PREFACE

The Thai–Yunnan Project of The Australian National University is proud to present the English-language version of Professor Yos Santasombat’s fascinating ethnography of the Tai in Daikong, southwestern China. This work, originally published in Thai in 2000, is a significant contribution to the ethnographic record of the Tai peoples and, at the same time, a fascinating insight into the current state of ethnography produced within the Thai–Yunnan region. In the preface to the Thai edition of the work, Chatthip Nartsupha suggests that this is the first ethnography of the Tai outside Thailand conducted by a Thai scholar and, as such, the book is an important example of the intersection between “local” and “academic” imaginings in the construction and reconstruction of ethnic identity in the Tai—and Thai—worlds.

Readers who are familiar with Thai or Lao culture will find much that is reassuring in this account of life in Lak Chang. Here, in the borderlands of Yunnan province, southwestern China, are Tai farmers cultivating rice in irrigated paddy fields; exchanging labour for transplanting and harvesting; referring to their fellow villagers as pi and nong; and unselfconsciously combining “spirit beliefs” with Theravada Buddhism. The local language is intelligible, though with some difficulty, to a Thai speaker. Little wonder that one important aspect of the recent renewal of cross-border linkages in the Thai–Yunnan region has been a growing interest—often imbued with nostalgia, a little fantasy and the occasional dash of chauvinism—in the spatial and temporal continuities of Tai-ness (and, for some, Thai-ness). These various attempts “to construct the distant past by studying the geographically distant” (page 16) respond nicely to a widely felt desire for cultural continuity in a space and time of economic, social and environmental transformation.

Of course, in the village of Lak Chang the Tai world is increasingly embraced by the Han Chinese world. Professor Yos skilfully weaves ethnographic and historical

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2 See the author's footnote on page xi for his definition of “Tai” and “Thai”.
writing to chart the course of Lak Chang’s incorporation into the modern Chinese state. His account of the period of agricultural cooperatives and communes provides important insight into the impact on predominantly household-based farming systems of an ideologically driven over-emphasis on communal arrangements. Similarly his account of the naïve brutality of the Cultural Revolution—culminating in the humiliation and death of the local Tai prince, the chaopha—is a potent case-study of the Chinese state’s assault at the time on minority authority structures and value systems. “Our objective”, the villagers of Lak Chang were told, “was to struggle against the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other ruling classes, and to transform education, literature and art and all other parts of the superstructure not in correspondence with the socialist economic base so as to facilitate the consolidation and development of socialism” (page 33).

However, the darkest periods are now in the past and what is striking about this book is its feeling of optimism. Professor Yos proposes a sense of Tai identity that is relatively flexible, adaptive and incorporative. In the course of the study it becomes clear that the boundary between Han and Tai—while clearly demarcated—is characterised by considerable symbolic and material passage. The influence of Han culture on housebuilding, architectural symbolism, weddings, funerals, clothing and consumer spending is clearly evident. Professor Yos is fully aware of the realities of unequal power but he argues, in a crucial passage, that “[p]erhaps, the Tai Yai emulation of Han characteristics is not just distorted imitation, but has become, rather, a constitutive element in Tai Yai’s lives” (page 15). While acknowledging the persistent influence of primordialism in Tai studies, Professor Yos makes a strong case for a sense of ethnicity that is, to a considerable extent, a strategic refashioning of historical consciousness in response to contemporary concerns. In this fundamentally political endeavour—from which I doubt Professor Yos excludes himself—there may even be a place for a dose of primordialism given that timelessness itself “may be situationally constructed” (page 13).

A particular feature of the optimism of this ethnography is the relatively benign presence of the market. The level of engagement with the market of Lak Chang’s villagers is little short of astounding. What appear to be enormously productive and relatively abundant agricultural lands enable Lak Chang’s villagers to sell a large percentage of their agricultural production to Chinese and Tai traders,
while still maintaining a secure subsistence base. There is little evidence that this substantial engagement with the market has undermined either village solidarity or a distinctive—yet flexible—sense of local identity. Indeed there are strong indications that agricultural commercialisation, and attendant pressures on land, has strengthened villager determination to maintain local control of the all-important paddy fields, perhaps leading to a strengthening of the preference for village endogamy. Similarly, pressures on dry-season labour resources have led to the *poi* festival each year becoming primarily a village undertaking rather than an opportunity for relatively well-resourced households to enhance their merit and prestige. Lavish spending on wedding feasts provides new avenues for household prestige but, at the same time, certain elements of the wedding ceremony provide opportunities to make culturally distinct statements about Tai-ness.

The research for this work was supported by the Thailand Research Fund as part of the Project on the Social and Cultural History of the Tai Peoples. In the preface to the Thai edition Chatthip expresses the hope that this project will assist in discovering the common roots of Tai cultures and in documenting the various cultural histories of the Tai peoples. Professor Yos has made an important contribution to achieving this goal and, perhaps most importantly, persuasively demonstrates that close engagement with other cultural, political and economic systems, while sometimes extraordinarily painful, need not diminish a distinctive and dynamic sense of local identity.

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