

FORUM ARTICLE

Strategic fluidity: Expansion by Kengtung (Chiang Tung) into Siam-controlled Lan Na, 1869–1892

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Abstract

This article approaches the 1886 British annexation of the Shan States in Burma from the perspective of small polities responding to British rule and border demarcation by European powers, the Qing empire, and Siam, a regional power centred at Bangkok. It investigates how Shan/Tai polities responded to changing allegiance from the Burman to the British Crown through the case of the Kengtung (Chiang Tung) polity. Britain's demarcation of borderlines compelled polities originally feudatory to Kengtung to switch allegiance to the Siamese and the French. This response sprang from the traditional Shan/Tai tactic of strategic fluidity rather than actions founded in a clear understanding of the implications of fixed borders. Civil war in the Shan States lying west of the Salween River from the early 1870s uprooted large numbers of Shan people. The Kengtung ruler mobilized them as manpower to consolidate his polity and opened new land in the Mae Sai and Mekong river areas on the Chiang Saen plain, a frontier zone between Kengtung and the Lan Na polity of Chiang Mai. Kengtung's frontier shrank due to two processes: first, aggression by Siam-controlled Lan Na, and second, by Britain's choice of border demarcation points in Chiang Saen. By demonstrating the ability of Shan/Tai polities to manoeuvre through intense imperial rivalry for territory this article seeks to counter the assumption that only powerful empires played important roles in the formation of colonial states.

Keywords: Shan States; Tai polities; Chiang Saen; migration; colonial policies

Introduction

Shan¹ polities tributary to the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885) of Burma encompassed both lowland wet rice cultivators and upland swidden agriculturists, and the mode

¹Shan is an exonym from Burmese for a people whose autonym is Tai (Ch. Dai). Tai peoples established polities in mainland Southeast Asia from the thirteenth century onwards and today constitute the majority ethnic group of the nation-states of Laos and Thailand where they call themselves Lao and Thai respectively. Unless otherwise noted, I follow the British sources in referring to Tai peoples in Burma as Shan.

of governance, history, and culture of their peoples overlapped with Tai polities distributed at the margins of China's Yunnan province, northern Thailand, northern Laos, and western Vietnam. Throughout the colonial period (1886–1948) the British retained Shan polities and their traditional modes of administration as an expedient means of governing ethnically diverse populations in the Shan States of Burma. The British annexation of the Shan polities in 1886 and the subsequent demarcation of the borders with Qing China, Siam,² and French Indochina established borderlines that were inherited by their post-Second World War sovereign successor nation-states. By the 1960s all Shan and Tai polities were incorporated within the borders of Burma, China, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

The historical trajectory of Shan/Tai polities ended with their incorporation into Burma, Thailand, and Laos, and the unification of their subjects with the culture and language of the ethnic majorities in these nation-states.³ Emphasis on unification, however, has marginalized Shan/Tai polities as research topics. Few studies have approached the 1886 annexation from the perspective of small polities responding to British rule or investigated how they reacted to border demarcation by Britain, France, Qing China, and Siam, the latter a regional power centred in Bangkok. By demonstrating Shan/Tai polities' ability to manoeuvre through intense imperial rivalry for territory, this article seeks to counter the assumption that only powerful empires played important roles in the formation of colonial states. Despite constraints, some polities managed to consolidate and strengthen their power bases by taking advantage of crisis circumstances. This dynamism enhanced the clout of Shan polity rulers in negotiating with the British.

What were the traditional concepts of sovereignty and territoriality embraced by Shan and Lan Na kingdom polity rulers? Shan/Tai polities or *moeng* or *müang* (T. *mǎng*)⁴ were conceptualized as existing in *mandalas* (Skt. circle) which had cosmological cores and peripheries, as was common in other parts of pre-modern Southeast Asia.⁵ A *mandala* could have multiple centres and peripheries, and the periphery of one *mandala* often overlapped with that of another *mandala* because they lacked fixed boundaries.⁶ Weak polities at the *mandala*'s periphery pledged allegiance to powerful polities at its centre, and as vassals substantiated their feudatory relationship by submitting tribute.⁶ These vassal polities were known as subordinate *moeng* (*moeng khün*) or satellite

²Known as Thailand after June 1939.

³Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830. Vol. 1: Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 40.

⁴For the *mandala* model of states with cosmological cores, see Stanley Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 102–131; Jan Wisseman Christie, 'Negara. Mandala and Despotism: Images of Early Java', in *Southeast Asia in the Ninth to Fourteenth Centuries*, (eds) David G. Marr and A. C. Milner (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), pp. 65–93; Kenneth R. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia: Maritime Trade and Societal Development, 100–1500* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), pp. 17–18.

⁵O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Religion in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), p. 17.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 17; and Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), p. 82.

moeng (moeng boriwan).⁷ Shan/Tai polities in the Shan States and Yunnan paid tribute to the Burman and Chinese courts, thereby acknowledging them as overlords. For polities in Mainland Southeast Asia, control of manpower was vital, and they engaged in warfare as a means of replenishing deficiencies.⁸ Shan/Tai polities in northern Thailand raided polities in the Shan States and Yunnan, forcibly settling war captives in their own polities to augment manpower shortages during the nineteenth century.⁹ In contrast to the uniform citizenship and horizontal equality that emerged with nation-states, Mainland Southeast Asian polities were hierarchical and 'obsessed with innumerable particularities of status and privilege determined by one's distance from the sovereign'.¹⁰ These characteristics should be borne in mind as background and context to the history of polities described in this article.

Empires ran thinnest at their peripheries, and British administration of the Shan States and Qing China's governance of Yunnan's southern border were no exceptions. For expediency, both the British and the Qing governed indirectly through polity rulers on their frontiers. The British followed Konbaung practice by referring to Shan polity rulers as *sawbwas*, while in Yunnan the Qing called them native officials (*tuguan* 土官/*tusi* 土司). Shan polity rulers retained jurisdiction over their own subjects, but after annexation the British prohibited them from negotiating with outside powers. Before annexation, polity ruler's vested political interests did not always align with those of a single overlord. Both the Konbaung and Qing dynasties were eager to extend their influence and power in the Sino-Burmese frontier zone and some rulers responded by pledging allegiance to both courts to enhance their own security. For instance, Sipsòng Panna and Moeng Laem on the Yunnan frontier owed fealty and submitted tribute to both the Chinese and Burmese courts for 300 years before the mid-nineteenth century. The Shan described such dual allegiances as 'China is our father, and Burmah our mother',¹¹ and Volker Grabowsky named them 'Chinese-Burmese condominiums'.¹² There were even 'polities under three overlords (*müang samfaifa*)', notably the triple allegiance that Müang Sing in today's Laos maintained with two polities tributary to Siam (Chiang Mai and Nan) and one polity tributary to Burma (Kengtung).¹³ Overlapping allegiances constituted the norm among Shan and Tai polities but gradually disappeared as the frontiers shrank into fixed borderlines during demarcation by the British, the French, the Qing, and Siam from the 1890s onwards.

⁷Liew-Herres, Foon Ming, Volker Grabowsky and Renoo Wichasin, *Chronicles of Sipsòng Panna: History and Society of a Tai Lue Kingdom Twelfth to Mid-twentieth Century* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2012), p. 13.

⁸Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, pp. 34–36; 131–132; Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 97–98.

⁹Volker Grabowsky, 'Population Dynamics in Lan Na During the 19th Century', *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 105, 2017, pp. 197–244.

¹⁰Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, p. 40.

¹¹Memorandum respecting Kiang Hung: Burmese Claims to Sovereignty over this State, India Office to Foreign Office, 20 November 1893, Burmah [Section No. 54] Confidential No. 2, p. 2, UL. L.55¹⁴, Scott Collection, University of Cambridge Library (hereafter Scott Collection).

¹²Liew-Herres, Grabowsky and Wichasin, *Chronicles of Sipsòng Panna*, p. 49.

¹³Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, pp. 73–74; Volker Grabowsky, 'Introduction to the History of Müang Sing Prior to French Rule: The Fate of a Lü Principality', *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. 86, no. 1, 1999, p. 235.

Shan/Tai communities belonged to polities, no matter whether large or small. Power relations between polities both intra-*mandala* and inter-*mandala* were founded on allegiances. Circumstances sometimes forced polities to shift allegiance for survival. I use the term 'strategic fluidity' to describe their manoeuvring tactics. Strategic fluidity was a stratagem employed by rulers, particularly by those at the peripheries of *mandalas* or on the Sino-Burmese frontier, to handle threats and demands for allegiance from powerful polities. Crisis situations compelled rulers to switch allegiance to the most powerful overlord or even to Burmese kings and Chinese emperors. When circumstances changed, rulers could negotiate returning to their original overlord. Rulers behaved with circumspection when choosing the solutions that saved their polities from destruction. Similarly, to strengthen security, some polities on the Sino-Burmese frontier swore allegiance to both China and Burma, as mentioned above. Strategic fluidity therefore constituted a tactic rather than a policy because rulers used it to handle emergency situations.

Recent historical scholarship on Yunnan's southern frontier with the Shan States is turning from state-centred interpretations to recognizing the role of borderland people in local governance. Apart from polity rulers, the Qing court also relied on a diverse array of people on the spot such as gentry, merchants, and military entrepreneurs to govern the Yunnan's southern borderlands.¹⁴ The novelty of this shift lies in highlighting the dynamism of local borderland actors in the making of history, and Diana Duan suggests that it indicates a 'decentralised approach'.¹⁵ During the colonial period the British relied on Shan rulers to administer the Shan States borderlands. This article aims to demonstrate the dynamism displayed by these rulers in the establishment of British administration after 1886. By doing so, it counters the assumption that British rule in the Shan States was achieved through imperial olive branch and carrot-and-stick policies alone.¹⁶ The dynamic roles of ethnic groups in Burma's borderlands today, particularly those adjoining China and Thailand, are an extension of trends dating back to the Konbaung and British periods.

To elucidate Shan rulers' transition from the Burman to the British Crown requires us first to clarify how they adapted their polities, their practices, and their procedures to conform with the demands of new overlords. Rulers' reactions to initial encounters impacted the size and standing of their polities under British administration.¹⁷

¹⁴Ma Jianxiong 馬建雄, 'Bianfang Sanlao: Qingmo Minchu Nanduan Dianmian Bianjiang shang de guojia dailiren', 邊防三老—清末民初南段滇緬邊疆上的國家代理人 (Three Elders of Frontier Defense: State Agents and the Formation of the Yunnan Burma Frontier in the Late Qing Early Republican Period), *Lishi Renleixue Xuekan* (Journal of History and Anthropology), vol. 10, no. 1, April 2012, pp. 87–122; Jianxiong Ma, 'The Rise of Gentry Power on the China-Burma Frontier Since the 1870s: The Case of the Peng Family in Mianning, Southwest Yunnan', *International Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, January 2014, pp. 25–51; and Diana Duan, *Contingent Loyalties: State Agents in the Yunnan Borderlands (1856–1911)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024), pp. 29–31.

¹⁵Duan, *Contingent Loyalties*, pp. 29–31.

¹⁶Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State From its Origins to 1962* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009), p. 166, attributes the success of the British occupation and the pacification of the Shan States to these policies.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 141, records the division of Hsienwi into two separate states. Sai Aung Tun observes that the British 'readjusted interstate boundary lines and amalgamated the small states into the big states to meet the needs of the British administration. Sometimes territories were taken from their original states and given back to their original owners to be in line with British administrative convenience', see *ibid.*, p. 167.

Therefore, their responses must be understood in the local context, starting from the pre-annexation period, through their interactions with the Burmese court as well as British administrators.

This article investigates how the Kengtung (Chiang Tung) polity (see [Figure 1](#)) manoeuvred its change of allegiance from the Konbaung king to the British monarchy at the time of the annexation. Kengtung lay in the Upper Mekong River region where Chinese and Burmese frontiers crosscut, and polities pledged allegiance to multiple overlords. Exclusion from Anglo-Chinese, Anglo-French, and Anglo-Siamese border negotiations forced Kengtung to readjust its territory to fit the new borders delineated by diplomacy between imperial powers. Kengtung and its vassal polities seized the opportunity to enhance their own regimes in the context of widespread dissatisfaction with post-1860s Burman court policy. Before the arrival of the British, Kengtung mobilized manpower displaced by warfare in the Shan States to strengthen its polity. Mainland Southeast Asia had low population densities: for instance, in 1800 densities only amounted to 10–20 per cent of those in India, China, or Japan.¹⁸ Rulers needed manpower to stabilize their tax bases. Kengtung absorbed approximately 10,000 Shan refugees fleeing civil war west of the Salween River in 1889,¹⁹ and the ruler attempted to consolidate his polity by assigning them to settle abandoned land. Vassal polities also utilized strategic fluidity to handle British, French, and Siamese interference, and the case of Kengtung demonstrates that they acted in their own interests, rather than those of their overlords.

To elucidate these issues, I begin by examining how vassal polities manoeuvred their way through the disputes by Britain, France, and Siam over territory in border demarcations, then probe the dynamism of Kengtung's expansion into Siam-controlled Lan Na territory and its implications for the history of Chiang Saen. Finally, I situate Kengtung's dynamism in the context of the civil war in the Shan States.

Disputes with Siam over the Trans-Salween Shan polities

Shan and Karen polities with capital cities on the Salween River's west bank also possessed territory on its east bank. Invoking the principle of the Right of Conquest under international law, as successors to the Burman monarchy, the British asserted sovereignty over these east bank territories because their rulers had paid tribute to Burma. These Trans-Salween polities bordered on the Lan Na kingdom, the largest and most powerful polity in northern Thailand from the late thirteenth century until the Burmese conquest in the mid-sixteenth century. The occupation of Lan Na lasted until the Siamese and their Lan Na allies evicted the Burmese from their last stronghold at Chiang Saen in 1804.²⁰ Anti-Burmese 'wars of liberation' during the last third of

¹⁸Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, p. 27.

¹⁹J. G. Scott, 'Report on the Administration of the Shan States for the Year 1889–90', Burma Foreign Department No. 880–80G, p. 20, Scott Collection. A large colony of Shan from today's Dehong in western Yunnan known as Tai² Maaw² or Tai Nüa had migrated to Kengtung long before 1890. They made pottery utensils and were credited with introducing roof tile manufacturing to Kengtung; see *ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰David Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeo, *Chiang Mai Chronicle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1995), pp. 169–170.



Figure 1. Map of Kengtung and Lanna polities. Source: Drawn by Laurie Whiddon.

the eighteenth century resulted in Lan Na splitting into five separate Yuan polities—Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Nan, and Phrae—each of which acquiesced to Siamese overlordship to secure its independence from Burma.²¹ Although Lan Na ceased to exist as a unified kingdom from the eighteenth century, the notion of it as a cultural zone persisted, as evidenced by the phrase ‘the fifty seven *moeng* of Lan Na’.²² At the time of the 1886 annexation, the Siamese government laid claim to a tract of mountainous land on the Salween’s east bank that ran 20 to 30 miles wide and 150 miles long, from Kengtung territory in the north to Kantarawady in the south. Siam’s claim was founded on the assertion that east bank territory fell under the jurisdiction of its tributary state, Chiang Mai. This dispute arose because both Britain and Siam wanted to acquire rights to the large reserves of commercially valuable teak forests on this land.

When the Anglo-Siamese Boundary Commission investigated the boundary line of the disputed east bank territory in 1889 they found that Shan and Karen had settled and worked the teak forests before *circa* 1886. After annexation, warfare erupted between two Trans-Salween Shan polities, Mäng⁴ Pan¹ (Moeng Pan)²³ and Mòk Mai (Mokmai) (see Figure 1). The Siamese seized the opportunity to occupy the four vassal polities of Mäng⁴ Pan¹ on the east bank from November 1886 to September 1888 because at the time the British had not commenced administering the Salween River area.²⁴ The four vassal polities of Mäng⁴ Ton¹ (Moeng Tung), Mäng⁴ Haang² (Moeng Hang), Mäng⁴ Kyöt (Moeng Kywat), and Mäng⁴ Thaa⁴ (Moeng Tha) accepted Siamese protection because they faced imminent invasion from Mòk Mai.²⁵ According to Assistant Superintendent James George Scott, the Siamese had ‘entertained designs on this tract along the Salween from the borders of Kengtung southwards’²⁶ ever since Siam’s unsuccessful attack on Kengtung in 1854.²⁷

Siam forced the headmen of the four vassal polities to swear allegiance to Bangkok, but Mäng⁴ Saat² (Moeng Sat), the fifth vassal polity of Mäng⁴ Pan¹, refused and came under the protection of Kengtung.²⁸ British intelligence reported Siam’s connection with the ravaging of Mäng⁴ Pan¹ by the Shan bandit Twet Nga Lu in March 1888, noting that he had received assistance not only from Mäng⁴ Ton¹ and Mäng⁴ Haang²,

²¹Grabowsky, ‘Population Dynamics in Lan Na’, pp. 197–201.

²²Wyatt and Wichienkeo, *Chiang Mai Chronicle*, p. 168.

²³Documents written in Shan script, place names, and other terms are Romanized according to Shintani Tadahiko’s system, except for terms already well known by other systems such as Kengtung, Hsienwi, etc. See Shintani Tadahiko, *Shan (Tay) go Oninron to Mojiho* (The Phonology and Writing System of Shan [Tay]) (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 2000).

²⁴J. G. Scott, Esq. Officiating Superintendent, Shan States, to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Burma, No. -03, dated 24 August 1889, Fort Stedman, Scott UL. 1.81, p. 4, Scott Collection. The four vassal polities are included within the territory of Mäng⁴ Pan¹ marked in Figure 1, but are not shown individually.

²⁵Ibid., p. 1.

²⁶Ibid., p. 2.

²⁷Ibid., p. 1. Scott mentions 1855, but this attack refers to the third and final war that Siam waged against Kengtung (Chiang Tung) in mid-1854 utilizing Siamese and northern Thai troops. Its failure was attributed to logistical problems: see Sarassawadee Ongskul, *History of Lan Na* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), pp. 157–166.

²⁸J. G. Scott, Esq. Officiating Superintendent, Shan States, to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Burma, No. -03, dated 24 August 1889, Fort Stedman, Scott UL. 1.81, p. 3, Scott Collection.

but also from Moeng Fang,²⁹ which Scott described as 'indubitably Siamese'.³⁰ In December 1888 rumours of Mäng⁴ Mai (Moeng Mai) pledging allegiance to the Siamese commissioner at Chiang Mai sprang up and spread.³¹ In January 1889 the British received word that Siamese forces were already in Mèhôngson, and that Tai Yuan levies from Mèhôngson under the command of a Siamese prince of the blood and son of the Siamese commissioner had overrun the Trans-Salween Pilu district in Karenni territory.³²

Siam deployed Mèhôngson Shan to Trans-Salween Karenni in June, increased their numbers by early July 1889, and compelled Karenni people crossing from the west bank to 'drink the water of allegiance to Siam'.³³ Mèhôngson Shans tattooed 180 people in the district of Mòk Mai and Mèsakon on the left forearm, in red and black, with the symbol of an elephant and a running number.³⁴ The Siamese had in effect annexed the Trans-Salween portion of Karenni, established ten stockades each garrisoned with 50 to 100 men (half Tai Yuan and half Mèhôngson Shans),³⁵ 'seized all elephants and felled timber', and prevented west bank people from crossing to work the teak forests.³⁶ The Anglo-Siamese Commission visited the disputed areas in 1889, evicted the Siamese troops stationed at Meksakun and Mäng⁴ Maw² (Moeng Mao), and forced the Siam government to acknowledge British suzerainty over the four vassal polities. The Siamese withdrew their troops from the Trans-Salween portion of Karenni after diplomatic pressure from the British.

British accounts portray border demarcation as a negotiation between Britain and Siam. They seldom divulge how vassal polities subordinate to Mäng⁴ Pan¹ understood border fixing. To probe their response, I examine two letters written in Shan script intercepted by the British. These letters, from the headman of Mäng⁴ Ton¹ to his overlord, the ruler of Mäng⁴ Pan¹, reveal the response of the four vassal polities. These

²⁹Moeng Fang is located in today's Chiangmai province. I have changed Phaang¹ in the original to Fang¹ for convenience of understanding.

³⁰The Maingpan [Mäng⁴ Pan¹] State has been so ravaged that the Sawbwa could not be expected to resist any but a very small force. Twet Nga Lu's band of 300 was too much for him and he retreated north-east to a point on the Salween. It seems indisputable that Twet Nga Lu has received assistance not only from Maingtun and Mainhan, but also from Maingpanlong (Moeng Fang) which is indubitably Siamese.' J. G. Scott, Assistant Superintendent, Shan States, Summary of the Shan States for the week ending 24 March 1888, -No. 8-12, Scott Collection.

³¹J. G. Scott, Assistant Superintendent, Shan States Summary of the Eastern Shan States for the week ending 26 December 1888, Monè, Scott Collection.

³²J. G. Scott, Assistant Superintendent, Shan States Summary of the Eastern Shan States for the week ending 23 January 1889, Camp Katulon, Scott Collection; and J. G. Scott, Assistant Superintendent, Shan States Summary of the Eastern Shan States for the week ending 30 January 1889, Camp Katulon, Scott Collection.

³³J. G. Scott, Officiating Superintendent, Shan States Summary of the Shan States for the week ending 5 June 1889, Fort Stedman, Scott Collection; and J. G. Scott, Officiating Superintendent, Shan States Summary of the Shan States for the week ending 17 July 1889, Fort Stedman, Scott Collection.

³⁴J. G. Scott, Esq. Officiating Superintendent, Shan States, to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Burma, No. -03, dated 24 August 1889, Fort Stedman, Scott UL. 1.81, p. 8, Scott Collection.

³⁵J. G. Scott Report on the Administration of the Shan States for the Year 1889-90, Burma Foreign Department No. 880-80G, p. 5, Scott Collection.

³⁶J. G. Scott, Assistant Superintendent, Shan States Summary of the Eastern Shan States for the week ending 6 March 1889, Fort Stedman, Scott Collection.

letters and other Shan documents cited below are exceptionally rare. Therefore, I must make a short digression to elucidate their value as historical sources.

Polity rulers wrote administrative documents in Shan script from the late fourteenth century onwards.³⁷ To facilitate communication with the Burmese and Chinese courts, rulers staffed their bureaucracies with translators and amanuensis to handle official correspondence in Shan, Burmese, and Chinese. British colonial officers frequently ordered rulers and their bureaucrats to submit written accounts of trade routes, villages, histories of disputed areas, and even maps for their own exclusive use.³⁸ The seizure of letters addressed to another local ruler cited below provided the British with valuable intelligence.

In the first letter, written in about January 1889,³⁹ the Mäng⁴ Ton¹ headman⁴⁰ informed his overlord that Moeng Fang's ruler had issued written instructions summoning the four vassal polity's headmen to assemble at his capital after Siamese and Khun Yuan (Yon) officials (*Khun¹ Thai⁴ Khun¹ Yon⁴*) had arrived with 3,000–4,000 troops. He explained his rationale for switching allegiance to Siam in this letter:⁴¹

We went to see them [Siamese and Khun Yuan officials] as a group, and they brought out and read aloud orders⁴² from the King of Müang Bangkok and from the King of Chiang Mai, that notified us that all west of the Salween River, whether crooked or straight, flowing as far west as Sop² Sem, has been given away [to the British], and that all [polities] east of that river have been completely incorporated⁴³ within Moeng Chiang Mai as vassal states.⁴⁴ Under the present circumstances, because our villages (*waan⁴*) and townships (*moeng*) are tiny we shall obey the orders and the authority of the *Khun Yon* and Siamese rulers⁴⁵ of the east. In the future we may again become subjects of your lordship.

³⁷The earliest known specimen of Shan script appeared in *Gemaba Wei Ming Taizu Jianfu Zu* 噶瑪巴爲明太祖薦福圖 長卷 (*A Painting of Gemaba Jianfu to the First Emperor of the Ming Long Scroll*), in Anonymous, *Baocang: Zhongguo Xizang Lishi Wenwu* 寶藏中國西藏歷史文物 (*A Collection of Treasures: Historical Cultural Artefacts of Tibet, China*) (Beijing: Chaohua Chubanshe, 2000), vol. 3, pp. 94–115. See Christian Daniels, 'Script Without Buddhism: Burmese Influence on the Tay (Shan) Script of Mäng² Maaw² as seen in a Chinese Scroll Painting of 1407', *International Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 9, Part 2, July 2012, pp. 147–176; and Roderick Whitfield, 'Ming Pyrotechnics: The Xiaoling and the Linggusi in the 1407 Scroll', *Arts of Asia*, vol. 44, no. 6, 2014, p. 75.

³⁸J. G. Scott sent the original Shan documents he handled to his elder brother at St John's College, Cambridge, and they are now held by Cambridge University Library. As far as I know no other collections of Shan administrative documents have survived.

³⁹'Written on the ninth day waning of the second month C.S. 1250', which was late January 1889. See J. G. Scott, Assistant Superintendent, Shan States Summary of the Eastern Shan States for the week ending 20 February 1889, Camp Loipok, Scott Collection.

⁴⁰Headmen: *pö³ mǎng⁴* literally 'the father of the mǎng⁴'.

⁴¹LL9. 348, lines 7–9, Scott Collection. My translation from the Shan. The Shan script letter comprises 11 lines, written in pencil on *saa* paper measuring 65 x 24.5 cm. A vermilion seal impression at the text's top left measures 4.8 cm in diameter and has a rabbit image in the centre which is surrounded by text in Shan and Burmese script. The Shan script in the seal reads '... long¹ Mǎng⁴ Ton¹'.

⁴²*aa³ ming⁴ tǒ³*.

⁴³*kyōn khaam*.

⁴⁴*tap⁶ pōng⁴*.

⁴⁵*Khun¹ Yon⁴ Khun¹ Thai⁴*.

According to Scott, the four headmen proceeded to Chiang Mai after drinking 'the *thissa-ye* (the water of allegiance)' at Moeng Fang.⁴⁶ The headmen realized that they now owed fidelity to Siam but failed to comprehend that by fixing the border they could no longer shift allegiance for their own self-interest.

The Mäng⁴ Ton¹ headman wrote another letter later in February 1889⁴⁷ asking the Mäng⁴ Pan¹ ruler to withdraw his men from his territory and refrain from entering his capital city because Chiang Mai and Siamese officials were spying and gathering intelligence, and their presence could bring disaster. In this letter the headman titled himself *caw³ phyaa* (*chaophyaa*), confirming his appointment to authority by Chiang Mai and Siamese officials who decreed:⁴⁸ 'You four polities (*moeng*) should not be subject to Mäng⁴ Pan¹'. These officials issued warnings: '[Though] Mäng⁴ Pan¹ and the British have made you swear allegiance⁴⁹ [to them] and have taken over the territory, we [Chiang Mai and Siam] will take back these four vassal polities, and if Mäng⁴ Pan¹ brings troops we will hinder and hamper them'. The headman elucidated:⁵⁰

Whether we like it or not, we all have had to revert to being subjects of Chiang Mai as before to survive. There would be no villages, polities (*moeng*), or any people left at all, if three or four polities resisted with military force. Therefore, it is not true to say that we have become subjects of Chiang Mai⁵¹ of our own volition. It is not true that we have become subjects of Chiang Mai because we frivolously hate the ruler of Mäng⁴ Pan¹ and do not desire to be his subjects ... In the future when the Superintendents of the East and the West⁵² have consulted about the territory and reached an unequivocal, final decision, it will not matter at all to us subjects⁵³ what [people] think, we will kneel down and abide. But now is not the time for us subjects to voice an opinion. Once a decision has been made, no matter to which side we are allocated, we shall not refuse to comply. The ruler of Mäng⁴ Pan¹ should not speak of ousting us because we have returned to being subjects of Chiang Mai. If you still claim that this area constitutes your own villages and townships⁵⁴ and use force to contest, not only will we feel unhappy, but we will collectively flee.

The headmen switched allegiance out of fear of invasion, not out of dissatisfaction with their former overlord. They could do nothing but abide by the final decision of

⁴⁶J. G. Scott, Assistant Superintendent, Shan States Summary of the Eastern Shan States for the week ending 20 February, Camp Loipok, Scott Collection.

⁴⁷The last line has: 'written on the third day waxing of the third month (about February) C.S. 1250 (1889)'.

⁴⁸LL9. 349, lines 3–4; lines 6–7, Scott Collection. My translation from the Shan. The Shan script letter comprises 18 lines, written in pencil on *saa* paper measuring 53 x 44 cm. A vermilion seal impression at the text's top left measures 4.8 cm in diameter and has a rabbit image in the centre which is surrounded by text in Shan and Burmese script. The words '... long¹ Mäng⁴ Ton¹' are visible in the Shan script on the seal.

⁴⁹*Phök sēt² caa²*.

⁵⁰LL9. 349, lines 7–9, Scott Collection. My translation from the Shan.

⁵¹*Kha* (serfs/subjects) *Yon⁴* (Yuan).

⁵²*Aa³ ye⁴ pëng² wan⁴ tok² wan⁴ ök²*.

⁵³*Haw⁴ kha* (us serfs/subjects).

⁵⁴*Waan⁴ man⁴ mǎng⁴ man⁴*.

the British and Siamese overlords. Therefore, the letter-writer entreated the Mäng⁴ Pan¹ ruler not to bear a grudge but to leave the door open for them to swear fidelity to him again in the future. Maintaining fluidity in feudatory arrangements was a strategy for survival.

These two letters reveal Shan rulers' limited understanding of the ramifications of border demarcation in contested territory. They did not realize that fixed boundaries deprived them of the opportunity to switch allegiance at will, nor did they consider Siamese territorial aggrandisement within the broader context of British and French power struggles. They remained unaware of Siam's intention to incorporate its tributary polities into a sovereign nation-state. Their failure to grasp the broader picture resonates with the Shan historian Sai Aung Tun's argument that Shan rulers did not comprehend why their traditional lands became dominated by the British and French.⁵⁵

Kengtung's expansion into Lan Na

The Declaration by Great Britain and France signed in January 1896 demarcated the upper Mekong River as the natural boundary between their colonial territories.⁵⁶ It marked the end of years of rivalry between Britain, France, and Siam over the sovereignty of two Kengtung vassal polities, Müang Sing (Muang Hsing) and Chiang Lap (Keng Lap) (see Figure 1). Located on the east bank of the Mekong, Chiang Lap was feudatory to Konbaung kings. Its population was comprised entirely of Tai Lü migrants from Chiang Hong (Keng Hong) Sipsòng Panna in Yunnan who had only recently pledged fidelity to Kengtung. In February 1891 Chiang Lap had three villages with 100-odd houses.⁵⁷ The Siamese claimed suzerainty over Shan polities on the Mekong's east bank, but the French forced Siam to cede all territories east of the Mekong in a treaty signed on 3 October 1893 after dispatching gunboats to the Menam River near Bangkok to threaten them. The transfer of these territories to France on 10 May 1896 meant Kengtung ultimately lost Müang Sing and Chiang Lap.

Earlier in 1893 the Anglo-Siamese Boundary Commission met at Mäng⁴ Haang² on the east bank of the Salween to determine the border between British and Siamese territory on the Chiang Saen⁵⁸ plain in today's northern Thailand. The frontier zone separating Kengtung and Chiang Mai polities overlapped on this plain, and here

⁵⁵'The Shan Chiefs of this region had lost not only their sovereign rights but the autonomous rights that they had enjoyed during the time of the Myanmar kings. Now it was the British responsibility to manage the affairs of the Shan States and to shape the destiny of the Shan chiefs. Some frontier chiefs regained their lost territories, but some had to forgo their legitimate rights, had their lands transferred to foreign powers, and finally even lost the right to choose their own suzerainty. They were willing to serve, but in some cases, they did not have such rights, and had to comply with the treaties they had made with foreign powers. They lost their hereditary rights over their own subjects. That was the heaviest price of foreign domination that the frontier chiefs and peoples had to suffer and sacrifice for reasons that they did not understand.' Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State*, p. 151. Sai Aung Tun articulates the view that Shan rulers did not understand the differences between Konbaung and British governance, and the ramifications of fixed borders.

⁵⁶'Declaration between Great Britain and France with regard to Siam and the Upper Mekong, Signed at London, January 15, 1896', *Blue Book*, France No. 2, 1896, Scott Collection.

⁵⁷J. G. Scott, Officiating Superintendent, Shan States Summary of the Shan States for the week ending 14 February 1891, Camp Keing Lap, Scott Collection.

⁵⁸Keng⁴ Sën¹.

Kengtung lost territory too. In the negotiations, Superintendent Hildebrand, assisted by H. G. A. Leveson, led the British Commission, and Long Hkam Chat and Long Sarasit represented the Siamese Commission. The joint commission demarcated the border in two places, erecting one boundary pillar in the district of Moeng Ngam near the Mekong River, and another on the Chiang Saen plain near the Mae Sai River. When Britain ceded Kengtung's territory near the Mae Sai River to Siam, the population stayed, despite dissatisfaction with the change of allegiance.⁵⁹

The demarcation struggle between Britain, France, and Siam intersects with regional and local history. When the British annexed Upper Burma in 1886, the Siamese began to tighten control over the five Yuan polities formerly under Lan Na with the aim of incorporating them into its own fledgling nation-state. Shan migrants uprooted by civil war (discussed below) in western and northern polities had been settling in northern Thailand and northern Laos from the 1870s. Shan script documents referred to these migrants as Tai⁴ Long¹ ⁶⁰ and I follow this usage in the translations below.⁶¹

In 1884 Kengtung's vassal polity Chiang Khaeng shifted its capital from the Mekong's west bank to Müang Sing on the east bank with the aim of asserting independence by distancing itself from its overlord,⁶² and pledged allegiance to Siam. When the British investigated the boundaries of Shan polities in 1886/1887, Kengtung was grappling with the Chiang Khaeng independence issue, and the British occupation of the latter's capital at Müang Sing from 1893 to 1896 in effect substantiated Kengtung's claims to this vassal polity. The Declaration signed in January 1896 granted France sovereignty over Chiang Khaeng, but this diplomatic solution overshadowed an oft unnoticed event of local history—Kengtung's loss of its Trans-Mekong polities.

Kengtung expanded into Chiang Saen during the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁶³ King Kawila (r. 1782–1816) ousted the Burmese from Chiang Mai and expelled the Burmese garrison from Chiang Saen in 1804. Kawila and his successors restored prosperity by repopulating the Chiang Mai area with 50,000 to 70,000 Tai Khün from Kengtung, Tai Lü from Mäng⁴ Yong (Moeng Yong), and Sipsong Panna captured in raids between 1782 and 1838.⁶⁴ In 1854, Kengtung forces successfully repelled attacks from the Siamese who withdrew due to lack of provisions.⁶⁵ Chiang Saen had already been depopulated for half a century and was unable to provide logistical support for Siamese

⁵⁹Letter, Superintendent Hildebrand to the Chief Commissioner, 23 March 1893, cited in Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State*, p. 154.

⁶⁰Literally: 'Great Tai' (Th. Thai Yai).

⁶¹Shan migrants from southern Yunnan, especially from places west of the Salween, are also known as Tai Nüa (Shan: Tai² Nă¹), lit. Upper or Northern Tai.

⁶²Iijima Akiko 飯島明子, 'Muan Shin no Shahon bunka ムアンシンの写本文化 (Manuscript Culture in Muang Hsing)', in *Laosu Gaisetsu* ラオス概説 (An Introduction to Laos), (ed.) Laosu Bunka Kenkyujo ラオス文化研究所 (Tokyo: Mekon, 2003), pp. 512–513. The Lan Na polity of Nan also laid claim to Chiang Khaeng: see Volker Grabowsky and Renoo Wichasin, *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng; A Tai Lü Principality of the Upper Mekong* (Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i, 2008), p. 5, pp. 36–37.

⁶³Andrew Walker, *The Legend of the Golden Boat; Regulation, Trade and Traders in the Borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma* (London: Curzon, 1999), p. 34.

⁶⁴Volker Grabowsky, 'Forced Resettlement Campaigns in Northern Thailand During the Early Bangkok Period', *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 87, nos. 1 and 2, 1999, p. 60, pp. 64–67.

⁶⁵Sarassawadee, *History of Lan Na*, pp. 157–166.

and northern Thai troops. From this time onwards, subjects of the Chiang Mai king cultivated the southern portion of Chiang Saen while Kengtung subjects opened land in its northern part.⁶⁶ By the 1870s, Kengtung had amassed sufficient manpower to assign people to till land in its vassal polities. Northern Chiang Saen had remained underpopulated and arable land had lain fallow for want of manpower since the 1850s, so Kengtung peopled it with Shan migrants from the 1870s, building villages and vassal polities (*moeng*). The political situation west of the Salween resulted in Shan migrating to its east. The dispute between Kengtung and Chiang Khaeng combined with in-migration created a complex situation in the Upper Mekong.

Lying at the northernmost tip of Thailand the Chiang Saen plain had functioned as the centre for administering northern Lan Na since 1327. After Chiang Mai recovered Chiang Saen from the Burmese in 1804, it did not actively promote agricultural production on the northern part of this plain nor attempt to repopulate it. A Shan script document prepared for the British described the situation before 1874–1876 (CS 1236/1237): ‘The Yon⁴ [Chiang Mai] did not have any land or people in Chiang Saen.⁶⁷ It merely functioned as a pass-through road for travelling up and down [country].’⁶⁸ Taking advantage of the situation, the Kengtung ruler shifted manpower to Chiang Saen during the 1870s. He settled Shan from polities on the Yunnan border to cultivate abandoned land on the plain.⁶⁹ In 1877/1878 (CS 1239), the Chiang Khaeng ruler shifted Shan migrants from northern Shan polities⁷⁰ to build settlements at Müang Sing on the Mekong’s west bank. By 1890 the Shan headman who served as the tax collector had become very influential in Müang Sing society: he collected tax from Shan residents and merchants in the market on behalf of the Chiang Khaeng ruler.⁷¹ This Shan headman played a prominent role in this vassal polity at the margins of Kengtung territory.

From the latter half of the 1870s, Kengtung stationed troops on the Chiang Saen plain, its frontier with Chiang Mai, to protect its interests. According to the *Kengtung State Chronicle*, Kengtung subjects migrated to the area⁷² in around 1878/1879 and built villages, intermixing with Siamese subjects. Kengtung and Siam concluded an agreement in 1879/1880 allowing Kengtung subjects to settle in Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai, and Siamese subjects to migrate as far north as Moeng Laen and Moeng Phayak. Kengtung stationed troops at five places and established granaries at Moeng Laen and Höng³ Lük⁵ (Rônglök) in 1880/1881, while the Siamese stationed troops at Tachileik and Hnônghvaen as a counter measure. Both sides later withdrew their forces.⁷³

⁶⁶J. G. Scott, Esq. Officiating Superintendent, Shan States, to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Burma, No. -03, dated 24 August 1889, Fort Stedman, Scott UL. 1.81, p. 1, Scott Collection.

⁶⁷Mäng⁴ Keng⁴ Sên¹.

⁶⁸LL9 106 Lines 16–17, Scott Collection. My translation from the Shan.

⁶⁹Chiang Ku and Chiang Lo are located in today’s Pu-Erh district, Yunnan. See Grabowsky and Wichasin, *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng*, pp. 8–9.

⁷⁰Moeng Nüa or Mäng⁴ Nă¹.

⁷¹Grabowsky and Wichasin, *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng*, p. 10.

⁷²Sao Saimöng Mangrai, *The Padaeng Chronicle and the Jengtung State Chronicle Translated* (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1981), pp. 270–271, lists Maebaancong, Hooygrai, Hoy³ Laay⁴, and Me³ Kham⁴ Long¹. I have not been able to identify these place names.

⁷³Saimöng Mangrai, *The Padaeng Chronicle*, pp. 270–271.

A Shan script document dated 1892, written by the Mäng⁴ Cim⁷⁴ headman on behalf of the Kengtung ruler for British officers, described Kengtung's settlement of the Chiang Saen plain after 1870. Around 1840, 100-odd kilometres of 'largely uninhabited frontier zone' existed between Chiang Mai and Kengtung territory,⁷⁵ but according to the 1892 Shan document by *circa* 1870/1871 the boundary lay at Këw Tap Yaang in northern Chiang Saen (discussed below), and the document's author even appended a list of 25 Shan villages under the jurisdiction of Hōng³ Lūk⁵. Scott, who had visited Hōng³ Lūk⁵ in early February 1891, reported the population as mainly west Salween Shans with only a few people from Kengtung.⁷⁶ The headman recounts the history of their settlement in the first 12 lines:⁷⁷

Line 1: In CS 1231 (1869–1870), Ke Yot Kham⁴ came and built Me³ Kham⁴.

Line 2: In the same year CS 1231 (1869–1870) Sën Mäng⁴ Kaang and Sën Kaang Po Kham⁴ Fan came and built Tachileik (Taa³ Khi³ Lek⁴).

Line 3 and Line 4: In CS 1231 (1869–1870), Sën Cum. built Tachileik, but after staying for one year, in CS 1232 (1870–1871) he moved and built Hōng³ Lūk⁵ [lit. 'deep stream'].

Line 5: In CS 1232 (1870–1871), Sën Kham Fan came and built Waang Sum Pöy.

Line 6: In CS 1233 (1871–1872), Sën Këw (or Kew) came and built Maan³ Cōng.

Line 7: In CS 1235 (1873–1874), Sën Kham⁴ of Mäng⁴ Cän came and built Paang¹ Wo⁴.

Line 8: Sën Kaang left Tachileik, and in CS 1236 (1874–1875) went down and built Sop⁴ Pün (or Pän).

Line 9: In CS 1236 (1874–1875), Pu Mäng⁴ came and built Më³ Saa Lōng.

Line 10: In CS 1238 (1876–1877), [Sën Caay⁴] came and built Hoy Laay.

Line 11: People subordinate (*kha*) to Sën Caay⁴ all went and built Keng⁴ Tum and Chiang Saen. At that time, there was not even one Lan Na (Yon⁴) person there. In the time of Caw³ phaa⁵ Mäng⁴ Mit³,⁷⁸ his majesty personally

Line 12: ordered the ruler of Mäng⁴ Lek⁴ to build Chiang Saen. Following his instructions, the ruler of Mäng⁴ Lek⁴ assembled the Tai⁴ Long¹ subjects under his authority and made them build it.

This account reveals three characteristics of Kengtung's settlement of the Chiang Saen plain.

- (1) The ruler dispatched officials (probably noblemen) to build villages and a vassal polity (*mäng⁴*). The passage above mentions the appointment of 11 officials

⁷⁴Phyaa⁴ long¹ Mäng⁴ Cim.

⁷⁵Grabowsky, 'Population Dynamics in Lan Na', p. 199.

⁷⁶J. G. Scott, Officiating Superintendent, Shan States Summary of the Shan States for the week ending 7 February 1891, Camp Hong Leuk, Scott Collection. Kengtung Shans refers to the Tai² Khün¹.

⁷⁷LL9 106, line 1–12, Scott Collection. Dated the ninth waning day of the third lunar month, CS 1252 (of the Kengtung/Chiang Tung) calendar) which corresponds to Monday, 2 February 1891 (1252 Pausha 24). My translation from the Shan.

⁷⁸According to the *Chiang Khaeng Chronicle*, the Caw³ phaa⁵ Mäng⁴ Mit³ ascended the throne of Kengtung in 1877–1878 and died in 1880–1881; see Grabowsky and Wichasin, *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng*, pp. 124–125.

with six different titles between 1869–1870 and 1876–1877. They included *caw³ mǎng⁴* (one-person ⑬⁷⁹); *Sěn Mǎng⁴ Kaang* (one-person ②); *Sěn Kaang* (two people ② and ⑧); *Sěn* (five people ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑩); *Ke* (one-person ①); and *Pu Mǎng⁴* (one-person ⑨). *Ke* is the headman of a village or a group of people. The *caw³ mǎng⁴*, *Sěn Mǎng⁴ Kaang*, *Sěn Kaang*, and *Sěn* must have possessed the authority to organize manpower to open waste land for cultivation because of their status as Kengtung officials.

- (2) Kengtung officials mobilized Shan migrants as manpower. The above document indicates that they rebuilt Chiang Saen in two stages. In the first stage *Sěn Caay⁴* built *Keng⁴ Tum* and Chiang Saen with his own labour force in 1876/1877 when ‘there was not even one Yuan (Yon⁴) person there’. In the second stage, the head of the vassal polity of *Mǎng⁴ Lek⁴* continued constructing Chiang Saen with his own Shan manpower between 1877/1878 to 1880/1881 by order of the Kengtung ruler who originally came from *Mǎng⁴ Mit³* west of the Salween River.
- (3) The history of villages and towns recorded by the *Mǎng⁴ Cim* headman corroborates the report by W. J. Archer, acting British vice-consul at Chiang Mai, who visited Kengtung in May and June 1888. The towns constructed by Kengtung during the 1870s still exist today. For instance, Kengtung established Tachileik in 1869/1870 and Maesalong in 1874/1875. Archer reported that Tachileik was the first place on the Chiang Saen plain settled by Kengtung subjects,⁸⁰ verifying the headmen’s account of Shan settlement beginning here.

Siam shifted people to populate the Chiang Saen plain from 1881⁸¹ as a countermeasure against Kengtung’s settlement of its northern part from 1877 to 1881. Lines 17–20 in the document recorded the ousting of the Shan from Chiang Saen by Lan Na settlers. Arriving sometime between 1874/1875 and 1875/1876⁸² Lan Na settlers erected huts (*sum⁵*) at *Mě³ Khi*. After bandits destroyed all their huts in 1876/1877,⁸³ the Lan Na settlers returned and expelled the Shan. The Shan left without protest because the Kengtung ruler had not instructed them to stay. Lan Na settlers evicted the Shan from the Buddhist temples at Tachileik in a similar fashion.

Kengtung governed large swathes of the northern Chiang Saen plain during its ten-year occupation. Evidence appears in a compensation case filed by Chinese sojourners⁸⁴ for damages, recorded in Lines 14–16. In 1870/1871,⁸⁵ the Chinese sojourners at *Mě³ Khi* suffered losses when bandits divided this place into two. The ruler of Chiang Rai rejected their claim for compensation on the grounds that he had no prerogative over *Mě³ Khi*. He clearly stated: ‘This place is not within our jurisdiction (*aa nē² pe*).

⁷⁹The numbers enclosed by circles refer to the lines in which names and titles appear in the translation of the Shan text given in the preceding paragraph.

⁸⁰W. J. Archer, ‘Extract from the Journal kept by Mr. W. J. Archer, Acting British Vice-Consul at Chiangmai, of a visit to Chiengtung in May and June 1888’, *Siam*, no. 1 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1889), p. 6, Scott Collection.

⁸¹Grabowsky, ‘Population Dynamics in Lan Na’, p. 199; Walker, *The Legend of the Golden Boat*, p. 35.

⁸²CS 1236 to CS1237.

⁸³CS 1238.

⁸⁴*Khě² Laaw Cung*.

⁸⁵CS 1232.

Our authority extends to Kĕw Tap Yaang. Places north of Kĕw Tap Yaang lie within the jurisdiction of Kengtung.’⁸⁶ The Kengtung ruler eventually compensated the Chinese. The important point is that the Chiang Rai ruler recognized the northern Chiang Saen plain as Kengtung territory in 1870/1871. Chiang Rai had been left depopulated in 1804 (alongside Chiang Saen, Phayao, Fang, and several other müang) and was only repopulated in 1843 by settlers shifted from Chiang Mai by order of that polity’s ruler. Chiang Mai also orchestrated the repopulation of Chiang Saen four decades later through the Chiang Rai ruler.⁸⁷ Given this situation, we can conclude that the Chiang Rai ruler’s recognition of Kengtung’s claim to parts of the northern Chiang Saen plain reflected his stance on jurisdiction. This stance differed from that of the Siamese government. If this is the case, then Shan migrants whom Kengtung settled in the Mae Sai area were not ‘illegal settlers’, as claimed by the Siamese.⁸⁸

Grabowsky has advanced a three-phase model of nineteenth-century Lan Na population growth. Phase 2 (*circa* 1840–1870) during which Kengtung settled north Chiang Saen spanned the last years of Siamese expansion north and lasted until its consolidation of northern settlement areas in Phase 3 (*circa* 1870–1900). Grabowsky attributes shifting populations north to ‘concerns of external security’ by northern Thai princes and their Siamese overlords as well as land scarcity in the south.⁸⁹ Shan sources confirm that Siam settled Lan Na migrants in Chiang Saen to support its claim for sovereignty over the entire plain. Siam’s success in securing a border at the Mae Sai River has caused historians to overlook the role played by Kengtung’s ‘illegal settlers’ in Chiang Saen’s post-1854 reopening and the construction of villages and towns. Its success has hindered understanding the repopulation of the plain within the broader context of Shan migration east to escape warfare west of the Salween.⁹⁰

Civil war in the Shan States

Kengtung’s ability to recover from depopulation during the first half of the nineteenth century and begin to expand during the 1870s stemmed from its capacity to absorb Shan migrants. Inter-polity warfare uprooted large numbers of Shan from *circa* 1878, disrupting the economies of polities west of the Salween. The British annexation of all Burman crown territories on 1 January 1886 and the military expeditions dispatched from November 1886 exacerbated unrest. In addition to using military force, the British restored stability by formally recognizing the political authority of each ruler through the issue of *sanads* (documents stating specific terms of appointment).⁹¹

⁸⁶LL9 106, line 15, Scott Collection. My translation from the Shan.

⁸⁷Grabowsky, ‘Population Dynamics in Lan Na’, p. 199.

⁸⁸In 1871, 8,000 troops from Chiang Mai, Lamphun and Lampang were dispatched to destroy illegal Shan settlements, see Grabowsky, ‘Population Dynamics in Lan Na’, p. 199.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 236–237.

⁹⁰The contribution of Kengtung to the reopening of the Chiang Saen plain in the post-1854 period is not mentioned in either Grabowsky and Wichasin, *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng* or in Grabowsky, ‘Population Dynamics in Lan Na’.

⁹¹*Sanads* were legal documents denoting decrees, grants, treaties, and proclamations used by the Mughal empire. The British in India continued their usage. *Sanads* specified the terms of appointment of each ruler in the Shan States. The British issued them to the rulers of large polities, the *myosa* of vassal polities, and the *ngwehkhunmu* in the Myelat. See Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State*, p. 166. Also see

sanads included clauses stipulating that rulers must maintain peace and order, keep trade routes open, and compensate traders and caravans attacked while within their polities.⁹² Civil war had disrupted trade between Burma and Yunnan. Gunnell Cederlöf has shown that British merchants and chambers of commerce had long petitioned the Government of India to promote commerce between India/Burma and Yunnan.⁹³ By compelling rulers to aid the recovery of trade with Yunnan, these clauses satisfied the demands of British merchants and interest groups.

Strategies adopted by individual Shan rulers reflected their reactions to the shift from Burman to British suzerainty. Their responses varied according to their political stances in the conflicts that marred the reign of the last Konbaung monarch, King Thibaw (r. 1878–1885). In the Shan States Act of 1888, the British followed Burmese monarchical practice by allowing Shan rulers to control the civil, criminal, and revenue administration of their own polities, albeit subject to restrictions specified in the *sanads* issued to each ruler.⁹⁴ This legislation resulted in Shan rulers continuing to govern mixed Shan/Tai (Tai Lü, Tai Khün, and Tai Long) and upland ethnic groups in the Shan States, while the British directly administered Burmans in Ministerial Burma.⁹⁵ For the British it was more expedient and cost-effective to govern the Shan States through polity rulers than by direct administration. This mode of governance ended up preserving the social structure of Shan society and traditional modes of social and cultural life.⁹⁶ It proved effective in restoring agricultural production and promoting local trade within a short period of time after annexation.

From the perspective of Shan rulers, the 1886 annexation marked a change of dynasty that required them to shift allegiance from the Burmese court to the British monarchy. This switchover proceeded according to traditional Shan/Tai political custom, rather than modern notions of territoriality. Annexation offered Shan rulers the opportunity to extricate themselves from the chaos caused by political intrigues at the Burman court since 1878, especially those affecting Moeng Nai (discussed below), and British overlordship helped stabilize their war-torn polities. At the first Durbar held at Fort Stedman in the Southern Shan States on 19 March 1890 in his speech to the ‘Sawbwas, Myozas and Notables of the Shan States’, Sir Charles Crosthwaite, chief commissioner of Burma, emphasized the political disruption before the annexation:⁹⁷

It is hardly necessary for me to remind you of the past history of your country. You know too well and your country itself, with its large fertile plains, its wide

Gunnell Cederlöf, ‘Armed and Bureaucratic Violence in the Formation of British Governance in Southeast Asian Contested Tracts’, in this Forum.

⁹²Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State*, p. 166.

⁹³Gunnell Cederlöf, ‘Tracking Routes: Imperial Competition in the Late-Nineteenth Century Burma-China Borderlands’, in *Flows and Frictions in Trans-Himalayan Spaces: Histories of Networking and Border Crossing*, (eds) Gunnell Cederlöf and Willem van Schendel (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), pp. 77–103.

⁹⁴Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State*, p. 171.

⁹⁵Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 37.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*

⁹⁷*Report on the Administration of the Shan States for the Year 1889–90, Appendices* (Rangoon: Government Printing, August 1890), Appendix II, p. XIX, Scott Collection.

stretches of fields now unfortunately deserted, the many sites of ruined villages, and marks of former wealth and of numerous populations, testifies to the fact that you have passed through a time of great misery. What the cause of these misfortunes has been you know full well ... I think most of you will admit that it is the misgovernment of Burma added to the want of unity and cohesion among yourselves, to which I have referred, that your misfortunes and your present impoverished condition are mainly due.

Court intrigues initiated by Queen Supayalat, the principal wife of King Thibaw, troubled the Konbaung dynasty from *circa* 1878 and spawned struggles between the reformists bent on modernization and administrative change and the royalists determined to maintain the old order.⁹⁸ While Crosthwaite's stress on Burman misgovernment was a blatant sales pitch designed to justify British rule, it was nevertheless true that persistent warfare had devastated the economies of Shan polities.

Dissatisfaction with court policy surfaced after the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852–1853). Weakened by the confrontation, the Konbaung dynasty faced hostility from the Shan, the Mon, and the Arakan.⁹⁹ Shan rebellions broke out in the north-western polities of Moby, Mäng⁴ Mit³-Mong Leng, Moguang, and Myitkyina during the 1860s. Shan rulers had supported King Mindon (r. 1853–1878) in overthrowing the previous king, Pagan Min, but by 1865 they opposed King Mindon's control of their territories and natural resources. Shan polities too faced internal problems such as succession disputes, the most notable being the one in Moeng Mit³-Moeng Leng *circa* 1840–1892. The decline in Burma-Yunnan trade soured relations between the upland Kachin allies of Shan rulers and the Burman court, affording Shan rulers an opportunity to hire Kachin mercenaries to fight their rivals, a change that ended up intensifying inter-polity warfare.¹⁰⁰

Faced with this troubled situation, King Mindon strove to mitigate conflict by cultivating friendly relations with the ruler of Moeng Nai, the largest and most powerful polity in the Southern Shan States. But the aggressive policy of Mindon's successor, King Thibaw, towards Moeng Nai compelled its ruler Sao Hkun Kyi to rebel in November 1883. Sao Hkun Kyi's list of grievances included Thibaw's imprisonment of his queen, tax rises, arbitrary apportionment of his territory to other Shan rulers, and the appointment of his enemies to important administrative positions. As unrest spread, usurpers and *de facto* rulers took over Shan polities west of the Salween.¹⁰¹ Before the arrival of the British, the rulers of Moeng Nai and Kengtung organized other Shan rulers affected by the conflict into a confederacy to dethrone King Thibaw and replace him with the Limbin prince, who was of royal blood. After the fall of Mandalay in November 1885, resistance against the British organized by the Myinzaing prince and the Shan ruler of Hsien Wi failed due to lack of support from prominent northern

⁹⁸Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State*, p. 125; Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 162–172.

⁹⁹G. E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma 1824–1942* (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1974), p. 561.

¹⁰⁰E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of the Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (G. Bell and Sons, London, 1954), pp. 241–244; Oliver B. Pollak, *Empires in Collision: Anglo-Burmese Relations in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1979), pp. 141–142.

¹⁰¹Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State*, pp. 125–127.

Shan polities.¹⁰² According to Shan and Burmese historians, Shan rulers did not resist the British to gain complete independence, but wanted to install Burmese princes as monarchs to preserve Shan autonomy under a nominal Burmese suzerain.¹⁰³ The Shan historian Sai Aung Tun argues that Shan rulers desired to remain under the overlordship of a Burman 'monarchical system' which recognized 'their traditional right to manage their internal affairs without interference either from the royal court or from their military representatives stationed at their capitals'.¹⁰⁴

The confederacy dissolved after the Limbin prince surrendered in May 1887 bringing temporary peace, but widespread inter-polity fighting erupted as local leaders took advantage of the small number of British troops garrisoned at Fort Stedman. The British did not completely eradicate resistance until 1896, yet they felt confident enough to begin governing Shan polities by 1888. To ensure that rulers administered their own polities 'properly', the British divided Shan polities into two divisions—the Northern Shan States and the Southern Shan States—each with its own superintendent in August 1888. Sai Aung Tun concludes that the British introduced this infrastructure of closer supervision to modify 'the autonomous rights' of Shan rulers.¹⁰⁵ This is undoubtedly true of Kengtung because the *sanads* of 1889 and 1896 both imposed constraints on the ruler. First, in all matters he 'shall accept and act upon any advice that may be given by the Chief Commissioner of Burma either in respect of the internal affairs of Kyainton [Kengtung] or its relations with other States'. Second, the ruler must ensure law and order, keep open the trade routes to Yunnan, and compensate traders or caravans for losses incurred by attacks within his territory in accordance with rates fixed by the superintendent of the Shan States. Third, if a railway were to be built through Kengtung, the ruler must 'provide land free of cost' and 'help the government as much as possible'.¹⁰⁶ A document dated 10 February 1890 from the chief commissioner's under secretary to the superintendent of the Shan States explained two differences between Kengtung's *sanad* and those issued to other Cis-Salween polities. First, it omitted the clause 'the government reserves proprietary right in forests, mines, and minerals' included in other *sanads*, because the chief commissioner 'thinks it unnecessary to impose restrictions of this nature on the Trans-Salween Chiefs'.¹⁰⁷ However, this clause was inserted in the 1896 *sanad*.¹⁰⁸ Second, the Kengtung *sanad* does not mention its vassal polities so as to discourage the ruler from 'entering States over which he has no real control, or over which we have no desire at present to assume

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, pp. 125–134.

¹⁰³Sao Saimong Mangrai, *The Shan States and the British Annexation* (New York: Cornell University, 1965), p. 107; Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, pp. 157–158, 161–162, 172–173, 206.

¹⁰⁴Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 135–147.

¹⁰⁶1889 *sanad* in Scott LL9. 39, Scott Collection. Both the 1889 and the 1896 *sanads* are given in Mangrai, *The Shan States*, pp. xxxiii–xxxvii.

¹⁰⁷Scott LL9. 39, Scott Collection. This document accompanied the English, Shan, and Burmese versions of the Kengtung *sanad*.

¹⁰⁸Sao Saimong Mangrai, *The Shan States*, p. xxxvi; Gunnell Cederlöf, 'Exceptional, Pragmatic and Provisional: Formation of British Imperial Governance in Asian Frontier Tracts', Paper presented at the 'Inter-Imperial Flows: Frontier Governance in the Chinese and British Empire (1850–1925)', workshop held at the University of Cape Town, 26–28 August 2024, pp. 24–25.

suzerainty'. The British feared that if mentioned in the *sanad*, the ruler would assume that they supported his feudatory rights over vassal polities.¹⁰⁹ Therefore even before the Anglo-French negotiations began in 1894, the British government had not committed to supporting Kengtung's claims to its vassals Müang Sing and Chiang Lap east of the Mekong River.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

The Kengtung polity manoeuvred the ever-mutating political and economic conditions accompanying the transition from Konbaung to British overlordship by settling land in Lan Na territory. The political acumen displayed by the ruler in expanding his polity started as a strategy to benefit from the heightened turmoil of the 1870s and 1880s and was not spawned by the British annexation of 1886. The fluidity of ties of allegiance enabled its Trans-Mekong vassal Chiang Khaeng to initially assert independence, only to be split in half, with left bank territories falling under French suzerainty and right bank territories under British rule.¹¹¹

International border demarcation compelled some Shan polities to switch allegiance multiple times to satisfy the demands of imperial powers. Political realignment reflected the prioritization of self-interest by polities of all sizes. Rulers of Shan polities submitted to the British for survival, while at the same time devising policies to recover from the devastation wrought by the civil war. The practice of switching loyalty in times of adversity ensured their relatively peaceful transition to governance by Siam and France. Restrictions on access to teak forests, mines, and other natural resources stipulated in the *sanads*, and borders fixed by imperial powers severely constrained Shan rulers' manoeuvrability, yet some still found the leeway to assert their own self-interests. The decision to govern indirectly through polities forced the British to support rulers' efforts to stabilize society and promote economic recovery. Fearful of triggering unrest, the British refrained from eliminating large polities, though they changed polity rulers and 'amalgamated the small states into big states to meet the needs of British administration'.¹¹² The need to preserve Shan polities demonstrates British dependence on them for governance and calls into question the validity of the notion of powerful empires single-handedly creating colonial states. Later, the British increasingly intervened in the administration of Shan polities, especially from the 1920s, which stands in sharp contrast with their inability to penetrate the independent and self-governing polities on the India-Burma borderlands, as demonstrated by Willem van Schendel.¹¹³

Shan polities depended on manpower for stable fiscal bases. Warfare and conflict between Shan rulers and the Burman court displaced populations. The Kengtung ruler

¹⁰⁹Scott LL9. 39, Scott Collection.

¹¹⁰'Further it seems desirable, in the Chief Commissioner's opinion, to do nothing at present which might commit the Government to a protectorate of territory east of the Mekong River.' Scott LL9. 39, Scott Collection.

¹¹¹Grabowsky and Wichasin, *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng*, pp. 36–43.

¹¹²Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State*, p. 167.

¹¹³See Willem van Schendel, 'A Hole in the British Empire: The "Free Hills" Between India and Burma', in this Forum.

mobilized these people to repopulate his polity and vassal polities from *circa* 1870. The case of Kengtung demonstrates that the demographics of Shan polities fluctuated with political upheavals and warfare, and refutes the notion of feudatory ties permanently binding vassals to one ruler. Vassals switched allegiance according to the circumstances. The mobility of manpower during the 1870s and 1880s shows that Shan polities waxed and waned not just through their encounters with Konbaung and British overlords, but, more importantly, by their ability, or inability, to manage manpower to consolidate their polities. The practice of strategic fluidity tactics and raiding from other polities could lead to the loss of whole villages, resulting in depopulation. One polity's loss was another polity's gain, creating opportunities for large polity rulers to attract manpower to their territories.

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