

7 **Revolutionary Scripts:**

Shan Insurgent Media Practice at the Thai-Burma Border

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From gun-toting revolutionary soldiers in the mountainous Thai-Burma border to domestic workers in middle-class homes in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the Shan constitute one of Mainland Southeast Asia's largest (sub)national ethnic groups. Most of Southeast Asia's Shan people can be found in the Shan State located in the Northeast of Burma (also known as Myanmar). The political landscape of the Shan State tends to be characterized as complex patchwork of ethnic militias, political commandoes, and drug warlords, scattered among villages of wet-rice farmers and slash-and-burn upland ethnic tribes. Although many Shan politicians had expected political autonomy following the Second World War, for a number of reasons, the Burmese military authorities have continued to rule the area, and some groups of Shan have been engaged in one of the longest-running civil wars in modern history, with the first Shan armed separatist movement dating its formation back to 1958.

Within that struggle, however, we can also find a great deal of news, literature, and bureaucratic paperwork in the Shan language. I have chosen to discuss the emergence of print media production of one Shan militia, the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) later the Shan State Army-South (SSA-South), and to examine the ways in which print media production is embedded in this group's ongoing political struggle. Based on content analysis of Shan insurgent media, selected articles from the Shan journal, *Song Le'o (Freedom's Way)* and the newsletter *Kawn Hkaw (Independence)*,

as well as ethnographic research carried out amongst a community of Shan insurgent soldier-veterans, this chapter examines the role of Shan print media produced by affiliates of this army in the context of the Shan ethnic liberation movement against the forces of the Burmese military government.

The first section of this chapter will situate the Shan struggle in the midst of post-colonial national liberation politics in Burma (Myanmar). Next, attention will be turned to the role of insurgent media in this national liberation struggle, from the politics, economics and geographies of insurgent media production, to media content and its interrelation with its respective readership, both within the Shan State and beyond. Ethnographic analysis based on field research among Shan communities will flesh out how people understand and re-articulate discursive links between issues such as Burmese oppression, Shan culture, and the Shan political movement. As I argue, in order for the media to be truly 'insurgent', it must be embedded in a dialectical relationship between its consumers, its producers and their military struggle for political autonomy.²

Finally, I will discuss the ways in which the Burmese state has responded to this media and its producers, as well as Shan language teachers. While on the one hand, newer publishing technologies have aided in the de-centralization of insurgent media production such that a strong-arm suppression of the media by the Burmese state is increasingly impractical; on the other hand, there has been limited aperturism on the part of the state in allowing Shan publications to enter the mainstream licit market in Burma. The contemporary situation raises fundamental questions about the role of the market, ethno-nationalism, and the future of print media production and literacy in the

Shan struggle for self-determination.

The Shan in Upland Southeast Asia: Past and Present

Ethnically and linguistically similar to their Thai neighbors, the Shan can trace their presence in upland Southeast Asia nearly two thousand years, as historical and archaeological evidence places Shan settlements along the Salween River as far back as the third century (Sompong 2001: 25). Although various Shan, Burmese, and Chinese kingdoms have exerted political and military authority over the region throughout the centuries, it was not until the end of the 19th century that the British conquest of Burma signified a European bureaucratic imposition on the areas ruled by Shan princes. Rather than fully colonize this area of upland Southeast Asia, in February 1889, the British reached an agreement called the Shan State Act with the Shan princes where the Shan would be allowed to rule their subjects as part of the 'frontier areas' to British 'Burma proper.' At this time, the Shan princes claimed a territory of 62,500 square miles and 1.3 million people (an estimated half of whom could be counted as ethnic Shan) and in exchange for being allowed to keep their positions, the Shan rulers started to pay tribute to the British Authorities (Elliott 2006: 42).

With the close of the Second World War, Burmese nationalists were engaged in independence negotiations with British colonial authorities. The British specified that evidence of cooperation with the political rulers in the former 'frontier areas' would be a necessary condition for Burmese independence. The accord, signed in the Shan

city of Panglong in February 1947, stipulated that the ‘frontier areas’ would join with the newly-formed Union of Burma in its independence from the British. The Union would consist of seven (predominantly Burman) ‘divisions’ and seven ‘ethnic states’. Two of the states, the Karenni and the Shan States, would have the option to secede following ten years’ initial membership in the Union (Kö Hse'n 1996: 374). For some politicians and members of Shan's elites, this accord made it clear that the Shan are a legitimate nation (Tai Revolutionary Council [TRC] 1990: 2). The ‘spirit of the Panglong Agreement’ will be a key recurring pattern in Shan independentist discourses throughout the following six decades of Shan separatist mobilization and political claims-making.

In the years preceding the Panglong Agreement, a group of nine Shan educators and literary enthusiasts were already at work simplifying the Shan written script so that it would more adequately reflect the spoken language. Although there already were numerous Shan scripts in circulation, literacy was not widespread, as it was limited to a handful of elites and monastic scholars. The previous Shan scripts were imprecise and represented the Shan spoken language with little consistency (Ranu 1998: 265). These nine Shan educators also drafted school textbooks, up to the fifth grade, in the aspiration that not only would this Shan script and language be taught in schools, but also that it would be the official bureaucratic language for an independent Shan nation. In the introduction to these textbooks, Sai Hsai Mōng, the representative of this committee, writes that the purpose of the textbooks is to enable the people of the Shan state, through education in the Shan language, to progress toward a modern political state (Sao Hsai Mōng 1962: iii). One measure of the enthusiasm and relative success of this initial endeavor is the fact that by the 1950s, there were a total of 20

Shan printing presses throughout Burma, publishing an estimated 250 kinds of publications in the Shan language (Sai Kam Mong 2004: 340). Crucial to the success of these Shan presses were the growing numbers of people in Shan cultural associations, particularly the students in Rangoon and Mandalay universities, who constituted a highly literate elite in a largely agrarian country.

However, world events soon made the Shan State the stomping ground for Chinese nationalist troops: with the 1949 revolution in China, small units of Chiang Kai-Shek's troops spilled across the Yunnan border, and before long the Kuomintang (KMT) started systematically to establish camps in order to carry out their counter-insurgency against the Maoists (Chang 1999: 22). This development greatly concerned the Rangoon government, and soon the Burmese army (or *Tatmadaw*) was dispatched to administer the area (Callahan 1996: 30). The consolidation and increasing presence of Burmese troops in the area throughout the 1950s, and the subsequent imposition of martial law, caused great aggravation for many Shan politicians, who were seeing the possibility for independence becoming increasingly bleak. While some Shan politicians decided to try to negotiate for a federation, rather than complete independence, other Shan princes signed over their powers to the Burmese government in exchange for hefty life pensions and property rights (Hkö Hse'n 1996: 410).

Other Shan groups were not prepared to join with the Burmese so willingly. 21 May 1958 saw the formation of *Num Sük Han* (young warriors), the first Shan armed resistance group led by Sai Noi (TRC 1990: 3). This group also counted among its membership numerous students from the several Shan cultural associations mentioned

earlier. In 1959, the Shan State Independence Army (SSIA) officially convened, declaring that there can be no common bond between the Shans and the Burmese (in terms of language or culture) except for religion, ‘nor is there any sentiment of unity which is the index of a common national mind’ (Smith 1999: 36). In addition to pointing to the Panglong Agreement, the Shan independence aspirations have consistently emphasized language as part of the fundamental differences between them and the Burmese, and for them *print language* becomes the key channel through which to assert Shan administrative authority, if only initially in resistance to the Burmese state.

Throughout the 1950s, a number of historical developments – the reaction to the KMT antagonism in particular – contributed to making the Burmese army the strongest political force in the country, and by 1962, general Ne Win effectively staged a coup of the fledgling civilian government. Although his rise to power was partially built on the hope that a stronger state could end the internal strife in Burma, it has also been argued that the 1962 military coup ‘poured oil on the flames of the country’s ethnic insurgencies’ (Smith 1999: 198). On 23 February 1963, Ne Win had nationalized 10 of the 14 private banks in the Union (*Kawn Khaw* 2000: 9), and in 1964 kicked out foreign (mostly Indian and Chinese) investments, and eventually, most foreign people (Smith 1999: 201). This strategy, though criticized by Shan nationalists as being a move of pure Burmese chauvinism, also signified a wresting of capital from foreign interests, and into the hands of the military, which, of course, happened to be Burmese. This strong-arm military regime soon named itself the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) and called its economic plan the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’. What is behind the motivation, also, is a history of independence in which

the ruling class is not the capital-controlling class; most of the capital was under the control of British, Indian, and Chinese business people (Callahan 1996: 32) and the military's strength was sufficient to make it such that they could become both the ruling class and the capital-controlling class, if only looking out from their headquarters down the barrel of their guns. However, while the military government professed a state monopoly on commerce, this was never realized, as shadow market forces encroached (and subsumed) key sectors of commerce within the nation. While World Bank estimates have put illicit trade as accounting for about 40 per cent of Burma's economy, other estimates suggest that the black market sector could constitute as much as 80 per cent of the national economy (Chang 2004: 487).

Language, Print and Politics

The Burmese Way to Socialism, the inception of Ne Win's Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP), and the nationalization of the economy affected Shan publishing in two marked ways: on the one hand, legitimate production plummeted as a result of the scarcity of paper, due to the lack of imports and economic mismanagement, but on the other hand, the expanding black market economy which fueled the insurgent activities gave nationality groups in liberated areas the desire and funds to maintain the Shan language.

By 1969, civilian Shan presses were ordered to halt operations (Sai Kam Mong 2004: 340). Far away from the cities, in the border area East of the Salween River, the same year saw a merger of the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) (led by Gon Jerg

from Num Hsük Harn) with one of the KMT divisions, with both groups choosing the Thai-Shan State border town of Piang Luang for the centre of their operations (TRC 1990: 4). This alliance lasted nearly 15 years, and the groups shared a mutual interest in benefiting from the black market economy, and a collective anti-communist stance helped ideologically to seal this marriage of convenience. The choice of the SURA/KMT headquarters on the border crossing to the Thai (sub) district of Wieng Haeng was strategic as it meant that the SURA could take advantage of trade with Thailand, and the border crossing as a point of entry to the black market commerce in Burma, to supply the general operations of their ethnic militias. This border crossing is 196km northwest of Chiang Mai city, and as of then, had not been fully integrated under the surveillance and administration of the Thai state (Nipanporn 2006: 42).

The areas of the Shan State east of the Salween River, all the way to the Thai border, were held by various insurgent armies, although unevenly, for nearly 30 years. The Shan State Army, by the 1970s, operated over 200 schools, while the much smaller Shan United Revolutionary Army had 18 elementary schools of their own as well (Elliott 2006: 350). During the 1970s, the SURA acquired a moveable Shan press and used it to produce a tremendous variety of articles in the Shan language. They also carried out supply projects for the local Shan villagers, which included the militia's invoice statements, and general bureaucratic paperwork, as well as wedding and funeral announcements. One woman SURA veteran that I interviewed had found out that the army was accepting women recruits from a flyer that they had printed on the Shan moveable type, and distributed to her village in Mong Pan. She told me how she had encountered problems in her Burmese-run high school, and together with a classmate one year her junior, left high school in Mong Pan to join the forces of the

SURA. Had she not seen the flyer specifically recruiting women soldiers, one can only wonder how the path of this woman's life might have been different. In addition to sundry publications, affiliates of the SURA produced two serials: *Kawn Hkaw* (or Independence) and *Söng Le'o* (or Freedom's Way).

Understanding Insurgent Media

How then are we to look at such media production? To start examining such artifacts, we must not only look at its producers, their circumstances of media production, but also its consumers and the kind of politics these artifacts mediate. Insurgent media can, and often does, fall under the rubric of 'indigenous' media. Many Shan often use indigenous politics in their claims-making. As the anthropologist Faye Ginsburg has pointed out, indigenous media offers a possible means 'for reproducing and transforming cultural identity among people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption' (Ginsburg 1991: 94). As the media theorist John Downing has argued, 'radical alternative media' tend to 'express opposition vertically from subordinate powers directly at the power structure and against its behavior [and] to build support, solidarity [...] or even against the very survival of the power structure' (Downing 2001: xi). However, in the Shan United Revolutionary Army case, the cultural reproduction capacities of these media are seen as a means toward the end goal of national liberation and the establishment of a sovereign Shan nation-state. Hence I have found 'insurgent media' a more accurate term to describe the media of the Shan liberation movement.

If we are to say therefore that publications such as *Kawn Hkaw* or *Söng Le'o* constitute examples of 'insurgent media', we must look at the ways in which these media forms are embedded in the politics, economics, and geographies of the movement for Shan separatism. This particular kind of mediation, then, is directed toward the negation of political authority, and in the hope for the establishment of a different kind of political order – in this case, one for an independent Shan nation. While straight content analysis can bring to light themes of rebellion and ethnic resistance in such articles as these Shan publications, in order for these publications to be deemed 'insurgent' the ethnographic method provides one strategy to examine the ways in which these media are part of an insurgent struggle. If a publication is truly radical, then it must play a key role in mediating insurgency between the people it claims to be fighting for, along with the political movement which mobilizes its soldiers and its villages which support those soldiers. The relationship between surrounding villages and the insurgent camps is vital to the survival of the sub-national movement in specific and crucial ways, and a paper trail of invoices and newsletters provides an interface with the hypostatized Shan state, even in its status as a sub-nation.

Where a central government holds a monopoly on the legitimate means of mass communication, the police and the military also seek to control the circulation of all forms of media within its borders. Media which do not have approval from the government censor board are therefore by definition illegal, and those engaged in unlicensed media production are often prosecuted by the Burmese government. Shan insurgent media are considered highly volatile, and those caught involved in the production, transfer, or even mere possession of such articles are subject to fines and

confiscation at best, and torture and/or imprisonment at worst. Among my informants who had moved to the Shan village at the Thai-Burma border where I have been carrying out my fieldwork, four of them have spent brief periods in Burmese prisons on the grounds that they were teaching the Shan language; even though their teaching materials were purposely benign elementary school textbooks. As one of these former teachers explained, the Burmese government does not know the difference: ‘the fact that we were teaching the Shan language, it meant we were teaching about independence politics.’

However, areas in the Shan state, particularly those East of the Salween River, constitute Shan liberated areas where the soldiers of the Burmese State do not patrol. As mentioned earlier, the Shan insurgency movement, as with all other such movements, intrinsically depends on surrounding civilian populations. Within every outpost, there will be a small team of *kun pai möng* (or scouts) who will maintain contact with surrounding villages, and take supplies up to the camps. These people are quite literally the brokers of insurgency, engaging in economic transactions to supply the armies at the ground level. At the most fundamental level, it is the *kun pai möng* who transport sacks of rice up to the hilltop insurgent camps to feed the troops, or requisition other necessary supplies from surrounding Shan villages. Whether these suppliers are in an amicable relationship with the *kun pai möng* is dependent on multiple factors, not the least of which is the villagers’ respective political stance toward the Burmese government, or their trust in the political leaders of the insurgent movement. Often as well, troops from the insurgent armies are given leave to visit families or to buy things in the shops to take back to the camps. One veteran of the Shan United Revolutionary Army carefully explained to me that back in the early

1980s, the Shan armies respected the villagers:

If you borrow the smallest thing, even just a sewing needle from the villagers, you had to return it; if you didn't and your captain found out, you would be punished. It was because we held the Shan villagers in the highest regard, and if we were soldiers for the Shan, and we could not abuse that. That's what we were told.

In addition to the mechanics of the economy for insurgent media production, in the struggle for liberated territory, geography plays a formative role in the logistics for printing and distribution of such materials. Whereas the Burmese government was relatively successful at controlling the production of certain forms of dissident media within the urban areas, the influence that they could exert on media production could only extend as far as could its soldiers. This is why in the 1970s and 1980s Shan liberated areas and black market economies were necessary conditions for the industrial production of Shan print media. Lest we forget, also, that during this period, a large moveable type was the production unit; it was still a full decade before the proliferation of the personal computer and accessible desktop publishing.

Texts of an Insurgent Media

Having briefly outlined the historical, economic and military context for the production of Shan insurgent media, I would like to use textual analysis and

ethnographic data to explain the ways in which such media operate on the ground level, or amongst its troops and its public. In order to measure and discuss the ways in which insurgent media operate in the political-ethnic framework of Shan resistance, I will turn now to the dominant thematic patterns of these artifacts of Shan media, produced with relatively old printing technology in a highly unstable and contested political economy described above. Using a representative selection of articles from Shan publications, I will relate them thematically to the larger political picture through ethnographic analysis. This is, I would argue, the litmus test to identify whether these Shan publications can be considered ‘insurgent media’.

Söng Le’o or *Freedom’s Way* is an annual journal originally published under the direction of intellectuals affiliated with the Shan United Revolutionary Army in the town of Mai Hsung, about a kilometer inside the Shan State from the border crossing at Piang Luang, Thailand. The publication started in 1984 with the first print run of 1,000 copies. This first issue has a thin paper cover, with 52 pages printed in the Shan language, and 16 in Burmese. By the late 1980s, the actual printing had been moved to Chiang Mai, Thailand, where producers could use color separation, offset printing technologies and glue-binding to create a slick, professional-looking volume. By this time, the print run had increased to 3,000 copies. Issue number four (1987) contains 119 pages, the first 66 of which are in Shan, and the remaining 53 in Burmese. Subsequent years of production saw the incorporation of articles in Tai Kun (Eastern Shan) and later articles in English. Although the importance of the use of the Shan language is repeatedly emphasized, the pluralistic approach to the printed language in these publications demonstrates that perhaps Shan insurgent writers had an open stance toward the multiplicity of languages in the region, so long as Shan remains the

primary language. Furthermore, knowing that amongst its audiences, there are Shan speakers who are literate in Burmese (but not Shan), *Söng Le'o* does not seek to isolate itself from these potential sympathizers. It is testament to the dedication of the Shan intellectuals involved in the production of this journal that in spite of a series of dramatic changes to the Shan political movement (from the merger with the much larger Shan United Army of Khun Sa to form the Mong Tai Army (MTA) in 1985, through Khun Sa's surrender in 1996)³ that *Söng Le'o* has continually been published every year since its inception, all the way until 2002 when production had to cease due to insufficient funds.

One of the Shan articles in the first issue of *Söng Le'o* is entitled 'The way to fall and the way out' (*Tang Tok Le' Tang Awk*). The article features a cartoon depiction of a man in Shan clothing being toppled by a Burman in a traditional soldier costume. The article itself starts with the assertion that 'The Burmese often accuse the Shan of having shallow ideology, as we seek independence' (Mot Som 1984: 35). Later, the article details the ways in which it is the tendency of the Shan to love the Shan nation and the Shan people, and that the Shan have the right to demand independence according to the Panglong Agreement. 'The Burmese', it claims, 'have not been straight with the Shan, oppressing them like cattle or buffalo. The Shan hate the Burmese, but only because the Burmese oppressed the Shan' (Mot Som 1984: 36). This article is simultaneously hitting on two fundamental issues of Shan ethno-nationalism: the first is the 'spirit of the Panglong Agreement', and the second, the notion of the Burmese aggressor. Although we can look at this as a repercussion of the political circumstances of the Shan state, we can also diagnose a specific way in which political problems have been filtered through an ethnic lens; pointing to the

Burman enemy as alien and hostile to the Shan often leads to the discursive and problematic mobilization of the notion of an enemy 'race' (Chao-tzang 2003: 31).

In a later issue of *Song Le'o*, in an article entitled 'National Symbols' (*Hköng Mai Sao Sat*), the author Hseng Küng Möng presents the argument that all countries, whether independent, or oppressed by another force, have their national symbols, examples being the American Eagle and the Russian White Bear (Hseng Küng Möng 1987: 19). The Shan symbol is the tiger, or the albino tiger (Hseng Küng Möng 1987: 21). Ultimately, the message is for people in the Shan areas to distribute and have a deeper understanding about national symbols (Hseng Küng Möng 1987: 22). Certainly, most movements will have their symbolic figures, the signifier which unites in the Durkheimian sense, but what is particularly interesting is that the push for a diversity of national symbols for the Shan is prefaced by a laundry-list of other nations and their respective symbols and insignia. Here is an explicit situating of the Shan nation in a wider international framework, even to the level of aspiring to have a Shan national flower, as 'local sentiments acquire national significance only in the light of an international order' (Ree 1998: 83). While full international recognition of Shan as a sovereign nation is not on the immediate horizons, these important symbolic aspects add force, through their status as modern accoutrements, to claims that the Shan have the necessary components of sovereignty.

Söng Le'o also constitutes a forum for engaging in ongoing discussion about Shan political issues. In one of the articles, entitled 'If you don't know how to fix things, don't place blame' (*Paw Am Maw Me' Ya Pe Ne*), the author responds to another article in the Shan monthly magazine *Kawn Hkaw (Independence)* which purportedly

derides Khun Sa for being Chinese, and therefore not a true Shan nationalist. In response to this accusation, the author argues that many of the Shan leaders have Chinese blood and ‘if they don't help the political situation of the Shan, whose situation are they going to help?’. The author also details that it was Khun Sa who built the Shan United Army, and that he continues to work for the Shan today. What is also interesting is that the author draws upon other historical examples, such as Che Guevara, an Argentinian, who helped the people of Cuba in their political struggles (Mawn Sai Hsük 1992: 65). Once more, we can see Shan print media working to situate the Shan political struggle in an international context, co-opting symbols and drawing distant illustrations into its printed domain.

Returning to the debate which the article by Mawn Sai Hsük focuses on, in the context of Shan ethno-national liberation, the issue of foreign (especially Chinese) involvement is a constant concern, and the insurgent media opens a key venue wherein these debates can ensue. The derision of Khun Sa as Chinese has emerged at crucial points: following the vast commerce networks established by the KMT in the Shan State, numerous Shan informants confided that they had initially supported Khun Sa because he represented a true Shan hero, and the idea of a Shan empire did appeal to them. However, other investigations suggest that Khun Sa may have been more interested in business, and was instrumental as such in his deployment of Shan (or Chinese) ethnicity to advance his personal financial interests. Most of the Chinese traders he worked with arguably accepted him as Yunnanese, and not Shan (Chang 2004: 494).

In hindsight, the machinations of ethno-nationalism which allowed Khun Sa to

accumulate massive material wealth are looked upon with great bitterness among former rank-and-file Shan soldiers. Many Shan veteran soldiers and affiliates iterated the point that Khun Sa used the Shan nation as a ‘façade’ to carry out his heroin trafficking business behind the scenes. As one informant noted:

He was the worst dictator imaginable. What he did was actually very clever. We Shan had been tired of watching them (the KMT) get rich while the Shan villagers had to sit paying taxes and suffering when the Burmese came to our village. Khun Sa and the MTA meant a Shan nation to us, but the more power he got, the worse he became. If he just didn’t like your face, he could kill you. He became a worse dictator than the Burmans, and if anyone spoke up, he’d get cut, too. Of course we were disappointed that he surrendered to the generals, but he didn’t really care about the Shan villagers like he used to say he did anyway.’

One can only speculate the extent to which Shan media aided in building Khun Sa’s image as a true Shan nationalist. However, as indicated above, it clearly did form part of the debate over his legitimacy around the time of his fall from power.

Shan insurgent media can, and indeed do, speak to the two overriding purposes outlined by Downing’s goals of radical media. First, they articulate the movement’s opposition to the Burmese military authorities; and second, they seek to build and maintain solidarity in their national project. However, it would be potentially rash to assume that insurgent media can only fulfill these aims. The number of artistic, and human interest (even potentially apolitical) articles in *Söng Le’o* suggests that just

because a publication is insurgent in its relationship to dominant power structures, its pages are not always used to serve those ends explicitly. The pages of the journal are graced by poems, stories, and other entertaining departures from simply ‘toeing the line’ towards Shan insurgency.

Whereas *Söng Le’o* is an annual journal, *Kawn Hkaw* is the serial newsletter published monthly. The periodical nature of *Kawn Hkaw* allows it to keep up with events relevant to Shan politics and military movements, as well as other more time-sensitive issues. On 20 May 2002, Shan State Army (South) soldiers launched an offensive on the troops of the Tatmadaw, seeking to reclaim their former headquarters in the town of Mai Soong, opposite Piang Luang (Thailand), where they had once operated the printing press, the SURA hospital and Shan elementary schools. These were part of the territories that Khun Sa had surrendered to the Burmese military in 1996 in exchange for personal concessions. By 2002, the Burmese military had already driven out most of the civilians from these areas, and had taken the temple school of Gon Jerng's Wat Fa Wiang Inn as an operating outpost. Thai soldiers had also set up a camp near the temple, a mere 400 yards from the Burmese outpost. In *Kawn Hkaw*, the headline ran: ‘Shan Soldiers Fight to Capture the old capital’ (*Hsüik Tai Tük Him Ngao Süng Kao*). The front page article of this issue featured three photographs: the first depicting two dead Burmese soldiers, the second showing two Burmese soldiers displaying their guns in front of their base at Mai Sung, then the third, a picture of a Shan soldier tying up a shirtless Burmese soldier to a tree at the same camp. For the latter two photographs, the caption read: ‘Burmese soldiers at Mai Sung before, and now’ (*Kawn Hkaw* 2002: 3). Following the news brief about the capture, the Shan newspaper detailed the history of the area, how it served as the

SURA headquarters between the years of 1969 and 1984 and the alliance with the troops of Khun Sa to the eventual surrender of the territories by Khun Sa to the Burmese Tatmadaw. The article made the point that the area had been under the control of the Burmese for six years, until its re-capture by the Shan soldiers.

Periodicals like *Independence* are important to the Shan movements because they can relate the events and conflicts which involve the troops of the SSA through the lens of the Shan insurgency. Those who rely on the media to learn about events such as border skirmishes through the Thai commercial media are inevitably subjected to a certain type of event framing, which is different from that of the Shan writers. This is not to say that one is more accurate or just. But looking at how Shan, Burmese, and Thai newspapers reported a border clash in May of 2002 is illustrative of this particular point. For Shan nation-building projects, form and content of 'Shan news' is imperative. As Benedict Anderson has argued, 'the very conception of the newspaper implies the refraction of even 'world events' into a specific imagined world of vernacular readers' (Anderson 1991: 63). *Kawn Hkaw* is serving that very role as it articulates this 'world' explicitly in the Shan print language. Indeed, one point that is (re)iterated and made explicit in every issue of these publications is that the Shan have their own language.

Maintenance of Shan literacy, on which such insurgent media depend, is a constant struggle. As one former teacher of the Shan language informed me, the Burmese army, upon re-conquest of Shan liberated areas following Khun Sa's surrender in 1996, rounded up and incarcerated many teachers of the Shan language. For the Burmans, teaching the Shan language meant teaching separatist politics. Another

overlooked obstacle to Shan literacy is that it was not uncommon for many peasants to frown upon book-learning. One of my informants commented that if it were not for her father's insistence that she attend school, she never would have been able to read or write. In multiple-children households, especially for elder sisters, their main task was to look after younger siblings. This woman's mother had once said, 'If you learn to write, all you will do is write stupid love letters to boys, and what good will that do us?' So, even for nation-building projects in a minority language, it is important not to neglect the ways in which the local cultural matrix is (or is not) receptive to such larger national ideals or even values toward literacy. Perhaps this last example shows us the character of valuing ethno-national literacy; print-capitalism somehow must presume a certain orientation for print language if it is to take hold in a given political context.

Conclusion: Market and Popular Culture in the New Century

So what has become of Shan print media now? With the opening up of the Burmese economy to increased foreign investment in the last decade, there has also been a loosening of the government's harsh stance on minority language publications, including Shan. The market has allowed increasing space for Shan artifacts of popular culture, especially in the form of entertainment items such as Karaoke discs (or VCDs), comics, and magazines. Although there are still tiny pockets of liberated areas held by the Shan State Army (South) along the Thai-Burma border, Shan publishing is increasingly de-centralized, owing largely to the increasing accessibility of desktop

publishing and Internet access. However, the Burmese government censor board still strictly controls the content of publications produced within its borders, explicitly forbidding the history of opposition groups to be written about (Thanwaa 2005: 5).

However, with the numerous publishers in Thailand, such works can be produced across the border and moved into hidden markets. Although the position of the Shan migrants in Thailand is economically and bureaucratically tenuous in crucial ways, the Shan have a relatively free reign in media production within the Thai State. The Thai government under the now-deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had staged large-scale crackdowns on media piracy for the benefit of global media groups such as Warner and Sony, but there is little economic incentive to regulate the circulation of Shan media, even that which is explicitly political in content. One can only speculate whether the rhetoric of pluralism somehow justifies the Thai state leaving the Shan media productions to their own devices. On the Burmese side, however, Shan insurgent media is remains banned, with steep penalties for the sale or transfer of items not bearing the censor board's approval sticker. Also within the past five years, the Internet has been allowed into the formerly closed-country, although the censorious government tries to keep a lid on potentially objectionable or subversive content. Nevertheless, in legalized Burmese recording studios, many Shan pop records are cut, though political content remains expressly prohibited. In spite of the ban, Shan nationalist media continue to seep across the border. So, across the Thai-Burma border, one can track love songs, novels, and popular culture magazines going one way, and war songs and political material going the other, into both licensed and hidden markets of Shan audiences in both the Shan State as well as the border towns of Northern Thailand.

In the village where I have been conducting my ethnographic fieldwork since December 2004, Shan-identified people constitute the majority, and Shan tends to be the *lingua franca* in the marketplace as well. Town meetings are conducted in the Shan language, and minutes of the meetings are handwritten in the Shan script. Funeral announcements are typed in one of the myriad of Shan fonts, and whirred out through inkjet or laser printers, to be distributed to various households. For this village, what we have here is not yet a Shan print capitalist economy of scale, but perhaps a proto-capitalist print cottage industry.

In October 2005, I attended a temple fair, in which a Shan monk asked the rhetorical question: ‘Millions of people can speak Northern Thai, but how many can read and write it?’ The implicit answer to this question is: just a handful of monks and academics; although Northern Thai does have a distinct script, there was never a broad movement to make Northern Thai a modern print language, unlike Shan. At the same time, one Shan educator looked at the example of the general lack of Northern Thai literacy amongst Northern Thai speakers and expressed concern that the Burmese government’s more open stance toward Shan print media could have a negative effect on Shan radicalism in the medium to longer term. As he said, ‘one of the reasons we fought so hard to keep teaching it was because the Burmese forbid it.’

Nevertheless, the Shan struggle continues, as does the teaching of the Shan language. Although the impetus for the Shan language simplification and textbooks stems from groups of politicians, scholars, and educators, their fragmentation, and later bonding with articulation into the ethnic politics of a national insurgent movement allowed the

Shan script to be distributed and take hold in ways that could neither have been predicted by the Shan or the Burmese authorities. The Shan (sub)nation is clearly in an interdependent relationship with the regional politics of ethnicity and black market economies. Studying the media production of group such as the SURA provides necessary background and insight to these struggles and processes in political history. In a dynamic region where a group is fighting for sovereignty, the production of such works is essential to the establishment of their (sub)national legitimacy, in their own hope that this movement may achieve greater political recognition in the future. One scholar of the Shan movement under Khun Sa has presented the argument that Khun Sa was able to successfully manipulate ‘a variety of social, ethnic, economic, political and geographical situations in order to create a shadow state that on occasion threatened to emerge as a viable national polity in its own right’ (Gallant 1999: 45). Khun Sa’s surrender to the Burmese forces marked a tremendous disappointment for many Shan independentists, and also a significant loss of territory to the Burmese military. But the Shan nation-building project is far from dead, as evidenced by the various Shan splinter groups still engaged in insurgency, to the monks and literary enthusiasts still teaching the Shan script on both sides of the Thai-Burma border.

Although Khun Sa is remains the most notorious persona in the history of various Shan insurgency movement leaders, the on-the-ground work of the *kun pai möng*, the brokers and suppliers of the movement, and the Shan language teachers and literacy enthusiasts must not be ignored. For this ethno-national movement, insurgency is more than just wresting the Shan State from the control of the Burmese government; it is an affirmation of a Shan nation within an international cosmopolitical order, and Shan insurgent media play a crucial role in building that history and political

relationship.

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NOTES

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² In his article ‘Insurgent Media,’ Eric Hiltner uses the phrase as a descriptive title (Hiltner 2005: 101). I am proposing here that the phrase can be used as an analytical category for certain forms of media production.

³ Khun Sa’s SUA in the mid-1980s was vastly larger than the SURA, and so some analysts look at the SURA’s choice to merge as nothing less than a sheer survival decision. Khun Sa has been sensationalized as an Opium Warlord, and amassed tremendous personal wealth as the head of the MTA forces. At one point the United States Drug Enforcement Agency had put a bounty on his head, and arguably, his surrender to the Burmese in 1996 was an escape which allowed him considerable concessions, mainly his own personal freedom and maintenance of his wealth within Burma.