

BLACK TAI AND LAO SONG DAM

The Divergence of Ethnocultural Identities

Abstract

This article examines the political processes and social environmental factors in the genesis of the Lao Song Dam identity category in Central Thailand as a branch of the Black Tai in northern Laos and northwestern Vietnam. Historical documents, ethnographic descriptions, and the observations of Western travelers reveal a pattern of political marginalization and ethnic definition of upland Tai peoples during the consolidation of lowland regions by the Siamese and Lao Tai states during the last six centuries. As the descendants of Black Tai forcibly resettled to the under-populated and undeveloped savannahs of the Chao Phraya river valley, Lao Song emerged and persist as a rural minority people whose distinct identity is based upon the retention of a patrilineal kinship ideology and other supposedly archaic Tai sociocultural traditions within modern Thailand.

My intention in this article is to provide an understanding of the emergent context and significant ethno-history of the Lao Song Dam, a little-known minority Tai people of Central Thailand. For well over a century, Lao Song have persisted as a distinct ethnic category in symbolic opposition to and objective social separation from the majority Central Thai or Siamese polity according to consistent if not unchanged cultural and historic charters.¹ Lao Song are the descendants of Black Tai families taken from the upland valleys of Laos and the Tonkin of Vietnam as captives of the Siamese government during the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century, and relocated to the central plains of Thailand. Today, Lao Song costume, dialect, folklore, ritual, and social organizational traditions still have close affinities with those of the Black Tai. Both Lao Song and Black Tai are distinguished along with smaller populations of upland Tai from the majority of Tai peoples occupying areas south of China, by a dialect revealing relatively little Sanscritic and Pali admixture, patrilineal kinship organization, ritual beliefs emphasizing the veneration of patrilineal ancestral spirits, and a traditional but currently abbreviated recognition of feudal class structure.

The divergence between the Black Tai and the Lao Song represents an unusual case of Tai ethno-political diversification in mainland Southeast Asia, not in terms of historical events or political processes, but in the fact that what many scholars might recognize as an archaic or even prototypical Tai culture is embodied in an ethnic tradition incorporated and nurtured (to a certain extent, through neglect) by a central Thai polity engaged in "self-conscious modernization" (Sharp, 1976 : 476) and national cultural definition. Numerous "tribal Tai" are found along Thailand's

geopolitical periphery, as is a large regional category of "Lao Tai" in the North and Northeast. The Lao Song, however, emerged and persist as a distinct people in the central provinces, the heartland of the modern Thai nation.

Ethnographic and historical material in this article derive from field work among Lao Song during August 1982-August 1983, and extensive archival research of Western and Thai historical documents or treatments, Christian mission records, and the journals of European travelers. Some details of Lao Song origin have been documented in Thai language publications, but accounts in Western scholarship are largely limited to Seidenfaden's brief and tentative remarks, or references thereto (e.g., Pedersen, 1968 : 114), identifying Song as a branch of the Black Tai. Seidenfaden notes :

Spread round about in the North, at Sawankaloke and Nakhon Sawan, in the West, at Rajaburi and Petchaburi, and right down to Bandon in the South, are settlements of the so-called Lao Song Dam. They hail from the region east of Luang Phrabang, and they are recognized by their black dresses with silver buttons, their women wearing black phasins with thin vertical white stripes (1954 : 88). The so-called Lao Song Dam in Central and Southern Thailand seem to be Black Thai, both sexes dressing in black. They are the descendants of former captives of war from Muang Thaeng (1958 : 89). These people...were originally prisoners of war and were, about a hundred years ago, brought down here from the highlands lying to the east of Luang Phrabang...and they present as such the curious fact of mountaineers who have become plain dwellers...They still talk their own dialect and have preserved many of their old traditions and quaint customs (1931 : 4).

It is atypical that Black Tai and Lao Song resisted or were protected from a greater degree of assimilation, considering the Tai experience generally. Incorporation of political and religious culture from the Indic and Sinitic traditions has been expounded as definitional in the florescence of Tai civilization in mainland Southeast Asia, with all its "dialectal" diversity (e.g., Coedes, 1968 ; Keyes, 1977 : 75). Beyond any accidental aspects of culture contact in the Tai migration into the great flood-plains of the south, assimilation and acculturation have been considered virtual "propensities" and adaptive "abilities" by observers (see Lebar et al., 1964 : 187).

The continuity of cultural form and common traditionalism noted between Black Tai and Lao Song suggests a coherence of identity which is, in contemporary terms, spurious. Despite that Lao Song have preserved much of Black Tai culture through generations of separation from the northern homeland, the categories are discrete. Relocation from semi-autonomous frontier polities to the capital region of the

Siamese state certainly invalidated the former feudal principles of social organization, and several adaptations in ritual practice, marriage custom, and inheritance patterns have occurred through subsequent generations. Formally, however, affinity with Black Tai is even now apparent; tracing events antecedent to separation, the physical linkage is demonstrable. Yet, cultural affinity between categories and facts of common origin do not constitute common identity in terms salient to ethnocultural categorization in mainland Southeast Asia. Lao Song identity is defined in part by common recognition of a distinct historic experience and common opposition to the dominant culture and political society following relocation. The migrants trace descent to families of the new settlement, rather than to focal ancestors shared with those remaining in the Black Tai homeland. Both peoples trace an ancient, mythic descent from common ancestors at the beginning of humankind, but the Black Tai and their upland states in the northern areas of Laos and Vietnam have become another link in the chain of mythic forbears in Lao Song ethnogenesis.

The Emergence of the Tai in the North

The specific military conflicts which occasioned resettlement of Black Tai communities occurred at the close of the reign of King Boromajā IV (Taksin of Thon Buri) and beginning of the present Chakri dynasty in the early 1780's, extending to the late nineteenth century during the reign of Rama V. In the history of Tai-speaking peoples in Southeast Asia, this is relatively late. The context of Black Tai and Lao Song ethnogeneses is, however, a persistent social, economic, and geopolitical pattern which dates back to the earliest period of Tai expansion into mainland Southeast Asia.

By the tenth century A.D., small groups of Tai speakers migrating gradually south from the Yangtze River region in southern Sichuan and northeastern Yunnan were established in the northern watersheds and river basins of mainland Southeast Asia. Whether already organized under separate "chieftains" (Chula Chakrabongse, 1960 : 17), or initially acephalous pioneer groups recognizing the leadership of village founders, they formed polities called *myang* (var., *muang*, *muong*, *myng*), under rule of hereditary sovereigns, or *chao myang*. Most northern *myang* constituted single upland valley jurisdictions, with a few exceptionally powerful *chao* controlling multi-valley systems. There is a correspondence between local topography and population distributions, but a conception of the *myang* as territorially-based polities obscures an important dynamic in the expansion of the Tai into mainland Southeast Asia and the centuries of conflict among various Tai powers. The *myang* is rather a "political entity of human settlements" (Davis, 1984 : 82n), representing an hierarchical distribution of power focusing on a particular town, as the hub of a civil tradition and center of authority. Conflict among *myang* has, historically, assumed the aspect of competition for power over areas of habitation and not over land, itself.

The particulars of early Tai expansion are largely undocumented. It is assumed

that transmission of *chao* authority, according to either ultimogeniture or primogeniture, encouraged a process of fission, with disinherited sons pursuing personal fiefs, perhaps through officially sanctioned and supported expeditions. However occurring, it is apparent the Tai systematically settled new territories or consolidated non-Tai populated areas, proliferating first along the upland frontier between China and the Mon-Khmer and Burman "civilizations" of mainland Southeast Asia, while rapidly encroaching on those southern domains. On the basis of historical chronicles, legends, and the contemporary situation, it is presumed Tai displaced and in some cases assimilated or co-opted aboriginal populations.

The rise to power of the Mongols over Sung China and annexation of Yunnan by Kublai Khan in the mid-thirteenth century precipitated a more dramatic Tai expansion through the region. In the east, a group sometimes called the "Lesser Tai" or Tai Noi (distinguished from the western "Greater Tai" or Tai Yai, also called the Shan Tai) moved down the Ou River valley into the middle Mekhong, Plaines des Jarres and beyond. In the northern Menam Chao Phraya valley, two Tai governors of towns under Khmer control rebelled and took control of the northern central plains Khmer stronghold at Sukhotai in 1238, founding a rule considered the precursor to the Siamese, or Thai, nation (Syamananda, 1981 : 20ff). During the reign of Sukhotai's Rama Kamhaeng, several neighboring Tai *chao* widened their territorial domain. Chao Mengrai, in alliance with Rama Kamhaeng and Chao Khun Ngam Myang of Phayao, established Lannatai which extended from the upper Chao Phraya valley to Wiengchan (Vientianne) on the middle Mekhong (Hall, 1981 : 186-190). In 1353 Chao Fa Ngum Myang Sawa (*chao* of what is now Luang Phrabang) brought Wiengchan and Luang Phrabang together as the centers of Lan Chang, around which the modern Lao People's Democratic Republic is constituted.

Flanked by the Mongols in the north and Viet to the southeast, the older *myang* between the Hong or Red River in the Tonkin and the Ou---an area referred to as the "central uplands" (Lebar et al., 1964 : 188)—were thus isolated by a succession of stronger Tai *myang* in broader lowland valleys to the southwest. Among those original *myang*, expansionary fission gave way to a tendency to assert territorial control through intra-regional contest, often with the support of more powerful Tai successors. In addition, the frontier *myang* were repeatedly impressed by the lowland Tai into military conflict against their neighbors.

Upland and lowland Tai *myang* during the thirteenth century likely differed only in scale and political environment, but the dynamic of a more profound divergence was incipient within those disparate circumstances. Until the European colonial period, central upland Tai perpetuated the supposedly indigenous practices of hereditary rule and as decentralized states divided into classes based primarily on kinship, i.e., as feudal chiefdomships. Lowland *myang* governments, on the other hand, combined elements of feudalism, military aristocracy, and civil bureaucracy,

assimilating elements of their predecessors' politico-religious ideology and Indic traditions of statecraft (Coedès, 1966 : 189-198). Supreme authority remained an hereditary office, and governorships in constituent *myang* were often held by either kin of the ruling *chao* or local vassal *chao*. Regions were also awarded to non-kin military leaders, and many levels of administration were dominated by commoners.

The unification of vast areas under centralized authority has frustrated Southeast Asian leaders into the modern era. Military expeditions against distant *myang* might result in imposition of nominal sovereignty, but states along the periphery of the major river basins and scattered among mountain valleys have been difficult to consolidate. In these outlying areas, vassal *myang* were sometimes virtually autonomous entities, or else disputed frontiers tributary to whichever regnant power. So it was among the central uplands. Long associated with the pre-colonial Lao states, the upland *myang* were under nominal Siamese hegemony in some periods, allied with Annam, China, or Burma in others. As Kunstadter observes, such marginal polities as in the central uplands which strove to preserve identity under threat of losing political independence to lowland powers sometimes erected "cultural boundaries" in ethnic opposition (1967 : 10). As a result of their contest by the Chinese, Burmese, Lao, Annamese, Siamese, and French, upland Tai "have come to be considered minority or tribal peoples, like the Lue, the Red Tai, White Tai, and Black Tai" (1967 : 11).

The Black Tai

The Black Tai are the largest among the so-called "minority" or "tribal" Tai populations in northern Laos and the Tonkin highlands (demographic and cultural descriptions reflect conditions prior to dislocations during the Vietnam Conflict).² Their villages are widely dispersed between and contiguous to the Red, Black, and Song Chay or Clear rivers in northern Vietnam and along the Ou, Ngum, and Khan in Laos. Occupying the lower elevations of mountain valleys, they practice valley and terrace irrigation riziculture, occasional hillside swiddening in marginal areas, and peripheral garden or cash cropping (Colonna, 1938 ; Gourou, 1952). Black Tai are organized in part by affiliation with named, ranked patrilineal clans, or *sing*, whose members claim common descent through unspecified links from a putative founding ancestor (Lafont, 1955). The number, social position, and names of Black Tai *sing* differ, according to regional and historical circumstance of observation (see Guillemet and O'Kelly, 1916 : 103-105 ; Lafont, 1955 ; Halpern, 1961 : 139-143 ; Lebar et al., 1964 : 222 ; Schrock et al., 1972 : 50 ; Pitiphat, 1980 : 29). Generally, Black Tai *sing* are divided as three classes : a ruling nobility, or *pu tao* ; commoner clans, or *pu noi*, and ; *mo*, priestly clans sometimes described as an interstitial category and included at times with *pu tao*, perhaps reflecting periods of phratry organization.

Prior to limited and marginally successful reforms imposed by the French in the late nineteenth century, the *tao* clans claimed proprietorship over *chao myang*

office and commune headmanship by divine imprimatur, owned all land and had conscriptive authority over commoners. Commoners enjoyed freedom of local affiliation restricted only by a system in which taxes were exacted according to both jurisdictions of origin and residence (ESJ [anonymous, c.1981] : 181 ; Izikowitz, 1963). As with other Tai valley farmers, Black Tai claimed superior status over the aboriginal or remnant groups of Austroasiatic speakers whose mountainside or forest communities constituted frontiers between two or more *myang* to which they were tributary.

Observers and scholars have ascribed an almost atavistic traditionalism to the Black Tai. Apart from differences in political history with lowland Tai, upland Tai peoples, "notably the Black Thai...are set apart...by the retention of their traditional dress, animistic beliefs, and their strong cohesion as a group" (Smith et al., 1967 : 569). Among minority or tribal Tai, the Black Tai have been singled out as archetypal. "If there is a general pattern of upland social structure...it is the system of the Black Tai" (McAlister, 1967 : 781). They are "more conservative than any of the other groups" (Lebar and Suddard, 1960 : 41), "'typical' in that they have preserved much of what was apparently the traditional Tai way of life prior to the expansion of Tai-speaking peoples in Indochina" (Halpern and Kunstadter, 1967 : 236). Compared with any other Tai in Southeast Asia, their language and religious beliefs are less Indianized ; among all peoples emigrant from the north, their language and political form are less Sinicized, and ; in comparison with their closest cultural and regional neighbors, the White Tai, they are less Vietnamized (Hickey, 1958 ; Seidenfaden, 1963 : 74 ; Gedney, 1964 ; Lebar et al., 1964 : 188 ; Pitiphat, 1980 : 37). By virtue of their ecological adaptation, social organizational character, and cultural integrity, the Black Tai have been called the "original Thai", the "ancient Thai" (Senaphitak, 1978 : 7-8), and the "Thai of yore" (Seidenfaden, 1963 : 74 ; referring to Izikowitz, 1962). Black Tai retention of traditional culture has often been attributed to their occupation of dispersed and remote areas (Hickey, 1958 : 206, 210 ; Schrock et al., 1972 : 50-51 ; 66-67 ; Pitiphat, 1980 : 36-38), just as acculturation among such upland peoples as the Red Tai and White Tai (see Hickey, 1958 ; Gedney, 1964) and such "tribal" Tai migrants in northern Thailand as the Lue (Moerman, 1965 ; 1967) has been associated with contiguity to or other enduring alignment with majority lowland societies. Citing some cultural diffusion from both lowland Tai and Vietnamese (e.g., adoption of Indianized script, probable vocabular and phonetic adulteration), others have questioned the significance of geographical barriers (Halpern and Kunstadter, 1967 : 237 ; Davis, 1984 : 33-34).

Both positions have merit, describing actual features of Black Tai environment and culture. On one hand, several Black Tai population centers are proximal to historically important trade routes, and the region has been a focus of intensive competition from neighboring states in every direction for centuries. On the other, no

external power has ever maintained more than a temporary or tenuous presence in the uplands, nor effected complete destruction of indigenous political and social institutions. The distance of foreign political centers, and reluctance in communicating threat of encroachment on rival states by imposing direct and martial rule, encouraged either administration through local officers or only nominal limitations to autonomous rule. Such compromises perpetuated the influence of traditional leaders and the importance of patriliney in social organization, contributing to the persistence of ethnocultural identity.

In their external relations with other *myang*, the upland Black Tai autocracies have been characterized as semi-autonomous, recognizing only periodic alliances or administrative corporateness, usually in response to the hegemony of external powers (McAlister, 1967 : 779-780). However ephemeral or derivative, two kinds of supralocal articulation deserve mention : consolidation of *myang* under individual powerful *chao* through warfare, and "tribal" alignment.

Although long widely dispersed, the Black Tai have traditionally marked their capital at Myang Teng (var., Theng, Taeng, Thaeng ; now known as Dien Bien Phu), located in the large upland valley between the Ou and Ma rivers and founded probably in the eleventh century (Guillemet and O'Kelly, 1916 : 105). Legendary recognition of this "magnificent plain" (ESJ : 181) is not exclusive to Black Tai : while they claim it as original, it is also specified as the hub of Tai dispersal by the lowland Lao and other Tai in the region. Myang Teng may in fact have been an early "homeland" for both the Black Tai and lowland Lao, but its legendary stature probably owes as much to geography. Covering over one hundred square kilometers, it is the most productive of upland agricultural areas and also dominates the most direct route between the Tonkin and middle Mekhong valley. The mythic status of certain *myang* as points of origin for various Tai as ethnic categories may have a basis in such geopolitical circumstances. Moerman speculates :

Proximity to a strong and durable capital may have resulted in the focusing and coalescing of minor differences of speech and custom to make them emblems of a "tribe." Where the states were weak, as in Tonkin, distinctions of language and tribe are especially unclear... Thai tribal labels seem to record not language and culture, but historical states which no longer exist. These states were never sufficiently durable or powerful, nor were watersheds so mutually isolated...as to produce the centripetal interactions that make for objectively distinctive cultures (1967 : 1221).

The situation in Tonkin does suggest regional topography and political demography as determinants of ethnic alignments (see also Hartmann, 1980 : 82, on Tai dialect groups). A relevant example of the problematic nature of tribal and cultural-lingual distinctions concerns that among the Black and White Tai. Excepting Diguët

(1908) and Maspéro (1929), ethnographers have chosen to distinguish White Tai and Black Tai, both as dialect groups (see Gedney, 1964 ; Fippinger and Fippinger, 1970) and as cultures (see Roux, 1954 ; Lebar et al., 1964), despite that regional variations among either are as pronounced as any sociocultural difference between them (cf. Abadie, 1924 ; Fippinger, 1971). Historically, "tribal" affiliation in the Tonkin and north eastern Laos has marked conflict over territory and competition for privileged recognition by more powerful lowland neighbors. Black Tai and White Tai are distinct ethnic categories, but the fundamental nature of their opposition is or has been highly specific to political contest, and persistent only within a context of sociocultural and ecological similarity. Until the power concentrated in certain *myang* was legitimized by the French in the late nineteenth century, what are now taken as "tribal" divisions had even less salience to dialect and culture trait distribution.

According to folk history, the legendary Black Tai homeland of Myang Teng was the capital of a centralized organization of twelve allied feudal states along the Red and Black rivers, known as the Sipsong Chao Tai or "Twelve Tai *Chao* or Cantons" (also known as the Sipsong Chu Tai). McAlister questions whether such a confederacy ever existed, suggesting that the Sipsong Chao Tai was no more than a "ritualistic entity" of Tonkin *myang* whose boundaries were reified by the French in the late nineteenth century as the political domain of a White Tai clan alienated by the Siamese and attracted to the potential influence of the French (1967 : 807-808). Although Black Tai were more numerous in the region, they were subjugated by the favored and more unified White Tai.

Conflict and Relocation

The relationship between upland Tai *myang* and the emerging Siamese and Lao states to the south was changeable and often volatile. Toward the end of the thirteenth century, Rama Kamhaeng of Sukhotai and Mengrai of Lannatai expanded their influence over the northern Chao Phraya and middle Mekhong river valleys. Both lowland Tai powers sought control over Myang Teng, occupying that strategic approach in the western Tonkin. While its *chao* offered nominal allegiance to Sukhotai, Myang Teng also furnished troops in support of Mengrai against the Khmer of the middle Mekhong, as did the *chao* of Myang Lai. Fearing that Mengrai would reciprocate by sponsoring the *chao* of Lai and Teng in consolidating the highlands, the *chao* of *myang* Muoi, La, Muak, and Bu made a concerted attempt to depose those ruling families. For several years, the upland Tai warred among themselves. Following the death of the *chao* of Muoi, in the struggle for succession among the powerful families, resistance to Luang Phrabang collapsed and the chiefdoms were annexed as Laotian vassal states. In the mid-sixteenth century, the Lannatai state and the Siamese, relocated farther south at Ayuthaya, were subordinated by the Burmese. While Siam regained independence before the turn of the century, the several *myang* comprising

the Lao state remained reluctant and frequently rebellious vassals of the Burmese, periodically impressed against the Siamese, until the late eighteenth century.

In the years between 1758 and 1767, Burma moved once again against Siam and the rebellious Lao states, subduing Chiang Mai, Wiengchan, and Luang Phrabang. The Siamese, driven briefly from their capital at Ayuthaya in 1767, repulsed the invaders in the north in 1775, and subsequently sought a more secure hold over the northern frontier. That frontier included not only the Lao states of the middle Mekhong, but the fractious upland Tai chiefdoms. Between 1774 and 1788, Siam allied with the northern *myang* against the Burmese, and assumed nominal jurisdiction over the disunified Lao. Both Wiengchan and Luang Phrabang resisted domination, encouraging frequent efforts at pacification by the Siamese. In 1778, Chao Taksin of Thon Buri despatched his general, Somdet Chao Phraya Mahakasatseuk (later Rama I, founder of Thailand's present Chakri dynasty), with an army of 20,000 against Wiengchan (Syamananda, 1981 : 97-98), whose *chao* had angered Taksin by ordering the execution of a rebellious minister of state who had assisted Siam in the annexation of Champasak. By 1780, the Siamese were engaged with Luang Phrabang and had occupied the Black Tai *myang* of Muoi and Than. During this campaign, a group of Black Tai families were taken captive, along with other Lao Tai, and marched south to settlements in what are now the Central Thai provinces of Saraburi, Rat Buri, and Chantaburi. A dozen years later, the Siamese-installed governor of Wiengchan sent troops into the highlands of *myang* Teng and Puan to quell rebellion, and additional Black Tai were impressed and relocated to Phet Buri province in Central Thailand (Burupaht, 1983).

Resettlement was not simply a punitive measure, but rather a military policy which reflected demographic realities and the prevailing concept of political jurisdiction. Measuring political power in terms of control over areas of human settlement, leaders relocated potentially troublesome or historically recalcitrant peoples to areas more accessible to control. They depopulated disputed zones to preempt invasion, and thereby increased the size of the citizenry in regions where settlement might provide economic or military benefit to the state. Since the Tai rose to power in the great plains of the south, their kingdoms had suffered from underpopulation. The kingdom's economy and the wealth of its aristocracy depended upon farming revenues which, along with canal-digging and other public works, were supported by a system of *corvée* and slave labor. Siam was also vulnerable to regular invasion from its neighbors ; Rama I instituted a policy of resettling war captives to defensive positions in the region around his new capital at Krung Thep (Bangkok). The policy's worth was proved in 1785 when the Burmese sought to invade Siam across its western border ; emplacement of troops including Black Tai conscripts at Rat Buri, Phet Buri, and Kanchanaburi was decisive in repulsing and eventually routing the foreign armies.

Forced relocation of Black Tai continued for several decades and through

many military campaigns directed by Siam against the Lao states and upland Tai *myang*. During the reign of Rama III, Chao Anuwongse of Champasak attempted to end Siamese rule over his native Wiengchan, taking the city and from there attacking Nakhon Ratchasima and Saraburi, north of Krung Thep, in 1827. The Siamese regained Wiengchan, lost it a second time when Annam came to the rebels' aid, and finally reoccupied the Lao capital with Chao Anu as prisoner in 1829 (Vella, 1957 :87 ff). During this conflict, Siamese armies moved into Myang Teng and again took captives among the Black-Tai, moving them to Phet Buri. In 1836, a rebellion of three Black Tai *myang* against Luang Phrabang resulted in the relocation of additional captives to the expatriate Black Tai community west of Krung Thep ; unrest in the Sipsong Chao Tai encouraged enslavement again in 1838, 1864, and at various other times in the last half of the nineteenth century (Buruphat, 1983). Under Rama III (1824-1851), it is estimated that some 46,000 inhabitants of frontier and foreign locales were taken captive (Vella, 1957 : 78).

Siam faced recurrent problems of local unrest in the Lao and western Tonkin vassal states, aggravated by the rival claims of Annam, but had retained at least nominal allegiance from the northern *chao* since the beginning of the Chakri dynasty. During the reign of Rama V (1868-1910), Siam's hold over the middle Mekhong and Tai uplands was lost, not through rebellion or threat from its perennial rivals, but the westward expansion of French rule in Indochina. The Siamese Field Marshal, Chao Phraya Surasak Montri (Chamuan Waiworanart), sent by Rama V ostensibly to rid the frontier of Ho bandits---Chinese expatriates who moved in at the close of the Taiping rebellion against the Manchu in 1864---led the last Siamese campaign in the Tai uplands during 1887 and 1889. At Myang Teng, Surasak's army was met by Auguste Pavie, accompanied by several hundred troops of the French colonial forces. With French occupation a *fait accompli*, the Siamese field marshal attempted to impress upon the French representative the historical claim of Siam to the Sipsong Chao Tai and its peoples. As reported in a communique with Rama V, Surasak focused on Siam's heavy expenditure of lives in pacifying the feudal states, as well as the resettlement of Black Tai families to Phet Buri as points of argument with Pavie. He noted :

When Somdet Phra Nangklao Chao Ju Hua (Rama III, *author*) was graciously pleased to have those Black Thai establish a place to live at Myang Phet Buri, it was expected that Lao Song would have sons, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, now numbering many thousands of persons. In raising the army for this campaign, many hundreds of able-bodied Lao Song men were also conscripted. And these men have met many relatives who live in Myang Thaeng, because the Lao Song/Black Thai people use patrilineages, in the fashion of the Chinese (Thatsanasuwaan, 1964 : 65, citing Montri, 1961 : 580, in Thai).

Three elements of this report are significant. First, it is evident that the Siamese government intended that the expatriate Black Tai community flourish, probably to continually replenish the ranks of crown serfs. Second, it is evident that the expatriate community was sufficiently stable that both Black Tai and Lao Song, separated by several generations, recognized patrilineal ties. Third, it is notable that Chao Phraya Surasak, while calling attention to the historical and kinship links between his soldiers and the populace, quite clearly distinguishes the expatriates from Black Tai by using the ethnic label "Lao Song." In any case, Pavie ignored the claims and, threatening the Siamese with forcible expulsion, established French jurisdiction over the Sipsong Chao Tai (ESJ : 205-206).

The Phet Buri Song

The period of relocation from the Sipsong Chao Tai extended from 1780 through the last decade of the nineteenth century. Since 1792, all the Black Tai captives were apparently settled in Phet Buri province, southwest of Krung Thep. In Siam, they came to be called "Lao Song Dam", marking their affiliation with the northern Lao states. The first community was a grouping of several hamlets of undetermined size, located in Tha Raeng commune, Baan Laem district. During the reign of Rama III, the Song petitioned for permission to move from that lowlying floodplain to Khao Yoi, a hillier district, "like their homeland, where stands of trees cut the wind" (Buruphat, 1983 ; my translation from Thai).

The early history of the Phet Buri community is sparsely documented. Malloch reports the receipt of census materials in 1827 which indicate the presence of 450 Lao in "Muang Phitcabari", but it is unknown whether these included Lao Song (Burney, 1912 : 354). Thirty years later, Mouhot mentions contact with Lao captives in Phet Buri, and describes customs of dress suggestive of the traditional Black Tai garb (1864 : 58). Much of what is known of the early years of Song activities as slaves of the crown derives from the accounts of Christian missionaries. In 1861, Revs. Daniel McGilvary and S. G. McFarland, pioneer Protestant missionaries to Siam, established a mission station at Phet Buri. McFarland's son writes :

For several years there had been interest in Petchaburi and several visits made there. Doubtless the initial impulse was given added life when King Mongkut (Rama IV, *author*) built a palace on the Petchaburi mountain in 1860 and dug canals connecting the rivers, thus facilitating transportation (G. B. McFarland, 1928 : 2).

McGilvary adds that his "interest in Pechaburi was increased by the knowledge that there was a large colony of Lao there" (1912 : 57). An anonymous history of the Phet Buri mission echoes McGilvary, saying the interest in the province was "deepened by finding villages near Petchaburi occupied by Lao captives taken in war and held by the government as slaves".³ That these "Lao captives" were Song or

included them is established by M. L. Cort, who served at the Phet Buri station from 1874 to 1891.⁴ Writing of the Lao villages outside the provincial capital, she describes a community of Lao whose costume and women's coiffure are unmistakably Song (1886 : 355-369). It is also apparent from her discussion that the mission concentrated most of its efforts on this particular settlement ; as such, what comments missionaries' chronicles include are likely applicable to the Song, though identification by name is absent. Such notes are not numerous, but they give a clear indication of the Song circumstance as captives of war. McGilvary, in personal correspondence, observed that the Lao "are in this place literally the hewers of wood and the drawers of water", characterizing their status as "serfs" of the Krung Thep dynasty.⁵ He notes further that, at a time when the crown was turning increasingly to wage labor among Chinese immigrants instead of exacting *corvée* service from the peasantry, 500 to 800 Lao men were impressed into building the royal complex atop Khao Wang—the palace mentioned by G. B. McFarland—for three months of each year, bearing bricks and mortar up the steep slopes for the temples and fortifications.⁶ The employment of Lao captives at Khao Wang is also noted by Thomson, who compared their masonic skills to those of the ancient Kampuchean temple-builders (1875 : 114).

McGilvary learned from villagers that the Lao had been transplanted from the north some two or three generations previously, which corresponds to the dates of capture early in the nineteenth century.⁷ Bock, resting an evening in a Lao village outside Phet Buri during his travels in Siam, determined that its headman was taken captive from northern Vietnam as a child, sometime in the early 1830's (1884 : 83-84). Neither observer noted later or periodic additions to the colony.

King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, decreed freedom for native-born slaves and descendants of prisoners-of-war upon his ascension in 1868, but full abolition of slavery did not occur until 1905. It is unlikely that secondary migration of Song from the Phet Buri colonies occurred prior to the earlier date, and probably not until the latter decades of the nineteenth century. All references to Lao Song between 1858 (Mouhot, 1864) and 1893 (ESJ), indicated contact with or reference to Phet Buri villagers. After that, however, migration must have been rapid and involved significant numbers. Graham encountered Lao Song in neighboring Rat Buri in 1924 (1924 : 169), and Seidenfaden reported Song settlements scattered from the northwestern periphery of the Chao Phraya River valley to the peninsular lowlands southwest of Krung Thep in 1937 (1954 : 88).

New trade opportunities with America and the Europe during the early nineteenth century encouraged exploitation of rizicultural potentials in the Chao Phraya flood plain, and development of entrepot towns outlying Krung Thep facilitated governmental and communicational centralization. In addition, it provided land within the inner kingdom on which farmers from overpopulated or less strategic areas, as well as growing numbers of manumitted slaves, could be resettled.

During the reigns of Rama IV and Rama V, large numbers of Song were enlisted in taming the swamps, jungles, and savannahs of western Central Thailand.

Elders of the numerous Lao Song villages in Nakhon Pathom province, west of Krung Thep, indicate different periods of settlement between the mid-nineteenth century and about 1900, and Phet Buri origins in every case. Buruphat (1983) ascribes current settlement patterns in the southern delta region entirely to voluntary migration. It may be that the earliest Song migrants were removed from Phet Buri and its public works as slave laborers, artisans, and militia for urban and rural settlement projects in the area. As the infrastructure of agricultural commerce grew, other Song probably followed to farm as retainers of the landed gentry, under the government program of strategic resettlement (see Montri, 1930). Given the burgeoning population in the southern colonies at that time, it is also possible that some immigrants were not Phet Song but Black Tai deported along with other Lao Tai from areas depopulated under orders of Prince Damrong between 1885 and 1889 (see ESJ : 154-162).

As with descriptions of Black Tai in the northlands of Indochina, the Phet Buri captives have been remarked consistently as conservative of cultural form, according to the obvious indicators of language, costume, and ritual practice. Traditional dress is particularly identificational; each reference to the Lao Song includes mention of the distinctive costume, many going no further in description. Maintenance of a separate dialect has been less noted, but the author (s) of the Phet Buri mission history observed that the captives, after two or three generations in Siam, could not easily communicate in the language of their captors.⁸ Mouhot, in 1858, noted that "isolated in their villages, these Laotians have preserved their language and customs, and they never mingle with the Siamese" (1864 : 58). Cort, describing Lao villagers later in the century, observed the retention of indigenous beliefs and practices regarding "demons, devils, and the ghosts of their ancestors" (1886 : 361). Noting that some young men were entering the priesthood in the manner of surrounding Siamese peasants, she demurred that this was but the "addition of the more prominent Buddhist customs to their own old rites and ceremonies" (361). The degree of attendance to Buddhism, maintenance of upland dialect, and physical enclavement seem not much different among Song, today.

The core of Lao Song traditional culture is the ideology of patriliney, and the institutional framework of the temporal community is the patriline and its contingent structures. Among Black Tai in northern Laos and Vietnam, patriliney supported the hierarchy of ruler, priestly, and commoner clans, and defined the structure of sociopolitical and economic relations among members according to the subordination of local communities to the *tao* elite of the *myang* (Diguët, 1895 : 6-10, 16-20 ; Shrock et al., 1972 : 37, 42-45). For the Lao Song of Central Thailand, patriliney has no such role in the supralocal political structure. The logic of descent as manifest in patrilineal ideology, cosmology, and ritual practice has, however, a primary significance to ethnic

differentiation and the maintenance of tradition.

Among Song, the *sing* is a category, rather than a structured, localized group, whose members trace descent through unknown linkages to a mythic founding ancestor. The *sing* is without corporate function or property, excepting common worship of the founding ancestor and tutelary deity of the clan. These clan deities are among the class of the most powerful heavenly spirits, responsible for the creation of the world and its inhabitants, the governance of human conduct, and regulation of the seasons. As with Black Tai, some clans observe prohibitions regarding the consumption or use of undomesticated flora and fauna, and certain distinctions of ritual practice among the aristocratic and commoner clans. *Pu tao* ancestral spirits are more powerful than those of *pu noi*, and thus require more elaborate propitiation and deference ; this has no discernible effect on noble/commoner relations. In their manifestation as spirits, the *tao* are privileged with greater control over the living clan members and inhabit an exclusive abode in the land of the dead, but this affords no prerogative to their mortal descendants. The worldly status preferment of the *pu tao* is part of a bygone era in which the nobility controlled access to wealth, prestige, and positions of leadership through divine right of inheritance. For rural Song, no formal political offices other than elective village and commune headmanship exist. Although traditionally a heritable office among Black Tai, village headmanship was not exclusive to the *tao* (see Halpern, 1961 : 142 ; Whitaker et al., 1972 : 51) ; and, while communes among the Black Tai were led by nobles, the scattered distribution of Song communities in Central Thailand and external imposition of administrative divisions result in many communes including non-Song villages. Nor have the *tao* assumed positions of leadership in the political setting of Central Thailand.

Summary

There were two significant aspects to Tai ascendancy over the great valley civilizations : one was the dynamism of the Tai autocracies which succeeded the Khmer and Burmans as lowland state powers, relative to those of the upland frontier ; a second was the impact of Tai feudal organization on the political demography of Southeast Asia. In pursuit of their own baronies, the sons of ruling Tai chieftains fragmentated the vast Khmer and Burman territories into a number of more-or-less autonomous feudal polities. Tai ethnocultural differentiation has an historical basis in this fragmentary expansion and the florescence of political centers.

It is probable that Black Tai identity emerged as a frontier category during the formation of a Tai-dominated mainland Southeast Asian society. This society was structured by profound differences in the political ambitions, martial power, and administrative ideologies of culturally cognate populations and of encapsulated and surrounding peoples having divergent cultural-linguistic traditions. The social institution of internal Black Tai organization, directly responsive to external political

threat, was stratified patricianship ; specifically, the investment of certain individuals, or *chao myang*, with supra-local leadership, validated as an hereditary office of aristocratic clans, or *tao*. These leaders held powers of land disbursement and labor conscription within the settlement area and, especially, powers of military conscription to wage wars of conquest among the highland states or wars of rebellion and defense against lowland states. Observers during the early French colonial period and after have commented upon the extraordinary durability of Black Tai ethnocultural identity in the face of continuous contact and contest with more powerful Vietnamese, Lao Tai, and Siamese neighbors. In retrospect, the inconsistencies of ethnographic characterizations through time and among different regions indicate that some accretion of external cultural elements occurred. More importantly, the persistence of a distinct identity category—despite internal variation of cultural content—would suggest that the adversarial relationship between the upland Tai feudal states and lowland political traditions was the generative basis of ethnic identification.

Similarly, it appears that the divergence of a Lao Song identity category from Black Tai occurred during the formation of the modern Siamese Thai state, as the central government sought to dominate its frontier populations which were internally fractious and subject to external political influence. The Lao Song category appeared following the forced relocation to Central Thailand of thousands of these highlanders ; although its members are generally assumed to have been exclusively Black Tai conscripts, it is possible that some were other Lao Tai whose former ethnic affiliations are since discarded from Song ethnohistory. Apart from physical displacement, these early Lao Song suffered separation from an upland region in which they had been part of the demographic majority and, in some periods during the pre-colonial era, the dominant ethnic category. During the early Phet Buri period, Song were an enslaved minority, confined to large reservation villages and subject to forced labor. The accounts of missionaries and travelers suggest that little acculturation or assimilation occurred through the period of enslavement. As with their Black Tai forbears, Song have been regarded as extraordinarily conservative of cultural identity. Inasmuch as physical separateness from the Siamese majority was mandated by the government, ethnic enclavement and cultural persistence may have been as much a typical, historically consistent social adaptation to continuing political encapsulation as any intrinsic propensity toward cultural conservation. It is apparent that alteration of indigenous political institutions occurred with the disappearance of traditional feudal loyalties to the aristocratic patricians which controlled the upland *myang*. The change in political organization between Black Tai and Lao Song should not, in my opinion, be overstated as representing a fundamental social structural change. Rather, it represents a difference in the application and effective scale of a generally unchanging kinship ideology. While ethnographers tend to emphasize the supravillage polity and the hereditary authority of the *tao* as characteristic features of the Black Tai, it is

reasonable to assume that patrilineal structure and morality also operated at the local level, providing one institutional framework for daily social life. In this respect, the Siamese government was complicit in the preservation of kinship communities. From the earliest period of resettlement, the maximal patriclan represented an important social category in terms of marriage prohibitions, ritual observance, and local economic activity. That it also provided for *myang* leadership among Black Tai in the uplands is appropriate to the particular circumstances of political conflict which obtained in the Sipsong Chao Tai.

Following emancipation, many Song migrated voluntarily or were dispersed under government direction to isolated and agriculturally marginal rural areas throughout Central Thailand. In these locations, they organized as separate, initially small villages. Given the number of marriages between members of the same maximal patriclan, it appears that individual identification with local patriclan segments superseded the importance of affiliations with any more extended kin category, which is more characteristic of the densely populated Phet Buri villages today. The testimony of elders indicates a purposeful withdrawal from interaction with non-Song ; villages were bounded and centralized, and ethnic intermarriage is claimed to have been rare or non-occurrent. As with the Phet Buri colony, however, physical seclusion from other pioneers to the internal frontier surrounding the capital may have been an important factor in perpetuating ethnic enclavement. It is only within the past thirty years that roads and rural marketing networks have expanded to the remote locations typical of Lao Song settlements. Since dispersal throughout Central Thailand, the nucleated village or hamlet has emerged as the largest, significant supra-family social arrangement. Over a period of several generations, Song villages and different regional concentrations of Song settlement have developed certain, trivial distinctions among what are regarded by each as customary practices, or proper forms of customary practice. In recent years, some haphazard acculturation has occurred—increasing attendance to Buddhism, formal education, adoption of Western dress styles, incorporation of local folk rituals, and engagement in non-traditional occupations and exchange systems—though not uniformly among Song communities nor to a degree that emblematic cultural practices and membership boundaries have disappeared. In fact, the persistence of patriclanship and kinship-related ritual ideology reveals the maintenance of a societal institution which likely extends a millenium. The diminution of the patriclan system from Black Tai feudalism to local patriclan segmentation among the widespread, pre-modern villages, and to the present conservation of the local segment as a ritual and land proprietary group, may be considered an adaptation of the central institution of social articulation within the Black Tai/Lao Song tradition to changing external circumstances.

The similarities between Black Tai and Lao Song cultural form, as well as the common attributions of traditionalism, must be considered separately from their

ethnic identities. For Lao Song throughout Central Thailand, the Phet Buri colony has replaced the Sipsong Chao Tai as a "homeland". In recalling family origins, villagers in Nakhon Pathom or Suphanburi speak not of *myang* Teng or Muoi, but Myang Phet. Many of a village's elders were born there, and most younger Song can trace descent from or other familial relationship to specific kin remaining in the now large villages of the old Phet Buri Song settlements. Folk ballads recall migrants' origins in these villages ; standards of custom observance are measured against those maintained in the colony. For many contemporary Song, Myang Phet is where the recollectible, meaningful history of the people begins. What existed before displacement from Laos and northern Vietnam is, at best, indistinct, often entirely unknown, and, where familiar to villagers, legendary in aspect. The people of Central Thailand who maintain Black Tai beliefs and practices, today, are descendents of the colony.

Bert F. Sams

ENDNOTES:

1. Conventionally, Southeast Asianists use the term "Tai" in referring to any speakers of the Tai language family, reserving the aspirated "Thai" to designate only those citizens of the Kingdom of Thailand as a Siamese Tai state.
2. Prior to mass displacement during the Vietnam conflict, Black Tai were reported to number about 335,500 in Laos and northern Vietnam, compared with an estimated combined total of about 171,500 White Tai, Red Tai, Tai Nya, and Phutai in the central upland region (Lebar et al., 1964 : 220-228).
3. *The Story of the Petchaburi Station in 1861*, p.2. Contained in the *Eakin Papers*, Box III, File # 017/80, collection of the Manuscript Division, Payap College, Chiang Mai, Thailand.
4. *Seccessional Records of the Vimohnsihn Church, Petchaburi*, in the *Eakin Papers*, Payap College.
5. Daniel McGilvary to Dr. G. Lowrie; D.D., 9 Oct 1862. Microfilm File # r. 181 RG 026/79 (e), Payap College.
6. McGilvary to Lowrie, 1862, *ibid*.
7. McGilvary to Lowrie, 1862, *ibid*.
8. *The Story of the Petchaburi Station in 1861*, *ibid*.

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