

**Being Shan on the Thai Side of the Border: Continuities and Transformations in  
Shan Culture and Identity in Maehongson, Thailand.**

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My focus is on Shan in Maehongson Province who are long term residents in Thailand and are Thai citizens. This separates them from more recent Shan refugees and illegal immigrants as well as those Shan who no longer live in Maehongson and have acquired other Thai regional identities. Since I began my research in 1977, many aspects of the community's social, economic, and cultural lives have changed. They've gone from being a relatively isolated community to one entangled in the larger political and cultural that entails being both Shan and Thai. Their political rituals have shifted in a parallel with the shifts in the larger political and economic context. While ceremonies that focus on the community as a bounded political unit continue, other ceremonies have been added that relate the community to the larger Thai nation state

When I began doing fieldwork in Maehongson in the summer of 1977, both Maehongson and the community of Thongmakhsan seemed very isolated and rather un-Thai. The road connecting Maehongson to Chiang Mai via Mae Sarieng was arduous, known for its curves and narrowness. There were three flights a week between Maehongson and Chiang Mai. The paved road north of Town to Thongmakhsan stopped at the bridge crossing the Pai river and the remaining 20 kilometers or so was unpaved and the last 3 km. to Thongmakhsan was on an even narrower dirt road. In Thongmakhsan and Maehongson, people spoke Shan (Tai Long) and Thai was simply a part of the school curriculum that people didn't use much once they finished fourth grade. There was no electricity although a few people had battery operated radios; newspapers were rare. Thongmakhsan seemed like an isolated community, separate from the politics and, to a large degree, the economics of Thai society. I remember being surprised that a man had who lived in Mawk Tsam Pe, a community about 10 km. away, had married into Thongmakhsan and being even more amazed that a number of Chinese Shan had walked out of China via Burma and had eventually married into the community.

“Seemed” is the operative word; I was in Thongmakhsan during the rainy season and there was little travel since people were busy working in their irrigated fields. In the past, Thongmakhsan and Maehongson in general has had a long history of relationships with various Shan States and with the Chiang Mai principality. Nonetheless, it was possible to imagine that Thongmakhsan was an autonomous, reasonably self-sufficient community.

Now, however, it is no longer even plausible to imagine this isolation since there is an increased interpenetration of Thai social, political, and economic relations. Roads

are paved; children attend school in Maehongson Town and a number of young adults have attended college in Chiang Mai and Bangkok. There are a number of trucks and quite a few motorcycles. There is running water and electricity and most households have TVs. Thai has gone from a school language to one that most adults are comfortable with. Some households are producing cash crops on a large scale and they are affected by national and international trade policies. The influx of Shan refugees from Burma have changed economic relationships within the community, the refugees provide relatively cheap agricultural labor while Thongmakhsan residents work for higher wages elsewhere. While Shan political rituals persist, Thai political rituals have been added to the ceremonial repertoire and some aspects of Thai ritual practices incorporated into Shan rituals. These international and national situations provide the context for being Shan in Thongmakhsan

### **The Larger Political and Social Contexts**

#### **Looking west from Thongmakhsan**

One aspect of this is the community's relationship with the Shan refugees from the Shan States. While one of the household clusters that settled in Thongmakhsan was, arguably, refugees from a Shan state; a guard and his relatives who were exiled because he had killed someone; but this is old history. The descendents of these households are now Thai citizens. People maintained relationships with their kin on the Burma side of the border and traders regularly crossed back and forth (Durrenberger 1977). And some Chinese Shan had made their way out of China and had settled in Thongmakhsan in the early 1970s.

However, starting in the 1980s, the number of Shan coming across the border looking for work and avoiding conscription in assorted armies sharply increased. In 1988, many households had hired hands (luuk liang) from the Shan State living with them and working for them. These were mostly individuals who would work on the Thai side and plan to return to the Burma side. Many of these workers eventually married Thongmakhsan people and were incorporated into existing kin networks; although they may not be registered as legal residents of Thongmakhsan, their children are and their children attend Thai schools in both nearby communities and in Maehongson Town.

In the early 1990s, more people from the Shan State started coming into Maehongson and settling in and around Thongmakhsan. Some of these newcomers were related to people long settled in Thongmakhsan, other were related to those who had come in the 1980s, and still others had no connections with Thongmakhsan people. Many came as complete households, husband, wife, children, and elderly parents. Rather than coming as individuals, planning to work, and, perhaps, returning to the Burma side, they came planning to settle in Thailand. Rather than being incorporated into households as hired hands, they established their own households, on the edges of Thongmakhsan and other communities in the area. There continue to be some marriages linking these new households to older households, but a number of these households are marginal socially, economically, and ritually to Thongmakhsan. Some of these newcomers may not intend to settle in Thongmakhsan or even in Maehongson but are using their stay in the area to learn Thai and to earn money before moving on into other areas of Thailand. People in these households do agricultural wage labor in and around Thongmakhsan as well as working construction and other jobs in Maehongson Town.

These newcomers provide one image of what it is to be Shan in Burma and Shan in Thongmakhsan define themselves in contrast with these Burma-side Shan. The people from Burma are poorer, uneducated, and are seen as lacking in manners. Maehongson has progressed from the recent past and it is more civilized and more law abiding. People in Thongmakhsan, while not as wealthy or as civilized as middle class urban people are better off than they were before – they participate in ceremonies that mark them as Thai citizens. And they see themselves as different from the newcomers.

### **Looking to the Thai nation**

In the recent past, there was little place for local Tai ethnicities; different ethnic practices were seen as a threat to the Thai nation state. With the Thai nation state securely in place and with internal and external threats to it gone, the contents of the Thai nation which no longer had to be homogenous. Now ethnic Tai differences become regional variations within Thailand (see Thongchai 1994:165 for a discussion of Northeastern Thai).

The Ratanokosin dynasty had its bicentennial in 1986 and provinces were directed to hold traditional festivals to celebrate the occasion. Maehongson's "traditional" festival became a large scale novice ordination festival. This tradition was established around 1984 when monks from the monk's university, Mahachulalongkorn, organized one. The normal time for ordinations is just before the three month rains retreat, however, because of the school year, few boys were being ordained and there was concern that they were no longer learning Buddhist values. Summer vacation ordinations, held all over Thailand, were seen as a way to compensate for this. Ordination festivals tend to be

picturesque and Tai Long ordinations, where the boys are dressed up as princes, are particularly picturesque and different from ceremonies held elsewhere in Thailand. A Tai Long cultural event was put to service as a provincial event, in the same way as the statue of the "Shan" founder was (Tannenbaum 2002a).

Provincial level festivals, like the ordination ceremony, helped reify provinces as culture and history bearing units at the same time they provided colorful ceremonies for tourists. While local cultural traditions are being celebrated, local is defined with reference to its place in the Thai nation-state. This shifts attention to regional histories and away from the center, especially Bangkok, as the locus of all history and culture. However, centers still play an important role in determining history and creating events<sup>1</sup>.

There is an increasing awareness of Maehongson as a Shan province; welcome signs are given a Shan decorative twist; the airport displays posters about Shan festivals and customs and on the second floor in front of the restaurant, there is a large wooden khing sang phut (usually part of the Awk Waa celebration); and a statue of the provincial founder, Phaya Sihanatraja, was erected in 1990. The impetus for this celebration of "Shan" comes from a number of sources, most of them not Shan and not natives of Maehongson. The Phaya Sihanatraja statue was built because the provincial level abbot, a N. Thai but a long time resident of Maehongson, thought it was a good idea (Tannenbaum 2002a). The person behind the Shan motifs on signs is also a N. Thai who is quite taken with Shan things.

Throughout Thailand, Fridays have become the day to dress in traditional regional clothing. In Maehongson, this means school boys wear Shan style shirts and trousers

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<sup>1</sup> See Tannenbaum 2002 for a discussion of the history of Maehongson and Phraya Sihanatraja from a Thai national perspective.

while school girls wear Shan style blouses and phasins (tube skirts). These contrast with their everyday uniforms of white shirts or blouses and khaki or blue pants or skirts. When school children participate in parades or other ceremonial occasions they are often told to wear their traditional clothes.

At provincial celebrations, the various ethnic communities are also encouraged to wear their traditional clothing, too. The ceremony to erect the statue of Phraya Sihanatraja as the founder of Maehongson was clearly a “Shan” event so that wearing Shan clothing seems quite appropriate. However, wearing appropriate ethnic clothing is part of many district and provincial level events. In 2003, there was a large provincial anti-drug rally, held at the school stadium in Maehongson Town. The stadium field was filled with people standing in reasonably orderly lines, arranged by village; most of the people attending were indeed wearing their ethnic clothing. They made a vivid contrast to the government officials who wore their uniforms and the governor who wore western clothes. Similarly, at the ceremony in 2006 to erect a statue of King Chulalongkorn at the provincial government office, people from villages wore their ethnic clothing.

From the provincial and national perspective, being ethnic is associated with wearing different clothing. Being Shan in Maehongson is more elaborately developed at the official provincial level since it is seen as a Shan province. Ethnicity and ethnic identity are associated with public displays that include: traditional, colorful ceremonies; a particular clothing style; and architectural details that have been taken from temples and used to decorate government and other buildings. The content or meaning of these elements do not matter; some older people are concerned that using the architectural

details from temples to decorate secular buildings is inappropriate and, perhaps, dangerous.

These official celebrations and the use of clothing become markers of being Shan in Thailand.

### **Shan Ethnicity, Thai Nationality in Thongmakhsan**

It is in this context of increased refugees/immigrants from the Shan States settling in and around Thongmakhsan as well as the increased interpenetration of Thai social, political, and economic relations that people in Thongmakhsan and surrounding communities define their Shan ethnicity and Thai nationality.

Thongmakhsan's autonomy continues to be enacted ritually with the annual repairing the village ceremony (*mae waan mae muong* or *plik waan*) and the offerings to the cadastral spirit (*liang tsao muong*). Durrenberger's (1980) descriptions of these ceremonies that he observed in 1977 are still structurally accurate. The cadastral spirit is still feasted; he receives chickens and liquor and people still feast on the offerings after the Tsao Muong has eaten. Monks are still invited to chant in the tower to repair the village and chase out malign influences and households still place baskets containing milled rice, sand, and other household goods (see Tannenbaum 2002b). The range of objects under the tower is broader than household goods now, as people bring their motorcycles to be blessed in the ceremony. But this is simply an elaboration of the earlier practices. The site of the tower is associate with the heart of the village (*tsau waan*), even though the pillar for the heart has long since disappeared (Tannenbaum 1990). The village is closed, at least ideally, during these ceremonies, although this has

become more difficult to enforce as there is more traffic on the road through the community.

This is a local political ritual and anyone who is a resident of Thongmakhsan or makes fields around Thongmakhsan and wants to participate, may. Other local rituals such as the annual village festival and celebrations at the temple are open to all residents of Thongmakhsan regardless of citizenship; recent arrivals and long term residents all participate. Residents of Thongmakhsan attend village celebrations in other local communities, including annual festivals, funeral, and merit making for the recent dead, as well as any household ceremonies to which they are invited.

However, other ceremonies and political rituals that reflect the ways in which people in Thongmakhsan are connected to the national polity are more exclusive. This is seen at a number of events, including the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King Bhumiphol's reign in June 1996; the political protest against a gravel pit in August 1996 and a tree ordination held in June 1997 (Tannenbaum 2000, 2002b); and the election in 2004.

When Thailand celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King Bhumiphol's coronation in June 1996, people in Thongmakhsan set up a Buddha altar at the school yard and villagers came to the school to make offerings to monks in the morning. In the evening, villagers lined up in front of the TV that was showing the ceremonies in Bangkok, held flowers and popped rice in their hands, and sang along with the songs that celebrated Thailand and the King. Men stood to the right, women to the left; in other ritual contexts, men are in front and women are behind. Unlike the repairing the village ceremony which highlights Thongmakhsan's political ritual autonomy, this event symbolically marked the

community's incorporation into Thailand. On the village scale it replicated what was happening in the capital, cities, and other communities. For this moment, at least, the people of Thongmakhsan were united with other Thai as Thai citizens honoring their monarch. For most festive occasions, usually each household has at least one representative attending; for this ceremony, only those who were Thai citizens or who had married into a family of Thai citizens participated. More recent refugees did not participate.

Again with the tree ordination ceremony in 1997, citizens and long term residents participated. The tree ordination was a follow-up on a successful political protest that stopped the creation of a gravel pit in an area near Thongmakhsan's water supply. The protest was led by younger educated adults who were competent in Thai and were confident enough to take a political stance against the local political leaders. More recent residents are illegal and rely on wage labor, they were in no position to take a stance against local leaders. A number of the poorer households as well as the new residents were looking forward to the wage work the gravel pit would provide. The protest fit with the political activism of the other poor communities (Tannenbaum 2000; Ockey 1997).

The tree ordination served to link local political activism to the larger national environment issues and align the protesters with the king's interest in environmental protection and community sufficiency. The tree ordination, with representatives from the provincial government, assorted government ministries, and national and international nongovernmental organizations placed Thongmakhsan firmly within the national framework; it demonstrated the participants loyalty to the nation and the king.

Like the celebration in honor the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the king's reign, this was a Thai event. People in Thongmakhsan organizing the tree ordination consulted with other communities that had held tree ordinations earlier and with western and Thai environmental non-government organizations. There was an educational display at the school with posters in Thai. It was directed at national concerns and the national media. People who attended were, primarily, Thai citizens.

Modern national political ritual has fewer religious elements, but the election in 2004 was also political ritual that allowed people in Thongmakhsan to demonstrate to themselves and others that they were good citizens of the Thai state. This was the first time voting took place in Thongmakhsan; prior to this, people had to go to the tambol village to vote. My friend, Noy Nan, took a great sequence of photos of people voting, the photos document: the initially empty ballot boxes; people checking the house registration rolls; people sitting outside waiting to vote; people placing their ballots into the ballot boxes; and, finally, sealing the boxes and putting them into a truck to deliver them to Maehongson where they would be counted. The photos included a policeman overseeing the event and two non-local poll watchers. Noy Nan has been taking photos of events that happen when I'm not there but these pictures also serve as local documentation that the election was in fact held and held properly. Here was a celebration of Thai citizenship.

When I first came to Thongmakhsan, people were aware that they were one ethnic group among many, each of which practiced their own customs and ceremonies. Most people in Thongmakhsan were Thai citizens, but being a Thai citizen was not

particularly salient. Now, in the context of the Thai state and the ways in which ethnicity is celebrated, long term Shan residents have begun performing their ethnicity for themselves in ways that fit the national model at least when the festivals face outward to the larger nation. The contrast between themselves and Thai in other parts of Thailand and the more recent Shan immigrants provides the space for performing their Shan ethnicity, much in the ways that sports festivals allow some upland groups to perform their ethnicity in an acceptable state context (Jonsson 2005 ). On a day-to-day basis, people just do what they did before – make fields, perform the ceremonies for the heart of the village and the cadastral spirit, prepare food using fermented soybeans, and speak Shan (albeit with an increasing number of Thai loanwords). The current period divides everyday Shan life where their activities are not particularly marked in ethnic terms from other political ritual occasions where Shan has become something to be performed in the context of a modern multi-ethnic Thai state.

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