

# Being an Urban Tai/Shan in the 21st Century: Challenges and Solutions

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**Abstract**--The recent worldwide trend to move from rural areas to big cities as well as economic and security issues has brought thousands of Tai/Shans out of their villages and small towns in Shan State to urban centres in Thailand and Myanmar where they are exposed to more modernized languages and cultures. The children of many of these emigrants have very little opportunity to practice their culture and risk losing their Tai/Shan ethnic identity. This paper employs the social identity theory in an attempt to synthesize a conceptual framework to generate ideas that may help sustain the Tai/Shan identity and culture in urban Tai/Shan communities.

**Index Terms**--Tai, Dai, Shan, Social Identity, Ethnic Identity, Cultural Identity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the Tai/Shan people of Shan State (Myanmar), Yunnan province of China, and Northern Thailand live in small towns or villages, which are generally monolingual and mono-cultural. In such an environment, one need not go beyond living a typical Tai/Shan village or small town life to be speaking one's own language and practicing one's own culture.

The worldwide trend to move to big cities as well as economic and security issues has brought a wave of Tai/Shans out of Shan State to regional urban centres, such as Bangkok, Chiangmai, Mandalay and Yangon where they are exposed to more modernized languages and cultures. The author knows many cases in his social circle where the children of these emigrants have better access to education and training but very limited knowledge of their own language and native culture. Combined with other factors, this lack of exposure to Tai/Shan culture may lead them to not identifying themselves with the Tai/Shan ethnic community.

By employing the social identity theory, this paper attempts to identify the factors that led to ethnic identity erosion of a previous wave of Tai/Shan emigrants that moved to urban centres in British Burma. The insight gained from this analysis is used to synthesize a conceptual framework, which may be used as a tool to generate ideas for sustaining the Tai/Shan identity and culture in urban Tai/Shan communities.

Section II of this paper describes the problem of ethnic/cultural identity erosion among some Tai/Shan emigrants and identifies some of its possible causes. Section

III proposes a conceptual framework, which may be used as a conceptual tool to generate ideas to mitigate the identity erosion problem. Concluding remarks are given in section IV.

Note that some of the statements in this paper are drawn from personal experience, which according to [1], is a valid source of information for academic research.

## II. PROBLEM DEFINITION AND ANALYSIS

The term Tai/Shan in this paper refers to an ethnic community that includes, but is not limited to, native Tai (any dialect) speakers or offspring of native Tai speakers in Shan State and Myanmar, Dehong Dai speakers of China and Thai Yai and Thai Kheun speakers of Thailand. Most members of this ethnic group live within the boundaries of what is officially known as the Union of Myanmar, particularly in Shan and Kachin states.

### A. Ethnic/Cultural Identity Erosion

The emigration of Tai/Shans of Shan State began before the arrival of the British as evidenced by the existence of Tai/Shan villages in Myanmar proper. Unlike the earlier emigrants, the Tai/Shan emigrants of the 20th early and mid century headed for British administered towns and cities in Myanmar proper, such as Yangon (Rangoon) and Shan State, such as Taunggyi and Kalaw, in search of educational, professional and business opportunities [2], [3]. Among them were some young emigrants from the Tai/Shan ruling families and the top tier civil servants. This wave of elite Tai/Shan emigrants will be referred to as Wave X emigrants from this point on. These emigrants included many young Tai/Shans from elite families and none of the cities they moved to for education and career opportunities had significant Tai speaking population. In their adopted hometowns, Wave X emigrants and their children learned to communicate in fluent English and Burmese, received modern education and joined non-traditional professions. Some of them went even further to pursue advanced studies and careers in the west. However, many Wave X emigrants failed to sustain a strong sense of Tai/Shan ethnic identity and their children, most of whom do not speak a word of Tai/Shan, do not consider themselves ethnic Tai/Shan at all. The loss of that generation of well educated and members is a significant loss for the Tai/Shan ethnic community because it entered the modern world with very few educated members, and it is still struggling to negotiate its existence in the twenty first century world.

A case in point is that of two Tai/Shan sisters from a central

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Shan State, whom the author knows personally. Their parents sent the elder one to a missionary school in Moulmein in the 1920s and then to Rangoon university, where she became one of the first Tai/Shan women to get a university degree. The younger one attended a local school up to grade seven. The children of the elder sister grew up to be a UK trained nuclear physicist, a doctor, an engineer and an administrator. All of her grandchildren have left Myanmar to live and work in the west. However, none of her children and grandchildren speaks Tai/Shan. On the other hand, both children of the younger sister went to the local school in their native town and grew up to be a farmer and a housewife. Although her grandchildren do not have the kind of educational opportunities that their second cousins had, they all understand Tai/Shan and still identify themselves with the Tai/Shan community.

The worldwide trend to move to big cities as well as economic and security issues has brought another wave of Tai/Shans out of Shan State to regional urban centres, such as Bangkok, Chiangmai, Mandalay and Yangon over the past ten to twenty years. They will be referred to as Wave Y emigrants. Some of the major destinations are Bangkok, Chiangmai, Mandalay and Yangon. Some emigrants use these places as stepping stones to move on to Singapore, Japan and the west. Consequently, one major challenge facing the Tai/Shan ethnic community is to prevent the repetition of its loss of well educated members through erosion of Tai/Shan ethnic-cultural identity among this wave of Tai/Shan emigrants and their descendants.

### B. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, which was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979, is a diffuse but interrelated group of social psychological theories concerned with when and why individuals identify with, and behave as part of social groups. Its main points may be summarized as follows.

1) *Identification*: Social identification is a perception of oneness with a group of persons [4]. This group identity then becomes an integral aspect of an individual's sense of 'who they are' [5].

2) *Categorization and Comparison*: Social identification stems from the categorization of individuals [4], and human beings have the tendency to put themselves and others into categories [6]. Studies by Turner and Tajfel (1986) showed that the mere act of individuals categorizing themselves as group members was sufficient to lead them to display in-group favoritism [7]. The reason may be that, after identifying themselves with a certain group, individuals seek to achieve positive self-esteem by positively differentiating their in-group from a comparison out-group on some valued dimension [7]. Moreover, the need to enhance their self-esteem would lead individuals to activities, which are associated with the identity, and which they believe will improve their in-group's position relative to comparison out-groups.

### C. Problem Analysis

Interviewing some Wave X emigrants within the author's

family circle revealed several reasons for the erosion of Tai/Shan identity. This section paper discusses two of them. Firstly, membership in the Tai/Shan community offers no attractions for the children of Wave X emigrants. Secondly, the circumstances of the time did not lend themselves to formation of culturally active Tai/Shan communities in Myanmar urban centres.

1) *Lack of Attraction*: According to one aspect of the social identity theory, individuals in a group want to see 'us' as different from and better than 'them' in a comparison out-group in order to enhance their own self-esteem [7]. In light of this, the Tai/Shan ethnic community of early and mid twentieth century was not an attractive group to be in. The Tai/Shan society in Shan State and Myanmar proper at the turn of the twentieth century was a peasant society that had a traditional form of government. Its forms of cultural expressions, such as dances, songs, festivals were meant to take place in rural settings for mainly illiterate, rice farming peasants. In fact, some states, such as Laikha, brought in Burman entertainers for major events in their capital towns and there was already a notion among some members of the Tai/Shan community that the Burman culture was more sophisticated and advanced than their own. For example, a former Tai/Shan Saopha recently told this author that he fell in love with the richness of Burman culture when he first got his Gramophone in the 1930s when the Burman had already developed a record industry for their urbanized population. It was in this backdrop that Wave X emigrants moved to Myanmar urban centres, where they were exposed to more of urbanized and modernized Burman culture as well avenues to advance themselves intellectually, professionally and economically in ways that most Tai/Shans could not even dream of. Under such circumstances, it was very difficult for these young Tai/Shan emigrants to bolster their self esteem through expressing membership in their ethnic community. These Tai/Shan emigrants were looking forward to modernity while their perception of Tai/Shan ethnic community is a peasant society ruled by feudal lords that had comparatively back-ward forms of cultural expressions.

2) *Barriers to Forming Active Tai/Shan Communities*: Even for Wave X emigrants who wanted to remain part of the Tai/Shan ethnic community, there were barriers to forming culturally active communities in their adopted home-towns. These barriers included the lack of critical mass as well as modern forms of cultural expressions that would appeal to educated urban dwellers. Moreover, virtually no Tai/Shan language books, periodicals, recorded music and movies were available to fulfill the intellectual and cultural needs of these newly educated Tai/Shan emigrants. Without being part of a culturally active Tai/Shan communities to counter the attraction new found groups, the Tai/Shan identity in many members of Wave X emigrants became either dormant or faded away even if they were willing to identify with the Tai/Shan ethnic community when they left Shan State. Consciously or unconsciously, they chose not to pass down their Tai/Shan linguistic and cultural heritage to their children.

### III. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

It is helpful to restate that Wave Y emigrants are the Tai/Shan emigrants who have moved to major cities in Myanmar and Thailand as well as Singapore and Japan over the past twenty years. This section uses the insight gained in the analysis of the previous section to help answer the question, "how can we minimize the chance of ethnic identity erosion among Wave Y Tai/Shan emigrants?"

In comparison with Wave X emigrants, there are sufficiently large numbers of Wave Y emigrants in Bangkok, Chiangmai, Mandalay, and Yangon to form cultural active communities. Moreover, modern Tai/Shan books, songs and videos are available on various media including the internet. However, many urban based Tai/Shan youths may not yet find the Tai/Shan community to be an attractive group. In light of the material presented in section II, it is clear that the Tai/Shan ethnic community should:

1. Make itself attractive for city dwelling Tai/Shan youths to identify with;
2. Create an environment in which community members can participate in activities that are aimed at the advancement of the community;
3. Be open to Tai/Shan youths with no or little prior knowledge of their own language and culture.

#### A. Attractiveness

The messages, which contemporary young Tai/Shans receive from the core members of the Tai/Shan ethnic community, urge them not to abandon the community by speaking the language, attending cultural events and marrying within the community. Many of these messages further warn them of possible disappearance of the Tai/Shan ethnicity if they do not maintain their traditional culture and way of life. These messages may be sufficient to induce Shan State born Tai/Shan youths from Tai/Shan speaking towns to keep their loyalty to the Tai/Shan community out of guilty conscience. However, these messages do not mean anything to most Tai/Shan youths who were born and raised in non-Shan urban centres. Thus, it is proposed that the Tai/Shan community build a positive and attractive image of itself for consumption of its existing and potential members. For the image to be credible, it should be based on the current strengths of the community, advantages of membership, an objective assessment of where it fits in the twenty first century world and a statement of achievable common goals for the foreseeable future. The objective of the image building exercise is to show current and potential members of the Tai/Shan community that 'we' are different from and better than 'them' in some comparison out-groups on some dimensions so that membership in and service to the Tai/Shan community will enhance their self esteem. As part of image building, the Tai/Shan culture should be modernized further. Moreover, finer forms of cultural expressions should be developed.

#### B. Activities for Community Advancement

It has been stated that an individual may achieve positive

self esteem by being part of a group that he/she sees as being better than comparison out-groups on certain dimensions. This may imply that participation of that individual in activities to improve his/her in-group's position relative to the out-groups may further enhance his/her self esteem and loyalty to the group. Thus, the Tai/Shan community should encourage and facilitate activities by its existing and potential members to help advance the community.

#### C. Accessibility

There are many urban dwelling Tai/Shan youths who do not know their own language and culture and are no longer certain about their ethnic identity. The Tai/Shan community cannot afford not to accept some of these youths with open arms if they wish to rejoin the community and learn their lost language and culture. It is worth developing suitable study material for such Tai/Shan youths to facilitate their integration into the community.

### IV. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This paper employs the social identity theory to analyze the erosion of ethnic identity among the Tai/Shan people who moved to urban centres in Myanmar proper in early and mid twentieth century. The insight gained from this analysis is used to construct a conceptual framework that may help sustain Tai/Shan identity and culture among more recent emigrants. This work finds that the lack of attractiveness was a major factor contributing to identity erosion among Wave X emigrants. Based on this finding, it recommends that the Tai/Shan ethnic community take pro-active measures to make itself an attractive group to the children of Wave Y immigrants.

This work is by no means a complete study of its subject. It may even raise more questions than it has answered. The author is not qualified to undertake more rigorous research in this area. As such, this paper is intended as a mere starting point that may prompt concerned social science researchers to conduct further investigation.

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