

**THE POLITICS OF INLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA:  
TRIBUTE RELATIONS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

Susan Conway

SOAS, University of London

In the 19th century, and for hundreds of years before, the politics of inland Southeast Asia operated on the basis of the Tai *muang* (*muong*) system. The term describes a primary unit of political and social organisation that can mean a city or a city with village dependencies, or a number of cities each with village dependencies. A *muang* functioned through mutually beneficial relationships in defence and trade and social interaction.<sup>1</sup> The rulers were Tai princes and in the outer reaches there were hill dwelling chiefs. Most came from powerful local families. The land size of the *muang* varied, Keng Tung was comparable with Belgium and Hsenwi with Wales but some were much smaller units. The *muang* system existed wherever the Tai were a powerful force; namely in parts of Assam, in the Shan states, in southwest China, in northern Thailand and western Laos. In the Shan states the people still refer to themselves as Tai and claim that Shan is a term imposed from outside.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Sir George Scott listed the major power centres as “states” with seventeen ruled by princes, seventeen governed by senior officials (*myosa*) and eight run by hill chiefs (*ngwegunhmu*).<sup>2</sup> According to Chao Tzang (1987) there were eleven Shan states in Yunnan.<sup>3</sup> In a recent translation of Shan and Chinese records, the

number of Shan townships (many of them *muang*) was listed as seventy-seven, with seventy-five listed in Burmese records.<sup>4</sup>

The success of the *muang* system relied on political deals based on loyalty to a local ruler, his loyalty to a more powerful overlord and so on up the power structure to senior princes and dominant hill dwelling chiefs. In economic and social terms this complex scheme was bound by tribute, a form of tax or services in kind, and an annual tribute ceremony when subjects went to pledge allegiance. Shan villagers went to the palace of their local ruler and minor rulers went to senior princes and chiefs. They in turn paid tribute to China or Burma.

Until the overthrow of King Thibaw in 1885, those tributary to Burma went to the palace in Ava and later to Mandalay. The *muang* rulers tributary to China were not permitted to go to the Forbidden City (Beijing) for an audience with the emperor but went instead to Muang Meng (a Shan principality now in south west China) where tribute relations were managed. In the eighth century CE a Shan prince was expected to prostrate himself on the ground facing north towards China and received a golden Chinese seal in recognition of his tributary status.

The Shan who attended court in Burma sat in order of precedence before the king in a ceremony managed by the office of the court chamberlain. They wore spectacular forms of dress and regalia allocated to them according to sumptuary law. These laws covered the style of dress, the type of fabrics used, and the value of the jewellery and regalia for every rank. The princes wore a form of Burmese civil or military court dress

as illustrated in Burmese manuscripts. They presented the king of Burma with gold and silver tribute trees, silver measured by weight and precious and semi-precious stones. In contrast the Shan princes who were banned from entering the city of Beijing received, via the Governor of Yunnan, dragon robes, jewelled hats, sequined shoes, and gold and silver seals stamped with Chinese characters. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was recorded that the northern Shan *muang* tributary to China sent each year a total of sixty-five and a half viss (more than one hundred kilos) of silver.<sup>5</sup>

As well as silver, gems and goods in kind the Shan rulers were forced to supply labourers and artisans, and military conscripts in time of war. Given the shortage of manpower throughout inland Southeast Asia this was a major cause of tension. It is generally accepted by political historians that power in inland Southeast Asia was more related to the ownership of people than land.<sup>6</sup> Human trafficking went on at national and international level. The Chinese and Burmese frequently demanded more men than the Shan were prepared to send and when their targets were not met they invaded Shan territory, using the slightest provocation as an excuse.

In 1765 a drunken brawl in Keng Tung led to the death of a Chinese citizen. The prince of Keng Tung offered compensation to the family and promised to arrest and punish the murderer. The governor of Yunnan responded by sending in troops. Almost seventy years later the British explorer Captain Grouperus McLeod reported that in order to resist Chinese invasion the prince of Keng Tung had made a deal with the chief of neighbouring hill dwellers to disrupt Chinese supply lines. They raided the caravans as they came over the high passes, seized the pack animals, took them to their villages

where they slaughtered and ate them.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese were defeated four times in four years as a result of these guerrilla tactics.

The Shan also resisted Burmese authority, particularly when the army was focussing attention on conflicts elsewhere. When tribute demands were excessive, the princes of the *muang* threatened to appeal to China. Successive kings of Burma were reluctant to have China drawn into their disputes with the Shan and often moderated their demands. In a well-known palace story a legendary king of Mandalay muses on the history of Shan rebellions and expresses anxiety in case he should upset the princes.<sup>8</sup>

Another tactic used by the Shan when they felt under threat was to pay tribute to Burma and China as a way of appeasing them both. Some Shan princes owned two sets of tribute clothes which they wore as appropriate on state occasions. There were Chinese and Burmese representatives at some courts who kept an eye on the Shan and reported back to their governments. The British, in an attempt to assess where the real influence lay, listened to the languages spoken at the courts, generally a local form of Tai and either Burmese or Chinese.

At times the Shan tolerated Burmese occupation because of threats of invasion from neighbouring Siam. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century following the defeat of the Burmese by the Siamese, the rulers of Chiang Mai sent an army into the Shan states where they captured thousands of people who were forcibly marched to Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang and Nan for resettlement.<sup>9</sup> In the 1840s the diplomat Thao Sitthimongkhon was sent from Chiang Mai to the Shan states. He reported that one and

a half thousand Burmese troops were stationed in Muang Nai and he reckoned there were twenty thousand Shan males eligible for Burmese military service if the Siamese should attempt another invasion.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Shan princes enlisted hill dwellers to help protect them from Burmese and Chinese incursions, they could not be relied on as permanent allies in this fluctuating power game. In the 19th century fear of the Kachin was particularly strong. The Prince of Hsenwi, like other princes, paid many kilos of silver to stop them raiding his state. If not appeased the Kachin were capable of torching settlements and kidnapping Shan villagers who they sold as slaves.

When the British and French colonised inland Southeast Asia, their representatives were confused by the *muang* and tribute systems. Europeans put little effort into understanding the concept of “areas of influence” where local deals meant the balance of power was constantly shifting and the aim of the Shan was to maintain a degree of independence. The Europeans wanted clearly defined boundaries marked on accurate maps showing watersheds and mountain ranges. Because they thought they could benefit from a western-style survey, the Chinese and Siamese agreed. In 1893 a British delegation led by Sir George Scott met with the Siamese, in 1894 with the French, and in 1900 with the Chinese. It was agreed that land placed under Chinese jurisdiction be determined by the watersheds of the River Salween and River N’maika. The land to the west of the Mekong River was allocated to the Shan states under British administration and the French took control of the land on the eastern bank (western Laos). Some Tai

rulers lost land in a process that marked the beginning of a slow decline in the thousand year-old Tai *muang* system.

Tribute ceremonies continued to operate informally between the *muang* that had been placed under Chinese jurisdiction, and under France and Britain. Villagers crossed the new boundaries that they did not recognise, to trade and for social interaction, although visits by foreigners required passes from the relevant authorities. The Shan princes and hill chiefs, now under British administration, took an oath of allegiance to Queen Victoria, and surrendered forest and mineral rights. They were expected to pay tribute annually, as they had done under previous Burmese regimes. Their affairs were administered through the offices of the Governor of India, a process that reduced them to mere advisors in an alien bureaucratic system that had no room for the complexities of the *muang* system. Paradoxically, when the British staged a grand spectacle of Empire at the Delhi Durbar of 1903, the Shan princes processed in the elaborate tribute dress and regalia that was a symbol of earlier tribute relations with Burma and China. In the 1930s, British policy makers developed the concept of the Shan states as part of “Frontier Areas” (homelands of the non-Burmans) that should eventually be united with “Burma Proper”. This concept suited the Burmans who viewed the Shan *muang* as tribute possessions, now to be brought firmly under their control. Meanwhile the Chinese reduced the status of the Shan in the Chinese Shan states by labelling them as a “minority” among many minorities in Yunnan.

The Shan thus lost land and influence, and most importantly the ability to broker deals among the *muang*, hill dwellers and ultimately with Burma and China. As their

complex social networks collapsed, they were unable to maintain political independence. The final blow came in 1962 when the Shan rulers were stripped of power and hereditary rights.

In essence nothing has changed in Western understanding, particularly in the media, who portray the Shan as a “minority group” living in the “Frontier Areas”. The fact that their history, language and culture developed independently over at least a thousand years is rarely acknowledged. Today they survive in a land occupied by the Burmese military. Many have fled to northern Thailand where the local population considers them to be “Tai brothers”. As such, they have not been placed in refugee camps and many have blended into the local population while others are forced to squat illegally.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rhum, Michael, ‘The Cosmology of Power in Lanna’, *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 75, 1987, pp. 91-107.

<sup>2</sup> Scott, J. G., and Hardiman, J.P., *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States*, Rangoon, 1900, 1901.

<sup>3</sup> Chao Tzang Yawngwhe, *The Shan of Burma*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Shan State Map Project, Chiang Mai University, (in preparation).

<sup>5</sup> Grabowsky, V., and Turton, A., *The Gold and Silver Road of Trade and Friendship*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Steinberg, David, J., *In Search of Southeast Asia*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> McCleod, Captain W.C. ‘A Journal kept by Captain W.C. McCleod, Assistant to the Commissioner in the Tenassarim Provinces during his Mission to the Frontiers of China 1836-1837’, The British Library, India and Oriental Collections, London.

<sup>8</sup> Fielding-Hall, *Palace Tales*, Harper Bros., 1900, reprint White Lotus, Bangkok 1997.

---

<sup>9</sup> Grabowsky, V. 'Forced Resettlement Campaigns in Northern Thailand during the Early Bangkok Period' in *Fifth International Conference on Thai Studies*, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Report of Thao Sitthimongkhon on the Reestablishment of Chiang Rai and its Borders' in *The Burma-Thailand Frontier over Sixteen Decades*, Wilson, C.M., and Hanks, L.M., Ohio University, Center for International Studies, Southeast Asia Series, no. 70, Athens, Ohio, 1985.