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THE STRUGGLE FOR CHIANG TUNG: LOYALTY AND TERRITORY ON AN UPPER SOUTHEAST ASIAN FRONTIER, 1800-1900

JOHN SF SMITH¹

ABSTRACT

Chiang Mai, Chiang Tung, and Chiang Rung were three Tai-speaking principalities in northern Southeast Asia, which, despite enjoying a shared history, culture, and language, became part of the separate states of Thailand, Burma, and China over the course of the nineteenth century. While geographic realities informed this division to an extent, the main driving factor was the growth of a culture of loyalty and a tradition of patronage in each of the respective states. A series of military conflicts and political crises over the course of the early nineteenth century saw the major regional powers each attempt to gain ground, but these conflicts were invariably resolved by the actions and decisions of the highland Tai states rather than the lowland empires. The Tai states thus proved the main agents in the delineation of Thai, Burmese, and Chinese territories in upland Southeast Asia, and played a major role in shaping the map of the region that we see today.

Key Words: Thailand, Burma, China, history, borders

A TAI WORLD BETWEEN EMPIRES

Tai-speakers constitute one of the world's great ethnic groups. Spread across East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia, Tai-speakers are the majority in two independent nation-states, Thailand and Laos, and a significant minority in at least five more. While the modern-day nation-states of Thailand and Laos possess a culture of ethnic solidarity, the pre-modern Tai world was fragmented and decentralized, divided between multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan lowland centers such as Bangkok and its predecessor Ayutthaya, and isolated hinterland kingdoms. None of these were sprawling empires, but rather independent and semi-independent city-states, tied together through bonds of economic interdependence and personal loyalty.

Between 1351 and 1800, the lower basin of the Chaophraya river, the location of Ayutthaya and Bangkok, became the pre-eminent power in the Tai-speaking world. Ayutthaya began as a small riverine city-state, and over the course of four centuries, grew into a sizeable empire. In 1767, a Burmese invasion led to the destruction of Ayutthaya, and in 1782, the Siamese capital was moved to its modern-day location, Bangkok. By 1800, the kings of the still-regnant Chakri dynasty had established an empire of unprecedented size and centralization for the Tai-speaking world. At the same time, similar processes occurred elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia. To the east, the Nguyen Dynasty established a similarly powerful grip over Vietnam, and to the west, the Konbaung Dynasty established control over Burma (Lieberman, 2009).

On the highland frontiers of Chakri Siam and Konbaung Burma, a number of Tai-speaking principalities maintained a nominal independence. These states would offer allegiance to one or more of the major lowland kingdoms. Usually this would constitute a military alliance and would allow merchants from the highland state access to the well-connected lowland market. However, the highland state would always maintain considerable autonomy. The two largest highland Tai states in the early nineteenth century were Chiang

¹Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, College of Innovation and Management, Thailand. E-mail - jsfsmith@umich.edu

Mai, located on a tributary of the Chaophraya River, and Chiang Rung, located on the Mekong. Each of these principalities was the center of its own kingdom, yet each also paid tribute to a larger empire. In the early years of the Chakri dynasty, Siam managed to gain the allegiance of Chiang Mai and the other cities of Lanna, the historical kingdom centered upon Chiang Mai, which had previously been subject to Burma. Chiang Rung, and its kingdom of Sipsongpanna, lay on the southern frontier of Qing China's Yunnan province, and paid allegiance to both Qing China and Konbaung Burma.

At first glance, the allegiance of these principalities seems natural. Chiang Mai shared a watershed with Chakri Siam, and as such, Siam was its natural suzerain. Similarly, Chiang Rung lay on the frontiers of the Qing Empire, one of the world's pre-eminent powers. However, the loyalty of these states was very much in flux. Chiang Mai only paid tribute to Bangkok after the Chakri dynasty helped repel repeated Burmese invasions in the late eighteenth century (Smith, 2013). The conflict in Chiang Rung was much deeper, with pro-Burmese and pro-Chinese factions at court periodically plunging Sipsongpanna into civil war.

Chiang Tung was more remote and smaller than Chiang Rung and Chiang Mai, and its importance derived largely from its strategic position rather than its role as a population center. It was a key stop on the trade route by which Chinese caravans would travel from Yunnan to the British and Thai controlled coastal centers at Moulmein and Bangkok (Grabowsky and Turton, 2003). It lay in the Mekong watershed, like Chiang Rung, but it was far from Chiang Rung, located in a small valley in the mountains separating the Mekong from the Salween. This remoteness drew it towards the Tai states of the Shan country west of the Salween, and placed it as close to the Burmese sphere of influence as the Chinese sphere of influence.

CULTURES OF LOYALTY

While geographic location was significant in determining the loyalty of the Tai states, their alignment was ultimately determined by the development, over the course of decades, of cultures of loyalty to one or more of the major powers. This is seen the most vividly in the case of Chiang Rung, which balanced itself between the Burmese and Chinese spheres of influence, and even invited Thai involvement for a short time in the 1850s. It is also apparent in Chiang Mai, whose ruling dynasty developed a close, multi-generational relationship with the Chakri dynasty of Bangkok starting in the late eighteenth century. Chiang Tung served as a fulcrum of sorts between the larger powers of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rung, but the long reign of the ruler Cao Mahakhanan (r. 1804-1857) placed Chiang Tung firmly within the Burmese sphere of influence.

Chiang Rung's location on the Mekong River to the south of China's Yunnan Province made it a contested principality in the nineteenth century's world of expanding kingdoms. However, despite the presence of pro-Siamese and pro-Burmese faction at court, its long-lasting cultural bond with China ultimately proved decisive. Chiang Rung had entered into its first tributary arrangement with the Chinese in the fourteenth century, and had established a separate tributary arrangement with the Burmese in the sixteenth century (Liew-Herres, Grabowsky and Renoo, 2012, p. 154-5). This arrangement of dual suzerainty did not cause any significant problems at the court of Chiang Rung until the 1760s, when a border war broke out between Qing Dynasty China and early Konbaung Burma. In this war, the ruling line of Chiang Rung split, with one prince, Cao Namphung, offering tribute to the Burmese, while another, Cao Suwan, offered tribute to the Chinese (Liew-Herres, 2007, p. 89-91).

Over the course of the following century, the ruling house of Chiang Rung remained divided between the lines of Suwan and Namphung. For most of this time, the Chinese would reliably support the descendants of Suwan, while the Burmese would alternate between recognizing the Chinese-backed ruler of Chiang Rung and supporting challengers to the throne descended from Namphung. These challengers usually ruled from Chiang Rung's tributary

cities west of the Mekong and unlike their Chinese-backed counterparts, rarely held uncontested power over Chiang Rung (Smith, 2013). In 1847, a ruler of Chiang Rung named Suchawan even invited Siamese involvement, leading to a messy conflict between the Siamese and the Burmese in the highlands near Chiang Tung. However, the cultural relationship between Chiang Rung and China was simply too old to be overcome by the politics of the moment. An early nineteenth century visitor described the city's courtly culture and architectural style as mimicking that of the Chinese, and their documents used Chinese characters rather than the Indic script used by their neighbors in Chiang Tung and Chiang Mai (Grabowsky and Turton, 2003).

If Chiang Rung had a historically venerable relationship with China, Chiang Mai had a similar relationship with Siam. This relationship dated all the way back to the fourteenth century, and can be seen in the common influence among the early Tai centers of the upper Chaophraya watershed, as well as the mythical friendship of the Tai rulers of Chiang Mai and Sukhothai (Wyatt and Aroonrut, 1995). Like Chiang Rung, Chiang Mai came under Burmese influence in the sixteenth century. However, this Burmese influence declined rapidly in the late seventeenth century, when the Siamese, under King Taksin of Thonburi, helped the newly autonomous rulers of Chiang Mai and Lampang defeat a Burmese invasion (Wyatt and Aroonrut, 1995, p. 151-2). The ruling dynasty of Chiang Mai remained loyal allies of the Siamese until the foundation of the Siamese nation state a century later.

THE STRUGGLE FOR CHIANG TUNG

Located far from any lowland centers of power, Chiang Tung's situation would have been far less stable and far more in flux than those of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rung if not for the stability of its leadership. From 1804 to 1857, Chiang Tung was ruled by Cao Mahakhanan, a pragmatic leader whose periodic shifts of loyalty ultimately established Chiang Tung as the arbiter of Burmese power on the Siamese and Chinese frontiers. From 1804 to 1812, Mahakhanan ruled from a succession of centers to the south of Chiang Tung and served as a vassal of Chiang Mai which was in turn a vassal of Bangkok. From 1812 until his death of old age, he returned to Chiang Tung and again ruled as a vassal of the Burmese. During his reign, he defended his principality against repeated aggression from the neighboring Tai states and established it as the primary Burmese-backed power east of the Salween.

Cao Mahakhanan became ruler of Chiang Tung when his father, Cao Kong Tai, was captured in a Chiang Mai raid in 1804. Mahakhanan immediately found himself in an awkward alliance with Chiang Mai, as encroachment by the Burmese and Shans west of the Salween forced him to abandon Chiang Tung and relocate, with his followers, to a series of smaller valleys south of Chiang Tung. From 1805 to 1812, Mahakhanan, with the support of Chiang Mai, opposed Burmese efforts to control the population of Chiang Tung and the surrounding highlands (Wyatt and Aroonrut, 1995, p. 192-4). This phase came to an end when the Burmese won the war of attrition, and the Chiang Mai rulers decided to relocate Kavila and his followers to Chiang Saen, closer to the center of Chiang Mai's sphere of influence (Smith, 2013). However, attrition had also taken its toll on the Burmese, who contacted Mahakhanan and invited him to return and rule from Chiang Tung, with Burmese backing (Mangrai, 1981, p. 259-60). With the two major powers having worn each other out, Mahakhanan was free to return and rule in peace.

As a Burmese vassal, Mahakhanan oversaw the wholesale restoration of Chiang Tung's population and infrastructure. Unlike most recovering Tai states, Chiang Tung did not conduct any raids to obtain a captive population. However, the Chronicles recall a period of stability, in which the city was rebuilt and its fortifications expanded from the previous era (Mangrai, 1981, 261). From 1813 to 1849, the Tai principalities as a whole enjoyed a period of relative peace and stability, and when this stability began to come to an end, Mahakhanan would prove

that he had both the political acumen and the fortifications necessary to stand up to the regional powers.

In 1836, the Chiang Rung conflict rekindled with a contested succession. Cao Suchawan, a descendent of Cao Suwan and the appointed heir of the previous ruler, squared off against Cao No Kham, a descendent of Cao Namphung. Initially, the Chinese backed Suchawan while the Burmese backed No Kham (Renoo, 1998, p. 682-4). This arrangement changed in 1842, when a combined Tai and Chinese force drove No Kham to the mountains west of the Mekong. Without a viable candidate, the Burmese acquiesced to the Chinese-backed prince and supported Suchawan (Phongsawadan, 1973, p. 10). Despite the Burmese support for Suchawan, Chiang Tung continued its support of No Kham. When a third prince, Cao Mahachai Ngadam, Suchawan's cousin, gained Chinese backing and rebelled against Suchawan in 1845, Chiang Tung's support for No Kham prevented Suchawan from seeking the assistance of his ostensive suzerains in central Burma (Smith, 2013). He was therefore forced to turn to Siam for help.

Siam quickly discovered that, just like the Burmese, they needed to control the highlands between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rung in order to exert power over Chiang Rung. This meant controlling the major political center of these highlands, which, at the time, was Chiang Tung. The Siamese thus launched three successive efforts to control Chiang Tung, in 1849, 1852, and 1854 (Sarassawadee, 2005, p. 161-2). These were all failures for the Siamese, and changed the political alignment of neither Chiang Tung nor Chiang Rung. They were also sizeable campaigns that involved tens of thousands of troops on either side, and saw direct confrontation between the forces of Chakri Siam and Konbaung Burma (Smith, 2013). Chiang Tung thus proved itself not simply able to obstruct Burmese policy in the frontier regions, but to defend itself against the consequences of that obstruction.

Following the wars with the Siamese, Chiang Tung switched its support back to Suchawan, their previous candidate, No Kham, having been killed in battle in 1850 (Renoo, 1998, p. 689). With the help of Chiang Tung and the Burmese, Suchawan was able to suppress his rivals and regain Chinese support, thus placing the Chiang Rung crisis back into dormancy.

CONCLUSION: LOYALTY AND TERRITORY

Two forces, loyalty and territory, drove the delineation of the Thai-Burmese, Thai-Chinese, and Sino-Burmese borderlands. Loyalty refers to the political alignments that formed between hinterland Tai leaders and the courts of China, Siam, and Burma, while territory refers to the geographic realities that caused the hinterland powers to gravitate towards specific lowland patrons. Chiang Rung, lying on the southern frontier of the vast Qing empire and enjoying a centuries-long relation with China, naturally gravitated in that direction, factionalism at court threatened to pull it in the direction of Burma or even Siam. While Chiang Mai shared a watershed with the Siamese kingdom, it also lay exposed to Burma, and remained a vassal of Thailand through a solid, multi-generational relationship with the kings of Bangkok.

Chiang Tung proved to be a key component in this arrangement. Its geographical location made it necessary for the Burmese or Siamese to control Chiang Rung, for the Burmese or Chinese to control Chiang Mai. Its isolation afforded its leaders a good deal of negotiating power, and at the height of his reign, Cao Mahakhanan was effectively able to dictate Burmese policy towards Chiang Rung, affecting the course of the crisis in Chiang Rung when Burmese support was unable to reach Cao Suchawan, the Burmese-backed candidate. To this day, the Thai-Burmese border remains a porous zone and a zone of constant change, with the decisions of leaders in the borderlands often driving national policy (Sirinya, 2017).

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