

# POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AMONG THE HMONG OF THAILAND<sup>1</sup>

## Some Ideological Aspects

### I

#### The Background

Although a Chinese Communist Party of Thailand had been in existence since the 1920s, and Ho Chi Minh himself had visited Northeast Thailand during the late 1920s, the CPT was not officially established until 1942, gaining military experience through its operations against the Japanese in their occupation of Thailand during the Second World War. For a period it operated legally in Thailand with the abolition of the 1933 Anticommunist Act and party members participated in general elections between 1946 and 1947, but shifted to the countryside after the passing of a new Anticommunist Act in 1952 gave the Government unlimited powers to suppress anyone defined as 'communist'. It was not until 1961, after the execution without trial of a former MP had followed Marshal Sarit's military coup of 1958, that the party declared its commitment to armed struggle (Morell and Chai-anan 1981). The following year saw the despatch of 10,000 American troops to Thailand by Kennedy without previous consultation of either Thailand or the Congress, as American engagement increased in Vietnam.

The CPT initiated its campaign of organised resistance against Government forces with the announcement over the 'Voice of the People of Thailand' radio of the formation of a 'Thai Independence Movement' in 1964, and the 'Thai Patriotic Front' at the beginning of 1965. Considerable rural support was received in certain areas, as the CPT challenged corrupt practices among local officials and opposed US involvement in rural development projects, and a 'People's Liberation Army of Thailand' (PLAT) was organised in 1969. Escalation of conflict closely paralleled events in Vietnam, at a time when US troops were using Thailand as a military base for attacks over Laos and Vietnam. By January of 1969, as many as 11,000 Thai troops were stationed in Vietnam. The CPT has historically maintained close connections with the Chinese leadership, and has in addition received much fraternal assistance from Vietnam and Laos.

In 1973, peaceful student demonstrations in Bangkok brought about the downfall of the military junta which had ruled Thailand uninterruptedly since 1958, and caused the flight of its leaders from the country. A three-year period of parliamentary democracy followed, in which the CPT continued to pursue a rural strategy although the main focus of political activity had shifted to the capital, as social struggle developed at a national level through the formation of powerful labour and

farmers' unions. While the CPT gained many new adherents during this period, a strong right-wing reaction had begun to set in, a variety of paramilitary rightist organisations were formed and numerous peasant leaders were assassinated. With the withdrawal of American forces from Laos and Vietnam and the normalisation of diplomatic relations between Thailand and China in 1976, support from neighbouring Indochina became additionally important for the CPT.

After the return to Thailand of the two military leaders, Thanom Kittakachorn and Prapas Charusathien, in 1976, a bloody military coup ensued which ended the period of liberal reforms. Some 3,000 members of the intelligentsia, including members of parliament, teachers, lawyers, doctors, students and the leaders and members of farmers' and labour unions, fled to take refuge in the countryside with the CPT, disillusioned with the political solutions the domestic interlude following the 'student revolution' of 1973 had seemed to offer, and a united front was formed between the CPT, the Socialist Party and other groups opposed to the Government. At this time the CPT was probably stronger than it had ever been before. However, tensions began to develop, both between the new adherents and the old party leadership, and between the CPT and Vietnam, over the CPT's continued pro-China stance, and the invasion of Kampuchea by Vietnam in January 1979, together with China's punitive incursion into Vietnam a month later, brought these into the open, marking the beginning of a new phase for the CPT and for political life within Thailand in general. Support for the CPT from both Laos and Vietnam ceased, and the lines of communication with China were cut short. Together with disputes over the correct analysis of Thai society, serious conflicts developed within the CPT between pro-China and pro-Vietnamese groups, besides a growing feeling among many of the younger members and supporters of the party that a distinctively Thai approach to revolution was needed. The CPT leadership, however, maintained its pro-Peking stance and classic Maoist analysis of the Thai situation. Combined with the lack of support received from neighbouring countries, these conflicts swelled the ranks of defectors who left the CPT under the terms of an amnesty offered to political offenders by General Kriangsak Chomanand, then Premier, in 1978-79.

Most of those who joined the CPT after the events of 1976 have now returned (Yuangrat 1982), and while the structure of CPT organisation reportedly remained intact, 1981-82 (the period of fieldwork) saw the emergence of a new 'strategy of enclaves' (Ryan 1982, p.218), representing a plurality of political struggles emanating from different groups of workers, peasants, students and politicians<sup>2</sup>. The Fourth Congress of the CPT, held in 1982, failed to resolve the conflicts within the party. At the same time as the defections of Thai intellectuals and former cadres, mass surrenders (more than 14,000 listed over a three-year period from 1981) of guerrilla members of ethnic minorities who supported the CPT have been reported. Contacts were first formed between a group of Hmong in Petchaboun province and (Hmong)

members of the Pathet Lao during the early 1960s, where considerable disaffection had been caused by local police policy after the 1958-59 Opium Act. Between 1960 and 1962 rumours of the birth of a Hmong 'King' which we examine below drew many whole villages from Chiangmai and the tri-province area of Phitsanalouk, Petchaboun and Loei to guerrilla areas in North Chiangrai province. Although some Thai Hmong were recruited there to fight in Xieng Khouang province of Laos, returning to Thailand after the Geneva Accords of July 1962, these early contacts were, if anything; disadvantageous to the CPT, and it was not until the beginning of 1967 that armed clashes broke out in Nan province.

During the course of fieldwork I had the opportunity to interview many recent Hmong defectors from the CPT, and some who had been supporters of the CPT in recent years. I was able to visit some CPT-controlled areas to meet Hmong before they surrendered to the Government. While some top cadres of the CPT are still reportedly Hmong, I did not have the opportunity to interview any such people, and therefore my data are inevitably biased<sup>3</sup>. I suspect that if I had had such an opportunity, their analysis of the social and economic conditions of the different Hmong communities may have been more profound than those I was able to interview. However, it is fair to say that most Hmong in Thailand are not top-ranking CPT cadres, nor even fervent supporters of the CPT. The average Hmong in Thailand lives in a village which is part of the Thai state, in that it has suffered inroads in the form of developmental and educational innovations from the Thai state, and its trading network is connected to the main market centres of the Thai state, but he probably knows or has relatives among those who have been involved by the CPT in its struggle against the Thai state. Loyalties remain over-ridingly towards other Hmong, through the medium of the clan-based kinship network, and the sort of extreme political polarisation which occurred among the Hmong of Laos (see Stuart-Fox 1982) has not yet occurred to a significant extent in Thailand. Primary commitments remain towards the fields cultivated, the acting networks of the lineage, and the ancestral practices of particular descent groups. The Hmong are thus in the position of a client for whose support opposed political bodies have vied, and there are primarily personal and idiosyncratic reasons for political participation rather than firm, ideological commitments. This was certainly the position of the majority of Hmong in the survey site<sup>4</sup>.

A fundamental neutrality was evinced with regard to most matters affecting the Thai state which did not concern them directly, since although they were in the position of having to suffer extensive Government interference with their customary modes of subsistence, nevertheless villagers were able to maintain them to a very great extent. However, should Government intervention have become too severe (should, for example, their crops have been destroyed), should an individual fear imprisonment, relocation, retaliatory murder, bankruptcy, starvation, or persecution of any sort from the authorities, an alternative did exist in the form of those areas controlled by the



CPT. Moreover, commitments remained to lineage brothers (*kwvtijj*) who might live in those areas or maintain contacts with branches of the CPT, and if a villager were visited by such a one he would have little alternative but to offer what help and hospitality he could. The majority of the Hmong whom I met who had joined the CPT had done so either for reasons of fundamental economic hardship, or because they had some reason for avoiding the Thai authorities. Having done so, many found themselves disillusioned by encountering within the CPT the same sort of hierarchalisation of ethnic groups and discrimination against minority members which had caused their flight from the Thai state in the first place. Indeed, although the CPT does lay great store by the issue of ethnic minorities, and has depended in the North on a fighting force made up predominantly of the members of ethnic minorities (Girling 1981, p.258), one of the many charges levelled against it by returning Thai defectors has been precisely its unwillingness to involve the majority of its adherents on an equal basis, and the rigid nature of its party structure.

It is not too much to claim that the members of ethnic minority groups have been exploited by the CPT, in much the same way as they are exploited by the agencies of the Thai Government, through their deployment in combat and intelligence work. Although the Thai members of the CPT I was able to interview often demonstrated a curiosity about and interest in the Hmong and the workings of their social system, with which they had been in closer contact than many Thai, at the same time they demonstrated familiar ethnic stereotypes and prejudices towards them. The situation was rather similar with the issue of feminism which the CPT has adopted as one of its programme points. That the CPT should gain such ethnic minority members because of the economic hardships and discriminations suffered by them in the rest of Thailand does not invalidate the party's analysis of the current situation, which is precisely one of economic deprivations furthered by the class and ethnic inequities of the Thai social order. However, it does shed some light on the motives which individual Hmong may have to support the CPT.

The case of Nyiaj Ntxawg<sup>5</sup> may illustrate some of the reasons for which a Hmong may seek to move into a CPT area. Nyiaj Ntxawg had lived in the survey site for thirteen years, and was thirty-three years old. Shortly after the Japanese retreat his father's elder brother had died of smallpox, and his father's house, at that time in another village, had been burgled by a Karen who took some silver. His father's eldest brother had succeeded in tracking down the Karen, and forced him to lead him to the place in the forest where the silver was buried. However, the thief had tried to trick him, leading him deeper and deeper into the forest, and then suddenly attacking him. Nyiaj Ntxawg's uncle ran away, but according to his nephew he struck out behind him with his sword as he did so, cutting the thief across the belly and killing him.

Nyiaj Ntxawg's uncle was imprisoned by the Thai authorities for ten years for having committed this offence. While in jail he became extremely ill, lived in fear for

his life from the relatives of the Karen he had killed after his release, and died within a year. With only one brother left in the family, it was difficult for Nyiaj Ntxawg's father to make ends meet. It is in such a situation, or to avoid such a situation, that the CPT has provided an alternative.

It was after several years of intensified Government intervention in the Hmong economic system, catalysed by official local protection money demanded for poppy cultivation, that many Hmong initially fled to safer CPT zones. There is a certain level beyond which a social system cannot support the dues demanded of its economic base, at which passive resistance must become violent confrontation. As in the case described above at an individual level, it is out of the economic dilemmas into which the Hmong have been forced that the political dilemma into which they are, likewise, forced, arises. The feeling in the Hmong Village, therefore, remains normally one of neutrality until a certain level of localised grievance is reached, and this eclecticism towards opposing forces is symbolised by the Hmong language radio broadcasts which are received from China, Laos, Vietnam and Chiangmai<sup>6</sup>. The attempt to maintain neutrality however, in the face of what has until recently been increased confrontation between the two parties, has increased the tension and uncertainty of the average villager's existence. The account of Tsheej, a returnee to the focal village with whose surrender I was involved, will clarify some of these points:

'Thirteen of us came back with nothing. I myself had not been as far as China, only as far as Laos. In Laos I saw nothing. We only saw Thai students from Bangkok there. Some of them had been to China and had come back to struggle for the towns from the forest. They told us they were only Thai students—from the south, the centre, the north, and the northeast. They came back after studying in China saying we should arise and make war—Thailand was too full of oppressors to live there any more. They went to the forest because two or three thousand people had been killed by the officials. They were very disturbed, and did not wish to live in the towns any more. If they had stayed in the towns they would have been killed with no chance to protest, so they had fled to the forest, so that if they were killed, at least they would be killed (for the sake of) the country. That is the way they talked. If we made war, once the land was secured we would no longer be looked down upon. We could become officials. Everybody would share their food and drink with everyone else, and help each other with clothing. And so everybody believed. For a long time we made war, but in the end it was not good, it was not as they had said. We had so many problems for living. We had no money and no clothes, no rice and no food. Whatever we grew they bought from us



at the lowest prices: they paid twenty baht for a *bip* of rice. We could not live like that, so we came out. We stayed with them for ten-years, and at the end we had nothing. We had only enough to get out with, and when that was finished, everything was finished. However many silver bars one had had in the beginning, they were all used up. Now we are very poor. They told us there was a King, with long ears which reached to his shoulders, and big eyes, so we went to see. But wherever we went we saw nothing but people like ourselves. They talked as if there was a King for us Hmong<sup>8</sup>.

If you had money (silver) you could leave, if you had none you could not. I am so happy to have been able to leave. If anyone ever comes here to deceive us again, I will not go with him, since there is nothing good in it. In the forest there is malaria, living in a land of war, great sickness. Some people were shot and died, others were bombed. I am happy to have been able to come out at last. I could not leave before: if I could have done, I would have. Those who went to China could see no Huab Tais, it was all lies. They had said a Huab Tais had arisen in Laos, and there I searched for two or three years without seeing anything but people like us. They were just ordinary people who ate rice like you and me. No King eats rice like you and me. They were only leaders of people, like the Thais have a King, because he is clever. The students said they fled into the forest because so many were killed in Bangkok. Now they do not live in the forest: they have all returned. The government called them back, to be good people and study further and not shoot each other, but to go to Chiangmai and Bangkok'.

(Nomya, June 1982)

These references to the King arose out of rumours said to have been initially circulated by (Hmong) Pathet Lao cadres to the effect that the Hmong King (*Vaj*) or Emperor (*Huab Tais*) had arisen, and was summoning his followers to his abode in a cave in Amphur Theung, Chiangrai Province, where one grain of rice would become a thousand grains, silver and gold would be had by all, all would be equal and not have to work for a living. On another occasion the same informant told me that Souphanouvong, the Lao prince who supported the Pathet Lao, was identified to the Hmong as their King after they had reached Laos.

Most Hmong, however, had considered themselves deceived by such tales, as the above account shows. The long ear-lobes often attributed to the Hmong *Huab Tais*, sometimes together with eyes placed vertically in his head, are in fact one of the Buddhist signs of a Boddhisattva, or future Buddha.



Messianic Buddhist uprisings have occurred periodically in Thailand, and are often characterised by similar beliefs. Although they are usually considered as peasant uprisings, they have almost invariably involved ethnic elements (see Koch 1981: Tanabe 1985: Bunnag 1967: Keyes 1977). Hmong messianism, however, while having absorbed elements both of Christianity and of Thai or Lao Buddhism, owes more to the long history of messianic and millenarian Taoist and Buddhist popular rebellions in China (Wakeman 1977: Davies 1977). There is an essential connection between themes of rebellion and sovereignty among the Hmong<sup>9</sup>.

Here, however, one may note the odd admixture of factual rationality and idealism in the above account. Although the references to notions of the equal distribution of food and clothing and the pervasiveness of oppression (*caij tsum*) in Thailand are of an idealised kind, they clearly refer to concretely felt and experienced phenomena, such as the simple difficulties of making enough to eat, becoming officials, and not being looked down upon<sup>10</sup>. Perhaps these are everybody's ideals. Yet the fact that disillusionment with the CPT occurred just as much owing to the actual calamities of living, as to feelings which must have been obvious that a losing battle was being fought, reveals the extent to which the motives for such political participation remain of an *instrumental* kind.

On the other hand, given the extent of those calamities and hardships of life under the CPT which I have heard enumerated many times, perhaps it is not surprising that such disillusionment should have occurred after so many years of guerrilla warfare. Informants claimed that living in CPT areas they had been unable to sell their crops or buy medicine, salt, cloth or anything else. They complained that for long periods they had been unable to light fires at night for fear of being spotted by overhead aircraft, so that they could neither cook nor keep warm on the mountains, but had had to live in rough field-huts moving on every few days and learn to speak and communicate in Thai. (It is true that the returnees spoke much better Thai than most of the villagers.) In accounts such as the above, with its admixture of felt economic grievance with idealism and fantasy, we see that the opposition between egotistic and moral impulses which characterises the 'homo duplex' and arises from a complex division of labour (Giddens 1971, p.220) is quite absent, and that as Marx put it, 'The individual *is* the social being...' (1975, p.350). It also seems clear that the informant, like other Hmong, had been primarily involved with people who had joined the CPT after 1976 and to a lesser extent with party veterans, and that they had not been involved to the same extent as Thai adherents.

Tsheej came back, together with his wife and four handsome children, to a fortunate situation in the village, after laying down his rifle in the BPP (Border Police Patrol) office in Theung and signing the appropriate forms of amnesty. The officials were extremely polite to the Hmong defectors, and although I cannot say how much this had to do with my own presence, I believe such courtesy is a matter of deliberate



practice. There was also some good-natured bantering, of a slightly threatening kind.

On his return to the village Tsheej was housed in his elder brother's house with his family, and for some months worked together with his brother's family clearing both their fields and new ones which would eventually be used by Tsheej's family. There was not very much communication between the two brothers, nor between their respective wives, although the mother of the household seemed grateful for the extra help in the house willingly offered by Tsheej's wife. All were ill and half-starved with bacterial intestinal parasites and skin diseases, and the children in particular were extremely thin, but recovered rapidly as they began to communicate with the other children of the village. The favourite youngest son of the family showed some jealousy, and cruelty, towards Tsheej's even younger two children, but in general the children were kind to the newcomers. After some months Tsheej began to construct a bamboo house for himself (with his brother's help) some way away from the house, with great pride, and the children would run excitedly around their new home. Rice was collected from all Vaj surname households in the village to give to his family, as also happened with the returning Thoj family in the larger settlement. It is the maintenance of this kind of lineage reciprocity which tends to prevent the emergence of stratifications of a more permanent kind. Tsheej remained, however, a dissatisfied and malcontented man. He brooded about his previous life, and I think he felt superior to the other villagers. His good Thai language had given him an understanding and appreciation of the local Thai merchants and officials which would probably stand him in good stead in future undertakings. He showed a great interest in the outside world, some resentment of his brother's position (which his brother ignored), and an extreme willingness to travel to Chiangmai under any pretext. It might not be fanciful to say that, like many of the Hmong refugees from Laos to the US, he was a man who would be haunted for the rest of his life by his experiences.

We may conclude from this that motivation for political participation against legitimate authority remains therefore largely instrumental, although deferential elements are also involved, while support for legitimate authority remains largely of a deferential kind, although inevitably also involving elements of instrumentalism.

## II

### The Articulation of Conflict

Already such experiences are passing into the realm of popular history and attempts are made to refashion such episodes in terms of the traditional elements of Hmong folk culture. The following is an example of a type of tale known as *dab neeg*, or literally as *hais txog dab neeg*, 'to speak of spirits (and) people', which refer by implication to a time in distant antiquity when the spiritual world or the world of *yeeb* (*yin*) had not yet been separated from the mortal world, or the world of *yaj* (*yang*), and



communists, or else it would be as his friend in the spirit country had prophesied'.

(Hapo, January 1982)

It is these sort of mechanisms which are activated to prevent the increasing threat of political polarisation. What is extraordinary about such stories is the way current political actualities are articulated with a mythological past. It is possible for this to happen because the Hmong Otherworld (like that of the Chinese, cf. Feuchtwang 1975) is closely modelled on this world, through a series of inverted oppositions. Thus the meeting place between the two realms is invariably symbolised by images of exchange, transformation, substitution and barter which are clearly derived from the historical position of the Chinese market at the frontier of the Hmong world of forest and mountain. Thus the boundary between ethnic groups becomes the boundary between natural and supernatural realms. The Hmong supernatural Otherworld forms an inverted image of the social otherworld represented formerly by the Chinese state bureaucracy, and now to some extent by the Thai state bureaucracy, both replete with images of guilt and punishment, both characterised by uncontrollable alien daemonic forces which must be placated or appeased. Hence the Head of the Spirits is *Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem*, who judges and collects taxes (*sau se*) in the afterlife. He is described as *tus plaub*, the Arbitrator, and is seconded by *Ntxwj Nyug*, who is said to issue licences for life<sup>12</sup>. Moréchand (1972) has pointed out some of the connotations of the White Hmong phrase *ua npau suav*, or 'to boil a Chinese', used to refer to a nightmare: the common identification of daemons with foreigners, coupled with the disturbance of the waters which similarly invariably divide the supernatural from the natural realms.

In the above account we see an example of what Coleridge considered the synthetic, shaping power of the 'Imagination', which blends and fuses disparate elements, dissolving in order to recreate; a modifying, esemplastic power, which he distinguished from the aggregating faculty of the 'Fancy'<sup>13</sup>. This is a kind of 'bricolage' which combines elements of the traditional belief system with current actualities and the changing course of events.

I hope that here I have shown something of what the conflict between the Thai Government and the CPT had meant to the Hmong, how the alternatives of insurrection or loyalty to the Thai state as symbolised by the Thai King are defined by fundamentally instrumentalist concerns which arise out of economic alternatives and how a typical Hmong village may be defined in terms of such alternatives<sup>14</sup>.

### III

#### Ideology

Although the CPT formerly maintained a number of large, well-organised

return quickly", he warned him, "and if you are not back by midnight, I shall fine you".

While Tsav Leej had been in prison his wife had remained alive, but she had died since then, and now he was able to see her. The Christian God lives up there too with the Head of the Spirits, they speak with the same voice<sup>11</sup>.

At midday his uncle came to the bridge, along the heavenly way, and took him into the spirit country, where he met many spirits who asked him where he had come from. "From Thailand" he said. "War in the world of people and war in the world of spirits" said one among them, "so you can go no further into the cold and dark country. It is because you are a good and honest person that you have been able to come so far to this place in the land of spirits". "We have heard of Thailand but never been there" said the host of spirits around them: "This way goes to France, and this way goes to Australia, and this way goes to England; all countries have ways to all countries, but this way you should not take: it leads through a hole to America. Come and visit our countries" they all begged him. "But I have already stayed a long time" said Tsav Leej, "I am not free to come and visit your countries". "If you come with us, we will look after you and you will be well", they promised him, "there are only five stages to our countries, where there are aeroplanes and cars". But he and his spirit friend said they had already stayed too long, and could not go with them.

"There is war in both the world of spirits and the world of people, and only those like Kings can go", they replied, "if you do not come further into our countries but return, both the land of spirits and the land of people will have war until brother will kill brother, husband and wife will kill one another, and the new sky will come (*lub ntuj tshiab yuav tawm los*).

His friend the spirit took him back to his home in Chaingmai. On the way he lost sight of his friend, and so arrived alone. He did not know where he was, and thought that he might have died. But looking around he remembered the mountains, and remembered that the road was not far from where he stood.

So he fumbled his way (*maub maub*) to the road and took a car and came back: he arrived at night in his home, and his son sent a message to the radio station in Chiangmai saying his father had returned. Since he has come back he has said that brothers should not fight brothers and nor should husbands and wives; it was only like that with the



men and spirits could communicate with one another.

In its admixture of current phenomena with a legendary past, the following accounts, told in Hapo by a misitor from another village who had come to court a bride, mirrors the transitional nature of the Hmong village:

### **The Story of Tsav Leej**

'There was one man named Tsav Leej, from Mae Chaem. For four days and four months he went into the spirit country, and yet he is still alive. He spent twelve months in Bangkhwen jail because his sister's husband kept going between Laos and Thailand (i.e., a communist) and the Border Police found many guns stored in his house, so they arrested him and took him to Bangkhwen jail. When he was released they took him from Bengkhwen to Lampang by bus, but he disappeared, so his son, who had gone to Bangkhwen to meet him, was unable to find him. The son reported him lost to the police, who accompanied him back to Bangkhwen again but were unable to trace him, so he returned to Chiangmai and sent a message from the radio station there to say that his father was missing and if anyone knew of his whereabouts, to report it so that he could come to meet him.

But his father had a spirit friend, who had led him up the Mekong River, all the way to China and past China to the country of the spirits. For four months he went into the spirit country, staying on the bridge where people and spirits come to trade with one another, but none know which are spirits and which people. People who wish to return must place some silver in a pail of water; if it sinks they may return, but if it does not then they cannot.

One day, after he had been gone some time, his spirit friend said, "Tomorrow I will ask them (the spirit family with whom they were staying) to cook breakfast very early, and after breakfast I will take you right inside to visit the spirit country". The next day after breakfast they went to meet the leader of the spirits there, to see what kind of licence they would issue him, of entry into the cold and dark country. So he replied that his uncle (Fyb) had already died a long time before, and had a motorcycle which could carry him. Then his uncle pleaded with the head of the spirits to write his nephew a card for him to go inside the cold and dark country. "I have been here a long time already", he begged, "and I should very much like to see him".

So the Head of the Spirits told Tsav Leej to swap clothes with his spirit friend, and at midday his uncle would come to collect him. "You must



bases in the forest, in which some Hmong were involved, many of the areas declared by the CPT to have been liberated, or considered by the Thai Government as 'red', have in effect been largely areas best described by the phrase 'freefire' zones formerly applied to similar areas in Laos. A large intermediate area of mountainside existed in which it was simply not safe for outsiders to venture or government employees to patrol, since they faced attack by the local population, often members of ethnic minorities, who maintained largely traditional settlements in the area. In a sense such areas had been controlled by the CPT, rather than properly liberated by them. CPT members formed the authorities in these areas, based on an accommodation with the members of ethnic minorities whereby they largely continued to practise customary modes of subsistence and belief in return for defending the area and providing material support for the bases, in the form of rice supplies for example. This situation did not essentially differ from the historic situation of the hills described by Leach (1960), in which lowland-based authorities would maintain varying degrees of influence over the inhabitants of those regions, who thus maintained a *de facto* autonomy—or from situations involving Government posts and installations in other areas of the hills. It is in this sense that the village may be said to have maintained a real autonomy, and labour to have remained, if not the acarest commodity it historically was, at least the commodity more valued than land. Thus authorities of differing political persuasions exerted sways of differing strengths over the populations of those regions. Ideological commitment was only demanded at the extremities of the situation—where, for example, BPP schools taught Hmong children loyalty to the King, or where the Hmong were educated in the history of colonialism in CPT bases.

This situation was aptly illustrated by a large Hmong settlement to which I conducted a field trip, in an area which afterwards became the location of a severe struggle between Government and CPT forces which resulted in the regaining of the territory for the Thai state. The Hmong of this large, 300-household settlement had maintained close relations with Hmong in Laos, and the settlement had been seriously polarised by the impact of Christianity, which was expressed in the spatial composition of the settlement. Although originally a *Nikhom* settlement, and still nominally under the supervision of the local Thai Government administration, all the peaks of the surrounding mountains constituted a CPT-controlled area where many Hmong who had been previous residents of the settlement, or had relatives there, were living.

One single, winding road led down from the plateau on which the settlement was situated, towards the local Thai town, which was also the local administrative centre and market. Every night a 'defence volunteer' guard of some thirty able-bodied Hmong males patrolled the periphery of the village against encroaching 'communists', under Thai supervision<sup>15</sup>. And often Hmong from the surrounding villages in the mountains would come secretly down to the settlement to beg blankets, rice, oil for lamps, or ammunition which their relatives in the settlement were in no position to



refuse. The sound of shelling echoed about the settlement every evening, but waking in alarm my first night there, I was told by the Hmong who was my companion,

‘It is nothing. It is only the Thai soldiers, firing at the mountains because they are afraid’.

It is hard to convey the mixture of kind regard for my well-being, and scorn for the Thai soldiers, with which this was said. But perhaps the essential powerlessness of many Hmong individuals and settlements in the ideological cleavages which have riven the Thai state cannot better be expressed than by the following account by a Catholic missionary to the Hmong, who has spent more than eleven years working in an identical settlement:-

‘In 1974 we met Lao Nia Kao, who had surrendered two days before. He had never been a communist, he explained. He had never shot at anybody and had not even any arms. The attack of 1968 had surprised him in the forest, but the very place where he lived was still peaceful, so he had remained there. That lasted for six years. The communists patrolled the region, and they met occasionally. Every second month they were visited by two of them who chatted for a few minutes and gave them some medicine, generally out of date. Life became harder and harder. They were afraid to make too big fields for fear of being seen by the helicopters. They could not go to the market. They had neither salt nor cloth. Their clothes were falling into rags, and for two years, “his trousers had a hole in the seat”. He no longer cut his hair. He decided to surrender’.

(Mottin 1980, p.62)

Many of the Hmong who originally burnt government schools in the hills in retaliation for the Doi Chompoo incident, affrighted by the napalming of their villages and fields which followed, never surrendered or settled in the Centres established for them once the Government had reversed its policy, but remained in the deep forests which were also the province of Thai insurgents, and thus inevitably fell under their command. Individual cases such as the one above have, however, also been common. From my observations in the village I would opine that Hmong in general do not suffer from the rooted dislike of solitude characteristic of many Thai, and I certainly met Hmong who were living by themselves, or with a wife and a small child, or with a friend, at the edges of the fields they were working, for months or years on end, and only rarely returned to their original village.

Although the neutrality of the Hmong towards the crisis of legitimacy in Thai politics was becoming more a matter of conscious strategy than a result of naivety as

their experience and knowledge of the political alternatives increased, the recent eclipse of the rural CPT following the return of large numbers of its members to the Thai state has to some extent obviated this<sup>16</sup>.

It is hard to see what the future will bring in such a situation, except that insurrection must remain an alternative for the Hmong even if unsupported by a Thai insurrection, unless the opportunities of engagement in Thai administration which we have seen are aspired to are made available to the Hmong to a much greater extent than they have been.

In the focal village a clash of interests was evident between what was termed by the Thai *prapayni chao khao*, the customs of the hillpeople, and *gotmai*, or (Thai) law. Ordinary villagers might make appeal to Thai law in the course of *kev plaub kev ntug*, as the Hmong term it, or the 'way of complaint and litigation'. One young man was being sued for marriage by a young girl he had made pregnant against his objections, those of his wife who had threatened to commit suicide if he should remarry, his widowed mother who took the part of his wife, and his clan relatives. Although in customary Hmong law there could be no serious dispute about the matter unless the girl could be persuaded to withdraw her claim, since the penalty she had demanded of seven *daim nyiaj* (silver bars) was far beyond his capacities to afford, and his wife could have no say in a matter of his taking a second wife, and no recourse but to her parents who were deceased, this youth did make an appeal to *gotmai*, which would have demanded an affordable compensatory payment to the girl, and in this he was supported by the Mien teacher, who thought it shameful that such an amount should be demanded of a young man. But he did have to marry the girl, and I do not yet know how his wife resolved the matter<sup>17</sup>.

However, although consensual Hmong political solutions may have been challenged to some extent at the local level by the writ of Thai law, the legitimacy of that writ is itself under challenge by other sectors of the Thai state, and it is these broader cleavages which have constituted the major political alternatives for the average Hmong village.

While neutrality in the conflict between the Thai Government and its opponents, therefore, was becoming more a matter of informed compromise and the 'playing-off' of the various parties against one another, and as political sophistication among the Hmong had deepened, partly owing to the presence of extremely politically conscious Hmong refugees from Laos in the border camps, so too had the uncertainty deepened, of not knowing which way to turn, or who to believe. And as uncertainty increased, so too did the anxiety which attended daily decision-making processes, much as it did in regard to the choice of whether to cultivate poppy or not. It was by such alternatives that the village was defined and defined itself, as the case of Tsheej's return to the village demonstrated.

At the same time as Tsheej's return, a family had returned to a larger



settlement nearby in a similar condition. I remember the pregnant mother of this household coming down the side of the mountain in Chiangrai to the road to meet her son-in-law, who lived in Hapo. From there they would travel, several days later, to the BPP office to surrender. The tears which she shed as she reached the road, and which her son-in-law also shed at their reunion, were for her brother, who was still up in the hills.

*Nicholas Tapp*

Department of Anthropology  
Chinese University of Hong Kong  
Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong

#### ENDNOTES:

1. This paper, presented at the International Conference on Thai Studies at the Australian National University, Canberra (3-6 July 1987), represents a slightly altered section of a Ph. D. thesis (*Categories of Change and continuity among the White Hmong (Hmoob Dawb) of Northern Thailand*, University of London 1985). Research for this was undertaken at the School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London, based on an 18-month period of fieldwork in North Thailand from April 1981 to October 1982. I should like to record my gratitude to the Central Research Fund of the University of London and to the (then) Social Science Research Council who sponsored this research and to my supervisor Dr. Andrew Turton.
2. This strategy appears in retrospect to have been not so organised as is suggested here: clearly a genuine fragmentation of the opposition to the Thai state was taking place.
3. Returnees were also naturally reluctant to discuss their recent pasts.
4. I realise that to speak of the 'average' Hmong or the 'typical' Hmong village in this way may be contentious. However, it arises from an attempt not to depict the Hmong over-simplistically at this time as merely apolitical or neutral.
5. I would stress that although this is evidently an anecdote which it was not possible to verify in every detail, nevertheless the case well illustrates the type of situation in which the Hmong were liable to seek the protection of the CPT.
6. The Hmong broadcasts from China are, however, difficult to understand.
7. These references to 'becoming officials' (*nomtswnv*), which one hears often repeated, are extremely significant since they demonstrate a genuine desire on the part of Hmong villagers for fuller participation in the Thai state (see Note 17).
8. *Vaj* (or *Vaaj* in Green Hmong) corresponds to Chinese *wang*. *Huab Tais* corresponds to Chinese *Huang Ti*, although a Hmong variant, *Faj Tim*, would be the more logical variant phonologically (personal communication, Professor G. Downer, March 1984). Many stories are told of Hmong *Huab Tais* in different contexts. However, messianic prophets seem to see themselves as invariably messengers of the *Huab Tais*.
9. At the same time, the strength of underlying resistance to the state expressed through sporadic messianic

or revolutionary movements should not be obscured by the latter. See the essays in Turton and Tanabe (1984).

10. Burridge's (1971 p.13) hypothesis that the 'redemptive process bears significantly on the politico-economic process' is amply confirmed in the light of such data.
11. This remark was probably for my benefit.
12. Lemoine (1972) identifies *Ntxwj Nyug* as *Yu Houang*, the Jade Emperor of the Taoist pantheon, who has here become identified with the Hindu-Buddhist *Yama* (*Yen Wang* in Chinese), the Lord of the Dead. The first two elements of *Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem* he also identifies with *Yu Houang*, the Jade Emperor. The latter two derive from *ta tien*, 'great palace' (Lemoine 1972), or perhaps 'great dynasty'. Although deities are often poetically doubled in the Hmong tradition, as Lemoine points out, it seems odd that *Nyuj Vaj* should not refer to the Chinese *Niu Wang*, or Ox-King (Werner 1932).
13. S.T. Coleridge, *Letters* (ed. E.L. Griggs, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1956).
14. Other major alternatives which existed for Hmong communities at this time were the conflict over whether to cultivate the opium poppy at the economic level, and whether to adopt Christian or Buddhist modes of belief.
15. They received six to seven hundred *baht* per month for their time.
16. It now seems clear that the current absence of an organised alternative to the Thai state has increased the helplessness of ethnic minorities in North Thailand as it has increased direct confrontation between themselves and state agencies. In the very serious situation of human rights abuse which now exists, of large-scale forced relocations of minority peoples and military-assisted deforestation measures, the possibilities of genuine ethnic insurrection or flight to neighbouring countries have perhaps become more serious than at any time since the early 1960's. It might be argued that the current 'slash-and-burn' policies enforced by the Thai Government with regard to opium poppy cultivation represent the final attempt on the part of the Thai state to destroy forms of economy and ways of life which differ essentially from its own. In this context it is worth pointing out that the World Commission on Environment and Development has recently stressed the need for reafforestation projects precisely *not* to eradicate traditional human ecosystems and the need for environmental programmes to 'put people first' (see *Our Common Future*, World Commission on Environment and Development, Oxford University Press 1987).
17. For the record, his first wife left him when he took the second. I include this case here because it sheds light on the important sense in which Hmong politics is not Thai politics, and the extent to which current debates in Hmong society between Hmong 'conservatives' and Hmong 'radicals' concentrate on the extent and directions in which Hmong society itself should or should not change, with very little reference to wider political debates about the nature of Thai society. Here the issues, for example, are to do with the continuation of bridewealth payments, the extent to which new forms of economic cooperation can or should transcend customary lineage boundaries, or modern medicine replace traditional systems of healing. In itself this raises important questions about the nature of state-formation, and the place of ethnic minorities within them. Indeed there may be a sense in which the kind of ideology associated with the *sakdina* system has classically assigned to those classified as ethnic minorities a place beyond, or at the perimeter of, the state, and a sense in which this obscures the very important role which minorities do or can play in the formation and functioning of the state. Opportunities for political participation in the Thai state are of course still very largely denied to the minorities of North Thailand, and this represents a real contradiction with Thai government programmes of avowedly assimilationist or integrationist aims.



## REFERENCES:

- Bunnag, T. : 'Kabot phu mi bun phak Isan', *Sangkomsat Parisat*, 5, 1, 1967.
- Burridge, K. : New Heaven, New Earth (Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1971).
- Davis, F.L. : *Primitive Revolutionaries of China: A Study of Secret Societies in the Late Nineteenth Century*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1977.
- Feuchtwang, S. 'Investigating Religion' in M. Bloch (ed.): *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology*, (ASA Studies 3, London, Malaby Press, 1975).
- Giddens, A. : *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Girling, J. : *Thailand: Society and Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Keyes, C. : *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia*, London, MacMillan, 1977.
- Koch, A. : 'Collective Protest Movements in Siam between 1850-1930: The Significance of Ideology', Unpub. M.A. thesis, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague 1981.
- Leach, E. : 'The Frontiers of Burma', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, 1960.
- Lemoine, J. : L'initiation du mort chez les Hmong: *L'Homme* XII 1, 2, 3: 1972.
- Marx, K. : *Early Writings* (Penguin Books in association with New Left Review) 1975.
- Morell, D. & Samudavanija, Chai-Anan : *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, Massachusetts, Oelgeschlager, Gunn and Hain 1981.
- Ryan, M. : *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.
- Stuart-Fox, M. (eds) : *Contemporary Laos: Studies in the Politics and Society of the Lao People's Democratic Republic*, New York, St. Martin's Press 1982.
- Tanabe, S. : 'Ideological Practice Within Peasant Rebellions: The case of Siam around the turn of the Century' in S. Tanabe & A. Turton (eds): *History and Peasant Consciousness in South East Asia*, Osaka, Senri Ethnological Studies, National Museum of Ethnology, 1984.
- Wakeman, F. : 'Rebellion and Revolution: The Study of Popular Movements in Chinese History', *Journal of Asian Studies* XXXVI 2, 1977.
- Werner, E. : *A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology*: Shanghai, 1932.
- Yuangrat, W. : 'Current Thai Radical Ideology: The Returnees from the Jungle', *Journal of Contemporary South East Asia*, June 1982.