Editorial

This issue of the Bulletin carries an amusing article on dogs and diet in Laos by the mysterious ‘Phu Fang’ together with fascinating extracts from Andrew Walker on his recent research among the colonial archives in French Indochina, a somewhat critical review of the recent ‘Politics of the Commons’ conference held in Chiangmai by James Haughton, a travel piece by Wasan Panyagaew and an unpublished article by Leo Alting von Geusau, whose sad death in December 2002 was noted in the last issue (Colin MacKerras, ‘Fourth International Hani-Akha Conference’). This piece was submitted for presentation at the conference on Migrating Identities and Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Diaspora organised by the Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora at the ANU, held on 26-28 September 2001 (reported on in the second issue of this Bulletin). Unfortunately Leo was unable to attend in person. For some reason the organisers did not see fit to include his useful, informative and thought-provoking paper in the publication of the results of this conference (Beyond China: Migrating Identities, ed. Shen Yuanfeng and Penny Edwards. Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, The Australian National University. 2002), so we are delighted to have the chance to present it here.

Leo’s work was instrumental in establishing development and educational organizations for the Akha in Thailand as well as establishing contacts with the related Hani of China, and inspiring a younger generation of workers on the Akha/Hani such as Cornelia Kammerer and Debbie Tooker all of whom lived or worked with Leo for varying lengths of time, went home and wrote up their theses in most cases with a considerable debt to Leo’s ideas and inspiration.

The Akha texts collected and translated (by Leo and Inge-Lill Hansson) under the aegis of the South East Asian Mountain Peoples’ continued on page 2

Preparing rice seedlings for transplanting into irrigated fields in Samoeng District, Chiang Mai, Thailand, July 2003. This is a high labour input stage of rice cultivation and labour is mobilized predominantly by means of exchange labour arrangements. Seedlings are pulled out of the seedling beds, tied into bundles, trimmed and then tossed into the flooded fields for planting. Over the last two years the Sanpatong 1 variety of rice has been widely adopted in this village due to the very high yields achieved by some of the early adopters. AW

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

2. Akha/Yunnanese Chinese symbiosis and strategic identity in the Southeast Asian mountainous border areas by Leo von Geusau
6. Thoughts on the Lao Dog and the Practice of Eating It by Phu Fang
10. Thefts from the temples of Chiang Saen, northern Siam, December 1900 by Andrew Walker
12. Moving Dai: A fictional story from the field by Wasan Panyagaew
14. NEW PUBLICATIONS
16. CONFERENCE REPORT

International Foundation (SEAMP) which he founded remain to be published, as indeed do the Flowery Miao (A Hmao) ritual texts collected by the Parsons brothers under http://www.archives.ecs.soton.ac.uk/miao. The editors of Asian Folklore Studies have expressed interest in principle, but clearly what is needed is more funding for a major programme of translations and publications on the region as a whole.

Andrew Walker and myself have now been managing the Thai-Yunnan Project for nearly 4 years, and we are pleased that we have had a number of publications (Luk Chang, The Tai World, The Miao-Yao Worlds), established an email network1, and of course this online Bulletin. There are now a number of research projects at Ph.D. level associated with, or benefiting from this programme; on the Thai-Khmer borders, on cooperatives in Thailand, on Lao agriculture, on wildlife management in Laos, on Luang Prabang ritual symbolism, on tourism and the Bai people in Yunnan, on the music of the Tai-Luc, on Tai-Lue architecture, on nuns in Thailand, on the media in Laos, on Vietnamese agriculture, and on upland fallow systems in the region. A strong programme of visits has included Aranya Siriphon from Chiangmai University, whose Master's thesis on the Hmong of north Thailand is of great interest, Duong Bich Hanh who is working on the Hmong women of Sa Pa in northern Vietnam, Christian Culas who also works on the Vietnamese Hmong, Joy Bai of Yunnan University who has worked on the Yi as well as Bai (see the second issue of this Bulletin), Joyce Li (Li Quanming) who is also from Yunnan University and working on the De'ang minority there, Helen James, who works on health and education issues in Burma and Vietnam (see the fourth issue of this Bulletin). Further visits are expected from Naran Bilek of the Central Nationalities University in Beijing, Charles Keyes from the University of Washington, and Yin Shaoing from the Department of Anthropology at Yunnan University.

However, there is no research assistance as such for the programme, although we benefit greatly from the assistance of Luke Hamby, Research Assistant in the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (ANU), and we have very little funding for the workshops and conferences on regional issues we should like to be able to organise. Earlier this year therefore a number of research proposals were submitted for the Thai-Yunnan Programme including one involving an exchange programme with IRSEA in France, another to the Rockefeller Foundation in Bangkok, and another to Toyota. Various other approaches were also made. The Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, its Division of Society and Environment, and the Department of Anthropology here have been generous in a number of ways in the past but this kind of support may no longer be possible in the future in the light of the funding situation facing all Australian universities. We have high hopes that one or more of these proposals will meet success; in the meantime, in view of time and labour constraints, we think it advisable to limit issues of the Bulletin to twice per year rather than the three we have attempted.

NT

Akha/Yunnanese Chinese symbiosis and strategic identity in the Southeast Asian mountainous border areas

Leo von Geusau

Introduction

The Hani/Akha are a population of 2.5 million, concentrated around the border-areas of Yunnan, China, Eastern Burma, Northern Thailand, Northern Laos and Northern Vietnam. They are considered to be a southern offspring of the Yi, or Lolo peoples, who have dominated large parts of Yunnan since the late Chin and early Han times. Their diaspora is hardly of recent origins; even before the beginning of the Nanchao kingdom, around the 700's, those among them who called themselves Hani, besides a variety of other related terms, had migrated from the Kunming area through the Ailao mountains to the Red River area in southeast Yunnan while others, who called themselves Zanyi, or Yanyi, and later Akha, had migrated to the Mekong or Lancang areas.

The Hani, and the Zanyi or Akha are both classified as belonging to the southern branch of the Tibeto-Burmesian language family, a branch classified as Hani by contemporary Chinese linguists, which is quite distinct from Chinese and not mutually intelligible with it. Traditionally both groups, together with the “Black Yi” of the Szechuan/Yunnanese border areas, were considered by the Chinese to be Wuman or “wild”, non-Sinicized “barbarians”.

Both the Hani and the Zanyi/Akha consider themselves to have descended from one apical Ancestor called Sm’io, who is located about 55-60 generations ago by the oldest Hani and Akha clans. (Geusau 2000). A most interesting fact is that both groups consider their original ancestor to descend from M, M-ma, or M-giang, that is respectively “Heaven”, the “Great, Wide Heaven”, and “The Emperor at the Middle of Heaven”. With others, I have speculated that some ancestors of the Hani/Akha ancestors, who became part of the Kuei or tribal vassal system in China in very early times, had to re-write their originally matrilineal (warrior-type) Yi descent system into a patrilineal system linked to “Heaven” and “the Yellow Emperor” (Backus 1981). This does not mean, however, that the tribal leaders included in such vassal systems had to surrender their own identity altogether. The Hani and Akha genealogical descent system is formed on principles

1 The Thai-Yunnan Forum: subscribe at http://mailman.anu.edu.au/mailman/listinfo/thaiyunnan and make postings (once you have subscribed) by sending a message to thaiyunnan@anu.edu.au
completely different from those of the Chinese descent system, and has been instrumental in the formation and maintenance of the identity of these people.

Ethnic identity is based on the historical roots of a people, but also includes historical and material economic and political/power relations with others and with the environment. In the case of ethnic minorities like the Hani/Akha, this also includes the internal tensions, and in a way contradiction, between “accommodating to the outside”, at the same time as building up a maximum of independence or autonomy on the inside. It will be the intention of this paper to show something of this history, and its importance in the formation of a distinctive identity which was nevertheless maintained in close relations with others throughout a long historical experience of diaspora.

An historical experience of diaspora

Historical relations between the Hani/Akha, and the Chinese in Yunnan, are complex. Both the Hani, and the closely related Zanyi or Akha people, consider themselves as having been marginalized into the mountainous parts of the Southern Yunnanese border areas by Tai warrior types of people after the invasion of the Mongols under Kublai Khan in the 1200s, and during a “power vacuum” following the collapse of the former Nanchao kingdom and its related sub-state systems. In the following centuries, the impact and colonization of Yunnan by the Han Chinese increased, partly through the means of bloody wars. This gradually but inevitably broke down the geographic isolation, arising from the existence of several mountain ranges, between the Yellow river areas on the one hand, and the resource-rich Yunnan province dominated by the Mekong, the Black and the Red Rivers which crossed the steep Himalayan foothills.

So what kind of relations did these diasporic minority peoples maintain with similarly diasporic Chinese people? The different Hani groups of the Red River and the Ailao Mountain areas remember the Han Chinese as traditional enemies and oppressors or colonizers. For the Akha/Zanyi in the Mekong region, the Han Chinese and their local representatives are symbolized by the dragon, for whom corvée labor has to be done. In the centuries-long processes of colonization and suppression of Yunnan by successive Chinese dynasties, not only Yunnanese “barbarians” like the Yi, Hani, or the Akha /Zanyi, but also local non-Han Chinese were often involved. These latter ranged from sinicized “barbarians” and the remnants of Mongolian, Uighur or Tibetan invaders, to colonialists and merchants who had “gone tribal”, and below we will examine some of the differences in these Chinese populations as perceived by the Hani/Akha.

Throughout this entire historical process of colonization and subjugation, the Hani of the Red River and Ailao mountain areas, and even more so the Zanyi/Akha of the Lancang/Mekong mountain areas, maintained their own identities and genealogies quite separately from those of the Han Chinese and even from those of the Yunnanese Chinese, and remained free of the Muslim influences of the latter despite maintaining close relations with them. The genealogical system of the Hani and Akha/Zanyi served, in fact, as a kind of pre-state socio/political frame-work and alliance system, into which other marginalized groups could also link, if they accepted the customary law and language implied in that system (see Geusau 2000).

Between the 16th and 19th century, the submission of the Wuman, Heman and Yung “barbarians”, amongst whom were the ancestors of Hani and Akha, was slowly achieved through bloody wars and suppression, leading to an almost complete colonization of Yunnan. But we also see the development of increasing conflict situations between the central Han Chinese power-centers and the local southwestern and western Chinese local populations. These latter areas were plagued by increasing poverty, floods and droughts, besides the rise and fall of a large number of so-called “warlord systems”. This resulted in an increase of local wars with the losers, or the impoverished, trying to migrate across the Southwestern Chinese mountainous borders into Southeast Asian countries, which were increasingly dominated by Western powers involved themselves in a kind of diasporic movement. As for southern Yunnan, it was increasingly dominated by a Dali-based Mohammedan Sultanate. The south Chinese Islamic people, who developed out of the interaction between colonizers and invaders with the local populations of Yunnan, and at times formed separate warlordships and quasi-states, are called Hui, or Hwa by others. The Dali-based Hui Sultanate had its economic power base, amongst others, in the Southern Yunnanese silver mines in border areas with contemporary Burma and Laos.

When the Manchu tried to secure the southwest border areas of China against the infiltrations of the French and English, a rebellion of the Hwa Chinese population in the areas was triggered off, leading to the Yunnanese war of 1855–1873. Many impoverished and exploited “tribal peoples” in the area joined in this, leading to about 6 million deaths. The result was a further displacement of large numbers of losers, including Hwa Chinese as well as Hmong, Yao, Akha and others, seeking to escape the burden of heavy taxation through flight over the borders into Burma, Laos, Vietnam and even Thailand (Wiens 1954). To these refugees, moving into the Southeast Asian “diaspora”, more were added after the Boxer rebellion of 1901, and finally again after the Kuomintang armies were defeated by the People’s Liberation Army in 1949.

I examine some aspects of this more recent diasporic history below. However, that this movement into the southwestern border mountains of Yunnan has had in fact a long history is clear from (fixed) oral archaic Akha/Zanyi ritual texts, memorized and transmitted through special mnemonic techniques by their Boma or Phi ma (shamans). From their archaic character and their location in the border areas of Xixuangbanna, these texts are certainly more than 300 years old. They describe Akha village life, and their inter-ethnic relations in the mountains which became their diasporic homes. In these texts, the Akha are depicted as located at intermediate altitudes, with the Wa (Agh’aw) peoples above them and the Bulang (A boe), another Khmer-speaking
group, below them. The valley basins are, however, dominated by the Dai or Tai Lü (Bi-tsm) peoples, who are seen as an antagonistic and warlike group tending to oppress the Akha/Zanyi. In many of these old texts there is also some mention of slavery-type corvée labour being performed by the Akha/Zanyi for the Dai.

Categories of Chinese

But besides these ethnic groups, the Akha/Zanyi texts also mention the Chinese, and it is important that these are divided into several categories which I will here detail. First of all there are those called La-bui and these are quite like other men (??), depicted as walking in rows somewhat far away in the lowlands. They are the “average” Yunnanese Chinese. The image of these Labui Chinese is relatively positive for the Zanyi/Akha. “If one stays near the Chinese, one can learn many things” is a common saying. There are also stories in which the Akha/Zanyi together with the Yunnanese Chinese once built a city with very wide-reaching walls, enabling them to engage in agriculture in time of peace within the city walls. This was in the past indeed the case with many local Chinese and tribal people, who had common interests in protecting the long trade-routes of Yunnan, and the inhabitants of such cities were indeed able to practice agriculture in times of peace, and convert themselves to military pursuits in times of war. Several Akha/Zanyi believe that Mojiang or Talang was such a city.

A second category of Chinese depicted in these Akha/Zanyi texts are the Peh Nyoe or “Green Shirts”. These are the main Chinese traders in the mountains, who raise mules or horses for their work. According to the texts they travel quite far from their homes and establish settlements somewhat at the edges of the mountains, where they also have relations with the Gu la people or a military group.

According to the Akha, the “Green Shirt Chinese” of the old texts are the Haw/Hui Chinese people referred to above, and the Akha/Zanyi had already for a long period had a close symbiotic relation with them. This relationship was based on the fact that these traders had access to far away markets which Akha/Zanyi either did not have or which were simply too dangerous for them to make use of.

The Akha/Zanyi formulate a series of oppositions between themselves and the Yunnanese or Haw Chinese, such as

“But besides these ethnic groups, the Akha/Zanyi texts also mention the Chinese, and it is important that these are divided into several categories which I will here detail. First of all there are those called La-bui and these are quite like other men (??), depicted as walking in rows somewhat far away in the lowlands. They are the “average” Yunnanese Chinese. The image of these Labui Chinese is relatively positive for the Zanyi/Akha. “If one stays near the Chinese, one can learn many things” is a common saying. There are also stories in which the Akha/Zanyi together with the Yunnanese Chinese once built a city with very wide-reaching walls, enabling them to engage in agriculture in time of peace within the city walls. This was in the past indeed the case with many local Chinese and tribal people, who had common interests in protecting the long trade-routes of Yunnan, and the inhabitants of such cities were indeed able to practice agriculture in times of peace, and convert themselves to military pursuits in times of war. Several Akha/Zanyi believe that Mojiang or Talang was such a city.

A second category of Chinese depicted in these Akha/Zanyi texts are the Peh Nyoe or “Green Shirts”. These are the main Chinese traders in the mountains, who raise mules or horses for their work. According to the texts they travel quite far from their homes and establish settlements somewhat at the edges of the mountains, where they also have relations with the Gu la people or a military group.

According to the Akha, the “Green Shirt Chinese” of the old texts are the Haw/Hui Chinese people referred to above, and the Akha/Zanyi had already for a long period had a close symbiotic relation with them. This relationship was based on the fact that these traders had access to far away markets which Akha/Zanyi either did not have or which were simply too dangerous for them to make use of.

The Akha/Zanyi formulate a series of oppositions between themselves and the Yunnanese or Haw Chinese, such as

“Are we the kind of people who - like the “Green Shirts” - don’t come home in the evening, because of traveling far away for money?”

“No, we Akha Zanyi are not such people like the “Green Shirts”, who don’t come home in the evening, because we have to come home from the field in the evening”.

Or, in another opposition,

“The ‘Green Shirts’ have houses which are so full of gold and silver that they collapse; we Akha/Zanyi are poor, but in our houses is happiness and the spirit of hard work”. (See also

Later migration and transformations

Over the last several centuries, as we have seen, the Akha/Zanyi, as well as the Haw Chinese or Yunnan mountain Chinese, have both migrated southwards into countries south of the modern Chinese Yunnan border. Their close symbiosis, based on trading products to far away markets, has taken various forms over this period which we shall examine here.

Older texts as well as witnesses relate that in the 1800s woven strips of cotton were exchanged for the salt which until quite recently was quite rare in the mountains. But several other products like sesame, peppers, ginger, precious woods and medical plants are also mentioned. Money in the form of silver was also often involved in these processes of exchange.

Exactly when it was that opium entered this circuit is not entirely clear. Opium was certainly grown in the Southeast Asian mountain areas since the end of the nineteenth century as a consequence of the British opium war in 1845 and subsequent Chinese efforts to counterbalance the British opium payments by expanding their own home production in the high cool hinterlands of Yunnan and Sichuan. Opium was observed among the Wa in the Chinese/Burmese border areas in 1895, and it then entered Laos, and later Thailand in the 1930s. The expansion of opium production tended to take place through the help and on instigation of the Haw traders in the area. These traders had established small settlements among the higher mountain peoples, especially the Lisu and Akha, and more centrally located villages above 1,000 metres from where a number of surrounding villages could be accessed.

This association of tribal minority people with Yunnanese Chinese through the production and marketing of opium intensified after the Kuomintang troops of Chiang Kai Shek were defeated in 1949 and gradually dispersed into the mountains of Burma, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. They later re-organized as militia attached to the Taiwanese army with the intention of reclaiming China from the Maoists. As was later the case with so many local warlords and ethnic armies in the region, they needed weapons, and the sale of opium and later heroin was ideal as a main source of funds for purchasing weapons. During the Vietnam war, the demand for opium and also heroin increased and so did the competition between several sections of the Kuomintang and Haw factions, and their locally interested counterparts, leading to an “opium war” in 1969 in Northern Laos (McCoy 1972).

After this both Laos and Burma insisted that the Kuomintang troops which roamed around their northern and eastern mountainous areas should either disperse or face armed resistance, and subsequently most of the Kuomintang troops moved into the very sparsely populated mountainous areas of Northern Thailand.

Thailand, as the only non-socialist or non-communist country in the area, and the last bridge-head of the West or the USA against
Communism, had initially counted on the mountain peoples, including the Hmong, Yao, Akha, Lahu and Lisu, as their main guardians in the northern border areas against Communism. The unruly Kuomintang groups, which concentrated themselves in existing Haw centers, were often located in or near Akha and Lisu villages. They tended to plunder these ethnic minority mountain villages in the border areas throughout the 1950s and 1960s and thus were initially seen as a danger.

This situation was dramatically reversed in 1969, after some Vietnamese and Lao Vietcong/Pathet Lao Communist activists started to train Thai activists (and perhaps also Hmong) in Nan province of Northern Thailand, bordering Laos. One gunshot in a Hmong village was enough to provoke a general national paranoia against the Hmong and all the other mountain Peoples as being communists. What can be called the “Hmong war” lasted until 1973, but the paranoia against mountain peoples remained for much longer.

From a Thai Government point of view, it seemed at that time that the Kuomintang and related Haw centers, which in the meantime had settled near the Thai borders with Burma and Laos, might be the ideal allies and guardians against communism. For that reason, Prime Minister Kriangsak and Kuomintang leaders made an agreement in 1979, in the town of Mae Salong, Chiang Rai province, in which the Kuomintang troops were recognized as paramilitary forces attached to the Thai Army, and simultaneously recognized as belonging to the Taiwanese army.

In this new situation, relations between the new Haw/Kuomintang centers and the local mountain population changed in many cases into relations of patronage and clientelism. This was particularly the case with impoverished Akha and some nearby Lisu villagers who found work in the rapidly expanding tea-fields and gardens which were being built up with the profits from opium. Amongst them were also quite a few opium addicts from lower altitudes, who settled in small hamlets around Haw/Kuomintang towns and were paid in opium for their labour (Lucien and Jane Hanks, 1965).

Towards the end of the 1900s opium production inside Thailand seems to have diminished considerably and production shifted towards west Burma and partly also to north Laos. The Thai/Burmese border areas were increasingly dominated by warlord-type militias like the Shan Liberation Army of “Kuhin Sa” and later a so-called Wa army. In these groups the Akha/Zanyi, as well as other mountain peoples, are seen purely as soldiers or slaves—a striking contrast with the previously far more relaxed (albeit often somewhat unequal) relationships which had obtained particularly between the Akha/Zanyi and the Haw/Kuomintang groups.

Conclusions

Although their relations had their ambiguities, the Akha/Zanyi peoples over several centuries have enjoyed generally positive relationships with the Yunnanese Chinese peoples, quite different to the slave/master relationships which had obtained between themselves and the various Dai or Tai peoples in southern Yunnan. By contrast, relations of both the Akha/Zanyi and the Yunnanese Chinese with the Han Chinese have been considerably more distant.

In the mountainous border areas of southern Yunnan, particularly mutually beneficial relationships developed between the Akha/Zanyi and the marginalized Haw merchants in the mountains. Under the increasing oppression by the Central Chinese Dynasties of the Yunnanese Chinese and related mountain minority peoples after the 17th and 18th centuries, which exploded in the “Yunnanese war” of the mid-1800s, it was particularly the Islamic Haw Chinese, and the mountain minority peoples, who both united in rebellion against the Han Chinese. And after their defeat they were even further united through their common diaspora to SouthEast Asia.

Relations between the Akha/Zanyi, other mountain groups and the Haw “Mountain Chinese” were heavily affected by the entry of opium into the Southeast Asian mountain economy towards the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s. These close relations formed through common economic activities were further intensified after the defeat of the Kuomintang armies in China in 1949 and their escape or dispersal into the “Golden Triangle” areas. Concentrated in Northern Thailand, these groups became vitally important to the Thai and US strategies against communism. They also became important for the development of Thailand and Taiwan.

Despite this increasingly close symbiosis, and all the changes and transformations of relationships between in particular the Akha and the Chinese from Yunnan, increasingly united through their common experience of Diaspora in Southeast Asia, both somehow managed to maintain a strong separate identity. Even in the rare marriages which occurred between Akha/Zanyi women and Chinese men, the Akha/Zanyi keep strictly to their identity. There is a great tolerance between both groups in spite of these enormous differences in language and customs.

An economic basis for this phenomenon may be found in the entirely different clan networks of the Akha/Zanyi and the Yunnanese Chinese in Yunnan and China as well as in the Southeast Asian Diaspora. It seems that these networks of Akha/Zanyi grass-roots village economies on the one side, representing production, and the geographically rather widespread Yunnanese Chinese “selling economies” on the other, representing markets in particular for rare and precious products such as forest products, medicine, sesame, cotton, rattan and later opium, must somehow have needed each other.

This paper has tried to show the importance of considering history and identity in a context of the material economic and political/power relations between groups undergoing a common diasporic experience. The Akha/Zanyi, and closely related Hani, of the mountainous border areas of Yunnan/Southeast Asia, provide a telling example of how a separate identity can be maintained in diaspora, largely through the means of the genealogical system.

continued on page 6
Thoughts on the Lao Dog and the Practice of Eating It

Phu Fang

A short way up a dusty semi-paved lane just off the main road to Vientiane’s international airport sit the crumbling ruins of the French colonial military barracks. Now inhabited by bus drivers, labourers, rural migrants and their families in search of the promises offered by the big city, the barracks also host two makeshift restaurants serving beer and dog meat. Young government officials and workers sit around aluminium tables on plastic chairs while middle-aged ladies slowly roast the meat on grills in the rounds of halved petrol drums and the light bulbs hanging from extension cords in the bamboo ceilings flicker. “It doesn’t taste like chicken, it isn’t quite beef and its definitely not pork,” says one newly initiated connoisseur.

If eating dog meat is considered morally unacceptable in the West, at least on the surface it is equally unthinkable in traditional Theravada Buddhist societies. This paper argues that the practice of eating dog in Laos occupies a distinctively ‘modern’ cultural space for a younger generation of Lao created by the weakening of conservative Theravada Buddhist values, increasing urban social autonomy and the often unacknowledged influence of Vietnamese culture. The practice is ‘tolerated’ despite contradicting both local Buddhist morality and the contemporary penetration of Western cultural ideas via the influential Thai media. It is indicative of the way conservative Theravada Buddhist values concerning the social status of the dog have been influenced by the culinary habits of Laos’ East Asian neighbours and an emerging awareness of Western values.

An Internet search on dog meat reveals a wealth of information on animal rights activism demonizing the stereotypical dog-eaters South Korea with a few references to the practice in China, Taiwan, Burma, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, Ghana, and the Congo. Calvin Schwabe’s (1988) Unmentionable Cuisine, which offers a range of recipes for dog meat, points out the moral double standards of Western society and its contribution to the growing global food-population problem. Feffer (2002) notes the clash between cultural globalization and culinary practice. While such authors address the chauvinism of Western morality and the pressure of Western transnational influences, they do not look behind local traditions to address the, often contradictory, cultural spaces in which the practice of eating dog takes place.

While there are no signs or advertisements in Laos, roadside shops around the country specializing in grilled dog (pèng maad) are

---

1 This article, intended as a cursory research note, is the product of informal participant observation in Vientiane from August to December 2002.
2 French actress Brigitte Bardot singled out this aspect of Korean culture in 1988 adding voice to animal rights protesters. ‘The Internet is now filled with reports that smack of “yellow peril,” boasting such titles as “Korea: The Sadistic Country” and “Korea’s Cruel Cuisine.” Recently, these Web sites have promoted the e-rumor that Koreans are raising meaty St. Bernards for their stews.’ (Feffer 2002)
3 Sticky rice is a regional food. It is consumed by other Tai and non-Tai ethnic groups in Thailand, Southern China and elsewhere.
popular evening gathering places for a new generation of Lao who enjoy greater mobility and autonomy and weaker links to traditional Buddhist values than their elders. Junior Government officials, manual labourers, soldiers and others described as ‘lower and middle class people’ sit around with a few bottles of beer, plates of cold noodles, mint and lettuce leaves. The dog meat is enshrined along with these and other condiments in a bowl of dog’s liver sauce.

Lao, at the crossroads of Southeast and East Asia, is commonly seen as the construct of external, national and colonial forces posing problems for the articulation of a ‘unique’ Lao identity. (Jerndall & Rigg 1998) It is ‘common for ordinary Lao, for Lao intellectuals, and foreigners to refer to the eating of sticky rice as a key marker of Lao-ness.’ (Evans 1999:28) While such ‘popular epithets’ of identity (Mayoure 1994:17) are problematic in themselves, Lao eating habits prove both more interesting and more problematic for the cultural identities of those concerned than just sticky rice.

**Buddhism and the Modern Social Attitude**

The dog, and the practice of eating it, occupies a confusing place in lowland Lao society, at once stigmatized and tolerated. Buddhist monks adhere to the doctrine Mang Sang Sip Yang, listing the ten kinds of meat considered sacred (and therefore inedible) in Theravada belief: elephant, snake, monkey, tiger, yellow wildcat, horse, bear, lion, human and the dog.Outside the confines of the Buddhist clergy, the Sangha, human-animal relations are less sacred. While Buddha taught a doctrine of kindness to all living things, in Laos the dog seems to have been left out of this agreement. Angry housewives can regularly be seen with broom in hand spanking the local yelping hound. To the outside observer, dogs in Laos learn servility, eat food scraps and give birth to so many offspring that the average village bitch has teats that drag along the ground beneath her.

Eating practices are also more liberal outside the Sangha. “Lao people, they eat…they eat most of these,” admits Khon, a consumer of dog meat, when asked about the ten inedible meats. While all manner of birds, insects, reptiles and mammals are a key marker of Lao-ness. (Evans 1999:28) While such ‘popular epithets’ of identity (Mayoure 1994:17) are problematic in themselves, Lao eating habits prove both more interesting and more problematic for the cultural identities of those concerned than just sticky rice.

The dog, and the practice of eating it, occupies a confusing place in lowland Lao society, at once stigmatized and tolerated. Buddhist monks adhere to the doctrine Mang Sang Sip Yang, listing the ten kinds of meat considered sacred (and therefore inedible) in Theravada belief: elephant, snake, monkey, tiger, yellow wildcat, horse, bear, lion, human and the dog. Outside the confines of the Buddhist clergy, the Sangha, human-animal relations are less sacred. While Buddha taught a doctrine of kindness to all living things, in Laos the dog seems to have been left out of this agreement. Angry housewives can regularly be seen with broom in hand spanking the local yelping hound. To the outside observer, dogs in Laos learn servility, eat food scraps and give birth to so many offspring that the average village bitch has teats that drag along the ground beneath her.

Eating practices are also more liberal outside the Sangha. “Lao people, they eat…they eat most of these,” admits Khon, a consumer of dog meat, when asked about the ten inedible meats. While all manner of birds, insects, reptiles and mammals are eaten, a number of Lao seem to be adopting what they see as a particularly Vietnamese culinary penchant for dog. Dog meat in Vietnam, Korea and parts of Southern China is seen as a source of good health and sexual potency. “If you eat dog it gives you more strength, increases your energy down there!” says Chanh, an office worker in Vientiane. Some say they simply like the taste of the meat. “People eat it because it is delicious,” adds Noy as she sweats over the morning’s coffee sales at a local village shop.

Buddhist Karma and the belief in re-birth are associated with a hierarchy of nature within which humans and animals are bound. “I pity the dog,” said the well-spoken secretary at a local Government business. “I like all dogs, I don’t eat them,” she added. The belief in Karma determining ‘birth station’ is likely to turn many Lao away from eating dog because such animals are traditionally considered to possess re-incarnated human souls. Karma and re-birth are also commonly associated withfatalism and the idea that one’s place in the chain of life ‘can’t be helped.’ But as Keyes argues (1983:265), instead it leads to a notion of individual responsibility and freedom of action. One is free to act in ways that will increase one’s merit or to do otherwise which will influence one’s status in the next life. In such a context, the dog is to be pitied as a lowly form of social being and while the devout Buddhist may scorn those who eat dog, the practice is not prohibited. “It is bad luck to eat dog, but it is up to each person,” said Ai Sor, an older Lao.

Lao proverbs clearly describe the dog as a ‘social being’ and a metaphor for human relations. Maa hao baw kat – a dog barking at a plane – means that poor people have no authority to talk about the rich and powerful. Maa hao baw kat – the dog that barks, never bites – refers to people who talk a lot but do nothing. Dok jaa aup maa vat – flowers in the sky and dogs in the temple – hints at the social barriers separating rich from poor. Moo bet maa, maa gin kao – the pig does the work but the dog eats the rice – is a proverb about people who take the benefits from the hard work of others. Yok maa, maa lia pak – if you play with the dog, the dog will lick your mouth – is a warning not to get involved with lowly things because you will get dirty.

It may be such images of low social status associated with the dog that explain why Lao people have mixed feelings about eating it. Most Lao would consider dogs as pets that fulfil some purpose such as guarding the house. In contemporary Vientiane, a wealthy consumer class has adopted the Western concept of ‘the pet’, creating a new category of well-cared-for Lao dog that can occasionally be seen on the streets of the capital. Despite this, the overwhelming majority of Lao dogs are conditioned to exhibit none of the confidence and arrogance of the clean, spott Western pooch. In countries where birth rates are declining and ideas of hierarchical communal belonging are much less pronounced than in Laos, domesticated animals appear within an egalitarian sphere as ‘people substitutes.’ As a pet, the western dog

---

3 Sticky rice is a regional food. It is consumed by other Tai and non-Tai ethnic groups in Thailand, Southern China and elsewhere.

4 Literal translation: ‘the ten forbidden meats.’

5 This list derived from conversations in Vientiane. Elsewhere Ajahn Brahmavamso explains the reason behind meats specifically prohibited for Buddhist monks to eat: “Human meat, for obvious reasons; meat from elephants and horses as these were then considered royal animals; dog meat - as this was considered by ordinary people to be disgusting; and meat from snakes, lions, tigers, panthers, bears and hyenas - because one who had just eaten the flesh of such dangerous jungle animals was thought to give forth such a smell as to draw forth revenge from the same species!” (1990)

6 Very little attention has been paid to Vietnamese ‘cultural’ influences in Laos. Most authors focus on Vietnamese political influence over the reconstruction of the Lao State since the 1975 seizure of power by the Communist Pathet Lao. See for example Stuart-Fox (1980).

7 Spiritual standing based on the quality of this-worldly action determining future birth. (Keyes 1983:265)

8 In the Lao language the dog, like all animals, is referred to as maa (it), and if ‘it’ is given a name by its owner it is probably just maa, dog.

9 Proverbs were gleaned from conversations in Vientiane from August to December 2002. Thanks to Apiradee and Aranya for their additional comments.
is treated like one of the family. The dog normally has a human name, is referred to as ‘he’ or ‘she’ and the very mention of eating it is likely to produce looks filled with ‘the sort of horror reserved for hangmen and white supremacists.’ (Feffer 2000)

In stark contrast, in Laos the dog remains a signifier of the lowest form of being and when a dog becomes dangerous, when it steps out of its ‘natural’ place in society, rituals are used to restore the order of things. It is common practice for the owner of a dog that has bitten someone to organize a su khwan ceremony for the victim to remove the bad luck and spiritual trauma associated with the bite. When the dog is showing symptoms of rabies however, the victim may catch more than bad luck.

Ireson notes that the moral boundaries of Lao village community are maintained in part by the possibility of being thrown out of the village for failing to participate in communal activities. (1996: 232) Ostracism also results from morally questionable practices. “In the past, the people would not allow you to stay in the village if they knew you ate or sold dog meat,” said Lor.

Several famous disputes in the capital in recent years indicate that the grilled dog is still a source of village tension. Directly behind the golden That Luang stupa in Vientiane locals say there used to be one or more shops selling dog meat. Elders from the district reportedly complained to the authorities to have the shops closed. Other stories of dog shop owners being driven out of villages abound but while it seems that village action has in some cases succeeded, the practice of eating dog continues.

**History and Social Space**

The taste for dog may have been introduced into lowland Lao society some time under French rule, with the influx of migrant Vietnamese to work in the colonial administration. It may also have spread during and in the years after the Second Indochina War when North Vietnamese soldiers were in Laos, mixing with their counterparts in the Communist Pathet Lao movement. New social attitudes emerging from this tumultuous period may be challenging older traditional Buddhist values.

While accurate figures are unavailable, locals say that up to 100 shops selling dog meat are operating in the Vientiane area, including two located close to the Prime Minister’s Office. “Some officials in the PM’s office have studied in Vietnam,” said Noh with a chuckle. While dog is eaten all over the country it is considered unlucky to sell a dog let alone eat it. According to Khon, people would typically ‘exchange’ a dog for another item if they wanted to get rid of it.

The popular negative stereotype of a dog eater is the Vietnamese immigrant. However, a younger generation of Lao, mainly junior Government officials, manual labourers, soldiers and others described by locals as ‘lower and middle class people’ typically consume dog meat. Class differentiation is commonly associated with type of food eaten. In Laos and northeastern Thailand class is expressed by the type of rice eaten with sticky foods considered a sign of poverty. (Mayoury 1994:18) Consumption of dog meat may also indicate low class status, perhaps reflecting the images of social lowliness associated with the dog itself. The practice is also almost universally male. Shops are commonly located near military barracks and worker’s dormitories. Such areas also tend to be associated with other taboo practices such as prostitution and gambling. It may be this association that keeps women away from the practice. The practice may also be associated with a ‘coming of age’ or with ‘young bloods’ who revel in the increasing anonymity and separation from their villages afforded to them by the growing urban spaces of Vientiane.

Acceptance of the practice is reflected in the modern Lao proverb *nyot sin men maa, nyot paa men een* – the best meat is dog, the best fish is eel. If you can eat eel and call it a fish then you can eat dog like any other red meat, implies the proverb. But the cheesiness suggests an underlying anxiety. A post-Socialist Lao regime that values cooperation and friendship with Vietnam above all else cannot afford to see its conservative Buddhist values in conflict with Vietnamese traditions. Evans notes that while Buddhism has always been linked to state legitimacy the relationship between the Sangha and the State has not led to the Sangha’s direct involvement in politics. (Evans 1998:52) It may be this separation that has afforded the practice a tolerated social space in the face of conservative Buddhism.

The taste for dog is also practiced in Northeastern Thailand. The Thai encounter with dog meat has been much more vocal than in Laos as a Westernized middle-class Bangkok media culture including pet lovers and animal rights activists draws politically on Buddhism and Western values to argue against the practice. The Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej may also be weighing (intentionally or not) into the controversy adding royal tradition in support of Western values concerning the dog. In 2002 he published a book on his pet dog, which sold out within hours of its release. Controversy has ensued in Thailand’s media over the practice of eating dog in the Isaan (Northeast) region, especially Sakhon Nakhon and Nan provinces bordering Laos. Thailand

---

10 Su khwan or Baci ceremonies are based on the belief that souls (Khuan) need to be integrated with the body to ensure the well-being of the individual. Tham Khuan refers specifically to a Baci for the restoration of the soul after an injury has been inflicted on it. The ceremony is not a request for pardon; it is meant to re-establish the proper order of things. (Mayoury 1999:289)

11 In one local newspaper article, the author described the character of a crazed rabies victim, taking on the same traits as the diseased dog that bit him – salivating, wagging tongue, red eyes and unusual aggression. (Vientiane Times 2001) ’If a dog bites a man, it’s not news. But if a man bites a dog, that’s news,’ or so the saying goes. In Laos, it seems both are true.

12 It was considered unlucky to sell a dog let alone eat it. According to Khon, people would typically ‘exchange’ a dog for another item if they wanted to get rid of it.

13 Dog is eaten by various minority groups in Laos but information on the character of the practice and its influence on lowland Lao society is very sketchy. While sub-groups of the Akha and Khu minorites living in northern Laos reportedly eat dog, the ethnic Lao traditionally do not. Likewise, the Hmong do not eat dog but ‘the Yao eat dog as a ritual practice because of the belief that the Yao descend from the mythical five-coloured dog Panhu who married the Chinese Empress and gave birth to twelve sons who founded the twelve Yao (Lo Mien) clans.’ (Conversations with Nick Tapp)

14 The author can confirm the existence of at least six shops offering barbecued dog meat in Vientiane municipality in late 2002.

15 See, for example, ‘Dog Eaters Still Active in Thailand’ in The Nation, February 27, 2002.
is to enforce a law regulating but not banning the trade in dog meat.17

Given the popularity of Westernized Thai media in lowland Laos and the influence it may have on awareness of Western values, along with the mediation of local Buddhist values with cultural influences from Vietnam, the practice is left in an ambivalent place in Lao culture, perhaps leading to its stigmatization. The combination of stigma and consumer demand for dog meat in Laos may contribute to the practice of ‘dog napping,’ the theft of privately owned village dogs destined for the grill. “People around here complain that their dogs have gone missing. I think mine went to a restaurant,” said Tia, who was woken early one morning at her Mekong riverbank house to the sounds of someone driving off with the eldest of her three dogs.18

The practice of eating dog meat is an everyday activity in Laos situated in an ambivalent social space between traditional Buddhist values, and the socio-historical influence of the outside world. Despite the increasing influence of Western morality within global culture and the possible stigma consequently associated with dog eating, the practice seems to be tolerated, especially in urban Vientiane. Further research could reveal this to be an aspect of the cultural identity of young urban Lao left uncovered by ‘popular epithets.’

References


Newspaper Articles


16 ‘Thai King’s Dog Book Sells Out’ in Bangkok Post, November 26, 2002. The King’s dog has also been in the media recently, delighting the crowds with a traditional ‘wai’ greeting (‘nop’ in Lao). (Assavanonda 2002) The author has also been informed of a Thai body of literature concerning the dog as a pet, particularly for the Thai elite and royalty.


18 The author has heard three accounts of dogs going missing or being stolen. All were associated with rumours concerning ‘dog napping.’
Thefts from the temples of Chiang Saen, northern Siam, December 1900.

Andrew Walker

In late 2001 and early 2002 I undertook research in the Archive D’Outre Mer in Aix En Province. My objective in undertaking this archival research was to gain a deeper understanding about the historical development of the upper-Mekong border between northern Thailand and northern Laos, about which I have previously written.1 I was pleased to find that there is a rich body of material about French activities in this borderlands zone, especially in the early years of colonial rule. Of particular interest were the detailed accounts from the French Commercial Agencies that were established on the Siamese side of the border, in the towns of Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen. What struck me is that the accounts of the French administrators based in these agencies have little to say about the classic concerns of boundary consolidation or borderline regulation. There are, of course, notes about numbers of passports issued—and occasionally refused—and data about trade and travellers passing in and out of colonial territories. But, by and large these are minor concerns tacked onto the end of monthly reports.

What does figure prominently, however, in these early colonial accounts is what may best be called the machinations of cross border politics. I am hoping soon to publish a detailed account of this upper-Mekong manoeuvrings, in which I argue that in the early stages of colonial rule the French administrators were more interested in maintaining an ambiguous zone of overlapping authority than they were in strictly demarcating the borderline. Given the considerable interest in this material among those who I have discussed it with I have decided at this stage to provide just one archival insight in this frontier zone of dispute, negotiation and dialogue. This is an account written in December 1900 by Laurant Leon who had been appointed as Commercial Agent in Chiang Saen in July of that year.2

At around 5 PM, I received at the agency the notables of Xieng Sen accompanied by some indignant inhabitants. The ancient temples had been profaned, pits had been dug up at the bases of the "Chats" in order to take out from them the money placed there by believers since far back times and lastly, a hole was made on the pedestal and behind the big Buddha of the [central] pagoda. They had recovered some in the pagoda itself in the cell of the chief of the "monks", who has since then ran away to the left shore [of the Mekong], leaving behind him … the proofs of the committed theft. This man had

2 Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer, Files of the Governor General of Indochina, File number 20839, Laurent Leon to Governor General, Chiang Saen, 24 January 1901 (my translation).

continued on page 11
I declared to the notables that I was going to give them satisfaction, if it were proven to me that this inhabitant was in fact guilty of these crimes. The next morning, these officers… showed me as proof of the crime committed a stock of vulgar small glassware, in which one could notice in between other trifling things the top of a jug, two worthless rings and three children’s marbles, made of glass…[T]hey asked me to listen to the indicter, a “novice” of the name of Pha Yue. We all made our way to the pagoda, where this person carried, indeed, a firm charge against his ex-chief. But, as this accusation could be fueled by a inferior/superior resentment, I let the notables know that this testimony alone was not enough for me to place the guilt and that even more so, following the hypothesis of a revenge taken against [the chief of the monks] by his subordinate… the exhibits that were brought to me could well have been intentionally placed by the latter in the fugitive’s cell. And finally, as the arrest of a French “protégé” was a big case, for which I was not prepared to take responsibility on the basis of these unconvincing facts, I wanted to see things more clearly before taking a decision.

Leon sent for the suspect who crossed the river and arrived at his house in the middle of the night. Leon immediately summoned the local officials. The local chiefs of Chiang Saen came, but the Siamese “were out playing.” The monk confessed.

He told me of the excavations he undertook several times in the destroyed temples and in the new ones too, in order to find money, and that being done under the orders of the two Siamese officers, his managers of games, and because of continuous important losses, he was made their debtor… Thefts had been committed in a number of different places but with accomplices… and under the commands of the Siamese officials. Under these circumstances, I could not ask for the arrest of the abbot, before having heard from all of these accomplices…

They all agreed to all the facts that were held against them and were unanimous in declaring that they were only acting following the ideas and under the orders of the representatives of Siam, who usually tempted them into coming to their places every night to play “Chinese Swivel” with dices and cards, thereby making them lose considerable sums of money, and that incited them to forget their duties. It was only in order to reimburse these people that they allowed themselves to be pushed into digging in the pagodas to steal sacred deposits.

Later the principle culprit was questioned again and provided more information on the role of the Siamese. Given the mounting evidence against them, one of the key Siamese officials was forced to respond.

[He] admitted that he, indeed, gave out orders to dig, but only in order to find a source of water. But, I had seen the holes made everywhere; the deepest one is not even a meter deep. In this country, everywhere water can be found at ten meters at least underground, bringing this politely to his attention, expressing my astonishment at the symmetry of the diggings made exactly on the angles of the “Chats”, and under the sacred tree, where it is an ancestral custom to hide the donations of believers. Taken by surprise, he laughed as an answer. Before closing the interrogation, I asked everybody if they were satisfied by my correction of this case and of the polite rightfulness of my procedures. In a unanimous way, they answered affirmatively. The notables and the population surrounded us, their spirits and ears open, waiting for the solution.

I, then, took aside one of the leaders of the Siamese officials, in the presence of the interpreter and of the notable Noi Sane, telling him how childish was his defense and what influence it could have on the local people. Then, I pushed him to tell me the truth, assuring him of my indulgence. He, then, lowered his head, and let out a confession telling me that he would never dare tell the truth to his chiefs, that his situation was on the line! This man, not very smart looking, must be the least malicious of the bunch, and they must have taken advantage of his simple mind and his weakness for wrong-doing… but, as he holds in his hands the power, he remains the main responsible. The first act demonstrating the state of mind in which the population is at the present moment is the protest that is attached to this report; and, through which, under the signatures of their most respected chiefs, the population demands instantly for the liberty, that was promised in the… treaty. The convincing testimonies, that accompany the folder of this case well signed by them, establish in an irrefutable way the culpability of the Siamese officers before anybody else’s… The Siamese officials must sit with all the others on the bench of the accused! Today, thanks to the power that I was able to acquire over the country’s nobility… everything is back in order…

Leon’s account raises numerous intriguing questions about the nature of borderline administration in this early period of colonial rule. In particular, why was a French official taking such an active role in politics and litigation in Siamese territory? Why was there a French “Agency” in the Siamese town of Chiang Saen? And, more fundamentally, what was the nature of the relationship between the local “notables,” the Siamese “officials” and this self-confident French administrator? In my forthcoming work I seek to cast light on these various questions, suggesting that an understanding of this local political frontier can provide valuable insights into the various local understandings about the nature of the newly established Mekong river border.
Moving Dai: A fictional story from the field

Wasan Panyagaew

Crossing the Mekong

It was in late June of 2003, after I had had to leave Banna (Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan) about two months earlier because of the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in China, that this story began. This was my first trip on the last phase of my following the ‘Music Tai’ project of my Ph.D research topic (‘Music Tai’ is the term used to refer to the modern music of the Tai-Lue people, which has recently been created in Banna). My plan for this route was to follow up ‘Music Tai’, considered as a kind of commodity, in the borderlands area of the so-called Mekong Sub-Region. From Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, my destination was Muang Singh, in northern Laos. First heading up to Chiang Rai, and then catching a local bus to Chiang Khong, was the easiest way to begin my journey.

I arrived at the Chiang Khong border checkpoint at about 5.10 in the evening. The checkpoint was due to close at about 6, but I was still able to get on a boat crossing the Mekong and sleep over on the other side that night.

I tried calling my contact, who my Lao friend in Chiang Mai had introduced me to earlier; she was his mother-in-law. Then, I accidentally met her at the jetty, since she with her daughter had just came back from a hospital in Chiang Rai. Thus we all crossed the river, a borderline, together. She put me into the Gaew Champa Hotel, which was, in fact, part of her family estate but now leased to a Chinese businessman from Yunnan. At a hundred and fifty baht per night, it was half the price of a guest-house on the Thai side.

The sun was not yet down, and I had about an hour to survey the town of Huay Xai. Walking along its main street from the north to the south, I saw a few groups of tourists, some still looking for the passengers. Quite often, the driver gave them some small gifts, cigarettes and bubblegum and suchlike. Sometimes he stopped for the passengers to take a rest. Passengers got on and off all the way. The scene seemed to be a usual one for the local peoples in this town; perhaps some get used to it, while others probably get bored of it!

On this left bank of the Mekong, it was still possible to use a Thai mobile, and in fact the local people here do use Thai mobiles. Since I was alone here, I thought I might just as well call back to Chiang Mai. But at that moment, just a few seconds before I had connected to the network, some Laotians who were sitting in a small retail shop on the right-hand side of the street smiled, said ‘Hi, Sa Bai Dee’, and invited me to have drinks with them. They were one gay guy and two girls, probably around 25-26 years old. This was the first time I had drunk ‘Beer Lao’, which is great! We soon became friends, and many stories came spilling out of our

drink-chat meeting, about Huay Xai nightlife, gambling, and how to get to Muang Singh. After about an hour a new member joined us, who later confirmed to me that some groups of the locals here knew and listened to ‘Music Tai’. And she turned out to be one of them (the next morning I found that ‘Music Tai’ was sold in the market, but by a Chinese vendor!).

A few hours passed, and we moved to another place where we could feel closer to nature, sitting beside the Mekong and having more Lao beers and foods. I was getting a bit drunk, but still they took me to Vang View night-club, in a converted right-hand drive car imported from the other side of the river; unluckily there were not many people there.

From Huay Xai to Nam Tha

Next day in Huay Xai morning market, after buying a bus ticket to Nam Tha at the town transport centre, I wandered around the market in search of breakfast (I ended up with Kow Soi Kai - rice noodle soup with chicken). In one music shop after breakfast I met a Laotian, the owner of the shop, who enjoyed listening to the ‘Music Tai’. “It sounds nice, especially being able to see Sipsongpanna on these MVs (music videos), that’s good, even if I don’t really understand the content”, he told me.

We took a four-wheel drive which left the town heading up to Nam Tha, at about 10 past 9 that morning, about 200 kilometres to go. It was the first bus of the day. On the pick-up, I got to know two Lao women; one was from Muang Singh, which was excellent! The other passengers were Lue men, Lao, and a few others who were perhaps Khmu, or even ‘Mussur’ (Lahu) - anyway they spoke Lao, and there were also two backpackers, one Japanese and the other German. Along the road to Nam Tha a converted pick-up took us past villages which were mostly inhabited by the ‘Lao Theung’.1 Looking out from there far away, I saw a temple in the distance, and guessed that there was perhaps a Tai community there.

When we stopped at Nam Nguyen for lunch, about 10-15 kilometres up north from Vieng Phu Ka, we were halfway there, the driver said. Here I still could use Thai baht.

The four-wheel drive took us still further, climbing up and down along the mountains, crossing the rivers, and passing quite a few checkpoints between provinces and districts, where we had to stop to let the police check the identity cards or passports of the passengers. Quite often, the driver gave them some small gifts, cigarettes and bubblegum and suchlike. Sometimes he also dropped off a letter, and sometimes he stopped for the passengers to take a rest. Passengers got on and off all the way.

We arrived in Nam Tha at about 4.40 that afternoon. There was still another bus to take to Muang Singh, which looked like the Chinese mini-buses I had seen in Banna. A Tai vender told me this would be the last bus. Rather than staying in Nam Tha like the two backpackers, I decided to head straight on further to Muang Singh with her on that late afternoon.

---

1 A vague category of ethnic minority excluding high-altitude mountain people - editors.
On the road to Muang Singh

On the way to Muang Singh, we were joined by more company. Most of these were Tai, from Muang Singh, but a few probably came from Banna. Some of them had come to Nam Tha to visit their relatives, and two Tai teenagers had come to town to buy modern things, judging from my rough observation of what they carried. Another one who joined us at this point was a Lao-Chinese from Huay Xai, whom I got to know later in Muang Singh; he was an imported-car trader (importing cars from Hong Kong to Kunming, but via Thailand and Laos), according to his own story. I still wondered a bit about this, but he explained to me that for a member of the Chinese middle class in Kunming ordering a Land Cruiser via this route was cheaper than importing it directly from Hong Kong. For this trip he had come “to clear up” some difficulty at a local border checkpoint.

The Tai passengers on the bus all seemed to know or be quite familiar with each other. Then a female vendor asked one old man (who looked a bit drunk) to sing Kam Kap (the Lue oral poetry) - she had recognised that he was a former singer. After several requests, the Tai singer began his love song, and many of the passengers started responding to his singing and expressing their appreciation of his improvisational skills. The performance got louder and louder, and the bus was seemingly transforming us into a Tai world; for a while at least, an old Chinese bus became a Tai moving space!

The Lue poetry narrator did not stop his narrative until we reached the next district checkpoint, which meant that we were now getting into Muang Singh, and again two policemen came to check the passenger’s ID cards and my passport. From here on, the driver turned on the car radio; the Tai voice was replaced by the Lao song, although it sounded like Mo Lam or Thai-Isan country music. The drunken singer, together with his brother and his nephew, got off the bus when we reached Ban Tad, (I saw him again in town the next morning when he was getting on another bus, crossing back to Banna).

Arriving in the town about 7 pm, the driver dropped me in front of Muang Singh Guesthouse – a place that my friend in Huay Xai had suggested to me, which cost about 80 baht per night.

In Muang Singh

Next morning, my first tour was to explore the town and visit a tourist centre. In the tourist centre, where I met a manager from Vientiane (who later kindly lent me a history of Muang Singh for photocopying - the official version, written in Lao, which he had been assigned to read!), many things were exhibited, such as a map of the old walled town, a short history of the town (quoted from one scholar’s work), and details of particular trekking packages, all written in English.

My next plan was to go and see the contact I had got to know earlier in Muang Mang (located about 26 kilometres from here, but on the Banna side). The first time I went I did not find him, and so I had to return again in the late afternoon. He was a Lue abbot (but only about 16 or 17 years old) of one of the four Chiang temples (in one of which I found mural dedications testifying to the strength of Tai transnational connections between the peoples here and in California). Presently he was still studying in Muang Singh High School, in Grade 11. Despite this, he was able to help me a lot, in reading the legend of Muang Singh (written in the Tai script), introducing me to the locals, and taking me to visit the town’s sacred pagoda, Tad Chiang Thuem (we also visited Tad Jom Singh), where he complained to me about a new hotel resort, named similarly to the pagoda – the Chiang Thueng Resort and Restaurant, which had just been put up close by the pagoda, downhill and southeast of the town. The four guardian spirits of the pagoda were so angry about this that they didn’t live there anymore, he told me.

Back in town, we met his colleague, the Tai Neua abbot whom I had also got to know earlier in Banna. He invited me to his house to visit his father, who later narrated to me several stories about Muang Singh in the past, particularly the legend (Thamnaan) of its spirit worship, a story which I had partially read earlier. This was apparently very similar to other Phi Muang spirit cults in Lanna and Banna, and nothing seemed to be particularly new about it, but the narrator told me a very fascinating story. According to him, the last spirit medium in Muang Singh, who was necessarily female as we would expect, spoke Lue in her daily life but when she was transforming into a Phi (a spirit; when she was becoming possessed by the spirit, in other words) she would speak Yuan (another Tai dialect, known as Kam Muang in northern Thailand today). And there was not just one Phi (not one Chao, Lord or possessing spirit), but two different ones, so that sometimes one would change into the other, whereupon she would become silent.

Might this suggest that once upon a time, one of the chiefs (Chao) of Muang Singh, now appealed to as a possessing spirit, was perhaps a prince from Chiang Mai? Isn’t this somewhat like a reincarnation of state power itself, a clear sign of the hierarchical power of the Tai states in this region in the past? Unfortunately, the oldest spirit medium in Muang Singh passed away last year, and the Tai of Muang Singh were not quite sure whether they would be able to find a new medium to replace her. Otherwise I might have had a chance to verify what he had told me.

Two days later, one late morning in the market, while I was seeking for ‘Music Tai’ products, I met a Tai female vendor (a Tai Neua) who distributed tape cassettes, CDs and VCD karaoke and films, both copied Thai and Lao products, in the town. Nonetheless, she did not sell any ‘Music Tai’, even though the locals here know about it and listen to it, because it is still, relatively speaking, a bit more expensive than the Thai and Lao commodities. In other words, it is cheaper and easier to get the songs by crossing over to Banna in China, or asking friends or relatives to go there to get them or bring them with them when they visit from there (in Nam Tha morning market, where I stayed overnight on the way back, however, I saw the ‘Music Tai’

---

1 The Tai Neua are another Tai sub-group - editors.
products, in copied version, sold in a few music shops by Lao and Chinese merchants. Later I got to know that it is distributed here via Muang La, Bo Han and Bo Ten).

**Muang Singh these days**

It was the last day of my stay, but I still wanted to see the town museum director again, and travel with the two young abbots. There were many things still left to inquire about, given that in Muang Singh’s lowland area where the inhabitants are mostly Tai (there are about 17 Tai Lu villages, 5 belonging to the Tai Neua, who mostly originated historically from Chiang Tung in present Burma, and one belonging to the Tai Dam or ‘black Tai’ who moved in from northern Vietnam perhaps as late as the 1980s), the Tais are in fact only one-fifth of the total population of Muang Singh district; the Akha account for three-fifths and the remaining one-fifth is made up other ethnic groups, such as the Hmong, Lahu, and Yao.

Muang Singh at night is just like many rural villages in Mae Sai Leang, becoming dark and silent quite soon after the sun sets. A guesthouse owner told me that in the past all electricity had to be turned off at around 8 or 9 at night, but since this April when the government on the other side of the border started selling electric power to the region, night life in this town (I found a few karaoke centres) has been extended a little longer.

The transport to Muang Singh, both from Nam Tha and from Muang Mang, seems to be very convenient; a local mini-bus from this town to the Banna side runs three times a day. There are also a few local buses to Nam Tha in the morning, and a few returning from there until late afternoon. According to one mini-bus driver, there are about twenty-five to thirty mini-buses and twenty-four six-wheel buses currently in operation in the town. This is definitely a consequence of the so-called ‘Quadrangle Economy’, or a side-effect of global tourism, but I cannot help wondering whether this transport system will most benefit the locals, the government, or the tourists.

Muang Singh, presently, perhaps has a lot of visitors from countries such as Germany, Australia and Japan, but only a very small number from Thailand, its neighboring country. Despite this, Thai television, ironically, is broadcast here every day by satellite. As I was told, many Tai households here would buy it for their first household’s item if they were able to afford this technological expense, whether such income is derived from trading, tourism, or their agricultural products. This is not simply because Lao TV signals cannot reach this area but also because this new technology means to them a new channel of information, knowledge and entertainment, a window on the world of others in these globalising days!

Six months earlier, they could probably only watch the odd Thai news program with the help of the town’s generator, or stay a bit longer to see a Thai game show or soap opera with their own batteries, but now, since they have been receiving hydro-electric power from Banna, they can watch it twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, if they can pay for it and wish to.

What is going on in the Tai households here, can you imagine? For me the imagery of Muang Singh these days conforms neither to what has quite often been described in Thai romanticised stories, through books, newspapers and magazines, nor to the otherised narrative of a scholar’s papers or journals. It is simply a small town that is being forced to change by a regional economy, a changing Tai world in this global age. None of the backpackers that come and go in this place, at least none of those that I had a chance to talk to, seemed to care much about the stories/histories of Muang Singh. Nor did they seem much interested in the old walled town (historically composed of four Chiang - Chiang Lae, Chiang Yuen, Chiang Jai and Chiang Inth) which the young abbot kept telling me the legend of, and whose original location he kept pointing out to me. What they were interested in seemed to be simply tulip fields, local exotic scenes, ethnic villages, trekking trips, and opium smoking (if they were able to do this). Some of them may just be passing this way because they have been directed to by Lonely Planet guides!

I left Muang Singh with a promise to the young Lue abbot to get him a grass-cutting machine. He wants to use it to demolish all the unwanted plants that grow up in his temple, and also perhaps all the other unwanted things in his town, who knows!

**NEW PUBLICATIONS**

**Aranya Siriphon & Andrew Walker**

**Biodiversity, Local Knowledge and Sustainable Development** by Yos Santasombat, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 2003. This book is about biodiversity, local knowledge and ethnic politics in northern Thailand. Assumptions about non-Thai minorities and ethnocentric biases have resulted in misconceptions labeling people as “untamed hill-billies” slashing and burning the forest while producing opium and running drugs. The book tries to do away with the misconceptions, and to encourage a rethinking of sustainable development based on indigenous local knowledge. AS

**Chumchon tai nai pama ton nua: rat shan ton tai pak Mandalae lae Khamti Luang (Tai community in northern Burma: southern Shan State, Mandalay region and Tai Khamti)** by Sumit Pitiphat et al. Bangkok: Thammasat Univeristy Press. Having visited many Tai communities in Southeast Asia, the authors have collected many beautiful pictures and some useful details about Tai people and their culture. This book is not quite an academic book but it is about travel in northern Burma, southern Shan State, and the Mandalay region. But with their academic views and their expertise in Tai studies, the authors provide valuable information about Tai culture and rituals. AS

that documents the process by which democratic citizens are formed through processes of “democrasubjection.” Provides detailed analysis of hitherto inaccessible Thai language publications that reflect Thai democracy in its various royalist, statist and liberal forms. AW

Labour, Politics and the State in Industrializing Thailand by Andrew Brown, London: Routledge, 2003. This book is the first English-language study that focuses on the history and politics of labour in Thailand. It demonstrates that the long-standing struggles between labour and capital have been central to the development of capitalism. The books also examines the ways in which the state has become entangled in processes that have determined the forms of labour's economic and political activism. AW

Laae lod ween khatichon lae wannakam phuun baan. (An insight into local myths and folklore) by Siraporn Nathalang, Bangkok: Matichon, 2002. This book provides an interesting view of Tai cultures and societies through local myths and folklore, many examples of which have been collected and selected for publication. This book also reviews some Thai literature about Tai myths and folklore and proposes how to research this academic field. AS

Living at the edge of Thai society: the Karen in the highlands of northern Thailand edited by Claudio Delang, London, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. This book is the first major ethnographic and anthropological study of the Karen for over a decade and looks at such key issues as history, ethnic identity, religious change, the impact of government intervention and gender relations. (From the publisher.)


Somdet Krom Phraya Damrongrachanuphap: kansang attalak muang thai lae “chan” khong chao sayam (Phraya Damrongrachanuphap: Thailand Identity construction and ‘status’ of the Siamese). By Saichon Satayanarak, Bangkok: Matichon Press, 2003. For the past one hundred years, Phraya Damrongrachanuphap's thought has been influential in Thai society. He was a key person who determined the role and duty of different status positions in Thai society—King, governor, merchant, woman, monk etc. Phraya Damrongrachanuphap sought to define the roles and responsibilities for different status positions in Thai society for the national benefit. AS

The Assembly of the Poor in Thailand: From Local Struggles to National Protest Movement by Bruce D. Missingham, Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2003. On 25 January 1997, a coalition of rural villagers and urban slum dwellers from every region of Thailand commenced a mass demonstration in from of Government House in Bangkok. This became a defining moment in the struggle of the Assembly of the Poor to mobilize and sustain people in their nonviolent attempt to force the government to address their grievances, many of which involved large-scale development projects that adversely affected their communities. Over twenty-five thousand people joined the rally, refusing to move until the government responded to their petition. In the end, the rally became an extended, ninety-nine-day encampment in the heart of the city. This book chronicles the development of a national protest movement, analyzing its origins, strategies, and goals within the context of a growing democratic and civil society. Using an anthropological approach, Bruce Missingham bases his research on ethnographic fieldwork among the men and women who participate in the Assembly, including a broad spectrum of villagers, village leaders and NGO activists. He explores the processes underlying mass mobilization and the social construction of protest, discusses the contradictions and conflicts that have arisen, and considers the degree of participation and democracy within the grassroots movement. Finally, he describes the Assembly's campaigns and changing fortunes following the Thai economic crisis in mid-1997 and looks at the results of its sustained protest activities. (From the cover.)

New Publication from The Thai-Yunnan Project

Gordon Downer, late Professor of Chinese at Leeds University, was the foremost scholar on the historical phonology of the Miao-Yao languages and their relations to the Tai and Chinese dialects. This volume, published by the Thai-Yunnan Project in association with the Department of Anthropology, ANU, represents a selection of his published and unpublished papers. Available from Pandanus Books http://www.pandanusbooks.com.au/
Conference Report

Politics of the Commons : Articulating Development and Strengthening Local Practices', 11-14 July 2003, organised by the Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiangmai University, together with the Australian Mekong Resource Centre and the York Centre for Asian Research.

James Haughton

This conference was held in scenic Chiang Mai, by far the prettiest city in Thailand if not SE Asia in my opinion, and attracted a wide range of regional scholars and younger presenters from Thailand, Laos, China, the Phillipines, Cambodia, Vietnam, India and Nepal as well as Anglophonic scholars. While the theme of this conference was the politics of the commons, there were rather more commons than politics in evidence. Sharp divisions in the conceptualisation of “commons” were in evidence, yet these divisions and the potentials for research and action which they offered remained largely unremarked upon by the keynote speakers. As a social scientist I felt that the conference’s focus, despite the socially-oriented title, encompassed too many trees and fish and not enough people, or, to put it more succinctly, too many commons and not enough commoners.

Let me clarify this bad-tempered remark. Ajaan Chayan Vaddhanaphuti remarked during the closing session that discussion of the “commons” had moved on greatly from the topic as it stood 20 or even 10 years ago, when the field was dominated by arid game theoretic discussions of whether or not social norms could overcome the “tragedy of the commons”. Today we have moved on from this point, and most participants accept that social norms are the key to the so-called commons. Indeed the theoretical western discourse of the “tragedy of the commons”, deconstructed at the conference by Craig Johnston, can be seen more as an attempt to justify the process of “primitive accumulation” or mass land grab by government and capitalist forces through quasi-legal expropriation and enclosure processes.

Within this discourse, there have been two classic political solutions to situations of commons. The first, Hobbesian solution proposes that common resources (including social resources) must be placed under the control of an authority with the power to compel their use for everyone’s net benefit. This policy has often been followed by south-east Asian and south Asian countries in the management of forestry resources, which have been placed under absolutist Forestry Departments of the government. In the case of Thailand, the government has recently proposed the use of the army to displace “squatters” from “Crown” forest areas, though widespread protest has checked this option.

The second, Lockean solution proposes that common resources must be converted into private property in order to ensure that they are used efficiently and with a view to long-term productivity. “The magic of property turns sand into gold” as one thinker of the time put it. In the Lockean view, in theory property is created by the labour of those who make productive use of common resources, and this is enshrined in law by various attempts to provide title to those who have always worked land. In practice, it has been more usually created by theft from those already making use of the “commons”, by government and capitalist interests working together either illicitly, openly or both, as can be seen in Thailand by the corruption and abuse of the land titling system already cited or the steady conversion of “Crown” forest into farming land by displaced peasants following up illegal loggers working with the connivance of government figures.

The overall theme of this conference was a rejection of both these ideas in favour of the “pre-modern” concept of a commons embedded in community life, treated not as an abstract resource but as embedded within social relationships. In this formulation, these social relationships must be seen as prior to the natural resources that are managed by them. Several papers followed this approach by treating “social capital” as the commons in question. Non-coincidentally, these papers also tended to focus on the situation of people living in urban areas and their interactions with power centres.

However, those papers which focussed upon community forests, fisheries and similar resources were almost inevitably focussed upon “marginal” peoples and positions, for example the Karen in highland north Thailand and the Dalits of India. This has an unfortunate side effect of suggesting that ideas of the “commons” can only be applied successfully to “pre-modern” communities existing in physical and cultural margins, at the edges of capitalist/modernist expansion. While from an environmentalist perspective these peoples and places are key to preserving the remaining areas of Asia in which relatively undegraded ecosystems exist, from a social and political perspective, confining the idea of the commons to marginal, eco-friendly tribes-people means that the ideals of community and equity that a commons represents are denied to the majority of people who are struggling with modernity in increasingly urbanised and market-oriented conditions. This disappearance of the centre was raised as a question to Runako Samata’s otherwise excellent paper on the increasingly marginal situation of Karen agriculturalists in northern Thailand. She outlined the marginal situation in which they exist - either continue existing patterns of shifting, quasi-communal agriculture on land that is slowly but steadily degrading and shrinking under pressure from commercial agriculture, or attempting the transition to cash crop production which promises potential high rewards, but also the certainty of large debts and high risks if the crop fails or fluctuates in price. Presenting this classic dilemma of peasant economies in this way ignored the
third option; for some or all members of the community to leave the land and join the paid workforce. Her presentation was undermined by a lack of information on the degree to which migration is pursued and the role that these migrants might play in the local economy, through remittances, absentee land ownership or similar processes.

The absence of a coherent discourse of the commons at urban and national levels leads to problems, the ramifications of which were indirectly explored by various speakers. For example, Peter Riggs pointed out in a plenary address that the WTO is now seen as a more oppressive organisation than the World Bank or the United Nations, despite the fact that its structure is inherently more democratic, with one-nation-one-vote structures. This is due to the fact that the rules of trade, originally designed to avoid political processes, have become a cover behind which to screen the use of force by more powerful nations. Exclusion of politics has also excluded the potential for democracy and concepts of the common good. Pichet Maolanond addressed the problem of the conservative nature of the Thai judiciary, who have generally ignored the provisions of the 1997 constitution requiring the recognition of community and cultural rights in their judgements. I would suggest that the absence of any discourse of the commons at the geographical and social centre, rather than the margins, of a society is a contributing factor to this conservatism and ignorance among judges and policy makers. Ajaan Yos Santasombat pointed out in the closing addresses that gatherings like this were underattended by representatives from the private sector, the government, etc, so there was a problem of “preaching to the converted”. Again, if the centre cannot see the commons as relevant to it, this problem will only continue.