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Highland Chiefs and Regional Networks in Mainland Southeast Asia: Mien Perspectives

Le Jiem Tsan, Richard D. Cushman, and Hjorleifur Jonsson*

This article is centered on the life story of a Mien upland leader in Laos and later in the kingdom of Nan that subsequently was made a province of Thailand. The story was recorded in 1972 but primarily describes events during 1870–1930. The aim of this article is to call attention to long-standing networks of highland-lowland relations where social life was unstable but always and persistently inclusive and multi-ethnic. The centrality of interethnic hill-valley networks in this Mien case has numerous parallels in studies of Rmeet, Phunoy, Karen, Khmu, Ta'ang, and others in mainland Southeast Asia and adjacent southern China. The implications of the Mien case support an analytical shift from ethnography to ethnology—from the study of singular ethnic groups that are viewed as somehow separate from one another and from lowland polities, and toward a study of patterns and variations in social networks that transcend ethnic labels and are of considerable historical and analytical importance. The shift toward ethnology brings questions regarding the state/non-state binary that was largely taken for granted in studies of tribal peoples as inherently stateless.

Keywords: Mien (Yao), history, chiefs, highland peoples, interethnic networks, Thailand, Laos

Introduction

In the studies of highland societies of mainland Southeast Asia, it is somewhat rare to get a glimpse of chiefs as a significant component of regional networks of relations. When anthropologists studied Thailand's hill tribes since the 1965 founding of the Tribal Research Center, their mandate was to examine the socio-economic characteristics of the six main tribes: Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Lisu, and Mien (Geddes 1967; 1983). The resulting works described for the most part egalitarian village societies that had no links to lowland national society (Walker 1975; McKinnon and Wanat 1983; McKinnon and Vienne 1989). It was primarily the research of Ronald D. Renard (1980; 1986; 2002)

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with the Karen, independent of the Tribal Research Center since he was a historian and they were all ethnographers, that has insisted on the importance of long-standing connections between upland and lowland regions, and on the positive role of chiefs.

But recent work on upland-lowland relations in Laos, Burma, and southern China flows in a similar direction to Renard's research and suggests that interethnic upland-lowland networks may have been historically the predominant form of political organization in this region (Badenoch and Tomita 2013; Bouté 2011; 2015; Chen 2015; Evrard 2006; 2007; Hayami 2004; 2011; Ikeda 2012; Jonsson 2005; 2014a; Kojima and Badenoch 2013; Sprenger 2006; 2010). Other recent work suggests that the attribution of statelessness to highland peoples may express recent dynamics of dispossession, rather than any intrinsic feature of highland societies over the last millennia (Scott 2009; Kataoka 2013). Both issues encourage a move away from the ethnographic focus on ethnic groups as distinct from one another and toward an ethnological focus on patterns and variations that transcend ethnic labels and leave questions with the state/non-state binary.

The main text of this article is a Mien history that was recorded in 1972 and centers on the life of a particular Mien chief (Le and Cushman 1972). His name was Tang Tsan Khwoen, and he later received the Thai title Phaya Khiri ("mountain chief") from the king of Nan, and the family name Srisombat which many of his descendants still carry. The story was told by Le Jiem Tsan to researcher Richard D. Cushman in the village of Khun Haeng, Ngao District of Lampang Province, on June 1, 1972. Most of Cushman's recordings with Le Jiem Tsan and others are in the Mien ritual language, but the chief's life-story and a few other recordings are in the everyday language. Le Jiem Tsan died before 1980 and Richard Cushman in 1991. Because I (HJ) was somewhat familiar with the individual chief from ethnographic research among his descendants (Jonsson 1999; 2001; 2005) I am able to check some of the information against other sources. The Mien story shows the ease and normalcy with which relations between hill peoples and lowland rulers were established, and I situate the story against the general trend in northern Thailand at the time of cutting relations with highland peoples and depriving them of rights to settlement and livelihood.

While the evidence for highland people's dispossession in the early twentieth century is published and has long been available, it seems that anthropologists of Thailand were not particularly curious about the separation of highlanders from their lowland neighbors, but instead expected ethnic divides to be important. Ethnographic traditions encouraged the search for ethnic groups as distinct and separate from others, and anthropological theory expected clear differences between state populations and stateless peoples. The peculiarity of twentieth century Thai history and of research traditions regarding highland peoples were perhaps less apparent because neighboring countries

were inaccessible for research due to wars and other political turbulence for a good part of the last century. The idea that tribal culture and social organization were endangered traditions from the past appears to have discouraged areal comparisons and critical historical scrutiny of highland people's isolation and dispossession in Thailand.

German anthropologist Hugo Adolf von Bernatzik did research in Thailand during 1936–37. In his book *Akha and Miao* (1970, German original 1947) he noted that many minority groups had migrated into northern Thailand in previous decades, had settled in the mountains and that their farming endangered forests and watersheds. He also noted that in 1915 the governor of Chiangrai Province had issued a ban on making fields in the mountains:

Duplicate decrees were published by the governors of all those provinces into which the mountain peoples had immigrated. Other decrees prohibited the cutting down of bamboo groves, which likewise are important water reservoirs. The punishments that were threatened, for example, for cutting down one of the larger trees, amount to more than a year's imprisonment. An attempt to get at the smuggling of opium was also made by means of a prohibition against the cultivation of poppies. The fields of a village whose inhabitants paid no attention to the prohibition were to be destroyed; the owners, if they could be caught, were punished with imprisonment. (Bernatzik 1970, 699)

Bernatzik mentioned that as a consequence, anyone who knew the law would go into hiding once there was word of a group of police approaching a highland village. Further, highland peoples were not adjusted to illnesses that pertain to lowland areas, and the punitive policies significantly enhanced distrust across the ethnic frontier:

In various villages of the Lahu, Akha, and Meau I have met natives who had been sentenced to short prison terms for trivial and even unsuspectingly committed offenses, such as the forbidden carrying of weapons, violating market regulations, and the like. Without exception all these people were wasting away from malaria, and many of them later died from it, so their relatives told me. Precisely such circumstances have also frequently given rise to the belief of the mountain peoples that the valley dwellers could bewitch and kill them. [As Bernatzik viewed the situation]; the annihilation or emigration of the mountain peoples from Thailand can only be a matter of time. (*ibid.*, 702–703)

Because the lack of positive engagements with highland peoples (that is, any alternatives to fines and imprisonment) was rather general across northern Thailand, it is important to point out that there were exceptions to this trend. By the late 1880s at least, the king of Nan had made a deal with the leader of Mien and Hmong highlanders that he could legally settle with his followers in the mountains of his domain, he would collect tax among the highlanders, serve as a back-up military force for Nan, and the leader was awarded a Phaya title (Jonsson 1999; 2001; 2005). Whether initially or later, the Mien

were also allowed to grow and sell opium within the folds of the Royal Opium Monopoly, and this arrangement lasted until 1958 when the ban on opium cultivation was finally enforced in Thailand.

The Mien population was not uniformly allowed to grow and trade opium. This only applied to big households in five villages under the Phaya, and it was declared illegal for all other highlanders to cultivate poppy; they were thus continually at risk of being fined and imprisoned. It is not clear if the highlanders generally were poppy growers before settling in northern Thailand. Rather, it is possible that the political isolation of highland peoples—a product of national integration—led to their symbiotic relationship with itinerant Chinese traders who encouraged the cultivation of poppy. Again, the work of Bernatzik is informative on this front:

[Chinese traders] regularly visit the mountain villages, pay the taxes for the natives or lend them money, and for all these services buy the opium for a small fraction of its value. Thus the mountain peoples receive only a small equivalent for the craved drug, but the traders operated with a profit of often thousands of percent for the turnover. The business proved to be so lucrative for the traders that they persuaded the inhabitants of whole villages, especially the Lisu but sometimes also the Akha to apply themselves exclusively to the cultivation of poppies and to exchange opium for food supplies from their neighbors. (Bernatzik 1970, 697–698)

Thus it seems that the social and political isolation of highland peoples resulted directly from policies against highland farming, and further that it played to the interests of the itinerant Chinese traders who had connections to the underground opium trade. The traders cultivated relations with the highland villagers, and this economic and social alternative—that made highland peoples independent of lowland Thai stores and traders—furthered highland people's isolation from Thai society. One part of this history is that for the most part, Thailand's national integration was a manifestation of the hegemony of Bangkok over the regions that were incorporated, many of which had been independent kingdoms each with their own regional society of multi-ethnic networks.

When these various kingdoms became national provinces of Thailand during the reign of kings Rama V and VI (Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh; 1865–1910, 1910–25), the old elites were for the most part replaced by officials who came from Bangkok, assumed the superiority of Bangkok civilization and language, and generally made no attempts to cultivate local society or to learn local languages (Vella 1978; Moerman 1967; 1988, 70–86, 162–172). The kingdom and later province of Nan is an exception—there the king was not replaced but was allowed to stay in power though with reduced ability to rule. He could no longer demand tribute from lowland peasants, but was dependent on taxes that went through Bangkok. It is thus perhaps not surprising that he made a contract with a highland leader who enabled him to gain from highland taxation and from the legal

opium monopoly. I had learned of some of that history from the descendants of Tsan Khwoen, the Mien chief (Jonsson 2005, 74–85).

One unexpected example of inclusive and diverse identities in the Thai hinterland concerns the Mlabri, or Phi Tong Leuang, who were studied as an exotic, ancient, and isolated people by a team connected to the Siam Society, and reported on in a special volume in 1963 (Boeles 1963). Most of the reporting concerned the Mlabri as a separate race, thus blood samples, nostril comparisons, and head measurements were employed in order to arrive at a scientific sense of who the people were. The Thai and Western research team to the Mlabri in the early 1960s only had success in finding them because the Mlabri were in a labor and social relationship with some Hmong people; the Thai had no connection of their own.

The documentary film that was made of the expedition (Siam Society 1963) suggests instead that the Mlabri were a regional (Southeast Asian) people and not some isolated Stone Age holdover. That is, the film's narrative relates the Mlabri as isolated primitives, but the footage shows that many of the men had tattoos, in line with what was practiced among lowlanders. Further, the film shows that the Mlabri men did a variation on a sword dance to entertain the visitors—something which perhaps all peoples in the region knew how to do when needing to entertain some strangers.

Writing in the 1930s, Bernatzik reported the following about the Mlabri and their regional context without any additional comment:

In Nan a Buddhist priest told us that there was a document in his monastery in which it was recorded that the Phi Tong Leuang were subjects of the king of Nan, to whom they paid annual tribute in honey, rattan, and wax. At the time they appear to have been very numerous. (Bernatzik 2005, 43)

The Mien (Yao) people have a long history in southern China and in Southeast Asia of negotiations and entanglements in regional networks of continually shifting social lines where no one position is guaranteed or necessarily stable (Cushman 1970; Alberts 2006; 2016; Chen 2015; 2016). I suggest that this situation was common across the region and that it continually availed the possibility to negotiate identities, positions, relations, borders, and basic rights between particular partners (Renard 1987), such as that shown by the unexpected case of Mlabri and the kingdom of Nan. Borders and identities were not fixed or objective. These were always dependent on particular relations, but this flexibility and specificity has (mis-) led many modern scholars to assume that neither pre-twentieth century states nor the highlanders were territorial (see Thongchai 1994). For the most part such interethnic relations were not recorded and are not easily (if at all) found in the archives. I address potential reasons for this archival absence at the end of

the article, and now turn to the story of the interconnected lives of some Mien leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Le Jiem Tsan's Story of the Life of Phia Long Tang Tsan Khwoen Waa

Let me tell you the story of the Phia Long. In earlier times the Phia Long was very important among the people and all of us knelt down before him. The Phia Long, originally, lived in Laotian territory. He was a member of the Tang lineage, and his given name was Tsan Khwoen, or, as he was often called, Tsan Khwoen Lu-Phia. His descendants are among the people who now live in Phulangka Village, and one of them is the *kamnan* there.

Tsan Khwoen's father was Tsoi Waa and hence the Phia Long's full name was Tsan Khwoen Waa. His son was Wuen Lin Lu-Phia who later ruled as Lu-Phia at Phulangka. When Wuen Lin died, his son Fu-Tsan succeeded him and is now the *kamnan* at Phulangka. Fu-Tsan was the third son in the family, and the fourth son now lives in Chiangkham where he runs a store [this man was Tang Fu Jiem who later also established himself in Bangkok within Chinese society and took a second wife there. He had subsequently two homes and two lives, HJ].

In those early times Tsan Khwoen was a courageous man; indeed, his whole family consisted of courageous men. They lived over in Luang Prabang territory. His father's younger brother held the title Phan Nya Djun. This title of Phan Nya Djun, or Phu Djun, was Laotian. The full title was Phan Nya Djun Lak Nii (พระยาจุลลิกหนี), which means "Duke Djun who thieved and fled."

After Tsoi Tso was appointed Phan Nya Djun Lak Nii, nothing he said was as wise as his nephew's counsels. All of the people preferred his nephew. When the Laotians learned of this situation, they went to that village of the people to appoint Tsan Khwoen to the rank of Lu-Phia in place of his uncle. Tsan Khwoen could not be prevailed upon, however, no matter what the Laotians said, since his uncle already held the position. When further persuasion proved useless the Laotians finally asserted that they would have to "weigh the fate" (*dziaang kau maeng*)¹⁾ of the two men to see who should be the *lu-phia*.

Now, Tsoi Tso had an enormous amount of hair on his head; Tsan Khwoen, in contrast, had only a tiny bit of very fine hair on the sides of his head, his pate being totally

1) "Fate" is only a rough translation of the complex Mien concept *maeng* which relates to a person's luck, fortune, or power as dictated by astrological influence. The concept is close, but not identical, to that of *rit* (ฤทธิ) in Thai.

bald. One of the Laotians took out a razor and shaved off a little of Tsan Khwoen's hair. From Tsoi Tso, on the other hand, quite a lot of hair was obtained. A pair of scales for weighing opium was then brought forth and assembled. A little of Tsan Khwoen's hair was put on one of the scales and a one-gram weight on the other. When the weight was put on the other scale, the scale with the hair immediately tipped downwards. The same thing happened when a second weight was added to the first. Well, let me tell you, nobody had seen anything like that before! When Tsoi Tso's hair was put on the scale it balanced out even with more weight, but it took three weights to balance Tsan Khwoen's hair in spite of the fact that there was 10 times of the uncle's hair being weighed as there was of the nephew's.

The Laotians were amazed by this demonstration and interpreted the results as indicating that Tsan Khwoen's power (*maeng hlo hai*) was much greater than his uncle's. So, again, the Laotians tried to appoint him Lu-Phia but he wouldn't accept regardless. The Laotians, however, kept up their persuasion and tried to make him Sien Long [lower ranking than Phia/Phaya] but he wouldn't accept that position either. Finally, when their entreaties had no effect, the Laotians had no other recourse than to force him to become Sien Long. In making the appointment they proclaimed that, in the future, if the Sien Long did anything wrong, the Lu-Phia was not empowered to fine him. Such transgressions were to be outside the Lu-Phia's jurisdiction to decide/settle. On the other hand, if the Lu-Phia committed a crime, the Sien Long was empowered to judge the case and fine him.

In a while thereafter, the Lu-Phia and the Sien-Long went on living in the same village, but finally a division was made with each residing in their own village. After the division had been carried out, Tsoi Tso, having turned into a good-for-nothing (*mwoen tsoeu hu*), conceived the desire to become king. When it was known that someone had shot a wild animal, that person had to give him a share of the meat to eat. Whoever shot a deer, a *diem dzei*, or anything else for that matter, was required to present him with a portion to eat.²⁾

At the time there were a lot of Hmong in the area and he ruled over both the Hmong and the Mien. Quite a few Mien grew displeased with him and getting together with the Hmong they hit on a plan to deceive/trick him. Several Mien went to him and told him; "One of the Hmong shot a deer but he hasn't given you any of the meat, has he?" He

2) [HJ] In 1992–94 I asked after this regarding Thao La, Phia Khiri's successor son. One answer I got from older people was that the chief expected this but that people often kept him uninformed of their occasional hunt. The issue was identified by Edmund Leach's (1954) study of Kachin chiefs and their prerogatives, and continued in Cornelia Kammerer's (2003) study of "thigh-eating chiefs" among the Akha of Thailand.

answered; "I haven't seen him, is it true?" They answered him it was true and so he called a number of Mien together to go with him to apprehend the Hmong. After discussing how they were to go about the matter of seizing the Hmong they set out for the Hmong village. Having been thus tricked, Tsoi Tso reached the Hmong's house, entered, and lay down on the guest platform.

The Hmong asked him his business. Tsoi Tso answered; "It is said that you've shot a deer. Now, you can't get away with not giving me my share, so I have come to fine you." The Hmong answered; "I'm afraid we've eaten the deer up. There isn't any left and I haven't been able to bag another one. The venison's just all gone." "How come you ate it all up without giving me my share?" "Well, there are an awful lot of people around, and if I had divided it up there wouldn't have been any left." "What do you mean? Giving me my share doesn't mean you have to give everybody else shares too!" The discussion continued in this vein for a bit until the Mien and the Hmong pounced on Tsoi Tso and tied him up so there was no way for him to escape.

Their plan was to take him down to be incarcerated in the capital (*mung long*). Tsoi Tso could see that there was no way for him to escape since it was true that he had previously treated his people harshly and they had, as a result, hardened their hearts (*ngong nin*) against him and would refuse to obey his orders. So, tied up as he was, he sent a letter to ask Tsan Khwoen Lu-Phia to release him. Tsan Khwoen Lu-Phia brought three men with him, each carrying an axe or two on his shoulder. He himself did not carry any weapon with him, but led a horse along (on a rope).

When they arrived (at the house where Tsoi Tso was being kept prisoner) Tsan Khwoen tied the horse up just outside the door. Entering the house he demanded; "Untie him! Why don't you untie him? What's he done wrong? Even if he is guilty he should be untied, and if he is not guilty he certainly should be untied. When he's been released we'll talk about the matter slowly according to the proper etiquette. Untie him!" Tsoi Tso, however, had harmed a great number of people and his captors, having managed this time to tie him up, were not about to let him go. "You won't untie him?" "No we won't." So Tsan Khwoen put down one of the axes he was carrying on the ground, placed the chain (binding Tsoi Tso) on it, and gave it a blow with the other ax. Then, walking over to Tsoi Tso and calling to him; "Get up, uncle!" he took hold of the ax and with one yank burst the chain asunder.

The chain, mind you, was as big around as one's thumb! Well! That terrified all those present. "How powerful is he," they wondered, "that he can break a chain with one jerk?" Again Tsan Khwoen called out; "Get up!" As soon as Tsoi Tso got up they ran out the door, lifted it back in place and Tsoi Tso got on the horse and rode off with Tsan Khwoen bringing up the rear. Everyone in the house snatched up their guns and

ran off in pursuit, but they called to each other, “Don’t do it, Don’t do it,” since they were all afraid to shoot. And so Tsan Khwoen got Tsoi Tso safely back home and then returned to his own village.

The conspirators, however, were not satisfied and decided to make another attempt. So the Hmong and Mien again got together and sent a file of soldiers to capture Tsoi Tso at his house. This time they did not manage to catch him although they did capture his younger brother. They then took the incense pot from Tsoi Tso’s ancestral altar and tried to smash it but were unsuccessful. Although they finally managed to break off the ears of the pot they were unable to find any way to destroy the main body. Even hurling it on the ground and beating on it had little effect. They next turned their attention to Tsoi Tso’s portraits of the gods. Taking the [spirit] pictures down from their storage basket hanging over the altar they spread the pictures out on the guest platform for the Hmong to lie on while they smoked opium. Afterwards, the Hmong who had done this went insane, of course, and didn’t recover until the ritual heads of their households killed a pig and held an atonement ritual.

The younger brother was taken and tied to the platform of the cattle shed and left there. He managed to escape by dragging the shed along with him. Just imagine how strong he must have been!

Tsoi Tso, meanwhile, had had time to think the situation over and had realized that he wasn’t going to be able to go on living there, so he fled to Tsan Khwoen’s village. Tsan Khwoen, unfortunately, lived quite close by and Tsoi Tso decided he should move up to the border area near China, where he had some relatives. Everyone knew, however, that he planned to flee and as he was then extremely rich they were very anxious to capture him. As he did not have any horses at the time he carried his money, amounting to 11 or 12 pack saddles of silver, away on oxen.³⁾ He himself, dressed in women’s clothing, put on large earrings (but since his ears weren’t pierced he just hung them over his ears), put on a woman’s turban and departed. His pursuers, meanwhile, had taken up positions along the trail where they could shoot him. But having taken up their positions they didn’t see any Phaya-Jun-Lak-Ni. All they caught a glimpse of was a bit of woman’s clothing further down on the trail. So they shifted over to the other trail out of the village, but again they saw no one although they could have shot him on sight.

3) A “pack saddle” (*taw*) measure is a wooden frame to each side of which baskets, boxes, or other containers may be strapped. The saddle is then lifted up by two men and placed on the back of an ox or horse and the only trick is to make sure that the two sides balance each other in weight. *Taw* is used here only as a very loose measure of silver. According to Bunchuai Srisawat (1954, 349), one ox can carry about 52 kilograms with a pack saddle, as compared to about 78 kilograms for a horse, but takes two or three times as long to cover the same distance as a horse does.

Meanwhile, Tsoi Tso's followers, who were to take the silver-laden oxen with them, brought out the ox-saddles and got them ready. They then obtained some hooks which, after being tied to ropes attached to the saddles, were hooked onto the saddle frame. The group then set out and when they reached the part of the trail where the pursuing Mien and Hmong were lying in wait, they stopped. Slipping the saddles loaded with silver off the oxen, they drove the hooks deep into the ground. By this time their armed attackers were almost upon them, and so they grabbed their guns and fled into the forest. The attacking Mien and Hmong tried to help each other carry off the silver loaded saddles, but, no matter how much muscle they put into the task, they couldn't budge the saddles because of the hooks embedded in the ground.

The oxen drivers, in the meantime, started firing on their attackers and killed one man. In a moment another man who was trying to lift a saddle and failing was hit and fell. Indeed, that day a lot of men were shot and killed. When the attackers finally realized that the saddles were so firmly embedded in the ground that they could not be moved they fled to a man. And that's how *Phraya-Jun-Lak-Ni* got his name which Mien bestowed on him in praise of this exploit whereby he stole his own belongings and fled.

In this way Tsoi Tso managed to flee the area but Tsan Khwoen didn't get to go along with him. Tsoi Tso eventually fled all the way up to China. Tsan Khwoen stayed on and when he moved to the territory of Dong Ngon⁴⁾ he was appointed Phraya. Later Tsan Khwoen fled to Phu Wae.⁵⁾ That is, he entered Thai territory and settled at Phu Wae in Nan Province where he was again later to receive a government appointment.

When Tsan Khwoen first came to Thailand the authorities adamantly refused to grant him and his fellow villagers permission to stay and they were not even allowed to cut down any part of the forest. He therefore got out his copy of the Charter for Crossing Mountains⁶⁾ and invited a Cantonese to translate it for the king of Nan and for the officials at the Nan court. Now, in the Charter it says that in ancient times the Emperor Pien Kou, who opened the heavens and established the earth, gave the charter to the Mien and therein ordered that, wherever the Mien went, no one was to deny them access to, or the right to live in, any part of the mountains. Nor was anyone allowed to collect tolls from them at fords or ferries, or charge them for riding on any kind of conveyance

4) Dong Ngon (Phu Dong Ngon) is the name of the western end of a mountainous area located within the angle formed by the Nam Beng and the Mekong River and, since it rises over a mile above sea level, contains one of the highest peaks in northwestern Laos.

5) Phu Wae is a mountainous region extending over the eastern through northwestern parts of Thung Chang District in northernmost Nan Province. Phu Wae is located in the eastern part of Pua District, in Bo-Kleua-Neua Township, just south of Thung Chang District.

6) [HJ] Cushman was going to include a study of the Charter for Crossing Mountains (which he photographed, transcribed, and translated) in a prospective book from his research.

vehicle. As for the collection of taxes in any area, such could be levied on all other peoples but not on the Mien, and this restriction was to apply equally to corvée labor, to surcharges on goods, and to all other kinds of taxes. After the Charter had been read to the King of Nan, he decided that he could not forbid the Mien to settle in his territory.

In this way Tsan Khwoen and his followers received permission to settle at Phu Wae, and Tsan Khwoen was further appointed Phaya Khiri. At the time Tsan Khwoen was made Phaya Khiri, Thai rule extended all the way up as far as Muang Singh. As soon as Tsan Khwoen had shaved his head, he was put in charge of all the hill peoples—Mien, Hmong, Lisu, Lahu, Akha, Kuei-Tsong, Tsan-tsei/Mun—in the Nan Kingdom and was empowered to collect taxes from everyone of them. His jurisdiction extended all the way up to the Chinese border and included the areas controlled by Nan in both Laos and Thailand. This place was a really bustling place then, as big as a province, and people had an awful lot of fun there. Although he, himself, collected the taxes from all the hill people therein, everyone looked up to him in the same way as, though obviously on a lesser scale than, people today love and respect the Thai King.

Tsan Khwoen ruled uneventfully until the business concerning a man of the Le surname group [Sae Lii], named Wuen Tso Lu-Phia, who lived at Doi Chang. The whole affair began with an incident which occurred at Doi Chang when a Thai tax collector went to extract money from the people and was shot to death. The whole village apprehended Wuen Tso and sent a message down to Tsan Khwoen Lu-Phia. Tsan Khwoen sent an escort up to bring him back safely out of the area and the Thai never did manage to apprehend him.

Phia Tso came from a very poor family belonging to the Le surname group. His father's name was Yao Ei so his name was Wuen Tso Ei. Phia Tso had two older brothers, Kao Ei and In Nai Ei, who, being so poor, became thieves. They were caught, tied up, and fined. To pay their fines, Yao Ei had to sell his son, Wuen Tso. After a few years, when he had grown up a bit, Wuen Tso began to think of his father. So he begged the people who had bought him to let him go home and raise the money to buy himself back. They agreed, but after three years had passed he still hadn't been able to save enough money and was forced to go back and live as son in the house of his foster parents. Later his father came to visit and said that he didn't have any rice to eat or clothes to wear.

About 20 kilometers from the village where Wuen Tso was living there was a very good place to grow opium. A lot of people had settled there and they frequently hired people to harvest their opium for them. So Wuen Tso went there at harvest time, to see if he could earn enough money to buy himself back. But everywhere he asked for work people refused him saying that his father, Yao Ei, was a clever thief and they were afraid that his son would likewise steal their opium. Over a week passed and he still couldn't

find anyone who would hire him. Finally he went to visit some of his relatives, his maternal grandfather's younger sister, whose husband had planted some opium in the area.

When he arrived, his relatives were clearing the undergrowth off for fields for early corn, but they needed someone to chop down the trees. "Well," his great aunt's husband said, "I thought you'd come to hire out as an opium harvester but I haven't seen you working at all. Aren't you going to look for work?" "I haven't been able to find any work," Wuen Tso answered, "because nobody will hire me." "If you can't find any work harvesting opium, why don't you work for me and cut down the trees in my fields. If you help me I'll pay you three *lung* of opium.⁷ How about it?" "Any work I can get," Wuen Tso answered, "I'll take." So he helped his mother's father's younger sister's husband cut down the trees in his corn fields and when the work was finished Wuen Tso received three *lung* of opium.

Wuen Tso took his three *lung* of opium back to his village, a day's journey away, and sold them, receiving banknotes in return. At the time one *lung* of opium was selling in the area of the opium fields for four banknotes. In his village, however, where opium wasn't being grown, one *tiu* of opium was selling for 2 banknotes, and one *lung* cost 20 banknotes. By selling his three *lung* of opium in his own village, Wuen Tso obtained 60 banknotes. He then went back to the fields where his money enabled him to purchase 15 *lung* of opium. Wuen Tso, himself, told me this story and how, by traveling and trading back and forth between the fields and his village for a year he was able to make a profit of 120 bars of silver.⁸ In addition, he was able to buy one large knife to carry on his shoulder, one thick blanket, one pot for cooking rice, and two bowls to eat out of, one for his father and one for himself.

With the 120 bars of silver, Wuen Tso was able to reimburse the people who had bought him and with what was left over he bought cotton and learned how to deseed it. In those days there wasn't anyone who knew how to deseed cotton, and cotton wool was very expensive. By buying unseeded cotton, deseeding it, and selling the cotton wool, he managed, over a number of years, to become a respected, responsible member of society, and ended up being appointed Lu-Phia.

Only after he had received the appointment of Lu-Phia did Wuen Tso look for a wife. But, having married, the couple did not have any children, so he left his wife with his father. He figured that the reason they couldn't have children was because he didn't have any merit.

7) Ten *tiu* equals one *lung*. [HJ] The ratio is comparable to what Douglas Miles reports from the Mien village of Phulangka in 1967, of 10 *saleung* amounting to one *tamleng*. About 24 *tamleng* weigh in at about a kilogram (Miles 1967, 20).

8) At 1972 exchange rates, 120 bars of silver equaled Thai *Baht* 60,000 and US\$ 3,000.

So he went looking for horned poultry, particularly roosters, and whenever he could find one with a long comb, he bought it up. Taking the roosters home he used their combs in preparing “mustard-green horns.” These are made by sealing a piece of the comb tightly inside an “old lady rice cake,” and tying the skin of a rat firmly around the cake and soaking the whole bundle in the blood of a freshly killed chicken, after which the bundle was put out to dry in the sun until it rustled in the wind. Wuen Tso took the “mustard-green horns” around to various places in Laos to sell for 80 Burmese rupees apiece. Since he had prepared about 15 he made over 1,000 Burmese rupees. And in those days money was really worth something! Anyone who accumulated money was considered really respectable. The remaining mustard-green horns, which he couldn’t sell, he threw away in a river—it was really only a glorified rice cake, after all!

After he returned home, Wuen Tso was afraid to go back to the places where he had sold the mustard green horns, so he bought some opium and set out in the fifth month to sell it in Mung Thswon, Mung Hiem, Mung Long, Mung Thsiaang, and other areas in Jau-tsei (today called Vietnam). He took along some servants and three of his paternal cousins, Wuen Fin, Wuen Yen, and Wuen Seng, to help him carry the opium. One day they discovered that they weren’t going to reach a Mien village before dark so they stopped to spend the night at a temple in a small village at the foot of some hills in which there was a Mien village.

Now, at the time they were carrying quite a lot of gunpowder stored, as was practice in those days, in water-buffalo horns and ox horns. That evening it started to rain and, fearing that the gunpowder was getting damp, they poured it out over paper on one side of the room so it would dry. Then they sat down to supper. When the meal was finished somebody lit a match to smoke and, without thinking, threw the match away right into the middle of the paper. The gunpowder instantly caught fire and exploded with a bang, knocking over everyone in the room. Two monks were very seriously hurt, their torsos and limbs being badly burned. Everyone else had also been scorched, but none so badly that they couldn’t get up and move around. The two monks, however, couldn’t even manage to feed themselves.

When everyone had sorted themselves out it was discovered that nobody present knew any curing spells—*none* of the Mien there even knew any! One of the Mien, I think it was Wuen Seng, did remember the name of his *gya-fin-tsio* [“the leader of his ancestors”]; Le Kwe Faam Long. Another fellow, Wuen Yen, was able to do one of the minor kinds of divination but he only asked a question after he got an answer. Well! There wasn’t much any of them could do since they did not know any curing spells. They managed to carry a pail of water up to the room where the two monks were and hold a sort of slapdash curing ceremony as best they could.

Taking up a knife, Wuen Seng invoked his *gya-fin-tsio*; “Oh, Lei Kwe Faam Long and all the ancestors. Whoever among you, when they were alive, could cool water, could make frost appear, could cause snow to fall, please descend. We are on a business trip and not in much shape to invoke your help properly. We’ve had an explosion and people are hurt, etcetera, etcetera.” And so Wuen Seng improvised a ceremony, and instead of putting proper spells on the water he just talked on in the same vein. When he finished the ceremony he took some water from the bucket and spewed it over each person in turn. In a moment everyone was shivering with cold.

As a result of the ceremony, those who weren’t so badly wounded didn’t even blister. The two monks, however, did break out in blisters. From the 20th day of the fifth month on they stayed at the temple and looked after the injured with what medicines they could get hold of. During this time they stored their opium there in the temple and only after almost a month had passed were they well enough to leave, reaching the nearby Mien village in time for the *jie-tsiep-fei* rites.

When Wuen Tso arrived at the village he found that his fame as a prosperous person had preceded him. And there he met the woman, Nai, who was to be his second wife and who was later mauled by a tiger. He engaged a go-between to arrange the marriage and an agreement was almost reached when Nai’s mother insisted that they drink the wine. “I won’t allow an itinerant trader to buy her and beat her,” she said. “If he is willing to stay and drink the wine, I’ll consent, but not otherwise.” Wuen Tso, not having any choice in the matter, settled down to prepare the wine and a house for the ceremony. His companions, however, he allowed to return home ahead of him.

Some of the local villagers helped him build a house and he settled in for a short while in whatever the area was called. Vietnam has a lot of Mung located there, Mung Long, Mung Thsiang, Mung Thswon, Mung Hiem, Mung Phon, Mung Mwon, Mung Maa, Mung Paw, Mung Thaeng, Mung U—but I think this all took place in Mung Hiem. When the winter months arrived, Wuen Tso bought pigs and other things needed and the full wedding ceremonies were carried out.

When he and his wife finally set out for his home village they found it lying deserted and abandoned. Every last person had moved away, including his first wife. Here he had returned home and the whole village was absolutely quiet; he hadn’t the slightest idea where everyone had gone. The weeds were already thick in his front yard. As the nearest village lay two nights away they had no choice but to sleep in his old, deserted house.

The next morning they set out for the nearest village to ask where all his villagers had moved to, and learned that they had gone across the river. They had gone up to Pha Mun on the Laotian side and some had settled there, whereas others had moved on down and across the [Mekong] river into the areas of Mung [Thoeng] and [Chiang] Khong.

Taking his bride with him he finally managed to track down his first wife on the Thai side of the river and there they all lived for a number of years. Later they moved into the Doi Chang area and there Wuen Tso Ei finally succeeded in establishing his reputation as an important person.

For a number of years Wuen Tso lived peacefully on Doi Chang and slowly built up a fortune based on the opium trade, while Tsan Khwoen ruled uneventfully at Phu Wae. The string of circumstances which were to bring these two men into competition did not begin until the incident over the shooting of a Thai tax collector. There was a Chinese of the Liow surname group also living in the Doi Chang area and he and Wuen Tso were close associates. In those days only the Thai tax collector could arrest Mien, not like today when the Thai are all confused. One day a tax collector went up with some men into the Doi Chang area, arrested Mr. Liow and a number of Mien, confiscated many saddles of opium, and started back down the mountain. Wuen Tso called on a Hmong named Ku Taa Nyouw, who was exceptionally skillful at hunting wild cattle, to waylay the Thai. Ku Taa Nyouw set up his ambush and shot the tax collector dead with one bullet through the heart. One of the ambushers, who had gone to sleep on a pile of wooden partitions, was shot in turn when the Thai saw the sun reflected off the silver on his gun. As a result of this affair Wuen Tso couldn't continue to live on Doi Chang and so he sent a message down to Tsan Khwoen Lu-Phia to request his help. Tsan Khwoen deputed an escort to bring him safely out of the area, and the Thai never did manage to apprehend him.

When Wuen Tso reached Tsan Khwoen's territory he discovered that it was a really bustling place, and that Tsan Khwoen, with an appointment as a high official, controlled people all over the place and collected taxes amounting into the thousands and ten thousands from them. When Wuen Tso learned how much money was being collected in taxes he grew jealous, and through jealousy began to covet Tsan Khwoen's position. So he went down to the Nan court to advise the king. After discussing a number of matters, he asked the king, "what arrangements did you make with Phaya Khiri when you gave him the right to collect taxes (from the hill peoples)?" "Let's see," the king answered, "once he really shaved his head, we only asked 500 *tsin* a year. Regardless of how much he collects in a year we only take 500."

"Well," exclaimed Wuen Tso, "then he is only giving you a hundredth part of what he collects! Isn't it stupid for a king to receive only a hundredth? Why not require that whenever a man wants to move to another village he first obtain a [four Baht] permit (a *baai si baat*, as they were called in those days) for which he would have to pay four *tsin*? Then, however many permits were issued times four would be quite something, wouldn't it? Furthermore, whenever a couple gets married a license could be issued at a charge

of four *tsin* per couple. If you don't do something like this, aren't you just letting Phaya Khiri keep all the money for himself? Why should you, as king, receive nothing and he keep it all?"

When Wuen Tso had finished talking the king had to admit that such a procedure would be quite profitable, and so the system of permits was instituted. Phaya Khiri was required to collect the fees for the permits but he himself did not get to enjoy any of the profits since all the money so collected had to be handed over to the king. Phaya Khiri, needless to say, was quite dissatisfied with this arrangement.

About the same time Wuen Tso had also promised to help the king of Nan feed his soldiers. In those days there weren't any paddy fields in the territory of Nan and the King of Nan kept a large army of soldiers. Since there wasn't anyone else to take care of them Wuen Tso had promised to collect upland rice from the hill tribes to give the king to feed his soldiers. A huge granary was built at the Nan capital to receive the rice sent down to supply the army. After Wuen Tso had carefully kept his promise for a number of years the king began to think very highly of him and appointed him Phaya Intha. The king simultaneously began to regard Phaya Khiri as a good-for-nothing and decided to bestow his position as ruler over the hill tribes on Phaya Intha.

When the king confided these thoughts to Phaya Intha, Phaya Intha stated that, if the king turned Phaya Khiri out of office and appointed Phaya Intha as ruler over all the tribes people, he would let the king decide how much of the yearly tax revenue was to go to the king and how much he could keep himself. The king, when he understood Phaya Intha's offer, then took counsel with him on how best to handle the situation, and then ordered Phaya Intha to return home while a command to appear at court was sent to Phaya Khiri.

When Phaya Khiri arrived at court, he and the king discussed the matter for quite a while but the king could not get the better of him. Finally the king, in exasperation, ordered him to go home without yet having deprived him of his position. And so Phaya Khiri went home. Phia Tso, meanwhile, waited in vain for word that the Thai had bestowed overlordship of the hill tribes to him. When he heard that Phaya Khiri had been to Nan and returned home already, he went back to court taking another saddle of silver with him. In those days Phia Tso was extremely rich and only became poor later because of all the problems he got into. When he got to Nan he presented the saddle of silver to the king and begged that the king, regardless of the difficulties, obtain the position for him. The king assured him that he would speak forcefully and not listen to Phaya Khiri's objections.

Again, Phaya Khiri was called to court for an audience and again the king couldn't get the better of him. So once more the king declared that he was impossible to deal with

and ordered him to go home, still without having obtained his resignation. Phia Tso waited and waited but didn't receive any news concerning his appointment as overlord. So once again he went to Nan and took more money to present to the king. During the audience he told the king, "You are the highest person in the kingdom. Even if he isn't willing to step down there is nothing he can do about it. Why should you, the king, listen to him? There are proper procedures for dealing with cases like this." The king stated, "All right! This time I won't listen to him. As soon as he gets here I'll remove him from office and I won't stand on ceremony to do it either."

Yet again Phaya Khiri was called to court for an audience. As soon as he arrived the king called out, "I am not going to let you be Lu-Phia any longer!" "That's all very well and good," answered Phaya Khiri, drawing forth his official letter of appointment, "but just what did you have in mind when you drew up this document? If you, in your capacity as an official, hadn't used a written proclamation to appoint me, you could then remove me like this. But as it is you do use writing for all kinds of documents—passes, permits, certificates, and the like—which have to be honored. Now, only, if you can take this official appointment of mine and return the paper to me in its original condition, without the ink used to write on it, will I step down."

The king could find no answer to this and so Phaya Khiri went home. When Phia Tso reappeared the king told him, "There just isn't any way to get the better of him. Besides, he's old and about ready to die, so wait and when he's dead I'll appoint you in his place."

Phia Tso, being left in the unenviable position of having to wait for Phia Khwoen to die before taking over his office, decided upon a plan to hasten his death. This plan, however, was not successful. What he did was to send some men to ambush him, one evening at the village bathing area. While Phia Khwoen was bathing they shot at him, but their gunpowder only sputtered and failed to explode. Phia Khwoen, hearing the noise, shouted out, "Has someone come to shoot me, or what?" and thereby frightened them into running away.

Now, Phia Khwoen had a very powerful riding horse. Everyone recognized this horse and knew that no one could get near it. Anyone who approached close enough to put a hand on it got bitten. Phia Khwoen himself was the only person who could touch it. So Phia Tso again sent some men to Phia Khwoen's village with the idea of releasing the animal and then shooting Phia Khwoen while he was looking for the horse in the woods. They managed to sneak up to the stable without being seen, open the gates and let the horse out. Phia Khwoen, however, suspected that this might be some kind of ploy to shoot him and so he, himself, did not go and look for the horse. The only problem was that no one knew just where the creature had gone.

After everyone had hustled about looking for the horse for some time without success, Phia Khwoen decided he would just have to go and search himself, plot or no plot. But as soon as he stepped out of the door he met the horse returning on its own accord. As his horse did not make a sound and as there wasn't any electricity or anything like that in those days, Phia Khwoen took the horse back to its stable, tied its rope firmly to a post, and firmly sealed up the stable door. The ambushers spent a fruitless night in the forest and Phia Khwoen was now convinced that someone was out to kill him.

Now the trail which led to the city of Nan had broad expanses lying on each side of it which were perfect for fields. Every year Phia Khwoen sent out an announcement to all groups in the area that they shouldn't start clearing these expanses before the 15th of the third month when he took the tax monies he had collected down to give the king. The reason for the announcement was that Phia Khwoen was afraid that, if the forest were cut down and people started burning off their fields, he wouldn't be able to deliver the taxes on time because the trail would be blocked by fire. When Phia Tso heard about the interdiction he called together a bunch of Mien and Hmong under him and took them off to cut down the trees along the both sides of the entire length of the trail. On the 15th of the third month he and his followers planned to set fire to the area and burn Phia Khwoen to death.

When Phia Khwoen had gotten about a third of the way down the trail the cut timber on both sides was fired. Seeing the flames, Phia Khwoen realized something was afoot and beat his horse into retreat. Fortunately, a wind blew up at that point and while the fire on one side caught quickly, the wind blew the fire on the other side the wrong way. Only after Phia Khwoen had managed to escape did the fire on the second side finally catch. Phia Khwoen was certainly a man of power. Not only did his hair vastly outweigh that of his uncle's, but he managed to escape the fire as well.

Matters proceeded in this fashion for some time, but no matter what Phia Tso resorted to, he couldn't do away with Phia Khwoen. The reason for the ambushes could not remain hidden forever and in the end, Phia Khwoen learned who was trying to do him in. Once he knew who was behind the attacks, Phia Khwoen sent for Phia Tso to come and give a personal accounting for his actions, or to come and be judged. On those days such judgements were arrived at in a general council. Phia Khwoen's council was very large, consisting of 40 or 50, maybe even 60 men, all of them were very sharp indeed.

These men filled a multitude of lower offices, as *kae ban*, *sien long*, and *tong kun* under Phia Khwoen.⁹ There were even some in the position of Phia or Lu-Phia, to be

9) [RDC/HJ] These titles pertain to the rulers of individual villages, while Phaya and Saen usually implied a chief who had power over a number of settlements.

distinguished from Phi-Nyaa, the highest rank any of them held and of which there was only one, Phi-Nya Khwoen himself. These councilors included Yaa-thsang Lu-Phia, Wuen Fou Syo Lu-Phia, and a great many others, all of whom had assembled to discuss the case of Phia Tso.

Now, Phia Khwoen's house consisted of two storeys, the upstairs being his official government offices and the downstairs forming his regular living quarters. The meeting was held downstairs and during it Wuen Lin Lu-Phia insisted that Phia Tso should be tied up. When Phia Tso heard about the meeting, he realized that this time he wouldn't be able to escape, that no matter what, they were determined to tie him up. Since he had no other recourse he got out his silver and put some in each of the side pockets of his coat; in these days men were wearing long coats with very large pockets which were bought from Chinese traders and were called *ko tu lui*.

An escort was sent to bring him to Phia Khwoen's village as everyone was afraid that he wouldn't come otherwise. The escort, whose name was Ta-Seng Wuen, was a highly respected person. When they reached their destination, Phia Tso was not allowed to enter Phia Khwoen's house or to sleep there. Instead, he stayed at Ta-Seng Wuen's home and the next morning was escorted to Phia Khwoen's place.

The night before Wuen Lin Lu-Phia and the other Mien officials had sat up late discussing the case and working a consensus on tying up Phia Tso. Because of the many guests who had to be fed during the proceedings, a huge cane basket to uncooked hulled rice had been placed upstairs. While the deliberations were still going on downstairs, the basket burst with a resounding "pop" and the rice came pouring down on the people seated below. "Hey! How come," someone said, "you didn't floor over this part of the upstairs? And now to have the basket burst like this!" Everyone's daring dissipated somewhat with this incident, and someone else said, "If we don't tie up Phia Tso then he won't have any opportunity to escape his bonds." And so it was agreed that they wouldn't tie him up.¹⁰

When Phia Tso reached Phia Khwoen's house the next morning, he went in and started up the stairs to see Phia Khwoen. At this moment Phia Khwoen, who had just gotten up, started downstairs and so the two encountered each other there on the middle of the stairway. Phia Tso quickly transferred the silver in his pockets to the pockets of Phia Khwoen. Phia Khwoen didn't know how much it was; all he knew was that his pockets were equally weighted down. They descended the stairs. Phia Khwoen invited

10) Note that Wuen Lin is Phia Khwoen's son who at the time did not yet have a title or an official position. Also note how small a role Phia Khwoen plays in the discussion. RDC had left himself a note to discuss the significance of the burst rice basket, but did not get to that task. It may remain a mystery.

his opponent to have a seat while he went into the family quarters to get some tea and tobacco and while he was there he took the silver out of his pockets and put it aside.

When Phia Khwoen returned, he and Phia Tso talked for some time. Finally Phia Khwoen said, "Well, I guess there isn't much more to be done. Everything that you have said here younger brother Phia has been very placating." Phia Tso, after all, was trying to get off with as little punishment as possible. "Yes, very placating. In these circumstances we think the best course is for all of us to share in a feast of reconciliation." So a special pavilion was erected and a cow was killed while the discussions continued at Phia Khwoen's house.

All the preparations for the meal were carried out in the pavilion and a great many Mien were invited to share the feast. As the discussions at Phia Khwoen's drew to a close, Yao Tsiang Lu-Phia got up to say a few instructive words. "Well, now, people say that 'the early litters are fat while the later ones are skinny'. It's been said here before and I'll say it again loudly, the only reason matters have reached this point is because of your actions, younger brother Phia Tso. If it hadn't been for your actions we wouldn't have had to do all this. So think about the saying 'the early litters are fat while the later ones are skinny!'" Yao Tsiang then sat back down.

That was just too much for Phia Tso. He rolled up his pants legs and then jumped up, shouting, "Damn it! What are you talking to me about 'the early litters are fat while the later ones are skinny' for? Whose wife have I dishonored?" On and on he ranted, his body poised in fighting stance with one leg raised to kick. Everyone sat stunned, their faces blotched, and nobody could get in a word in answer. When he had finally run down, Tsan Syo Lu-Phia spoke up, "We needn't say anything more about this, or we'll just get into another argument. There was plenty of justification for holding this meeting—we all know about it—and now we should all get together and settle the matter. We are going to eat a feast of reconciliation. Now, we of Phia Khwoen's group will eat more of the meat because there are more of us, but together we constitute only one of the parties to this case." Wuen Tso's group, though fewer in number, constitute the other party in this case. The ox for the feast, whatever its cost, should be paid for equally by each group. "Fine," said Phia Tso, "I know the proper custom here." And so each of the two parties paid for half of the feast ox and the case was formally closed.

Phia Khwoen's son, Wuen Lin Lu-Phia, however, was not satisfied with the feast of reconciliation. Being still very angry at Phia Tso, he ensorcelled him. During the sorcery ritual, Wuen Lin invited his masters to help him, collected together the heavenly forces, blocked off the protective spirits who might have rendered the sorcery ineffective, built a magic bridge, and sent his celestial soldiers across it to Phia Tso's body where his soldiers captured his life spirits. When the soldiers had returned across the bridge with

Phia Tso's life spirits, Wuen Lin put them on the back of a land crab and let the crab go down into a hole.

Well! Phia Tso got really sick and no matter what measures were taken he didn't get any better. A divination ceremony held for him revealed that his life spirits wouldn't return but had descended into the water world. A save-the-life ceremony (*tzo seng*), therefore, was held but was unsuccessful. Nothing worked! He went on being sick until he became prematurely senile. Sick for years, he didn't die. All the family's money was spent on unsuccessful cures and they ended up as nobodies, with neither rank nor face.

When I (Jiem Tsan) was born, Tsan Khwoen Lu-Phia had just completed a 60 year cycle. I met him once when I was quite young, my uncle having taken me to visit him. He was 60 in *ki-yo* 1909 and 70 in *loi-mei* 1919. He didn't live to 80, but only reached 75 or 76, while Phia Tso, the younger of the two, died later. After Phia Khwoen his son, Wuen Lin, was made Lu-Phia, but he was not the man his father was, nor were the times the same anymore.

On Chiefs and Interethnic Politics

The life story is not meant as a report that simply lists facts, but instead as a Mien performance that is entertaining and pleasant, and expresses the varied skills (memory, word-play, insight, social commentary, humor, etc.) of the storyteller. The story is quite unique and gives considerable insight into life in the old days while chiefs mediated relations between villagers and lowland kingdoms. Tsan Khwoen is a real person, his title from the king of Nan is right, he lived in a two storey house (unlike other Mien at the time), and he would purchase a cow from lowlanders for the occasional feast (Jonsson 1999). There is a photo of Tsan Khwoen flanked by family and perhaps associates in an old volume of the *Journal of the Siam Society*, that was taken in Nan town in about 1920. The photo caption only declares that the people are "a group of Yao" and calls attention to the silver jewelry (Rangsiyanan and Naowakarn 1925, 84).

I had never heard of Phaya Intha before reading the story in translation, but instead had been told that Phaya Khiri's full title had been Phaya Inthakhiri. This is curious, and it is possible that his son Wuen Lin (who had the title Thao La and later was made *kamnan* and was based in the village of Phulangka), who hexed Phaya Intha with lasting effect, had a hand in making his father's rival disappear in plain sight by having his official identity absorbed by that of his father. On this front I can only offer conjecture, but I find the matter intriguing.

Mien leaders in 1860–1930 were for the most part strongmen, analogous to the Thai

nak-laeng. Their power came in part from the ability to intimidate people, but how this was felt is another matter. The way Mien people have related this to me, both regarding chiefs in Thailand and Laos, is as follows: some say that the chief had complete command and that there was peace and the rule of law; others say the chiefs were cruel and heavy-handed and would arbitrarily punish or harm people; and a third segment of the population suggests that these men were not so important, that they basically sat in their house, never engaged in farming themselves, and mostly kept busy by drinking tea and receiving visitors (Jonsson 2005, 82; 2014a, 65).

Chiefs in highland areas were largely made to disappear in the social transformations that came with colonial rule and subsequent nation states. The basic difference concerns a shift from localized valley kingdoms that had many networks in lowland and highland areas, toward a single-capital nation-state whose officials owed primary loyalty to the capital and not to the local peoples where they ruled. Nan is somewhat exceptional in Thailand in that the royal house was not immediately dismantled but was allowed to exist for two more generations. The king of Nan lost a lot of power, however. His domain had covered what now are parts of northern Laos. Along with a shrunken land-mass, the king no longer could demand tribute in rice from the peasants.

Thus was the king's interest in striking a deal with Tsan Khwoen to collect tax from the highlanders, and his facilitation of legal poppy growing through the Royal Opium Monopoly. Poppy cultivation everywhere else was against the law. Both the Nan king and the Mien leader profited greatly from this legal farming and trade. Everywhere else, poppy cultivation basically profited only the agents of the illegal trade, and the highland farmers had no other options since they were formally excluded from Thai society. There is some indication that the account of Phaya Intha procuring rice for the soldiers stationed in Nan is to a large extent historically accurate. I at least found published accounts describing that Bangkok had stationed a number of soldiers in Nan by the border with Laos, and that because the Nan peasants had no rice surplus then this became an opportunity for the Mien to sell their rice (Jonsson 2005, 77).

Many elements of the story of Tsan Khwoen as Phaya Khiri correspond to things I had learned from local recollections in the early 1990s, as well as the occasional published source. Tsan Khwoen was engaged in a major status contestation with another Mien leader, Tzeo Wuen Tsoi Lin who became Phaya Kham Khoen Srisongfa in northern Laos during 1870–1930. They were both well connected to lowland authorities, had an analogous title, and are said to have been trying to outdo one another with a household of 100 people—something neither of them really achieved (Jonsson 2009; 2014a). Mien recollections to me were that the king of Nan had denied the group settlement in the domain but reversed the decision in exchange for a payment of silver and elephant tusks. After

that, Tsan Khwoen received his title and collected tax for the Nan king. Published works by explorers and missionaries affirm Tsan Khwoen's two-floor house, his considerable wealth, his many trips to the court in Nan, and declare that it was the Mien population that was providing rice to the Thai military posts in Nan that were placed near the border with French Laos/Indochina (Jonsson 1999; 2001; 2005, 73–93).

I had not previously heard of Phaya Intha, or that there had been a Mien settlement on Doi Chang in Chiangrai. The story brings out persistent rivalries between Mien contenders for leadership, such as in relation to the king of Nan. This suggests that conflict was less between state authorities and highlanders and more internal to either social order. The story suggests repeated assassination attempts and numerous conflicts among Mien and Hmong highlanders. The ritual desecration of spirit paintings suggests, somewhat like the story of the spell against Phaya Intha at the end, that ritual knowledge was commonly used for competitive and destructive purposes—this element is an important corrective to the ethnographic impulse to assemble a composite image of Mien religion as somehow a shared tradition. Equally, it is important to note that the storyteller insists on the effectiveness of certain spells and formulas and at the same time he mocks the group of Mien men who were lacking even the basics of calling on ancestor spirits and performing a curing spell.

The story reflects the esteem that Tsan Khwoen had among his followers, in such elements as the magical quality of his hair (compared to his uncle) and his unusual strength when he later broke the chains that held the same uncle. But he is also described as rather easily corruptible, such as in accepting the bribe from his rival Wuen Tso (Phaya Intha).

One thing I learned in the early 1990s is that in approximately 1945 the Thai police had come to Phulangka and had taken away a permit that was in the possession of Thao La (Tang Wuen Lin), Phaya Khiri Srisombat (Tang Tsan Khwoen)'s son. The permit was never returned and I don't know what it said. But I do know that for the following decades, the Mien population and their leaders stubbornly insisted on their membership in Thai society by annually going to pay respect and taxes at the District Center in Pong. The Mien villages each had a "village owner spirit." They would ask around who was the most powerful lowland leader in their area and then invite the spirit of that leader to become the guardian of the village (Jonsson 1999, 105, 115). These ritual relationships certainly indicate one aspect of inclusive identities, elements that the ethnographic emphasis on the Mien as bounded, unique, and distinct might make disappear.

When I first learned of Tsan Khwoen as Phaya Khiri I did not have the sense that such chiefly connections were common. But I later learned that many Mien leaders at the time were successfully making analogous connections in the adjacent areas of Viet-

nam, Laos, and Yunnan. Vanina Bouté (2007; 2011; 2015) shows how Phunoy came into titled leadership and registered villages in an area of northern Laos in the eighteenth century. The preserved record of titles and associated command is unusual; in most cases such relations were made verbally and practically without any archival trace (see Sprenger 2006; Evrard 2006; 2007; Badenoch and Tomita 2013 for some cases of non-recorded titles and networks; for a rare case of a documented contract and titles, see Kraisri 1965). This is the main reason Renard (1980; 1986; 2002) could find little archival trace of the Karen in Thai histories.

Dynamics of national integration contributed to the general disappearance of titled highland chiefs across mainland Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The kingdoms which made such relations and granted the titles were demolished in the colonial-era making of large single-capital states. Kingdoms previously had mostly been much more locality-specific affairs of particular hill-valley settings that combined diplomacy, trade, and ritual that established relations and at the same time maintained ethnic and other differences. There is no indication that pre-twentieth-century states insisted on ethnic or other homogeneity, or that ethnic diversity marked the state's outside (as suggested by Scott 2009). Instead, the typical situation appears closer to the shifting and multi-ethnic networks described for northern Laos by Badenoch and Tomita (2013), Bouté (2011), Evrard (2006), and Sprenger (2006), where members of the same ethnic group were unevenly situated and differentially integrated into politics, but where a considerable number of ethnic identities was generally involved in any one state.

Given these indications of pluralism, one may ask why there is so little trace of it in the archives, and how come there is no trace of Karen and many other hinterland peoples in the common perceptions of the region's history (Renard 2002). I suggest that the pluralism that some scholars have pointed to is just one of several "structural poses" among the region's peoples. The term is from anthropologist Fred Gearing (1962), who suggested that any society takes shape in relation to particular orientations and activities; livelihood, feuds, ritual practice, and war each structured the same settlement differently and in terms of different units. For mainland Southeast Asia, if pluralism was a regular feature of social life then it was made largely invisible by an alternative structural pose that stressed boundaries and exclusivity. That is, I suggest that any society may harbor alternative models of itself that imply exclusive versus inclusive identities. In general, groups tend to promote an exclusive self-image while in practice its boundaries can be much more varied, negotiable, and/or elusive. Linguist N.J. Enfield (2005; 2011) makes one such case for social diversity in mainland Southeast Asia, that an insistence on ethnic boundaries went hand-in-hand with the cultivation of ethnic diversity.

The Nan Chronicle (Wyatt 1994) can serve as an example of how such diversity was

made to disappear from public view. Written by a certain Saenluang Ratchasomphan in about 1894, the chronicle is singularly focused on Tai royal genealogies and Buddhist virtue, and there is no trace of the Mlabri, Khmu, Lawa, Mien, or any other hinterland peoples who had more or less formal and more or less regular relations with the court. This issue of a public denial of internal diversity commonly arises in ethnographic research, such as in statements that members of a particular ethnic group will only marry members of the same group and not of others, when follow-up inquiries such as household surveys and the assembly of genealogies often reveal pervasive patterns of the incorporation of outsiders (Hanks and Hanks 2001). Such strategic essentialism, the insistence on an exclusive identity (in kinship, politics, or any other dimension of sociality), is a common feature of a society's self-image, while no society is ever singular or matches the ideal image of itself.

The complexity of social orders is not specific to states. Anthropologist Robert H. Lowie (1920; 1927) suggests that any social order can have at least three dimensions that are in part incompatible or at least irreducible to any single one. Organization along alternative lines such as kinship and territoriality (based on a village or a larger entity) tends to coincide, and Lowie further suggests that it is general to find also associations based on some third premise (gender, age, craft, trade, etc.). Any social group may come up with norms of behavior and ways of monitoring and enforcing them, while the three alternative and co-present bases for social organization may at times be at odds: "A trade union may oppose the central authority, successfully cope with its agents, and in so far forth nullify national unity" (1927, 111).

To some extent it was anthropologists' shift from ethnology to ethnography by about the 1930s (see Stocking 1992)—from comparisons to the expectation of bounded groups—that encouraged the disappearance of multi-ethnic networks from the anthropological horizon. Scholars tended to seek "pure" examples of hinterland peoples who showed little or no signs of "contact" (see Jonsson 2014a, 46–47). One example is the work of anthropologist Douglas Miles in 1967–68 (Miles 1967; 1990) with the direct descendants of Phaya Khiri, Tsan Khwoen Waa, in the village of Phulangka. In the introduction to his dissertation he acknowledges the link to the authorities and the considerable wealth that derived from the opium trade, but Miles proceeds to study and describe the Mien of Phulangka as an ethnic case that reveals particular patterns in the combination of agriculture, ancestor worship, and kinship.

Karl Gustav Izikowitz did research in northern Laos in the 1930s. He mentions titled Lamet chiefs, but not as an important feature of local social life and regional connections. He states instead that; "the Lamet were deceived into buying titles of nobility from the [Tai Lue] in Tafa" (1951, 354). In my assessment, the Lamet interest in pur-

chasing titles must be understood in terms of how Lao, Lue, and other rulers of lowland kingdoms in what is now Laos had shifted their interest from Khmu, Lamet, Phunoy, and others and toward Mien, Hmong, and Mun leaders (Jonsson 2014a; Lee 2015; Badenoch and Tomita 2013).

Edmund Leach's (1954) work on Kachin and Kachin-Shan connections suggests that ambitious Kachin chiefs would emulate the Shan and call themselves *Saopha* (Shan, analogous to *chao fa*, "lord of the sky"). But his description does not show that any of the Shan lords or kings had a role in social life—50 years after the British colonial takeover of northern Burma, which separated Shan and Kachin in previously unprecedented ways—so it is unclear how telling the case is of things beyond the colonial setting.

In contrast, connections to valley lords and national authorities in Thailand and Laos in the 1930s had considerable impact in the everyday lives of Hmong, Mien, and others. The ethnographic consensus—the focus on ethnic groups as distinct from one another and as either tribal peoples in kinship-based societies or peasants in stratified and territorial societies—contributes to making unthinkable the long histories of multi-ethnic networks that shaped Southeast Asian societies. Neither Izikowitz (1951) nor Leach (1954) viewed highland chiefs as normal or important features of regional and local societies—the former thought the titles were fraudulent, while the latter thought they expressed a quest for power that drew on imitative desire of lowland king's glory and would lead to the emulation of stratified lowland society.

The Mien story of how Tang Tsan Khwoen became Phaya Khiri shows the mutual interest between the Nan king and the Mien leader in making and maintaining interethnic networks. The kingdom of Nan had a long but mostly-unrecorded history of making networks with a range of peoples, and recollections of Tsan Khwoen and other leaders suggest that they had been making such relations with lowland rulers in numerous places as they moved through southern China and into areas that now are northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand (see Jonsson 2005, 74–85). Elsewhere I have suggested that there are clear parallels in Mien attitudes toward the spirit world and what can be called the political world, of an interested search for contracts of some mutual benefit by establishing relations that are maintained as long as they are considered rewarding (*ibid.*, 78–91; Jonsson 2014a, 27–35).

Guido Sprenger's (2010) study of the relevance of lowland-derived titles among Rmeet/Lamet upland peoples suggests an important regional dimension to these dynamics: "Outside objects are introduced into the ritual reproduction of society, kin terms are expanded to foreigners, people boast of their knowledge of other languages. . . . The necessity of external influence for a social system crystallizes in values that emphasize interethnic communication as desirable and productive" (2010, 421). This perspective

spells out what I am calling inclusive identities which contrast sharply with the exclusive-identity focus on group distinctions and non-permeable boundaries.

When Le Jiem Tsan told his story to Richard Cushman in 1972 he remarked at one point: “In those days only the Thai tax collector could arrest Mien, not like today when the Thai are all confused.” He was talking during a time of civil war when there was considerable violence and discrimination against highland peoples, and Hmong in particular had become singled out as dangerous communist suspects (as *Meo Daeng*, “Red Hmong”). Le Jiem Tsan had lived in a region where the Mien had citizenship, legal residence, and license to farm. That area was unlike anywhere else in the northern mountains, where highland peoples and in some ways especially the Hmong regularly faced extortion and imprisonment.

The Mien population that was integrated into Thai administration, economy, and society since the late 1800s was always diverse and differentiated, and the Hmong who were under the Mien leader may never have received citizenship. The members of one Hmong community in that area joined with forces of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the late 1960s but later surrendered. As part of their surrender in the early 1970s they discussed how they came to join the CPT. In one testimony, a Hmong man says that they felt betrayed by the Mien leader, the *kamnan*, who annually collected taxes from the Hmong on the promise that this would get them citizenship. The Mien leader simply took their money every year, and never brought them any benefits in return (Somchai 1974, 250–274).

Perhaps because of the conditions of the interview—the surrender of former guerillas to government forces—the Hmong villagers do not air the possibility that decades of official (military and police) discrimination, extortion, or abuse had motivated them to join the insurgents. The Mien *kamnan* in question was the third-generation leader, Fu Tsan, who according to his daughter-in-law had a weakness for opium and who did no work at home or in the fields. Fu-Tsan’s son who succeeded him as *kamnan*, Tang Tsoi Fong (his Thai name was Phaisal Srisombat, and he passed away in 2011), was a farmer and a genial leader. He was instrumental in bringing some equality and recognition to the Hmong people in his sub-district during the 1980s and early 1990s, before he reached the age of mandated retirement. In my experience, Tsoi Fong never had any chiefly airs about him; he did not impose himself on people in the *nak-laeng* fashion of his grandfather and great-grandfather. The times were different, and each person is individual.

In a recent historical study that responds to the claim regarding highland “Zomian” statelessness (Scott 2009), Kataoka (2013) suggests that the Lahu in Yunnan and Southeast Asia had their own notions of kingship and states, and that it had only been as of the eighteenth century encroachment of Han Chinese on Lahu domains that they became

“stateless.” This claim is very much at odds with the ethnographic consensus that so-called tribal peoples are kinship-based and stateless societies. Kataoka’s case is compelling, but in many ways different from what I call attention to in this article regarding the Mien and various other groups having most likely for centuries been embedded in multi-ethnic political networks that connected hill and valley populations.

The case for Lahu statelessness as a recent matter of active dispossession is useful for critiquing the ethnographic consensus. In many ways the idea that some peoples are intrinsically stateless has been the rhetoric of dispossession, in the Americas, Africa, and across Asia. Ethnologist Robert Lowie (1920; 1927) argued strongly against the notion that state-ness was a feature exclusive to certain societies. He showed through comparisons that even the most apparently egalitarian peoples had state-like features and could produce mechanisms of coercive power. Lowie suggested further that even in simple societies one can find elements that are associated with sovereignty. He expressly rejected the validity of an evolutionary trajectory for human societies, and the distinction among societies on the binary of kinship versus territoriality (1927, 112–113).

This distinction was common among anthropologists as a way to distinguish state societies from tribal peoples as supposedly non-state societies (thus the distinction between kinship and territoriality). A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940) offers an angle somewhat similar to Lowie’s in the preface to the *African Political Systems*, a collection of essays by his peers and juniors. Radcliffe-Brown’s preface blatantly disagrees with the premise of the book, which was also the consensus in British social anthropology; the distinction between state societies (as organized territorially) and stateless societies (as organized through kinship) that later re-surfaced in Edmund Leach’s (1954) study of highland Burma:

Every human society has some sort of territorial structure [that] provides the framework, not only for political organization whatever it may be, but for other forms of social organization also, such as the economic, for example. The system of local aggregation and segregation, as such, has nothing specifically political about it; it is the basis of all social life. To try to distinguish, as Maine and Morgan did, between societies based in kinship (or, more strictly, on lineage) and societies based on occupation of a common territory or locality, and to regard the former as more “primitive” than the latter, leads only to confusion. (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, xiv)

States may look somehow singular from examinations of the ethnic frontier, if ethnicity implies a political unit. But with Lowie (1920; 1927) things may look different—the same society may harbor rival agendas or perspectives rooted in the different priorities of kinship, territoriality, and sodalities. Instead of any hard and fast ethnic and/or upland-lowland divides, Southeast Asia as a region may avail a very different story of complexity and the negotiation of diversity. The case of the Mien in Nan (later Chiangrai, Phayao,

Lampang, Kamphaeng Phet, and elsewhere) suggests that they are somewhat exceptional among highland peoples in northern Thailand in that they were not made stateless in the early twentieth century. Bernatzik ([1947] 1970) describes how most of the highlanders were defined as illegal settlers and illegal farmers. The consequence was a general highlander avoidance of Thai authorities and many other lowlanders, as they were perpetually at risk of arrest and fines. The tendency to avoid contact with lowland peoples is apparent in what Bernatzik reported about a stay in a Lahu village in 1937, when he had sat down with his notebook and was about to get answers to all his questions about them as a people:

Suddenly a Lahu man from a neighboring village appeared and whispered a few words. Without a word, all my informants and the spectators who had gathered seized their belongings and, to my astonishment, disappeared with kith and kin into the forest. I did not understand what was going on until, almost three hours later, several Thai gendarmes appeared, who, after a short rest, again left the village. They had scarcely disappeared [when] my Lahu with friendly smiles appeared again. (Bernatzik 1970, 702)

Such avoidance patterns correspond to the Zomian image of highland areas as those actively avoiding contact with lowland states (Scott 2009). It seems clear that this contrasts sharply with the manifest interest in interethnic hill-valley networks that shine through the Mien case of Phaya Khiri and the king of Nan. In that case there was little sign of conflict of interest between lowland kings and highland leaders, while there is much about rivalries among contenders for leadership within highland domains.

While the vagaries of life mean that the three co-authors are not in direct consultation about the contents of this article, it does seem appropriate to close on a somewhat enigmatic statement from Le Jiem Tsan that makes up the final entry in Richard Cushman's field diary, dated in March of 1972:

The other day Jiem Tsan told me [RDC] that before WWII the Yao fled to the forest whenever Thai came to their village. We were really stupid then, he said—now we are beginning to wise up and learn a little about the world.

This description certainly seems to contradict the ease of interaction between Mien leaders and the court in Nan, but it comes very close to describing how stateless highlanders lived in perpetual fear of arrests based on their (recent) dispossession. Among Thailand's Mien one can find evidence of successful integration and national recognition, as much as of dispossession and marginalization. The story of the life of Tang Tsan Khwoen Waa and his rivals is a clear indication of the kinds of histories that were never included in any histories that emphasized ethnic exclusiveness, either highland or low-

land—stories that express regional traditions of multiethnic negotiation that maintained a level of diversity and contestation that had no singular center.

Conclusions

The life story of the Mien leader Tang Tsan Khwoen Waa is telling of a historical setting that has been somewhat unthinkable in ethnography, of diverse and multi-ethnic networks as the basic units of politics and society. I situate the issues in relation to alternative models of exclusive and inclusive identities, in part to contextualize the invisibility of highland peoples in the historical record of Southeast Asia. Rather than aiming to offer an interpretation or explanation of every part of the life story of Tang Tsan Khwoen, I (HJ) wish to leave some things for the reader to discover, ponder, and perhaps enjoy. Instead of being exhaustive about the story I have tried to call some attention to regional and historical contexts that have made or unmade the patterns of social resilience and creativity that one finds in settings of inclusive diversity, within and beyond Thai society and the Thai national borders.

Some episodes of the life story evoke hilarity, such as the accidental explosion of gunpowder and the rice-container that burst. Hilarity may also pertain to the group of Mien men who knew not even the basics of curing spells and knew no details regarding their own ancestor spirits. Many elements of the story concern human decency, including when the traveling Mien men tended to the injured monks until they were healed. Various components bring up human trickery (“mustard-green horns,” Tsoi Tso disguising himself as a woman to escape assassins) and sometimes cruelty, and the very last bit is on the use of powerful magic spells that can destroy a person and ruin a family’s fortune. I don’t try to extract some timeless Mien culture from the story, but insist instead that a number of Mien perspectives and experiences come together in the complex and skilled performance of Le Jiem Tsan’s storytelling that Richard Cushman recorded and translated.

By 1910, the Bangkok government had largely replaced all valley kings with provincial governors whose primary allegiance was to Bangkok and they were not particularly interested in striking up relations of possible mutual benefit with local upland or lowland peoples. By 1915 the governor of Chiangrai officially declared a ban on opium cultivation and slash-and-burn farming, and for the next 20 years the highland peoples were being fined and arrested on both real and bogus charges by agents of the Thai police and military. The dynamic created much distrust across the upland-lowland divide, and appears to have given this divide a stronger force than was otherwise the case. This production

of mistrust between hills and valleys went on for the next 60 years in all the provinces across northern Thailand before things turned even worse during a civil war (Jonsson 2005).

In reaction to the general expectation that the hill tribes were traditional and isolated until the Thai state started to incorporate them by the 1960s, I suggest that the isolation of highlanders was a novel element that can be dated to 100 years ago. All of the scholars of highland society have presumably perused the books of Bernatzik, but none so far has been looking to explain highland people's isolation as recent and anomalous. The awareness of highland diversity helps clarify the situation: A small group of perhaps initially only 500 Mien people had official recognition from the king of Nan by the 1870s and their descendants have had official recognition since, including citizenship (*ibid.*, 73–147).

This group is an exception. All other ethnic minority highlanders and including many Mien peoples were *made stateless* and deprived of the ability to negotiate for any improvement of their lot. Many people in this particular state-included Mien group were legal growers of poppy from perhaps 1900 and until 1958. Everyone else in the highlands was continually at risk of arrest, eviction, and extortion. The leader of the legal Mien group had received a semi-royal title, *phaya*, from the king of Nan in perhaps 1880, and the group never lost these administrative connections because they stubbornly maintained them through friendly visits and annual tax-payments.

Outside the small area of legal poppy cultivation by certain Mien peoples under the king of Nan, the pervasive opium production in the northern Thai hills was the result of highlanders' societal isolation. They were made to grow the crop by agents of the illegal trade (this includes the Thai police force during the mid-twentieth century) who profited greatly, and the farmers had practically no other options because of their "accidental" isolation from Thai society. The (mostly "Chinese") traders would visit villages and sell consumer goods, often on credit. This process perpetuated the isolation of hill peoples from Thai society and their dependence on the clandestine opium traders. The majority of highlanders had no inroads in the Thai towns and most did not learn to speak Thai during this time of isolation.

Most of the ethnographic work on the highland peoples of northern Thailand was done through the Tribal Research Center in Chiangmai. This work was directed at discovering and describing "the six main tribes"; Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Lisu, and Mien as non-Thai peoples and as ethnic types. By design or not, the research accentuated ethnic distinctions and uniqueness, and generally focused on settlements that seemed untainted by too much contact with lowland society. Thus this research generally found nothing unusual about the isolation of highland peoples from lowland national society.

The resulting ethnographic image suggests that highlanders can be described in terms of their disconnection from regional society and hill-valley networks. Against that ethnographic grain, the story of the lives of Tsan Khwoen Waa and his rivals implies that Mien and other highland peoples have always situated themselves in networks with valley populations, and that they have only become stateless through deliberate policies of dispossession.

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Appendix: On Richard D. Cushman's Research

Richard D. Cushman had written a two-volume ethnohistorical study of Yao in southern China, based on archival materials accessible in the USA (Cushman 1970). His follow-up research in Thailand was focused on the ritual language and ritual traditions. Cushman wanted in his work to emphasize a “confrontation” of many cultural elements, and thereby to offer an alternative to the commonly expected story of the colonization of weaker or less advanced people by a stronger civilization (see for instance Wiens 1954). Inter-cultural borrowing, he proposed, may have played a much more creative role in the fashioning of new societies than commonly expected in scholarship and elsewhere. To show this, there needed to be research on Yao (Mien and some others) religious practices. Cushman conducted research with Mien in Thailand in 1970–71 under a Cornell China Program post-doctoral research grant. A Ford Foundation Southeast Asia Research Fellowship enabled continued data collection during 1971–72, and that is the archive of tape recordings, texts, and photographs that now is housed in the Cornell University Archives.

Cushman (1972) explained in a final report to the Anthropology Department at Cornell University: “My basic strategy of research consisted in working from text to performance. I discovered quite early in my research that even the simplest ceremonies were too complex in actual performance to allow me to take down adequate descriptive information—and this even if I had a knowledgeable priest free to explain what was happening! Moreover, because priests frequently had to move around during ceremonies, and because the background noise was usually excessive, tape recordings of what was being said proved to be both incomplete and often unintelligible. Furthermore, in several cases, because of the special sacredness of actual performance, I was requested not to record or do any photographing. The only reasonable solution was to have the texts for the various rites written out in Chinese characters. The texts could then be recorded and explicated, and detailed instructions for all activities linked in at the appropriate places. A crosscheck on the reliability of the results was maintained by my attendance at as many real performances as possible.”

Mien ritual traditions are voluminous and complex. “When I left the field in June [1972] my list of ceremonies totaled 280. These may, on the basis of form, be divided into three types: ‘ordinary’ rites each under five hours in performance (total 210 ceremonies); rites witnessed by the Jade Emperor (*heu lung*) which take between 5 and 10 hours (50 ceremonies), and ‘feast’ rites which run continuously for three or four days and nights (20 ceremonies). My chief informant managed to write out the texts for fifty of the ceremonies, a total of 2,300 pages. Of these fifty, I ‘finished’ thirty-five: i.e. we recorded the texts verbatim on tape, and then for each recorded detailed explication covering meaning and how-when-where-why-by-whom-for-whom performed. Although we could have finished the other fifteen ceremonies, I chose instead to spend the time taping a general overview of all the other ceremonies in order to have available a greater range of material while pursuing the comparative side of this research.”

In addition to the number of ceremonies and the length of their performance, Mien religious life is further complicated by the use of four or five distinctive linguistic idioms. Certain parts of most ceremonies are spoken in Everyday Mien language but they have an enormous ritual vocabulary which I refer to as “liturgical Mien” (*sip mien nye waa*). The conventions of story-telling are distinct enough from Everyday Mien to refer to this variant as “Narrative Mien” (*ko waa*). Yunnanese Mandarin (*khe waa*) is used for reciting many spells, for reading the official petitions addressed to the high gods, for consulting horoscope books, and for the complete text of one ceremony. Many myths and stories are written in a formal song-style. The Song Language (*ndzuung waa*) is related to Cantonese. Finally, the language used in most rituals is a second form on Cantonese; Liturgical Cantonese (*zie waa*).

Linguist Herbert Purnell was Cushman's graduate-school mate and in 2014 he gave me (HJ) a box with over 20 reel-to-reel tapes of Cushman's recordings that I then passed on to Cornell University. Then I learned that historian David K. Wyatt had deposited 18 boxes of Richard Cushman's research

materials to the Cornell Library and that there were over 70 tapes in the Cushman Papers that are in the Rare Manuscripts Collection. The Library channeled some funding to cover the cost of digitizing the recordings (myth, history, song, and primarily ritual matters) that ideally will have a guide to the contents in English, Thai, Romanized Mien, and in Chinese (I am still working on the details and the collaborators). The history involving Tang Tsan Khwoen Waa is on one of the tapes, and Cushman had written up an English draft translation of it but not pursued the matter further.

When Cushman got an academic job at Rice University (1974–81) he appears to have already abandoned the Mien research project (Wyatt 2000). So far I have not found any explanation for this shift. But it deserves mention that as of 1971, the world of US American anthropology was convinced that many or most of the anthropologists working among Thailand's hill tribes (and especially through the Tribal Research Center) had been complicit with counterinsurgency efforts and had been entangled with the agents of the US State Department in Thailand and that information garnered from the anthropologists had been essential to the Thai military's bombing of highland villages. While the claims or insinuations were based on scanty information and primarily on misinformation and panic, they appeared convincing to many in the USA who wanted to take a stand against the US war effort in Vietnam and Cambodia and needed somewhere to point an accusatory finger (Hinton 2002; Jonsson 2014b; for the more conventional view, see Wakin 1992; Price 2011).

The consensus in American anthropology at the time did make it difficult for Thai highland researchers to get published and they met persistent suspicion at conferences and the like. This is the most likely explanation for Cushman having abandoned the Mien project. Earlier, Cushman (1970) had written a PhD dissertation based on library research on the Yao in southern China, a work that Mien and Yao scholars consider top-notch and still of major importance. Subsequent to this, Cushman channeled his energies into a translation of the Ayutthya chronicles, work that David K. Wyatt helped finish (Cushman and Wyatt 2000) as Richard Cushman had passed away in 1991.

The story of the life of Tsan Khwoen Waa was a story which Richard Cushman's teacher, informant, and friend Le Jiem Tsan wanted to tell. The village of Khun Haeng had only been in existence for a little over a year when Cushman arrived there for his research project. Sometime in 1969 or 1970 the Suan Ya Luang people moved, fleeing increased fighting between units of the Communist Party of Thailand and the Thai military in the mountains of Chiangrai and Nan Provinces adjacent to Laos. By the late 1970s, many in Jiem Tsan's group had moved to the village of Jom Khwaen in Amphoe Muang of Kamphaeng Phet Province, where I met them in summer of 2015 and played them some of the digitized recordings. When they settled in Kamphaeng Phet they bought forested land in lowland areas that they gradually cleared. Initially the soil was fertile but over the years it has required more and more fertilizer to sustain yields, and for about the last 20 years the soil has only been good enough for growing tapioca, not rice or corn. But the ability to purchase land in the early 1970s is very telling of their somewhat unique history. Because of Tsan Khwoen's status as Phaya Khiri, and of his direct descendants' continued administrative service as *kamnan*, everyone in that group had citizenship and village registration already for a long time. This is very unlike the marginalization that was common among highlanders in the 1960s to 1980s (see Alting 1983; McKinnon and Vienne 1989), and which I suggest was the result of policy changes initiated in about 1910.