

CHAPTER VI CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 A “Place” at the Margins

Examination and understanding of a Lisu community, and identification individually and collectively with this phenomena, as this study shows, has moved past place-centered dichotomies such as *müang* and *pa*, us and them, civilized and uncivilized, and has in turn illustrated the situational relationship between place and locality, encompassing the interconnectedness of physical and symbolic meanings. In essence, this process has changed the frame of reference from clear divisions between the forest and the city, to a situation demonstrating the phenomenon of continual interaction, contestation and articulation of power and identity. This study was situated theoretically and empirically to reveal and understand these changes, the consequences of interaction, and the dynamics of the classification and categorization of ethnic peoples. Beyond a simple dialectical relationship of domination and resistance, empirical narratives illuminate the ways in which these issues are embedded in the demonstration and assertion of rights to place. This study has argued that community, identity and place are not neutral concepts theoretically or empirically. They encompass multiple meanings and experiences, and are contested and negotiated within the political sphere of place, so it is necessary to investigate these concepts at overlapping and intersecting points of lived experiences. As both a symbol and a desire, the idea of community continues to hold a significant position in public discourse.

The significance of minorities within the political systems of pre-modern Thailand and the contemporary Thai state is concerned not only with the creation and maintenance of boundaries, but also with the categorization of people in terms of geographical location, ethnic background and cultural characteristics. Ethnic minority groups within the Thai state have been systematically marginalized and categorized as underdeveloped and backward in policy state discourse and policy rhetoric. From a historical perspective, interaction between highland peoples and lowland Thai have

been characterized by a dichotomous relationship of power — politically, culturally and economically. Therefore, meanings and experiences of community exist at multiple sites (multilocality), and this is evident throughout this thesis, highlighted by the different interpretations of locality and place by village members and the state, conflict and contestation over place and resources, and the forming of networks and alliances. This corresponds with individual and collective understandings of identity, creating a situation where Lisu identity is strengthened as a result of historical interaction with state and non-state actors. The link between community and identity thus emerges through contestation. Lisu, as this study has shown, have been classified as living in a certain fixed locality defined as the property of the state. The contemporary idea of identity, however, flows over boundaries as represented by the emergence of a Thai-Lisu identity. Analysis of the village has focused on the extent to which boundaries can be drawn around a population to create a physical entity that we can describe as a “village,” and how in turn the community has responded to this action.

The entity known as a Lisu community is shifting and is perceived and defined differently by different members, based on age, gender, social position and access to information in the formation of networks and alliances. Their right to place for community members is a continual struggle, and in constant negotiation. “Community” is promoted by NGOs for mobilization and organization, protest and development, where it is perceived as a unified whole, and is used by the state as an administrative unit that remains a problem for policy and development planners to solve. The right to place for community members is a continual struggle and in constant negotiation. Using the language of conservation, struggles for collective rights for land are fought, forming the foundation for community-based natural resource management paradigms where Lisu have created their place within the territory of the state forest classification system. For the Lisu in Ban Sai Ngam, the community exists at multiple levels simultaneously and therefore highlights both the theoretical problematic surrounding places and identities as well as the empirical challenge faced by the Lisu in their struggle for legitimacy, recognition and security.

This study has illustrated that in the conceptualization of the interconnectedness of meaning and experience between community and identity, where people live — their place, community or home is a fundamental dimension, however, the networks and alliances that they form at the clan and kinship level as well as with state and non-state actors and institutions, are the sources of basic materialistic substance, symbolic meaning, produces and defines contestation, struggle, and ethnic identity as a distinct group. Reflecting on this approach it can be seen to directly influence decision making, to be involved development projects, cash crop production, migration to urban centers and livelihood strategies increasingly attached to the market town of Müang Pai, Chiang Mai and even Bangkok. As well as this interpretation, such processes in turn directly affects and produces alternative understandings of place; and how people identify with these new locales, encompassing different ideas about development and progress that challenge previously-held beliefs and ideologies. How state policies fix highland peoples to place has impacted on notions of place and struggles to live, and the level of internalization of these discourses and narratives of a bounded entity — ‘the village’ — are significant for Lisu of Ban Sai Ngam. The consciousness of the community is, then, multiple, and embedded in the perceptions of and experiences with its boundaries. These boundaries are largely constituted by peoples’ interactions, both internally and with external actors such as NGOs, government officials and researchers.

6.2 Reflections on Place and Identity of the Lisu: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

The fluidity Lisu identity cannot be defined solely in a framework of historical migration and interaction with a diverse range of ethnic groups, nor can investigation place undue attention to the contemporary relations of the Lisu with the Thai state. It must, as this thesis attempted to do, situate the discussion in the contemporary context of development and change within the community. Boundaries can be drawn on a map or codified into national policy, however, the significance of these notions are dependent on the power of those defining and enforcing this imaginary divisions of people and resources. These boundaries like the identity of those included and

excluded are not fixed and has resulted from the differing definitions of locality, state land, and Lisu classification and divisions of place.

From this study, the notion of fluidity of Lisu identity has emerged through unprecedented interaction between the state and the village, the tightening of controls over resources, the demarcation of land as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, the formalization of boundaries, increasing levels of migration, and the forming of networks and alliances at the clan and inter-community levels, with networks moving from the periphery to the center. It is from this perspective that factors such as external classification, development policy, land and resources, NGO rights and networking have crystallized “Lisuness”. This thesis therefore shows an increased sense of continual articulation of identity.

Approaching community and identity by investigating meanings and experiences of place, locality, interaction, and networks, has proven very productive for this study. In the case of Ban Sai Ngam, this included state and non-state actors, NGOs and INGOs, as well as researchers. An analysis of place for the Lisu clearly illustrates the problematic of ethnicity and territory resulting from the traditional interpretation of these subjects as static and fixed, whereas struggles fought at the local level emphasize the dynamism of local relationships and networks while simultaneously connected, to varying extents, to international organizations and social movements in a wider global community. However, the ability of village members to access these networks through vertical interaction and the assertion of voice and rights is limited to only a few and depends on personal relationships and contact with both state officials and NGOs. The fluidity and blurredness of boundaries can be seen from both the perspective of the state, including changes to policy regarding development within national parks and wildlife sanctuaries illustrated by the governments rubber plantation project and use of wood for the construction of a village bridge, and from the perspective the Lisu of Ban Sai Ngam, for example by considering the Lisu word *meua*, that has similarities to the Thai word *müang* indicating a country, land or village (Klein Hutheesing 1991:14). It can be seen that in this context the politicalized state-orientated concept of territorialization of land

and domains has filtered into Lisu folk beliefs as a cosmologized “country” (see Chapter IV section 4.3).

As urban migration increases, the geographic area and the question of where the community exists is shifting. A sense of community becomes intensified in times of problems and conflict, creating a context of contestation. In this respect, the community is a resource called upon in times of struggle and protest by NGOs to show a unified voice (see Chapter I, Prologue). The Thai village is a construct with multiple meanings — geographical, ritual and social. For the members of *Ja Zu Na Khuaw*, ‘community’ essentially constitutes a sphere of interaction with state agencies, and NGOs, as well as spirits, clan and kinship relations, all of which simultaneously correspond to spatial boundaries and transcend them. Ban Sai Ngam is also represented and bounded by lines on a map, information gathered from a census survey, and through participation in state development projects. As such, it can be seen that the village represents both social and political spaces for the villagers and administrators alike. However, as this study indicates, the perception of an identifiable unit of analysis is likely to be of greater relevance for external authorities than for the actual residents of the particular village.

Lisu experiences and understanding of their community resides in their orientation to its symbolism. This indicates that the notion of community and identity can be approached as both fixed in a particular geographical position as ‘the village’, and as encompassing broader relations such as clan and kinship networks and alliances with NGOs. Members of the community construct ‘locality’ beyond the bounds of the local community, such as in the case of the territorial spirits and the Lisu classification of land (see Chapter IV). The different interpretations, perceptions, feelings and experiences of the community outlined in this study do not function separately, but serve to objectify the villagers and the village on the one hand and empower them on the other. These are the contradictions and challenges that village members of Ban Sai Ngam, *Ja Zu Na Khuaw*, must negotiate for recognition, legitimacy and security.

Through the work of various NGOs, and as a result increased international significance placed on terminology and related networks and alliances, Lisu are promoted as an indigenous group at the national and international level. Lisu are linked to indigenous and tribal peoples' movements and organizations through ethnic networks based on village membership in particular networks, for example, the Lisu Environment and Culture Network of Mae Hong Son. They are linked nationally through NGOs to national networks such as the Assembly of the Poor and the Assembly for Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of Thailand (AITPT), simultaneously linked internationally with the United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples and other supra-national bodies, and at the personal level with clan and kinship networks. Through these networks and alliances, perceptions of Lisu identity, have moved from illegal border peoples, to being increasingly recognized as a visible group within the Thai state through the formation of officially registered communities, and Thai citizenship. Identity in this sense indicates a situation where Lisu are not only Lisu, but are an ethnic minority, marginalized, hill tribe, *chao khao*, and indigenous. There is more to these classifications than simply a label, the classification and categorization of the Lisu has meaning to both the state and the Lisu themselves.

Focusing on the classification of terrain or boundary demarcations, and the categorization of cultural, agricultural and resource management practices of ethnic minorities, such identification has social as well as political significance. As boundaries are drawn and spaces become territories, the spatial organization of people and resources are fundamentally altered. Lisu relationships with their environment have been redefined and these new manifestations of interactions between and within local communities and the state are at the core of notions of community, and are represented through notions of belonging and identity. This can be seen in terms of how Lisu are viewed by state agencies, as destroyers of the forest, involved in narcotics trade and use, and a threat to national security, and how in turn this perception, stereotype and classification has been codified into national law and legislation, with specific reference to forest management and citizenship criteria and application processes.

State perceptions of highland people, including the Lisu, are characterized and solidified in government policy, national law and historical contact. This can best be seen with regards to citizenship and the rights that it entails. Participation in the process of governing as full citizens is fundamentally significant for any individual or group, and the denial of such rights is a basic violation of these rights. Village members of Ban Sai Ngam have full Thai citizenship, however, they lack land title and are continually faced with restrictions on land use and conflicts with forestry officials. This results in a situation where their legitimacy to place, their village and fields, is based not solely on their rights as citizens, but is dependent on sustainable outcomes of resource management practices. Lives of the village members are bound therefore, in the eyes of the state, not only to a specific place but also to specific resource management practices.

Power to determine and construct identity lies with both the contemporary state through codified laws, classification and territorialization of land, resources and people, and with minority peoples' responses to these practices. Power relations that are created, strengthened and maintained along with the construction of the nation state define those who are in the minority and majority. Approaching Lisu identity from this perspective of symbolic interaction provided a significant frame of reference for this study. Different individuals and groups negotiate their identity through different means. The official categorization of peoples according to elevation, border, and traditional practices have thus situated perceptions of the Lisu as shifting, or "slash and burn", cultivators. The increasing political nature of place and identity have moved from social constructs into the realm of politics. Identity is now an approach for the promotion of rights, no longer expressed at the local or village level, but promoted at the national and international level for policy change and cultural recognition. Consequently, identity is located both at the symbolic and practical level. According to external perceptions it is powerfully evident that, in terms of the cultural dimensions of identity, "Lisuness" is simultaneously connected to place and dependant on other factors such as agricultural practices, and perceived level of involved in state and non-state development activities. However, this study has

shown that previously held ideas about a homogenous fixed community is no longer sufficient to analysis and interpret the changes occurring within the village itself.

A significant change for highland people occurred as a result of modifications in forest policies, primarily the introduction of a national logging ban in 1989 and the introduction of replacement crops for opium cultivation. The mid-1990s witnessed the emergence of ethnic minority group participation in national public demonstrations with people identifying themselves as the rural poor. It is here that the concept of agency must be addressed, as this study has shown, the Lisu have access to provincial and national networks and alliances through connection with NGOs. However, participation in these networks remains selective, in many cases, local people were supported by academics and NGOs, and while mass rallies and protests were not generally organized by local people themselves their presence and was essential for these external groups in their attempt to assert the rights of minority and marginalized people.

Increasingly, the state has focused on highland development through various strategies and policies, including the formalization of village boundaries and borders, a centralized education system, and promoting increased connection and dependence on the market systems (see Prologue). At the same time, interaction between government agencies and highland people occur on many levels, and officially-recognized villages have an elected leader, generally chosen on their ability to speak Thai and perform official government duties, as well as an elected Sub-district Administration Organization representative (SAO) involved in development and budgeting for the community.

In Ban Sai Ngam, the physical representation of government policy has been seen through the positioning of army personnel in the village and surrounding areas for several months during 2003, with check-points established at the entrance to the village, and village committees established to control and monitor narcotics in the community, and provide information to government authorities. By situating Ban Sai Ngam historically, it follows a pattern of control and classification implemented by state agencies. Over the past 20 years, since the formalization of the village in 1983,

the state has been attempting to fix Ban Sai Ngam in a particular place, both ideologically through state policy and discourse regarding the classification of highland peoples, and physically through the demarcation of boundaries. Ban Sai Ngam is situated within the territorial administrative system of state authorities and is located within a National Park and a Wildlife Sanctuary. Currently, the villagers of Ban Sai Ngam hold no land title for agricultural fields or living areas and poses a major problem for villagers in terms of the security of livelihood and legitimacy of the community, and is underscored and intensified by financial insecurity.

Approaches to forest classification, and connection to wider ethnic networks by the villagers indicates a counter process to the territorialization of land, indicating to a certain extent a response to external pressure. When, for instance, land is classified by the villagers and these efforts are instigated and supported by NGOs at both practical and policy advocacy levels, state environmental laws and policies are thus solidified indirectly through local adoption of community-based natural resource models. Such strategies have proven to be a strong tool in negotiating with state agencies; it has been some time since there have been any major conflicts or confrontations with forestry officials, and few villagers have been arrested for encroachment of protected areas, which in itself is remarkable.

It can be said that the community encompasses both feelings of belonging and a particular social phenomena. This can be expressed through the search for meaning and solidarity, and in collective identities surpassing previous conceptualizations of the community connected to a fixed place. The adaptation and negotiation of highland people to both internal change and external pressure have been continually played out at the local, national and international levels with the emergence of communities aligned not only through fixed geographical places. For example, it is clear, from this study that social relationships between different groups and with their environment is at the core of notions of community and is represented through notions of belonging and identity. Following this approach it was not my intention to romanticize the relationship between people and their surrounding environments. It was, however, a primary objective of this study to illustrate the complexities and

interrelationships that occur at the local level between different groups and institutions, how such have relationships evolved, and what their impacts have been on the local conceptualization of community for the Lisu in a village in northern Thailand.

6.3 Towards a Conclusion

This study of a Lisu community in northern Thailand, was not only situated in one particular village, but expanded investigation to encompass surrounding communities, the market town, and other villages in Chiang Mai. Relationships and networks include the immediate village and spread through clan lineage and economic relations to other communities in the surrounding area and to other provinces in northern Thailand such as Chiang Mai, as well as Bangkok. The notions of community, and in turn how the Lisu identify with this changing phenomenon, are both fixed in the particular geographic position of “the village” and encompass national and international relations and networks. Throughout the previous chapters we have seen that articulations of power are quite clear and flow past the level of the local community to the inter-community, national, regional and international network levels, the spirit world, and further through the expression of one’s identity as Lisu.

Analysis into notions of community for Lisu, in particular those living in Ban Sai Ngam, is both strategic and locally relevant. Through a process of historical interaction and contemporary relationships with the state and NGOs, the meaning of community transcends previously-held interpretations of organic or egalitarian wholes, and can be seen as constructed locally in conjunction with, and in opposition to, outside agencies. Community and identity for Lisu extend beyond administrative boundaries assigned to “place”. This study has shown that boundaries, and in turn the transcending of these boundaries through ritual practice, migration, interaction with other ethnic groups, state agencies, NGOs, and the creation of national and international networks and alliances, the community is simultaneously constructed and reconstructed through the experiences and actions of different members of the community.

Through the processes of state-led development and policy implementation, the state promotes an ordered categorization of both territory and its population, emphasizing the significance of a common and shared identity — Thainess, or *khawm pen thai*. At both ideological and practical levels, the state fixes people to places that are imbued with historical and political meaning; ‘hill people’ are perceived as uncivilized, underdeveloped and backward. For a ‘village in the forest,’ the notions of community are experienced as both a demarcated physical space and the setting for social interaction. It can also be seen that the classification of particular places emerge through connection with outside structures and organizations of space along with internal processes of culturally-specific action. Examined from the viewpoint of interaction with outside agencies, the village is an administrative entity and a development-focused community, with NGOs and state agencies implementing development projects with equal enthusiasm.

The connections between town and village have intensified significantly, the meaning and experiences of which have penetrated many aspects of highland peoples’ livelihoods as well as the understanding of tradition and modernity. The past twenty years of development of highland areas and people in Thailand have been characterized by multiple intertwined factors. These dynamics include the tightening of government policy regarding forestry management and traditional agricultural practices, policies of assimilation, and the territorialization of land. As a direct result of this there has been a redefinition of boundaries, resources and people, which has witnessed an unprecedented level of the opening of highland communities to national and international markets, the promotion and in turn reliance on cash-crops and external income sources, and transformation in the production systems of agriculture and the structure of labor. As physical boundaries are drawn spaces become territories, this has fundamentally altered the spatial organization of people and resources. It is in this context that the relationship between natural resources and people has become highly politicized. Where we live, our place, our home is an essential element of our self in how we shape social relations, understand the world, live our lives and plan for the future.

Physical location and territory have traditionally been the primary unit of analysis for understanding and mapping cultural differences of individuals and groups. Such a perspective must now, as this study supports, incorporate multiple frameworks that enable further examination into connection, contiguity, and more generally, the representation of territory incorporating factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity. For Lisu in northern Thailand, the community as seen from an external perspective is a fixed geographical entity conforming to boundaries set by state agencies, predominantly within the boundaries and demarcations of national parks and forest reserves. However, Lisu communities have a deeper meaning; they are places that have been constructed and maintained through memory and history, highlighted by contestation and negotiation with ecological settings, social organization, and the supernatural, through ritual practices, external pressures, life histories and political mobilization. Ritual, migration, memory and labor structures transcend fixed notions of a community and in turn community members. This has led to a redefining of the community and identity from local perspectives, where the geographical location of the community has taken on new meaning.

Within the larger environmental and political background of development in a period when highland communities have been undergoing unprecedented transformation, economically and socially maintaining own ethnic identity becomes even more complex, retaining some aspects of their existing cultural identities and incorporating those of others. The Lisu of Ban Sai Ngam are connected by locality in a particular historical context, and it is for this reason that we cannot talk about one identity, but shifting representations of “Lisuness” within the contexts of government policy and development.

In reality, the contested nature of the relationships between highland people and lowland government has created an image of a fixed community both in the minds of state officials and increasingly highland peoples themselves. However, this entity, including the imaginings of a permanent area as “the village”, is anything but secure. These experiences of community have produced feelings of place consciousness relating to multiple sites, or a multi-consciousness of community. This

is shown by minority peoples' relationships with locality, and the interconnection between identity, community, migration, clan and kinship networks, along with membership in alliances and organizations simultaneously local, national and international in scope and direction. This approach recognizes the significance of a place-based consciousness in the formation of community, providing a place of every day activity and voice presented locally, nationally and internationally, and subsequently embedded in the individual and collective formation of identity.

The examples of the Princess arriving in Müang Pai, and the interview with the unidentified soldier illustrates the extent to which state ideologies of identity and community penetrate local realities and expressions of a collective national identity. This 'new' collective identity attempts to identify the nation's subjects as 'citizens', as well as identify those who are not. It is powerfully evident that, in terms of the cultural dimensions of identity. "Lisuness" is simultaneously connected to place and dependant on other factors such as social relationships, interaction with external groups, and thus interconnected with political, social and cultural variables at the levels of family, clan, society and nation. In essence, this has given empirical evidence to the theoretical approaches of identity through the symbolic interaction between community members, with outside agencies and the spiritual world, and as sites of contestation and negotiation.

Internal social relations help to determine the dimensions of boundary crossing for members of the community. The boundaries of the community are simultaneously constructed and reconstructed through the experiences and actions of different members of the community. The parameters of resource management and conservation, or exploitation and degradation, lie in the imaginings of the state and wider society. Changes in social and economic relations between both internal and external actors and institutions cause changes to the way resources are perceived and managed. From the perspective of state agencies, one dimension of community identity of Lisu in Ban Sai Ngam, and thus their legitimacy and security, is based on how they use their resources. This is a significant component in state and ethnic minority relations, for NGOs focus attention of creation of rules and regulations for

village forestry use following paradigms of CBNRM. This has resulted in a situation, as this study has shown, where rights are conditional upon sustainable outcomes and are negotiable according to specific practices such as moving from shifting cultivation, ceasing to cultivate opium and community development models based on natural resource management and local knowledge. These practices situate the Lisu of Ban Sai Ngam into fixed territorial units.

It is through these various processes that state control over local places is established and formalized, processes that are intrinsically linked to the hierarchical political and social structure of the state. Such theoretical underpinnings are played out in practical terms when villagers are incorporated into state mechanisms, or systematically and selectively excluded. In order to effectively address the model of community and development, a critical examination of not only the meanings and interpretations of development are required, but also a questioning of the inherent foundations of community, boundaries, and social structure. For Lisu in *Ja Zu Na Khuaw*, the community exists for the members of the village simultaneously at multiple levels; through migration and movement, ritual ceremonies speak of areas and mountains in Myanmar and northern Thailand, symbolic connections expressed through reference to history and cultural practices. It is also a developmental and administrative village connected to the state, and through NGO networks, integrated into national, regional and international struggles of indigenous and tribal peoples.

We need to understand community as produced in specific historical and institutional frameworks, encompassing specific practices and strategies. It is from this analysis that it becomes clearer that identity emerges within the play of specific sites of power, both state and local perspectives, and thus includes paradigms of difference and exclusion, as it does similarities and selective inclusion challenging traditional conceptualizations of identity as an all-inclusive sameness and without internal differentiation. Diversity of strategic representations of place related identity of the Lisu is distinct and multiple and contributes to a greater understanding individual expressions of identity.