The “Tai studies project”

Looking north from Thailand, Thai academics and activists tend to focus attention on the people they categorise as “Tai”.²⁰ The Tai constitute a large proportion of the population in a broad, trans-national arc stretching across continental Southeast Asia. From the Thai perspective, this:

Dai or Tai ethnic family does not only live within Thailand. They are spread throughout northern Vietnam, southern China, Laos and Myanmar.

¹⁹ For an example which uses the Thai formulation of “community culture” in the context of the Economic Quadrangle see: Prachan Rakpong, *Garnsueksa Saparp Setthakit Laew Wattanatam Chumchon Nai Ket Sen Tang Seeliam Setthakit Thai-Lao-Jeen = A Study of Economics and Community Culture on the Economic Quadrangle Route of Thailand-Laos-China* (Chiang Mai: Neighbour Studies Project, Rajaphat Institute Chiang Mai, 1996)

²⁰ Following the usage developed in Srisak Williapadom and Suchit Wongthes, *Thai Noi Thai Yai Thai Sayam = the Lao, the Shan and the Siamese* (Bangkok: Art & Culture Special Edition, 1991): 88 this thesis uses the word “Thai” (“ไท”) for the Tai people of Thailand and the word “Tai” (“ไต”) for the Shan, Lao and other groups who are not as connected with the nation-state of Thailand. This is, on some levels, an inadequate distinction but it is rigorously defended by many scholars, including Teeraparp Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanaai = The Tai in Southeast Asia* (Bangkok: Praphansarn, 1994): 13. In addition, where Thai sources use the word “ไต” (or a derivative or sound equivalent) with reference to the Shan it is translated as “Shan” but “ไต” is written in the footnote. For a useful summary discussion of the usage of the words “ไต” and “ไท” in the Thai language see: Amra Prasitratanasin, *Kam Wa "Thai" Laew "Tai" = The Words "Thai" and "Tai"* (Institute for Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, [cited 22/7/2003 2003]); available from www.thaistudy.chula.ac.th/pinitthai/thai-tai.html.

*The total number of people is more than 90 million according to a report by the Australian Anthropological Institute.*²¹

90 million is a large number of people living in diverse social, economic and ecological conditions. Their number and trans-national groupings mean that descriptions generally begin by stating that “the Tai tribes have spread themselves in the lands of different countries”.²² The Tai peoples proliferate in many places: they are not bound by the national borders of Thailand.

The trans-national “spread” of the Tai has stimulated Thai research and scholarship into their societies and histories. That interest has led to what this thesis calls the “Tai studies project”.²³ This broad collection of Thai writings and interpretations describes the Tai place in the world. It has been facilitated and championed by Thai scholars and propagated in Thai institutions. Its genesis is the assertion that “the people who call themselves ‘Tai’ or ‘Thai’...are spread outside the Kingdom of Thailand as well”.²⁴

²¹ “ชนกลุ่มตระกูลไตหรือไท มิได้อยู่แต่ในประเทศไทยเท่านั้น แต่ยังกระจายอยู่เวียดนามตอนเหนือ จีนตอนใต้ ลาวและพม่า คิดเป็นตัวเลขประชากรรวมกันมีมากกว่า ๕๐ ล้านคน ตามรายงานของสถาบันมานุษยศาสตร์แห่งออสเตรเลีย”: Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanai = The Tai in Southeast Asia*: 8. That the “Australian Anthropological Institute” is used to quantify the diversity of Tai peoples settlements is interesting. As no source from that “Institute” is given it is difficult to know precisely what publication is referred to.

²² “ชนเผ่าไทกระจายตัวอยู่ในดินแดนประเทศต่างๆ”: Sompong Witayasakpan, "Sarm Tosawat Tai Sueksa Gab Thai Sueksa: Garn Sueksa Priab Tiab Sangkom Laew Watanatam Tai = Three Decades of Tai Studies and Thai Studies: Comparative Tai Social and Cultural Studies," in *Satarnapap Thai Sueksa: Garn Samruad Cherng Wiparg = Situation in Thai Studies: A Critical Survey*, ed. Chatthip Nartsupha (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000): 48.

²³ The designation “Tai studies project” does not refer to any particular “project” or activity. Rather it is a convenient way of unifying a diverse range of sources about the Tai produced by people in Thailand. In Thailand, “project” (โครงการ) is a popular way of describing shared endeavours. Calling the Thai study of the Tai a “project” is especially appropriate.

²⁴ “คนที่เรียกตนเองว่า “ไต” หรือ “ไทย”...กระจัดกระจายอยู่นอกพระราชอาณาจักรไทยทั้งนี้ด้วย”: Suchit Wongthes, "Tarm! Grasuang Sueksatigarn Laew/Reu Rattabahn Thai 'Kon Thai Yuu Tee Nai Gan Barng' = Ask! The

That assertion has attracted many Thai scholars to the opportunities and possibilities of “studying the Tai nationality that live outside Thailand”.²⁵ To facilitate their studies, there have been a number of major research series including the *Project on Tai Social and Cultural History*, the *Comparative Research on the Cultures and Societies of Tai-Speaking Groups in Northern Thailand, Shan State of Burma and Assam State of India Project* and various others originating from the *Art & Culture* stable.²⁶ These research series underline the current importance of the Tai studies project to Thailand’s academic and activist output. Sun Laichen argues that the depth and breadth of research mean that “over the past several decades much progress has been achieved in Tai Studies”.²⁷ Somchot Ongsagul points out that “‘Tai Studies’ has expanded the borders of knowledge to cover all the cultures of the Tai tribe”.²⁸ The Tai studies project covers a vast geographic and social spectrum with research occurring in all of the Tai “homelands”.

Education Ministry and/or the Thai Government 'Whereabouts are there Thai?'" *Sinlapa Wattanatam* = *Art and Culture* 4, no. 4 (1985): 19

²⁵ “นักวิชาการในประเทศไทย...ศึกษาชนชาติไทที่อาศัยอยู่นอกประเทศไทย”: Somsong Burustpat, "Tai Sueksa," *Pasar laew Wattanatam* = *Journal of Language and Culture* 17, no. 1 (1998): 5

²⁶ Many of the academics and activists cited in this thesis have been published in the monthly journal *Art & Culture* (ศิลปวัฒนธรรม). In its 24th year of publication, it has been a regular forum for articles on the Tai and Shan. The long-time editor of *Art & Culture*, archaeologist Suchit Wongthes, has a particular interest in the work of the Tai studies project. For more information on the publication, and selected articles from recent editions, see: Suchit Wongthes, *Sinlapa Wattanatam* = *Art & Culture* (Maticchon, 2003 [cited 7 August 2003]); available from www.maticchon.co.th/art/.

²⁷ Sun Laichen, "Introduction," in *Padaeng Chronicle and the Jengtung State Chronicle Translated*, ed. Sao Saimong Mangrai (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 2002): xi.

²⁸ “‘ไทศึกษา’ ขยายพรมแดนความรู้ให้ครอบคลุมพื้นที่ทางวัฒนธรรมของชนเผ่าไททั้งหมด”: Somchot Ongsagul, "Jark Lannakadee Sueksa Tung Tai Sueksa: Kwarm Kuen Wai Kong Garn Perd Laksut Geow Gab Park Neua Nai Mahawitayalai Chiang Mai Chuang Sarm Tosawat Raek = From Lanna Thai Studies to Tai Studies: The Movement to Open the Northern Thai Studies Programs in Chiang Mai University

The vastness of the Tai studies project has led to a level of self-reflection about its achievements and future. A chronology of developments in the Tai studies project has been written by Sompong Witayasakpan.²⁹ He divides the Tai Studies project into distinct periods centred (in chronological order) on “nationalism” (ชาตินิยม), “finding answers in the village” (หาคำตอบที่หมู่บ้าน) and then “globalisation” (โลกาภิวัตน์), each reflecting the popular outlook of the era. Nowadays, and representing the current theoretical paradigm, the emphasis is “doing research at the community”.³⁰ Such research is, according to Sompong, a way to help “build independent villages and communities”.³¹

Sompong’s analysis distances contemporary examples of the Tai studies project from the ideologies of the past. It is with satisfaction that Sompong notes that in recent years the Tai studies project includes “not only Thai academics but also local academics from Assam, China and Vietnam”.³² According to Sompong,

in the First Three Decades," *Warasan Samnak Ho Samud Mahawitayalai Chiang Mai = Chiang Mai University Library Journal* 2 (1991): 70

²⁹ Witayasakpan, "Sarm Tosawat Tai Sueksa Gab Thai Sueksa: Garn Sueksa Priab Tiab Sangkom Laew Watanatam Tai = Three Decades of Tai Studies and Thai Studies: Comparative Tai Social and Cultural Studies."; Note that a shorter English language version of this article has also been published: Sompong Witayasakpan, "Three Decades of Tai Studies and Thai Studies: A Comparative Study of Tai Societies and Cultures," *Tai Culture: International Review on Tai Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2000)

³⁰ “การทำวิจัยอยู่ที่ชุมชน”: Witayasakpan, "Sarm Tosawat Tai Sueksa Gab Thai Sueksa: Garn Sueksa Priab Tiab Sangkom Laew Watanatam Tai = Three Decades of Tai Studies and Thai Studies: Comparative Tai Social and Cultural Studies," 57.

³¹ “สร้างเป็นตัวของตัวเองให้กับหมู่บ้านและชุมชน” Ibid: 76.

³² “มิได้มีแต่เพียงนักวิชาการไทยเท่านั้น แต่ได้มีนักวิชาการท้องถิ่นไม่ว่าจากอัสสัม จีน และเวียดนาม”: Ibid: 56.

*studies used to come from the perspective of the upper class, the rulers or the academics with state backing. Now it is academics of the people: ordinary people who have become local philosophers.*³³

The inclusiveness and sophistication of the Tai studies project has no doubt increased. However, the changes in philosophy and direction, which Sompong identifies, do not represent a complete shift. Ideas of nationalism, the village and globalisation are, this thesis will go on to argue, still very important to the Tai studies project. And with the output of the Tai studies project largely monopolised by the Thai, it is important to acknowledge that the Tai studies project remains heavily influenced by an accumulation of Thai ideas and theories that Sompong relegates to an historical status. Those issues and ideas are still relevant: they cannot be wished away.

In 1998, a different attempt was made to quantify and analyse the output of the Tai studies project and to summarise its major parts. This analysis categorised material based on thematic emphasis rather than historical periods. Titled simply “Tai Studies” (ไทศึกษา), it categorised 68 major research publications as part of the Tai studies project.³⁴ Of those studies, 22 were about “language and linguistics”, seven were concerned with “history and anthropology” and six focussed on “society, culture and politics”. That so many studies focussed on language is not

³³ “การศึกษาที่เคยมองมาจากชนชั้นสูง ผู้ปกครอง หรือเป็นนักวิชาการของอำนาจรัฐ มาเป็นนักวิชาการของประชาชน คนธรรมดามาเป็นปราชญ์ท้องถิ่น”: Ibid: 76.

³⁴ Burustpat, "Tai Sueksa," 7. The 68 studies documented in that essay are but the surface of the total number of “Tai studies project” articles and monographs. In the catalogues of Thai, Australian and American University libraries there are many more. Almost all have been written in the last 20 years, and the majority of those were published over the last 5-10 years.

surprising as the detail of Tai etymology has frustrated and intrigued generations of Thailand's linguists.³⁵ The study of language in the Tai studies project focuses on what is called the "Tai language family" (ตระกูลภาษาไท).³⁶

Crucially, research about that "language family" has led to the description of the particular relationships between the Tai groups as analogous to those between siblings (เป็นพี่น้องกัน).³⁷ Some people use the more flexible classification of "siblings or...cousins"³⁸ or "sibling friends".³⁹ Originating from the recognition of the linguistic "family", there is an assertion that the Tai peoples share "collective cultural characteristics of language, beliefs...food and eating, and their lifestyle connected to rice culture".⁴⁰ Explaining the closeness of these familial relations was the purpose of Teeraparp Lohitagul's study of *The Tai in Southeast*

³⁵ For examples of Thai and non-Thai interest in Tai linguistics see: Sompongse Burusphat, *Abstracts: The International Conference on Tai Studies* (Bangkok: Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University, 1998); Theraphan L. Thongkum (ed), *Studies in Tai and Mon-Khmer Phonetics and Phonology, in Honour of Eugenie J.A.Henderson* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn Univ. Press, 1979)

³⁶ Thakerng Panthakengamorn, "Pasar Tragun Tai Nai Tragun Pasar Lok = Tai in the World Language Family," *Sinlapa Wattanatam = Art and Culture* 6, no. 8 (1985)

³⁷ For one of the many examples of the Tai siblinghood, see the use of "พี่น้องชาวไทใหญ่" (Shan siblings) in Chatthip Nartsupha's introduction to Sompong Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History, Tai Social and Cultural History Project* (Bangkok: Thailand Research Council and Chulalongkorn University, 2001): 16

³⁸ "เป็นพี่น้องหรือ... เป็นเครือญาติ": Narimon Thepchai, "Kon Tai Kam Tai Kae Wan Tai = Tai People and Tai Language before a Tai Day," *Sinlapa Wattanatam = Art and Culture* 9, no. 5 (1988): 62

³⁹ "เพื่อนพี่น้องไท": Luang Wichitwathakan, *Ngarn Khonkwa Ruang Chont Chat Thai = Research on the Thai Nationality* (Bangkok: Central Information Department, 1962): 232

⁴⁰ "มีลักษณะร่วมกันในวัฒนธรรมทางด้านภาษา ความเชื่อ...อาหารการกิน และวิถีชีวิตที่ผูกพันอยู่กับวัฒนธรรมข้าว": Siraphon Na Thalung, *Chonchat Tai Nai Nithan = Tai Ethnicity in Chronicles* (Bangkok: Ngan Di, 2002): 3. "Rice culture" is also emphasised in one of the earlier English language descriptions of the Tai. It notes that, "A common feature of all Thai is their wet-paddy culture. The Thai are essentially a people of tillers of the land. Some 90% of the Thai are peasants, growing enormous quantities of the world's finest rice. The nomadic instinct is foreign to the Thai with his inborn love for the land": Erik Seidenfaden, *The Thai Peoples*, 2nd ed. (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1967)

Asia. He wanted to make people in Thailand understand that “being indignant with the Shan who are fighting with the dictatorial government of Burma along the Chiang Rai border...is the same as getting angry with our own relatives”.⁴¹ For Teeraparp, maintaining and developing the relationships between the members of this “Tai family” is essential. The prevailing challenge is to make the Thai understand “that there are many different Tai siblings living in other lands”.⁴² The emphasis put on those “siblings” prompted Suchit Wongthes to ask “what is the benefit of these (Tai) studies?” His answer is revealing. Suchit studies the Tai so that “future Thai generations will know more about their ‘relatives’ in India, Burma, China, Laos and elsewhere”.⁴³ It is not surprising that the Tai studies project has also been given the rather clumsy title of “Relative Seeking Movement” (กระบวนการสืบหาญาติ).⁴⁴

Professor Chatthip Nartsupha – a leader in the Tai studies project – gives a slightly different explanation for his interest in studying the Tai. He suggests that Thai academics and activists need to study Tai cultures to “better understand the rural

⁴¹ “การโกรธแค้นชาวไทใหญ่ที่สู้รบกับรัฐบาลเผด็จการพม่าอยู่ตามชายแดน เชียงราย...ก็เท่ากับเกลียดแค้นญาติพี่น้องของเราเอง”: Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanai = The Tai in Southeast Asia*: 10

⁴² “มีพี่น้องไทอาศัยอยู่ในดินแดนประเทศอื่นอีกมาก”: Ibid

⁴³ “คนไทยรุ่นต่อไปจะรู้จัก ‘ญาติ’ มากขึ้นไปถึงอินเดีย พม่า จีน ญวน ฯลฯ”: Wongthes, “Tarm! Grasuang Sueksatigarn Laew/Reu Rattabahn Thai ‘Kon Thai Yuu Tee Nai Gan Barng’ = Ask! The Education Ministry and/or the Thai Government ‘Whereabouts Are There Thais?’”: 21

⁴⁴ Narimon Thepchai, “Kon Tai Kam Tai Kae Wan Tai = Tai People and Tai Language before a Tai Day,” Ibid

Thai culture of Thailand”.⁴⁵ Chatthip emphasises the geographically distant to give people in Thailand an opportunity to reconnect with what he sees as *their* culture. Teeraparp clarifies this thinking by explaining that,

*we (meaning Thai people today) watch Hollywood films, barrack for Premier League Soccer and follow the news on CNN. There is nothing wrong with that, however there is a problem if we do not know our own roots.*⁴⁶

Professor Naipaet Wijarn Parnich takes this focus on society’s roots one step further. The Professor argues that studies of the Tai, “help to create awareness amongst the Thai about our collective social and community identity. Our society stands secure because it has such deep roots”.⁴⁷

Focusing on these “roots” means that the investigation of genealogy and descent is crucial.⁴⁸ Again, the analogy of family and siblinghood is never far away. In the introduction to an edition of the *Journal of Language and Culture*, Iayam Tongdee repeats the question, “Where do the Thai come from?” (คนไทยมาจากไหน).⁴⁹ This is a

⁴⁵ “เข้าใจวัฒนธรรมชนบทไทยประเทศไทยดั้งเดิม”: Chatthip Natsupa, *Prawatisart Watanataam Chumchon Laew Chonchart Tai = The Cultural History of Tai Ethnicity and Community* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1997): 80

⁴⁶ “ผู้สืบทอด (หมายถึงคนไทยวันนี้) ดูหนังฮอลลีวูด เซียร์ฟุตบอลพรีเมียร์ลีก ติดตามข่าวซีเอ็นเอ็น ซึ่งไม่ใช่เรื่องแปลกอะไร แต่ปัญหาคือเรากลับไม่รู้จักรากเหง้าของตัวเอง”: Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanai = The Tai in Southeast Asia*: 9. The use of the word “roots” (รากเหง้า) here is particularly important. It conjures an image of collective descent and origin.

⁴⁷ “ช่วยให้ชาวไทยเรามีจิตสำนึกในอัตลักษณ์ของชุมชนและสังคมของเราเองสังคมของเราขึ้นอยู่กับอย่างมีพลัง เพราะมีรากหยั่งลงลึก”:

Introduction by Professor Naipaetwijarn Parnich to Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 11

⁴⁸ For example, a recent edition of the Thai language *Journal of Language and Culture* attempted a definitive response to the question “คนไทยมาจากไหนแน่?” (Where exactly do the Thai come from?)

⁴⁹ Iayam Tongdee, “Kon Thai Mar Jark Nai? = Where Do the Thais Come From?,” *Pasar laew Wattanatam = Journal of Language and Culture* 17, no. 1 (1998)

question about migration, collective origins and, seemingly, ethnic pride.⁵⁰ It underlines a search for evidence of the nation's lineage and genealogy. It is a revealing question because the emphasis is directly placed on the Thai (ไทย) who inhabit Thailand and not the Tai (ไท). The spelling is clear: the question is “where do we *Thai of Thailand* come from?”

When answering this question there is often barely restrained delight at the fact that there are T(h)ai living in other places today.⁵¹ Suchit Wongthes' collection of essays on the “whereabouts” of the different T(h)ai groups has the tone of a detective thriller. The search is enlivened by clues, innuendo and speculation. Sometimes the emphasis is on “Tai tribes” (ชนเผ่าไท). This quickly changes to a more neutral focus on “culture and environment” (วัฒนธรรมและสภาพแวดล้อม).⁵² Suchit's hunt for the T(h)ai settles on a classification which gives them different names based on this theme. For example, he uses the Mekong and Salween River systems, and his understanding of comparative linguistics, to delineate a major grouping called the “Upper Group”(กลุ่มตอนบน). This includes the Tai peoples of China, northern Burma, India, Laos and Vietnam. By contrast the other Tai

⁵⁰ For an investigation of Thai historical migration see: Tu I Ting, Chan Li Phan, and Praput Sukolratnametee (translator from Chinese to Thai), "Jagornpak Kublai Khan Song Pichit Anajagorn Tali Tam Hy Chonchart Thai Opayop Long Tai Yarnng Kanarn Yai Jing Reu = Did the Thai Really Migrate to the South after Kublai Khan's Victory over Tali?," *Sinlapa Wattanatam = Art & Culture* 7, no. 6 (1986)

⁵¹ One of the more complete examples of that delight is in: Suchit Wongthes, *Kon Thai Yuu Tee Nai Barnng? = Whereabouts Are There Thais?* (Bangkok: Sinlapa Wattanatam, 2001) It chronicles the Tai peoples in Southeast Asia and has a particular focus on the Tai Ahom of Northeastern India.

⁵² Ibid: 112

peoples, included in Suchit's "Lower Group", are dominated by the Thai of Thailand and the Chao Phraya river basin.

This "Upper Group" includes all of the Tai peoples "who do not live in Thailand". What should be noted is that many members of Suchit's "Upper Group" do, actually, live in Thailand. The Lue, Shan, Lao and others all have significant populations within Thailand.⁵³ But this was of limited interest to Suchit given his primary concern was finding T(h)ai origins - outside Thailand. His analysis ignores the rather impoverished and impotent existence within Thailand of groups like the Shan. Proving their "whereabouts" outside Thailand was his main goal. Suchit does, however, make a general assertion that the "Upper Group" are people who "robustly conserve idiosyncratic traditional and local customs".⁵⁴ This phrase, focussing on what is perceived as *traditional* and *local*, demonstrates an enduring preoccupation of the Tai studies project.

Three Significant Elements in Thai Interpretations

What becomes clear in the Tai studies project is that interpretations of Tai groups often rely on similar ideas and arguments. The Thai academics and activists who focus their attention on the Tai consistently apply a small number of key concepts.

These discursive elements "fit" the prevailing Thai academic and activist psyche

⁵³ For descriptions of some of the Tai groups that live in Thailand see: Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanai = The Tai in Southeast Asia* ; Joachim Schliesinger, *Tai Groups of Thailand*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001)

⁵⁴ "รักษาประเพณีท้องถิ่นแต่ดั้งเดิมอันเป็นลักษณะเฉพาะของตัวเองไว้อย่างเข้มข้น": Wongthes, *Kon Thai Yuu Tee Nai Barng? = Whereabouts are there Thai?* : 114

and its critique of Bangkok. By examining these concepts it is possible to gain a better understanding of some of the ways that the Thai interpret the Tai.

These significant and consistent elements are present in the introductory statement of the *Project on Tai Social and Cultural History*.⁵⁵ Led by Chulalongkorn University's Professor Chatthip Nartsupha,⁵⁶ the project brought together researchers from a range of backgrounds and disciplines.⁵⁷ Their research and writing are one of the most important examples of the broader Tai studies project.

The introductory statement argues that Chatthip's project is an attempt to,

*better understand the importance of the institution of the village community. In lands outside Thailand, communities are better able to preserve their original character, because the central government and market have limited penetration. The Tai outside Thailand believe that community is something with its own life - they believe that a village has a body and spirit.*⁵⁸

⁵⁵ The *Project on Tai Social and Cultural History* is an important part of the wider "Tai studies project". It produced a number of well-received scholarly translations and monographs. Its 15 members include: "Professor Kam Jong, Professor Yaanyong Jiranakorn, Professor Dr. Chontira Watayawatana, Professor Dr. Yos Santasombat, Associate Professor Suwit Teerasaswat, Assistant Professor Dr. Ratanaporn Setagul, Assistant Professor Dr. Sompong Witayasakpan, Assistant Professor Jaohongyin, Ajarn Ranoo Wichasin, Ajarn Saewong Malasaem, Ajarn Dr. Patiya Yimrewat, Ganya Lelalai, Sompong Taitumgaen, Eanee Lerdseumsai, and Professor Chatthip Nartsupha (the project leader)": Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 4

⁵⁶ Professor Chatthip is a member of the Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University. One of his major contributions to Thai social thought has been recently translated from Thai into English: Chatthip Nartsupha, *The Thai Village Economy in the Past*, trans. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999) .

⁵⁷ For a brief discussion of the *Project on Tai Social and Cultural History* from somebody who was not a participant see: Omra Pongsapanich, *Kwarm Larklai Tang Wattanatam = Cultural Diversity* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1999): 30-31

⁵⁸ “เข้าใจความสำคัญของสถาบันชุมชนหมู่บ้านดีลึ้น ที่ดินแดนนอกประเทศไทยชุมชนสามารถรักษาคุณลักษณะเดิมได้มากกว่า เพราะว่ามีรัฐส่วนกลางและทุนแทรกเข้าไปได้จำกัด ชาวไทนอกประเทศไทยถือว่าชุมชนเป็นสิ่งมีชีวิตของเขาถือว่าหมู่บ้านมีทั้งร่างกายและจิตวิญญาณ”: Part of the Project Statement for the *Project on Tai Social and Cultural History* in Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 5. It has been translated in the Appendix (pp.107-111).

This description signals what are three consistent and significant elements in the Thai interpretation of Tai peoples. These elements are *similarity*, *authenticity* and *community*.

Similarity

The documentation of Tai life outside Thailand attempts, in general, to demonstrate a high degree of *similarity* among Tai peoples.⁵⁹ The explication of similarity builds relationships between the people of Thailand and their Tai “relatives” in other countries. Such similarity is based in a *Thai* acceptance that they share a culture, language and outlook, with the other Tai peoples. Such similarity gives people from Thailand an opportunity to make trans-national connections: national borders are no barrier.⁶⁰ It is telling that the *Project on Tai Social and Cultural History* has been lauded, “for its continuity”, as “a good example of research as a series”.⁶¹ Such a series assumes that there are sufficient continuities among Tai people to make the project worthwhile. Moreover, it assumes that the Tai and the Thai are sufficiently similar to warrant the significant Thai intellectual and financial investment in such studies.

⁵⁹ The words in Thai used to denote this type of similarity are: คล้ายกัน, คล้ายกับ

⁶⁰ For example, Tanet Charoenmuang justifies a personal interest in the Tai studies project by arguing for the unity of Tai groups based on their shared rivers and emphasising the “inevitability” of migration between them in pre-modern times: Chareonmuang, *Thai-Pamar-Laos-Jeen: Seeliam Sedikit Seeliam Wattanataam = Thailand-Burma-Laos-China: Economic Quadrangle, Cultural Quadrangle*: 16

⁶¹ “เป็นตัวอย่างที่ดีของการวิจัยเป็นชุด”: from the introduction to the *Project on Tai Social and Cultural History* by the Office of the Thailand Research Fund in Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 11

An example of a significant investment in similarity comes from Professor Yos Santasombat, an academic based in the Northern Thai city of Chiang Mai. He describes his work on the Tai of Daikong, in China's Yunnan province, as,

*an ethnography of a Tai people written from a Tai perspective. It is part of an intellectual movement to reconstruct the Tai cultural roots, to search for a self-definition of Tai-ness.*⁶²

In other words, the Tai of Daikong (“Tai people”) are in the same sphere as Yos (with his “Tai perspective”). Yos places himself within the political sphere of the Tai – in the same breath as he places the people of Daikong within that *same* sphere. In a comparable but more cryptic vein, Shalardchai Ramitanondh, describes the “sameness of the Tai” built on the foundation that “if *we* are not the same, *we* are not *we*, *we* cannot be *we* if there is no *them* or *other*”.⁶³ Sameness is, for Shalardchai, built on the homogeneity of “we”.⁶⁴

Shalardchai's argument about this type of identification and identity is used as the basis for Wandee Santiwutamet's study of the Shan at Piang Luang on the Thai-Burma border. Wandee paraphrases Shalardchai and surmises that “the word ‘identity’ means the things which make *us* feel like *us* or *our* group: different from

⁶² Yos Santasombat, *Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identity in Daikong* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies; in conjunction with the Thai-Yunnan Project, 2001): 17

⁶³ “ถ้าเราไม่เหมือนกัน เราไม่ใช่เรา เราจะเป็นอย่างเราไม่ได้ถ้าไม่มีเขาหรือคนอื่น”, *emphasis added*, Shalardchai Ramitanondh, “Naewkid Nai Garnsueksa Atalak Kwarm Pehn “Tai” = Some Concepts in Studying “Tai” Identity,” in *Garnsueksa Prawatisart Laew Wattanatam Kong Glum Chartpan Tai = Studies in the History and Literature of the Tai Ethnic Groups*, ed. Sarawadee Ongsakul and Yoshiyuki Masuhara (Chiang Mai: 2002): 158.

⁶⁴ Interestingly, to demonstrate his awareness of Tai cultural *difference*, Shalardchai begins his argument by writing “we” in four Tai languages: *Ibid*.

them and their group”.⁶⁵ Yos, Shalardchai, Wandee and others assume to write from within the privilege of their inclusionary “we”. They assume similarity. What however does a Bangkok or Chiang Mai based academic or activist do similarly to a peasant tilling his or her fields in northern Yunnan? Do the wealth, power and prestige of Thailand make many of its people totally *dissimilar* to their “Tai siblings”? Why are the differences between Tai groups, particularly when they relate to different social and political conditions, merely glossed over?⁶⁶

Authenticity

The answer is that the Tai outside Thailand are described as similar yet *authentic*.⁶⁷ That authenticity or originality emerges from subsistence agriculture, rural village kinship relations and traditional beliefs and practices. The claim to authenticity is often joined to assertions about the lack of state or market penetration and the primordial character of local economic and ecological practices. This authenticity has led to the claim, by a panel of eminent academics no less, that “the land of upper continental Southeast Asia is naturally the land of

⁶⁵ “คำว่า “อัตลักษณ์” หมายความว่า สิ่งที่ทำให้เรารู้สึกว่าเป็นเราพวกเรานอกจากเขา พวกเขา หรือ คนอื่น”: *emphasis added*, Wandee Santiwutamet, "Grabuangarn Sarng Atalak Tarng Chartpan Kong Chao Tai Yai Chaidae Thai-Pama: Goraneesueksa Reoang Mubarn Piang Luang, Ampoe Wiang Heang, Jangwat Chiang Mai = Shan Ethnic Identity Construction at the Thai-Burma Border: A Study of Piang Luang Village, Wiang Haeng District, Chiang Mai Province," *Sangkomsart = Sociology* 15, no. 1 (2002): 219

⁶⁶ For an example of this type of glossing over see: Thalang, *Chonchat Tai Nai Nithan = Tai Ethnicity in Chronicles*: 3. The implications of different “politics, economics and societies” (การเมือง เศรษฐกิจ และสังคม) in the countries where Tai people live are raised and then ignored.

⁶⁷ The words in Thai that indicate this type of authenticity are: ดั้งเดิม, ตามเดิม, เหมือนเดิม . Thai dictionaries tend to translate these words as “as before” but in the context of the Tai “as before” means “authentic”, “original” or “as it was/as we were”.

the Tai ethnicity”.⁶⁸ Religious and cultural systems are often also highlighted to reinforce an assumption that the Tai outside Thailand represent a more “authentic” T(h)ai.⁶⁹ For example, Chatthip Nartsupha wants to examine “ancient Tai cultural characteristics” among the Tai outside Thailand.⁷⁰ Chatthip considers the Tai outside Thailand as pristine with little penetration from the market or the state.

As a further example, a book on the Tai Chuang of southern China, states that, “the Chuang’s planting process is still like *dang derm* and mostly uses human and animal power”.⁷¹ *Dang derm* here means “as it was”. It is a phrase that echoes a nostalgia for a more pure and more original form of T(h)ai-ness. That type of authenticity is not part of how Thailand’s cities and urban populations are seen. This conceptualisation of authenticity, based on rural life, was explained by Professor Chatthip in terms of Tai dialects. From that perspective,

⁶⁸ “ดินแดนเอเซียอาคเนย์ตอนบนเป็นดินแดนของชนชาติไทโดยธรรมชาติ”: Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 5

⁶⁹ The use of “authenticity” to make social and ecological arguments is not unique to Thailand. As an aside, Saloth Sar (the man we now know as “Pol Pot”) used the nom de plume of “khmaer da'em” meaning “original Khmer” early in his career: Ben Kiernan, “Myth, Nationalism and Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Studies* 3, no. 2 (2001): 194; T. Nairn, “The Curse of Rurality: Limits of Modernisation Theory,” in *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, ed. J. A. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 110.

⁷⁰ “ลักษณะวัฒนธรรมไทโบราณ”: Chatthip Nartsupha, *Prawatisart Watanataam Chumchon Laew Chonchart Tai = History, Community Culture and Tai Ethnicity* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1997): 81

⁷¹ Ratanaporn Sethakul and Benajar Oontuan, *Chuang - Tai - Thai Sai Yai Haeng Watanataam = Cultural Connections: Chuang - Tai - Thai* (Chiang Mai: Tai Studies Project, Academic Division, Payap University, 1993): 8

*the dialects of Thai villagers in Thailand are closer to the Tai language of the Tai outside the country. Some are probably closer (to the languages outside Thailand) than they are to the Central Thai language of Thailand.*⁷²

This authenticity gets its meaning from village life. It is not only a way to connect the Thai village to the people, villages and communities of the Tai outside Thailand. It is also a way to criticise the “inauthentic” culture and society of modern Bangkok and Thailand’s centre.

Community

Peppered throughout descriptions of the Tai outside Thailand the term “community” is commonly used.⁷³ This is an interpretation which elevates a particular type of communal lifestyle as similar, authentic and *quintessentially* Tai. For example, it is claimed that “the village community is the basis for the economy and culture of the Tai including the Thai of Thailand”.⁷⁴ This explicitly political formulation has been developed to oppose the state, capitalism and the erosion of “community” values. Chatthip Nartsupha asserts that people involved in studying the Tai “oppose the state, we oppose all states in the region, we want to build networks between all Tai communities”.⁷⁵

⁷² “ในแง่ภาษา ภาษากันของชาวบ้านไทยประเทศไทยก็ใกล้เคียงกับภาษาไทของชนชาติไทนอกประเทศ บางกรณีอาจใกล้เคียงกันเองมากกว่าที่จะใกล้เคียงกับไทยกลางของประเทศไทย”: Nartsupha, *Prawatisart Watanataam Chumchon Laew Chonchart Tai = History, Community Culture and Tai Ethnicity*: 80-81

⁷³ The word in Thai that indicates this translation of “community” is “ชุมชน”. Other words that are very occasionally used to explain the same idea are “กลุ่มชน” and “หมู่ชน”.

⁷⁴ “ชุมชนหมู่บ้านเป็นรากฐานของเศรษฐกิจและวัฒนธรรมชาวไทรวมทั้งชาวไทยประเทศไทย”: Part of the Project Statement in Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 5

⁷⁵ “เราต่อต้านรัฐ เราต่อต้านทุกรัฐในภูมิภาค เราต้องการสร้างเครือข่ายของชุมชนไททั้งหมด”: Nartsupha, *Prawatisart Watanataam Chumchon Laew Chonchart Tai = History, Community Culture and Tai Ethnicity*: 92

Contrasted with the term “globalisation” (โลกาภิวัตน์), the word “community” has been harnessed to explain “localisation” (ชุมชนากิวัตน์).⁷⁶ It is, for Yos Santasombat, a term that denotes other key words including natural resource management, rights and responsibility.⁷⁷ Such Tai “community” can “free Thailand from being a development colony of the West”.⁷⁸ It is not surprising that the concept of “community” has become central to how resource management is approached in Thailand.⁷⁹ There are also recently published Thai studies of other communities like “Lue community”⁸⁰ and “Karen community”.⁸¹ These studies use the notion of community to critique the centralising and hegemonic aspects of state and market power.⁸² Community is framed as a bulwark against the influence of

⁷⁶ The term “ชุมชนากิวัตน์” is explicitly used to translate the English word “localisation” in: Bantorn Oondam, “Kam Niyom = Preface,” in *Witi Tai: Witi Tang Su Chumchon Pung Tong Eng = The Tai Way: A Way to Self-Reliant Communities*, ed. Suwat Kongpaen (Bangkok: Ruamtaat, 2002).

⁷⁷ Yos Santasombat, *Kwarm Lark lai laewPumbanya Chao Bahn peua Garnpattana yan Yang Yuen = Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge for Sustainable Development* (Chiang Mai: Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge Studies Centre for Research and Sustainable Development, Sociology and Anthropology Department, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 1999): 155

⁷⁸ “ทำให้ประเทศไทยเป็นอิสระจากอาณานิคมพัฒนาของตะวันตก” Oondam, “Kam Niyom = Preface,” Preface.

⁷⁹ Anan Ganjanapan, “Satanaparb Garnwijai Chumchon Gab Garn Jadgarn Sapayagorn: Bot Sangkraew Kong Garnsueksa = The Situation of Research on Community and Resource Management: A Synthesization of Knowledge,” in *Polwat Kong Chumchon Nai Garn Jadgarn Sapayagorn: Grabuntas Laew Nayobai = Community Resource Management Practice: Envisioning and Policy*, ed. Anan Ganjanapan (Bangkok: Office of the Thailand Research Fund, 2000).

⁸⁰ Sethakul, *Community Rights of the Lue in China, Laos and Thailand: A Comparative Study*: 1

⁸¹ Kawancheewan Buadeng, *Garnplienplaeng Witicheewit Damrongcheewit Kong Chumchon Kariang: Goraneesueksa Mubarn Nai Ampoer Mae Chaem Jangwat Chiang Mai, Changing Livelihoods Amongst a Karen Community: A Village Casestudy from Mae Chaem District, Chiang Mai Province* (Chiang Mai: Social Research Institute, 1996)

⁸² Chusak Wittayapak, “Community Culture Revisited: Community as a Political Space for Struggles over Natural Resources and Cultural Meaning” (paper presented at the 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, University of Amsterdam, July 1999)

outsiders that, in this instance, means specifically people from “outside the community”.

Together with a focus on what is similar yet authentic, community helps to define the Tai as a siblinghood - with a shared history, culture and language. For the emerging Thai critique of Bangkok and the excesses of non-Tai foreign modernity, the Tai community offers a familiar resource. It helps Thai academics and activists to challenge what they see as destructive influences in Thai society and signals an attempted reorientation. That reorientation uses the Shan as a specific example for research and activism.

Chapter 2: The Shan in Thai Interpretations

A branch of the Tai studies project

This chapter continues the earlier discussion of the Tai studies project by focussing specifically on Thai interpretations of the Shan. The study of Shan history, society and culture makes up an increasingly important part of the Tai studies project.

Described in terms of the broader siblinghood, the Shan are perceived as a similar yet authentic Tai group based in communities. However, the Shan are also resident in an often contested and complicated part of Southeast Asia. Within Thai interpretations, the problematic national and ethnic politics of Burma define the Shan as *a particular type* of Tai.

This chapter will demonstrate that Thailand's critics of modernity use the example of the Shan. The Shan in Burma and Thailand are utilised to argue against the hegemony of *Bangkok's* power and influence. Importantly, the Shan are also used to offer opposition to *Burmese* hegemony, militarism and oppression. A key problem is deciphering how Thai academics and activists reconcile these different contexts. The general acquisition of the Shan, and other Tai peoples, to argue against the corruption of Thailand's development is contrasted with the more specific defiance of the Burmese offered by the Shan. The question is: in Thai academic and activist interpretations how do the Shan represent both opposition to Thai modernity *and* opposition to Burmese authoritarianism?

To answer this important question it is necessary to delve into interpretations of the Shan in Thai language material. The abundance of such Thai material highlights the lack of comparable work in other languages.¹ With the exception of research done by Tannenbaum² and Durrenberger³ there is little significant or recent academic writing on the Shan in English or other European languages.⁴ Even in a recently published international collection of essays on different Tai groups there was no contribution about the Shan.⁵

The Shan in Thai Writings

To understand how Thai academics and activists interpret the Shan the research for this thesis examined a range of Thai language material. From a 32-hour Thai television mini-series⁶ to a short book on a Royal visit to Chiang Tung⁷ there is no

¹ There is, it should be noted, an important body of Chinese language writing about the Shan, particularly about the Shan in China. For comparative purposes, and an overview of this material, see: Bai Chun, *Taisueksa Nai Meaung Jeen: Grabuan Garnsarnng Rangong Kwamruu Geow Gab Tai Sueksa Kong Nak Wichargan Jeen Tang Tae Tosawat 1930-1990 = Tai Studies in China: An Analytical Study of the Process of Constructing Knowledge of Tai Studies by Chinese Scholars from the 1930s-1990s*: Chapter 1

² Nicola Beth Tannenbaum, *Agricultural Decision Making among the Shan of Maehongson Province, Northwestern Thailand* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1982)

³ E. Paul Durrenberger, *Agricultural Production and Household Budgets in a Shan Peasant Village in Northwestern Thailand: A Quantitative Description* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1978); E. Paul Durrenberger, "Annual Non-Buddhist Religious Observances of Mae Hong Son Shan," *Journal of the Siam Society* 68, no. 2 (1980); E. Paul Durrenberger and Nicola Tannenbaum, *Analytical Perspectives on Shan Agriculture and Village Economics* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1990)

⁴ There are older accounts of Shan life such as: Archibald Ross Colquhoun, *Amongst the Shans* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp, 1885; reprint, 1970); Leslie Milne, *Shans at Home* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp, 1910; reprint, 1970).

⁵ Pointed out by Craig Reynolds, "Review Article: Tai-Land and Its Others," *South East Asia Research* 11, no. 1 (2003) in reference to Andrew Turton (ed), *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000)

⁶ Kirta Chana, "Buangbanjatorn," (Bangkok: Paojinjong, 2002)

⁷ H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, *Doi Tung Chiang Tung = Doi Tung to Chiang Tung* (Bangkok: Suriwong, 1994)

lack of interesting or relevant sources. The focus of this thesis – the Thai interpretations of the Shan propagated by academics and activists – was, however, particularly fruitful. Much has been written about the Shan by Thai anthropologists, historians, linguists, social commentators, geographers, non-government organisations and economists. While some of these sources are over 40 years old, most have been written relatively recently. This recent proliferation of Thai writings about the Shan demonstrates the Tai studies project's influence and growth.

The Thai academic and activist writings about the Shan cover a range of issues. Many focus on linguistics, culture and social history.⁸ There are also more focussed studies of issues related to the Shan, for example, proverbs,⁹ local wisdom¹⁰ and responses to tourism.¹¹ In the Thai language, there are at least 100 sizeable academic works specifically about the Shan. There are also studies of the Tai or other broader issues that have chapters or sections devoted to the Shan. For

⁸ Sompong Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Sangkom Laew Wattanataam Tai Yai: Rai Ngarn Wijai = Shan Social and Cultural History: A Research Report* (Bangkok: The Office of the Thai Research Fund, 1999)

⁹ Prananta Tarnwaro and Tawee Sawangpanyangur, *108 Pasit Tai Yai = 108 Shan Proverbs* (Chiang Mai: Tai Language Study Club, 1987)

¹⁰ Ranoo Arntarmet, "Pumbanya Chao Tai Yai Gab Kwarm Cheua Laew Pitigaam = Shan Wisdom in Beliefs and Ceremonies," in *Tai*, ed. Shalardchai Ramitanondh, Virada Somswasdi, and Ranoo Wichasin (Chiang Mai: The Toyota Foundation and the Women's Studies Centre, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University, 1998)

¹¹ Banyen Charntanawat, *Garntongteow Gab Polgratob to Chumchon Chao Tai Yai: Goraneesueksa Mubahn Tamlod Tambon Tamlod Ampoe Pang Mapa Changwat Mae Hong Son = Tourism and Its Affects on the Shan Community: A Case Study of Thamlod Village, Pang Mapha District, Mae Hong Son Province* (Chiang Mai: Graduate School, Chiang Mai University, 2001)

example, Teeraparp Lohitagul's study of the *Tai in Southeast Asia* has a section on the "Shan of Mae Hong Son" (ไทใหญ่แม่ฮ่องสอน).¹²

Some Tai studies project writings about the Shan are particularly notable. One of the foremost Thai interpretations of the Shan is Sompong Witayasakpan's recently published *Shan History* (ประวัติศาสตร์ไทใหญ่).¹³ Based on his examination of Tai and Chinese language sources, it is an excellent example of the Tai studies project's epistemological and philosophical position. It attempts a comprehensive overview of Shan history, particularly in Burma and China. Printed along with the introductory statement to the *Project on Tai Social and Cultural History*, it combines rigorous scholarship with the common Thai justifications for focussing on the similar, the authentic and the community. Regardless of that limiting vision, *Shan History* is an important contribution to understanding the Shan throughout Southeast Asia.

Another key contribution was written by Yos Santasombat. In Thai, and then English translation, Professor Yos analyses the negotiation of identities among the Shan living in Daikong, Western Yunnan.¹⁴ Distant from the politics of the Thai-Burma border and some of the usual emphasis of the Tai studies project it is

¹² Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanai = The Tai in Southeast Asia*: 106-121. Almost all Thai books on the Tai have, at least, small sections devoted to the Shan.

¹³ Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*. A picture of the cover of this book is on page v of this thesis.

¹⁴ Yos Santasombat, *Lak Chang: Kansang Mai Khong Attalak Tai Nai Tai Khong = Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identities in Daikong* (Bangkok: Amarin, 2000)

perhaps the best recent Thai anthropology of a Tai group. In the preface to the Thai version, Chatthip Nartsupha introduces it as a study of “Shan attempts to preserve their cultural identity”.¹⁵ He sees the book as contributing to “finding the collective roots of Tai culture”.¹⁶ By comparison, Andrew Walker’s preface to the English language edition expresses the view that the book “persuasively demonstrates that close engagement with other cultural, political and economic systems, while sometimes extraordinarily painful, need not diminish a distinctive and dynamic sense of local identity”.¹⁷ Strikingly, Walker highlights the “level of engagement with the market...which is little short of astounding”. By contrast, Chatthip describes what he sees as a “self-reliance economy”.¹⁸ Notwithstanding the significant divergence of opinion among the prefacers, Yos’ work tempers its emphasis on the “similar yet authentic” by a concerted engagement with local conditions. Professor Yos’ wide-ranging ethnology sets the standard for future anthropologists working with the Shan.

The details of these and other Thai interpretations of the Shan are the focus for the rest of this thesis. These interpretations use the Shan to help develop the Thai critique of modernity. To begin that discussion, it is important to examine the general ways that the Thai define the Shan as a *particular type* of Tai.

¹⁵ “การพยายามรักษาอัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมของชาวไทล้านนา”: Chatthip Nartsupha writing in Ibid: Preface

¹⁶ “ค้นพบรากเหง้าร่วมของวัฒนธรรมไท”: Ibid

¹⁷ Andrew Walker writing in Santasombat, *Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identity in Daikong*: xi

¹⁸ “เศรษฐกิจแบบพึ่งตัวเอง”: Chatthip Nartsupha writing in Santasombat, *Lak Chang: Kansang Mai Khong Attalak Tai Nai Tai Khong = Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identities in Daikong*

เงี้ยว , Shan, & ᨾᩯ᩠ᨦᩉ᩠ᨦᩃᩣ᩠ᨦ ; ไทยใหญ่ : What’s in a Name?

Thai ethnic and social classifications of the Shan rely on description and designation. In the first instance, Thai writings tend to introduce the Shan as “a Tai group”.¹⁹ Their membership of this trans-national ethnic and linguistic “community” is then regularly repeated and reinforced. The Shan are generally called *Tai Yai* (ไทยใหญ่) which gives an impression of regionality and “Tai-ness”.²⁰ In this vein, Luang Wichitwathakan²¹ begins his description of the Shan by noting that they are:

*one branch of the Thai. They live in the land adjoining the north of our country. Westerners take after the Burmese and call them “Shan” or “Chan”. Those who live in our country we call “ngiaw” but that is a name that they are not satisfied to be called.*²²

¹⁹ All of the Thai writings about the Shan cited in this thesis introduce the Shan as “Tai” (เป็นคนไท) or as a “Tai group” (เป็นกลุ่มไท).

²⁰ This designation could be translated as “Big Tai” or “Major Tai”. It is contrasted with the “Minor Tai” or “Tai Noid”, which is a term often used for the Lao and other Tai peoples in Laos and Vietnam. Alternative spellings of “Tai Yai” include ไทยใหญ่; Therapan L. Thonkum, *Banyanugrom Pasar Chon Glum Noi Nai Prathed Thai = Bibliography of Minority Languages of Thailand* (Bangkok: Research Division of the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 1984): 57; and ไทยใหญ่; Baanjob Panmetta, “Laksana Pasar Thai Yai Tiab Pasar Krung Thep = A Comparative Study of Shan and Bangkok Thai,” in *Promdaen Haeng Kwarm Ruu = Borders of Knowledge* (Bangkok: Samarkom Sangkomsart Haeng Prathed Thai, 1972).

²¹ Luang Wichitwathakan’s work displays characteristics which make it unpopular in some Thai intellectual circles. For more information on his life and diverse scholarship, particularly his role in the creation of Thai nationalist discourse, see: Scot Barme, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993); Chalio Phansida, *Luang Wichitwathakan Laew Ngan Dan Prawatsat = Luang Wichitwathakan and Work in History* (Bangkok: Baungchit, 1977)

²² “ไทยใหญ่ คือไทยสาขาหนึ่ง ซึ่งอยู่ในดินแดนติดต่อกันทางทิศเหนือแห่งประเทศไทยเราฝรั่งเรียกว่า “ชาน” หรือ “จาน” ตามที่พม่าเรียก และบางทีในประเทศเราเองเรียกว่า “เงี้ยว” ซึ่งเป็นชื่อที่ชาวไทยใหญ่เองก็ไม่พอใจที่จะถูกเรียก”: Wichitwathakan, *Ngarn Khonkwa Ruang Chont Chat Thai = Research on the Thai Nationality* . By using the term “ไทยใหญ่” (“*Thai Yai*”) and then the phrase “ไทยสาขาหนึ่ง” (“*Thai sakar neung*”: One branch of the Thai), Wichitwathakan dates his description to a time when the distinction between the “Thai” and the “Tai” was particularly ambiguous and, it should be noted, *nationalistic*.

Despite its outmoded language, this type of explanation is a common introduction to Thai descriptions of the Shan.²³

In fact, it is almost customary to repeat the names that the Shan are called.²⁴ For example, at the beginning of discussion it is often noted that the Thai call the Shan “ngiaw” (เงี้ยว). In the *New Model Thai-English Dictionary*, So Sethaputra translates this word as meaning “a Shan in the Shan States of Burma or in the north of Thailand”.²⁵ As another book notes, “the Northern Thai and the Central Thai call them ‘ngiaw’ which is a name that the Shan heavily dislike because it has discriminatory overtones”.²⁶ That the Shan dislike the term has not stopped its use

²³ There are other almost identical descriptions of the Shan which introduce them by their different names. For a good examples see: Shalardchai Ramitanondh, "Botnam = Introduction," in *Tai*, ed. Shalardchai Ramitanondh, Virada Somswasdi, and Ranoo Wichasin (Chiang Mai: The Toyota Foundation and the Women's Studies Centre, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University, 1998): 10; Sompong Witayasakpan, "Tintarn Kong Glum Chart Pan Tai Nai Puentee Paen Din Yai Asia Tawanook Chieng Tai = Foundation of the Tai Ethnic Group in Greater Southeast Asia," in *Tai*, ed. Shalardchai Ramitanondh, Virada Somswasdi, and Ranoo Wichasin (Chiang Mai: The Toyota Foundation and the Women's Studies Centre, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University, 1998): 239. Another book predictably begins by stating that, “In various countries the Shan are called by different names...” (ไทใหญ่ในประเทศต่างๆ จะมีชื่อเรียกต่างกันไป...): Thalang, *Chonchat Tai Nai Nithan = Tai Ethnicity in Chronicles*: 11

²⁴ This type of repetitive discussion occurs in English as well. An example is “Thai know them as Thai Yai; Burmese and English as Shan; they call themselves Tai Long”: Durrenberger, "Annual Non-Buddhist Religious Observances of Mae Hong Son Shan," 48

²⁵ So Sethaputra, *New Model Thai-English Dictionary* (Bangkok: Thai Wattapanich, 1999): 97

²⁶ “ชาวไทยล้านนาและไทยภาคกลางเรียกว่า “เงี้ยว” ซึ่งเป็นชื่อเรียกที่คนไทใหญ่ไม่ชอบนัก เพราะเป็นคำที่สื่อไปในทางดูถูก”: Somsom Taamtee, *Ray Ngarn Garnsueksa Reoang Laisaik Tai Yai = Research Paper on Shan Tattooing* (Chiang Mai: Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University, 1995): 1

and the Shan States have even been called “เมืองเงี้ยว”, literally “*ngiaw* country”.²⁷

Apparently, the name also relates to a highly poisonous snake.²⁸

These names for the Shan are used in other ways. For example, a Thai government report combines them to label the Shan: “*Tai Yai (Chan or Ngiaw)*”.²⁹ Thai sources often relate that the Chinese call them “सान” (*Sarn*) and call the Shan State “सानปุ” (*Sarnpu*).³⁰ In Burmese, they are called “ရှမ်း” (*Shan*). The etymology of this word is often discussed and, according to Teeraparp Lohitagul, “the Burmese write Shan using the letters for Siam but read it as ‘Shan’...therefore Shan is the same word as ‘Siam’”.³¹ This description is thus used to affirm the relationship and similarity between the Shan and the Thai with, peculiarly enough, evidence from the Burmese language. This Burmese word has also been transliterated, as happens in Thakerng Panthakengamorn’s study of Tai linguistics,

²⁷ It could be translated as “Shanland”: Nakorn Punnanrong, *Panhar Chaidaien Thai-Pama = Problems on the Thai-Burma Border*, ed. Charnvit Kastsiri and Kanchanee La-onsri, (Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund, 1997): (53)

²⁸ Wongthes, "Tarm! Grasuang Sueksatigarn Laew/Reu Rattabahn Thai 'Kon Thai Yuu Tee Nai Gan Barng' = Ask! The Education Ministry and/or the Thai Government 'Whereabouts are there Thai?': 19

²⁹ “ไทใหญ่ (ฉาน หรือเงี้ยว)”: Grasuang Wattanataam = Ministry of Culture, "Draft Master Plan," (Bangkok: 2002): 5. Available from www.culture.go.th/ops/panda/DraftMasterPlan.doc

³⁰ Wongthes, "Tarm! Grasuang Sueksatigarn Laew/Reu Rattabahn Thai 'Kon Thai Yuu Tee Nai Gan Barng' = Ask! The Education Ministry and/or the Thai Government 'Whereabouts are there Thai?': 19

³¹ “ชาวพม่าเขียนคำเรียกไทใหญ่เป็นคำอักษรว่า ‘ซาน’...ดังนั้น...ซานเป็นคำเดียวกับ ‘สยาม’”: Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanai = The Tai in Southeast Asia*: 110

where the Shan are called “the Shan or Chan group” (กลุ่มชานหรือฉาน) rather than the more usual *Tai Yai*.³²

This type of etymological analysis is generally universal. The same ideas and information tend to be repeated and reinforced. Sometimes an unexpected variation emerges, as happens in Kajadpai Burustpat’s study of *Burmese National Minorities*. He describes the Shan as the “กลุ่มใหญ่ไทย” (*Glum Yai Thai*) – inverting the usual order of the words and making it seem like the “big group of Thai”.³³

While some of the designations are not always clear, they indicate a Thai commitment to *name* the Shan.

The implication of these repetitive discussions is that the various and confusing titles given to the Shan have significance. They help the Thai to name the Shan *as Tai*. They also allow the Thai to *differentiate* the Shan from the Burmese and the Chinese, and from other Tai groups. The development of such ethnic, linguistic and social classifications is an important part of Thai ethnographic writing. A process of differentiation and explanation, it often aspires to taxonomic accuracy. In the case of the Shan, the use of a range of monikers and justifications indicates a desire to place the Shan between other groups as a *particular type* of Tai.

³² Panthakengamorn, "Pasar Tragun Tai Nai Tragun Pasar Lok = Tai in the World Language Family"

³³ Kajadpai Burustpat, *Chonglum Noi Sanchart Pamar = Burmese National Minorities* (Bangkok: Praepitaya, 1997): 34

The Place of the Shan

Despite the linguistic taxonomy, many Thai academics and activists remain happy to give the Shan an imprecise and wide geographic definition.³⁴ In broad terms, “the Shan group live to the west of the Mekong valley”.³⁵ However inadequate this demarcation of the Shan may be, the Mekong valley remains a widely used divider between the Shan and other Tai groups. While the Shan can be further subdivided into a range of other specific linguistic and geographic groups, the subtleties of these classifications are often glossed over in defining the place of the Shan.³⁶ The Shan, under the name *Tai Yai*, are immediately placed in the valleys of northeastern Burma, southern China and northern-most Thailand. There are other populations of “Shan people” in India and Laos but these are generally not referred to as “Shan”.³⁷ Their location means that many Shan live in areas that are

³⁴ Citing Anan Ganjanapan, "Satarnaparp Garnwijai Pattanagarn Tang Sangkom Laew Wattanataam Tai Yai = The State of Social and Cultural Research on the Shan," in *Garnsueksa Wattanataam Chonchart Tai = A Study of Tai Culture* (Bangkok: Samnakngarn kanagamagarn wattanatam haneg chart, 1995). Siraporn na Thalang elaborates on the difficulties of defining the Shan: Thalang, *Chonchat Tai Nai Nithan = Tai Ethnicity in Chronicles*: 8-11. Another perspective on the difficulty of defining and placing the Shan comes from an adolescent in the Burmese border town of Tachilek. He insisted that “there are no genuine Shan. They have all been mixed together around here”.

³⁵ “กลุ่มไทยใหญ่อยู่ฟากตะวันตกของกลุ่มแม่น้ำโขง”: Suchit Wongthes, "Kon Thai Yuu Tee Nee Kon Lao Gor Yuu Tee Nee = the Thais Are Here: The Lao Are Here Too," *Sinlapa Wattanatam = Art & Culture* Special Edition (1987): 10

³⁶ For a brief discussion of some of these subtleties see: Ranoo Wichasin, "Sankep Pumleng Kong Chao Tai Yai Nai Rat Shan = Summary of the Shan in Shan State," in *Tai*, ed. Shalardchai Ramitanondh, Virada Somswasdi, and Ranoo Wichasin (Chiang Mai: The Toyota Foundation and the Women's Studies Centre, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University, 1998): 262; Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 11

³⁷ For the definitive account of the Shan peoples' national whereabouts see: Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 3-7

close to Thailand and to Thai people.³⁸ They are not placed as a distant, unfamiliar or abstract Tai population.³⁹

Their proximity to Thailand has not stopped inaccurate descriptions about their place. For example, a 1976 Thai language monograph insisted that the people in Burma, China and Vietnam who call themselves “the Thai - are a highland minority that we call the ‘Thai highland minority’”.⁴⁰ This is, for the most part, an inaccurate historical relic.⁴¹ As Thai sources now assert, the Shan are a “lowland majority” and not a “highland minority”. But mistaken designation still occurs and, in a genuine gaffe, the Shan were recently called “ancient highland migrants” in a widely read English language essay.⁴²

³⁸ One of the most recent accounts of the Shan notes that “Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son provinces adjoin the Shan State of Burma. Each of these three provinces has a large Shan population” (จังหวัดเชียงราย เชียงใหม่ แม่ฮ่องสอน มีอาณาเขตติดต่อกับรัฐฉาน ประเทศพม่า ทั้งสามจังหวัดนี้จึงมีชาวไทยภูเขาอาศัยอยู่มาก): Wandee Santiwutamet, "Pasar Botpleng Jart Tai: Grabuangarn Sarng Chart Tai Yai Nai Chumchon Jintanagarn = Language, Lyrics and the Tai Nation: Constructing Shan Nation as an Imagined Community," *Muang Boran = Ancient City* 29, no. 3 (2003): 35

³⁹ In comparison, the Tai Ahom of Assam are often described in terms of their distance from Thailand and other Tai populations. See, for example, the descriptions of the Ahom in: Sumit Pitpat and Damrong Injan, *Kabuangarn Fuen Fu Pasar Kwarm Cheua Laew Pittigam Kong Tai Ahom Nai Rat Assam Prathed India = The Restoration of Tai Ahom Language, Beliefs and Ceremonies in Assam State, India* (Bangkok: O.S. Printing House, 2003)

⁴⁰ “ชาวไทยซึ่งเป็นชนกลุ่มน้อยชาวเขา ซึ่งเราขอเรียกว่า “ชนกลุ่มน้อยชาวไทย””: Masian Datse and Phaithun Datse, *Panha Kanmuang Kong Chon Chuachat Phao Thai Nai Esia: Wiatnam Pamar Jeen = Political Problems of Ethnic Thai Tribes in Asia: Vietnam, Burma and China* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1976): 1

⁴¹ Placing the Shan confused writers during colonial times as well. Leslie Milne asserted that the “Shans call themselves the Tai Race. They are Mongolian in type, but until their heads can be scientifically measured, it is not possible to know from whom they are descended”: Milne, *Shans at Home*: 114. Craniometry has subsequently gone out of fashion as a method of anthropological understanding.

⁴² Jean Michaud and Christian Culas, "The Hmong of the Southeast Asia Massif: Their Recent History of Migration," in *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social & Cultural Change in the Border Regions*, ed. Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton, and Kuah Khun Eng (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000): 106. This “mistake” was first pointed out in a review of the book: Jonsson, "Book Review: Where China Meets Southeast Asia,": 201

These incorrect descriptions of the Shan as an “other”, have now generally been replaced by a Thai desire to locate the Shan at *the intersection* of Thailand and Burma. Motivated by a desire to escape conflict and persecution in Burma, recent migration has led to large Shan populations at the Thai-Burma border with increasing numbers of Shan trying to live on the Thai side. With regard to these recent arrivals it is,

*possible to divide them into two groups. The first group came to live more than 45 years ago. An example of this group is the Shan at Mai Sai district, Chiang Rai province. The next group came to places like Tued Thai village or Hin Taek village in the last 20-25 years.*⁴³

These recent migrants have prompted some books to note that the border area of northern Chiang Rai province is dominated by Tai peoples.⁴⁴ Foremost among these “minorities” (ชนกลุ่มน้อย) are the Shan: “a very populous group” (คนไทยใหญ่เป็นจำนวนมาก). The Shan who have sought refuge in Thailand have gained a degree of acceptability. According to a prominent Chiang Mai academic “they are much easier to understand than highlanders: they assimilate, they speak Thai well in only

⁴³ “อาจแบ่งได้เป็น ๒ กลุ่ม กลุ่มแรกได้อพยพเข้ามาอาศัยนานกว่า ๔๕ ปีแล้ว เช่นชาวไทยใหญ่ที่อำเภอแม่สาย จังหวัดเชียงราย อีกกลุ่มหนึ่งได้แก่ชาวไทยใหญ่ที่บ้านเทอดไทยหรือบ้านหินแตกซึ่งอพยพเข้ามาในระยะ ๒๐ - ๒๕ ปีที่ผ่านมานี้”: Kajadpai Burusphat, *Chon Klum Noi Sanchat Phama = Burmese Ethnic Minorities* (Bangkok: Samnakphim Phr Phitthaya, 1997): 70. Interestingly, Hin Taek Village was renamed Thoed Thai (“Thai elevated”) village in the early 1980s: Gehan Wijeyewardene, “The Frontiers of Thailand,” in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand, 1939-1989*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Clayton: Monash Papers on Southeast Asia - No. 25, 1991): 176

⁴⁴ “ประชากร...จำนวนมาก”: Pornpimon Trichod and Saigaew Chutrap, “Garnka Chaidae Thai-Pama = Thai-Burma Border Trade,” in *Garnkar Chaidae = Border Trade*, ed. Witaya Sujaritthanarak and Chapa Jitprathun (Bangkok: Institute for Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1994): 33

6 months”.⁴⁵ He surmised that many of them “feel like Thailand is also their homeland”.

The ease with which these recent arrivals are accepted and then placed in Thailand is interesting. It should be remembered that although *these* Shan have migrated only recently, many others have lived in Thailand for generations. This is particularly evident in Mae Hong Son province where the Shan constitute the major lowland population and have done so for many years.⁴⁶ Mae Hong Son province challenges the belief held by,

*some people...that the people (of the province) are Thai highland minorities. Whereas, in fact, the major cultural characteristics of Mae Hong Son come from the Tai culture (Shan).*⁴⁷

As a rural, valley-dwelling group, the Shan have been easy to place within Thailand and neighbouring countries. Even with their complex history of migration and movement, the placement of the Shan within Southeast Asia serves to mark them as a *particular type* of Tai.

⁴⁵ These comments were made in the context of an informal lunch in early 2003 where the conversation turned to the Shan living in Thailand.

⁴⁶ E. Paul Durrenberger and Nicola Tannenbaum, "Thirty Years of Development in Shan Villages of Northwestern Thailand," *The World and I* April (1999)

⁴⁷ “บางท่านอาจเข้าใจว่าเป็นชนกลุ่มน้อยที่เป็นชาวไทยภูเขาแต่ต่างๆ แต่ในสภาพความจริงลักษณะของวัฒนธรรมหลักของแม่ฮ่องสอน คือ วัฒนธรรมไต (ไทใหญ่)”: Onsiri Parnin, "Mubarn Laew Barn Tai (Thai Yai) Tee Barn Parnng Muu, Ampoe Meaung, Changwat Mae Hong Son = Tai (Shan) Village and House in Parnng Muu Village, Municipal District, Mae Hong Son Province," *Sarnarsa* (1994)

The Similar Shan

The Shan are useful for Thai critiques of modernity when they display the *similarity* characteristic of Tai peoples. This similarity is often described in terms of Shan language and culture. For example, Kajadpai Buruspat notes that,

*the majority of the Shan (in Thailand) live in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai provinces and are a group that possess ethnicity, language, culture and customs which are closest to those of the people of the northern region. The people of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai see the Shan as relatives and have no feeling whatsoever that they are foreigners who speak foreignly.*⁴⁸

That the people of northern Thailand display such affinity to the Shan is not altogether remarkable. They have long histories of interaction and their populations are geographically very close. Accordingly, another author categorises the Shan language as “part of the Tai language family in the Southwestern group along with Northern Tai, Tai Ahom, White Tai, Black Tai, Tai Lue, Siamese and Lao”.⁴⁹ This linguistic categorisation fuels an acceptance that the Shan are related to other Tai groups, in particular the Siamese who we now know as Thai. Kajadpai emphasises this feeling by concluding that the Shan are, in fact, so similar that “it is impossible to send them back” to Burma.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ “พวกไทยใหญ่พวกนี้ส่วนใหญ่อาศัยอยู่ในจังหวัดเชียงรายและเชียงใหม่เป็นกลุ่มที่มีเชื้อชาติ ภาษา วัฒนธรรม ขนบธรรมเนียมประเพณีใกล้ชิดกับคนภาคเหนือมากที่สุด คนเชียงใหม่และคนเชียงรายมองคนไทยใหญ่เสมือนญาติ ไม่มีความรู้สึกว่าเป็นคนต่างชาติต่างภาษาแต่อย่างใด”: Buruspat, *Chonglum Noi Sanchart Pamar = Burmese National Minorities*: 82. The double use of the adjective “foreign” meaning “from another country” is used in this context quite deliberately. It is also bemusing that Kajadpai ignores the settlements of Shan in Mae Hong Son province to focus solely on those in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai.

⁴⁹ “จัดอยู่ตระกูลภาษาไท กลุ่มตะวันตกเฉียงใต้เช่นเดียวกับ ไทเหนือ ไทอาหม ไทขาว ไทดำ ไทลื้อ ไทสยาม ลาว”: Wichasin, “Sankep Pumleng Kong Chao Tai Yai Nai Rat Shan = Summary of the Shan in Shan State,” 264

⁵⁰ “จึงเป็นเรื่องที่เป็นไปไม่ได้เลย”: Buruspat, *Chonglum Noi Sanchart Pamar = Burmese National Minorities*: 83

This sentiment is echoed by a Chiang Mai shopkeeper, who discussed her views on the Shan in relation to the economic and political situation of Northern Thailand. Commenting on the persecution of the Shan in Burma, she said that “the Shan speak the same...we are siblings, the one group, the one nation”.⁵¹ She thought that the Shan received unfair treatment and should be welcomed in Thailand. Her attitude resonates in academic and activist writings. Unlike some other groups, the Shan are widely perceived as being at home within Thailand. By invoking the Tai family and talking about their Shan siblings (พี่น้องไทใหญ่),⁵² the Thai specify their proximity to the Shan.

One extreme version of this affiliation is espoused by Thai singer, social critic and activist Yuenyong "Ad" Ophakul. Better known as “Ad Carabao”,⁵³ he sings about the Shan in his 2002 album, *Don't Cry: The Story of the Dispossessed*. The album refashions Bob Marley songs with lyrics that describe the suffering of the Shan. The lyrics emphasise Tai unity and the affinity that the Thai and Shan feel for each other. Ad Carabao's brief introduction to the situation is a cry for

⁵¹ “ไทใหญ่ก็อยู่เหมือนกัน เป็นพี่น้องกัน พวกเดียวกัน ชาติเดียวกัน”: Sopaporn Sailiang, *Pers. Comm.*, Chiang Mai, 23 February 2003

⁵² This phrase is often used. For example: Ad Carabao, *Mai Tong Rong Hai = Don't Cry: The Story of the Dispossessed* (Bangkok: The MD Company, 2002); "TongTai", *Tai Yai = Shan* (Bangkok: Samarpan, 1988): Inside Cover

⁵³ Ad Carabao is a famous Thai singer and musician who has carved out a niche in the Thai market of “songs for life” (เพลงเพื่อชีวิต). These often moralistic folk songs tend to champion the causes of disenfranchised groups. Whether singing about Karen forest conservation or shooting Burmese army conscripts, “Carabao” has developed into a distinctive brand of social statement and protest. For more information on Ad Carabao, and this album in particular, see: Anonymous, *Carabao* (2003 [cited 11 September 2003]); available from www.carabaothai.com; Anonymous, "An Interview with Ad Carabao," *The Irrawaddy* 10, no. 7 (2002); William Barnes, "Burmese Bandit a Bangkok Folk Hero," *South China Morning Post*, May 27, 2001

attention and support. He declares that the “Shan are the majority population of the Shan State. Those 10 million people – citizens and soldiers... are involved in a legitimate battle for an independent homeland”.⁵⁴ The legitimacy of that fight is underlined by the title of track nine, which exhorts listeners to “Grab your weapons” (จับอาวุธ). Carabao positions himself as a Tai: as part of the Shan struggle. In the song book there is a picture of Carabao holding the flag of an independent Shan State while wearing a Shan State Army uniform. This gesture is aimed, no doubt, to motivate Thai support for the Shan war against the Burmese government. To achieve the goal of a free Shan State, there is a need, the title of track four suggests, to “Settle Accounts” (เลิกบัญชี). In that vein, Carabao cries that the:

Land of the Shan State is ours.

The land of the Shan State is the Shan's.

*Don't make us forget.*⁵⁵

For Carabao the prize is the “Shan State Our Home” (รัฐฉานบ้านเรา).

His call to take up arms against the Burmese government is an extreme version of interpretations of the Shan as part of a Tai siblinghood. Other Thai academics and activists use the similarity of the Thai and the Shan to unite their causes. For example, in the dedication to a book titled *Tai Yai* the “Thai siblings in the land of

⁵⁴ “ไทใหญ่ คือกลุ่มใหญ่ในรัฐฉาน 10 ล้านคนนั้น มีทั้งประชาชนและทหาร...ต่อผู้กดขี่อันชอบธรรม”: Carabao, *Mai Tong Rong Hai = Don't Cry: The Story of the Dispossessed: Inside Cover*

⁵⁵ “แผ่นดินรัฐฉาน เป็นของเรา
แผ่นดินรัฐฉานของไทยใหญ่
อย่ามาทำขี้ลืม”: Ibid

the Siamese Kingdom” are thanked for their support of the Shan.⁵⁶ The similarities between the Shan and the T(h)ai of Thailand make possible mutual understanding and purpose. That purpose is to divide the Shan from the Burmese and to support Shan identification as Tai.

The Authentic Shan

In Thai interpretations, the Shan are often portrayed as an authentic Tai group. Their distance from Thai urban culture gives the Shan an authenticity based on the perception of a more traditional lifestyle. This interpretation of Shan authenticity manifests in many ways. Some of these ways are discussed in Chapter 4 where the Shan village is examined in detail. In general, Shan authenticity is allied with rurality, agriculture and simple stories. As Sompong Witayasakpan writes,

*the life of the Shan is intertwined with the paddy field. They plant rice and plant vegetables, beans, tobacco, watermelons and other annual crops. Life is regulated by the seasons. They set the pattern of life: work, ceremonies and religious customs throughout the year.*⁵⁷

Such a description of the Shan lifestyle harks back to a time when Thai life was similarly structured. Rice culture remains an important part of Thai life but the particular *simplicity* and *seasonality* of this description of the Shan is generally lacking in modern Thai agriculture. Thailand’s industrialising agriculture is rapidly moving away from this type of pattern.

⁵⁶ “พี่น้องชาวไทยในแผ่นดินอาณาจักรสยาม”: “TongTai”, *Tai Yai = Shan*: 3

⁵⁷ “ชีวิตของชาวไทใหญ่ผูกพันอยู่กับทุ่งนา ปลูกข้าว ปลูกผัก ถั่ว ใบยาสูบ แดงโม และพืชล้มลุกอื่น ๆ ชีวิตถูกกำหนดด้วยฤดูกาล ที่จะเป็นตัวกำหนดวิถีชีวิตการทำงาน การประกอบพิธีกรรม และประเพณีทางศาสนาต่าง ๆ ตลอดปี”: Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 8

Ranoo Wichasin's discussion of the Shan in the Shan State is a classic description of authentic Shan life.⁵⁸ Its focus is material culture, traditional livelihood, ceremonies and natural ecology. Sentences begin with “แต่เดิม” which means “originally”. The “wealth of natural resources” (ร่ำรวยแหล่งทรัพยากรธรรมชาติ) in both agriculture and forest is noted. Ranoo enthuses that traditional irrigation systems are supplemented by “sty manure” (ปุ๋ยคอก) and “compost” (ปุ๋ยหมัก). Outside of agricultural production, there is “industry work *within* the household”.⁵⁹ The picture of Shan life that Ranoo paints is one that is familiar to many people in Thailand. It is a popular image of the Thai countryside before the emergence of state and market hegemony.

This picture of Shan life focuses on the aspects that easily fit Thai nostalgia. Such a claim to authenticity is not generally tempered by discussing the labour of large numbers of Shan in the Thai economy. Thailand uses Shan labourers, attendants, prostitutes and other unskilled workers – they fill a particular rank in Thailand's economic hierarchy. I am unaware of any detailed study which focuses on the lifestyles and opportunities of these Shan. There is, arguably, nothing particularly authentic about their economic pursuits. Nor are the economics of the Shan

⁵⁸ Wichasin, "Sankep Pumlang Kong Chao Tai Yai Nai Rat Shan = Summary of the Shan in Shan State," 255-284.

⁵⁹ “มีงานอุตสาหกรรมภายในครอบครัว”: *emphasis added*, Ibid: 273.

State's war-economy⁶⁰ at all “authentic”. Images of Shan “teak and pine...forests” (ป่าไม้ ไม่สักไม้อื่น),⁶¹ have little to do with many actual Shan lifestyles.

The Community Shan

Community is, it should be remembered, a major part of the way that the Thai interpret all Tai peoples. In a book about Burma and “quality of life”, a whole section is devoted to arguing that “if people are in their own community they will look after their culture”.⁶² The argument is that familiarity with neighbours and shared histories – which is facilitated by community – preserves culture. Strangers and strange environments do not require the conservation of culture and so, the argument goes, the culture disappears. In this argument, “community is thus an instrument of cultural preservation”.⁶³

Sompong Witayasakpan describes a “Shan community”(ชุมชนไทยใหญ่) at the level of the village.⁶⁴ Chatthip Nartsupha takes this idea and argues that,

Shan culture is similar on a foundational level to the culture of the Tai in other areas. As such there is a village community which is the basic

⁶⁰ Jake Sherman, "Natural Resources and Armed Conflict: How Effective Are Economic Policy Levers?," *Workshop on Natural Resources and War, September 13-14, 2003 Montreal, Quebec* (2003): 12-13

⁶¹ Wichasin, "Sankep Pumleng Kong Chao Tai Yai Nai Rat Shan = Summary of the Shan in Shan State,": 271

⁶² “คนถ้าอยู่ในชุมชนของตนเอง จะรักษาวัฒนธรรม”: Prawet Walee, *Yeuan Pama = Visit Burma* (Bangkok: Mor Chao Bahn, 1997): 34

⁶³ “ชุมชนจึงเป็นเครื่องรักษาวัฒนธรรม”: Ibid: 35

⁶⁴ Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 9

*element of the society. They live on the lowlands near rivers or between mountains, plant rice as their staple...*⁶⁵

Chatthip unites the Shan as a community with what he sees as *similar yet authentic*. For Thai interpretations, Shan culture and community are indivisible. As Ganya Lilarlai has emphasised, Chatthip sees “community culture” as contributing to “nationalism by villagers and not the state” and “Thai awareness that they are part of the Tai”.⁶⁶

A recent Thailand Research Fund sponsored project is titled *The Shan Community Local History Project: The Kok River Catchment in Northern Thailand - Mae Ai and Mae Mao, Fang District, Chiang Mai Province*.⁶⁷ Its objective is to examine the natural resource management of the Shan in the context of changing political and ecological conditions. The basis for the study is the naturalised concept of “Shan community”. One of the project’s goals is to,

*study the historical awareness of Shan communities and the experience of change in the management of resources...in the context of maintaining ethnic identity and the management of natural resources.*⁶⁸

⁶⁵ “วัฒนธรรมไทใหญ่ ซึ่งโดยพื้นฐานแล้วก็คล้ายกับวัฒนธรรมไทในเขตอื่น คือมีชุมชนหมู่บ้านเป็นองค์ประกอบรากฐานของสังคม อาศัยอยู่บนพื้นที่ราบลุ่มแม่น้ำหรือที่ราบระหว่างภูเขา ปลูกข้าวเป็นพืชหลัก...”: Chatthip Nartsupha writing in Ibid: 18

⁶⁶ “เป็นชาตินิยมของชาวบ้านไม่ใช่ของรัฐ” and “ประชาชนไทยต้องยื่นขึ้นมาด้วยจิตสำนึกที่เป็นไทร่วมกัน”: Ganya Lilarlai in the introduction to Nartsupha, *Prawatisart Watanataam Chumchon Laew Chonchart Tai = History, Community Culture and Tai Ethnicity*: 7

⁶⁷ In Thai it is called: “โครงการประวัติศาสตร์ชุมชนไทใหญ่ท้องถิ่นภาคเหนือของประเทศไทยลุ่มน้ำแมก แม่อายและแม่มาว อำเภอฝาง จังหวัดเชียงใหม่”.

⁶⁸ “เพื่อศึกษาจิตสำนึกทางประวัติศาสตร์ของชุมชนไทใหญ่ และประสบการณ์เปลี่ยนผ่านต่อการจัดการทรัพยากร...ได้แก่ การดำรงอัตลักษณ์ทางชาติพันธุ์และการจัดการทรัพยากรธรรมชาติ”: Thailand Research Fund, *The Shan Community Local History Project: The Kok River Catchment in Northern Thailand - Mae Ai and Mae Mao, Fang District, Chiang Mai Province* (2002 [cited 12 July 2003]); available from: www.trf.or.th/Program_Management

The “community” – a collective and almost timeless body – is the basis for study. This is an example of the way in which the Shan are appropriated for the Tai studies project. Thai interpretations are also forced to understand the Shan in regard to Burma.

The Shan and the Burmese Question

Thai academics and activists devote significant effort to presenting the Shan as an example of Tai similarity, authenticity and community. The discourse emerging from the Tai studies project is used, in the case of the Shan, as a way of criticising Thailand’s modernity. It also focuses on developing the Shan as a *particular type* of Tai marked by their name and their place. The specific character of the Shan in Thai interpretations is further complicated by something that is generally absent from Thai writings about other Tai groups. Thai interpretations must reconcile with the fact that many Shan live in Burma: a country with an authoritarian and often brutal regime. Modern Burma is, according to some observers, a story of “human rights violations, war and the obstruction of ethnicity”.⁶⁹ The use of

⁶⁹ “การละเมิดสิทธิมนุษยชน สงครามและการกดขี่ชนชาติ” Various, *Rupbeeb Mai Kong Garn Ka Tart: Garn Ka Ying Laew Dek Sao Pamar Nai Prathed Thai = A Modern Form of Slavery: Trafficking of Burmese Women and Girls into Thailand* (Bangkok: Foundation for Women, 1993): 29

sexual violence as a “weapon of war”, for example, has recently received much attention in Southeast Asia and throughout the world.⁷⁰

The misery of the Shan in Burma is often described by Thai academics and activists in terms of economics and poverty. According to a guidebook to Burma authored by a graduate of Bangkok’s Silapakorn University, “the General Assembly of the United Nations has labelled Burma as a least developed country”.⁷¹ This designation situates Burma’s people among the world’s poorest and most marginalised. Their opportunities for human development are greatly restricted. This might be because,

*Burma has abundant natural resources that are yet to be exploited. This is a consequence of inadequate investment and technology. However, some resources are also in areas controlled by minority groups, where the Burmese cannot go.*⁷²

⁷⁰ *License to Rape: The Burmese Military Regime's Use of Sexual Violence in the Ongoing War in Shan State* (The Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF), The Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), 2002 [cited 11 May 2003]); available from: www.shanland.org/shrf/License_to_Rape/license_to_rape.htm. This report has generated much international interest in the use of sexual violence against Shan and other women in the Shan State. See for example: Clause 9 of the report by International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, "Question of the Violation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in Any Part of the World," (Geneva: United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2003). The report by the Special Envoy to Burma, Razali Ismail, also deals with the issue of sexual violence: United Nations Secretary General, "The Human Rights Situation in Myanmar," (New York: United Nations, 2002): 5

⁷¹ “สมาชิกหออุ้งศักรสหประชาชาติ ได้ประกาศให้พม่าเป็นประเทศที่พัฒนาน้อยที่สุด”: Pairat Sunggijbul, *Teow Myanmar = Travel to Burma* (Bangkok: Othitta, 2002): 30. 48 other countries are currently designated as “least developed”. For more information on the classification and strategies to alleviate the poverty and other problems of these countries see: UNCTAD Secretariat, *The Least Developed Countries: Report 2002* (New York: United Nations, 2002)

⁷² “พม่ามีทรัพยากรธรรมชาติที่ยังไม่ได้นำมาใช้อีกมากมาย เนื่องจากไม่มีเงินทุนและเทคโนโลยีที่พอที่จะนำทรัพยากรมาใช้ได้ นอกจากนี้ทรัพยากรบางประเภทอยู่ในเขตปกครองแขวงกลุ่มน้อยซึ่งทางการพม่าเข้าไปไม่ได้”: Trichod and Chutrap, "Garnka Chaidan Thai-Pama = Thai-Burma Border Trade," : 21

In general, Burma's lack of development is a result of poor government, corruption and conflict.

However, in some Thai interpretations, Burma's economic struggle is not entirely unwelcome. For the Thai, Burma has often been the *other* – a “different” and acrimonious neighbour. While only the Shan are currently involved in open warfare with the Burmese, Thai-Burmese relations are historically rooted in hostility. Even today, the 44 wars between Thailand and Burma⁷³ are often remembered with considerable anger.

For example, in an upbeat chapter titled “Myanmar and the Economic Quadrangle”, Tanet makes the point that Burma is different from Thailand's other neighbours. He cites three main reasons:

1. Burma is larger, in area, than Thailand
2. Burma has attacked Thailand many dozens of times
3. Burma has never been a Thai colony or vassal state.⁷⁴

This serves as a warning and contributes to Thai insecurity about Burma. Such insecurity distinguishes Burma from Thailand's other neighbours. Talking with shopkeepers in a northern district of Chiang Mai province in February 2003,

⁷³ A controversial description of those wars is the recently reprinted: H.R.H Prince Damrong Rajanupab, *Thai Rob Pamar = Thailand Fighting Burma* (Bangkok: Banakarn, 2000): 1

⁷⁴ Chareonmuang, *Thai-Pamar-Laos-Jeen: Seeliam Sedikit Seeliam Wattanatam = Thai-Burma-Laos-China: Economic Quadrangle, Cultural Quadrangle*: 171-172

somebody suggested that “the Burmese government is insular. The Thai government, and people, are more open”.⁷⁵

The conflict and competition between Thailand and Burma put the Shan in a sometimes precarious situation. This situation is problematic because the Burmese are not a Tai sibling: they are different and potentially dangerous. Within the context of the volatile border environment, the Shan and the Thai are long-standing allies. That alliance is solidified by their mutual distrust of the Burmese and of the government of Myanmar. Tanet notes that, “in the land of the Economic Quadrangle the minority with an important military role against the government are the Shan or the Tai”.⁷⁶ The ability of Shan armies to retain their strength is probably a result of their ability to gain support from elements of Thai society and Thai military organisations. The assistance that Shan groups have received in Thailand, and from Thai authorities, is not secret – just listen to Ad Carabao.⁷⁷

Thai opposition to Burma is also channelled through the Shan by other Thai academics and activists. Pinkaew Laungaramsri is undertaking a research project that “focuses on the making of the Shan nationalism as a subversive identification

⁷⁵ “รัฐบาลพม่าใจแคบ รัฐบาลไทยและคนไทยใจกว้าง”: Shop-keeper in Chiang Mai, February 2003

⁷⁶ Chareonmuang, *Thai-Pamar-Laos-Jeen: Seeliam Sedikit Seeliam Wattanatam = Thailand-Burma-Laos-China: Economic Quadrangle, Cultural Quadrangle*: 180

⁷⁷ "Karen Refugees Fear Repatriation May Lead to Persecution," *The Nation* 1995

against the Burmese oppression/hegemonic regime and its gender ambivalence”.⁷⁸

She is an academic at Chiang Mai University whose research into these issues integrates a perspective on “subaltern Shan nationalist identity”. This identity is marked by its relational opposition to the Burmese.

With the lyrics of Ad Carabao and the more theoretical support of academics like Pinkaew, the Shan have many sympathisers in Thailand. Shan opposition to the Burmese government makes them popular amongst many different groups in Thailand. The widespread poverty, brutality and corruption of the Burmese government cannot be excused and in Thai academic and activist interpretations the Shan are celebrated because they oppose the Burmese. Thai academics and activists are generally united in their opposition to the Burmese government and find inspiration and comfort in the struggle of the Shan.

The way that the Shan are described as opposing both Burmese dictatorship and Bangkok modernity is an example of the nuance of Thai interpretations. On the one hand, Thai academics and activists use the Shan to oppose what they see as one of Asia’s most despotic governments. This does not contradict or compromise the use of the Shan to oppose the hegemony and destruction emanating from Bangkok. The Shan are effective because, as a peripheral and often ignored group,

⁷⁸ Pinkaew Laungaramsri, *Women, Nation, and the Ambivalence of Subversive Identification among the Shan Along the Thai-Burmese Borders* [Internet] (Southeast Asia Collaborative Research Network, 2002 [cited 22 July 2003]); available from www.yale.edu/seacrn/groups/chiangmai_group.htm.

they can oppose two states. The Shan are a very useful example of the “local” in contrast to both the Burmese and Thai states. The enemy of the “local” is the nation-state, its hegemony and demarcation.

Chapter 3: The Thai-Shan-Burma Border

Borders

Studies of borders have become an important part of Thailand's activist and research output. There is interest in many "border" topics including border trade and border security.¹ When Thai researchers and thinkers ponder the implications of borders, they focus on areas that are traditionally peripheral to Bangkok's interests and power. The border has become a focus for issues of political and economic instability, access to resources and markets, and human movement.

With so many important issues, it is unsurprising that the Thai-Burma border region has emerged as a particular research and activist preoccupation. Currently, Burma is emerging as a focus for Thailand's *official* foreign and economic policy² and for its *alternative* social and environmental activism. These are *different* engagements with Burma and have both prompted significant Thai research and commentary. The management of border issues has excited Thai academics and activists because at the border the power of Bangkok and the nation-state often seems most tenuous. It is also at the border that Thailand's academics and

¹ Parida Ratanapart, "Panhar Karm Promdaen Laew Sapa Wa Rai Promdaen: Lok Tee Plien Bai Reu Mum Mong Tee Plien Bai? = Translation Problem and Getting across Border: Has the World Changed or Just our Perspective?," *Sangkomsart = Sociology* 15, no. 1 (2002); Ongarj Sukumasawan, *Garnka Chai Daen Thai-Jeen Ton Tai: Goraneesueksa Ampoe Mae Sai Laew Chiang Saen, Changwat Chiang Rai = Border Trade between Thailand and Southern China: A Study of Mae Sai and Chiang Saen Districts, Chiang Rai Province* (Chiang Mai: Graduate School, Chiang Mai University, 2003)

² For insights into the ways that official Thai thinking about Burma and the Burmese has been constructed see: Anonymous, "Kid Mai Tam Mai Gae Panhar Pamar = New Thinking, New Doing to Solve the Burmese Problem," *Matichon*, 25 July 2003; The Editors, "Thai Len Pamar = Thai Play the Burmese," *Thai Post*, 29 July 2003

activists – buoyed by rhetoric of democracy, human rights and environmental benevolence – rub against one of Asia’s most intractably poor and totalitarian states.

Almost all Thai engagements with the Tai and the Shan must contend with national borders.³ These borders divide land and people, along mountain ridges and down creeks and rivers. The border between Thailand and Burma runs for approximately 2000 kilometres through mountainous terrain. It is a problematic border because of its length and the trans-national populations of “border peoples”. The Mon, Karen, Shan, Lisu, Akha and others all have significant populations in both Thai and Burmese border zones. The border’s partitioning of geography and society is, however, never complete. As the Tai studies project shows, there is always connection, overlap and common ground - at least in the mind if not on any map.

Taking up the issues of connection and division, this chapter describes Thai interpretations of the Thai-Burma border.⁴ Particular emphasis is given to interpretations of the border in areas inhabited by Shan groups. These areas, along the southern edge of Burma’s Shan State, are adjacent to Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces in Northern Thailand. It is within this specific

³ In Thai, the most common expressions for the idea of a “border” are “ชายแดน” and “พรมแดน”

⁴ Bertil Lintner has described what he calls the “Shan-Thai border”. This is useful because it brings ethnicity into a context where nationality sometimes becomes dominant and confusing: Bertil Lintner, “The Shans and the Shan States of Burma,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 5, no. 4 (1984): 433

geographic, ecological and social context that the development of Thai border interpretations of the Tai and the Shan are examined. To further understanding of Thai interpretations of the Shan and this contested Southeast Asian border zone, this chapter sets out to describe Thai studies of *the* border. This involves an examination of some of the concepts and formulations that dominate Thai thinking about the border.

This discussion leads into an analysis of how some Thai interpretations attempt to subvert the concept of *the* border. The creation of Thai interpretations that are “cross-border” and “trans-national” is analysed. It is argued that Thai academics and activists have attempted to create and maintain a discourse of “anti-border”. This “anti-border” subverts the concept of a national boundary by emphasising pre-national ethnic and ecological relationships. For Thai academics and activists the Shan are a convenient and useful example of the “anti-border”. They are used to re-assert a primordial vision of the area where Thailand and Burma meet.

These border interpretations are selectively applied in the specific contexts favoured by the Tai studies project with its affinity for peripheral areas. It is argued that using the Shan as part of the “anti-border” discourse is an important part of the Thai understanding of the Shan because it legitimises the broader understandings of similarity, community and authenticity. At the Thai-Burma border this subversive discourse encompasses the Shan within the T(h)ai cultural and political realm.

The Border: State Control and its Difficulties

To understand this Thai interpretative challenge, it is necessary to define the border from a Thai perspective. Thai academics and activists tend to describe the Thai-Burma border based on the way that nation-states control and demarcate their territory. The border is allied with national projects like militarism, taxation and central regulation. The border facilitates the exercise of control over the national peripheries by the Thai government based in Bangkok. Many Thai academics see the border, and border problems, as a way for Bangkok hegemony to justify its expansion and control.

Both the Thai and the Burmese maintain demarcations – which they call borders – to defend or control perceived spheres of influence.⁵ In general, borders are a key way that nation-states delineate themselves and assert their control. This is part of a process that has been called “territorialisation”.⁶ Such territorialisation affects people and their thinking about place and space. According to Siripon’s study of territorialisation and the Thai-Burma border,

⁵ Studies of borders have, over recent decades, maintained the interest of people in many countries. A relevant regional study of borders and their problems was written by Klaus Fleischmann. It narrates the problems that occur when religion, language, culture, poverty and resource inequality are examined in the geo-political context of a regional border conflict. It focuses on Arakan in Western Burma and the conflicts which have dominated the relationship between Burma and Bangladesh: Klaus Fleischmann, *Arakan: Konfliktregion Zwischen Birma Und Bangladesh = Arakan: The Conflict Region between Burma and Bangladesh* (Hamburg: Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde, 1981): 24-25

⁶ Two western academics who have influenced Thai thinking about these issues summarised territorialisation as being “about excluding or including people within particular geographic boundaries, and about controlling what people do and their access to natural resources within those boundaries”: Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Lee Peluso, “Territorialization and State Power in Thailand,” *Theory and Society* 24, no. 3 (1995): 388

*the border means a line between nations/countries or between two localities in geography. The role of the border is to demarcate the area of one people to one zone, by ordering and controlling. The border is thus a line that demonstrates ownership.*⁷

Such claims to land and resources use the border to regulate social and ecological functions. Border demarcation is a complicated and imperfect process.

Along the Thai-Burma border, government control – *and* lack of control – is highlighted by the trade in drugs.⁸ This trans-border, illicit and highly disruptive business has stimulated Thai government attempts to “seal” the Thai-Burma border.⁹ These periodic efforts to stifle cross-border interactions generally evaporate after specific incidents of heightened tension are resolved.¹⁰ The flow of drugs into Thailand is never completely blocked. A Thai social commentator notes that,

the large quantity of drugs that come from production facilities in Burma create problems in many areas. Most critically, there is a consequence for the management of border communities’ border trade. This is because a huge amount of money is taken by beneficiary groups in direct and indirect

⁷ “พรมแดน หมายถึงเส้นที่ขีดกั้นระหว่างชาติ/ประเทศ หรือระหว่างท้องถิ่นกับอีกท้องถิ่นในเชิงภูมิศาสตร์ หน้าที่ของพรมแดนคือการกำหนดขอบเขตของผู้คนในกรอบพื้นที่หนึ่ง โดยการจัดระเบียบและควบคุม ซึ่งพรมแดนจึงเป็นเส้นที่แสดงความเป็นเจ้าของ”: Siripon Sombunburana, "Chan Mong Mai Hen Promdaen: Chumchon Kon Thai Sen Promdaen Thai-Pamar = I Cannot See the Border: A Thai Community on the Thai-Burma Borderline," in *Chumchon Chai Daen = Border Communities* (Sirintorn Centre for Anthropology, 2003): 2

⁸ An excellent introduction to the politics of drugs in this region is: Ronald D. Renard, *The Burmese Connection : Illegal Drugs and the Making of the Golden Triangle* (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1996)

⁹ The Thai Army has promised to “seal the border” on numerous occasions: Bertil Lintner, "Khun Sa, Drugs and the Chinese Connection," *Far East Economic Review*, October 19, 1995; Wassana Nanuam, "Smugglers Could Turn to Aircraft," *Bangkok Post*, March 7, 2003

¹⁰ For example in 1995 “the governor (of Chiang Rai province) decided to seal the whole border after Burmese troops shot and killed a fleeing Thai local who crossed the Sai River into Tachilek”: *emphasis added*, Anonymous, "Thailand Opens Border to Burma," *The Nation*, June 30, 1995

*ways. These include businessmen, politicians, government officials and influential locals, particularly sub-district and village chiefs. The benefits they receive continue to make it difficult to implement government programs in border areas.*¹¹

In a convoluted way, this points to the problematic nature of the Thai-Burma border. The Thai government, from Bangkok, often fails to convince local people that Thailand's "national interests" are *their* interests. Notwithstanding the complicity of some Thai in the border drug trade, these illegal activities also justify the Thai presence at the border. In academic and activist interpretations, Thai official corruption and Bangkok hegemony are targeted.

In a similar way, illegal immigrants are a crucial part of the way that Thai academics and activists frame Thai power at the border. Pisan Pongsawatdee,

*found that the biggest group of illegal trans-national workers is the group that we call "Burmese workers". This term is appropriate, without specifying tribe or group, for all who enter from the Burmese side.*¹²

This category of "Burmese workers" refers in a broad sense to everyone from the other side of the border. Illegally working in Thailand, they generally fill the

¹¹ "ปริมาณชายข้ามแดนจำนวนมากถูกส่งมาจากแหล่งผลิตในพม่า ก่อให้เกิดปัญหาในหลายประการ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งมีผลกระทบต่อการจัดระเบียบชุมชนในพื้นที่ชายแดนและการจัดระเบียบการค้าชายแดน ทั้งนี้เพราะเงินจำนวนมหาศาลก่อให้เกิดกลุ่มผลประโยชน์ขึ้น ทั้งทางตรงและทางอ้อม ซึ่งประกอบไปด้วยตัวนายทุน นักการเมือง เจ้าหน้าที่ของรัฐ และผู้มีอิทธิพลในท้องถิ่น โดยเฉพาะกำนัน ผู้ใหญ่บ้าน ผลประโยชน์ดังกล่าวก่อให้เกิดข้อขัดข้องในการปฏิบัติงานในพื้นที่ชายแดนมาโดยตลอด": Amporn Jirattigon, ed., *Thai Gab Pamar: Ko Kuan Tam Laew Mai Kuan Tam = Thailand and Burma: What to Do and Not to Do* (Bangkok: 5 Area Studies Project, 2001): 115

¹² "ผมพบว่าแรงงานข้ามชาติที่ลักลอบเข้าเมืองอย่างผิดกฎหมายกลุ่มใหญ่ที่สุดคือกลุ่มที่เรียกว่าแรงงานสัญชาติพม่า ซึ่งเป็นคำเหมาะรวมเอาแรงงานที่ลักลอบเข้ามาจากฝั่งพม่าทั้งหมดโดยไม่แยกเป็นเผ่าเป็นกลุ่ม" Pisan Pongsawatdee, "Garnsueksa Reong Meoang Chaidoen Boriwaen Mae Sod Laew Mae Sai: Kosanged Bang Pragarn (Tarng Trisadee) Wa Duay Setasart Laew Watanamatam = A Study of the Mae Sod and Mae Sai Border Towns: Observations of a Theoretical Nature Taking into Account Economics and Culture," in *Chumchon Chaidoen = Border Communities* (Siritorn Centre for Anthropology: 2003): 17

ranks of the least remunerated parts of the economy. Pisan's sympathetic account of these people and their life at the border is a criticism of Bangkok and central power. He sees "the problem of the border as something new": an imposition.¹³ The situation of migrant workers was further illuminated by a worker at a market in Chiang Mai. She said, "Before lots of Shan came here from Burma, everyday...but now [in February 2003] they do not come. The police do not allow it because we have a war on drugs".¹⁴ In her words, that meant that "at the moment the market is not selling well because the Shan do not come".¹⁵

These two examples – drugs and illegal labour - indicate that the border between Thailand and Burma is a point for state control and also for challenges to state regulation. The border is crossed and does not stop trade or traffic. To emphasise this point, another author notes that,

*today the trading connection between Thailand and Myanmar is very strong. Ever since Myanmar opened the border at Tachilek on the Chiang Rai-Chiang Tung road, apart from its role to trade in goods, it is a road which takes girls from Myanmar to stock the brothels of Chiang Mai.*¹⁶

¹³ "มองปัญหาชายแดนในฐานะที่เป็นสิ่งใหม่": Ibid: 5

¹⁴ "เมื่อก่อนไทใหญ่ที่มาจากพม่ามาเยอะ พวกเขามาทุกวัน...แต่ช่วงนี้ (กุมภาพันธ์ปี ๒๕๔๖) ตำรวจไม่อนุญาตให้มาเพราะว่าเรามีสงครามยาเสพติด": Worker at a Market, Chiang Mai, February 2003

¹⁵ "ช่วงนี้ตลาดขายไม่ดีเพราะไทใหญ่ไม่มา": Ibid

¹⁶ "วันนี้การติดต่อไปมาค้าขายระหว่างไทยกับพม่าก็ไปอย่างคึกคัก นับตั้งแต่พม่าเปิดด่านชายแดนที่ทำให้เหลือ ถนนสายเชียงราย - เชียงตุง นอกจากจะเป็นเส้นทางขนส่งสินค้าต่าง ๆ แล้ว ยังเป็นถนนสายกามโลกีย์ที่พาเอาหญิงสาวชาวพม่า ทะลักเข้ามาสู่ช่องโศกใหม่ที่เชียงใหม่": Waitun Porhamawijit, "Sao Chiang Tung Aids Wan Nee Mai Mee Sanchart Laew Prom Daen = Chiang Tung Girls: Aids Today Has No Nationality or Borders," in *Siang Priwok Jark Chartpan = Cry from Ethnicity* (Chiang Mai: Centre for Ethnicity and Development, Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University, 1998): 96

The connection and division between the economies and peoples of Burma and Thailand is facilitated, in Thai interpretations, by the border. This border is an intervention of nation-states that is imposed on local geography and local people. At the border the state is attempting to exercise control. The sometimes tenuous and sporadic nature of that control has encouraged Thai interpretations to “negotiate” the border. For Thai academics and activists the border has become a site for research and activism.

Thai Border Studies

Perhaps the most famous example of Thai academic engagement with borders and geographic demarcation is Thongchai Winichakul’s regularly cited study, *Siam Mapped*. Described as an “intriguing book”,¹⁷ it argues that there is a geographic logic to Thailand’s history: that modern spatial knowledge was used to create a geo-body. This knowledge emphasised demarcation, exclusion, and the bounded geo-body of the nation. According to Thongchai, in the triumph of this new logic, the “ultimate loser was the indigenous knowledge of political space. Modern geography displaced it, and the regime of mapping became hegemonic”.¹⁸ The obliteration of the pre-national geography which was flexible and emphasised the *control of people over the control of land*, led to Thongchai’s attempted reclamation of the older visions of unbounded geographic entities.

¹⁷ Jefferson Fox, "Siam Mapped and Mapping in Cambodia: Boundaries, Sovereignty, and Indigenous Conceptions of Space," *Society and Natural Resources* 15 (2002): 67

¹⁸ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994): 129

Thongchai's broader examination of the "fetishism of nationhood in modern times" has made *Siam Mapped* required reading in University courses worldwide.¹⁹ Its argument is regularly cited and critiqued in English and other languages. Pinkaew Laungaramsri describes *Siam Mapped*, from the perspective of Thai social scientists, as "an historical work which has influenced how we see place, borders, and the nation".²⁰ Thongchai's study is an important example of Thai academic interest in borders, demarcation and the desire to move away from a nation-state focus.

That desire is present in other Thai studies of borders. For example, border issues recently provoked the journal *Sociology*, which is produced by Chiang Mai University's Faculty of Social Science, to publish a large collection of mostly Thai writings concerning the issue of "trans-borders". Writing about the "problems", "theories", and "constructions" of "borders" it focuses on border issues from a Thai perspective. Pinkaew Laungaramsri introduces the edition as challenging the idea that borders delineate cultural and social identity. She wants to undermine

¹⁹ Thongchai's study of the geo-body is required reading in University courses in Thailand, India, Australia, the United States, Canada, and many other countries. For some examples of how it is used in various countries and contexts see: Week 5, "Cadastral Politics" in *Frontiers - Anthropology 552*, taught by Professor David McDermott Hughes, Rutgers University, Spring 2003, anthro.rutgers.edu/courses/552hughes2002.html; and also HSTAS 463 *Southeast Asia: 1800 to the Present*, taught by L. Sears, University of Washington, Winter 2000, depts.washington.edu/cli/undergrad/course_desc/99+courses/hstas.html

²⁰ "งานศึกษาทางประวัติศาสตร์ที่มีอิทธิพลต่อการมองเรื่องพื้นที่ พรมแดน และความเป็นชาติ": Pinkaew Laungaramsri, "Karm Promdaen Gab Kam Tarm Reoang Atalak Wattanatam Peun Tee Laew Kwarm Pehn Chart = Crossing Borders and Questioning Identity, Culture, Place and Nation," *Sangkomsart = Sociology* 15, no. 1 (2002): 6

“the belief that the similarity of people in a society (or a nation) and their difference with people from another society (or nation) is determined by their place...inside and outside the borderline”.²¹

For Parida Ratanapart's study of trans-border issues, “‘borders’ should mean the borders of nation-states and the borders of culture”.²² She goes on to comment that,

*Over the past 10 years, I have observed a number of sociological studies examining border-ness become characterised by their increasing specificity and rigidity. The research examining movements of people, in particular, interprets trans-“border” as something novel: as something which was not present in the past.*²³

For Parida, understanding the border requires asking and answering questions without that rigidity of thinking. In this way, trans-border ideas can be historicised. Parida wants to know, “Where does the border come from? How was it made and how can it be made to disappear?”²⁴

Even though Parida rejects some of the simplistic analysis that has recently emerged in Thai studies of the border; she remains defiantly critical of borders.

²¹ “เชื่อกันว่า ความเหมือนของคนในสังคม (หรือในชาติ) และความต่างของคนต่างสังคม (หรือต่างชาติ) ถูกกำหนดตำแหน่งแห่งที่...ภายในและภายนอกเส้นพรมแดน”: Ibid: 2

²² “พรมแดน’ ที่มักจะ...คือ พรมแดนของรัฐชาติและพรมแดนทางวัฒนธรรม”: Parida Ratanapart, "Panhar Karm Promdaen Laew Sapawarai Prom Daen: Lok Tee Plien Bai Reu Mum Mong Kong Nakwishargarn Tee Plien Bai? = The Problem of Crossing and Getting across the Border: Has the World Changed or just Our Perspective?," Ibid: 19

²³ “แต่ในช่วง 10 ปีที่ผ่านมา ผู้เขียน สังเกตเห็นว่ามีการศึกษาทางสังคมศาสตร์จำนวนหนึ่งที่มีองค์ความเป็นพรมแดน ในลักษณะที่เฉพาะเจาะจงและตายตัว มากขึ้นเรื่อย ๆ โดยเฉพาะงานที่พิจารณาปรากฏการณ์เกี่ยวกับการเคลื่อนย้ายของผู้คนและความคิด ข้าม “พรมแดน” ว่าเป็นเรื่องที่แปลกใหม่ ไม่ใช่สิ่งที่เกิดขึ้นอย่างคายนั่น ในอดีต”: Ibid

²⁴ “พรมแดนเหล่านั้นมาจากไหน ถูกทำให้เกิดขึ้นและถูกทำให้หายไปได้อย่างไร”: Ibid: 42

She wants to examine the origins of borders and the ways they are constructed and maintained. Her purpose is to eradicate the border, to make it go away. The questions that Parida proposes demonstrate the discontent among Thai academics and activists with the machinery and philosophy of borders. The Thai interest in borders is an attempt to orientate away from the homogenising, hegemonic and centralising nature of the border. In Thai interpretations, the Shan serve a useful purpose and are used to challenge the hegemony and acceptance of nation-state borders.

The Discursive “Anti-Border”: An Example from the Shan

We are born into a world riven by factions.

*If we want to live together, we have to
get rid of these factions.²⁵*

Eliminating national demarcation is an important part of the Tai studies project’s engagement with the Shan.²⁶ The power of the nation-state to demarcate and regulate a line of control is subverted in Thai interpretations of the Thai-Shan border. The Thai interpretations seek to replace the idea of a national border with an authentic, ethnic unity between the Tai. While the border facilitates control and

²⁵ “เราเกิดมาบนโลกที่ถูกแบ่งแยกเป็นฝักเป็นฝ่าย ถ้าเราต้องการมีชีวิตอยู่ร่วมกัน ฝักฝ่ายเหล่านี้จะต้องหมดไป”: Witun Panyagul, ed., *Tamnan Pracharchon = People's Chronicle* (Bangkok: The Committee of Rural Development NGOs, 1992): 17

²⁶ This type of thinking is not unique to people in Thailand. For example, Su Yongge argues that borders are the outcome of what he calls “narrow nationalism”. He wants to “challenge the frontiers of nation states”: Su Yongge, “Ecology without Borders,” in *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social & Cultural Change in the Border Regions*, ed. Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton, and Kuah Khun Eng (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000): 68 and 51

exclusion, Thai academics and activists selectively emphasise and de-emphasise trans-border and trans-national linkages. Emerging from Thai interpretations, this is a discursive “anti-border”.

To begin the subversion of the border, a pre-colonial vision of geography is established. According to Sompong “in the valleys between the mountains...the Shan built their village communities over 2000 years ago”.²⁷ The assertion, made by Teeraparp and others, is that “at the border between the Shan State and Lanna Thai, there was no clear division in the past”.²⁸ The division occurred when Thailand was forced – by external pressure – to maintain a border. As chronicled in Nakorn Punnarong’s historical account of *Problems on the Thailand-Burma Border* (ปัญหาชายแดนไทย - พม่า), Thailand lost parts of its territory to the colonial powers during the period of British and French colonisation of Burma and Indochina.²⁹ Further British ambitions necessitated a border between the Shan State and Thailand. This colonially imposed border is inauthentic. As an “unnatural” boundary, it divides the “similar” populations of Shan and other groups in an arbitrary and nationalistic fashion.

²⁷ “ที่ราบลุ่มระหว่างหุบเขามี...ชาวไทยอยู่มานานกว่าสองพันปีพวกเขาได้สร้างชุมชนหมู่บ้าน”: Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 434

²⁸ “เนื่องจากพรมแดนที่แบ่งแคว้นล้านนาไทย ไม่มีเขตแดนที่แน่ชัดในอดีตกาล”: Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanaai = The Tai in Southeast Asia*: 112. Note that “Lanna Thai” (ล้านนาไทย) is one way of referring to Northern Thailand.

²⁹ For a full description of the territories lost from a historical perspective see: Punnarong, *Panhar Chaidaien Thai-Pama = Problems on the Thai-Burma Border*

To subvert the border, Thai academics and activists use understandings from the Tai studies project to redefine the significance of the border. They base their arguments on interpretations like “Border Communities” (ชุมชนชายแดน).³⁰ Rather than being a community that is under state control, the “border” community’s legitimacy exists separate from the state and its regulations. There are variations on this idea like “ชุมชนข้ามพรมแดน” which Siripon translates into English as “Trans-national community”.³¹ A more literal and accurate translation is actually “cross-border community” or perhaps “trans-frontier community”. These communities cross the national boundary and are not beholden to the nation-state demarcation of geographies.

A more specific way that the Thai develop their ideas about communities *without* borders is through the concept of “border towns (เมืองชายแดน)”.³² These towns, like Mae Sai, in Chiang Rai province, and Mae Sod, in Tak province, are part of the

³⁰ Pongsawatdee, "Garnsueksa Reong Meoang Chaidae Boriwaen Mae Sod Laew Mae Sai: Kosanged Bang Pragarn (Tarnng Trisadee) Wa Duay Setasart Laew Watanamatam = A Study of the Mae Sod and Mae Sai Border Towns: Observations of a Theoretical Nature taking into account Economics and Culture"

³¹ Sombunburana, "Chan Mong Mai Hen Promdaen: Chumchon Kon Thai Sen Promdaen Thai-Pamar = I Cannot See the Border: A Thai Community on the Thai-Burma Borderline": 2 Note that in Thai academic articles and books, English language terms are often written in brackets after the Thai translation. Western theorisations are often inserted into Thai arguments in this way

³² "Nakrian nok", "Wa Duay Kwarm Mankong Kong Pom Tee Chai Daen (?) = What About My Security at the Border?," *Nation Suksabda = Nation Weekly*, no. 574 (2003); Pongsawatdee, "Garnsueksa Reong Meoang Chaidae Boriwaen Mae Sod Laew Mae Sai: Kosanged Bang Pragarn (Tarnng Trisadee) Wa Duay Setasart Laew Watanamatam = A Study of the Mae Sod and Mae Sai Border Towns: Observations of a Theoretical Nature Taking into Account Economics and Culture": 17

Thai subversion of the Thai-Burma border. Mae Sai has been called a Shan cross-border community. Pisan describes that:

*the town of Mae Sai is next to the border and cross-border bridge...Mae Sai is characterised by the cultural affinity between the people on both sides of the river...this is because the Shan and the Northern Thai speak the same language and “look similar” (for the ears and eyes of somebody from Bangkok, like myself).*³³

For Pisan this is a border community, *united by culture, not by nationality*. The culture of the border is, for Pisan, an example that the border can be subverted by local conditions and people. The Shan culture in Burma and Thailand blurs the border: the Shan have become part of the “anti-border”.

This unification of border culture was described in more specific terms by Tanet Charoenmuang. He uses similar examples to justify what he calls “united border culture”. This is not surprising because those who argue against the border often argue in favour of some other type of unity.³⁴ Tanet has developed a conceptualisation of:

³³ “ตัวเมืองแม่สาขานั้นอยู่ติดกับชายแดน สะพานข้ามพรมแดน...แม่สาขานั้นมีลักษณะของความผูกพันในเชิงวัฒนธรรมระหว่างคนสองฝั่งนี้...ทั้งนี้เพราะไทยใหญ่กับไทยเมืองที่แม่สาขานั้นพูดภาษาเดียวกัน และ ‘หน้าตาคล้ายกัน’ (จากหูและตาของคนกรุงเทพฯ อย่างผม)”: Pongsawatdee, "Garnsueksa Reong Meoang Chaidae Boriwaen Mae Sod Laew Mae Sai: Kosanged Bang Pragarn (Tarnng Trisadee) Wa Duay Setasart Laew Watanamatam = A Study of the Mae Sod and Mae Sai Border Towns: Observations of a Theoretical Nature Taking into Account Economics and Culture": 21.

³⁴ As an example, Grant Evans' account of indistinct boundaries between cultures also suggests that at borders national cultures blur together. He defines a culture area of Hinduized states populated by Theravada Buddhists. This expands the area of interest from the Tai to include Cambodia and Burma and, challenges, as he points out, the current conception of Thai/Tai Studies: Grant Evans, *Laos: Culture and Society* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1999): 15

*border culture which means the local culture that is in the area of a border of some state. Such border culture is really just one kind of local culture.*³⁵

By categorising this culture as part of a process of “localisation”, Tanet is coming at the problem of blurring borders from the perspective of “local border culture”.

Tanet’s arguments about border culture become more emphatic when lamenting its potential replacement with other cultures, like national culture and global culture.³⁶

The subversion of the border is, in Tanet’s case, in direct opposition to the nationalisation and internationalisation of what he sees as “local”.

The Anti-Border as a Selective Discourse:

Division and Ethnicity

What the Thai discourse of the anti-border generally ignores is that in many Shan settlements, the border is not an abstract geo-political imposition. It is daily reality that soldiers, checkpoints and customs officers “control” a line of demarcation.

For example, from the perspective of Chiang Mai’s border district of Wiang Haeng,

Fa Wiang In Temple was once the centre for religious ceremonies for the Shan on both sides. The village of Piang Luang and the villages in the border districts of the Shan State were then divided into two separate parts...after the Burmese soldiers set up base in the other half of the

³⁵ “วัฒนธรรมชายแดน หมายถึงวัฒนธรรมแบบท้องถิ่นที่ในบริเวณชายแดนของรัฐบางรัฐ ในความเป็นจริงวัฒนธรรมชายแดนก็คือวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นอย่างหนึ่ง”: Chareonmuang, *Thai-Pamar-Laos-Jeen: Seeliam Sedikit Seeliam Wattanatam = Thailand-Burma-Laos-China: Economic Quadrangle, Cultural Quadrangle: 227*

³⁶ Ibid: 235

*Temple the villagers did not dare to make merit because they were scared of the Burmese soldiers.*³⁷

That Temple is now completely divided – with a Thai Army encampment on one side and a Burmese Army base on the other. The line of demarcation is heavily fortified and the situation at Piang Luang has been marked by protracted, low-level conflict. Such conflict influences all activity throughout the border region and has an impact on research as well.³⁸ In recent years, the Shan on the Thai side of the border have been the beneficiaries of Thailand's relative security and prosperity. On the Burmese side, the Shan and other non-Burmese groups have suffered. What this suggests is that the Shan use the border – for their welfare and security – and have made no attempt to subvert it.

As another example of the selectivity of Thai interpretations of the “anti-border”, it is worth highlighting a non-government organisation called “Friends without Borders” (เพื่อนไร้พรมแดน). It tries to create a better and more secure life for Burmese nationals who find themselves in Thailand.³⁹ Based in Chiang Mai the

³⁷ “วัดฟ้าเวียงอินทร์ ซึ่งเคยเป็นศูนย์กลางประกอบพิธีกรรมทางศาสนาของชาวไทยอยู่ทั้งสองฝั่ง คือหมู่บ้านเปียงหลวงและหมู่บ้านในเขตชายแดน รัฐบาลถูกแบ่งออกเป็นสองส่วน...หลังจากทหารพม่าเข้ามาประจำการพื้นที่ครึ่งหนึ่งของวัด ชาวบ้านต่างไม่กล้ามาทำบุญที่วัดเพราะกลัวทหารพม่าจะทำอันตราย”: Santiwutamet, "Grabuangarn Sarng Atalak Tarng Chartpan Kong Chao Tai Yai Chaidae Thai-Pama: Goraneesueksa Reoang Mubarn Piang Luang, Ampoe Wiang Heang, Jangwat Chiang Mai = Shan Ethnic Identity Construction at the Thai-Burma Border: A Study of Piang Luang Village, Wiang Haeng District, Chiang Mai Province": 227

³⁸ The Introduction to Hayashi Yukio and Aroonrut Wichienkeeo, *Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Making of Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwestern China* (Bangkok: Amarin, 2002): vii demonstrates that even some researchers are wary of travelling to the border.

³⁹ Anonymous, "Peuan Rai Promdaen = Friends without Borders," in *Tamniab Onggorn Pattana Ekachon 2546 = 2003 Directory of Non-Governmental Organisations*, ed. Anusorn Chaipan (Bangkok: Committee for the Promotion of Development Work, 2003); Friends without Borders, *Peun Rai Promdaen* (2003 [cited 5 September 2003]); available from http://www.friends-withoutborders.org/html/history_thai.htm.

organisation assists people in the border areas. Under the auspices of this organisation, a book was recently published called *Taking Shelter Under Trees*.⁴⁰ Its description of the difficulties faced by Shan and other refugees in the border districts of north-western Thailand contradicts the interpretative basis on which Thai academic and activists assert that the Thai-Burma border should be subverted. Indicative of its engagement with the problematic existence of the Shan, it quotes one Shan villager as saying,

*If we are pushed back by the Thai authorities, the farm owners will also lose. They won't be able to find other labourers. Thai labourers don't want to handle the chemicals and carry the heavy loads*⁴¹.

Unlike most of the literature reviewed in this thesis, *Taking Shelter Under Trees* makes a concerted attempt to incorporate ideas and perspectives from villagers and other disenfranchised people.⁴² The problems, aspirations and inconsistencies of Shan life are not generally glossed over. It highlights the comparative lack of engagement with *local contexts* and *local ideas* in many of the Thai interpretations of the border.

These examples demonstrate that the Thai attempt to subvert the border can only ever be selective. They also indicate that the problems of the Shan will not evaporate by subverting the border. The harsh economic and political realities of

⁴⁰ Duncan Gallasch and others, *Taking Shelter under Trees* (Chiang Mai: Friends Without Border, 2001)

⁴¹ Ibid: 64

⁴² In particular, the "Refugee Voices" on pp.60-64 indicate that the authors have tried to understand the perspective of villagers and refugees. The quotations serve a particular political purpose but are, nonetheless, useful for gaining a better understanding of specifically "local" perspectives.

the Shan State and, to a lesser degree, the border districts make it difficult to justify the particular way that the Thai subvert the border.

Their subversion relies on selectively making distinctions which are not based on the nation-state border. For example Wandee Santiwutamet claims that the:

*ethnicity of the Piang Luang Shan is an awareness intensively constructed. The Shan of Piang Luang have chosen their identifications including language, religion, dress...to differentiate themselves from other ethnicities.*⁴³

These “other ethnicities” (like the Burmese) are groups which cannot be satisfactorily excluded by current national boundaries. For that reason, Wandee’s interpretation emphasises cultural and ethnic identification and demarcation. To underline this point she describes that “their (Shan) identity has a relationship with the political situation between the Shan National Army and the Myanmar government”.⁴⁴ From Wandee’s perspective, the *nation-state boundary* should be subverted but the *ethnic boundary* needs to be maintained and reinforced.

This selective ethnic subversion of the anti-border further legitimises the suspicion that *nation-state* (รัฐชาติ) boundaries do not align with the boundaries of *nations* (ชาติ). What might seem like a semantic difference is crucial to how Thai writings

⁴³ “ความเป็นชาติพันธุ์ของชาวไทยหมู่บ้านเปียงหลวงเป็นสำนึกที่ถูกสร้างขึ้นอย่างต่อเนื่อง โดยชาวไทยหมู่บ้านเปียงหลวงเป็นผู้เลือกอัตลักษณ์ต่าง ๆ เช่น ภาษา ศาสนา การแต่งกาย...เพื่อแยกแยะให้เห็นความแตกต่างระหว่างกลุ่มตนกับกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์อื่นๆ”: Santiwutamet, "Grabuangarn Sarng Atalak Tarng Chartpan Kong Chao Tai Yai Chaidae Thai-Pama: Goraneesueksa Reoang Mubarn Piang Luang, Ampoe Wiang Heang, Jangwat Chiang Mai = Shan Ethnic Identity Construction at the Thai-Burma Border: A Study of Piang Luang Village, Wiang Haeng District, Chiang Mai Province": 244

⁴⁴ “อัตลักษณ์ดังกล่าวมีความสัมพันธ์กับสถานการณ์ทางการเมืองระหว่างกองกำลังภูชาดไทใหญ่กับรัฐบาลพม่า”: Ibid: 245

about the Thai-Burma border should be understood. The nation, encompassing the Tai or Thai people, does not, according to some people line up with the boundaries of Thailand's nation-state. The same can be said for the other nation-states and nations of the region. To emphasise this point Wandee asserts that,

*the important factors that have made us see a clear change in the Shan ethnic boundary are the two large political upheavals of (non conforming to) the Panglong Treaty in 1957 and the surrender of Khun Sa in 1996.*⁴⁵

The Shan ethnic boundary is thus deployed as a Tai border. Capitalising on the contiguity assumed of the Tai, its selective application of demarcation allows the Thai to claim a role with the Shan that they might not otherwise have. The Shan (Tai) ethnic boundary is used in place of the national border and facilitates the projection of Thai influence beyond the Thai nation-state.

The subversion of the nation-state border and the imposition of the ethnic border merely serves to replace one with the other. These Thai interpretations of the Thai-Burma border attempt to give more importance to the periphery of Thailand. Using the Shan as “anti-border” is a way of ensuring that the Tai are not excluded from Thailand by virtue of borders. Argued in terms of social and cultural characteristics, rather than historical or military happenstance, their interpretations are a shrewd way of disowning the border between Burma and Thailand. By virtue of this anti-border they can then *selectively* claim to interpret everything

⁴⁵ “ปัจจัยสำคัญที่ทำให้เส้นพรมแดนทางชาติพันธุ์ของชาวไทยใหญ่เกิดความเปลี่ยนแปลงอย่างเห็นได้ชัด คือ วิกฤตการณ์ทางการเมืองครั้งใหญ่สองครั้ง คือ การละเมิดสัญญาปางโหลงในปี 2500 และการวางอาวุธของขุนสำเภาในปี 2539”: Ibid

beyond it. In these interpretations the Shan village emerges as a site for continuing Thai research and activism.

Chapter 4:

The Shan Village and the Village Shan

Villages and Localities

Discontent with the direction of Thailand's development has stimulated interest in "localisation". Villages, rural communities and traditional patterns of subsistence and lifestyle are promoted and contrasted with globalisation, commoditisation and corporatisation.¹ The village and its people are generally portrayed as an alternative to dominant development and economic practices. The popularity of focussing on village life and culture demonstrates Thai desires for alternative future development.

Phrases that are commonly used to describe this alternative perspective are "village community" (ชุมชนหมู่บ้าน)² or "local community" (ชุมชนท้องถิ่น).³ I have noted that the idea of "community" is an important influence within the Tai studies

¹ Associate Professor Dr. Omra Pongsapanich, condensed the justification for writing about "localisation" when she noted that "there are studies of local culture and local history, that are not of the centre" (มีการศึกษาวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นและประวัติศาสตร์ท้องถิ่นที่ไม่ได้อยู่ที่ศูนย์กลางด้วย): Pongsapanich, *Kwarm Larklai Tang Wattanatam = Cultural Diversity*: 26. For an example of "localisation" in Thai academic thought in the English language see: Chusak Wittayapak, "Local Institutions in Common Property Resources : A Case Study of Community-Based Watershed Management in Northern Thailand," (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1994)

² Yos Santasombat, "Manusiayawitaya Thai Gab Ngarn Wijai Pak Sanarm," in *Kon Nai: Prasobgarn Pak Sanarm Kong Manusiaya Wittaya Thai = The Insider: Field Work Experience of Thai Anthropologists*, ed. Pritata Chelimpao-Goonantagul (Bangkok: The Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center, 2002): 108

³ Prisana Porahama and Montree Jantuang, *Chumchon Tongtin Gab Garn Jadgarn Kwarm Larklai Tang Cheewaparp = Local Communities and the Management of Biodiversity* (Chiang Mai: Kronggarn Pattana Lum Nam Pak Neua Doy Onggorn Chumchon = Development of Northern Watersheds by Community Organisations Project, 1998)

project. It is also important, more generally, for current Thai anthropological and development theory.⁴ In a recently published book on Thai fieldwork experiences, Professor Yos Santasombat describes “Thai anthropology as not merely the acquisition of theories and concepts from the West to use...in our home”.⁵ He goes on to explain that Thai academics have developed new theories for explaining what they encounter in the village. This is a process whereby “theories come from field research, for example thinking about ‘community rights’ and ‘local wisdom’”.⁶ These two important ideas have been widely discussed by Thai academics.⁷ That Yos attributes them to inspiration derived from the field is interesting for, as he goes on to explain, these theories are a means of “understanding and explaining social reality”.⁸ Yos argues that anthropological fieldwork is a way of “aligning with social reality”.⁹

⁴ For an important insight into Thai theorisations about “community” see: Witaya Wonggul, *Sang Sangkom Mai: Chomchontipatai, Dhammatipatai = Building a New Society: Communal Democracy, Dhammic Democracy* (Bangkok: Amarin, 1999). The introduction notes that “communal democracy is wisdom which has been refined by current Thai community leaders from all areas” (ชุมชนชาติไทย เป็นภูมิปัญญาที่กลั่นกรองมาจากผู้นำชุมชนไทยปัจจุบันทุกภาค).

⁵ “มานุษยวิทยาไทยมิได้เป็นเพียงการนำเอาทฤษฎีและแนวคิดของตะวันตกมาปรับใช้ใน...บ้านเราเท่านั้น”: Santasombat, "Manusiyawitaya Thai Gab Ngarn Wijai Pak Sanarm": 107

⁶ “การสร้างทฤษฎีจากงานวิจัยสนาม ดังเช่น แนวคิดเรื่อง ‘สิทธิชุมชน’ และ ‘ภูมิปัญญาท้องถิ่น’”: Ibid

⁷ For example: Pragasit Hongwiset, *Garnpattana Pumbanya Tongtin Nai Garn Jad Garn Tee Din Peua Garn Gaset Bon Puen Tee Sung: Goranee Sueksa Bahn Lo Yo Tambon Patung Ampoe Mae Chan Changwat Chiang Rai = The Development of Local Wisdom in Highland Agricultural Land Management: A Study of Lo Yo Village, Patung Sub-District, Mae Chan District, Chiang Rai Province* (Chiang Mai: Gradutae School, Chiang Mai University, 2002); Somjit Pornmatep, *Garn Chai Pumbanya Chao Bahn Kong Prachachon Chonabot: Rai Ngarn Garn Wijai = Using the Local Wisdom of People in Rural Areas: A Research Report* (Chiang Mai: Faculty of Anthropology and Sociology, Rajaphat Institute Chiang Mai, 2000)

⁸ “เพื่อใช้ทำความเข้าใจและอธิบายความเป็นจริงทางสังคม”: Santasombat, "Manusiyawitaya Thai Gab Ngarn Wijai Pak Sanarm," 108

⁹ “สอดคล้องกับความเป็นจริงทางสังคม”: Ibid: 110

What Yos ignores is that “social reality” is a problematic concept. Attempts to represent or reflect “social reality” are selective and highly subjective. It seems unwise to frame “thinking about ‘community rights’ and ‘local wisdom’” as a reflection of “social reality”. It is certainly possible that many anthropological subjects do not see “community rights” or “local wisdom” as representing *their* “social reality”. In general, Southeast Asia’s village-dwellers have unprecedented engagement with the market and display a marked willingness for new and non-communal activities. These are often not based in the “social reality” of “community rights” or “local wisdom”. There are many social realities, just as there are also many social myths. The construction of “social reality” is a necessarily selective process. That ideas like “community rights” and “local wisdom” have developed considerable cachet in Thailand is not disputed. However, it does not follow that theories “discovered” in villages necessarily reflect the “social reality” of villagers, individually or collectively.

A more useful way of looking at interpretations of the village and its “community” was introduced by Phillip Hirsch in his essay “What is *the* Thai Village?” Hirsch “considers the village not in terms of its essence but as a discursive category”.¹⁰ This is an alternative to the homogenising conception of *a* village “social reality”. He ponders the fact that “in looking for Thai identity in rural identity, and in

¹⁰ Phillip Hirsch, “What Is *the* Thai Village?,” in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand, 1939-1989*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Clayton: Monash Papers on Southeast ASia - No. 25, 1991): 323

looking for this in turn in the village, we often search for remnants”.¹¹ Hirsch’s formulation of a “discursive category” avoids searching for an essentialised vision of the village. Such a “discursive category” – imbued with contradictions, inconsistencies and discontinuities – is a challenge to the assertion that “social reality” exists in *the* village or elsewhere.

Hirsch’s formulation offers an opportunity to focus on the Shan village as something other than a “social reality”. The general lack of rigorous engagement with the substance of “local ideas” and “local conditions” is troubling. At best, Yos could insist that the village “social reality” he presents is a reflection of *his* personal social reality, social preconceptions and social myths. To probe Thai interpretations of the Tai village, this chapter explicitly focuses on how the Thai interpret the Shan village. Their interpretations are not assumed to constitute a “Shan village social reality” but are what has become *the discursive category of the Shan village*.

The Shan Village: A Discursive Category

When Thai academics and activists gaze on Shan societies their interest often settles on the Shan village (หมู่บ้านไทใหญ่). This village is widely accepted by many writers as the basic unit of study. Also called the “Shan community or village”

¹¹ Ibid: 337

(ชุมชนหรือหมู่บ้านไทใหญ่),¹² it conforms to the similarity, authenticity and community expected of Tai peoples and also offers a subversion of the Thai-Burma border.

For Thai critics of modernity, the Shan village is used as a site for developing their ideas about alternative Tai social formations.

Thai academics and activists require a certain type of village for their critique of modernity. In Thai interpretations, the Shan village offers an example of collective, harmonious and primordial life: a “Shan community society” (สังคมชุมชนไทใหญ่).¹³ Described in terms of self-sufficiency and environmental benevolence, a romantic and pristine image of Shan village history is presented.

*At first when the Shan came to the various places they survived by getting their food from the forest. When they became familiar with nearby communities they would go and work as wage labourers in their fields or paddy...receiving rice, seeds or...go and establish their own agriculture. They planted rice as a staple and planted other crops like soybeans, garlic, red onions, tomatoes and other vegetables to eat within their families. There was no trading because everybody planted and ate the same.*¹⁴

Yos Santasombat emphasises the village as a place of minimal ecological destruction or impact.

A small rice-producing peasant community, with customs and traditions emanating from dialectical relationships between rice and man within the

¹² Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanai = The Tai in Southeast Asia*: 114

¹³ Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 444

¹⁴ “ชาวไทใหญ่ที่เข้ามา ในระยะแรกนั้นดำรงชีพอยู่โดยอาศัยป่าเป็นแหล่งหาอาหาร เมื่อรู้จักชุมชนอื่นใกล้เคียงก็ไปรับจ้างทำไร่ทำนา...ค่าตอบแทนแรงงานอาจจะเป็นข้าวสาร เมล็ดพันธุ์และ...แม้ว่าการเกษตรของตนเอง โดยปลูกข้าวเป็นหลักและปลูกพืชผักต่างๆ เช่น ถั่วเหลือง กระเทียม หอมแดง มะเขือเทศและผักต่างๆ เพื่อเก็บไว้กินในแต่ละครอบครัว ไม่มีการซื้อขาย เพราะต่างก็ปลูกไว้กินเหมือนกันหมด”: *emphasis added*, Taamtee, *Ray Ngarn Garnsueksa Reoang Laisaik Tai Yai = Research Paper on Shan Tattooing*: 5

*ecological niche of the river valley...these peasant communities have been able to support themselves economically without very intricate production other than to clear the forest into rice fields.*¹⁵

What is striking is that within the genre of Thai writing about villages, these could be depictions of the history of almost any village in Thailand or Southeast Asia.¹⁶

It is not immediately recognisable as quintessentially Shan or Tai. It is, however, the beginning of the Thai interpretation of Shan “social reality” and a part of what this thesis calls the discursive category of the Shan village.

According to Sompong Witayasakpan, “Shan communities are communities where there are close interactions. There is mutual cooperation and generosity”.¹⁷

Sompong continues with this idyllic picture of the Shan village by emphasising abundance *and* subsistence. Apparently,

*a Shan village community is characterised by being a village of plenty. There is a subsistence economy. There is very little trade within the village...but there is always communication within the village as people are neighbours.*¹⁸

This local and harmonious social grouping seems to appeal to Sompong and his vision of Tai economics and priorities. The tranquil and contented character of

¹⁵ Santasombat, *Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identity in Daikong*: 158-159; Santasombat, *Lak Chang: Kansang Mai Khong Attalak Tai Nai Tai Khong = Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identities in Daikong*: 235-236

¹⁶ It is, in many ways, very similar to the type of description which was analysed and criticised in: Andrew Walker, "The 'Karen Consensus', Ethnic Politics and Resource-Use Legitimacy in Northern Thailand," *Asian Ethnicity* 2, no. 2 (2001)

¹⁷ “ชุมชนไทใหญ่เป็นชุมชนที่มีความผูกพันกันอย่างเหนียวแน่น มีการช่วยเหลือเกื้อกูลและเอื้อเฟื้อเผื่อแผ่ซึ่งกันและกัน”: Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 438

¹⁸ “สภาพของชุมชนหมู่บ้านไทใหญ่เป็นหมู่บ้านที่มีความสมบูรณ์ มีเศรษฐกิจแบบยังชีพ มีการค้าขายภายในหมู่บ้านน้อยมาก...หากมีการติดต่อกันระหว่างหมู่บ้านอยู่เสมอในรูปแบบของการเป็นเพื่อนบ้าน”: Ibid: 441

Shan life is reinforced when Sompong allows the Shan to interpret themselves. He notes that “the Shan seem themselves as a peace-loving people”.¹⁹ This perception of tranquillity is often described in terms of Shan village religious ceremonies and traditional beliefs. According to Teeraparp, “the cultural practices of the Shan identity emerge from their Buddhist activities”.²⁰

Based in tradition and harmony, this type of “localisation” is sometimes framed as a rejection of outside influence in favour of preserving village stability. Sompong relates that “the society of a Shan community is a very closed society”.²¹ Based on religious piety, geographic isolation and traditional social mores, this “closed society” is an implicit rejection of outsiders. The implication is that other people – outsiders – disrupt the peace of the Shan village. With its “original traditions” (ประเพณีดั้งเดิม), the “Shan village community” (ชุมชนหมู่บ้านไทใหญ่) is presented as a consistent and enduring (เป็นเวลส์ช้านาน) place.²² Outside influence is seemingly unwelcome.

Notwithstanding this picture of a tranquil and isolated village, in some interpretations the Shan village is described as having been changed by *outside* influences. Capitalism, colonialism and the state are oft-cited culprits. These

¹⁹ “ชาวไทใหญ่มองตนเองว่าเป็นผู้รักความสงบ”: Ibid: 443

²⁰ “วิถีวัฒนธรรมที่เป็นเอกลักษณ์ของชาวไทใหญ่ จึงแสดงออกที่กิจกรรมอันเกี่ยวข้องกับพุทธศาสนา”: Lohitagul, *Kon Tai Nai Usarkeanai = The Tai in Southeast Asia*: 112

²¹ “สังคมไทใหญ่เป็นสังคมค่อนข้างปิด”: Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 440

²² Ibid: 435

changes mean, for example, that “the villagers know how to use chemical fertilisers and other agricultural chemicals which have started to change their livelihoods”.²³ In this description of agricultural change, the changes to Shan livelihood come from external forces, not from the agency or aspirations of individuals or groups. Chatthip Nartsupha describes the economy of the village as only reluctantly engaging with the market when forced. For Chatthip, villagers “only trade when they need to get more to *have enough*”.²⁴ Chatthip also argues that Shan “community and society were independent...the state was not important for the maintenance of the community”.²⁵ What he sees as the Shan village is “traditional” and devoid of outside influence.

To further understand how Thai academics and activists understand the Shan it is worth looking at a specific example. This example shows how a complex and changing Shan community is interpreted to conform to the Tai studies project’s emphasis on similarity, authenticity and community. The example is an attempt by Thai activists and academics to reconcile the complexities of the Shan village.

²³ “ชาวบ้านรู้จักใช้ปุ๋ยเคมีและสารเคมีต่าง ๆ ในการเกษตร ทำให้รูปแบบการยังชีพเริ่มเปลี่ยนแปลงไป”: Taamtee, *Ray Ngarn*

Garnsueksa Reoang Laisaik Tai Yai = Research Paper on Shan Tatoeing: 5

²⁴ “ไปค้าขายเพียงเพื่อให้พอเพียงยิ่งขึ้น”: Chatthip Nartsupha writing in the introduction to Ranee Lerdleumsai, ed., *Kamrong Nai Cheewit Laew Pitigaam Chao Tai Neua: Tai Yai Nai Yunnan = Life's Entreaties and Tai Neua Ceremonies: Shan in Yunnan* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2001): 17

²⁵ “เป็นชุมชนและสังคมในตัวเอง...รัฐไม่สำคัญต่อการดำรงอยู่ของชุมชน”: *Ibid*: 16

Baan Mai Hmok Cham: A Shan Village

The community of Mai Hmok Cham Village

*is, by nature, a Tai community.*²⁶

Baan Mai Hmok Cham was the subject of a number of articles and essays in the late 1990s. It is perhaps the most thoroughly documented Shan village at the Thai-Burma border. Most of the studies of this village were produced as part of a wider project titled *Comparative Research on the Cultures and Societies of the Tai Speaking Groups in Northern Thailand, Shan State of Burma and Assam State, India* (การวิจัยเปรียบเทียบข้ามประเทศเรื่องวัฒนธรรมและสังคมของกลุ่มคนพูดภาษาไทยในภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย ราชอาณาจักรในประเศพม่าและรัฐอัสสัมในประเทศอินเดีย).²⁷ Coordinated by Shalardchai Ramitanondh, a Chiang Mai academic and activist, the project began in 1986 and ended in the mid-1990s. Taken as a whole, the articles and essays about Baan Mai Hmok Cham are a good example of Thai interpretations of the Shan and their villages along the Thai-Burma border. The specific nature of this research - which was supported by fieldwork - makes it a particularly useful example of Thai interpretations.

Ranoo Arntamet, one of the contributors to the project, places the village in a specific geographic context. She states that the geography of the Shan State and of

²⁶ “ชุมชนบ้านใหม่หมอกจ๋ามเป็นชุมชนไทโดยธรรมชาติ”: **emphasis added**, Nongnutch Chandrabhai and Ranoo Wichasin. "Sangkom Laew Wattanataam Tai Barn Mai Hmok Cham = The Tai Society and Culture of Mai Hmok Cham Village." In *Tai*, edited by Shalardchai Ramitanondh, Virada Somswasdi and Ranoo Wichasin, 285 - 332. Chiang Mai: The Toyota Foundation and the Women's Studies Centre, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University, 1998: 298

²⁷ A very useful introduction to this Project and to Tai studies more generally, was written by Shalardchai Ramitanondh. He discusses the challenges inherent in the implementation of the project and the project's core objectives in: Shalardchai Ramitanondh, "Botnam = Introduction," *Ibid*, ed. Shalardchai Ramitanondh, Virada Somswasdi, and Ranoo Wichasin: 1-20

Northern Thailand are similar (คล้ายคลึง).²⁸ Her description subverts the border in favour of the geographic and ethnic continuity of the anti-border. This geographic depiction puts the village in a familiar context for Thai readers and allows for the explication of other “similarities”. The village is manageable and not abstract: “the Tai society of Baan Mai Hmok Cham is a small-scale society which has approximately 2000 members”.²⁹ Ranoo’s assertion about mountains and valleys is superficial but leads into the explanation of broader associations and similarities between Northern Thailand and the Shan State.

More specifically, Baan Mai Hmok Cham is,

*the most northerly village in Mae Ai district. It connects to Chiang Tung province of the Shan State, in the Union of Myanmar.*³⁰

Importantly, the “village is on the Burmese border”.³¹ Like many border villages, it has a multi-ethnic population with Northern Thai, Shan, Tai Ngaen, Tai Lue and Tai Sam households.³² However, according to Ranoo Arntarmet, “Baan Mai

²⁸ Ranoo Arntarmet, "Prapeni Pittagam Chao Tai Yai Baan Mai Hmok Cham = Shan Ceremonies and Customs of Mai Hmok Cham Village," Ibid: 336

²⁹ “สังคมไทบ้านไหมหมอกจ๋ามเป็นสังคมขนาดเล็ก ที่มีจำนวนสมาชิกประมาณ 2000 คน”: Nongnutch Chandrabhai and Ranoo Wichasin, "Sangkom Laew Wattanataam Tai Barn Mai Hmok Cham = The Tai Society and Culture of Mai Hmok Cham Village," Ibid: 309

³⁰ “เป็นหมู่บ้านเหนือสุดของอำเภอแม่เมาะ มีอาณาเขตติดต่อกับแขวงเชียงตุง รัฐฉาน ประเทศสหภาพสังคมนิยมแห่งพม่า”: Ibid: 287

³¹ “หมู่บ้านนี้อยู่ติดชายแดนพม่า”: Ranoo Arntarmet, "Prapeni Pittagam Chao Tai Yai Baan Mai Hmok Cham = Shan Ceremonies and Customs of Mai Hmok Cham Village," Ibid: 334

³² Nongnutch Chandrabhai and Ranoo Wichasin, "Sangkom Laew Wattanataam Tai Barn Mai Hmok Cham = the Tai Society and Culture of Mai Hmok Cham Village," Ibid: 291

Hmok Cham' is a village of the Tai, the group which the Thai in Thailand call *Tai Yai*".³³

The authors of articles about Baan Mai Hmok Cham all emphasise the role of the Shan as a dominant group. It is repeatedly stated that the Shan "are the ethnic group with power and a position as leaders of the border community".³⁴ They are the focus because "the group with the highest population is the Shan ethnic group".³⁵ This means that claims about the authenticity, similarity and community of *this* "Shan village" can be easily made. The emphasis on the Shan is justified on the basis of the numerical dominance of the Shan population (เป็นกลุ่มที่มีสมาชิกมากกว่ากลุ่มชาติพันธุ์อื่น ๆ)³⁶ and the fact that the Shan were the first to settle in the village.

These two factors do not, however, indicate that the village is currently "homogenous" or, even, "Shan". As a village comprising different ethnic groups it is interesting that all the accounts of the village emphasise the Shan and their dominant position. The descriptions of Baan Mai Hmok Cham as a "Tai society and culture"³⁷ use "Tai" as a synonym for Shan.

³³ "บ้านไหมหมอกจ๋าม' เป็นหมู่บ้านหนึ่งของคนไทย ที่คนในประเทศไทยเรียกว่า 'ไทใหญ่': Ranoo Arntarmet, "Prapeni Pittagam Chao Tai Yai Baan Mai Hmok Cham = Shan Ceremonies and Customs of Mai Hmok Cham Village," Ibid: 334

³⁴ "ชาวไทเป็นกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ที่มีอำนาจและบทบาทในการเป็นผู้นำของชุมชนชาวเคน": Nongnutch Chandrabhai and Ranoo Wichasin, "Sangkorn Laew Wattanatam Tai Barn Mai Hmok Cham = the Tai Society and Culture of Mai Hmok Cham Village," Ibid: 298

³⁵ "กลุ่มที่มีประชากรสูงสุดคือ กลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ไทใหญ่": Ibid: 290

³⁶ Ibid: 300

³⁷ Ibid

While the basis for a Shan “social reality” is problematic, not all of the ideas in the Thai writings are so superficial. Some articles do acknowledge that “almost half the population of Baan Mai Hmok Cham have a status as ‘Displaced Persons of Burmese Nationality’”.³⁸ However the opportunity to discuss the problematic nature of such status is missed. The reality that the residents of the village are mostly migrants from the Shan State is only used to further the emphasis on an authentic and primordial existence. Ranoo asserts that “the lives of people in this community *maintain the lifestyle of their ancestors*”.³⁹ They are described as having an authentic or traditional lifestyle (วิถีชีวิตดั้งเดิม). Apparently, they maintain this culture because the village is “preparing to build an independent Shan State”.⁴⁰ Again, an opportunity to describe the complexity of life in Baan Mai Hmok Cham is missed. Nothing more is said about “preparing an independent Shan State” or the particular machinations and difficulties which have accompanied the Shan independence struggle.

Perhaps this is because within the discussions of Baan Mai Hmok Cham the concepts of traditions and customs (ประเพณี) are dominant . For example there are

³⁸ “เกือบครึ่งหนึ่งของประชากรบ้านใหม่หมอกจ๋ามมีสถานภาพเป็น ‘ผู้พลัดถิ่น สัญชาติพม่า’”: Ibid: 290

³⁹ “ชีวิตความเป็นอยู่ของผู้คนในชุมชนจึงดำเนินรอยตามวิถีชีวิตของบรรพบุรุษ”: *emphasis added*, Ranoo Arntarmet, "Prapeni Pittagam Chao Tai Yai Baan Mai Hmok Cham = Shan Ceremonies and Customs of Mai Hmok Cham Village," Ibid: 334

⁴⁰ “เตรียมการก่อตั้งรัฐถนให้เป็นรัฐอิสระ”: Nongnutch Chandrabhai and Ranoo Wichasin, "Sangkom Laew Wattanatam Tai Barn Mai Hmok Cham = the Tai Society and Culture of Mai Hmok Cham Village," Ibid: 298

descriptions of “traditional healing” (ประเพณีการรักษาพยาบาล)⁴¹ and an “elder ceremony” (ประเพณีกั่นตอ).⁴² The traditional and authentic character of these beliefs are highlighted in a description of “produce ceremonies” (ประเพณีเพื่อการผลิต).

According to the description, “the relationship between humans and nature is often found in agricultural production customs because in such systems of production humans must continually live with nature”.⁴³ In these different ceremonies, the traditions associated with rice production are particularly prominent.⁴⁴ There is no mention of non-traditional practices or ideas. Every aspect of the village’s “culture and society” is justified in terms of history and tradition.

The institutions of the village are generally only described in terms of what is seen as communal. The status of Baan Mai Hmok Cham as a “community” is reiterated. While no quotation or justification is offered for the emphasis, one large section deals with what is called “the life of the community”.⁴⁵ This allows for discussion of issues like “community conflict”,⁴⁶ “community leaders”,⁴⁷ and

⁴¹ Ibid: 328

⁴² Ibid: 326; Interestingly “กั่นตอ” is “a Burmese word which means ‘to demonstrate respect for elders’”. That a Burmese word is used indicates that perhaps the Shan are not as pristine and free from “foreign” influence as Thai academics and activists sometimes like to assert.

⁴³ “ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างมนุษย์กับธรรมชาติ ส่วนมากจะพบในประเพณีเพื่อการผลิตเพราะในระบบการผลิตมนุษย์ต้องอาศัยธรรมชาติโดยตลอด”: Ranoo Arntarmet, "Prapeni Pittagam Chao Tai Yai Baan Mai Hmok Cham = Shan Ceremonies and Customs of Mai Hmok Cham Village," Ibid: 347

⁴⁴ For examples of the Shan traditions and ceremonies that relate to rice production see: Ibid: 349-354

⁴⁵ “ชีวิตของชุมชน”: Ibid: 334

⁴⁶ “ข้อขัดแย้งของชุมชน”: Ibid: 338-339

⁴⁷ “ผู้นำของชุมชน”: Ibid: 339

“things the community respects”.⁴⁸ What these discussions do is highlight the “community” and give normative value to what the authors’ consider the “community”. It is a normative value because no attempt is made to demonstrate how fundamental “the community” is to its members. For those trying to understand Shan life through the Thai interpretations this is particularly problematic. The focus on the community is never justified.

To expand on this approach to village study, it is worth describing what they mean by “community conflict”.⁴⁹ This conflict exists between a group of village elders and the monks at the temple. Apparently, the Abbott has taken on a role as custodian of monies donated by the villagers. Some villagers feel this is inappropriate. This conflict – between religious precepts and the necessity for accounting regulation – is the *only* “community conflict” which is discussed. Because this conflict is between “tradition” and the “non-traditional” role taken by the Abbott, the tradition-oriented point of reference taken by the author is particularly inadequate. Writing in generalities, there is also no mention that Baan Mai Hmok Cham might have other tensions, problems or conflicts. In the case where conflict *is* raised there is no quotation and no justification from anybody involved with the dispute. There is, in this instance, *only* interpretation.

⁴⁸ “สิ่งเคารพของชุมชน”: Ibid: 343-346

⁴⁹ Ibid: 338-339

With almost no direct quotation from people in the village the interpretative character of these studies of Baan Mai Hmok Cham is evident. There are no descriptions of the village, its “community” or its history *that come from local people*. In the context of a discourse of “localisation” this lack is ironic. Although based on field observations, the collected Thai anthropology of Baan Mai Hmok Cham seems to be based on weak foundations. For this reason, these studies of a Shan village are most useful for understanding the *Thai interpretations of the Shan*. Those Thai interpretations offer, perhaps, limited insight into the realities of Shan life.

Focus on the Shan Village: Community and Tai-ness

Thai interpretations of the Shan village presume to describe a social reality. The homogenising and generally narrow focus of Thai interpretations should, however, be seen as part of the construction of a discursive category. That category allows for a limited engagement with the Shan and their lives. The nuance and colour of Shan life village only rarely emerges in Thai interpretations.

To better understand why the Shan village is described in this way it is worth returning to the introductory statement of the *Project on Tai Social and Cultural History*. Another example is taken from that statement to again highlight how Thai academics justify their engagement with the Tai, village culture and traditional rural economy. For the Tai studies project:

*there is importance and meaningfulness in historical and cultural knowledge about the Tai. Such knowledge helps to understand the original characteristics of all the Tai and understand the special characteristics of the various Tai groups. It makes for improved understanding of the Thai in Thailand, especially rural society and culture because villager culture in rural Thailand is similar to the culture of different Tai groups that are outside the country.*⁵⁰

This focus on “villager culture” makes a broad claim for the similarity of the Thai (at least in rural areas) to the Tai and the Shan outside Thailand (นอกประเทศ).⁵¹

Apparently when writing about Tai peoples, Thai scholars assume that “outside *the* country” means “outside Thailand”.⁵² This elementary lack of rigour on the part of the Thai writers is symptomatic of a body of academic and activist literature which sometimes ironically implies the supremacy of the Thai and their interests. Those Thai interests are revealed through the predominance of descriptions of the Shan which obsessively critique Thai modernity. From the Thai perspective, the focus must be the Shan village.

The focus on the Shan village ignores people, in deference to the discursive category of *the* village. As such, it is the *Shan village* and not the *village Shan* that

⁵⁰ “ความรู้เรื่องประวัติศาสตร์สังคมและวัฒนธรรมชนชาติไทยมีความสำคัญและมีความหมายมาก จะช่วยทำให้เข้าใจลักษณะอัตลักษณ์เดิมของชนชาติไทยทั้งหมด และเข้าใจลักษณะพิเศษของชนชาติไทยแต่ละกลุ่ม ทำให้เข้าใจสังคมและวัฒนธรรมไทยดีขึ้น โดยเฉพาะสังคมและวัฒนธรรมชนบท เพราะวัฒนธรรมชาวบ้านในชนบทของประเทศไทยคล้ายกับวัฒนธรรมชนชาติไทยกลุ่มต่างๆ ที่อยู่นอกประเทศ”: Introduction to Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 11

⁵¹ The term “นอกประเทศ” literally means “outside *the* country”.

⁵² Many writers use a similar description. Intentionally or not, the “Thai in Thailand” (ไทยในประเทศ) are contrasted with the “Tai outside Thailand” (ไทนอกประเทศไทย). For examples see: Thalang, *Chonchat Tai Nai Nithan = Tai Ethnicity in Chronicles: 271*; Witayasakpan, *Prawatisart Tai Yai = Shan History*: 4

is emphasised. In accounts of the Shan village rarely (if ever) do individual Shan villagers speak. *The* community and *the* village are ever present but the constituent parts: families and individuals are almost entirely absent. There is no personality or agency, just community and consistency. The homogenising and communalising force of such community based study does not necessarily illuminate the reality of Shan life. By narrowing the focus to what is merely “communal” the Thai envisage patterns of life which, in many of their own “communities”, are non-existent and largely forgotten. Many Thai interpretations assume a unity and consistency in Shan village communities which would not be implied of mainstream Thai villages.

The “village community” is assumed to be fundamental to constructions of Shan-ness and also to ideas about what makes the Tai. By interpreting the Shan village as a “social reality”, the Thai are creating a vision that they would like to see of themselves. The discursive category of the Shan village is, however, more *a reflection on the reality of Thai academics and activists*. The discursive category of the Shan village makes little attempt to legitimise its engagement with *the reality of the village Shan*.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Shan village is one place where Thailand's relative economic and cultural power within mainland Southeast Asia has left its mark. That power has allowed Thai academics and activists to fashion influential interpretations about the Shan and other Tai peoples. Distant from Bangkok and the centres of Thai power, the focus on these people is offered as a critique of Thailand's development. In the case of the Shan, this critique extends to the Burmese government and processes of national demarcation. It is striking that most Tai will never have an opportunity to read what the Thai write about them.

These Thai interpretations create a selective image of Southeast Asia and its people. The emphasis that these interpretations place on the Tai peoples is important and problematic. The Tai studies project of interpreting "other" people demonstrates an ironic elite Thai reminiscence for simplicity and tradition. These researchers and social commentators yearn for something other than Thailand's rapid and unpredictable change. Their reaction to modernity demonstrates the lengths to which some Thai will go to justify a return to the village – to a simple and coherent community.

The lifestyles of the Shan along the Thai-Burma border are distant from the lifestyles of Bangkok or Thailand's other cities. In villages where it can be argued that the traditional patterns of Tai life are preserved, Thai academics and activists

have seemingly found comfort and inspiration. Their nostalgia for agrarian minimalism and environmental harmonisation has led to the description of idyllic Shan villages, under pressure from outside influence. The Shan village is interpreted based on Thai understandings of Tai similarity, authenticity and community. The Shan represent an opportunity for the Thai to describe social and ecological interactions which are comfortingly familiar and yet which challenge the dominant development philosophy of Thai society.

The “Shan village” is constructed out of the perceived ideal of Tai life, not out of the realities of Southeast Asia’s industrialising economic and agricultural outputs. In Thailand’s central plains, arguments based on authenticity, similarity or community are often weak. That perceived ideal is preserved only in Southeast Asia’s peripheral areas, amongst poor and relatively powerless peoples. In Thai interpretations these people rarely speak: they are present but go unheard. Such peoples (including the Shan) live in the mountains or in border areas. These are places where most people (including most Thai) do not wish to go.

From these border areas, the Shan have been used to offer a critique of modernity. That critique is aimed at the culture of the centre – marked by its political hegemony, agricultural industrialisation and ecological bankruptcy. In Thai interpretations, the degradation of Thailand’s social and environmental inheritance is contrasted with descriptions of the relative security and contentedness enjoyed by other Tai peoples. The implication is that Thailand’s nationhood, development

and relative prosperity have obscured and destroyed the Tai similarity, authenticity and community of Thailand's people. Apparently, such a critique works best when it focuses on places distant from Thailand's centre and problems.

For this reason finding the values of authenticity, community and similarity amongst the Shan along the Thai-Burma border has become a preoccupation. While comfortably distant from Bangkok, these Shan people are not living in abstract, "foreign" conditions. They live at Thailand's northern periphery under geographic, social and political conditions to which the Thai can generally relate and empathise. Their proximity to Thailand and its perceived shortcomings has made the Shan a unique example for Thai researchers and activists. The Shan have been challenged by the deceit of colonialism and the oppression meted out by the Burmese state. However the Shan and their villages continue to struggle for their cultural, political and economic identity. As Carabao reminds us, "they have not been defeated".

This continuing struggle and relatively precarious existence – wedged between two of Southeast's Asia's most antagonistic neighbours – is complicated by a national boundary. However, the Shan have been used to subvert the border between Burma and Thailand. That subversion has created a discourse which pays no heed to colonial demarcation or social disconnection imposed by the nation-state. For Thai writers, the nation-state border can be wished away because it does

not conform to their understandings of authenticity, community and similarity.

This border is a perversion: it *must* not dominant how the Thai see the Shan.

In the interpretations of Thai academics and activists, the justification for a community of Tai peoples, joined by their shared cultures and historical relationships, has been reinforced. While it may be a weak and, at times, inappropriate critique of modernity, such interpretations retain considerable weight. They are widely disseminated and culturally influential. Currently used to justify Thailand's "regional" economic and social engagement, the existence of Tai peoples outside Thailand could hypothetically be used to justify an expansive and authoritarian political and strategic agenda. With discredited national borders, there is, perhaps, a ready-made justification, in certain circumstances, for a "greater Tai" political entity. That the potential of these Thai interpretations has gone unchallenged by Thailand's supposedly "left-wing" academics and activists is disconcerting.

Nevertheless, Thai critiques of modernity are important and timely. That Thailand and its neighbours face ecological and social dilemmas has not been questioned.

What should be questioned is the use of the Shan as an example or model of "Tainess" to be deployed in the battle to change Thailand's direction. This nostalgic and chauvinistic acquisition of poorer or lesser powerful peoples does not advance the Thai critique of modernity. The Shan should be seen as a group embroiled in their own battles and problems, with the same contradictions and hopes that the

Thai allow of themselves. They are not just a convenient way for the Thai to interpret a better future for Thailand and for the Thai.

The academics and activists who rally for social “localisation” and ecological “harmonisation” would do well to face up to the challenges of Thailand’s modernity. In Thailand’s cities, towns and villages the absence of Tai community, authenticity and similarity should be exposed, if those values are what is considered vital. Why do the Shan and other Tai groups have to bear the brunt of Thai nostalgic visions? Who will seal off the Shan from the world, in their *similar yet authentic* communities? Why are the problems and disempowerment of Thai people within Thailand not the focus of the Thai critique? The Shan are already a part of these same problems. They cannot be considered “pristine”. By evasively looking for solutions to Thailand’s problems amongst peoples and ecologies that are considered “pristine”, Thailand’s academics and activists are undermining their own agenda.

This is a consequence of the inconvenient fact that such unspoiled and untrammelled peoples and ecologies are generally an illusion. Thai academics and activists ignore the complexity of Shan and Tai culture, history and ecology. The Shan live in diverse social and ecological conditions which will not always align with a Thai critique of modernity. It is unfortunate that these singular Thai critiques have gained such currency. These critiques mean that a version of Shan life and culture has been agreed upon by Thai academics and activists. This

version is perhaps merely the one which best advances *their* agenda and alternative vision for Thailand's development.

This focus on the Tai village – when dressed as a critique of modernity – has the potential to mark a regressive and conservative agrarianism.¹ Disavowing the state, the market and the city will not necessarily improve people's quality of life. For this reason the prominent elements of this interpretation – authenticity, similarity and community – are not harmless in all situations. Criticism is however generally stifled because these values are seen as marking a better future. There is no debate about the basis for the Tai studies project and the acquisition of peoples outside Thailand. Nobody has asked the most important question: *what kind of future is sought by Shan villagers?*

Until that question is adequately answered the acquisition of the Shan and the Tai by Thai academics and activists will remain open to challenge. As the Thai continue to explore and explain the conditions of peoples on the peripheries of Southeast Asia they would do well to engage with the aspirations and ideas of villagers. Those ideas will not necessarily fit with their preconceived notions of Tai social and ecological priorities. The challenge remains: *how can Thai academics and activists (and everyone else) help to improve the quality of Tai life*

¹ For an excellent description of non-Marxist peasant movements in Europe, and particularly Austria, see: Gavin Lewis, "The Peasantry, Rural Change and Conservative Agrarianism: Lower Austria at the Turn of the Century," *Past and Present*, no. 81 (1978). His argument offers some insight into the mentality of "conservative agrarianism" in a different time and place.

based on an engagement with local aspirations? The currently limited engagement of Thai interpretations with the conditions of Tai peoples could then be completely reconsidered. Writing about “the village” without engaging the hopes, desires and fears of village people is misconstrued.

To improve the situation requires going beyond reminiscences of social and ecological harmony. Such social and ecological harmony will only exist and thrive if developed in conjunction with aspirations. Clinging to what are seen as *similar* and *authentic* Tai *communities* pre-empts new ways of looking at Tai, Shan and, even, Thai life. The challenge is to now re-energise understandings of Tai societies and cultures. The goals of villagers cannot be divorced from that challenge.

Appendix I

Project Statement¹

Project on Tai Social and Cultural History

The research project “Tai Social and Cultural History” includes 15 Tai researchers and students, inside and outside Thailand. They primarily use historical research methods. They have read dynastic chronicles and stories in local Tai dialects, Chinese and Western languages. Over 3 years (1995-1998) they spent between one week and 3 months visiting and doing field-work and interviews in all of the areas where Tai people reside. These Tai outside Thailand are the Chuang in Guangxi State of China numbering 14 million people; the Black Tai and White Tai of Vietnam who number 1.5 million; the Lao of Laos who number 5 million people; the many hundreds of thousands of Tai Lue of Sipsongpanna; the Shan in Burma and Daikong Province, Yunnan State numbering 10 million people; the 2 million Tai Ahom of Assam; and the Gam, Suy, Geulao, Yee and Puyee in Guizhou, Yunnan and Hailam in China. In total there are approximately 30-40 million Tai people.

From this research emerged three important points.

1. A better understanding of the institution of the village community. In lands outside Thailand, communities have been better able to conserve their original character because the central government and capitalism have limited penetration. The Tai outside Thailand believe that communities have life - they believe that a village has a body and spirit. In every community ancient rituals are performed. There is the *kuan* ceremony which is a ceremony for the community to help people who are having problems - to make them feel that they are not fighting their problems or difficulties alone. Every member is thus helping them and giving them

¹ This “project statement” was written as an introduction to all the books in the *Project on Tai Social and Cultural History*.

encouragement. Every community also has a central meeting place for members. In North-eastern Thailand and in Laos it is the *sarn puta* which is in the forest near the village. There are ceremonial offerings to the spirit of the *puta*. In the Shan State there is the “village heart” which is where the spirit of the ancestors resides.

When studying the history of Tai communities outside Thailand we can continually see the maintenance of the community. Across time, it does not matter that other economic or social systems have changed. The research group truly believes that the village community is the basis for the economy and culture of the Tai including the Thai of Thailand.

2. Village culture is the culture of the Tai ethnicity by nature. In research on upper Southeast Asia, including Yunnan and Assam, we have found that different groups accepted Tai culture and language in similar ways. The Tai live in the lowlands while other groups like the Lawa, Lawar, Palong, Khamu, Tin, Kachin, Karen, Hmong and others live in remote mountains. These other groups have two cultures. They have their own culture and the Tai culture. They are able to speak Tai. When they descend to trade with the Tai or with other tribes they use the Tai language. In the view of the research group the land of upper Southeast Asia is, by nature, the land of the Tai nation. Nation does not necessarily mean only the one tribe. Importantly the different communities have been able to cooperate for a long time. They have collective historical experience and collective language use. It is a collective culture which has bountiful value. Community culture or village culture can become national culture. Tai culture can have a special status as the culture of a nation and the culture of the peasants.

3. Tai culture should develop an independent culture. In the article “The Original Character of the Thai” written 4 decades ago, Jit Phumisak (1930-1966), an important Thai academic, suggested this way of thinking. He introduced the method of studying comparative Tai cultural history. He introduced the Tai culture as something with an identity different to China or India, even though it was influenced by those two large cultures. This research groups has used the methodology introduced by Jit Phumisak.

In information from the Tai in Yunnan and from Chinese researchers, we have seen documentation about a united Tai society in Mao Luang State before the 15th-16th centuries. This confederacy existed in the Western part of today's Yunnan State, Shan State and Kachin State in Burma. It was established over 1000 years ago and is written about in the letters and poems of the Chinese and the local Tai. There might still be important historical and archaeological sites from the confederacy of Mao Luang State there. This is evidence that Tai communities existed prior to the Sukhotai era. We can see the culture of the Tai of the Mao Luang State in the Yue culture of ancient southern China. Professor Huan Hui Kun from the Yunnan University of National Minorities wrote an important book called *From the Yues to the Tais*. It argues that the Yue use Tai to sing and wrote Tai in Chinese characters 2000 years ago. In various decades, the Chinese have written about the Yue in various historical periods.

When we distinguish the Tai culture from the Chinese and Indian cultures we will have a new vision. We will better see the relationships between the Tai culture and the Mon-Khmer culture of the tribes and hill-tribes of Southeast Asia.

From the research we have found significant things for Thailand and, more generally, for Tai peoples inside and outside Thailand.

For Thailand we are more confident in the social institutions and culture of ourselves, meaning the village community and village culture. Tai communities and culture have a long history intertwined with the culture of what is currently southern China. This is a self-identity which endures across time. Half of Thailand's people live in village communities. Thailand is now going back to the country for the sustainable development of rural areas. To ward off the capitalist system and to battle today's economic arrangement, we should clearly understand the full benefit of the institution of communities and the culture of communities. Village communities and the culture of communities are central to uniting the spirit for local development and national development.

For the general Tai population inside and outside Thailand, studying Tai culture outside Thailand has benefits towards the preservation, restoration and future development of Tai culture. This has many benefits, especially in areas where the Tai ethnicity is an ethnic minority. In these communities, the conservation of Tai culture means that mutual help and cooperation can prevent exploitation. This can preserve cultural identity and a level of self-government. Maintaining and rejuvenating the Tai culture is an important support that can nourish the conservation of their cultural identity. Outside of that, exchanging culture between different Tai ethnic groups allows them to transfer their achievements. In each place, where they develop themselves or where get influence from outside they can strengthen Tai culture together. There are different levels of development and strengths it will make Tai culture in each place a model for Tai peoples in different places. To fulfil the vision, examples could include the Thai of Thailand who are able to transfer Western technology to Tai groups who have not opened themselves as much - who live outside Thailand. At the same time, the Thai of Thailand are able to learn the importance of spirituality of communities which they themselves are in the

process of losing. Returning to preserve and study Tai culture is thus a way to strengthen the spirit of the nation. Whatever the environment, this is a way to maintain and further our Tai life in the future.

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