

CHAPTER 6

CONTEXTUALIZING TAI CULTURE

WITHIN THE HEGEMONY OF THE MODERN STATE

This chapter shifts from the economic dimensions of trading seen in prior chapters to examine trading's cultural aspects. As illustrated previously, China's economic border incentives do not only improve economic life, but also create a favorable environment for renewed social interactions and activities among ethnic residents living along the border. The revival of ethnic identities and culture has been made possible within the context of the new border conditions. Different nationalities of the same ethnic group nowadays are able to rekindle lost kinship ties, and re-establish and enlarge their social networks.

Products from Thailand, both Thai brands and items made in Thailand, have played crucial roles in the social lives of the Tai in the Dehong area. Although Thailand and China's Yunnan province have no physical border connection, Tai ethnic groups, especially those in Dehong Prefecture and Xishuangbanna of China, the Tai in Laos, and the Shan Tai in the Shan State of Burma are connected to Thailand through several social activities such as those associated with Buddhism (Cohen 2001, Davis 2006), Thai songs (Amporn 2006, Wasan 2007), and cross-border trade of ethnic commodities.

In this study, I have questioned how traders view "Thai"¹ when they engage in trade in Thai products, and in what way Thai products have played a significant

¹ When I use the term "Thai" I mean how they see Thai and Thailand; the meaning of "Thai" includes that of one of being Tai siblings since Thai, Shan Tai, Dehong Tai and other Tai in Southeast Asia are seen as Tai speaker. But it also includes the conception of Thai in relation to Thai products which reflect their thoughts about Thailand.

role in creating social meaning to the Tai people who engage in trade and consume Thai goods.

This chapter argues that there is a phenomenon reflected in the trade of ethnic commodities between Tai customers and Tai petty traders. Official signs and orders designating territories and sovereign borders as defined by the states are being challenged by Tai customer and petty trader agency; I refer to the phenomenon as a “translocality of Tainess”. This translocality is taking place partly because of the advent of economic border development encouraged by the states themselves, and partly because of the growing trend of cross-border trade in ethnic commodities conducted by the Tai petty traders.

This chapter will first provide the political and socio-cultural contexts of the Tai culture under state influence. It will begin with the context of cultural hegemony, whereby the Dehong Tai have long been culturally and politically dominated by the Han Chinese. This will illustrate the nature of the long association of the Dehong Tai with the Chinese state.

Next, I will discuss the images of *Pii Nong Tai* (Tai sibling) that the Thai state and modern scholars have been creating for several decades. I will examine how the Tai actively perceive these “Tai sibling images” and utilize these images in their cultural materials.

I contend that the Tai living along the Yunnan-Burma border, with their active responses to the Tai sibling images, have been simultaneously merging with four major processes: (1) Tai migration into Thailand; (2) the emergence of modern scholars, and extensive interaction between Thai and Tai scholars; (3) the social and religious activities engaged in by the Royal Family of Thailand in Dehong and other places of “Tai-land”; and (4) media flows (in the form of television programs and VCDs).

The discussion of the construction of the images of *Pii Nong Tai* and “civilized Thailand” will illustrate how the Thai state, faced with foreign colonialism from the 1930s until the formation of the modern Thai nation, has associated with the Tai outside Thailand. Following this discussion, this chapter will argue that the state hegemonic power, which played such a crucial role in dominating the Tai culture, has not been passively received by the Tai community. Instead, the Tai have defined a new ideal and then have acted upon it forcefully.

6.1 Cultural Hegemony: Tai Culture in Association with the Chinese

The Han Chinese long dominated the Dehong Tai culture through various strategies: “barbarians ruling barbarians”, sinicization, and ethnic assimilation over time. The strategies of “barbarians ruling barbarians” and the “Tusi” system were applied during the pre-modern state, in which the Chinese kings and their administrative systems allowed ethnic leaders along the frontier to rule their tribal people as hereditary native chiefs. During the early twentieth century, the modern Chinese state began to employ other strategies - direct sinicization and ethnic assimilation - to control minority group.

Much academic literature about ethnic minorities at the Chinese frontier has confirmed the modern Chinese state’s power and domination over ethnic minorities. For example, Dreyer (1979) asserts that “integration” is the central approach by which the Chinese state had long dominated its ethnic minorities. Heberer (1989) contends that Mao Tse-tung’s policies, mainly the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and later governments as well, have influenced China’s minorities through misguided government policies of forced assimilation. Gladney’s (1994) ideas on “ethnic classification” shows that the modern Chinese state has constructed an image of its ethnic groups, categorizing culture, cultural material, and nationality through a process defining tradition and “exoticization”. Harrell (1995) looks at “hegemony” as the dialectical process between a dominant power, or “civilizing center” and the reaction of subordinated groups or “peripheral people”. Tapp (1995: 195-220) presents minority nationality policies and practices of the Chinese state. He illustrates that there is a policy of positive discrimination, offering tangible benefits to the members of ethnic minorities, but that, unfortunately, the policy in practice has failed to work well -

especially in Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. Schein (2000) reflects on the Chinese state's "interpellation" and unitary discursive practices under which the Miao, and China's other ethnic groups, were framed and categorized by the classification theories and policies of the post-1949 Chinese government. While Litzinger (2000) employs concepts on "knowledge construction" and "technology of gaze" to understand the post-Maoist Chinese state in relation to Yao intellectual elites who have been involved with the complex institutional structures and discourses of power and knowledge.

The line of thought presented by this academic literature has all pointed out that through hegemony, modern China has long legitimized its power and used various strategies towards ethnic minorities, which, Harrell (1995: 8) states, is "the ideology of a civilizing center tailor[ing] itself to its goals; the facilitation of the civilizing project through the creation of hegemony, and a relationship of superiority and inferiority that maintains the hierarchy."

The Dehong Tai have historically belonged to the Tai states ruled by a hereditary chief *Sao pha* (Lord of Heaven). The Tai states, before the emergence of the modern states, were politically under the Chinese kingdom authorized in Teng Yueh or *Muang Man* (present day Tengchong). Throughout history, the Tai states have been politically dominated by the Chinese and Burmese kingdoms, and, including for a time, British colonizers. During the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the Tai *Sao pha* were under the political power of the Burmese and Chinese kings. However, they were able to maintain relative autonomy and various degrees of sovereign status during the period. The Tai *Sao Seanvee pha* or *Khun Hokham*, for example, established rule on the China-Burma frontier and accepted the power of the Burmese kings and Chinese emperors, sending them tribute.

This situation changed dramatically following communist control of China over the past five to six decades. The process of ethnic assimilation through sinicization, ethnic classification, and communism-based development projects have culturally and socially forced the Tai inhabitants to change drastically.

Particularly in Dehong during the past seventy years, the Dehong Tai have been intensively challenged in politics and suffered from political impacts and intensive changes during the appearance of the Burma Road (Tien Ju-Kang 1986 [1949]) and later during the Chinese Revolution (Yos 2001). The suffering of the Dehong Tai was evident by what they called the Han Chinese in their language. *Soepoerk*, or Han Chinese soldiers wearing white-and-yellow colored uniforms, represented army troops of the 1911-1949 Republican government who went to Dehong for military purposes. But, for the Dehong Tai villagers, *Soepoerk* actually referred to the soldiers who stole chickens, money and belongings from the Dehong Tai villagers. This is similar to the case of the *Soelaeng*, or Han Chinese soldiers wearing red-colored uniforms – the Red Guard² and soldiers of the communism era, where the term was used to refer to those who had ruined the formal Tai feudal states and destroyed Buddha images, scripts, temples, other cultural icons in following the Communism ideal.

Many Dehong Tai, both elite and common people, fled from China to Burma in anticipation of social upheaval after the communist takeover. Lands and agricultural systems were reformed based on the commune system. Some *Sao pha* and Dehong Tai elite were sent away from home for higher education, in an attempt to control this powerful elite group which could potentially cause political conflict and unrest (Yos 2001).

The term *Ban Muang Tai Suksak* (horrible Tai land) among the Dehong Tai denotes the ruin of Dehong Tai livelihoods and culture, and a feeling of being “trapped in the margins”. Cultural materials - temples, writings, and images for religious ceremonies and festivals - were destroyed by the Communist government to support political aims.

From the 1970s onward, Chinese migrants from inner China have moved increasingly into the Dehong area because of both the state's promotion of sinicization and the migrants' search for fertile lands and new hope. The Chinese migrants nowadays have

² In the Dehong area, red guards were not only Han Chinese, but also consisted of some Dehong Tai students and young people who believed in the teaching of Mao Zedong, and who wanted to attack the “Four Olds” of society - old ideas, cultures, manners, and customs - during the Cultural Revolution.

become the first major group appearing as a powerful force expanding into the border societies. The Dehong Tai, who were the majority in this land before, and long had had the power to impose the so-called “Tai-ization” (Evans 2000: 263-289) on other ethnic groups (e.g., the Bulang),³ have themselves become an ethnic minority here.

The winds of change have exerted a powerful force on the Dehong Tai. The pressure of Chinese migration has inevitably affected the Dehong Tai. These conditions have raised anxieties about their home settlements, agricultural lands, livelihoods, and cultural pride. The Dehong Tai elders are now worried that their children will lose their lands and their ways of life, since the Han Chinese have come to buy their lands and settle down in their places.

“We got the money from selling lands to *Khea* (Chinese), but we lost our pride because we are selling our homes, and our children become *Khea*”, an elder of Ban Lom Kai, a Dehong Tai village near the city, told me during my fieldwork (December 2005).

Besides selling lands to Han Chinese newcomers, many Dehong Tai in urban areas have sold their lands to the Chinese government for development projects, a consequence of the urbanization occurring during the past two decades. Some Dehong Tai have been affected by state land reform policies which began during the late 1970s. Although they received subsidies from the local government, it was often minimal compensation. The land reform policy and the development projects have limited the size of agricultural lands, which are no longer enough for the big Dehong Tai families. Those Dehong Tai who sold lands and were affected by land reform have changed their careers. Some of them rent their relative's lands in rural areas to keep working in agricultural activities. Some Tai made the choice to be traders in markets or travel further to engage in commerce in other provinces, or in cross-border trade. Their decisions depended on their investment budget and the size of their extended social and economic networks. Many of them looked for new work in other

³ Bulang, or Blang, is one of the fifty-six ethnic nationalities of China. There are several names to call this ethnic group. In Dehong, they are called *Tai Loi* or mountainous Tai. Their speech belongs to the Mon-Khmer family of languages. Some Bulang also speak Chinese and Dehong Tai in addition to speaking Bulang. This ethnic group uses the *Tolik* writing system - the Dehong Tai writing system which has long been used as their own.

places. They became wage earners, working for private companies or the government, and relied on other provinces for education, investment, and jobs.

The Dehong Tai seemed to have acquired an inferior status due to the powerful Chinese forces pressing in on them. The Dehong Tai, always proud that they had had their own kingdom in the past, have not been proud of themselves nowadays, since their perception of their new inferior position. The phrase *Muang Tai Leu Muang Khea* (Dehong Tai land under the Chinese state) was used by the Dehong Tai elite in urban Luxi and recently held two meanings. Overtly, *Muang Tai*⁴ as referred to by Condominas (1990), is “an emboxment” of domain, village and household. However, the phrase also expresses Tai feelings of inferiority caused by being displaced in their own homeland.

Within this cultural hegemony, the Dehong Tai, who now feel inferior in their own homeland, are now undermining the power of the Chinese by assimilating some Thai culture - the culture constructed as “the culture of *Pii Nong* (Sibling)”. Also, Thai cultural products, which have higher quality and are more fashionable than Chinese ones, become one more way for the Tai to undermine the Chinese power over them.

6.2 *Pii Nong Tai* Images

6.2.1 The Constructed Images of *Pii Nong Tai* and the Thai State

Generally, the concept of *Pii Nong*, or sibling, is a special unit of organization, generally among the same generation, in which mutual aid could be exchanged within the Tai communities. As asserted by Moerman (1966), Hanks (1962, 1975), and

⁴ This sense of *Muang* here is different from the territorial and sovereignty concepts of the nation-state. *Muang* means the principality or the petty state by which the Tai traditionally classified their social-political units of household, village and state respectively. It is an all-purpose principle for organizing groups which rely on social-political units. However, the concept of *Muang* today is more complex than before, because it is also used for social differentiation among the Tai along the border, and it is used in conjunction with political subjects in Burma and China. For example, *Khon Muang Mao* (Ruili people) does not mean only the Tai in Ruili of China, but also includes Tai people who live in *Toung Mao* lands, where the Tai of both sides relate themselves to *Nam Mao* (the *Mao* River) and have social relationships within the lands of this *Muang*. In some sense, then, *Muang* is an identifier that the Tai usually use to include or exclude outsiders.

Keyes (1975), the *Pii Nong*'s association of kinsmen is the key concept of social organization and of the hierarchies of the Tai communities, no matter whether the people in question are northern Thai villagers, northeastern Thai villagers, Tai in Shan State, Lao in Laos, etc. However, with the concept of *Pii Nong* and the idea that Thailand already consists of multi-ethnic and culturally diverse inhabitants, there has been a growing tendency for people in Thailand during late twentieth century to think of themselves as a more pluralistic society, in an ethnic and cultural sense.

The groundwork for the construction of images of *Pii Nong Tai*, including the search for the ancient origins of the Thai race, began with the Thai nationalistic feelings of the 1930s, which were fueled by Thai Premier Phibun Songkhram. During that time, the Thai state encouraged ideas of a "Pan-Thai" commonality. Turton (2000) asserted that after 1910 and up to the watershed 1973-1976 period, there was a greater awareness and appreciation of a variety of Thai and Tai traditions both within and beyond the national frontier. The interest in Tai cultures beyond the border of Thailand was "a continuing element of Thai cultural nationalism". It was partly based on knowledge uncovered by the modern scholars of the time (Turton 2000: 5).

In the 1960s, the story of Tai migration from a remote "homeland" somewhere in southern China gained currency and become part of the textbook history of Thailand. Western scholars⁵ contributed to the idea by identifying *Nanchao* as the original homeland from where the Tai migrated, to which some Tai migrated from the east and some from the west as far as Assam in India.

Besides Western research, narratives on searching for the origins of the Thai race, as politicized by Thai nationalists, have been discussed among Thai and Western scholars (see, for example, Srisakara 1981/2524, 1983/2526, Sujit 1986/2529, Tida 1994/2537, Reynolds 2003, Thongchai 1994). The academic discussion centers around the idea that Thai nationalists from the 1930s onward (led by Luang Wichit Wathakan), whose notions appear to be Thai-centric, propose that Thai racial roots

⁵ For example, Coedes in his 1912 article published in the *Journal of the Siam Society* titled "The Origins of the Sukhodaya Dynasty" made a case that the ancestors of the "Thai" people were dispersed from *Nanchao* Empire (Coedes 1912).

come from southern China. Such narratives become one of the Pan-Tai commonality themes created by Thai leaders and various Thai scholars over the past decades. These narratives have played a significant role in attracting Thai people who envision the close relationship of the Thai with their Tai "siblings" who have been living in southern China for over a hundred years.

Initially, debates about the narratives focused on the Thai/Tai research done within the territory of Thailand itself. The early scholars paid attention mainly to Thai roots, race and culture. From 1930 onward, there have been widespread debates between several nationalists (led by Luang Wichit Wathakan) and groups of anti-nationalists. Five theories⁶ on Thai migration and settlement have been debated. Around 1957, many Thai scholars studied the Tai people using linguistic, philological, and historical linguistic comparisons. Jit (1976/2519), Bunchui (1955/2498, 1960/2503) and Banjoub (1961/2504, 1979/2522, 1983/2526) were the key Thai scholars of that time.

It is not until the beginning of the 1980s that the anti-nationalists gained the spotlight. They proposed that the Thai people in the center (present day central Thailand) did not migrate from elsewhere, but have been living in their present place for a long time (see Srisakara 1981/2524, 1983/2526, Sujit 1986/2529, Tida 1994/2537). In fact, this group believes there are no Thai of pure blood or race which we scholars have been looking for. Instead, the Thai people consist of multi-ethnic and culturally diverse inhabitants living in their present locations in Thailand.

In sum, the two groups' debate centers on the issues of race and culture. Unlike the nationalists, whose main studies focus on race and biology, the anti-nationalists argue that Thai identity cannot be identified without considering all aspects of culture, history and development in each specific area. All books regarding Thai arts and culture published by Matichon Publishing House and other Publishing Houses from the 1980s onward centered around at this point, e.g., *Sukhodaya was not a Kingdom* (Sujit 1983/2526), *Thai people did not migrated from there* (Sujit

⁶ There are five theories discussing Thai migration and settlement; please see the details in Tida (1994/2537).

1984/2527), *Chinese mixed with Laos* (Sujit 1987/2530a), *Whereabouts are there: Thais?* (Sujit 1987/2530b). These books engage the argument on theories of Thai migration and settlement, including the concept of Thai nationalism. The writers carefully study culture in terms of language, ritual, social structure etc. They have collected data using various approaches, and use the methodology of archeology and history to prove their case.

Apart from these studies, Thai and Tai research beyond Tai-lands has been debated intensively. Chronologically, the academic movement concerning “Tai studies outside the border of Thailand” can be categorized into four periods. First, in the late 1980s, the Department of History and the Department of Linguistics from the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, set up a project of Tai studies situated outside the border of Thailand. In this project, several research projects and studies were conducted on Tai linguistics and culture. The project presented its results in a seminar titled “Tai outside Thailand: a state of knowledge”, and published several notable papers, including those of Pranee (1986/2529), Pompan (1989/2532), and Thongtam (1989/2532).

The second period, after the 1990s, saw Srisakara Vallibhotama, Sujit Wongthes and Pranee Wongthes, all from Silpakorn University, join an exchange program with Chinese and other ethnic scholars from the Ethnic Minorities Institute in Guangxi, who were studying the Zhuang and Tai people in south and southwest China. These Thai scholars went on a fieldtrip to China. Later on, they published some books on the Zhuang and the Tai living in southern China, with an emphasis on the Thai/Tai theme of “the close relationship and relatives-ness” of the Thai and Tai people. They suggested that the “bronze drums” and “rock art” (including “frog legends” and “frog rituals”) were important archeological evidence for their claims.

Thirdly, during the mid 1990s, Chatthip of the Political Economy Center, Chulalongkorn University proposed a project on “the cultural history of Tai ethnicity and community” to study Tai communities outside Thailand (1994/2537). He wanted to trace back and describe the origin of the Tai traditional community in order to remind the Thai people of the original Thai state. This project was an attempt to

illuminate an alternative for the Thai people who nowadays are suffering from the influence of modernity, state and market. The discussion initiated by his project sparked an ongoing controversial area of debate.

Fourth, Rajabhat Institute Chiang Mai and Chiang Mai University joined hands in a research project on Tai studies throughout the North. Organized by Reanoo Wichasilp and Shalardchai Ramitanond, the project published several articles (i.e., Reanoo and Shalardchai 1998/2541), focusing on Tai rituals and cultural materials of the Tai from northern Thailand to southern China and Assam, India.

Based on the themes and approaches, the works from the four main groups previously described can be broadly categorized, as below.

The first group - the “*comparativists*” - includes various groups of archaeologists, historians, anthropologists and sociologists including writers. They study Tai people and their cultures in order to highlight similarity with the Thai. This premise led them to study local-cultural-essential matters and cultural values to compare with Thai traditional culture.

Among those in this group is the work of Srisakara and Sujit entitled, *Thainoi, Thaiyai, Thaisiam* (1991/2534), which describes the cultural matters compared to Thai cultural essences. Reanoo (1998/2541) studied several rituals and beliefs of the *Tai Yai* (or the Shan) to reflect Tai local wisdom in Maehongson. All papers in the book *Tai* (Reanoo and Shalardchai 1998/2541) describe linguistic, social structure, rituals and cultural materials of the Tai in northern Thailand, southern China, and Assam. Teeraphap (1994/2537) and Siraporn (2003/2546) collected Tai myths and tales from various Tai groups.

In their studies both in the north of Thailand and outside the country, the scholars of this group base their work on the similarity and the sameness found among various groups of Thai and Tai people, which inevitably led them to an assumption that the Tai and the Thai have long been close relatives and siblings. The local-

cultural matters and cultural values, collected by these scholars, can be seen as a “static essence”, reflecting how and in what way the similarities exist.

The second group is the “*historicists*” who wish to find out who their “Thai ancestors” are. They subscribe to the idea that the Thai originated in southern China. This group includes linguistic experts and archaeologists who have used archeological evidence (e.g., bronze drums, local legends) to prove ancestry claims, e.g., in the case of the *Pai-Yue*, an ethnic group described in Chinese history, it was proven to have had Thai ancestors nearly a thousand years ago. In accordance with Jia Yan Jong’s work (1986, 1990), certain Thai scholars reached the conclusion that the *Tai*, the *Pai-Yue*, and the *Zhuang* peoples share the same Thai ancestors. This group, investigating Chinese historical records of the *Pai-Yue*, and the *Zhuang*, both were found to have the same Thai ancestors because they shared cultural commonalities.

This group of scholars produced several significant publications. Jia Yan Jong (1986) proposed that the *Zhuang* and the *Tai* people share the same ancestors as those of the *Pai Yue*, the *Taiyun*, and the *Tailue* people in Jinghong or Xishuangbanna in Yunnan province. He then developed a hypothesis that the two groups are close cousins. Pranee (1986/2529) studied linguistic roots to compare the Zhuang-Tai-Thai languages. Pornpan’s *Zhaung gab Thai* (1989/2532), Thongtam’s *Khon Tai Nai Jin* (1989/2532), Sumit and his 2000 (2543) work compare ritual, social structure and beliefs of the *Tai* with those of the *Zhuang*, arguing that they share a common cultural origin. Srisakara and Pranee, in their 1993/2536 *Zhuang: Phinong phao Thai kao thisut*, studied bronze drums and rituals, and made comparisons with the *Tai/Thai* bronze manufacture of drums in central Thailand. Chontira’s inquiry (2000/2543) into *Thai roots* resulted in answers that agreed with the opinions of many Thai and foreign intellectuals - that Thai ancestors may have come from the *Pai Yue* in southern China. However, she raised another question: Due to the fact that there were a hundred tribe of the *Pai Yue*, which of them were the real ancestors of the *Thai/Tai*.

The third group can be characterized as the “*communitarians*” whose basic premise is that communal ideology of a traditional *Tai* has served to be the same image of the old Thai communal unity. The feeling of nostalgia to the old Thai

community by searching from Tai community outside Thailand is envisioned through the project led by Chattip (1997/2540) and several Thai scholars whose studies of the Tai outside Thailand focused on social structure, community culture and change. They assumed that the traditional community structures of the Thai and the Tai can be found in Tai communities outside Thailand where they still have profound traditional cultures. A remarkable work from this group is Sompong Vittayasakphan and his book on the history of the *Tai Yai* in chronicle, especially Tai writing script (2001). Their pursuits are mostly underpinned by a political agenda of criticizing the modern Thai state, market and modernity. This group of scholars criticizes modernism and capitalism while looking nostalgically at what they found remaining in Tai communities elsewhere but not Thailand. These scholars worked in northern Thailand and further to the south of China and Assam of India searching for remaining Tai communities in order to study their traditional culture. In this process, it is possible to see local (Assam and Southern China) Tai scholars who joined the project also helped create a nostalgic discourse. As a result, many papers about Tai language revivals in Assam came out of this project and were presented during the 6th Thai conference in Chiang Mai (1996). This project clearly shows a discovery on Tai relatives and their traditional culture to reflect Thai origin and especially to imprint a good traditional culture in the past of Thailand through Tai culture found in the southern China nowadays.

The fourth are the “*localists*”. Generally, this group studies Tai people and their culture by applying a political economy perspective to a larger national and global context. For example, Yos (2000/) situated the struggle of the Dehong Tai in engagement with other larger cultural, political and economic systems. Tai identity, according to Yos, is commonly maintained and reinvented in symbolism of wedding ceremony, telling stories etc., while Chinese state and its national boundaries had attempted to assimilate the Tai, as an ethnic nationality of the nation. Research of Wandee (2002/2545) on Shan Tai people who live at the border between Thailand and Burma demonstrated Shan Tai group have their own cultural identities practiced through the process of reinvention by employing varied cultural materials; for example, tattoos, the meaning and use of tiger symbols. These cultural identities are

resurrected with the relationship of their political movement and its organization in the context of political conflicts and suffering. Pinkaew (2003) focused on a struggle of three groups of Shan women; NGO workers, ordinary women, and Shan women soldiers. The three groups were analyzed to see an intersection between female marginality, and nationalism within the movement for political independence.

As illustrated by the literature reviewed here, knowledge about Tai people inside and outside Thailand has become a set of narratives beginning from the search for the Thai race origin and the migration from southern China, to the highlighting of Thai/Tai siblings who share common cultural and linguistic roots and have a close relationship. The narratives have influentially impacted the imagination and nostalgia of Thai people (Thailand, especially Bangkok), looking for the lost land, lost culture and their siblings which still remain outside Thailand, among the many ethnic groups of the Tai people in southern China.

However, academic literature, for example, Bowie (2000) and Thongchai (2000) argue that the predominant cultural homogenization of Thailand's population and the central concept of "Thai-ness" is now gradually disintegrating in the face of the nation's awareness of the multi-racial, multi-cultural components of its population. To argue against the cultural homogeneity thesis, Thongchai (2000) illustrates the "fragmentation, the ethno-spatial heterogeneity, and tension of diversity within the nation". Bowie (2000) refers to "ethnic heterogeneity as the historical reality of the subaltern in pre-modern Thailand" (cf. Tapp 2000:353). Supporting the criticism and the construction of the Thai race origin and sibling images, Tapp (2000: 352) asserted that general movement towards Thai cultural studies within Thai academic world was associated extensively with the notion of Thai nationalism. As shown by a specific case on Tai Ahom (Saikia 2004), the interest in the Tai Ahom of Assam was mostly motivated by internal development in Thailand. In the 1970s, in response to capitalist's development in Thailand's society and economy, some Thai academics developed a political agenda emphasizing the "community culture of villages", hoping to empower villagers so that village communities could gain a foothold in national development projects and bargain with the state in planning

development. For this, the Thai need an archaic, “original” Tai society that they can display as a model and inspire the transformed Thai villages to follow in its lead (Saikia 2004: 215-219).

6.2.2 The Tai and Active Responses to the Tai Sibling Images

Although the Thai state and the modern scholarship produced by Thai scholars during several decades has been influential in the construction of images of *Pii Nong Tai* or “Tai sibling”, the Tai outside Thailand actively conceives this “Tai sibling images” and utilize these images as cultural materials. This section will discuss how *Pii Nong Tai* images, as seen by the Tai living along the Yunnan-Burma border, have emerged. The four major processes of (a) the Tai migration into Thailand; (b) the emergence of modern scholarship and extensive interaction among Thai and Tai scholars (c) the social and Buddhist activities performed by the Royal Family of Thailand in Dehong and other places of the Tai-land; (d) the process of media flow (television and VCDs) will be presented. The Tai have been actively engaged in shaping these processes; in particular, the emergence of modern scholarship as illustrated in the extensive interaction among Thai and Tai scholars.

(a) The process of Tai migration into Thailand can be described as the migration of Tai peoples into Thailand during the past several decades of economic and political difficulty and their gathering of direct experience with Thai images. The migration movement, both Shan Tai in northern Shan State and Dehong Tai in Yunnan, was caused by the political conflicts in their own place of residence (e.g., the Shan Tai movement was caused by both economic depression and ethnic political conflicts whilst the Dehong Tai movement was caused by the atmosphere of Communism) and the growing economic opportunities in Thailand where the Tai could find more jobs.

There have been two main periods of migration into Thailand. The first period was during the 1950s spurred by the political conflicts in Dehong and Shan State. The political conflicts and the war during Communist Era brought Dehong Tai elites, *Sao pha* family and educated Tai, into Thailand. Most of them stayed in Chiang Mai or

Bangkok, where other Tai people had settled for many decades. The second period was during the 1980s and onwards which included the common Tai people, especially the Tai in northern Shan State who fled into Thailand due to political tensions and economic hardship.

Since political and economic hardship along the border after 1990s has decreased, the displaced Tai people (who mostly are *Sao pha* families of Dehong Tai and Tai commoners of the Shan Tai and Dehong Tai) went back home and began their renewed lives. Experiencing Thailand during several years, the displaced Tai came back home with stories about Thailand and their experience. What they learned and shared about Thailand was the enjoyment of a similar language and culture that they were able to join without any 'strange' feelings.

The process of Tai migration into Thailand also includes the temporary journey of relatives, friends and children who move into Thailand, looking for jobs. They come back and forth from Dehong or Shan State to Thailand. Some Tai displaced persons return home permanently. It is evident that they give the money they earned during their stay in Thailand to their parents upon return. Recently, Thailand's economic boom has attracted many Shan Tai in southern Shan State into Thailand (Aranya 2006/2549). This situation has not only taken place in the South of the Shan State, but also, the Shan Tai youth in the north including Dehong Tai in Yunnan prefer to go to Thailand simultaneously for employment and travel.

However, the rapid movement of the Tai has aroused concern, particularly that of the Shan Tai in southern and middle Shan State who have migrated into Thailand for economic purposes and in order to flee from Burmese violence in their homeland. The displaced Shan Tai become migrant workers; with an alien status and uncomfortable working conditions in Thailand. These Shan Tai have given rise to the negative images of illegal workers in the Thai public; these displaced Shan Tai groups have attempted to change such negative images by utilizing cultural materials, historical narratives, and Buddhism, for instance. Through practicing religious activities, the Shan Tai migrants have produced constructed images of being Tai siblings in which the Thai and the Shan Tai belong to the same system of making

merit by impoverished people. In belonging to the same Buddhism, the image is portrayed that the Thai and the Tai belong to the same group. Furthermore, the Shan Tai migrants have constructed images of being “Tai siblings” through historical narratives of King Naresuan of Ayutthaya Kingdom.⁷ The Shan Tai refer to King Naresuan as *Sao Narid* because the Shan Thai believe he helped them fight the Burmese (specifically, by cutting off their heads!) which gained him the title of *Sao* to show he was the sibling king of the Tai *Sao pha*. The *chedi* or pagoda in Fang District of Chiang Mai was built in honor of King Naresuan as evidence that the Shan Tai migrants have operated under this historical narrative and turned it into practice through the assistance of many other Tai Yuan (local Tai in northern Thailand) and the abbot of the Thai temple in that area. The pagoda’s legend is also told by the Shan Tai leaders and other noteworthy participants involved with the belief that under the pagoda are the ashes of King Naresuan, brought from Muang Hang (20 kilometers from Burmese border) (Aranya 2006/2549).

(b) The process of the emergence of modern scholarship and interaction among Thai-Tai scholars has taken place through consistent interaction between Thai scholars and Tai local scholars after the decade of the 1990s and the more flexible border opening. These Tai scholars and what they reveal about the Tai sibling images are intensively connected to Thai and western scholars’ movements during the time.⁸

Following the increase of modern scholarship on Tai sibling and Thai scholars’ movements, furthermore there has been several visits of the Thai Royal family to the land of the Dehong Tai, Sipsonpanna (Xishuangbanna) of Yunnan in China and Shan State of Burma during 1990s onward. In the decade of 1990s, the Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana, the elder sister of King Bhumibol of Thailand together, with Thai scholars visited the Dehong Tai in Yunnan (Galyani Vadhana 1996/2529). Since then the beginning of an academic connection between

⁷ King Naresuan (1555-1605) was the King of Siam from 1590 till his death in 1605. During his reign, Siam had the biggest territorial extent in history. The territorial extension conquered by the King Naresuan included the whole Shan State, particularly on the southern part. The Tai who know history usually called King Naresuan as Chao Narid. The Shan Tai usually have the historical story about Chao Narid who always helped Sao pha Tai fight the Burmese.

⁸ For more detail, please “The Tai culture: the State of Knowledge” in *Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter*, No. 23 December 1993.

Tai and Thai scholars at Chulalongkorn University of Thailand has been extended through research scholarship and new knowledge discovered about Tai culture and languages. After a decade of 2000s, there has been consistency of the Royal family's visits to Dehong land and Shan State. For example, in the year of 2003, Dehong Tai and Shan Tai scholars welcomed the Royal family's visits, in the figure of Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the second daughter of King Bhumibol of Thailand. As stated by an elderly Shan who lives in northern Shan State nearby the Chinese border, "We know the Thai and the Shan are kin to each other...and that they still have their royalty while we have lost ours. All of us naturally were eager to give her a warm welcome" (SHAN. 2003).

The abundant scholarship produced by both modern academics and academic interaction among Thai-Tai scholars have examined many issues on the topic of Thai and Tai relationship. There have also been academic exchanges between Thai scholars visiting Tai-land in Shan State, Dehong, and Xishuangbanna of Yunnan and in turn Tai scholars from these Tai-lands academically collaborating on Thai and Tai studies in universities of Thailand.

These local Tai scholars have been interacting with Thai scholars in several Thai universities, publishing many articles, books and presentations in Thailand as well as their own countries; for example, Pushpa Gogoi (1984, 1993), Padmeswar Gogoi's book *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms* (1968), and Jia Yan Jong (1986, 1998/2541, 2005/2548).⁹ Some local Tai scholars have helped translating the old Tai scripts in order to publish Thai or English publications; for example Gong Su Zheng, Zhao Houng Yun, Sai Aung Tun, Sompong Taitumkean. Their publications are, for instance; the book titled *The Shan Tai History in the Middle Ages* (Sompong & Chattip 1997/2540,) and *The Shan Tai History* (Sompong & Chattip 2001/2544) as well as *Chants in Livelihood and Rituals of Tai Neau or Dehong Tai* (Sompong & Ranee 1998/2541), *Genealogy of Chao Seanvi Sipsongpanna* (Tao Khang Seang and

⁹ The main local Tai scholars from different Tai-lands involved within the aforementioned processes are, for example, Pushpa Gogoi, Yikham Gogoi from Assamese Tai of India, Jia Yan Jong from Xishuangbanna of Yunnan and a visiting scholar at Chulalongkorn University; Gong Su Zheng; Zhao Houng Yun and Saitip, his wife from Dehong were visiting fellows of Chulalongkorn University and Chiang Mai University; and Sompong Taitumkean, Sai Aung Tun, Sai Kham Mong from Shan State.

Ai Kham 2000/2543), *The Tai Chronicles* (translated by Zhao Hounng Yun and others in 2001/2544), and finally *The History and Development of the Shan Scripts* by Sai Kam Mong (2004).

The academic movement among the Thai and local Tai scholars also included the co-operation of the Tai associations in Tai-lands (i.e., the Dai Culture and Knowledge Association of Dehong, The Shan Language and Literature Association, and Tai Ahom Culture and Literatures Association). Mainly, these associations as well as the local Tai scholars reproduced the images and history about *Chao Sae Khanfa*, the great King of the Tai Kingdom during the thirteenth century, who was able to overcome the Chinese and Burmese Kingdom, widely expanding the territory of the Tai kingdom. Moreover, the local Tai scholars' movement also included translating the Tai chronicles about *Chao Sae Khanfa* with publication in several languages (Shan Tai, Dehong Tai, Chinese, and English). Referring to *Chao Sae Khanfa*, as the great king of the Tai is their attempt to recreate the images of a Tai-land which once had its own kingdom and a great king. In this way, the Tai scholars' movement tends to utilize this image in order to increase their status, to be more proud.

(c) The social and religious activities of the Royal Family of Thailand in Dehong and other places of the Tai-land after the 1990s, was part of the improved international relationship and the border opening. There was and has been a movement of the Royal Family of Thailand, as seen in the visits of many places of Dehong and other areas of the Tai-land in Shan State, Xishuangbanna, Laos and other Tai speaking areas. Recently, the Tai along the border actively participated in creating the *Pii Nong Tai* image by joining Thai-Tai cooperation between Thai states and local government. Practically, the *Pii Nong Tai* image has been emphasized by "diplomatic activities" operated by the Thai Consul in Kunming, as the representative of the Bureau of The Royal Household, The Kingdom of Thailand.

After the 1990s, and the visitation by the Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana, the Bureau of The Royal Household frequently offered the *Kantin*¹⁰ ceremony or *Poi Kantin* to the monks who dwelled in many monasteries in Dehong and Xishuangbanna, where those of Tai nationality are treated as Tai siblings by the Thai state, having lived there so long (see Figure 6.1-6.2).

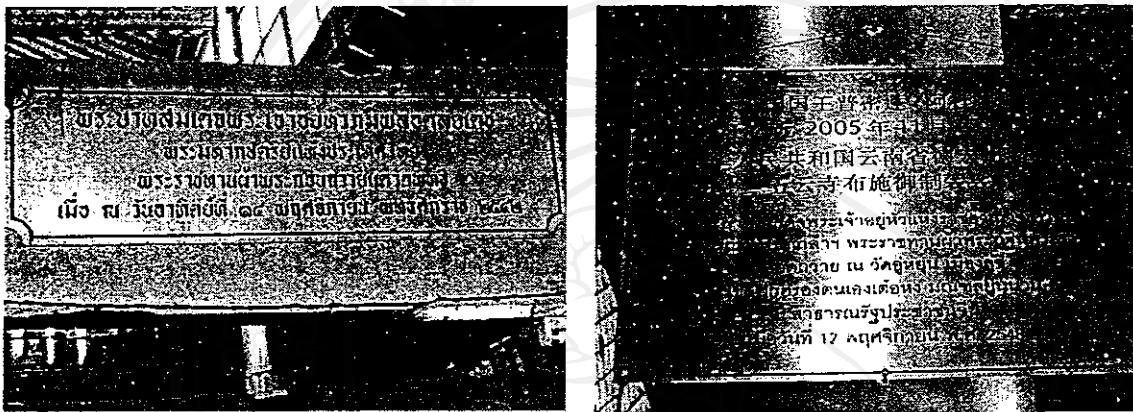


Figure 6.1-6.2 Two notice boards posted at temples in Dehong. The top photo declares that King Bumiphol of Thailand offered *Kantin* robes to the monks at Jongsang or Puti temple, in Luxi on 14 November 1999, while the one below reads that it was posted at the Jong Kam or Wuyun temple, in Luxi on 12 November 2005.

During the *Kantin* ceremony, operated by the Thai Royal Household, many Dehong Tai inhabitants in the city and nearby areas, including Shan Tai migrants usually leave their regular work, and participate in the ceremony. I experienced the *Kantin* ceremony once in Dehong in 2005. I was told by many Dehong Tai that the ceremony was an honor for the Dehong Tai since the temple in Dehong has not had this ceremony and has not had monks in the temple.

“Our children nowadays are not happy to be ordained as a monk. We have only layman which usually are elderly Dehong Tai who know how to pray and chant in Bali words,” an elderly Dehong Tai man stated. During the *Kantin* ceremony, moreover I was questioned by many Dehong Tai participants in the temple, who

¹⁰ *Kantin* ceremony is a religious ceremony in which yellow robes are presented to the priests, in Buddhism. It is held annually during one month after the Outdoor-Lent ceremony (after the rainy season which is usually November-December). *Kantin* is called *Katin* in Thailand.

would like to see *Look Sao Hokham*, or the king's daughter. But eventually, there were only Thai officers who attended the Kantin ceremony in Dehong. The Dehong Tai expressed their regret to me since they found out that the princess did not attend the ceremony.

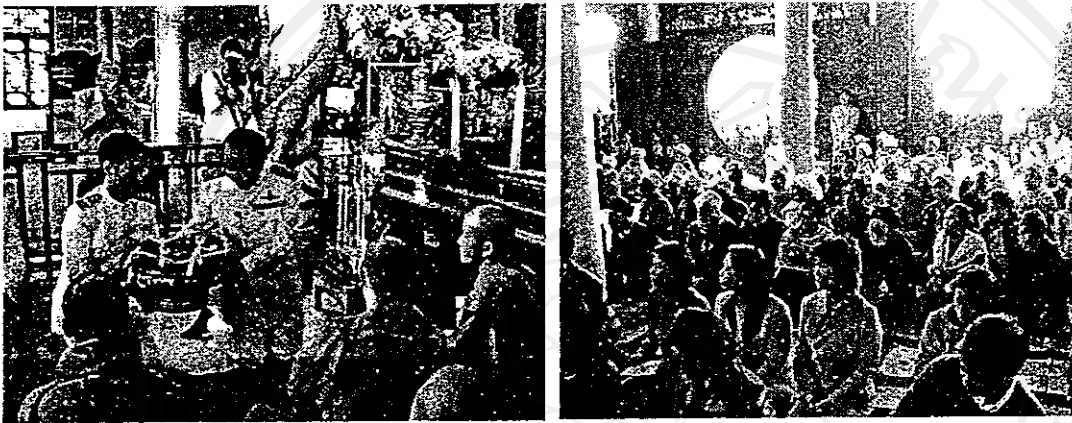


Figure 6.3-6.4 In 2005, there was a *Poi Kantin* or the *Kantin* ceremony operated by the Thai Royal Household at Wat Wuyun in Luxi. During the ceremony, many Dehong Tai in city and nearby including Shan Tai migrants left their regular work, and came to participate in the ceremony (also watch VDO clip 2).

As for the Kantin the Buddhist activities for the offering of monks' robes is not only performed by the Thai Royal Household, , but there are widespread similar activities in many areas and temples of Dehong and other areas of the Tai-land in Shan State, Xishuangbanna, Laos and other Tai speaking areas. The Buddhist activities of Kantin operated by the Thai Royal Household, the Kingdom of Thailand have emphasized that the Thai and the Tai have the same Kantin ceremony, belonging to the same Buddhist Order. But more than that, these activities have implied that there is still *the Great Sao pha* or so called *Khun Hokham*, or the King (of Thailand) in the present day which would be similar to the Tai *Sao pha* of the Tai state previously.

As seen here, Tai sibling images have been continually constructed through social activities of both the Thai and Tai in response to the images of each other. It is not surprising that the *Pii Nong Tai* image has emerged within the process of Tai

migration into Thailand and the emergence of modern scholarship through which Thai and Tai scholars connected to one another in academic and cultural activities.

(d) The process of media flow (television and VCDs) refers to the growing number of media types that the Tai people living along the border are able to receive. This includes television programs and other entertainment materials, sold and broadcast transnationally. The transnational media flow over the border have helped expand the feelings and images of the Tai sibling and has emphasized images of "civilized Thailand". Here, the transnational media flow has arisen mainly from VCD's, detailing information about Thailand and other Tai speaking places, sold along the border as well as the growing number of people receiving cable television in urban cities of Burma and ethnic television station in Dehong itself.

As shown by the situation of transnational flow of media today, Thailand's recent economic and political hegemony in the region has been accompanied by an enormous expansion of consumerist Thai cultural influence. This can be seen in the Thai television programs regularly watched in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, or in the Thai-style villas and hostels built in Kunming and Xishuangbanna area of China's Yunnan Province. Along the Yunnan-Burma border, the Shan Tai in urban city (mainly in urban Muse and other big cities) who could access to television satellite watch Thai free television everyday. The most popular Thai programs are Thai news and Thai soap opera. There is a possibility that some young Shan Tai people often use Thai television to practice Thai language, preparing themselves before moving to Thailand for a job.

Apart from television satellite distributed in the better-off group of Shan Tai, the copied VCD situation becomes another channel for common people to access Thai cultural material. The dubbed Thai soaps and other entertainment programs have become the most popular form of entertainment among Shan Tai communities throughout the Shan State in Burma, and are also widespread in Dehong of China where the Dehong Tai live in the Chinese border. The Shan Tai in Muse and Namkham on the Burmese side, and in Mangshi on the Chinese side, as well as the Dehong Tai in Ruili, have all expressed satisfaction with renting these kinds of copied

VCDs in central markets of Dehong and watching them with their families at home. This is unlike the situation in other neighboring countries of Thailand (i.e., Laos and Cambodia) where Thai media is consumed directly from satellite signals.

For the Dehong Tai, they usually watch television programs about images of Thailand and other places of the Tai speaking areas mainly through Chinese Television programs and particularly the Multiple Nationalities Language Television Station (MNLTS)¹¹, the television station which broadcasts Tai culture and language for Dehong Tai communities and is run by Dehong Tai media authorities (Aranya 2007). While the Dehong Tai watch Chinese television programs and experience the economic growth between Thailand and China, the MNLTS, as the direct television station running the television programs mainly in Dehong Tai language has played a crucial role in presenting some images about Thailand and in emphasizing the Tai sibling images.

¹¹ The Multiple Nationalities Languages Television Station, or MNLTS, was established in 1997. It is located in Mangshi, the capital of Dehong Prefecture. The MNLTS is one of five nationality-based TV stations in China (Tibet, Dehong, Mongolia, Shangrila, and Xinjiang). Their establishment by the central government is for the purpose of broadcasting TV programs in their own local dialects. The main aim is to improve the nationalities' education and knowledge in the Prefecture. These TV stations are 100% funded by the government with almost 20 million Yuan over five years and are different from many other Chinese TV broadcasting stations.

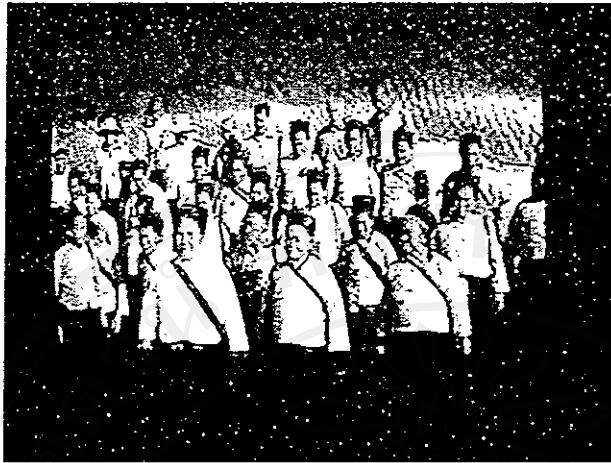


Figure 6.5 The Multiple Nationalities Languages Television Station (MNLTS) broadcasts television programs in Dehong Tai language. It is a means of cultural production for creating the Tai social world. But the MNLTS has both economic and cultural aims; while MNLTS desires to revitalize Tai culture, MNLTS also uses it to gain more a extended audience and bring money back to the television station (also watch VDO clip3).

What images have the Tai imagined of Thailand? What aspects are highlighted when Tai sibling images are received through media flows? Here, I propose to consider such questions in relation to the term that the Tai have for Thailand, *Muang Thai Hangli Seasa*, or precisely “beautiful Thailand”. However, the term also implies the meaning of a “civilized” Thailand. The term has been conceived of mainly in regard to two major notions, that of economic fertility and of Buddhist/cultural abundance. The image of Thailand as a “civilized place” is conceived by the Tai with the support of the growing process of transnational media flows.

Regarding images about economic situation of Thailand, what they receive through media flows (the television, VCDs’, media) is that Thailand has become the place where economic and politics are growing increasingly important in the region, compared to China and Burma. I experienced the Shan Tai actively responding to this view when I watched television programs with them during my fieldwork; especially about Thai news. The topic we always discussed was about the economic growth and land abundance. My interviewees always asked me about this topic; i.e. how high the buildings are, how Thai people get rich, have lots of money and cars and nice big,

brick houses. The term *Muang Thai Mi So Lam* (Thailand has lots of money), or *Khon Thai Mi So* (Thai people have lots of money) are popular term that the Shan Tai and Dehong Tai use to describe Thailand and Thai people.

Regarding images about Thai culture, the Shan Tai and Dehong Tai are satisfied with the images of a beautiful Thailand and the beauty of Thai dancing, Thai actors and actresses (including modern beautiful styles of clothes, places, etc). Tai songs, music and dancing, as well as Buddhist images and materials, are favorite discussion topics among the Tai because they think that their languages and Buddhist culture of the Dehong Tai and the Shan Tai are more similar to each other than to that of the Burmese or Chinese ones. The Dehong Tai understand the music lyrics and can share feelings and satisfaction with the more similar culture of the Shan Tai. For example, both Dehong Tai youth and middle-aged people prefer love songs produced by Shan Tai singers because they understand the contents, while Dehong Tai elders love to buy dubbed Buddhist ceremonial VCDs from Shan state because it is difficult to find such rich Buddhism in Dehong. Some prefer the songs about beautiful temples, forests or historical places of the Tai from different lands. Therefore, the meaning of “civilized” Thailand is an active response that the Dehong Tai and Shan Tai - especially the young people - have conceived explicitly via the flows of media. It was not until after the 1980s border opening which allowed the flows of media and people migration, that these ideas were constituted, and in response, led to their own reflexive thinking about themselves.

6.3 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a specific aspect of trading activities within a cultural dimension. It began with the political and socio-cultural contexts to show how Tai culture has been associated with the state influence over time. The process of cultural hegemony was presented which showed that the Dehong Tai have been culturally and politically dominated by Han Chinese culture for a long time. Within this cultural hegemony, the Dehong Tai, who have felt inferior in their own homeland, are now undermining the power of the Chinese by assimilating some Thai culture - the culture constructed as “the culture of *Pii Nong* (Sibling)”.

The chapter has also discussed the constructed images of *Pii Nong Tai* or “Tai sibling” which have been created with influence from Thai states over several decades. The discussion on the constructed images of *Pii Nong Tai* and images about a “civilized Thailand” shows how the Thai state, in facing foreign colonialism during the formation of modern Thai nation (1930s onward), has associated itself with the Tai outside Thailand. However, the main argument for this chapter is that the state hegemonic power which plays a crucial role in dominating the Tai culture has not been received merely and passively by the Tai agency. Instead, the Tai have defined a new meaning and then continued to actively react with this meaning.