INTRODUCTION

The Tai ethnic group, in its different branches, is beyond any doubt one of the most widespread of any ethnic group in the Southeast Asian peninsula. Different branches of the Tai are found from Assam, Vietnam and Laos to the Chinese province of Guangxi, and from Thailand to the interior of Yunnan. In Yunnan province, southern China, there are at least two major centres of the Tai civilisation. One is Sipsongpanna, home of the Tai Lue in southern Yunnan, and another is Daikong, home of the Tai Yai in western Yunnan. While the Tai Lue of Sipsongpanna have been described sketchily by various students of Tai studies, little is known of the Tai Daikong in western Yunnan.

The Tai Daikong are known by various names. They call themselves “Tai Luang” or Tai Yai and in fact share remarkable cultural similarities with the Tai Yai of Shan States and the Tai Yai in Mae Hong Son province of northwest Thailand. According to Chea Yanchong, Tai Daikong refers to a particular group of Tai who settled and continued to live in the areas south (dai) of the River Kong (or Salaween). The Chinese scholars have invariably called this group “Tai Dehong”, “Tai Mao”, or “Tai Nua”; all these different names connote different state names or places of residence. Professor Chea further distinguished Tai Daikong into two distinct groups. The first group is called Tai Nua (northern Tai). This group of Tai Nua lives near the Burma–Chinese border, in the areas of Muang Mao, Muang

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1 See, for example, Dodd (1923); Eberhardt (1968); Izikowitz (1962); Lebar, et al. (1964); Terwiel, et al. (1990); Condominas (1990).
2 Sipsongpanna is formally called the “Xishuang Banna Dai Autonomous Prefecture” by the Chinese government.
3 Daikong is formally called the “Dehong Dai and Jing Po Nationalities Autonomous Prefecture”.
4 See, for example, Anan Ganjanapan (1994); Chea Yanchong (1995); Hsieh Shih-Chung (1989).
5 See Elias (1876); Milne (1910); Leach (1954); Saimong Mangrai (1963); Eberhardt (1988).
Wan Teng or Wan Tieng, Muang One and Chiang Fang. Another group is called “Tai Dai” (southern Tai). The Tai Dai live in the areas of Muang Khon, Muang Ti and Muang La. These two groups of Tai Dehong share many similarities in terms of cultural traits. The spoken languages are basically the same but the written languages are mutually incomprehensible. Tai Dai uses the Tai Pong written characters of the Shan States, while the Tai Nua’s written characters resemble those of the Tai Ahom in Assam.

As if the multitude of tribe and state names (e.g. Tai Daikong, Tai Dehong, Tai Mao, Tai Nua, Tai Luang and Tai Yai) are not bewildering and confusing enough, a number of Western scholars have adopted the Burmese term “Shan” and referred to Tai Mao or Tai Daikong as “Chinese Shan”, “Mao Shan”, or “Shan of Yunnan”. In fact, as Leach has noted, the Burmese apply the term “Shan” consistently to all the inhabitants of the Yunnan–Burma frontiers area who call themselves Tai. The Burmese usage of the term “Shan” has not been confined only to Tai Yai but also included other ethnic Tais such as Tai Lue and Tai Khun who speak different dialects.

The question, then, is who are the Tai Daikong? Postulating from the linguistic arguments, around the eighth century AD, the Tai world already extended across much of northern Southeast Asia, differentiated into five linguistic groups11. The western group were ancestors of the present Tai Yai in Burma and Yunnan. By the next century, Tai-speaking chieftaincies were established on the flooded plains of the River Mao. These were believed to be Muang Mao and Pong. In the succeeding centuries, the western group of Tai-speaking people established themselves as the governing population through the Burmese Shan states, Assam and in much of Yunnan.

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8 Elias (1876); Burling (1992:85); Tanabe (1991:44).
9 Leach (1954).
11 Wyatt (1984:11–13). According to Wyatt, Tai-speaking people can be differentiated into five groups: (1) the northern group, ancestors of Zhuang; (2) Upland Tai group, ancestors of Black, Red and White Tai; (3) Siang Kwang group, ancestors of central Thai (Siamese); (4) Lao group, ancestors of Lao and Sukhothai languages; and (5) Western group, ancestors of Shan, Ahom and Lue languages.
Historical Studies of the Tai Yai:  
A Brief Sketch

Western studies of Tai Yai ever since the mid-nineteenth century have focused on 
the historical development of this particular group. Ney Elias’s pioneering work 
on the History of the Shan in Upper Burma and Western Yunnan is an attempt to 
outline Tai Yai history on the basis of Shan chronicles collected in Mandalay such 
as the Muang Mao, Shweli and Kosampi chronicles. Further attempts to present 
a brief sketch of the Tai Yai history, such as the works of Scott and Hardiman and 
Cochrane, are also based on Tai Yai chronicles.

However, the multitude of tribe names and state names and the conflicting dates 
recorded in these chronicles have led to different interpretations of Tai Yai history. 
For example, the kingdom of Pong appears in the translation of a Tai Yai 
chronicle obtained in Manipur by Captain Pemberton in 1895. The same 
kingship is mentioned in the list of conquests by Anoratha, the king of Pagan 
who conquered all the Tai Yai country up to Yunnan and reached Angkor and 
Lopburi in the early eleventh century. E.H. Parker, by dint of Chinese learning, 
believed the kingdom of Pong to be Luh-Schwan, while Ney Elias was convinced 
that it was Muang Mao. Differences in interpretation remind us to treat 
historical analyses based on the Tai Yai chronicles with caution. Conflicting 
historical interpretations and debates among Tai scholars concerning the dates 
and names of a number of Tai Yai states continue to the present.

According to many chronicles, the Tai Yai trace their existence as a nation to the 
fabulous source of the heaven-descended kings, Khun Lung (or Khun Lu) and 
Khun Lai. Most Tai Yai chronicles begin with the legend that, in the middle of 
the sixth century, two brothers, Khun Lung and Khun Lai, descended from 
heaven and took up their abode in Hsenwi, or in the valley of the Shweli, or of

12 Elias (1876:1–4).
13 Scott and Hardiman (1900).
14 Cochrane (1910).
15 Scott and Hardiman (1900:188); cf. Changli (1990:49–60).
the Irrawaddy. There they found a population which immediately accepted them as kings. Khun Lung and Khun Lai founded Muang Mao or Kawsampi and sent their children to rule over Tai chieftaincies in the plains of the River Mao. Some chronicles state that Muang Mao was founded in BE 1111 (AD 568) while others state that it was founded in BE 1378 (AD 835).

A legend which appears in the Muang Mao chronicles has it that Khun Tueng, son of a Naga princess of the Mao River, was appointed in BE 1305 (AD 762) by the King of Nan Chao to rule over the kingdom of Mao. Another Tai Yai chronicle states that in BE 1720 (AD 1177) Khun Fong Kham was appointed by the King of Talifu to rule over Muang Mao. Later on, the kingdom of Mao expanded its rule and subdued smaller chieftaincies to join together under the name of Muang Mork Khao Mao Luang Kawsampi or Muang Mao Luang Kawsampi.

The Tai Yai chronicles attribute stupendous feats of arms to the Tai Yai from the sixth century onward. Widely scattered through much of what is now the Burma–Yunnan fr ontiers area by the eleventh century, but apparently best organised and most densely populated in Nam Mao or Shweli Valley, the Tai Yai apparently were temporarily held in check by Anoratha, the king of Pagan. The Muang Mao chronicles state that Anoratha married a daughter of the Mao King (the chronicles give a date equivalent to AD 1057), thereby implying recognition of Pagan’s suzerainty. However, the chronicles also state that the Mao King never went to the Pagan court as a true vassal must have done. This, perhaps, implies that the Mao kingdom remained independent.

According to Wyatt, the Hsenwi chronicle pulls the whole Tai world together. It treats the Tai world as a single entity, dotted with innumerable centres in communication with one another, stretching from the Black River valley of northern Vietnam to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Wyatt asserted that there is little, if any, evidence that the Tai Yai of the Shweli valley attained anywhere near the expanse of territory that is claimed in the chronicle. It is important, however, that the chronicle preserves a tradition of an open world—an environment in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when the political organisation of the world was not

18 Scott and Hardiman (1900:196).
fixed but was susceptible to the ambitions of any group who dared to challenge the old empires. By the end of the eleventh century, the Tai Yai had certainly become the dominant element in the population of northern Burma and western Yunnan.

According to Chea Yanchong, a more reliable history of Tai Yai begins in BE 1797 (AD 1254), a year after Kublai Khan of Mongol descent defeated the kingdom of Talifu. The Chinese chronicle states that the Tai principalities of the Shweli valley became real vassals of the Mongol court. But decades later, Chao Sua Khan Fa, King of Mao, assumed the leadership of the Tai Yai of the Shweli valley. He subdued all the neighbouring principalities and pulled the Tai world together. The Hsenwi chronicles state that Chao Sua Khan Fa marched all the way to Kunming. He defeated the Lao states, Chiang Saen, Sipsong Panna and many other chieftaincies. During his reign, the Mao kingdom grew stronger, stretching its influence in every direction.

Historians, however, have assigned different dates to the reign of Chao Sua Khan Fa. Wyatt, relying more on the Burmese records, believes the reign of Chao Sua Khan Fa to be between 1152–1205 AD, while Chea Yanchong by dint of Chinese and Tai records contends that Chao Sua Khan Fa assumed the leadership of Muang Mao in BE 1879 (AD 1336). During his reign, Chao Sua Khan Fa united all the neighbouring Tai Yai principalities and attacked and subdued Ava, Chiang Rung, Chiang Tung, Chiang Rai, Chiang Saen, Lampang and Lamphun among others. He also sent his brother, Chao Sam Luang Fa, all the way south to what is now the central plain of Thailand.

About AD 1338, a long series of wars began between China and the Mao kingdom, perhaps a direct result of the rise to power of the Mongols in China. Early in 1253, the Mongol armies seized Talifu, the capital of old Nan Chao, and moved eastward to supplant the Sung dynasty and rule the Chinese empire. The more aggressive China of the Mongols was to prove almost immediately to be a very different neighbour to the Tai Yai than Nan Chao had been. For nearly half a century after the fall of Talifu, the Chinese had been in undisputed control of Tali and Yunnan, and were seeking a firmer grip on the Tai Yai principalities in

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the west by diplomatic and military means. The growing Mao kingdom under the leadership of Chao Sua Khan Fa was certainly seen as a major threat to the assertion of Chinese power in the region.

During 1342–1348 the Imperial Court of the Yuan dynasty launched a series of battles against the Mao kingdom, none of which was decided in favour of either party. Eventually, the Imperial Court decided in favour of more diplomatic means to compel the Mao King to acknowledge himself a vassal of the Chinese court. According to Chinese sources, in 1355, Chao Sua Khan Fa sent his son to the Imperial Court of China in token of homage and, in return, the Yuan dynasty granted Chao Sua Khan Fa the title of “Chao Saen Wi Fa of Lu Chuan kingdom” implying recognition of Muang Mao’s suzerainty over neighbouring Tai Yai principalities. Chao Saen Wi Fa is the highest title given by the Chinese Imperial Court to the head of tributary states.

Though Muang Mao and other Tai Yai principalities remained practically independent, the shadow of China hung over them and grew darker with each succeeding year. In 1399, internal disturbances within Yunnan presented the Chinese court with an opportunity to begin a divide-and-rule policy. By means of greater military might, the Mao kingdom was overthrown and divided into smaller principalities. Muang Saen Wi, Muang Yang, Muang Khon and other principalities were annexed and directly governed by the Yunnan province of China.

In 1413, Chao Sua Hom Fa, a grandson of Chao Sua Khan Fa, assumed leadership of the Mao kingdom. According to Ney Elias, Chao Sua Hom Fa reigned for many decades and administered the country so successfully that it enjoyed a state of prosperity it had never before attained. During 1442–1448, however, China again launched massive attacks on the Mao kingdom and completely subdued Muang Mao. It is apparent that from then on Mao glory had departed.

27 There are contradictory accounts of Chao Sua Khan Fa’s relations with China. Ney Elias, and Cochrane after him, believes that the Chinese expedition to Muang Mao resulted in a disastrous defeat of Chao Sua Khan Fa, who fled to Ava, hotly pursued by the Chinese army. Finding that the Burmese would not protect him, he took poison and died, preferring suicide to the disgrace of capture (see Cochrane 1910:25–26).
29 Elias (1876:29).
In place of a solid kingdom, we now have semi-independent principalities. In the sixteenth century, Tai Yai principalities east of the Irrawaddy river became the Shan states and were never free from Burmese control, though from time to time various states gained a nominal independence. The Tai Yai principalities to the east and northeast of Muang Mao were annexed to China and remain part of Yunnan province today.

As mentioned earlier, historical studies of Tai Yai since the mid-nineteenth century have relied heavily on the Shan chronicles. Historical accounts of the Tai Yai presented to the Western reader by Ney Elias (1867), Hallet (1885), Parker (1892), Scott and Hardiman (1900–01) and Cochrane (1910), though rather sketchy, fragmented and at times mingled with mythical discourses, contain useful descriptions of the ancient Tai Yai social and cultural aspects up to the sixteenth century.

In all of Tai Yai history, no period is as tantalisingly dark and unknown as the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries when the Tai Yai principalities came under Burmese and Chinese control and internal conflicts and battles between these principalities were rampant. Historical studies such as Cochrane (1915) provide brief descriptions of important events in that period, but analysis of Tai Yai social and cultural development in that period is totally lacking.

There are a number of historical studies of Tai Yai in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The writings of Mangrai (1965), Taylor (1988) and Renard (1988) rely heavily on British colonial records and focus on the impact of British annexation and subsequent colonial administration on the Shan States. In parallel with this there has been an indigenous development of historical writing among a few Tai Yai scholars who aim to understand the historical development of their own society and culture. These are best exemplified by the works of Yawnghwe (1987) and Sargent (1994).

During the past few decades, growing interest among Tai scholars in the origin of the Tai reflects the quest for cultural roots and a search for comparative materials among other Tai living in different social formations. Historical writings on Tai ethnic groups are best exemplified by the works of Jit (1976), Kajorn (1982), Nithi (1990), Terwiel (1990), Srisak and Sujit (1991), Chattip (1991) and Anan (1995), to name a few.
The Ethnography of Tai Yai in Yunnan

In terms of ethnographic writing, several excellent works on Tai Yai were already published early in this century. Leslie Milne's (1910) pioneering work on the Tai Yai in northern Burma provides detailed descriptions of the Tai Yai family and social life based on personal experiences of spending 15 months in Nam Kham, a small town in north Hsenwi, a few miles from the frontier of Yunnan. Other ethnographic writings on Tai Yai, though rather sketchy and impressionistic, include Hallet (1890), Hillier (1892), Woodthorpe (1896), Scott (1936) and Collis (1938) among others.

Perhaps the first systematic study of Tai Yai in the Western ethnographic tradition was the field research on pai-i in the Yunnan border area carried out by T’ien Ju Kang in 1940. At that time, the relative isolation of the region was already being overcome. The war with the Japanese had led to increased political, economic and military contacts between the Chinese and other ethnic groups in the border area. The “Burma Road” which was to ferry supplies overland to aid the Chinese war effort cut through the Shan States region.

From his research in the 1940s, T’ien found the Tai to be most obsessed with the complex and ostentatious religious ceremonies he calls the “Great pai”31 T’ien characterises the pai ceremonies as “the most important orientation” for the lives of the Tai people. The pai involves pledges by individual householders to contribute substantial gifts to the village temple. In any particular year a number of householders might independently make similar pledges, so that the pai ceremonies can be quite elaborate and extensive. The arrangements and activities associated with the pai are extended and protracted, involving large numbers of people over lengthy periods and the expenditure of substantial resources. T’ien observes that, despite the “private” nature of the pai, the Tai associate the performance with beneficial results which are collectively enjoyed. The sponsorship of a pai is the culmination of the aspirations of the whole community.

30 T’ien’s monograph originally was presented to the London School of Economics for a doctoral degree in anthropology in 1948, but was not published until 1986.
31 In Tai terms, the religious ceremony is called “poi” or “ngarn poi” which means to make merit by donating generous gifts to the temple.
Furthermore, the sponsorship of a *pai*, like that of a Melanesian or American Indian potlatch,\(^{33}\) is a status determinant of great significance. Prestige and power go to the individual householders who contribute substantial gifts and strive to sponsor as many *pai* ceremonies as they can in a lifetime.\(^{34}\)

T’ien’s pioneering work, which focuses on the religious cults of the Tai, also sheds light on how the changing conditions attendant on the building of the Burma Road influenced the Tai life. The rise in contacts with the outside world and economic opportunities had some impact on Tai social life. The unrivalled superiority of the Sawbwa or the elite and the ruling family was being undercut by opportunities for work for the Chinese authorities and by new sources of wealth. Land was increasingly valued because of expanded markets and increased demands for local agricultural products. The changed conditions had altered attitudes toward the *pai* ceremonies. Individuals who had previously expressed an intention to perform a *pai* now used these resources in new forms of investment. While they did not repudiate the ceremonies and expressed a high moral concern for their actions, T’ien believed that the attitude towards religious ceremonies had irreversibly changed.

Another important ethnographic study of the Tai Yai is Edmund Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954). In this study, Leach focuses his attention on the whole region known as the Kachin Hills area in northern Burma, where the Kachin and the Shan populations speak a number of different languages and dialects. Aside from his major contribution to the growth of anthropological theory, Leach also provides comprehensive ethnographic material on the numerous ethnic groups inhabiting the region, especially the interaction of the Tai Yai or Shan with their upland neighbours. To students of Tai studies, Leach’s monograph also raises a perplexing problem of how to conceptualise the category Shan or Tai Yai. As Leach points out, the Shan are territorially scattered, but fairly uniform in culture. Dialect variations between different localities are considerable, but even so, with a few exceptions, all the Tai Yai of northern Burma and western Yunnan speak one language, namely Tai.

Leach believes that a most important criterion of group identity is that all Tai Yai are Buddhists. A second general criterion is that all Tai Yai settlements are


\(^{34}\) Ethnographic study carried out by Leshan Tan (1993) confirmed T’ien’s observation that religious ceremonies were an important determinant of prestige and power among the Tai Yai in Yunnan.
associated with wet-rice cultivation. Tai settlements occur only along the river valleys or in pockets of level country in the hills. Such settlements are always associated with irrigated paddy land. The third criterion of Tai Yai group identity is that all Tai Yai settlements are members of a Tai feudal state. These three criteria are interdependent. The prosperity that comes from plains of wet paddy cultivation implies Buddhism, which implies membership of a Tai feudal state.\textsuperscript{35}

Leach also contends that the original Tai Yai colonisation of the river valleys is in fact a process associated with the maintenance of trade routes from Yunnan to India.\textsuperscript{36} Leach believes there is evidence that communications were maintained by establishing a series of small military garrisons at suitable staging posts along the route. These garrisons would have had to maintain themselves and therefore needed to be sited in a terrain suitable for rice cultivation. The settlement thus formed would provide the nucleus of an area of sophisticated culture which would develop in time into a Tai-type petty state.

Leach thus proposes a new theory that the distribution of the Tai Yai settlements in the northeast Burma is not the outcome of some fabulous large-scale military conquest;\textsuperscript{37} rather, the distribution of the Tai Yai or Shan settlements is determined by the strategy and economy of trade routes.

Even though this theory is clearly speculative, an important implication of Leach’s argument is that the Tai Yai culture is not to be regarded as a complex imported into the area ready-made from somewhere outside as most of the authorities seem to have supposed. It is an indigenous growth resulting from the socio-political and economic interaction of small-scale military colonies with an indigenous hill population over a long period of time.

Another significant study of the Tai Yai is Pattaya Saihoo’s (1959) ethnographic survey of the Shan of Burma. This study is an attempt to give a comprehensive and systematic ethnographic account of the Shan of Burma, with the emphasis on the study of institutionalised social relations and the beliefs and values associated with them.

The result of the ethnographic survey shows that the Shan are always found practising wet-rice cultivation in well-irrigated plains and valleys. This makes

\textsuperscript{35} Leach (1954:30).
\textsuperscript{36} Leach (1954:38–39).
\textsuperscript{37} For example, the wars with China which forced the Tai to migrate southward.
possible stable residence in one place and gives them a secure economic basis and fair degree of economic prosperity which includes a certain amount of industry and trade. The Shan are a homogenous people with a uniform culture, the characteristics of which are common language, economy, political organisation and religion. They speak a common Tai language, grow rice for their livelihood, have hereditary rulers and are Buddhists.38

There are a number of ethnographic accounts of Tai Yai in northwest Thailand. Durrenberger and Tannenbaum39 studied agriculture and economics in the Tai Yai village of Thongmakhsan in Mae Hong Son province, northwest Thailand. Both scholars have provided valuable insights into the context of Tai Yai agriculture, access to resources and economic processes. Nancy Eberhardt40 conducted ethnographic research which focuses on religious and cosmological beliefs in Huai Pha, a small Tai Yai village in northwest Thailand.

It is interesting to note here, however, that when one tries to search for a more comprehensive account of the Tai Yai of Yunnan, one finds that there has been a negligible amount of anthropological study up to now. As far as could be ascertained, there is no book about the Tai Yai which, apart from containing the needed information on the identity of the people, their population and distribution, would also tell us of the principles of their social organisation—the social status and role of individuals in society, their social grouping and stratification, kinship and marriage, rule of descent, property ownership and inheritance, political institution and religious beliefs—in other words, all the institutions which provide the framework for their social life and the ideas and beliefs that give meaning to the social relationships.

More importantly, after four centuries of isolation and Chinese domination, questions remain unanswered: Who are the Tai Daikong of Yunnan? What common ground is there between the Tai Daikong and other groups of Tai Yai living in other localities? What differences exist? How do they define their own ethnicity? What is their self-definition of Tai-ness? These questions inevitably lead us to the perplexing relationships between ethnicity and the construction of an “imagined community” among the Tai Yai in Yunnan (Anderson 1983).

39 Durrenberger and Tannenbaum (1990); Tannenbaum (1982)
40 Eberhardt (1988).
Ethnic Identity and the Construction of an Imagined Tai Community

Within the domain of Tai studies, ethnicity is often treated as a primordial given. It has been accepted as dogma that those who speak a particular language form a uniquely definable unit and that this unit of people has always had a particular culture and a particular history. Hence, if we describe the history of a language, we are describing the history of the group of people who now speak that language. It is groups of this sort that are meant by reference to the “races”, “tribes” and “ethnic groups” of this region.

To some extent, students of Tai studies during the past decades have followed this conventional classification. Edmund Leach was among the first group of scholars to cast doubt on the validity of the application of linguistic material to determine the history of existing groups. Leach notes that, in the Kachin Hills area where he did his field research, intermarriage between the members of different ethnic groups is very common. He also cautions against confusing linguistic grouping and the ethnic categories that may at different times be associated with it (see also Lehman 1979). Many linguists seem now to have adopted the attitude that historical linguistics will tell us very little about the movements of people in Southeast Asia; and evidence is coming to light that surprisingly indicates not only the rapidity with which communities may change their language, but also the persistence of language in other circumstances.

The perplexing problem of shifting and changing ethnic boundaries among different groups in Southeast Asia has been noted by a number of ethnographers. The region is one of constant shifting of ethnic boundaries, their memberships and markers. Leach notes that any particular individual can be thought of as having a status position in several different social systems at the same time. Lehman similarly claims that entire communities might be faced at

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41 Leach (1954:49–50).
42 Wijeyewardene (1990:7).
43 Leach (1954); Lehman (1963); Durrenberger (1990); Tapp (1989), among others.
any time with a conscious choice about which ethnic group to belong to. Nicholas Tapp, in his study of the Hmong of northern Thailand, contends that it is useful to regard ethnic identity as an historical consciousness. Ethnicity is treated here as a matter of conscious choice. We select our own histories, which are the significant events for us now, isolated from the mass of events which we have truly encountered, and they become real to us. This is the constitution of a significant, or a real history. What matters then is how any ethnic group defines its own ethnicity with reference to its sense of the past, and it is this sense of the past which ethnographers must try to uncover and present.

Ethnicity, then, can no longer be treated as a primordial given. On the contrary, ethnic groups everywhere define themselves, and are defined, by reference to their construction of the past or “real history”. We are not dealing with discrete groups which can be neatly packaged under ethnic labels but with a choice of identifications and affiliations that are picked up because they seemed advantageous. The “invention of tradition”, the way in which its timelessness may be situationally constructed as a weapon in the clash of social interests, is inherent in all political action. The sudden resurgence of Tai-ness among the Ahom of Assam since the late 1960s; the reproduction and reconstruction of Tai Ahom culture after centuries of assimilation with the Hindus; the attempts to separate Tai Ahom history from the history of the Assamese; and the re-learning of Tai language in schools and private associations, all attest to the role of human agency in actively constructing, perpetuating and transforming values in the interest of building political processes of differentiation and commonality. Amidst increasing conflicts with the Bengali Hindus and other groups of Assamese, the Tai Ahom try to differentiate themselves from the Assamese by redefining their Tai-ness in the vocabulary of history, kinship, home and religious rituals. We are thus witnessing a proliferation of Tai studies among the Tai Ahom, the invention of their “real history”, the production of ethnic consciousness and the re-learning of language in creating a unified political identity. The case of the Tai Ahom underlines the fluidity and invention of tradition and the forceful capacity of language to generate an imagined community.

47 Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).
48 Chattip and Renoo (1995:72); see also Saskia (1996).
Even less well understood, however, are the processes by which the nation-states define the ethnicity of their minorities. Are these imagined communities the conscious product of government policies? A number of Thai scholars have noted that the historical development of Tai minorities in Yunnan has been constructed according to the “Chinese plot”. The Chinese government has been in a position to influence construction of ethnic identity by assembling historical information about ethnic groups, and sponsoring research which allowed productions of identity to be partly invested in Chinese experts and authorities. Even though the Chinese government has taken on the banner of enlightened pluralism and not suppressed cultural differences in this context, it is clear that this liberal benevolence toward the minority groups still domesticates imaginings, attempting to centralise and manage the domains in which ethnic differences may be legitimately expressed.

Hsieh, in a study of ethnic and political adaptation of the Tai Lue in Yunnan, paints a rather grim picture of the processes by which China defines the ethnicity of her minorities. Hsieh maintains that historical and cultural descriptions of ethnic minorities in China are constructed and standardised in such a way that the productions of identity are heavily invested in the Han authorities. These constructions/creations are shaping a new minority world whose major symbols are in many respects contradictory to the traditional cultural symbols of those ethnic groups. Hence, ethnic pluralism in China means that an ethnic minority has to surrender itself to the ruler. Minority peoples are forced to accept the official constructions and to sacrifice their own traditional symbolism.

However, the ethnic minorities may not simply be passive receptors and conscious product of government policies, as Hsieh seems to suggest. On the contrary, contemporary strategies are more complex, minorities have become politically active and seek self-determination, which begins necessarily with the power of self-definition. Ethnic discourse may be constrained by dominant politico-symbolic constructions and yet contain the possibility of innovation. In the case of the Tai Ahom already mentioned, Saskia informs us of the popularity

50 Lilley (1990:178).
52 Lilley (1990:178).
of books, pamphlets, articles about Tai-Ahom language, religion, history, food habits, names, songs and so on. We are thus witnessing the regaining of control over the production of knowledge—the power of self-definition *par excellence*.

Yet ethnic groups are not completely excluded from the values and practices of nation-states. Long periods of domination may result in an internalisation of alien norms as a form of adaptive strategy of an ethnic group seeking survival in a nation-state. Chea\(^{56}\) notes that centuries of contact with the Han Chinese have brought about a great deal of change for the Tai Daikong in Yunnan. The Burma Road which cut through the Daikong region led to increased political, economic and military contact between the Chinese and other ethnic groups. The Han Chinese from the interior began to migrate and settle down in Daikong, so much so that they are now the majority of the Daikong population. As such, it is not totally surprising to learn that many aspects of the Tai culture have been influenced by the Han Chinese. Many Tai Daikong now live in wattle-and-daub houses with mud floors and shingled roofs, rather than in timber houses on piles with thatched roofs. Many have adopted the Chinese dress fashion and family names and celebrate Chinese New Year.

Perhaps, the Tai Yai emulation of Han characteristics is not just distorted imitation, but has become, rather, a constitutive element in Tai Yai’s lives. Subjectivity is a realm where culture and power are closely intertwined and, as such, we cannot afford to gloss over its intricacies.\(^{57}\) This means that an important point to be considered in defining what constitutes a Tai ethnic group concerns the nature of its subjective construction.\(^{58}\) This is deeply rooted in the image of themselves held by individuals, communities and polities, with each of these distinguished from others by the particular historical, social and political contexts. *The ethnic identity of a particular Tai group is thus 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.* The perplexing notion of ethnic group is largely attributable to this imagined construction. Thus ethnic categories can be examined only when we account for the continual processes of ethnic construction, both subjective and externally enforced, and at various levels, while at the same time viewing them together in their historical context.\(^{59}\)

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57 Lilley (1990:178).
59 Tanabe (1991:3); see also DeVos and Romanucci-Ross (1975).
Scope and Purpose of this Study

Since the late 1960s, there has been an indigenous development of ethnographic writing among Tai scholars who intend to understand their own society and culture. These are exemplified in recent works by Akin (1969), Shalardchhai (1984), Anan (1984), Chantip (1984), Chayan (1984) and Yos (1996) among others. A steady development of anthropology in Thailand has accompanied a growing concern with the marginalisation of local peoples and their cultures under the impact of capitalist transformation and globalisation. The work of Thai anthropologists, as Tanabe⁶⁰ has noted, has therefore tended from the very beginning to be a sociological praxis that is inseparably associated with the development of their own society and culture.

In recent years, growing interest among Thai scholars in other Tai groups outside Thailand, as exemplified by the works of Bunchop (1983), Chantip and Renoo (1995), Anan (1995), Sompong (1999) and Sumitr (1980) among others, also reflects the commitment underlying their academic practice as well as the search for comparative materials among other Tais living in neighbouring countries.

Implicit in these ethnographic writings is also a search for primordial meaning, an attempt to construct the distant past by studying the geographically distant. The construction/discovery that the Tais too have an authentic culture—just as exotic and primitive as any tribal society in the anthropological literature, that we too have supernatural beliefs, rituals, tales and legends susceptible to structural analysis, all of which can be found in the ordinary life of our Tai neighbours who share with us a common ancestry—represents intellectual movements which are meaningful at present to the Tai nation as a whole.

During the past decade, students of Tai studies have devoted much attention to the origin of the Tai race, the historical development of the Tai states, similarities and differences in languages and dialects, and customs and practices among different groups of Tai in various localities. What is missing are ethnographic accounts of Tais living in different social formations, their kinship systems, economics, politics, rituals, cultivation and everyday life; how they think and feel

about their lives and their world, and how they define themselves, not only in the present and immediate past, but also potentialities in the future. This study is an attempt to bridge this gap by presenting an ethnographic account of one of the least studied groups of Tai, namely the Tai Daikong or Tai Yai in Yunnan.

This study, then, is an ethnography of a Tai people written from a Tai perspective. It is part of an intellectual movement to reconstruct the Tai cultural roots, to search for a self-definition of Tai-ness, and to provide ground for comparison and generalisation of Tai social experience on the basis of concrete ethnography.

In the following chapters, an ethnographic account of the Tai Daikong will be presented. My concern in this study is to determine the nature of Tai ethnicity among the Tai Daikong: What are the processes by which Tai-ness is defined, and how is the imagined Tai community (if there is one) constructed in relation to a sense of real history and ethnic identity?

It should be emphasised that this study is about one single community and the extent to which it is representative of Tai Daikong as a whole varies greatly depending on the focus of inquiry and the kinds of abstractions involved. While all Tai Yai villages share many obvious characteristics, it is also true that certain differences in social organisation and mood that distinguish Lak Chang village from some neighbouring Tai communities seem to reappear consistently in other parts of Daikong as well. It is hoped that when enough detailed ethnographic studies are available, it should be possible to work out a useful description and generalisation based on sound comparative criteria of Tai ethnic identity.
Figure 0.1 Daikong Prefecture and Lak Chang village