Chapter One

THE SETTING

Liu Sam Fong was born 69 years ago in the house his grandfather built. His grandfather was appointed *puu kay* (headman) of the Lak Chang village by the *chaopha* of Muang Khon, so the family house was larger and more substantially built than others. While most Tai houses were built almost entirely of bamboo, his grandfather’s house was raised on hardwood piles six feet above the ground. The floor was made of teak wood and the walls of bamboo mats typical of Tai houses. A large open verandah in front of the living quarter was partially shaded by a thatched roof. The interior was divided by bamboo walls into a living room and three small bedrooms. The open space beneath the house served as workroom where paddy was pounded, firewood stored, weaving done, farming tools repaired and chickens, pigs and buffaloes raised.

Sam Fong, like most other villagers, cannot tell with certainty when the Lak Chang village was founded. Some elderly men contended that the village was founded sometime in the fifteenth century when Chao Sua Hom Fah, the King of Mao, was defeated by the Chinese army. The *fang* ruling clan was then granted the *chaopha*-ship of Muang Khon by the Chinese Imperial Court. At the time, there were three tiny villages which had been settled in the area where the Lak Chang village now stands. The *chaopha* of Muang Khon then decreed that these three villages be united and called “Lak Chang” (elephant poles). Lak Chang villagers were thereby ordered to serve as caretakers of the royal elephants.

Mother Nature has been kind to Lak Chang villagers. Flowing down the centre of the valley is the Nam Khon River which has its sources in the mountain ranges northeast of Muang Khon. Small tributaries of the Nam Khon spread all over the great plain of Muang Khon and provide an abundant supply of water all year.
round. Streams of water which flow through the ricefields of Lak Chang have never run dry in Sam Fong’s lifetime.

The great plain of Muang Khon is fertile, water is plentiful and crop yield is great. Vegetable and animal food is abundant. Under normal conditions, every peasant family can produce more rice than is immediately required for the consumption of family members. Life was easy for Sam Fong, that is, until the Communists took over China in 1949.

Daikong and the Chinese Revolution

During the two decades following the revolution, Sam Fong felt the winds of change sweeping over Daikong. Many Tais from Lak Chang and nearby villages fled to Burma in anticipation of social upheaval after the Communist takeover. Sam Fong’s wife, Kham, was then pregnant with their second child and the couple decided to stay on and face whatever came their way.

The Communists did not come to Daikong with a specific detailed plan, but they did have an overall perspective. They wanted to advance toward a socialist society, and they wanted to do so quickly. Under Communist rule, Daikong was turned into the “Dehong Dai and Jing Po Nationalities Autonomous Prefecture” and the former Tai feudal states were subsequently divided into five districts: Muang Khon (Mangshi), Muang Ti (Liang He), Muang Wan (Long Chuan), Muang La (Ying Jiang) and Muang Mao (Rui Li).

After liberation, Sam Fong saw a number of young Chinese activists and party cadres come to visit Lak Chang village on a monthly basis. These activists were organised to put on plays, sing songs and give speeches on a variety of messages the Communist regime was trying to convey to the Tai group. Sam Fong heard them tell younger villagers that their chaopha was the “oppressor”, and remnants of the old feudal state must be destroyed. Then and only then, the villagers were told, could the oppressed peasants be truly liberated. The activists conveyed these messages to students in the village school. Other villagers were encouraged to read certain key works on political theory and government policy and to consider some of the problems that their nation currently faced.
In 1953, the Tai world as Sam Fong knew it came tumbling down when the chaopa-ship, the feudal form of the Tai political organisation, was abolished. The royal palaces (hau) were condemned by the Chinese government and the various chaopa—lords of the sky—no longer retained the forms and appurtenances of royalty, were made district officers and received a salary from the government. “The chaopa and the ruling clique had been pursuing personal ends,” an activist told Sam Fong, “but now they were to be reformed to serve societal goals.” All the land which had traditionally belonged to the chaopa was confiscated by the authorities. Sons and grandsons of chaopa were sent away either to Kunming or Beijing for further education.

Figure 1.1 The last chaopa of Muang Mao who passed away during the Cultural Revolution
Land Reform

In July 1951, district administrators began a broad but superficial survey of the land tenure system in the countryside. They consulted with the village elders and requested them to help develop detailed plans for land reform. Sam Fong still vividly remembers the terrifying uncertainty that all the villagers faced. So many important decisions had to be made, so many people had to work together with new responsibilities and so many circumstances required re-evaluation. The land reform policy was in a constant state of flux and so was the collective sense of security. Many more villagers fled to Burma and those who remained were afraid to oppose the local officials. Each village meeting roused new fears that there would be more disagreements, inconsistencies and changes in policy directives.

From the very beginning, land reform was seen as a political struggle over leadership. In order to swing the balance of political forces in the countryside toward the new regime, the Communists hoped to turn the political tide in the villages by exterminating the traditional status of chaopha as lord of the land, by mobilising the peasants to denounce their former ruler in large public meetings and by distributing the land to all peasant households. It was exceedingly difficult, however, for most Tai peasants to attack the chaopha. Many local officials, recognising the peasants’ reluctance to criticise their former ruler, tried to go lightly on the public meetings and move quickly to distribute the land.

By 1952, the distribution of farmland was completed. Land reform stimulated many new hopes. Every peasant household now controlled the land they cultivated and with only half the villagers remaining home, each household was allocated a large piece of land. Further utopian visions were also drawn for the peasants: rural China was to be mechanised, consumers’ needs were to be satisfied and industrialisation was to be achieved in little more than a decade. All the Lak Chang villagers rejoiced. But the celebration of new hopes did not last long.

Once the Communists achieved a firm measure of control over the countryside, a different set of problems and a new vision began to dominate the stage. The problems centred around the economy and increasing productive capacity. The vision was one of an ordered and planned society. This vision was by no means new, but it had remained in the background in the early years of post-liberation when the Communists were scurrying to respond to immediate problems. By
1953, China had begun to stabilise, the problems of governing were under control and government officials had acquired more experience. In 1953, therefore, the Communists turned their full attention to socialist transformation.

In ideal terms, socialist transformation refers to the transfer of economic ownership from private to public hands. In the Communist view, it is conceived as a series of stages in which the scale of ownership gradually expands from smaller to larger collectives or cooperatives until they are fully owned by all the people. During the years 1953–1956, small enterprises and farms all over China were united into “cooperatives” managed and operated by the members who distributed profits among themselves. In 1956, collectivisation of farm land, the prerequisite for socialist transformation, came to Daikong.

**Tai Peasants and Cooperative Farming**

Despite widespread disagreement about the necessity of socialist transformation and the means for achieving it, most Lak Chang villagers were reluctant to criticise the government. Lak Chang residents took their first step toward cooperative production in April 1956. Attitudes throughout the countryside toward speculation on the one hand and cooperation on the other were undergoing a rapid transformation. The Communists prepared the way by holding “thought preparation” and “rectification” meetings, calling on all the villagers to form trial cooperatives.

A number of village elders remember those meetings well. As one of them put it:

> We had no choice but to jump in and pool our land for joint tillage. We had a lot of land and it was all good. That’s why we were worried about our freedom.

In order to ensure that this pioneering effort would start on a sound basis, a work team came from Muang Khon to give advice and help. When the work team first called the members of Lak Chang cooperatives together to discuss the model regulations, they stressed that private landholdings would not disappear. The markers in the fields that divided one plot from another would remain even though peasant members pooled their fields and worked them in common. At this stage, the peasants were not asked to give up the land which their families had
cultivated for centuries. Nevertheless, the cooperative still asked them to surrender the essence of ownership, which is the right to decide on use and the exclusive right to the produce of the land.

Many Lak Chang villagers were worried and found it hard to round the corner to socialism.

All my life I worked for the *chaopha*. He owned the land but it was I who made the decision of what crops to grow and when to do it. But with this cooperative every decision was made for me.

What the villagers found most disturbing about cooperative farming was the work-point system based on a refined concept of piecework that purported to be able to measure objectively the actual amount of work performed by every cooperative member. Linked to this was an accounting system recommended by Soviet experts\(^1\) that in its turn purported to be able to measure objectively the real cost of every facet of the production process.

Right from the beginning, problems and quarrels arose with the work-point system:

It was a disaster. They gave everything a value and then depreciated everything according to formulas that we found hard to understand or to use. But what was worse, the work-point system threatened to destroy the labour exchange system and mutual-aid groups which had traditionally been an integral part of our production process. We exchanged labour with our relatives, friends and neighbours especially during the transplanting and harvesting times. We also worked together on public projects, with each household sending a member to repair roads and irrigation canals every year. We had our own system.

The work-point system was tried, found distasteful and rather quickly laid aside. But cooperative farming, land and labour pooling remained facts of life for many years to come.

\(^1\) Cooperative farming and its model regulations did not spring from Chinese experience but were based on the kind of rules and regulations that had long been worked out and applied on the collective farms of the Soviet Union. In the early 1950s, the Chinese made an intense study of Soviet experience and launched earnest attempts to apply what the Soviet comrades recommended. For more detail on this issue, see Vogel (1969:133–136) and Hinton (1983:127–129).
In more ways than one, 1956 was not a good year for Sam Fong. The world as he knew it was crumbling. The crop on his land which he knew so well no longer belonged to him and since it was hard to visualise what any share of the total crop would be, he felt uprooted, cut loose from all past experience, adrift in an uncomfortable limbo, where promises of a socialist utopia could hardly hope to establish full confidence.

The socialist transformation was making his head spin. Mao’s Great Leap Forward left him behind in the world of yesteryear. In May 1956, Sam Fong was shocked when he saw with his own eyes how the grand palace was turned into a pile of debris.

I couldn’t think it through. It did not make sense. I couldn’t understand why they had to destroy such a wonderful work of art, a symbol of traditions which had existed for many centuries.

Unfortunately, the Chinese comrades disagreed with him. The “haw chaopha” was the symbol of the old regime, a feudal system that had become anachronistic and had to be wiped away in order to rebuild a new society.

To any younger villagers who would listen, Sam Fong recalled with nostalgia the “free” life of his days under the chaopha-ship. He yearned to return to the familiar while he dragged his feet into the new system. His was a community of peasants, family-centred and passionately committed to traditions. The Tai peasants knew of no hunger. The land was fertile and food plentiful. Unlike most of rural China, Lak Chang and other Tai villages never suffered from a severe land tenure problem. The land reform, the cooperative movement and class struggle to overthrow established leadership made very little sense to them.

Since the early 1950s, Sam Fong also saw increasing numbers of Chinese migrants come and settle in Muang Khon, so much so that by 1953 when the first census was taken, the Hans outnumbered the Tai and other ethnic groups and became the majority of Muang Khon and Daikong population (Tables 1.1 and 1.2).
Before the liberation, there were very limited numbers of Han settlers in Daikong and many of them died of malaria and cholera while the Tai and other ethnic groups seemed to be immune to these diseases. But after the liberation, many Hans were invited to settle in Daikong. The government claimed that they were better educated and should be able to help us develop our community.

Little did Sam Fong know then that there were many more drastic changes and revolutionary upheavals to come. The political pendulum soon swung far to the left as Mao Tse-tung attempted to lay the foundations for a broad united front of hundreds of millions of Chinese from all walks of life, who wanted to get rid of feudal ideology on the one hand, and to free China’s economy and culture from imperialist domination on the other.

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2 Source: The Census Bureau, Dehong Tai and Jing Po Autonomous Prefecture.
3 During the first five to six years after liberation, a number of Tai villagers fled to Burma and Thailand and the Tai population in Daikong decreased.
4 Source: The Census Bureau, Dehong Tai and Jing Po Autonomous Prefecture.
The Commune

On 6 August 1958, Chairman Mao arrived at the Ch’i-li-Ying People’s Commune in Honan. The commune had followed the guiding ideas of Mao and was formed by merging together several agricultural cooperatives. It was reported that Chairman Mao was very pleased with what he saw. “It is a cheerful prospect. What a fine thing when the whole province looks like that,” he said.5

Soon after, three converging movements drastically transformed life in China. First came the sudden and rapid organisation of communes throughout the country, second came a nationwide call for everyone to go out and make iron and steel, third came the growth on local land of an enormous crop, the fruit of hard collective work and very favourable weather. The crop, estimated to be twice as large as any that had been grown before, lifted morale, undercut conservatism and made it possible for large numbers of people to leave home for long periods with ease of mind. As a result, things began to happen at a pace and on a scale that nobody had foreseen.6

On 29 August 1958, the Politburo released the “Pei-tai-ho Resolutions on People’s Communes” setting forth the basic regulations for the establishment of people’s communes on a national scale. Within no time communes were being formed everywhere throughout China.

With food supplied by the mess halls, nurseries and schools supplied for children and resting homes for old people, it was possible for the government to present the communes to the people as an organ designed for their welfare. With the enlarged role of collective life, the expanded size of the collective unit and the increased proportion of goods supplied on the basis of need, the program formed a more coherent picture which could be publicised as progress toward communism, a theme that still evoked a positive utopian image. More importantly, the growth of an enormous crop from the summer harvest made it possible to open the mess halls with generous rations, thus enabling the Communists to portray the virtues of the communes in satisfying the welfare of the people.

The internal logic of the commune, however, was a logic of the hopeful dreamer attempting to impose a vision on less tractable reality. It was assumed that the

5 Quoted in Vogel (1969:244).
masses would be willing to engage in sustained hard work over a long period of
time on the basis of ideological and spiritual incentives. It was assumed that
people would be willing to work hard even as they turned their own tools and
personal possessions over to a higher-order collective. It was assumed that work
could be done while differentials in rewards and social status disappeared and the
division of labour vastly reduced. It was assumed that local mobilisation was more
important than planning and coordination. It was also assumed that agricultural
production could be maintained even as many able-bodied men were removed
from agriculture.7

As elsewhere, the commune campaign in Daikong combined the spirit of
traditional festivals with that of militant patriotism. The festival quality was
reflected in large rallies, celebrations, parades and music. All propaganda media—
newspaper, radio and public meetings—were mobilised to launch the
communisation campaign.

Nevertheless, Lak Chang peasants were apprehensive about the commune from
the very beginning. Not only did they have to give up private plots and a quota of
able-bodied men to work elsewhere, but they had to give up all kinds of private
possessions. Family animals, including buffaloes, pigs and chickens, were turned
over to the production team. To provide for mess hall facilities and to ensure that
people did not have an opportunity to cook on their own, families were asked to
give up all their cooking utensils.

Mobilisation for communes disturbed the pace of Lak Chang village life far more
dramatically than any previous reorganisation campaigns. Cooperatives distributed
land and changed the nature of the local work organisation, but the communes
penetrated deep into personal life. Not only did many families have relatives
living away from home, but those who remained behind had very little time for
private lives. Never in the history of Lak Chang, as Sam Fong remembered it, had
such large numbers of peasants used so much energy in an effort to comply with a
policy they did not fully understand.

Peasant resentment was greatly exacerbated in 1959 when grain production
declined precipitously. The increase of land planted with industrial crops, the
reassignment of labour power away from agriculture and the gradual dissipation
of peasant willingness to work without appreciable material rewards all took their

toll in 1959. Even though Lak Chang did not suffer from the spring drought and the summer floods like many areas in southern China, more food was taken away from Lak Chang and other Tai villages in Daikong to feed the expanding urban population and to provide extra heavy rations for the rural teams sent to work on irrigation and land reclamation. The mess halls were forced to reduce rations. It was the first time in Sam Fong’s life that rice was short in Lak Chang.

Cadre commandism was another focus of peasant resentment. The cadres had taken away peasants’ belongings and had insisted that people eat in mess halls. They were held responsible by superiors for seeing that peasants worked long hours, that old people took care of the children, that young women worked in the field, that young men stayed at the construction sites, that all farm work was done according to new regulations despite traditional patterns and the shortage of able-bodied men. Cadres could not use material incentives as a leverage for accomplishing these aims and the initial enthusiasm soon subsided with prolonged physical labour, low rations and the lack of free time. Commandism was a problem from the beginning, but it became more serious as the rural cadres were caught between increased pressure for meeting higher quotas and the peasants’ growing reluctance to sacrifice without material rewards.8

As shortages developed and as cadres became more demanding in their attempts to meet quotas, morale declined sharply. Lak Chang peasants saw little else but confusing orders, emergency tasks, low rations and finally chaos. By the spring of 1959 not only were rations reduced but hard-working peasants were receiving no more than their lazier neighbours. They no longer had any reason to work hard. As the summer crops ripened, more and more people began stealing right out of the fields.

We took what we considered the fruit of our labour. We could not get anything from the mess halls but a few ounces of watery gruel. If one wanted more food there was only one way—to take it wherever you could find it.

The collapse of the morale of the peasants forced the Communists to initiate a series of measures to reduce the alienation of the peasants from their government. In the winter of 1960–61, the peasants were not only given back portions of their private plots but they were to be compensated for the goods that had been taken from them improperly by the local cadres. Pots, pans, chairs, small agricultural

implements, fruit trees and buildings formerly used by mess halls and work teams were returned to their original owners. If not, the owners were to be remunerated for these possessions as well as for metal belongings taken during the iron and steel drive. Even though compensation was rarely adequate, it was a *sine qua non* for alleviating grievances and getting the cooperation of the peasants.

In Lak Chang, portions of the private plots had been returned to the villagers as early as September 1960. The return of private plots, the reopening of the private market and permission for villagers to keep the harvest from reclaimed land had a great psychological impact. Individual households were also permitted to have their own domestic animals, fruit trees and their own small farm implements. They were permitted to receive cash from the sale of manure and other sideline products.

The acute crisis of 1959–60 was accompanied by a decline of faith in the wisdom of the leaders in Beijing and in the inevitability of economic progress. The collective effort had brought serious failures while the concessions to private capitalism brought moderate improvement. These results caused many to doubt whether progress and communism were inseparable. The success of increased privatism caused many to advocate more concessions to private capitalism.

The crisis of 1959–60 also reflected the deep split within the Party between the Maoist leaders and more moderate—dubbed capitalists—leaders led by Liu Shao-chi and Deng Xiaoping. By 1962, when the conflict had temporarily stabilised and set the economy on an upward curve, Mao moved to stem the precipitous retreat from collective practice that Liu and Deng’s emergency measures had initiated on so wide a scale. He moved to block the wind of privatism that was gaining momentum in so many places.

The method chosen was the “socialist education” campaign. The campaign, inaugurated in late 1962, was a determined effort to keep alive a high degree of commitment to China and Chairman Mao, to overcome the tendencies toward privatism and bourgeois selfishness and to initiate an open-door confrontation between right-wing leaders and a fully mobilised people.

The key battleground of the political conflict was over the program for socialist education. The revolutionary zealots who rallied around Chairman Mao wanted a powerful campaign that purged the opposition, mobilised the masses and
increased their prestige and power in comparison to that of party bureaucrats. The party bureaucrats, who were practical politicians responsible for running organisations, wanted to blunt the cutting edge of the campaign, to channel it into a harmless educational effort that would curb excesses without disrupting production at their own organisational base. During the course of the next several years, the Maoists succeeded in issuing a number of proclamations pushing the campaign further, but the party bureaucrats succeeded in moderating the effect of the proclamations. Mao turned increasingly to the People’s Liberation Army to convey the propaganda message and to provide a power base. As Mao gained more power, the party bureaucrats were forced to make more concessions while seeking new means to subvert the efforts of the Maoist leaders. These conflicts continued to sharpen until they reached high points in the great party purges in 1966–67 and the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76.

Daikong and the Cultural Revolution

In the mid-1960s, Mao became increasingly convinced that the primary obstacle to change and development was the existing party–state apparatus manned by a class of bureaucrats who seemed more likely to lead China to capitalism than to socialism. He believed that the officials in the upper echelons of the party bureaucracy, by virtue of their power and prestige in the state apparatus, were acquiring material privileges and exploiting society as a whole; in effect they were becoming a functional bourgeoisie, albeit one whose privileges derived from political power rather than from property. Mao also believed that an entrenched bureaucracy had acquired a vested interest in preserving the social order over which it ruled and from which it derived its privileged status and thus was opposed to radical social changes and was willing to tolerate and perhaps even actively promote capitalist forms of socio-economic relations and ideologies in China.9

This line of thinking placed Mao in direct opposition to most of the other power holders in China and caused him, again and again, to confront the “elite” by appealing directly to the people to launch mass movements that either bypassed the normal procedures approved by economic planners or directly challenged

their expertise and control. The failure of mass movements—such as the Hundred Flowers campaign and the Great Leap Forward—to achieve the goals Mao had set for them led him to a direct confrontation with other power holders in China. When the Socialist Education movement of 1962 also failed to break the capitalists’ grip on the Party organisation, Mao launched in 1966 a much bolder and more decisive strategy, a nationwide political offensive that he called a “Cultural Revolution”.

The central theme of the Revolution was that the great masses of the Chinese people should rise up, challenge whatever stood in the way of transforming society, enter into lively contention and serious debate, learn by doing and liberate themselves not only from party members in authority who were taking the capitalist road, from bourgeois academic authorities and from cadres guilty of commandism, but also from all the old thoughts, customs, culture and habits of the exploiting class, so as to establish the thought, customs, culture and habits of the working class.10

In August 1966, having quietly secured the allegiance of the army and lined up his Cultural Revolution coalition at the apex of the political system, Mao unleashed the Red Guards to attack the party. Most Red Guards were urban high school and college students. Mao encouraged them to “make revolution”, “do battle with revisionism”, “yank out the small handful of capitalist roaders in the party”, “overthrow China's Khruschev”, and “destroy the old and establish the new”.11 Red Guard groups quickly launched a reign of terror in most urban areas. They waved the little red book of Mao quotations and engaged in contests to see who could recite the quotations most rapidly from memory. The Red Guards also took to the street to—in the slogan of the day—“destroy the four olds”. This translated into destroying old culture by raiding houses, burning books and antiques, beating and humiliating people who seemed not to be in the spirit of things and killing those who tried to resist.12

Party cadres at all levels who had immersed themselves too long in urban affairs and isolated themselves too long from the realities of life were sent out to live and work in remote villages. They were supposed to re-establish contact with the masses, do

manual labour, raise crops and pigs, plough the fields, study politics, repudiate
privatism and revisionism, take part in self- and mutual criticism and prepare
themselves for the right course of socialist transformation. Those chosen for the
honour, however, often found that they had simply been sent away to practise hard
labour at a spot so isolated that they could not hope to hold their forces together or
ever mount a counterattack on their rivals who had sent them down.

Once the Cultural Revolution began, a drastic escalation of antagonism, both
spontaneous and rigged, infected almost all of China. During 1967–68, shocking
episodes of increased Red Guard terrorism and violence alternated with more settled
times as China shut itself off from the outside world to a remarkable degree.

The Cultural Revolution was extended to Daikong in December 1966. The
regional Red Guards were formed in Daikong in early 1967 but the spring of
1968 was perhaps the most violent time, although no firm statistics exist to
confirm this. Many Lak Chang elders remembered vividly some of the most
shocking episodes of violence that took place in Muang Khon when the chaopha
and his family became the prime targets of the Cultural Revolution.

Although the bourgeoisie had been overthrown [the villagers were told] it
was still trying to use the old ideas, culture, customs and habits of the
exploiting classes to corrupt the masses, capture their minds and endeavour
to stage a come-back. The proletariat had to meet head-on every challenge
of the bourgeoisie in the ideological field. Our objective was to struggle
against the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other ruling classes, and
to transform education, literature and art and all other parts of the
superstructure not in correspondence with the socialist economic base so
as to facilitate the consolidation and development of socialism.

When these words were translated into practice, however, it meant the torturing
and killing of the chaopha and his family members, the burning of Buddhist
temples and the holy scripts and defrocking of Buddhist monks. As Sam Fong
recalled the horror:

The chaopha and his family members were arrested and charged with
treason. With their hands tied to their backs the Red Guards paraded
them on the streets. They were beaten at intervals and forced to admit that
they had been scoundrels all along. No one dared to stop them.
Between 1968 and 1969, the Cultural Revolution inflicted enormous violence on the population and left deep scars and social fissures. Although no reliable figures are available, those in Daikong who suffered incarceration, serious injury or death certainly reached into the hundreds. The chaopha of Muang Khon died a few days after his arrest. His wives, children and grandchildren were beaten, humiliated and sent away to do manual labour in the most isolated and desolate parts of the region.

In late 1969, Mao ordered the army to suppress the Red Guards. About eighteen million young radicals were sent to resettle in harsh interior and border regions. The remaining years until 1976 witnessed a see-saw battle between the “moderates” headed by Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping and the “radicals” headed by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing. From 1973 to 1976, the moderates generally controlled the executive organs of the political system, while the radicals had the upper hand in the propaganda and media apparatus. The military was not clearly committed and remained an object of concern for both sides. As Mao grew weaker and the succession battle raged, the radicals repeatedly used their control over propaganda machines to stir up mass campaigns to put pressure on the moderates. The rapid changes in policy lines that these campaigns produced exhausted and embittered the population. Politics had more than ever taken a deadly turn and most individuals tried to find ways to weather the storm by silencing and disguising their real thoughts and feelings even more than usual. The Chinese polity had entered a bizarre period of crisis that was brought to an end only by the death of Mao and the arrest, a month later, of the leading radicals who were dubbed “the Gang of Four”.

When Deng Xiaoping assumed leadership of the Party in the late 1970s, China began the most far-reaching and systematic reforms that ultimately decentralised political power, energised and changed the ways the economy and society functioned. In the economy, China’s real gross national product (GNP) per capita nearly doubled during the first decade of reforms. At the same time, the political system changed in significant ways, with substantial improvements in information flow, policy process and flexibility in adapting to local conditions. China’s relations with the international economy and with foreign countries grew

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rapidly. But these changes came at the cost of developing any consensus on national values. The bureaucracy changed little or not at all and thus became more out of touch with an evolving social and economic milieu. Inflation and corruption also became endemic problems.

In the early 1980s, the communes initially formed during the Great Leap Forward were abolished. Instead, China developed a household farming system in which each family leased land from the state. The government eventually permitted leases of fifty years or more. The leasing system provided a means for re-establishing all the incentives of family farming without turning all the land over to direct private ownership. These reforms produced spectacular growth in agricultural output and in peasant standards of living. Peasant demand for consumer goods mushroomed, providing strong market support for increased production in the industrial sector.

**Lak Chang Today**

During the past two decades, Sam Fong has witnessed a dramatic increase in agricultural productivity, especially in cash crops and vegetables for market. The farmland has once again been allocated to each and every peasant household. The peasants now have greater leeway in deciding which crops to plant and how much of what is grown is sold at free-market rates. Lak Chang villagers’ morale has been invigorated. Wealth, prosperity and freedom have once again returned to Lak Chang.

Nowadays, Lak Chang village is home to some 203 households with 962 inhabitants. The village is located about eight kilometres northeast of Muang Khon. The village proper has been enlarged in response to population increases but still retains many of its original features.

Lak Chang village, approximately two kilometres on dirt road off the main highway, can be seen clearly from it across a vista of rice paddies. Each of the paddy fields surrounding Lak Chang is planted at a slightly different time so that the fields ripen in succession, creating a patchwork of iridescent jade and golden greens. Streams of water run from the main irrigation canals and waterways onto the paddy fields. Lak Chang enjoys a semitropical climate with cool, relatively dry winters and a warm, moist summer monsoon season that allows for the planting
of crops all year round. Cash crops which are intermixed with the rice paddy fields on a rotating basis include wheat, sugar cane, beans and watermelons. Vegetables such as mustard, tomatoes, cucumber, peas, cabbages, squash and green beans are grown all year round for domestic consumption. All surplus produce is invariably sold at the market in Muang Khon.

Lak Chang village is situated amidst the tranquillity and scenery of the surrounding area. Standing in the ricefield near the village one can see a rim of hazy blue mountains in every direction as one’s eye sweeps the horizon. When viewed from a distance, the village stands imposingly above the glittering, lushly green rice paddy.

In spite of the village’s scenic surroundings, the layout of the village itself is like that of most Tai villages in this region, rather chaotic with an apparent lack of concern for planning and space utilisation. Dirt roads and narrow alleys zigzag through back corners of haphazardly scattered houses or turn into field paths. Pigsties and outhouses, unaesthetic in sight and odour, block the main thoroughfare in the heart of the village.

Like most Tai villages in the great plain of Muang Khon, the shape or layout of Lak Chang is nucleated: houses are built close together to form a compact settlement cluster. Within the village proper, there is a general absence of green spaces or even space between dwellings. Tight discernible clusters of houses are grouped together in the middle of the ricefields. Lak Chang peasants typically surround their ricefields with groves of bamboo which serve to demarcate Lak Chang from the neighbouring villages.

A small spirit house (saan chao baan) stands at the village entrance. Previously, it is reported, every household had a small spirit house made of bamboo with a thatched roof. But today, these spirit houses have all disappeared.

Buddhism, however, is still an integral part of Tai social life. Many Buddhist monasteries in Daikong, including the one in Lak Chang, were burnt down during the Cultural Revolution. Today, a new monastery is being built in the middle of the village. Temple-building has become a major cooperative affair among Lak Chang villagers. All households are called in to “make merit” and to contribute labour and construction materials for the new monastery.

Traditionally, house-building was also a cooperative affair: relatives, friends and neighbours joining to cut bamboo, to weave the wall mats, to make the roof
thatch and to erect the house. In earlier days, Tai houses were usually built almost entirely of bamboo. The houses were raised on piles a few feet above the ground to avoid damp and flood. The floor was made of split bamboo and the walls of bamboo mats. The roof was thatched with grass.

Figure 1.2 A traditional Tai house, a style which is rapidly disappearing from the village

Nowadays, however, the architectural character of Lak Chang and other Tai villages in Muang Khon is strikingly similar to the Chinese. The houses are basic in planning organisation and building construction. For the most part, walls are laid out forthrightly in a single rectangular grid. Older homes are of tamped earth construction, with concrete floor and grey-tile roofs. Newer homes are usually built with brick on a foundation of stones taken from the hills nearby. Most residences are constructed around courtyards along the four lateral sides. The single-storeyed main building typically has three rooms, a family room and two bedrooms. The multi-purpose family room serves as a living quarter, a dining room and a memorial hall to honour the ancestors. Here, portraits of ancestors and pictures of family members are hung on the wall above an altar that faces the main entryway. On ceremonial occasions, such as those accompanying mourning or wedding rites, the wooden partitions that separate the rooms are removed to enlarge the space,
opening the rooms to the gallery in front. Tradition prescribes that the elder, married brother resides in the east room and younger, unmarried brothers or sisters in the west room with the parents. The kitchen is placed in the eastern wing room as a good omen—following the sun rising from the east, the family itself is to grow.

In older homes, a partial second level, generally of wood construction, is sometimes added on the west and the front of the buildings. The resulting loft space is accessible by a steep wooden stairway or a ladder and is used as a granary for rice storage. The ground level is utilised in a number of ways: traditionally, a loom was kept here and, even though weaving has been abandoned, many households still have a loom under the house. The open area also serves as a workroom where farming equipment and firewood are stored and buffaloes and pigs raised.

Most of the village families have wells in their household compounds. Water drawn from the well is used for cooking, drinking and washing dishes. Bathing is done in a flowing waterway or irrigation ditch. Human evacuation is done away from the house and no latrine is found within individual compounds. Public latrines are built overhanging fish ponds, flowing waterways or irrigation ditches running through the village. Young children use any spot at the edge of a waterway as a toilet. Yet village sanitation is good, for the irrigation ditch flows continually and villagers do not use this ditch water for cooking or drinking.

The dress of the Tai in Daikong is fairly uniform in a general sense, but not in detail of colour and pattern which vary in different towns and localities. Today, the man’s dress tends to be Western in style, if not in manufacture. Men and boys wear Western-type shorts, trousers, shirts and jackets. These are purchased from the stalls of Chinese merchants in the market of Muang Khon. Loose baggy trousers of Tai origin are still worn by the older men.

Village women, on the other hand, have not completely adopted Western-style clothing. The woman’s dress consists of a blouse and a dark-coloured (usually black) pasin skirt. This is a piece of long cloth sewn in a tube and folded at the waist and held in place by a belt. Pants and European-type dresses may be found on special occasions among the young unmarried women of the village. But for everyday wear, a blouse and pasin skirt can be regarded as the regular costume of Tai women. Married women, however, always wear the characteristic Tai dress: a blouse, a pasin skirt and a turban.\footnote{A turban is an indicator of marital status among Tai women.}
A young Tai woman usually lets her hair grow to shoulder length. But once settling down as a married woman, she adopts the hairstyle of the mature women of the community. Married women usually put up their hair in a knot at the back of the head and cover it with a turban. The size and colour of the turban vary greatly in small detail in different parts of Daikong. In Muang Khon, the turban of a young married woman is often merely a pink or other light-coloured cotton scarf wrapped around the head. The colour of the turban will become darker as the woman grows older. For field work or for wear to the market town, a soft straw hat with a wide floppy brim is worn on top of the turban and tied under the chin. Apparently, women’s dress is still one of the most distinguishing marks of the Tai group in Daikong.

Another distinguishing mark of the Tai is the tattoo. Traditionally, Tai men tattooed their body extensively from the neck to the ankle. The designs and patterns of tattoos were believed to have the effects of charms. Today, most Tai men still have their body tattooed in some isolated parts, especially on the thighs, on the legs down to mid-calf, on the belly, the back or the arms and hands.

During the past two decades, Sam Fong has witnessed a considerable amount of changes in Lak Chang. The market economy is beginning to pervade every corner of social life in the village. Elsewhere in China, the increasing demand for agricultural produce to feed the growing urban population has brought about a sharp increase in the price of farm produce which is a great incentive to production. More and more cash crops are produced directly for the market. The whole process of agricultural production has come under the influence of the market and agricultural productivity has increased tremendously. Increasing productivity has also raised the income of Lak Chang villagers and is beginning to bring about a sharp increase in consumer spending. The village economy has undergone a complete transformation.

With the introduction of electricity in the late 1970s, demand for television sets and other electrical appliances has skyrocketed. Motorisation has also made tremendous progress during the past decade. The construction of new roads has allowed many convenient and novel commodities to flow in. Most peasant households now own a small motorised farm truck which serves as a good facility to transport agricultural produce from the village to the market. The social distance between Lak Chang and Muang Khon has been remarkably diminished because
of this transportation development. All kinds of manufactured goods, from soap, toothpaste and cigarettes to motorcycles, have become daily necessities. These changes in consumption patterns mean that most peasant households find themselves in a situation in which more and more cash must be earned and spent to meet the needs of everyday life.

Lak Chang has never been an isolated village; the peasants always considered themselves to be a part of Muang Khon and have always had contacts with the chaophya and the market. During the past decade, however, the peasants’ contacts with Muang Khon and the outside world have intensified. Every five days, the women take bamboo chopsticks, baskets, bananas, mustards, cabbages, watermelons and other agricultural produce to the open market in Muang Khon. Their motorised farm trucks allow them to buzz over the country roads to Muang Khon in just twenty minutes.

Links to the outside world are also provided by the omnipresent Chinese television sets which transmit events of local and national significance. Increasing links and access to the world outside Lak Chang, however, do not necessarily mean that the peasants are interested in it. Most villagers have only a slight idea of the world beyond Muang Khon. Many of them knew that the maan tai (Shan) were fighting against the Burmese army and they knew that there were pii nong muang thai (Thai brothers and sisters) who live in Thailand. The villagers’ knowledge of the outside world is not increased by their compulsory six-year primary education in the village school. The only language of instruction is Chinese and the school teachers teach mostly by rote learning, which gives no encouragement to originality. The result is that the children emerge from primary school semi-literate at best. They can converse in Chinese but very few can read or write fluently. None of the children continue their education beyond primary school. Worst of all, the Tai written language has not been taught for a few decades and now only a handful of villagers, mostly elderly men, can read or write in Tai. Those who can read seldom do and the village culture is becoming an illiterate culture.

Under four centuries of Chinese domination, the people of Lak Chang and Daikong have been ruled by the authority of Chinese government officials, have been taught Chinese in schools and have been subjected to pressures, directly or indirectly, which tend to acculturate them to the Han culture emanating from
Kunming and to assimilate them into the national Chinese society dominated by the Han Chinese. These forces have had their effect and the village is now definitely a part of China.

Nevertheless, the Tais have not forgotten their ethnic identity, established during the many centuries of their independent existence. The villagers still speak *kham tai* (Tai language), which is intelligible, but with difficulty, to a Thai speaker. The villagers distinguish themselves from the Hans, who serve as government officials over them and who, at times, look down upon the Tais with ill-disguised disdain as “*pai-i*” (barbarians) with uncivilised habits and queer customs.

The villagers view the Chinese, whom they call by the derogatory term “*khay*”, with mixed emotions. The Chinese own almost all grocery shops and department stores in Muang Khon and are the middlemen and brokers who collect the peasants’ agricultural produce and ship it to Kunming. On the one hand, the Tais admire the industriousness and the business ability of the Chinese. But on the other hand, they are envious of the political power that the Chinese have over them. The Han represent progress, modernity, power and prestige and hold the leading position in the government; and villagers admire them as much as they resent them.

The Tai peasants are also aware of linguistic and cultural differences between themselves and the many ethnic groups, especially Jingpo, Palung, Lisu and Ashang, who live in the mountains surrounding Muang Khon. Their attitude toward these ethnic groups is clouded with an air of confident superiority. A mixed marriage between a Tai and other ethnic groups, including the Han, has never taken place in Lak Chang. “We are a proud people,” says Sam Fong, his eyes gazing at the lush green ricefields in front of him, “as proud as a peacock.”

A proud people they certainly are.

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17 In the Kachin Hills area where Leach did his field work, he noted that intermarriage between members of different ethnic groups, especially between the Tais (Shan) and Kachins, is very common. This observation, however, does not apply in the case of Tai Daikong. In fact, the Tai are inherently endogamous. This marriage pattern is a result, in part, of the increasing scarcity of land in Tai villages and the ever-present xenophobic antagonism between the Tai and other ethnic groups in Daikong.

18 The peacock is one of the most important cultural symbols of the Tai ethnic group.