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Negotiating Shan Identity in Northern Thailand

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Introduction

This paper is not the paper I originally set out to write. I had intended to discuss the topic of “Buddhism and Shan Identity,” based on my previous research in a rural Shan community in Mae Hong Son province. I have been conducting research in this community for the past 28 years. But last year I had the opportunity to live in the city of Chiang Mai, during which I was able to explore parts of the city’s Shan community, as well as renew contacts with Shan friends in the countryside. This experience prompted some thinking about the different ways Shan Buddhism and culture is manifested in rural and urban contexts, but it also complicated my understanding of both “Shan Buddhism” and what it means to be Shan.

During my year in Chiang Mai, I encountered a wide variety of Shans who would seem, on the face of it, to have little in common with one another: intellectuals with advanced degrees who had formed study groups to discuss “Shan culture,” mini-bus drivers who listened to tapes of Shan pop music as they cruised the streets of Chiang Mai, itinerant ritual specialists – fluent in the Shan script – who performed at Buddhist ceremonies, activists and community organizers who worked with Shan refugees, students from Mae Hong Son attending community colleges who could read Thai but not Shan, and a host of recent arrivals employed as gardeners, cooks, construction workers, and clothing salesmen at the famous Chiang Mai night bazaar. Thinking about the sheer variety of their perspectives and concerns raised a host of questions for how I might begin to talk intelligently about “Shan Buddhism and culture.”

So before I could pursue my original topic, I felt I needed to sort through some of the complications that surround the way Shan identity is currently being constructed in northern Thailand. In this paper, I will try to lay out what I see as the main contributing factors to this process, beginning with that area I know best, Mae Hong Son province, and moving from there to a consideration of similar issues in the city of Chiang Mai. I am particularly interested in drawing attention to the increasingly complicated connections that exist between “different kinds of Shan” in northern Thailand and what these connections mean for emerging views of Shan identity. To illustrate both the differences and the connections, I will compare aspects of the

“Pau Sang Long” or novice ordination ceremonies I observed last year in Chiang Mai with earlier, village-based ceremonies I have attended.

Finally, I must point out that my remarks today should be understood as very much a “work-in-progress.” I offer them in the spirit of a preliminary field report and would welcome your comments and suggestions as I continue to refine them further in the coming months.

The Mae Hong Son Shan

Let’s start with Mae Hong Son, Thailand. Mae Hong Son province, near the Thai-Burma border, has a large Shan population, most of whom live in well-established villages. (The one I work in was settled over a hundred years ago.) These Shan villages have traditionally had strong ties with both the Shan State and with the northern Thai culture area that is centered in Chiang Mai. Although, over time, the relative strength of various aspects of these ties has fluctuated – with ties to the Shan State dominating at some points and ties to Chiang Mai at others, the villages in Mae Hong Son have managed to maintain important political, economic, social, cultural, and religious relationships in both directions. Looking at the most recent history, I would suggest that two main issues – one connected with each of these two “poles” of influence – have been dominating everyday life for Mae Hong Son Shan and demonstrate the ongoing importance of their dual identity.

The first, emanating from the Thai polity, has to do with the tremendous push for rural economic development that has accompanied Mae Hong Son’s increasing integration into the larger Thai economy. From the building of new roads and the expansion of the school system, to the promotion of tourism in the province and the increasing market orientation of area farmers, Mae Hong Son is experiencing the changes that accompany rapid economic growth. This has led many local Shan households to experiment with new livelihood strategies with an aim toward increasing their social and economic mobility. It has also, in the process, brought them into greater and more frequent contact with Thais and the Thai state.

The second issue, which is associated with events on the other side of the border, has to do with the recent dramatic increase in the flow of refugees from the Shan State into northern Thailand, including Mae Hong Son province. Many of these migrants have gone directly to urban areas in Thailand such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok, but some of them have stayed in the countryside, joining established Shan villages where they work primarily as agricultural laborers. Although there has always been some flow of people back and forth across the border, especially during the peak agricultural seasons when young men from the Shan State have traditionally come to work as *luk liang* (or “hired hands”) in Shan villages in Mae Hong Son, what has changed in the last ten years has been an increase in both the sheer number of people coming and in the number who are migrating permanently, often as entire families, rather than as single men looking for temporary, seasonal work.¹

¹ For example, this past year in the Shan village where I have been conducting research, I found that roughly a third of the households were composed entirely of people who were born in the Shan State (compared with only 7% in

What has been the impact of these two processes (a rapidly changing economy coupled with a flood of refugees) on the local Mae Hong Son Shan? I have spoken elsewhere² about the strictly economic effects of this situation, which are considerable. Here I want to concentrate primarily on the social and cultural effects of these developments. But I want to preface that discussion with an observation: While the *economic* effects of the two processes have been more or less consistent with one another and have tended to reinforce each other,³ the *social and cultural* effects of these developments have been more disruptive, resulting in new tensions and social conflicts, but also in new alliances and new or “revised” cultural productions. It is these disruptions, and the accommodations they elicit, that I want to explore in this paper.

Complicating Shan Identity

Against this backdrop, then, what sorts of social and cultural changes are visible?

Simply put, I will argue that the two processes have “pulled” the local Shan in opposite directions – the first process pulls toward Thai-ness and assimilation, the second process serves as a “reminder” of one’s roots and pulls toward Shan-ness. The attempt to reconcile these oppositional tendencies has led to increased self consciousness about culture and customs, and to various new ways of “remembering” what it means to be Shan.

One example of how this works is the dramatically increased emphasis being placed on formal education as the engine of social mobility. More and more village children are being sent to school in Mae Hong Son town, often at considerable sacrifice by their parents, because the schools there are perceived to be of significantly higher quality than the village school. And a surprising number of those who complete high school are also being sent on for further degrees in higher education, a situation that keeps local Shan children out of the work force (and immersed in the Thai-speaking world) much longer than previous generations, while making them deeply ambivalent about farming by the time they do finish their schooling.

This pattern is not restricted to those in school. The increased involvement with government-related jobs, trips to the hospital in Chiang Mai, state-sponsored agricultural cooperatives, and participation in various tourism ventures that cater to visitors from outside the province (to name only a few of the most prominent developments) has led to more frequent use of the Thai

1991). Further, if one adds in those households that have inter-married couples, almost half (48%) of the households in this village had at least one adult member born in the Shan State (compared with only 11% in 1991).

² “Changing household strategies in a Shan community of Mae Hong Son province: The impact of cross-border migrants and capitalist development,” presentation to RCSD (Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development) at Chiang Mai University on June 13, 2007; and (with Steve Cohn) “Evolving Economic and Gender Practices in a Shan Community of Mae Hong Son province,” presentation at IAFPE (International Association for Feminist Economics) in Bangkok on June 30, 2007.

³ That is, the presence of large numbers of migrants has created a new work force that can be harnessed to the expanding ambitions of local Shan landowners, fueling their aims of social mobility.

language and increased comfort levels with Thai cultural forms. This creates a social climate in which some degree of blending with Thai (or Northern Thai) culture is virtually inevitable. Further, to the extent that people actually move out of the province and pursue livelihoods in Chiang Mai and beyond, their “Shan-ness,” in these Thai contexts, becomes invisible.

Interestingly, the presence of the migrants is serving as a check on this process. For every Mae Hong Son Shan who moves away to pursue education or a job in Chiang Mai or Bangkok, two more arrive from the Shan State and contribute to the local community. The village schools that the local children have largely abandoned are now filled with migrant children, along with a smattering of local children whose parents cannot afford to send them to town. Similarly, the Buddhist temples that were once staffed primarily by Shan (and occasionally Northern Thai) monks from the Thai side of the border are now almost exclusively staffed by monks from the Shan State. When I asked about this, people told me: “Our boys do not stay long in the *sangha* because they want to continue their education and get good jobs. That’s not an option for young men from the Shan State, so they go into the *sangha* and stay there.” In addition, some of the migrants are marrying local Shan villagers, establishing households where people of different backgrounds can comfortably mingle, and giving each of the spouses a stake in the fate of their relatives on both sides of the border. All of these factors help to keep the Shan presence vibrant and visible in Mae Hong Son province.

Beyond the local level, these processes are generating different kinds of Shans across northern Thailand. Here I am referring not only to the obvious contrasts between Shans born in Thailand and Shans born in the Shan State, but also to the differences between those who eventually manage to obtain Thai citizenship (regardless of birthplace) and those who remain “without I.D. cards,” between those who have college degrees and those whose unsettled childhoods have allowed for little or no formal education, between those who have found work in the towns and cities of northern Thailand and those who remain employed in the rural agricultural sector. Increasingly significant class differences combined with vastly different life experiences and varying degrees of identification with (and commitment to) Shan nationalist projects has produced a highly diverse group of people in northern Thailand, all of whom call themselves “Shan.”

How do these various sorts of Shan regard each other? Among the Mae Hong Son Shan I talked to most frequently, this diversity has encouraged a certain degree of self-consciousness and a heightened concern with “authenticity” and “origins,” a process that tends to highlight the potentially positive role of the migrants in remembering and recovering Shan customs and identity, which are now perceived to be under threat of loss.

But it has also generated ambivalence about these developments in a way that suggests a tension between a rising concern with social class, on the one hand, and a desire for ethnic solidarity on the other. At times, the local villagers I spoke with were anxious to distance themselves from the migrants, employing a discourse of difference that invoked a mix of positive and negative attributes. In these contexts, migrants are alternately described as dirt poor, a bit rough around the edges, but admirably hardworking, or (less flatteringly) rumored to be shrewd, calculating, and secretly ambitious.

At the same time, the very experience of social and economic mobility that allows many Mae Hong Son Shan to see themselves as “different” from the migrants is also accompanied by pressures for further integration into mainstream Thai society, a situation that calls into question the continuity of Shan culture and tradition. While villagers, for example, very much want their children to pursue schooling outside of the village, they are not blind to the fact that children educated in this manner are less willing to return to the village and carry on the community traditions. Similarly, Shan professionals living in Chiang Mai worry aloud that their children are not learning to speak Shan and that they are largely unfamiliar with the ritual life and village customs that were so meaningful to them. In short, people are becoming increasingly aware that Shan culture will no longer simply reproduce itself automatically, but they have found no easy answers to the dilemma this presents.

At these moments, when wrestling with these issues, Shan State migrants are more likely to be described as “the same as us,” and perceived as a cultural resource. A local Shan schoolteacher, for example, has built a miniature version of a traditional style Shan house on the school grounds which, she explained to me, is there so that the children will “know” and “not forget” what these houses looked like.^{4 5} She has also invited some of the older Shan migrants who are known to be skilled in the traditional “bird” and “deer” dances to teach these dances to the schoolchildren, a project that has been very successful.

To some extent, such efforts at cultural recovery are part of a larger movement in contemporary Thai society to acknowledge and celebrate local customs. Schools throughout Thailand, for example, often choose to designate Fridays as “wear your ethnic costume day,” and the Mae Hong Son schools participate in this practice, with children donning traditional Shan “suits” they have purchased from Shan State traders in the local market. (Characteristically, that is the *only* time children and young people are seen wearing them, aside from a few religious and/or ceremonial/performance occasions.)

But arguably the largest area where Shan migrants function as a cultural resource, and where extensive cooperation is evident between local Shans and the migrant community, is in their joint production of novice ordinations, the famous Pau Sang Long ceremonies.⁶

⁴ Her own home in the village is one of the more upscale ones, built in the modern urban style common throughout northern Thailand.

⁵ Notice that there is no need to build a model “Shan temple” because there are still plenty of these in use.

⁶ Because these ceremonies are so rich, and so important to Shan of all backgrounds, there is much more that could be said than I will have time for today. (We will also hear more about them later by other participants in the conference.) Here I will have to restrict my remarks to their significance for understanding contemporary issues of Shan identity and save the rest for another venue.

Novice Ordinations in Mae Hong Son and in Chiang Mai

I was alerted to this relationship on my first visit to one of the Shan temples in Chiang Mai. As I studied a prominently displayed bulletin board filled with photos of the previous year's Pau Sang Long ceremony, I was surprised to find pictures of people I knew – people from Mae Hong Son who had apparently come to participate in what has now become an annual ceremony in Chiang Mai, with large numbers of boys from the migrant community ordained each year. Some of the key organizers for the event, it turned out, had roots in Mae Hong Son. Other Mae Hong Son Shan had come to serve as ritual specialists, to help staff the temple kitchens, or simply to enjoy the festivities. So it was with great anticipation that I looked forward to the Pau Sang Long ceremonies planned for the following spring, as I was anxious to compare it with similar rituals I had observed in village settings.

In my previous writing about the Pau Sang Long,⁷ I suggested that it be viewed not only as a rite of passage for the boys, but also as rite of passage for the adult sponsors of the ceremony (especially the women), for whom – at least in the village context – it was also a major life event. This interpretation was based on my experience of Pau Sang Long ceremonies prior to 1992, that is, prior to the recent influx of large numbers of Shan migrants into the community. At that time, the ceremony accomplished (among other things) the goal of highlighting a person's moral career, confirming their status as a devout Buddhist and establishing their public status as a community "patron." The people who served as major sponsors of a Pau Sang Long in the village were the primary financial backers of the event, the ones who contributed the most money and who also agreed to handle the myriad unexpected costs that arise in the course of any given ceremony. Others (often the parents of the boys being ordained) served as additional sponsors whose contribution was limited to a set amount. The village as a whole provided the labor for the preparations (which, at that time at least, were very labor intensive), and the relative success or failure of the event thus reflected on both the major sponsor(s) and on the entire village. The primary *participants* in these village ordination rituals were the villagers themselves, but guests from other nearby villages were also invited to come and watch, and these guests played an important role in providing an *audience* for the village's cultural production.

More recently, and partly in response, I suspect, to the processes outlined earlier of economic development and the influx of refugees, Pau Sang Long ceremonies in Mae Hong Son have gotten larger and more extravagant, with many more boys being ordained at a time.⁸ They have

⁷ Eberhardt (2006), *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-Transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community*.

⁸ This is another example, perhaps, of the kind of "ritual inflation" that often occurs in traditional settings during the early years of economic development, before the full logic of a more market-oriented mindset begins to deter people. Some segments of the Shan population, though, have already adopted a more critical view. Consider this excerpt from the shanland.org website, March 17, 2007:

Shan novitiation ceremonies in Thailand

March and April are the months when Shans, wherever they are, squander their hard-earned fortune to turn their sons, nephews, grandsons and grandnephews into novice monks. A straightforward, simple and cheaper way is just to buy a set of yellow robes, the uniform for monks, and ask the abbot of a monastery to accept your ward into the religious fold.

Outrageously, that is not the Shan way. Shans, no matter how poor they are, love pomp and ceremony

also been incorporating more cultural elements derived from the Shan State (such as more widespread use of traditional Shan suits for the men, employing more singers and musicians, and so on). But the role of the major sponsor, in these village ceremonies, has remained intact; if anything, it has taken on even further status and prestige, since the presence of needy members of the migrant community offers many opportunities for local patrons to display their generosity and enlarge their entourage.

The two Pau Sang Long ceremonies I observed last spring in Chiang Mai (one at Wat Ku Tao and one at Wat Pa Pao) were consistent with this trend toward “mega-ordinations” (with 111 boys ordained at Wat Ku Tao, and 63 at Wat Pa Pao), and both followed a basic overall structure that was familiar to me from my observations of village ordinations, but there were also many interesting differences. Although I will not have time to discuss more than a few of these today, I would like to draw your attention to those that I think are especially relevant for understanding how Shan identity is currently being negotiated in northern Thailand.

The first critical difference to mention is the contrast in the social and political backdrop of these two venues. In Mae Hong Son villages, Pau Sang Long ceremonies are performed by Shan, largely for other Shan. While there are often tourists present (Thai and *farang*) at the ordinations that take place in Mae Hong Son town, few of these make it out to the villages. In Chiang Mai, however, the ceremonies take place within the larger context of northern Thai culture and society, and in a political climate that is deeply ambivalent toward the Shan migrant community.

This is reflected in a significant shift in the overall focus of the ceremony; it has changed from an event that is focused on a specific village to one that is focused on a specific ethnicity, becoming in the Chiang Mai version a “festival” primarily devoted to *celebrating Shan ethnicity*. This shift in focus is accomplished by several specific differences in organization.

First, the role of the major sponsor in village ceremonies has been replaced in the Chiang Mai version by that of the “organizing committee,” a move that takes the spotlight off of an individual who is intended to be the personification of Buddhist piety and replaces it with a group of people who are seen more as community leaders and organizers. The eligibility requirements for these roles also shift from the need for a generous person with substantial wealth (usually middle-aged or older) to a need for energetic individuals with practical knowledge and skills (usually somewhat younger). Although the organizing committee may have a leader or chairperson, this person’s role is less that of “patron” and more that of “professional event planner.” Those who serve on the organizing committee are not personally responsible for the expenses of the ceremony (in fact they may be people of quite modest means), but they *are* supposed to keep track of what must be bought, who has yet to pay their portion, and so forth.

and will spend all they have and all they can borrow to dress their sons in colorful princely attire and organize a fitting festival for him before surrendering him to the abbot.

After this critical introduction, however, the website went on to list the dates and venues of upcoming Pau Sang Long ceremonies throughout northern Thailand, apparently resigned to the unflagging interest of their readership in these events.

Since the task of organizing literally hundreds of individuals, choreographing their movements during the 3-day festival, publicizing the event in two languages, and coordinating everything with the relevant city officials requires skills that clearly improve with experience, the same individuals are often asked to serve on this committee for several years in a row. Hence, unlike the village sponsor of a Paui Sang Long, whose role is that of someone undergoing a once (or perhaps twice) in a lifetime rite of passage and who is usually a parent or other relative of one of the boys about to be ordained, the role of serving as an organizer for the Chiang Mai ceremonies is more likely to be done by the same person repeatedly and is detached from any specific relationship to one of the boys; it is, in other words, becoming *professionalized*. Unlike the ceremonies held in Shan villages in Mae Hong Son, organizing a ceremony in Chiang Mai and coordinating it with city officials requires Thai language skills and other kinds of expertise that newly arrived immigrants often do not have. Hence, in the Chiang Mai ordination rituals, the public role of the parents of the boys (who are often recent migrants) is muted, while the public role of the organizers (who are more often local Shan, or migrants who have been in Thailand for many years) is highlighted.

A second significant difference with implications for how Shan identity is being constructed has to do with the itinerary of the boys during the 3-day ceremony. In the village, the boys about to be ordained are brought to every household where (in anticipation of their new role as members of the *sangha*) people use their visit as an opportunity to make merit. The boys receive small offerings and chant the blessings they have been practicing for the past six weeks, while the people of the household sit respectfully.⁹ Meanwhile, the act of physically going to each and every house in the village serves to ritually define the boundaries of the community.

This focus on a spatially bounded community is not possible in Chiang Mai, of course, because the boys themselves are not from a single “place” (they have been gathered from towns all over northern Thailand and the Shan State); rather, they are from a single “ethnicity.” In the Chiang Mai versions of the ceremony, the boys were taken instead to pay respect at a long list of prominent Chiang Mai temples, receiving the resident abbot’s blessing at each one. This essentially reverses the pattern observed in the village, where other people paid respect *to the boys* (and, by implication, to the Shan *sangha* they were about to join). In the Chiang Mai case, the act of going to each of the prominent temples becomes a ritual of deference, a way of acknowledging the status of the northern Thai temples and monks, and – in the context of local media reports that tend to portray Shan youth as rebellious troublemakers – a way for the Shan community of Chiang Mai to publicly proclaim their willingness to live within and respect the local authorities.

As this interpretation indicates, the shift in emphasis from “place-based” village novice ordinations that celebrate the achievements of a particular community to those in Chiang Mai that celebrate the more general concept of “Shan ethnicity” entails a corresponding shift in audience. For village ordination ceremonies, the audience is primarily other (Shan) villages, the nearby communities with which they form an ongoing ritual network. For the Chiang Mai Paui Sang Long ceremonies, the primary audience is *other ethnic groups*, notably the Thais. This was indicated in many different ways, from the printed invitations that had Shan script on one side and Thai on the other (but no English), to the presence of the city mayor (who spoke in Thai) at

⁹ The repetition of these chants at each household is also considered good practice for the boys.

the opening ceremonies, to the prominent display of banners depicting the Thai king in monk's robes that was carried aloft at the head of all processions. Members of the organizing committee for the Wat Ku Tao ceremony were interviewed on a local Chiang Mai TV station (dressed in matching Shan suits), while the local branch of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) helped sponsor the ceremony organized by Wat Pa Pao. The Wat Pa Pao ceremony was particularly set up to attract tourists by holding its opening ceremonies at Tha Phae Gate, a prominent and central location.

Finally, the labor for the ordination ceremonies in Chiang Mai is organized rather differently from the locally-based labor pool used in the village ordinations. Many tasks, such as food preparation, are sub-contracted out to local entrepreneurs (some Shan, some northern Thai) who rent space in the temple courtyard in which to sell their wares. The lively market of clothing, toys, and Shan music tapes and VCDs lends a carnival atmosphere to the Chiang Mai ordinations, while the nightly live Shan rock bands drew many times more people than the audience listening to traditional Shan opera at the other end of the temple grounds.

There are many more comparisons that could be made, but I hope this will suffice to indicate some of the ways the migrant community and the locally born Shan are cooperating to create an event that accomplishes a variety of goals for different kinds of Shans, all of whom face challenges in maintaining their ethnic identity. In Chiang Mai, these ordination ceremonies accomplish the goal of giving visibility to an otherwise invisible ethnic minority in the city.

Buddhism and Shan Identity

The example of the Chiang Mai novice ordinations shows how Buddhism – and, in particular, Buddhist ritual – is serving as an arena that draws different kinds of Shan groups together and is mutually reinforcing of their identity as “Shan Buddhists.”

In some ways, Buddhism worked better as an ethnic marker in Mae Hong Son, an area that Shan have traditionally shared with their non-Buddhist upland neighbors, than it does in Chiang Mai, where they are surrounded by northern Thai who are also very much Buddhist. In this context, the Pau Sang Long ceremony gains added significance as a practice that is recognized as distinctively “Shan” and thus provides a way to distinguish Shan Buddhist practice from that of other Buddhist groups in the area.

But ordination rituals are not the only arena where Buddhism is bringing different sorts of Shans together. Monks from the Shan State, some with longstanding connections on the Thai side of the border, have been fundraising among Shan in the Chiang Mai area to rebuild temples in the Shan State that have fallen into disrepair. More recently, Buddhist merit-making ritual provided a venue for various groups of Shan in northern Thailand to commemorate the recent killings of Buddhist monks in Burma, with ceremonies at Wat Ku Tao and at various sites along the Thai-Burma border. On a less somber note, Shan organizers in Chiang Mai are using schools and more informal educational opportunities based at Shan Buddhist temples to reach Shan youth. Some even talk of trying to create new “Shan communities” outside of Chiang Mai that will feature a Shan temple as a primary focal point.

Shan ethnicity in northern Thailand is in the process of reinventing itself. Perhaps this process (including any professed nostalgia for the past) has been going on for as long as we have known about Shan. Surely the Shan that my generation of anthropologists first encountered in the writing of Edmund Leach, negotiating their identities with their Kachin neighbors and the British colonial officers, were anything but static. Since then, Shan communities have endured political suppression, economic upheaval, and social dislocation under the military government of Myanmar. They have had to cope with the militarization of its youth and with the articulation and promotion of various nationalist discourses by Shan armies committed to resisting the Burmese. In Thailand, they have been subject to the demands of the Thai state, including the need to subscribe to royalist rhetoric and to defer to Thai regimes of etiquette, language forms, schooling, and so on. Throughout all these changing circumstances, they have maintained a sense of Shan-ness, but it is unlikely that the substance of that Shan-ness has remained untouched by the tumultuous events surrounding it. In that sense, the unsettled circumstances that greet us at the turn of the 21st century are no different from those of the past. I expect the Shan communities I know to go on reinventing themselves in ever more resourceful ways, and I look forward to chronicling the process in the years to come.