Chapter Seven

CONTINUITY AND RECONSTRUCTION OF TAI ETHNIC IDENTITY

In the book *Islands of History*, Marshal Sahlins asserted that “culture is precisely the organization of the current situation in the terms of a past”.\(^1\) In other words, the past is always practised in the present, not because the past imposes itself, but because subjects in the present fashion the past in the practice of their social identity. Thus the organisation of the current situation in the terms of a past can only take place in the present. The past that affects the present and the future is a past constructed in the present. The imposition of a model of the past on the present occurs as a wilful act in socialisation and in nation-building, and in both cases the relation between the constitution of identity and the identification of the past is strongly systemic.\(^2\)

The construction and reconstruction of identity is a complex temporal interaction of multiple practices of identification internal and external to a population. The making of history is thus an important part of the constitutive process of identity formation. “A society is what it remembers, we are what we remember…”\(^3\) History is just as much a social construct as ethnic or group

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1 Sahlins (1985:155).
identity. The attribution of meaning and production of identity models are motivated practices. History and identity should therefore be understood in terms of the way in which they are constructed and reconstructed.

During the past two decades, the construction and reconstruction of identity on the basis of “nation-state” have reached a critical stage in many countries. Old imagined communities based on citizenship of nation-states have begun to decline rapidly in importance under pressure from globalisation storms. New forms of imagined community based on primordial loyalties, ethnicity, local community, language and other culturally concrete forms have begun to play increasingly important roles.

On the disastrous collapse of the Soviet Empire, Soviet citizenship rapidly lost its meaning. The once mighty and fearsome empire disintegrated and faded away in the wake of rapid increase of ethnic-based movements for political and economic autonomy. Several ethnic groups, such as the Lithuanians and the Kazakstans, tried to break free from Russia. The process of fragmentation of the traditional political community has taken the form of ethnic movements toward local autonomy and community self-control. Each group united itself based on ethnic identity to struggle for the freedom to manage their own lives. What Clifford Geertz⁴ depicted some years ago as the “integrative revolution” in reference to the so-called modernisation process in the new post-colonial states of the Third World might just as well be depicted today as the “disintegrative revolution” in reference to the system as a whole especially since the 1990s.⁵

The re-emergence and intensification of ethnic conflicts in various parts of the world such as the Basques and the Catalans in Spain, the Irish and Scots in the United Kingdom; the emergence of groups known as the Fourth World, such as Indians of North America, the Hawaiians in the United States, the Kastom movement of the Melanesians or of the Karens, Lawa and Tai in Burma; these ethnic conflicts are clear evidence of the process of fragmentation which has taken the form of ethnic movements for cultural autonomy. New imagined communities are being constructed on the bases of primordial loyalties, languages and ethnic identities. A kind of membership known as citizenship in territorially defined and state-governed societies or nation-states is being replaced by an identity based on other culturally concrete forms.

⁴ Geertz (1973).
In cases where the population or “citizenship” in question is only weakly integrated into a larger political unit or a nation-state, an ethnic movement may simply imply political and economic autonomy in a situation where the ethnic group still manages to retain its own cultural and ethnic identity. This applies to groups such as the Tai and Kachin of Burma and the Kurds in Iran. In such movements, these groups may have been able to maintain their traditional niches in large political systems dating back to early colonial periods. These groups may have been able to maintain their distinct cultural heritage which is set apart from the rest of the nation-state’s majority community. Consequently the struggle for self-determination and independence does not stress new ethnic identity and local culture since these groups already have their own cultural and historical continuity.

But in the cases of ethnic groups that have been assimilated and absorbed to some degree and have become a part of the nation-state, the ethnic identity which was based on the use of the same language, nationality, religion or certain cultural symbols would have greatest importance in creating a culturally distinct community when they break away or try to break away from the former nation-state. Creation of a new imagined community therefore involves the creation of a new self-identity based on a culture and/or an ethnic group quite separate from the former nation-state.

In the case of the Tai in Daikong, throughout the past several centuries, the local culture and identity have been very much taken for granted simply because there was no historical discontinuity between the present and the cultural past. However, after the Communist revolution in 1949, the abolition of the chaopha and the changes that took place in Daikong during the Cultural Revolution moved the Tai to alienate themselves from the larger political community. More than two decades of direct Chinese rule after the Cultural Revolution resulted in a crisis of identity, the re-emergence and intensification of sub-national ethnic conflicts and a search for meaning and cultural roots.

Ever since the early 1980s, after the political upheaval in China began to subside to a somewhat orderly condition, a search for cultural roots and a reconstruction of the Tai ethnic identity began to emerge in Daikong. The economic and

6 Leach (1954).
political crises which the Tai people had to endure from the 1950s onwards made it necessary for them to have a new self-definition and new meaning to fit the real experiences facing them. Naturally, the process of self-definition of the Tai did not take place in a vacuum but sprang up in a world whose self-definition has already been predetermined at a certain level. For this reason, the reconstruction of ethnic identity was a process of separating ethnic boundaries and selecting certain past experiences and incidents to be rewritten so that they represent “life experiences” which connect the past with the present and the future. The self-definition process therefore means rewriting the “real history” of the group or a new historical chapter. History making is one form of the self-definition process as long as such history making links or reflects involvement between incidents alleged to have happened in the past with present living conditions. History making in the self-defining process therefore means the creation of a set of incidents that has meaning to people of the present generation.

During the past decade, the reconstruction of the Tai ethnic identity has become a matter of conscious choice. The Tai select their own histories which are significant events for them now, isolated from the mass of events that they have actually encountered. The Tai have been trying to reconstruct and reinterpret their own history by means of writing folklore and Tai chronicles, such as *The Tai Yai Chronicles* and *Muang Tai Chronicles,* which are interpretations of Tai chronicles from the original text of *Chaophya Dharmatay.* In these writings, including interpretations of other folklore of the Tai Daikong, the Tai people are telling themselves and other people that more than a thousand years ago there was an independent and self-governing Tai state that expanded and covered vast territories—an area which extended from the northwest of Yunnan province to the Kachin, Shan and Sky states in Myanmar. These writings, including folklore and other Tai chronicles that have been used in rewriting and revising interpretations, all speak of the “kingdom of the White Flower Mao Luang Kohsampee” or the “Mao Luang federation” which was a united and prosperous kingdom, having mighty armies able to extend its authority up to Kunming, Burma and the territories of Laos, Chiang Mai and Ayudhaya in later years. According to modern Tai Daikong interpretation, Tai Daikong culture flourished—before the Lanna, Sukhothai or Ayudhaya kingdoms—under a

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8 Nanthasingha (1997).
9 Chao Hong Yuen and Sompong (1997).
famous Tai leader or hero: Chao Sua Khan Fa of Mao kingdom who unified the Tai race into a strong united people. However, this kingdom disintegrated in the sixteenth century due to massive attacks by the Chinese army.

Whether Chao Sua Khan Fa and other heroes mentioned in the chronicles really existed and the Mao kingdom was truly a large and powerful state may not be such important issues,¹⁰ but the important thing is that the writings and interpretation of Tai chronicles in the past decade are the constitution of a significant or real history. It is an attempt to reconstruct a sense of Tai ethnic identity through the creation of an historical consciousness or ideals of the Tai race. Almost every line of the Muang Tai Chronicles depicts the yearnings for the glories of the Tai people of the fourteenth century. During the period of Chao Sua Khan Fa, the Tai were one country with one and the same king, united and inseparable, free of oppression by any other people’s rule. The Tai chronicles also record accounts of many major battles between the Mao kingdom and the Ming dynasty of the Chinese Imperial Court in the fifteenth century to remind the Tai people to enshrine in their memory that at one time Muang Tai used to be independent and that their ancestors sacrificed their blood and lives to preserve that independence. Even though the Tai people were attacked by the Chinese and the Burmese, they tried to defend themselves and were able to revitalise their strength many times until finally they were broken up into small states under the rule of China and Burma, a situation which persists up to the present time.

The perplexing problem of shifting and changing ethnic boundaries among the Tai in Daikong in their relations with other ethnic groups in Yunnan, the reshaping of their own ethnicity with reference to their own sense of the past or the construction of Tai historical consciousness which began to emerge during the past decade may not involve only the yearning for past glories or the return to the security of the chaopha system, and may not be attempts to seek separation and independence from Chinese rule. On the contrary, we are witnessing the regaining of control over the production of knowledge or the power of self-definition. Amidst increasing tensions with other ethnic groups in Daikong, the Tai try to differentiate themselves by redefining their Tai-ness in the vocabulary of history, kinship and religious rituals; and, most of all, by resisting Chinese supremacy.

The reconstruction of Tai ethnic identity takes place within the context of power relations with the Han Chinese. It is part of an attempt to seek self-determination which begins necessarily with the power of self-definition. In this light, the reinterpretation of *Muang Tai Chronicles* stresses that there was little disparity in terms of greatness between the Tai *chaopha* and the Chinese Emperor, and between the Tai kingdom and China of the past.

After the revolution of 1949, Daikong became a prefecture within the province of Yunnan. Although China officially referred to Daikong as an “autonomous prefecture” of the Tai and Jingpo, in reality the Tai were under the direct rule of China. Soon after the revolution, the *chaopha* were dethroned and the palaces dismantled and burnt to the ground. The *chaopha* and family members were incarcerated, beaten up, abused and put to death in the presence of the Tai populace. The ricefields that the Tai people cleared and cultivated and from which they earned their livelihood for hundreds of years were turned into state property, snatched from the control and management of the Tai people. Conflicts and upheavals which have characterised Chinese politics during the decades after the Communist revolution also resulted in economic crises for the Tai community. The abundance of food and bountiful crops were replaced by hunger and starvation under the collective farming system and commune plans.

After 1976, although Chinese official policies became more transparent and the Tai people began to enjoy more freedom of self-determination, the power relations between the Tai and the Han Chinese developed into a sort of confrontation between two interest groups, each group vying to expand its own freedom and curb the liberty of the other. In their relations of confrontation, the target of each side was not a conflict or a fight to the death with the other side; but rather to alter the positions in the power relations that benefit the opposite side and to fortify the positions that benefit one’s own side and prevent one’s own side from turning into something else.¹¹ From this perspective, Tai ethnic identity is situationally reconstructed as a weapon in the clash of social, economic and political interests in the relations between the Tai and the Chinese and other ethnic groups. Therefore self-definition is a matter of power relations expressed by symbolism¹² which the Chinese and the Tai, representing two interest groups

¹¹ Foucault (1982:221).
(including other ethnic groups in Daikong territory), are contending and striving for in the process of allocation, preservation and utilisation of power.

Self-definition is therefore the creation of historical consciousness. In the interest of building a political process of differentiation, many cultural symbols are utilised in order to arouse emotions and feelings and to prompt group members to resist dominance. Cultural symbols and ethnic groupings are utilised in forming organisations and creating unification to oppose the other interest groups. The employment of ethnic symbols is an effective strategy, as ethnic symbols are able to resolve various problems of organisational arrangements, such as cultural emblems of ethnic groups that confirm common ancestry, and kinship and marriage traditions that ban outsiders from joining the group.

In this light, the reconstruction of Tai ethnic identity may take on many forms as the Tai adapt themselves to the changing needs and new social reality of modern times. Cultural symbols may be utilised as symbolic resistance against cultural domination within the power relations with the Han Chinese, age-old traditions could be modified to form a new organisation, and old cultural traditions can be reinterpreted to constitute a new set of social rules.

**Symbolic Resistance and Reconstruction of Ethnic Identity**

From fieldwork carried out in the Kachin Hills in northern Burma over 50 years ago, Edmund Leach offered his view on the criteria for establishing the ethnic identity of the Tai people who settled in various locations in the Shan State of Burma and neighbouring territories. A first general criterion is that all Tai settlements are associated with wet-rice cultivation. Tai settlements mostly occur along the river valleys or in pockets of level country in the hills. Such settlements are always found associated with irrigated paddy land suitable for replanting rice seedlings and growing a variety of rice which is their staple diet. A second and most important criterion of group identity is that all Tai are Buddhists of the Theravada sect, devoutly observing their religious precepts and practices. The

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14 Leach (1954:30–31).
third criterion of Tai group identity is that all Tai settlements are members of a Tai-type petty state. These three criteria are closely intertwined. The prosperity and surplus production that come from plains of wet paddy imply membership of a Tai petty state which implies Buddhism.

Even though more than half a century has passed, the general criteria that Leach has observed still prevail as important criteria of how to conceptualise the category Shan or Tai. From this point of view, we will examine the reconstruction of ethnic identity and symbolic resistance of the Tai in Daikong on the basis of the three criteria mentioned above. Examples will be drawn from three cultural symbols of the Tai, namely: rice as the symbol of the Tai peasant community, *poi* festivals as the symbol of belief and devotion in Buddhism and the invention of marriage rules and traditions as part of the community reproduction process in Daikong.

**Rice: Symbolic Resistance against Cultural Supremacy**

Rice has played an important role in the way of life and social development of the Tai Daikong and other Tai groups since time immemorial. Tai society everywhere developed from a small rice-producing peasant community, with customs and traditions emanating from dialectical relationships between rice and man within the ecological niche of the river valley. Rice is not only a plant that suits the Daikong ecological system but also the staple food of the Tai; rice economy lays the foundation of social organisation and production technology as well as the belief system and world view of the Tai. For this reason, it is not surprising to find that almost all Tai communities are peasant communities, practising wet-rice cultivation; labour-exchange groups and land and irrigation committees are among the most important social and resource management organisations; households are the basic unit of production and consumption; and kinsmen are important bases for creating political and social alliances.

The Tai have a saying that mentions the old domicile of their ancestors over a thousand years ago: “wherever the water is clear and the grass is tender, the Tai people will build houses, clear forest land for ricefields and make a living”. Rice
cultivation as a way of life has been an important basis for expansion of the original Tai colonisation of the river valleys associated with the maintenance of trade routes extending from Yunnan to India.\textsuperscript{15} The peasant communities have been able to support themselves economically without very intricate production systems other than to clear the forest into ricefields. When new peasant communities began to grow in numbers, such new communities attracted and accumulated greater strength and more surplus produce, thus expanding themselves into larger communities which would develop in time into Tai-type petty states.

For centuries of Sino-Tai historical relations, “rice” has played a crucial role in the practice of political supremacy. From many historical records,\textsuperscript{16} it was mentioned that after the Tai lost the last battle against the Chinese armies in the fifteenth century, the Chinese succeeded in taking the Mao kingdom. It is apparent that, from then on, Tai glory had departed. In place of a solid kingdom, we have now semi-independent principalities. In the sixteenth century, Tai principalities east of the Irrawaddy River became the Shan states and were never free from Burmese rule, though from time to time various states gained a nominal independence. The Tai principalities to the east and northeast of Muang Mao were annexed to China and remained part of Yunnan province till today. The chaopha of each principality was appointed directly by the Chinese Imperial Court to rule over his own territory independently and was answerable directly only to the Imperial Court. As the Tai Daikong now remember it, Tai rice, especially from Muang Chae Fang, was of superb quality, relished by the Chinese Emperor and ministers of the Imperial Court. In the historical consciousness of the Tai, rice becomes a symbol of political superiority and domination.

Moreover, during the three decades following the Communist revolution, the Tai people had to suffer unprecedented shortage of rice for consumption as a result of production problems arising from collective farming and the commune systems, including the fact that rice production from Daikong was heavily siphoned off to feed labour forces in other parts of China.

During the past two decades following administrative reforms under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese government abolished the collective

\textsuperscript{15} Leach (1954:38–39).

\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, Elias (1876); Parker (1892); Scott and Hardiman (1900–01); Cochrane (1910); Chea (1995).
farming and commune systems, opening the way for farmers to have a free hand in production and sale of their produce. Throughout this period, the Tai peasants took advantage of this favourable situation to concentrate on production and trade to quickly raise their status. The demand for agricultural products increased rapidly, thus making prices advance accordingly. The fertility of farmland in Daikong enabled the Tai peasants to produce cash crops all year round. The Tai peasants turned into expert traders and producers of cash crops. They have developed an ability to predict market demand and they have the skills to bargain for better prices for commercial crops with Chinese merchants on equal terms.

In Daikong prefecture, rice production is carried out during the months of April to October. Thereafter, the Tai peasants normally divide their farmland for growing a variety of commercial crops such as wheat, watermelons and peas. All these products will be sold to the Chinese traders who come to buy them directly from the fields. In addition, the peasant households grow a variety of vegetables for family consumption as well as for sale in Muang Khon open market to earn cash income all year round.

Non-glutinous rice is the produce that brings in good income for the Tai people every year. Income from rice sales accounts for nearly half of the total earnings that a household obtains from the sale of agricultural produce each year. The price of rice fluctuates according to the volume and each year’s market demand. During the months of June and July, rice supply becomes short in many parts of China, pushing up the price, and rice merchants come by the Tai village almost every week to buy rice. However, the Tai villagers who definitely have surplus stock—because they never use or consume up to half of the quantity they produce in each year—prefer not to sell rice at this time of the year and, instead, prefer to sell the rice during the months of October to November when rice stocks begin to flow into the market and prices begin to fall. The Tai people stock up their silos with new rice and sell the previous year’s rice to the Chinese traders.

If the Tai sold rice during the month of August, they would make 25 to 30 per cent more money from the sales. When we asked why such shrewd traders do not choose to maximise the profit from the rice sales as with other products, the answer we invariably obtained was that the villagers want to hold on to the rice stock in order to have the feeling of security in life.
One night, at the wedding party of Sam Fong's nephew, we found what may be the real reason behind this odd behaviour when an elder of Lak Chang retold this story.

Our forefathers had to deliver the best rice to the Chinese Court for many generations… But nowadays, the Tai descendants sell *left-over* rice they don’t want to eat to the *khay* people. It makes me feel good.

The words of this elder made a large group of Tai peasants who were drinking at the party burst into thunderous laughter as if these words had touched a tender spot in their hearts and provoked common feelings among the circle of listeners.

In reality, we probably would not be able to arrive at an understanding of the rice-selling conduct on purely economic grounds since this behaviour is guided by another set of values. To fully grasp the meaning of it, one has to begin with an understanding of “rice” as a symbol of resistance against political dominance, which may help to explain the situation the Tai are currently facing, both in terms of their adaptation to the market mechanism and as a means of expressing their resistance to a more powerful ethnic majority.

By viewing rice as a cultural symbol in Tai society, we can clearly see that the Tai have changed rice from the symbol of a subjugated community to that of a respectable one, from being a subordinate to that of a challenger, altering the inferior position of relationship to one of equal terms by the process of historical retrospection. The use of rice as a symbol of Tai community has given special meaning to the awareness of being subjected to economic and political dominance. The sale of rice that is left over after consumption to the Han Chinese is one form of symbolic resistance. Rice becomes the symbol that gives meaning to the experience the Tai are currently facing, both in terms of self-adjustment to capitalism that came with the Chinese and as symbolic opposition to political dominance, while at the same time it is also a tool for presenting the Tai ethnic identity.

**Poi Festivals, Buddhism and Tai Community**

Apart from rice being used as a symbol of resistance, the holding of Buddhist religious events—especially *poi para* or *poi prachao*—is another form of expression whereby cultural traditions are reinterpreted in the formation of new social organisations uniting fellow Tai in competing with other ethnic groups.
Throughout history, Buddhism has played a fundamental role in the shaping of Tai ethnic identity. The nucleus of being Tai today is the belief in Buddhism. The Tai differentiate themselves from neighbouring ethnic groups by citing one main reason: the others are not Buddhists. By this reasoning, being Tai means professing the Buddhist faith; other people who do not believe in the Buddhist religion of the Theravada sect are looked upon as outsiders and are segregated outside the Tai ethnic boundaries. Buddhism is paramount at the cultural level and also exerts a great deal of influence on village social life. The significance of Buddhism in the life of the Tai can be measured by the time, resources and labour that ordinary Tai villagers devote to Buddhist religious affairs, especially in arranging *poi* or merit-making festivities.

In the past, *poi* festivals were affairs in which rich households in the village dedicated themselves as sponsors for the purchase of Buddhist statues, Tripitaka cabinets as well as various items for presentation to the temple, including celebration feasts to which all villagers were invited to join. *Poi* festivals were good occasions to celebrate life after harvest, to reaffirm positive ties with friends, relatives, neighbours and all members of the village invited by the sponsors to join the celebrations. *Poi* festivals were also significant occasions for merit making and creating self-esteem for the sponsors, as well as playing an important part in socialising the new generations of young men and women with duties and training regarding their roles and responsibilities toward the community. The group of young men had an important role acting as representatives of the sponsors in travelling to purchase Buddhist statues as well as other items for presentation to the temple. These young men were also the main labour force repairing the temple prior to the *poi* festival. The maiden group, on the other hand, had the main task of decorating and beautifying the temple and helping the sponsors arranging flowers and cooking food for the feasts.

At present, however, *poi* festivals sponsored by various households in the village have become scarce because increasing intensification of agricultural production has saddled villagers with increased work on their farms and trading all year round. The Tai villagers now prefer to organise *poi* festivals at temples where every household in the village becomes a joint sponsor, with the village elders acting as organising committee. *Poi para* festivals are similar in nature to *poi* festivals in olden days in all respects with the exception that funding for the festivals is
derived entirely from donations by every household and the feasts are held on the temple grounds. *Poi para* or *poi chong* festivals have become an important occasion for joint participation by every household in the village in cleaning and making the temple beautiful as well as preparing food and wine for the feast.

During the past decade, *poi chong* festivals have become important functions that various villages organise on a grand scale by inviting guests from outside the village to join the festivities. These festivals have begun to take the shape of competition between villages in the vicinity to see which village can outdo the others. If in the previous year, Lak Chang village was able to arrange a *poi* festival on a grand scale and became the talk of people in that area, then in the following year another Tai village would try to organise a *poi* festival that was even grander and more lavishly entertaining in order to make Lak Chang and other villages lose face. In so doing, Tai villages have to try to arrange grander and grander festivals year after year. Consequently, *poi* festivals have undergone a transformation from being activities that concentrated upon competition and display of wealth and prestige between various households of the same village to instead becoming competitions between villages.

This new form of *poi* festival places a great deal of emphasis on the unity and cohesion among villagers and at the same time strengthens ethnic identity through the display of religious symbols. *Poi* festivals have become rituals which stress religious devotion to the Buddhism of the Tai people. Through these rituals, the stage is set whereby the Tai are set apart from other ethnic groups. At the same time, displays of affluence and social prestige at the village level are now expressed through other forms of social display such as organising funerals or wedding parties on a grand scale to give impressions of esteem and honour at individual or household levels.

**Marriage, Farmland and the Reproduction of an Imagined Community**

Nowadays, every Tai in Daikong is a citizen of the People's Republic of China. Holding Chinese citizenship, however, does not imply assimilation into the Han ethnic group. On the contrary, it is a part of an adjustment to a social situation
where a number of ethnic groups coexist together, and each group speaks a number of different languages and dialects. To a certain extent, the Tai have adapted themselves by learning to speak, read and write the Chinese language, eating with chopsticks and building Chinese-style houses, all of which are part of their adaptation to present-day social conditions. The Tai emulations of Chinese characteristics are not just distorted imitations but become, rather, constitutive elements in Tai lives. The ethnic identity of the Tai Daikong is constructed in a continual process, not only by external forces and labelling by outsiders with whom they interact, but also by their own socio-cultural process of creating a self-definition. In certain situations, the acceptance of Han characteristics is real. Conversely, in other situations, the stress on ethnic difference and group identity may be more advantageous, especially in terms of using ethnic boundaries and markers to exclude and deny other groups the access to scarce resources, particularly farmland.

In Daikong, the best farmlands belong to Tai villagers whose ancestors were pioneer settlers in the central plain of Muang Khon many centuries ago. Each Tai village maintains the distinct characteristics of an autonomous unit, not only in terms of physical appearances but also in historical background and socio-economic formations which are clearly distinguishable from other villages. Fellow villagers have a strong sense of belonging to the same social unit, yet they live separately from Tai people of other villages in the vicinity.

During the past two decades, farmland has become increasingly valued due to expanded markets and increased demands for agricultural products. Increasing demands from the market have resulted in more intensification of land-use and increasing ethnic tensions over landholdings, as the Han Chinese migrants began moving in and laying claim to a share of the village’s paddy fields. The Tai peasants tried to refute the claim, citing the reason that the khay were not real members of the village because their forefathers had no part in the pioneer work of clearing the forestland in this area. The khay therefore had no right to the use of farmland unlike the Tai offspring of Lak Chang village who have a right as direct descendants.

In this case, the reproduction and reconfirmation of Tai ethnic identity are attempts to proclaim legitimate rights over land inheritance and, at the same time, to exclude outsiders from access to resources that are scarce and essential to the local economy. The reconstruction of ethnic identity thus plays a crucial role
in the struggle over scarce resources. However, the struggle between the Tai and the Chinese is not merely a struggle over land and property rights, it is also a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a struggle which has become a contentious effort to give meaning to local history and ethnic identity. In this struggle, the Tai peasants have modified their cultural traditions in various ways. For example, marriage practices have been reshaped so that endogamous marriage is now the rule, traditional practices of respect toward the elders have been revived and the council of elders now plays an important role in supervising various affairs of the village.

Symbolic resistance against cultural domination as expressed in the selling of leftover rice, the endogamous marriage rule, the organisation of poi festivals, the reaffirmation of ethnic identity to legitimise land rights, the construction of historical consciousness by reinterpreting ancient chronicles, the relearning of Tai languages in villages and the Tai Association in Muang Khon, all attest to the role of the Tai people in actively constructing, perpetuating and transforming cultural values and traditions in the interest of building political processes of differentiation and commonality. Amidst increasing conflicts and competition with the Han Chinese over scarce resources, the Tai try to differentiate themselves from the khay by redefining their Tai-ness in the vocabulary of history, kinship, marriage, land rights and religious rituals. We are thus witnessing the invention of their real history, the production of ethnic consciousness in creating a unified political identity and an imagined Tai community.

However, Tai ethnic identity is not a ready-made entity, fixed and permanent, but a conscious choice of identifications and affiliations that are picked up because they seemed advantageous under present conditions. The Tai choose to invent new traditions—such as endogamous marriage—and they choose to modify old ones—for instance the poi festivals—in order to construct new principles of social organisations which emphasise social unity in the context of increased competition with other ethnic groups. The construction and reconstruction of Tai ethnic identity thus take place within the context of an adaptation aimed at meeting the changing needs of modern times. The case of the Tai Daikong underlines the fluidity of tradition as a weapon which the weak can use to fight for and protect their interests.
The Tai construct, reconstruct and modify value systems to conform with changing socio-economic and political contexts. Ethnic differentiation from other groups thus becomes an important issue of power relations arising from a certain set of conditions such as competition for scarce resources and the clash of interests. In such power relations, the Tai people find themselves in a more advantageous position by redefining their ethnic boundaries and their Tai-ness through the invention of their real history and modifications of various cultural symbols.

Tai ethnic identity is thus a realm where culture and power are closely intertwined. An important point to be considered in defining what constitutes a Tai ethnic group concerns the nature of its subjective construction. This is deeply rooted in the image of themselves held by individuals, communities and polities, with each of these distinguished from others by particular historical, social and political contexts. The ethnic identity of the Tai Daikong is thus constructed in a continual process, not only by external forces and labelling by the Chinese and other outsiders with whom they interact, but also through their own socio-cultural process of creating a self-definition. The perplexing notion of the ethnic group is largely attributable to this imagined construction. Thus the Tai ethnic category can be examined only when we can account for the continual processes of imagined construction, both subjective and externally enforced, viewing them both together in their historical context. The Tai ethnic category is thus a complex and dynamic construct which takes place within the context of changing power relations and socio-economic conditions where the past is reconstructed to give meaning to the present and hope for the future.