Traditionally, the largest political unit of the Tai Yai in the Burma–Yunnan frontiers was the “state” or “muang”, which had a territorial limit and was governed by a chaopha (prince). Before the Shan country in Burma was annexed to Great Britain in 1886 each chaopha governed his own state, and the King of Upper Burma was his overlord, to whom he was obliged to pay a heavy tribute. Western authors have invariably described the relationships between Tai states in terms of factionalism and constant fighting among themselves. According to Milne:

Burman officials tyrannised over the Shans, and, owing to heavy and unjust taxation, the people were in a state of perpetual rebellion against their Chiefs; the Chiefs were constantly fighting among themselves, and were also trying to free themselves from the Burman rule. The condition of the country whilst under Burma has been described already in the historical chapter, so it need not be repeated here, but I should like to draw attention to the unhappy state of the people under the invasion of the Kachins, who were slowly but surely taking possession of the hill-country. We read in the Parliamentary Papers for 1859–1876: “The Kachins are a portion of the vast

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1 Milne (1910:186).
2 For instance, Parker (1893); Milne (1910); and Scott (1936), among others.
hordes of Singphos that inhabit the mountain districts of Northern Assam, and stretch round the north of Burma into Western China. These extend not only all along the northern frontier, but dip down southward wherever the mountain ranges lead them... They have ousted many Shan tribes... and wherever they appear they assume the same character of 'lords of all they can reach', only to be appeased by some form of 'black mail'... They inspire such terror, that in the neighbouring plains no Burman or Shan will venture alone, or even in company, unarmed along the roads within their reach. This state of affairs lasted until the British annexation, and our Government has worked what one might almost call a miracle; for the first time since the beginning of Shan history, peace prevails all over the country.”

The imagined political landscape of the Shan described by Milne was perhaps a by-product of the making of modern European self-consciousness. It was part of what Jean and John Comeroff called the “discourses of the imperial imagination”. It aimed to construct a mechanism of mastery, an explanatory scheme capable of rationalising British colonialism. For, by portraying the Tai states as a land of “terror” and chaos, we witness the rise of a more and more elaborate model of the relationship of Britain to the Orientals, a relationship of both complementary opposition and inequality, in which the former stood to the latter as civilisation to savagery, saviour to victim, actor to subject. It was a relationship whose very creation implied a historical imperative, a process of interaction through which the wild would be cultivated, the suffering saved and the chaos ordered. Once emancipated and humanity established, the savage would become a fit subject of the British Empire.

The imperial imagination aside, we learn from the Tai chronicles that, throughout history, the Tai political landscape had been characterised by the rise and fall of ambitious and powerful chaopha. The political organisation of the entire Burma–Yunnan frontier area had been very unstable. Small autonomous political units had often tended to aggregate into larger systems; large-scale feudal hierarchies had fragmented into smaller ones. There had also been violent and rapid shifts in the

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6 Nanthasingha (1997).
7 Leach (1954:6).
overall distribution of political power. In Tai history, an ambitious leader was able to extend his sphere of influence and enlarge his territory at the expense of neighbouring chaopha whose states were either completely annexed into the conquering state or continued their existence as tributary states to the successful chaopha. On the other hand, a large state with a weak ruler was often split up into a number of small independent states ruled by the local heads who either had earlier had their sovereignty held in temporary abeyance, or now acquired royal titles by public recognition of their leadership. Often in the absence of a strong authority or in a time of oppression, local communities struggled to break away from the mother-state, either to become independent with their own rulers or to transfer their allegiance to a more benevolent ruler.8

The number and size of the Tai states in Daikong as well as in Shan territory varied a great deal. In general, a state (muang) consisted of circles of villages with the chaopha residing in the capital village or town, which was usually larger and more populous than any other town or village in the state. A large and powerful state usually consisted of several tributary states, which in turn were divided into circles and villages.

To be a member of a state, a Tai had to recognise the authority of the chaopha of that state. Though a state had its territorial limit, and membership of a village was dependent upon the residence in that village and the acceptance of the authority of the village headman appointed by the chaopha, state jurisdiction over its members was personal and not territorial. In other words, membership of a state could be acquired or renounced on the principle of giving recognition and allegiance to the chaopha in so far as his political protection was effective. In a time of oppression, however, migration to another state was normal. In fact, wholesale migration of an entire village in defiance of a chaopha’s authority was not uncommon.9

The political organisation in all Tai states in Daikong and in the Shan states of Burma10 appeared to be similar, though the detail and number of officials may vary according to the sheer size and requirements of individual states. The head of the political organisation with absolute power was the chaopha, who ruled from

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10 cf. Scott (1900); Pattaya (1959).
his palace in the capital with the assistance and counsel of the council of ministers (amat). The chaopha and his ministers constituted the central government of the state. Orders and decrees from the capital concerning governmental affairs, tax collection, corvée and military services were sent to the heads of townships or circles of villages who administered the final detail through the village headmen under their respective command. The township or village circle heads and the village headmen constituted the local government.

The Chaopha

In Tai terms, chaopha literally means “lord of the sky”. Traditionally, the chaopha ruled by hereditary right as an absolute monarch having the power of life and death over his subjects. According to Leach, the Tai ideal of a chaopha was a monarch who lived apart from the world in his sacred palace. He lived a life of luxury and indolence surrounded by a vast harem of wives and concubines. Practical affairs of the state were delegated to the amat. These ministers received no salary but made a lucrative living from official positions.

The good chaopha was a man who managed to maintain a luxurious and extravagant court and at the same time keep the rapaciousness of his courtiers within bounds. The chaopha maintained the forms and appurtenances of royalty: they had many wives and concubines; they sometimes, perhaps, married their half-sisters; and they had the royal throne and the white umbrella similar to the Kings of Burma.

When addressing a chaopha or any member of the royalty, a commoner properly used a respectful expression in every sentence. Only his title was addressed and the chaopha was never spoken of by his name. If it was absolutely necessary to name him, the voice was lowered to a whisper as a token of respect. The commoners’ houses were never allowed to excel the chaopha’s either in height or in design. No one was to ride past his palace, nor were dead bodies, either of men or of animals, carried past it.

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12 Yule (1858:303–305).
14 Scott (1900:408).
In the ideal system, succession to the throne passed from father to son in a direct line. As a rule, the chaopha-ship devolved on the eldest son of the maha devi (the queen or chief wife). Failing heirs in the direct line, the succession went to the eldest male of the next wife. From reviewing the history of many Tai states in the Shan territory, Pattaya\textsuperscript{15} concluded that there appeared to be no rigid rule of succession. In practice, the chaophas could name as their successors anyone they wished.\textsuperscript{16} If there was no son, or the son was unfit for the throne, the chaopha-ship went to a brother or a brother’s son. A commoner could also become a chaopha by leading a successful rebellion against a tyrant or a weak ruler and getting himself accepted by the people. Collis\textsuperscript{17} gave an example of Khun Sang, who was originally a local chief and rose successfully against the then oppressive tyrant and became chaopha of Hsenwi in 1885.

\textsuperscript{15} Pattaya (1959:124–125).
\textsuperscript{16} Woodthorpe (1896:22–23); Cochrane (1915:13–15).
\textsuperscript{17} Collis (1938:251–253).
Among the Tai of Shan states, a custom of a chaopha marrying his half-sister as his queen was mentioned by Yule,\textsuperscript{18} so as “to preserve the blood royal”.\textsuperscript{19} This practice was questioned by Leach,\textsuperscript{20} even though it was certainly a fashion of the Burmese court. According to many chronicles of the Tai Daikong,\textsuperscript{21} there is no evidence that this practice was customary among the chaopha of the Tai states. Some cases of a chaopha marrying his half-sister have been reported as having taken place, but these cases are too few and far between to justify the claim that this was a standard practice expected of a ruling chaopha.\textsuperscript{22}

Normally the chaopha had many wives. The principal wife was called maha devi whilst his other wives would be appointed as devi with priority ranking according to the time of their presentation to the chaopha. Having many wives played an important role in the Tai political system since the devi of the chaopha usually was the daughter of a chaopha from another state, the daughter of a minister or from the family of an influential person in the area. Having several wives would enable the chaopha to attract persons in various groups as political allies. As influential groups developed ties through marriage with the chaopha, the size of the palace and the number of devis came to reflect the scope of political power and influence of each chaopha. The chaopha of large states, for instance the chaopha of Muang Seephaw, who died in 1928, had a total of 28 devis, whilst the chaopha of small townships might have merely two or three devis.\textsuperscript{23}

The number of devis was an important indicator of a chaopha’s royal power and greatness, so it was one important factor accounting for the size of the haw chaopha, the residence of members of the royal family, the devis, relatives and children as well as all the retinue and servants. The haw chaopha of Muang Tai was divided into three haw—haw kham (golden haw), haw klang (the middle haw) and haw awn (the minor haw). The haw kham or royal palace was the residence of the chaopha, the maha devi and their children whilst the haw klang was usually the residence of his younger brothers or sisters or elder relatives. The haw awn was the residence of nephews, nieces, grandchildren or relatives of lower echelons.

\textsuperscript{18}Yule (1858:303).
\textsuperscript{19}Quoted in Pattaya (1959:130); cf. Milne (1910:78).
\textsuperscript{20}Leach (1954:216).
\textsuperscript{21}Nanthasingha (1997).
\textsuperscript{22}Pattaya (1959:130).
\textsuperscript{23}Leach (1954:132).
In practice, the power base of a chaopha did not emanate only from the connections or alliances with influential family groups as well as the number of faithful followers, but the important power base of the chaopha lay in the control and management of the entire land resources of his territory. The chaopha was the one who appointed the poo heng (district head) or poo kay (village head) who were responsible for the collection of land taxes and delivering them to the chaopha. Apart from having to pay taxes, villagers were also expected to provide corvée labour for the chaopha such as building and repairing the haw chaopha, or certain villages were assigned to carry out specific chores for the chaopha: for instance, certain villages were allocated the duties of delivering meat to the chaopha, other villages were required to supply vegetables whilst other villages had to look after elephants or horses belonging to the chaopha. Villagers were also duty-bound to
present gifts to the *chaopha* on various occasions such as birthdays, marriages or funerals.\(^{24}\) All villagers were also duty-bound to act in defence of their homeland in the event of war.

The *chaopha* had the duty to act as judge in legal cases. In the event that the *poo kay* or *poo heng* made an unjust verdict, the villagers might petition the *chaopha* for a re-trial of the case. The *chaopha* also had to preside or officiate at important religious functions such as at the *poi chong para* ceremony to welcome the return of the Buddha during celebrations marking the end of the lent. Several *chaopha* used revered animals as insignia or totems of the royal family such as the *chaopha* of Muang Mao who had the tiger as the royal family emblem and name, whilst the *chaopha* of Muang Chae Fang had the wasp as insignia.

The *chaopha*’s role was to govern and rule the state according to ancient royal customs assisted by a group of ministers or counsellors with senior monks serving as advisers. The Tai people considered that even the *chaopha* himself did not have the right to defy ancient customs or important Buddhist religious precepts; violations against established traditions could be used as justification leading to the overthrow of the *chaopha* or assassination by political rivals.\(^{25}\)

Since time immemorial Tai people have held on to the belief that the *chaopha* is a person endowed with utmost righteousness, compassion for the common people as his children and a brave and capable warrior in times of hostilities. Ruling in a manner oppressive to the people, such as excessive taxation, might result in resentment and defiance by refusing to pay taxes followed by massive migration to other states.\(^{26}\) Migration and showing allegiance to another *chaopha* were a challenge to the legitimate ruling of that *chaopha*. Migration of the masses weakened the productive forces and power of the *chaopha* and could become the starting point of rebellion by people who wanted to overthrow their own leader.

The *chaopha* had an important role to perform as representative of the state in maintaining relationships with other states, so he had to try to build up friendly alliances with the *chaopha* of other states through marriages so as to create bonds of friendship, family association and political relationship as much as possible. A *chaopha* bold and skilful in the martial arts and capable of extending his royal

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\(^{24}\) T’ien (1986:53).

\(^{25}\) Scott (1900:429).

\(^{26}\) Scott (1900:286).
authority over other states usually sent one of his sons or brothers to become \textit{chaopha} of such states. The \textit{chaopha} of many Tai states were therefore interrelated by blood or through marriage and maintained rapport by frequent regular reunions.\textsuperscript{27}

\section*{Council of Ministers}

The \textit{chaopha} was the head of state, administering and governing the common people by the administrative mechanism of the council of ministers who were advisers to the \textit{chaopha}. The council of ministers comprised from four to twelve persons or more depending on the size of the state or power and influence of the \textit{chaopha} of that state. The council of ministers had duties similar to the cabinet, with meetings to consult on political or civil matters with the \textit{chaopha} every five days. The council of ministers was headed by a royal minister as chairman. The royal minister's office was passed on by descendant line from father to son and the royal minister possessed great power and influence. He looked after the affairs of the state when the \textit{chaopha} happened to be ill, when the \textit{chaopha} was away on journeys to other states, or when the position of \textit{chaopha} was vacant. The entire council of ministers was directly appointed by the \textit{chaopha} under the recommendations of the royal minister. Normally the council of ministers comprised close relatives of the \textit{chaopha} who were appointed as advisers or assigned to look after various departments such as collection of taxes, supervision of the army or adjudication of various lawsuits.

The council of ministers carried out administrative duties in the name of the \textit{chaopha} by assigning responsibilities to district officials to carry out work. Each minister drew no regular salary but acquired a share of land and was able to obtain benefit from the fruits of such land without having to pay taxes. Moreover the ministers received fees from adjudicating lawsuits and also received presents or gifts from merchants and the general public.

\textsuperscript{27}Harvey and Barton (1930:15).
The most important leaders at local levels were *poo heng* and *poo kay,* the word “*heng*” in Tai means one thousand. *Poo heng* was the title for the chief of a circle of villages in a certain area, so presumably it may have derived from the ancient tradition that the *poo heng* had the duty to collect tax of one thousand bushels of rice for delivery to the *chaopha* regularly each year. *Poo heng* was the head of a circle of villages directly appointed by the *chaopha.* Generally the *poo heng* came from an influential family and enjoyed respect from the local people. The title of *poo heng* passed on from father to son or to persons in the same family.

The *poo heng*’s important duty was to look after the welfare of the people in his circle of villages, to maintain order, suppress robbers, collect taxes, give decisions on lawsuits when requested and to supervise the work of the *poo kay* or village chief in his territory. The *poo kay* had duties similar to the *poo heng* but at a lesser level—he was chief of a village, responsible for looking after the welfare of the villagers, settling disputes or quarrels and collecting taxes for handing over to the *poo heng.* One of the most important duties of the *poo kay* was to divide paddy land for the people of the village. Tai people considered that all the rice land belonged to the *chaopha,* so a villager had the right of using and occupying paddy land as allocated by the *poo kay* only. When there was an increase of households or new influx of migrants, that village would have to undergo reallocation of working land to suitably accommodate the increased number of households. The *poo kay* was responsible for land allocation in his village. Villagers elected and submitted the name of the *poo kay* to the *chaopha* for appointment. Theoretically, if the majority of villagers were dissatisfied with the performance of the *poo kay* or *poo heng,* the villagers could join forces and send an elder of the village to petition the *amat* (minister) or the *chaopha* to remove the *poo heng* or *poo kay* from office at any time, although such cases scarcely appear on record and this never happened in Lak Chang in the village elders’ memory.

### Social Classes

Throughout history, Tai society in Daikong consisted of only two classes: the ruling class and the common people. The ruling class included the *chaopha,*
royalty and relatives as well as the *amat* (ministers), the majority of the ruling class being related to the *chaopha*.

As the Tai reckon relatives bilaterally and since the *chaopha* normally had several *devi*, the group of relatives or number of persons claiming to be related to the *chaopha* would be rather considerable. Leach\(^{28}\) suggested that the ruling class in Tai society also included persons who were able to induce servants or the entourage to address them with various titles indicating relationship with the ruling class—such as the word *chao* or *khun*—by claiming affiliation with the *chaopha*. In the ruling class, as the *chaopha* was the centre of relationship and social position, recognition of kinship or lineage on the paternal side was more important than the maternal one.

Tai peasants in general had the right to exploit the land belonging to the *chaopha* according to allocations made by the *poo kay*. The social class of a peasant was lower than that of the ruling class; they engaged in production to feed society whilst the ruling class ruled. The common subjects had to show respect to the ruling class, carry out orders, provide service and pay taxes to the ruling class. The commoners were divided into two groups whose position differed. The first group comprised the majority of Tai Daikong, that is, peasants who engaged in agricultural production, including traders and various artisans. The second group comprised common labourers who, by occupation, engaged in sinful deeds or contravened the Buddhist religious precepts: butchers, fishermen, liquor-dealers and pig-keepers. Tai people are inclined to view this group of people with a lower status than peasants or traders in general. Moreover, members of other ethnic groups such as the Kang or Jingpo are given a status inferior to the ordinary people.

Although Tai society distinctly separated the ruling class from the common people and each class had clearly different rules of conduct, in practice class distinction did not absolutely separate people of each social class. In everyday life, members of the ruling class and ordinary people often crossed the status bar by intermarriage, particularly marriage between a man of the ruling class and the daughter of a villager, a practice which became conventional and commonplace. In the same way, a *devi* or widow of a deceased *chaopha* could remarry a villager, another practice which often took place.\(^{29}\) Therefore interclass marriage has

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\(^{28}\) Leach (1954:213–214).

\(^{29}\) Pattaya (1959:142).
become a common practice. However, the interesting factor is that the separation of social classes in Tai society was not an absolute distinction; class was a system of indicating relative position in society. Persons of a lower “class” acknowledged the authority and station of a person of higher status by courteous, respectful manners and behaviour. Villagers in general showed courteous deference towards the *poo kay*, the latter showed courteous deference towards the *poo heng*, the *poo heng* showed courteous deference towards the *amat* (minister) and all the people showed respect and deference towards the *chaopha* in that sequence. The *chaopha* held the highest rank with the uppermost status, removed from all other people. For the general citizen, the *chaopha* appeared all highest, almost godlike, and the *chaopha* had to uphold this social stance by surrounding himself with a royal retinue, residing in a sizeable *haw* and by distancing himself from the ordinary people in general to preserve purity of lineage.

As for the other low-ranking royals who had no ambition to reach the pinnacle of the political ladder, the purity of the royal lineage was probably not something that they had to preserve or be overly concerned with. These royals had closer contact with the common people, their daily lives being intermingled with the people and marriage with ordinary people was a possibility.30

**Social Groups and Organisations**

In the past, important social groups and organisations in a Tai village could be divided into four categories: family group, labour-exchange group, youth group and elders group.

The family group began with blood ties within the family between father, mother and children and extended to relatives of the father’s and mother’s sides. The family and kin group was the group of people who had closest contact. Family and kinsmen were consulted in every important decision. They were also allies, sources of loans and important labour resources at weddings, funerals and other festivities at various junctions of social life.

The labour-exchange group was the social group extended from the family and kin group to include close neighbours, friends and owners of adjoining paddy

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fields. The labour exchange group would send family members to assist when requested especially in times of hard labour such as rice planting and harvesting to make the work easier and more pleasant. The labour-exchange group was the basis of social contact and mutual assistance on other occasions such as house-building and merit-making activities. Young men and women who were members of the same labour-exchange group had the opportunity of meeting one another while working in the fields or during family celebrations. Occasions conducive to development of intimate contacts between these young men and women were rather plentiful, often leading to love and eventually to marriage. Parents of both sides usually favoured and encouraged marriage between families that enjoyed a close relationship. The marriage would also create closer and stronger ties within the group.

A social group of another type which was very important in Tai society was the youth group. This type of social group was a combination of young men and women of similar age mostly 16–20 years old. This group of youths joined together to form an important force in conducting various affairs in Tai social life.

The youth group in Tai village society began from a grouping of four or five relatives or cousins of similar ages to help out with household chores such as on occasions of marriages or funerals. These young men and women were an important source of labour for preparing places and transporting materials and supplies to enable the occasion to be successfully carried out. Sometimes, the youth group would be formed into an official organisation by combining various youth groups to become an important work force for arranging religious ceremonies of importance such as the village *poi* or merit-making festival.

Normally, young men and women reaching marriageable age would form into a youth group. Becoming a member of the group meant that the social standing of a minor was transformed into that of an adult. The youth group transformed itself into an official social organisation under the supervision of the *poo kay* who appointed leaders from the young men’s group and young women’s group with the duty to supervise and look after the work of the group. Many villages of large size might break up the youth group into several small teams to compete with each other in carrying out work or to divide their responsibilities. Each team would try to recruit new members from households of affluence and girls who
were pretty, in order to increase the work force and potential of their team. Teams within the youth group would assist in all kinds of work in the village. The young men’s group might take on the repairs of temples and carry coffins for burial while the young women’s group would make flower arrangements, clean up places, prepare food and wash dishes. Before the time of the Communist revolution, the Tai Daikong favoured celebrating *poi* festivals at each household, each household taking turns to act as host to present gifts to the village temple. Gifts most chosen to be presented to temples were cabinets made of teak primed with black lacquer and covered with gold leaves. These cabinets contained a Buddha image. The young men’s group would undertake the task of travelling to the Shan State in Burma to purchase such cabinets and Buddha images to be brought back for presentation to the temples. The youth group was the social organisation responsible for training young men and women in the moral responsibilities, and the roles and duties of an adult. The young men and women would remain members of the group until they married and had a house of their own. Marriage marked the end of their role inside the youth group, with new young men and women coming of age to take their places.

Another social group of great importance in the Tai village society was the elders group comprising men with the highest seniority of each family lineage in the village.
Membership of the elders group normally consisted of about five to eight persons or more. The elders group would be invited to preside at marriage ceremonies, to teach and give advice to the bride and groom and ensure that their marriage conformed with traditions. The elders group also exercised duties when presiding over land partitions and looked after the interests of various households that were members of their kin group. The elders also acted as advisers to the poo kay in adjudging various cases within the village. Hence the elders group was an important arm in political society and played a very powerful role in village affairs.

**Political Organisations and Social Changes**

After the Communist takeover in 1949, the various states in the territories of Daikong or Dehong had their boundaries broken up and then realigned by the Chinese government into five districts (kang) namely: Mangshi or Muang Khon, Muang Ti or Liang He, Muang Wan or Long Chuan, Muang La or Ying Jiang, and Muang Mao or Rui Li. In each district a district officer (poo kang) was appointed by the Chinese authorities from among the local people to act as official administrator, with representatives elected from the populace to sit on the local council, with the duty of supervising the work of the district officer.

The Chinese Communist Party tried to exert influence over the social life of the Tai people by sending officials to conduct affairs and supervise the establishment of official political organisations in four forms: village committee, people’s army at village level, women’s association and farmers’ association. District officers give the people an opportunity to elect the poo kay, the election being in a roundabout way: the authorities will make a selection of two or three persons qualified to be poo kay and let members of the village cast votes to elect the person they want. In addition, members of the village cast votes to elect another ten persons as the village committee to administer and manage the affairs of the village. The village committee chairman or the poo kay, either one of them, will become a member of Communist Party Committee at district level. The Chinese People’s Liberation Army sends officers to form the people’s army at village level, selecting physically strong young men to undergo training in military duties and tactical warfare for the purpose of maintaining peace within the village and becoming army reserves. The Communist Party also sends officers to form women’s groups, holding
seminars to enable women to have modern “thoughts” not bound to ancient tradition, to possess leadership and to join more in social activities. The Communist Party arranged to form farmers’ groups at village level to propagate Marxist theories, and the ideologies of Chairman Mao as well as important government policies such as collectivisation or new farming techniques.

The Chinese government, in exerting its influence by setting up social organisations at village level, has effected changes in the Tai village society in many respects. The village committee, the majority comprising new members of young men and women, began to have a greater say in decisions relating to the affairs of the village thus causing conflicts with the elders group which originally was the influential group of the village. The values and traditions formerly based on gender, age and seniority as factors in deciding social standing were severely challenged. Conflicts of this nature erupted frequently during the Cultural Revolution.

Samfong gave an account of what happened in Lak Chang village as follows:

The Red Guard cadres took the village elders and placed them under house arrest in the village school house which was renamed as old people's home and kindergarten and assigning the elders with duties of caring for the children so that their parents can work full-time in the fields.

The establishment of new forms of social organisations also altered traditional norms and social values. Adults and senior persons began to feel increasingly oppressed by these new developments. The formation of the farmers’ association and cooperative system to supervise and manage commune farm production also made the household lose control over agricultural production. The Tai farming households began to feel irritated by the cooperatives’ meddling and dictating rules concerning management of production in each household. Production problems resulted in increased conflicts when the agricultural products of Lak Chang village were taken away to feed the city population and the quantity of food for the village diminished, as never before.

At the same time, Han Chinese began to migrate and settle in the vicinity of Muang Khon in increasing numbers as never before so that the Tai people began to feel that they had become a minority group. The administration system came under increasing control of the Chinese government. Even though the Tai
Daikong were under the dominance of the Imperial Court for many centuries, the influence of China was limited merely to appointment and recognition of the status of the chaopha and the chaopha was left alone to govern his own people without interference. For this reason the Tai people have for countless years never felt the domination of China over their political and social way of life. However, after the Communist revolution, the Chinese government tried to exert greater influence by indoctrination and ideological propaganda, including the establishment of social organisations under new systems. The abolition of the chaopha system in 1953 caused a great number of Tai people to fall into a state of fearful shock, the changes being no longer bearable. During those years, many villagers fled to the Shan State in Burma in order to escape the new form of oppressive governance. Demolition of the chaopha palace, the burning of temples and religious scriptures, the defrocking of monks to become coolies forced to do hard labour, the beatings and murders of the chaopha and family members during the Cultural Revolution produced a sense of violent anguish in the minds of the Tai people which transformed into an undercurrent of ethnic tension between the Tai and Han Chinese, resulting in a resurgence and reproduction of the Tai ethnic identity and historical consciousness in the decades to follow.

Even after Deng Xiaoping took control in 1976 and the Chinese government adopted the policy of allowing the people to have greater freedom in agricultural production and trade—abolishing the centralised farming system, communes as well as social organisations that the government had set up in the villages—still the feelings of conflict and scars of wounds deeply inflicted on the minds of the Tai people remained clearly visible. The Tai people still felt that the Chinese government or the khay (Han Chinese) people had interfered too much with their own lives and began to express resentment towards the khay people in various forms and manners.

In Lak Chang village, the antipathetic feelings towards the khay people are expressed by various means. For instance, the Tai peasants choose not to sell newly harvested rice to khay merchants and prefer to sell only the surplus or leftover rice from the previous agricultural year. Endogamous marriage has now become a standard practice. Some Lak Chang villagers explicitly forbid their children to marry different ethnic groups. More importantly, during the past two decades, the demands for local agricultural products have increased rapidly and
the value of paddy land has also increased. Land-use patterns have become more intensified and ethnic tensions between the Tai and the Han Chinese over landholdings have also increased.

During the late 1980s, a group of five khay families migrated to settle in Lak Chang village by purchasing land within the village from a few Tai families and building houses at the entrance to the village. In 1994, due to an increase in Tai farmer households, the land committee and the village elders convened a meeting for a new allocation of the village farmland to suit the changing needs and reality. The meeting consisted of the poo kay, members of the land committee, the elders group and officials of the district acting as witnesses. All five khay households presented demands to the land committee for a share of farmland by arguing that they were now part of the village. The demands made by the khay newcomers were met by fierce opposition from the village land committee and the elders group.

Yee, who chaired the land committee of the village at that time, gave an account thus: “The land committee refused to let the khay people have a parcel of land because their fathers had never contributed their labour to open up farmland in Lak Chang village.” The reasons of the village committee were that the khay people were not real members of the village and the forefathers or ancestors of these people had had no part in developing the place nor had they earned a living on the village land before. These people therefore had no right to the use of the village land like other offspring of Lak Chang villagers who have a right as direct descendants.

The district officers who were khay people argued that these people had a legal right because, according to domicile registration, they were lawfully living in Lak Chang village and all were citizens of China. However, the poo kay, the land committee and elders of the village invariably refused the khay householders rights over the village farmland of the kind proposed by the officers. Even though the officers threatened to bring the matter up with the district office, to consider removal of this land committee, as well as to relieve the poo kay of his position, the people of Lak Chang still adhered to their original resolution. Meetings to resolve this problem were held five times but to no avail until the rice-planting

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31 In Daikong, household land within the village can be bought and sold freely but farm land is state property and therefore cannot be bought or sold.
season approached and the matter still could not be settled, resulting in the process of land allocations coming to a halt, with other Tai farming households who had not received land allocations before suffering from this problem as well.

After vehement arguments for a period of several days, the land committee issued a resolution that the village meeting allocate farmland to the five *khay* households of an area merely one-third of the land that a Tai household receives, that is, each *khay* household was to receive farmland of three *mou*. All the *khay* householders protested against this ruling but the land committee affirmed their decision saying, “We give only this, take it or leave it.”

Although the people of Lak Chang were fearful of the powers of the district officer and the representatives of the Chinese authorities, a feeling deeply inflicted following the Communist revolution, the villagers were united in opposition—“concerning farmland, we cannot give in”—and in the end the *khay* householders conceded to the decision of the land committee and accepted the said quantity of land. From that time on, the people of Lak Chang issued a village law absolutely forbidding any villager to sell household land to an outsider to prevent a recurrence of this problem in the future.

Conflicts, as in the case of farmland allocation, may be one instance showing that the Tai, as a minority under the influence of China for a long time, although accepting authoritative rule and accepting Chinese culture and traditions in many ways as their own and unavoidably acknowledging themselves as a part of China, have not remained passive receptors of government policies. They have, however, tried to struggle for the rights of self-determination, as well as engage in the struggle to define a meaningful identity of Tai-ness which is deeply rooted in farming community, land, rice, Buddhism and other cultural symbols. We shall return to discuss this matter in detail again in the final chapter.