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Conscription by Capture in the Wa State of Myanmar: acquaintances, anonymity, patronage, and the rejection of mutuality

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Abstract: Capturing people, sometimes by taking relatives hostage, is a common practice for the purpose of conscription and law enforcement in the Wa State of Myanmar. Given the relative weakness of civil government, census and register, in a de-facto state governed by an insurgent army, the personal politics of capture provides a functional equivalent to state legibility. This personal politics operates on the basis of the re-organisation of personal networks between representatives of the military state and ordinary people: first, circles of acquaintances within the military state which provide access to local knowledge; and second, relationships of patronage formed on the basis of those new acquaintanceships, as well as connections of kinship and co-residence. Conscription by capture, however, also requires anonymity, i.e. the passive non-recognition of mutuality with strangers, and the active refusal of mutuality with acquaintances. This article describes the historical emergence of networks of acquaintances and relationships of patronage as a combination of Maoist state building and local institutions of war capture and adoption, and demonstrates how conscription by capture relies both on the relationships of acquaintances and non-recognition, as well as patronage and the refusal of mutuality. The politics of conscription by capture are contrasted with conscription in imperial states and contemporary nation-states.

keywords: capture, child soldiers, adoption, conscription, hostage-taking, state building, acquaintances, patronage, anonymity

The sun was about to set, when Sam Sin and I saw the first houses of the village of Yaong Rai.¹ We had been to his rice fields on the hills on the other side of the *Rhom Lo* stream, two hours walk from the village. Sam Sin was telling stories about his adventures outside the village – he had spent almost twenty years in the army, and then five years in Burmese prisons, before he returned to the village three years ago. He raised his hand and pointed back to the hills, “that’s where I was hiding when the army came to recruit soldiers.” It had been the time of the Chinese New Year, in the spring of 1990, the year after the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) had been dissolved and the emblems on the uniforms had been changed to “U.W.S.A.” – the United Wa State Army – instead of the former Communist Party of Burma. The leaders of the Communist Party of Burma, mostly ethnic Burmese intellectuals, had been sent back to China, where they had come from in the late 1960s; and the former mid-level commanders, mostly Wa and some Chinese, had taken over the leadership of the new army.

¹ Local place names and personal names have been given pseudonyms to protect people’s privacy. This article is based on 18 months of fieldwork in the Wa hills of Burma and China during four fieldtrips between June 2014 and November 2017, part of which was funded by LSE Research Investment Funds. I am grateful for the support received at Dianxi Normal University, Lincang, and Yunnan University, Kunming. Some of this material was first presented at the Friday morning seminar of the Department of Anthropology at LSE, and I have greatly benefited from the comments and suggestions of the participants. Thanks are due in particular to Natalia Buitron Arias, Stephan Feuchtwang, Chris Fuller, and Jonathan Parry, who read and commented on later versions of the article.

Soon after, the various divisions of the CPB split up into new independent armed movements; the strongest one of those being the new Wa army that was based in the former headquarters of the CPB at the Chinese border.

During the 1980s, units of the CPB had been involved in battles elsewhere in the Shan State of Myanmar competing for control over the drug trade in the centre of the Golden Triangle at the Thai border. There they had been in conflict with the Mengtai army of Khun Sa, the biggest armed force in the Golden Triangle at the time. The CPB in disarray, Khun Sa sensed a chance to increase his area of influence and attacked various of the former CPB units in the Golden Triangle. But the commanders of the new Wa army quickly retaliated; trained in warfare for almost twenty years by Burmese and Chinese officers, and equipped with weapons from the CPB, they put together several new army regiments, including a new ‘independent regiment’ directly responsible to the headquarters in Pang Kham. The independent regime quickly started conscripting soldiers in the Wa hills, and in the spring of 1990, they arrived in Yaong Rai.

When Sam Sin heard that the army would register at least one son of every household to enter the army, he ran away into the hills a few hours from the village. But he was reported by another villager who was a driver to the commander who had just arrived. The soldiers threatened to arrest his parents, if he would not return to the village. His father came to the slope where he was hiding, to tell him, and convinced him to return. Back in the village, Sam Sin registered his name and age, and twenty days later, the truck came again to pick him up, together with 50 others. They received two months of army training, before they left to the Thai border – the journey took 15 days on dirt roads – where he served in different units of the UWSA in their fight against the Meng Tai army of Khun Sa, for the next five years.

When he left the village, Sam Sin was just about 17 years old, but he had already married and built his own house. He wouldn't see his first son being born, and his father died, before he returned for the first time five years later.

In June 2017, like every year, the government of the Wa State held half-year meetings across all government levels. Village governments do a census of every household, and deliver the data to the district. Then a meeting is held at the district government, where all the data are collated, and reports from the central government are read out. After the district meeting, another meeting is held at the county government in Meng Mao, and finally by the central government in the capital of the Wa State, Pang Kham. For the meeting held in Taoh Mie district at the end of June this year, the district clerk had prepared a 5-page report about the work of the different government offices in the district during the first half year of 2017, including one item, Number 13:

Regarding the relationship between the military and the civilian population, every time a mass meeting is held, everything is conscientiously communicated, and diligently implemented, according to the relevant policies of the central government, so that the army and the people are as inseparable as fish and water, and so as to allow them to cooperate whenever necessary. During the past half year, the leaders of our district have cooperated with various regiments of the Army to capture deserters; there were 6 persons who went on holidays and did not return to their army units, altogether 5 persons who had deserted were captured and arrested.²

² In the same half-year report in June 2015, there was a shorter note about the 'situation of troops and people': "In the last half a year, the leaders of the district already have received

The expression of ‘the troops moving among the people like fish in the sea’ was coined by Mao Zedong and has become proverbial in China.³ But the ideal of a smooth relationship between the people and the military has always been difficult to achieve, which is obvious when we look at the actual practices of recruitment and desertion. Below the same entry, the report notes the following “suggestion of the masses”: “regarding the problem of family members having to replace deserters, it is hoped that the higher leaders will continue to consult with the frontline of the relevant army units.” This was just one item in a seven-page report, written in Chinese, which the scribe simultaneously translated and read out in the Wa language to about 150 village officials from the entire district, who sat quietly and did not show much reaction.

According to this year’s census, there are 11649 people living in Taoh Mie, and 2452 soldiers from the same district serve in the army; compared to these numbers, 6 deserters in one year might not seem a lot. In fact, there were probably quite a few more. Some deserters did not

enquiries about deserters six times, respectively from the 618, 318 and 468 brigades, and others, about altogether 35 deserters. We have received already 4 phone calls enquiring about deserters.” All translations from Chinese and Wa are mine, if not otherwise noted.

³ Mao first used it in ‘On Guerrilla Warfare’, chapter 6: “Many people think it impossible for guerrillas to exist for long in the enemy’s rear. Such a belief reveals lack of comprehension of the relationship that should exist between the people and the troops. The former may be likened to water and the latter to the fish who inhabit it. How may it be said that these two cannot exist together? It is only undisciplined troops who make the people their enemies and who, like the fish out of its native element, cannot live” (Mao 1961:92–93).

appear in the statistics, including some who had been already ‘replaced’ by family members, often their brothers. That is, if a son or a daughter doesn’t return to her or his army unit, the local police will capture a family member and keep him until the deserter returns. If he doesn’t, then the captured relative, or another son of the family, will be taken to the same army unit where the deserter served. In the village of Yaong Rai, one of the twelve villages of the district, there were two cases of such replacements during the same half year period. Such ‘replacement captures’ obviously can cause a lot of anger and grief, hence the ‘suggestion of the masses’ in the document.

Whereas in some households, fathers or brothers of the deserters are arrested, elsewhere some men, who leave their army units, are simply taken ‘off the books’. Families who have relatives in army units, or otherwise powerful connections, might plead for their children. If they are successful, then the name of the child might simply be taken off the lists that are passed on from army units to the local police. Similarly, the children of those who have good relationships with the elite, might avoid being recruited altogether, or might end up in relatively more comfortable positions in the army. The most important decisions about recruitment (Who has to serve? How many children per family?) and desertion (Should the case be followed up?) are taken not according to written rules known to everyone, but according to the logics of acquaintanceship and patronage. In both cases, written documentation is generally prepared *after* decisions about capture have been taken.

The UWSA today employs various strategies to capture⁴ people, which includes arresting the close kin of deserters or criminals to force fugitives to return. People are captured by the police and the military not only for the purpose of conscription, but also in cases of legal conflict. In fact, to arrest wrong-doers or their kin seems to be the general way of dealing with crime and conflict. For instance, in the village of Yaong Rai this spring, an adulterous woman and her lover were put in a labour camp for three months, before a delegation of relatives and local officials went to the district to negotiate their case. A group of 16 teenagers, the youngest ones about ten years old, who had crossed the border into China to work on tea plantations without any legal papers, were returned by the Chinese police, and then put in prison for three months, before the headman of the village negotiated a settlement of 200 Chinese Yuan⁵ for each child to be paid to the district police. In the same village of Yaong Rai, there were at least two cases of ‘replacement’ of soldiers; that is, deserters had not returned to their army unit, and therefore a brother of the deserter was captured and arrested. And in another two cases, the mere threat of arresting the father of the deserter was enough for the deserter to return to the village, and report to the police – where they then had to spend a week under arrest, before they were returned to their army unit, or were assigned to another unit. When someone is captured, the police and the government officials usually

⁴ I employ ‘capture’ as a catch-all term referring to detention, arrest, and enlistment that is forced and extralegal. This is basically the same as what is meant by the colloquial terms *giex* (in Wa) and *zhua* (in Chinese).

⁵ The Chinese Yuan is the common currency of the Wa State, only in the areas bordering the Shan State, Myanmar Kyat is used, and in the Southern Command at the Thai border, Thai Baht. The exchange rate in 2017 was approximately 1 Chinese Yuan Renminbi to 0.12 Pound Sterling.

take their time, and keep prisoners for at least a month or two, before they start dealing with their case; the head of the district government of Taoh Mie told me that the main reason to wait for so long, is to find a suitable moment when all parties can participate in court dealings. But surely another important side-effect is to instil respect and fear in the minds of prisoners and their relatives.

One reason for capturing people, sometimes by arresting relatives, is that the registration and documentation of the population by government offices is patchy, and for the Wa State authorities it is difficult to chase deserters or delinquents who have left the areas governed by the UWSA. Even though many people have household registration papers and ID cards, and a census is done intermittently, generally these different sets of data are not compared and collated – instead, simply a new set of data is collected. Most ordinary people do not have Chinese or Burmese ID cards, and the ID cards of the Wa State are not always recognised as identification in China and elsewhere in Myanmar, but it is relatively easy to enter China or Myanmar proper avoiding the official border crossings. Chinese and Burmese police sometimes capture ‘illegal’ immigrants and return them to the Wa State, but the Chinese and Burmese governments do not recognize desertion from the UWSA as a legal offense. As long as population cannot be made ‘legible’ (Scott 1998) by bureaucratic means, the Wa State authorities capture people, sometimes by taking relatives hostage.

This article deals with the politics of conscription by capture in the Wa State. In the first section, conscription is introduced as a core challenge for state building. Throughout human history, states needed to access knowledge about local populations for the purpose of conscription. In the case of the Wa State today, conscription by capture is made possible by the personal networks of acquaintances and patrons, and reproduces the same networks.

These personal networks connect and separate ordinary people and representatives of the military state: they connect those who have served together in the army, those who work together in government, or those who have formed a patron-client relationship; the same networks exclude others, who either simply aren't acquaintances, or with whom relationships of mutuality are refused. I suggest that state violence relies on networks of acquaintances and relationships of patronage, as well as the absence of acquaintances, i.e. anonymity, and the absence of patronage, i.e. the refusal of mutuality. The combination of these four relationships (acquaintances, anonymity, patronage, refusal of mutuality) are shown at work in the case study of the capture of one boy soldier by the army. The next sections describe the historical emergence of current practices of capture in the Wa State, as a combination of Maoist state building and local institutions of war capture and adoption. The conclusion summarises the workings of acquaintanceship and patronage in the politics of conscription, and emphasises the importance of personal bonds as a corrective to theories of state formation focusing on knowledge and bureaucracy.

State building, conscription and legibility in the Wa hills

Before the 1960s, there was no centralized government in the Wa hills, but today, with approximately 30 000 soldiers, the United Wa State Army has become the strongest of Myanmar's numerous 'non-state armed groups'. Most of the rank and file of the UWSA are ethnic Wa, whose grandparents lived in a society of peasant-warriors organised along connections of lineage and village. The UWSA is a successor of the Communist Party of Burma, a Maoist guerrilla army which fought local warlords, armed groups and the Burmese

national army, and then governed much of this region in the 1970s and 80s.⁶ The foundations of contemporary governance in the Wa hills of Myanmar were laid by the Maoist guerrilla, following Chinese models, guided by Chinese advisers, soldiers, and Red Guards, and supported with rice, weapons, and equipment from China.

Chinese observers have described the Wa State as a cheap copy of the People's Republic of China, a "mountain fortress China", using a popular Chinese neologism for a cheap brand copy, *shanzhai* or 'mountain fortress'.⁷ Comparing the Wa State with other non-state armed groups in Myanmar, the political scientist Mary Callahan identifies a situation of "near devolution of power to networks of former insurgent leaders, traditional leaders, businesspeople, and traders" (Callahan 2007: xiv). Callahan's term "devolution" basically defines the political regime of the Wa State by an absence – the absence of the Burmese central government. To describe this regime *sui generis*, this article aims to disentangle some of the mechanisms central to the exercise of power in the Wa state today. To this purpose, I will analyse conscription by capture in the Wa State as a combination of Maoist state building and local institutions, in particular war capture and adoption.

The institution of conscription is an excellent place to study and compare state building: Most states have armies, and need to deal with the problem of how to recruit soldiers, either by force or by persuasion. Writing about 19th century Europe, the political scientist Margaret

⁶ For a concise history of the Communist Party of Burma, see Lintner 1990; I will discuss some of this history further below.

⁷ See Steinmüller (2016) for a discussion of the uses and meaning of the notion of *shanzhai* ('mountain fortress') as applied to the Wa State.

Levi (1996) suggests four basic models of conscription: a professional army; universal conscription; conscription that allowed for exemption by finding a replacement; and conscription that allowed for exemption by buying oneself out of service. The last two disappeared over the last two hundred years in Europe, according to Levi, basically because people increasingly perceived them as unfair. This shows consent was necessary and important, and in most states some form of negotiation of the duty of conscription was possible. The historian Michael Szonyi (2017) describes the strategies available to military households in Ming-dynasty China to deal with the obligation of conscription. In such military households (*junhu*), one son in each generation had to serve in the imperial army – at the time the largest army in the world (of probably around 2 Million soldiers). Szonyi shows how families measured the benefits and costs of conscription: even though military service meant hardship and possible death, there were also potential material gains, e.g. in the control of border trade and smuggling. Lineages often found intricate arrangements to compensate recruits, e.g. by offering their families parts of the lineage estate. Analysing official accounts and local history (in particular family genealogies), Szonyi argues that the military households made market-like choices when they assessed the costs and benefits of sending sons to the army. The ‘art of being governed’ that he describes is basically the art of ‘regulatory arbitrage’, that is, taking advantage of the differences between two or more markets.

Such a formulation – engaging with the state through market choices – implies that the politics and rules of conscription are transparent enough to be assessed like a market. This might have been true for the military households of Ming Dynasty China, where government registration was relatively efficient, conscripts could find replacements or buy themselves out of service, and military households themselves were taking part in thriving market economies

(none of which is true for the Wa State today). And even if we accept that military households could make some ‘market-like’ choices related to the state policies of conscription in Ming Dynasty China, the foundations of those state policies are rooted in violent actions, such as the setting of rules for conscription and the punishment for deserters.

The UWSA, just like Myanmar’s other non-state armed groups, and the Burmese National Army (the *Tatmadaw*), do not have transparent rules and procedures for conscription. In the colonial era, recruitment into the armed forces was often considered an ‘elite career choice’, and the recruitment campaigns in the Kachin hills, for instance generally relied on the cooperation of local communities, and enlistment was largely voluntary (Sadan 2013: 218ff). But today, a large number of soldiers in Myanmar’s various armies are recruited by force, often as children.⁸ Certain rules for recruitment are said to be applied by the armies, for instance one child per family (in Kachin Independence Army, Chen 2014:25), or at least one

⁸ While little data is available on the practice of recruitment among different armed forces in Myanmar, without doubt most of them also practice forced recruitment, including of children. According to an estimate by Human Rights Watch, in 2009, about one fifth of soldiers on duty in Myanmar might have been children under the age of 18 (Chen 2014:22). UN agencies and NGOs have frequently denounced forced recruitment of children and violence against children in Burma, and Burma’s Army, the *Tatmadaw*, and seven non-state armed groups, including the UWSA, are listed in various UN reports as parties that recruit child soldiers. See for instance the reports by Child Soldiers international (2015a and b) and the annual reports of the UN secretary general on children and armed conflict (2014). The latter (on page 48) lists the *Tatmadaw* and seven non-state armed groups in Myanmar, including the UWSA, as parties that recruit and use child soldiers.

son per family will be spared (mentioned by Wa State officials to me). But even these rules are not always followed, and in general the decisions of how many and which individuals from a certain district or household have to serve are not transparent – which they would need to be for a politics of consent (Levi) or of market arbitrage (Szonyi) to be possible.

No matter whether enlistment is voluntary or forced, the institution of conscription fundamentally relies on mechanisms to make the population ‘legible’ to the army. James Scott, in his book *Seeing like a State* (1998), famously argued that for the most essential purposes of statecraft, that is taxation and conscription, states need to make populations ‘legible’. Sedentarisation, fixed surnames and household registration are the most essential methods to create such legibility. The UWSA, and before that, the Communist Party of Burma, applied all these methods of statecraft, but have so far not been extremely successful (at least when compared with 19th century European states in Levi’s account, or Ming-dynasty China in Szonyi’s account).

In Wa society, even now, household registration is often patchy. Many Wa families have adopted Chinese surnames, but they often do not match exactly the Wa lineage names that are used locally. In the central Wa hills, both in China and in the Wa State, many individuals do not have surnames in their ID cards, so that in a village of a hundred households you might find 10 men called ‘Ai Ga’, for instance.⁹ While both the Chinese state and the Wa

⁹ See Bao (2003), Fiskesjö (2009) and the *Reports on Wa Society and History* edited by the State Ethnic Affairs commission (2009:18–26) for reviews of Wa naming practices, including the spread of permanent family names. Scott et. al. (2002) situate the promotion of permanent surnames within Scott’s broader framework of state legibility.

state work hard to improve the documentation of their population in ID cards, registers, and census, the most common form through which ‘legibility’ is established is through channelling personal knowledge about individuals, households, and kinship relations. A census is done by most village governments every year, yet the census papers are then rarely or only sporadically used for the purpose of conscription or taxation. Instead of consulting the papers, higher-level officials will consult the headmen of village governments directly.

There have been public levies in the Wa State since the days of the Communist Party of Burma. Today, many children are directly recruited from schools. But the decision about who will be recruited does not follow scripted rules or procedures. If anything, there might be a target for a particular locale or school to recruit a certain number of soldiers. Recruits are captured and only after that, their names will be written into lists of draftees by the scribes in government offices and army units. The logic of capture is not arbitrary, but it follows the dynamics of networks of acquaintances and relationships of patronage in the military state: Networks form on the basis of acquaintances in the units of army and state. Such networks connect people beyond village and lineage, but they also separate those who know each other from others the same people do not know, and make anonymity possible. On the basis of new acquaintances formed in the units of the military state, relationships of patronage can develop; at the same time relationships of mutuality with acquaintances are actively rejected. In the following I will show how conscription by capture relies on networks of acquaintances as well as the recognition of anonymity, relationships of patronage, as well as the rejection of mutuality. I first give a concrete example of the replacement capture of one boy in 2017, to illustrate how knowledge is channelled, and violence exercised, through networks of acquaintances and relationships of patronage.

Conscription by capture

There had been some rumour for a few days that the army was looking for Ngoux Kai, the son of a farmer in the village. Headman Nap had told me that he got a phone call from the district police, saying that he had left his army unit and had not returned for two years. One day the step-mother of Ngoux Kai called me over to her house, constantly talking about her son, Ni Er. She seemed quite agitated, and it took me some time to realise why: the police had taken her eleven-year-old son away the day before, as a replacement for his older half-brother Ngoux Kai.

The woman kept talking to me, and insisted that I call the headman and invite him to their house for some rice wine, which I eventually did – but headman Nap said he was busy. Her husband, Sam Lao, and a few other neighbours arrived, and told me about the family: Sam Lao had six sons and two daughters with his first wife; the daughters had all married, and three sons had died already. One son moved to the Southern Command with the army, and hadn't returned to the North for about ten years. Another one, Luk, worked in the house of Geeing Cing Pao, a wealthy businessman and official, who is originally from the village of Yaong Rai. But only after a year, Luk returned to the village, irretrievably damaged. He came back 'crazy', Sam Lao said – he would do some work, but only when you told him, and he barely ever said a word. And then there was Ngoux Kai – the deserter, who left the army and was with his wife in China, without papers. After his first wife had died, Sam Lao had taken a second wife – the woman who had called me over. He had had two sons with her: the older one was in the district middle school, and the second one, called Ni Er, was at home. The day before, three men from the police had come over and had taken Ni Er to the district. Sam Lao had gone with his son, and stayed in the police station for a night, but in the morning he had

to leave, and Ni was put on an army truck that would take him together with other recruits to the same garrison of the same brigade in which his half-brother Ngoux Kai had served.

The woman offered me liquor and cigarettes, constantly talking, and crying, ‘my child’. The men told her to be quiet, and finally she lay down on the bed, but continued sobbing. The men told me about the family relations of Sam Lao – his brothers and cousins were members of the village militia, and the first wife of Sam Lao was the sister of Tax Seng, who worked twenty years in the district government. Someone said that Sam Lao had many sons, and in the past he could harvest much more rice than the family could eat. But after the first wife had died, misfortune and misery arrived. One man said that the second wife – lying next to us, sobbing on the bed – drank too much and didn’t do much work. After a few more glasses of rice wine, Sam Lao, who had been quiet most of the time, started talking about the policeman and the officials he met in the district – he didn’t know their names. His eyes were glassy when he talked, and at some point he started crying too. Tax Seng, the oldest man in the room comforted him, saying that there is no point in complaining. Sam Lao repeated a few times that there was the district head, ‘but I don’t know his name’. Tax Seng and I, who knew most of the officials in the district and the police, told him the names of the district head and the head of the police station, but Sam Lao just repeated, ‘There was the district head. I don’t know his name’.

Anonymity is crucial here: Sam Lao doesn’t know the name of the district head, and the district head probably didn’t know Sam Lao’s name either. This anonymity makes the exercise of violence – taking his son away – possible. Such anonymity is the flipside of the networks of acquaintances in the army and state through which knowledge about draftees and deserters is channelled. The names and villages of origin of all soldiers are registered once

they have been recruited. In principle it should not be difficult for army and police to find the family of a deserter. But they certainly need the help and guidance of local acquaintances, that is village level leaders and officials. Even though in principle every individual appears in household registration and census, these things are not very reliable, and there are mismatches between the official data (much of which is in Chinese) and the local names (which are mostly Wa).

The management of personal relations in this case crucially depends on the headman of the village, whom the district police had called in the first place. But the headman is not just an acquaintance of the police officers and district-level officials, but also a neighbour and distant kinsman of Sam Lao. As such, headman Nap disregarded the relationships of mutuality with Sam Lao and his family – he simply said, on the phone, he couldn't come now because he was busy.

Village-level officials, such as headman Nap are crucial mediators in the relationships of acquaintanceship and patronage that make capture possible, including, sometimes, by rejecting mutuality with co-villagers. Every administrative village in the Wa State has a number of officials that are generally appointed by district-level officials: a headman and his deputy, a scribe, the head of the local militia, the women's representative, and then the heads of the various village groups. As locals, village officials divide their loyalties between their neighbours and kinsmen in the village, and higher-level officials and army commanders outside. In their meetings with higher-level officials, the hierarchy of government levels is constantly enforced and re-enacted. A large part of the speeches at the public reunions in which the village officials participate, in particular when guests from the district or higher government levels are present, are basically top-down reprimand: higher-level officials scold

lower-level officials, and everyone chides the ordinary people. In some of the village level meetings this June, in preparation for the half year meeting in the district, the names of deserters were read out by a district level official, implying a clear challenge to the village officials.

Other than such ‘public’ pressure, an official also might simply want to ingratiate himself with the higher levels by ‘delivering people’. A village headman who wants to make sure he is on good terms with the district officials, or a district head who wants to give a favour to a regiment commander in the army, might ‘hand over’ a few soldiers. In fact, such practices are not even limited to the areas governed by the UWSA: the army also operates in some of the surrounding regions, where it supports its allies, in particular the Shan State Army- North and the National Democratic Alliance Army in Mengla. In a Wikileaks cable from 2010, it is reported that an employee of the Save the Children Fund in Namkham in neighbouring Shan State, trafficked at least five young persons to become soldiers in the UWSA. According to the cable,

‘[t]he alleged perpetrator apparently acted out of political motivations rather than for financial gain.’ [...] All of the victims and the perpetrator are members of the Palaung ethnic group. There have been reports that the Palaung State Liberation Organization is allied with the UWSA, which may have levied manpower quotas.¹⁰

¹⁰ See https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10RANGOON50_a.html [accessed 1 June 2018], and Allchin (2011).

If this case is at all similar to recruitment in the Wa State itself, the ‘political motivation’ of the Save the Children Fund employee is probably based on a relationship of patronage. When local officials in the Wa State help the police and army recruiting soldiers, they fulfil their duty, but they also act within their own personal networks. This is not only relevant for how information about families reaches higher levels of government, but also for which people are chosen: if someone has powerful connections in government and army, his children might not be conscripted at all, or their case might not be followed up if they run away from their army units.

There is a lot of gossip about such cases, but there is also a general consensus that the reason why children were not recruited, or relatives not captured as replacements, was that the family had powerful relatives or a wide network of friends and business partners. I never heard of any money exchanged in such cases. The favours of ‘handing over people’ to a regiment commander, or ‘not reporting a deserter’ are sometimes talked about as a ‘give and take’ between powerful people. A district-level official, for instance, might get a business concession (say, to open a market stall) from an army commander. But perhaps most fundamentally, it is about knowing and recognising people across the hierarchy of army and state. In fact, in all of the cases I knew of individuals who were recruited or captured against the will of the family, the family did not have a powerful network – in fact, they didn’t even know the head of the district and the head of the police station. Sam Lao, half-drunk and sobbing about his son Ni Er, said again and again, ‘there was the head of the district, but I don’t know his name’.

Knowledge management is essential to statecraft and sovereignty, and in the absence of other means of producing state legibility, officials will access local knowledge about individuals,

their residence, and their kinship relations through personal acquaintances. But the exercise of sovereignty also needs absence of acquaintance, that is: anonymity. Someone like Sam Lao has no chance to change the situation by invoking kinship when dealing with the police and the other people in the district. He doesn't even know their names. On top of this logic of acquaintance and anonymity, another logic of patronage and the refusal of mutuality is at work here: decisions about which people are to be captured often rely on patronage relations of the family or of local officials. Local officials sometimes also actively reject their mutuality (that is, the possibility of enacting a patronage relationship) with co-villagers and kin, as did the headman: he simply didn't respond to the invitation to be hosted at Sam Lao's place.

These logics of personal relations along the lines of acquaintances, anonymity, patronage, and the rejection of mutuality, have evolved on the basis of the long history of state building in the Wa hills. Prior to the 1950s, in the central Wa hills, relationships of acquaintance and patronage were broadly limited to the circles of lineage, village, and neighbours. Since then, relationships of acquaintance and patronage have proliferated and expanded, and this expansion, in turn, was a precondition for the possibility of relationships of anonymity and the rejection of mutuality with co-villagers and kin. New relationships of acquaintance and patronage were formed in the local armies and the emerging government institutions, where soldiers and officials spent increasingly long times away from their villages of origin. These developments started when modern armies moved into the Wa hills in the 1950s.

Maoist State Building

After the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-Shek lost the Chinese civil war, several regiments of the Chinese nationalist army, the KMT, retreated into Myanmar, and stayed in the Wa hills and in the ‘Golden Triangle’ (where Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos meet) (Gibson and Chen 2011). The Chinese Communist Army also moved into the Wa hills in 1950, and only in 1960 retreated behind the recently agreed national border between China and Myanmar. At the same time, the National Army of Independent Myanmar established local militias, the so-called Ka Kwa Ye. Sometimes supported by those different armies, local Wa headmen established their own militias, and some of these militias unified various villages. The Communist Party of Burma, which had been active throughout Burma since independence, retreated into the Shan State in 1967 and 68, and conquered Kokang, the Wa hills, and neighbouring areas along the Chinese border in 1971 and 72 (Lintner 1990). Trained and supported by the Chinese government and the PLA, the Communist Party of Burma quickly captured the Wa hills, drove out all the competing armed groups, and established its local government structure throughout what is now the Wa state.

Forced conscription was in fact a core topic of Communist propaganda in China: The Red Army used thought work and the mass line to unify the peasant masses, whereas the KMT just captured young men. There was even a theatre play about it, performed in Yan’an, which in 1963 was made into a film. Among the generation who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, many people had seen it in public screenings, in the cinema, and on TV – actually many of them so often that they didn’t pay attention to its ideological message, but for its comic quality, which goes to show the ideological over-saturation of the topic among

this generation in China.¹¹ It is most probably true that the KMT and the warlord armies relied more heavily on forced conscription than did the Communists. But it was certainly not easy to convince peasants to join the army, and sometimes the Communist Army also forced local men to become soldiers. Desertion was a problem for the Chinese Communist Army too, if perhaps not to the extent it was in other armies. In general, army officers would try to enlist the help of local governments to find deserters. In the process, army units sometimes applied considerable brutality, and there are cases reported about officers attacking and arresting the relatives of deserters – but according to official accounts such practices were severely criticised because they would cause too much resentment in the local population.¹²

Probably the main difference to the situation in the Wa State is that the Base Areas of the Chinese Communist Army had already relatively effective local governments in the 1930s and 40s, and because of the relatively quick success of the Communist army soon there were more soldiers who wanted to serve in the army than necessary. In the Wa State local government is not very efficient even now, at least in terms of registers and census, and the UWSA seems to need more soldiers than the number of those who would voluntarily join the army.

¹¹ *Conscription (Zhua Zhuangding)*, by Wu Xue, Ding Hong, Chen Ge, Dai Bixiang et al.

Many thanks to Zhou Yufei, who did a quick survey on Wechat (the Chinese version of Whatsapp), and consulted her parents and their friends about the film.

¹² In his comprehensive study of recruitment and desertion in the Communist army in North China in the 1930s and 40s, Qi Xiaolin briefly mentions that army units also scolded and arrested relatives of deserters, see Qi (2015: 331).

Most of the Chinese Red Guards who joined the Communist Party of Burma between 1969 and 1974 did so voluntarily; most of them had ‘bad class backgrounds’ and were escaping the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in China, hence ‘no conscription was necessary’, as one memoir says (Lao Di n.d.). Yet inside the guerrilla army, facing internal class struggle sessions, corrupt commanders, or simply the hardship of warfare, some soldiers also deserted and went back to China or joined other armies, including the marooned KMT regiments at the Thai border that by then had started trading opium (Sun 2009; Tujia Yefu and Zheng 2013). Yet the archival material and the memoirs written by Chinese Red Guards have very little information about the reasons why Wa men joined the Communist Party of Burma.

Several Chinese veterans of the CPB I interviewed said that the simple reason for Wa soldiers to join the CPB was to make a living: The Wa were incredibly poor at the time, and at least in the army they had basic food, some salary, and good uniforms and weapons. Also, it soon became obvious that the CPB, with Chinese support, was much better equipped than the other armies and militias in the region. From the 1970s, the CPB constantly fought the Burmese national army, the Chinese nationalist army, and other warlord armies in the region. Already in the 1970s the CPB established the rudiments of a civil government, with village, district, and county governments, and departments responsible for finance, propaganda, agriculture, traffic, and a ‘United Front department’ at the county level. In the 1980s, police, tax, food, education, and health departments were added. All were accompanied by party units – then the Communist Party of Burma, and later the ‘United Wa State Party’. At the village level, headmen and local militias had to respond to the higher government levels and the army. Since the establishment of the United Wa State and Party in 1989, civil government has expanded further, and now also includes a party youth league, and a women’s federation.

The CPB made a huge effort at building schools and teaching literacy in the Wa hills – mainly using Chinese as language of instruction. There are many elderly men who learned to read and speak Chinese using Mao’s Little Red Book and other canonical texts of the Communist Party. Another important new policy in the villages was the introduction of large-scale compulsory labour, in particular for the building of roads, dams, and paddy fields. Much schooling was done in the military itself, rather than in villages. For at least some Wa families it became clear that compared to toiling in the village, the army offered wealth and power. Possibly the ‘honour’ of service, and recognition from leaders were also important factors. Various men who joined the army as teenagers in the 1970s told me that their fathers had insisted that they should go, and personally brought them to the army barracks.

Infrastructure development, literacy campaigns, and communal labour to a large extent followed the Chinese model of state-building at the time, which might be called Maoist militarism. The main difference to China – both in the past and now – is that party government is much less effective; on the grassroots there are party members, but no party secretaries, and on higher levels, secretaries are generally not as powerful as the heads of government (the reverse is the case in China). Today, the leaders of government from the district upward are all very wealthy, and among Chinese businessmen in the Wa capital the saying circulates that ‘in the Wa State you have to be rich first before you can become an official’. All those leaders also have close relations with the leaders of the army – generally they are relatives.

This new elite emerged during the later years of the CPB, when several Wa commanders had risen to regiment commanders, and some of them had accumulated significant wealth and prestige. These commanders stood up against the Burmese leadership of the CPB and

established the new UWSA in 1989. Almost immediately, they started consolidating the power of the new army, fighting other armies in the Golden Triangle, in particular the Mengtai Army of Khun Sa. For almost a decade, the UWSA enjoyed a very good relationship with the Burmese national army, the Tatmadaw, and its leaders, and in particular the then chief of intelligence, Khin Nyunt, who visited the Wa State various times. From the Tatmadaw's perspective, a core consideration was to deter an alliance between the democracy movement in Myanmar proper with the ethnic insurgencies in the periphery. Additionally, both the Burmese military and Wa commanders benefited from business deals in mining and drugs. The Wa in turn helped fighting Khun Sa's army, which at the time was effectively governing much of the Golden Triangle.

To fight Khun Sa and other armed groups in the Golden Triangle in the 1990s, the new UWSA conscripted a large number of soldiers from the villages in the Wa heartland – including Sam Sin, mentioned in the beginning. During the nineties, forced conscription became very common and the battles in the Golden Triangle took a large toll – to take the example of Yaong Rai, then a village of about 500 households, during every year of the mid-90s about 30 soldiers died in battle. Once Khun Sa's army had been decisively defeated, the UWSA forcefully resettled more than 100 000 people from the Northern Wa to the area in the Golden Triangle that became now the 'Southern Command' of the Wa State (LNDO 2002) – from Yaong Rai alone, more than 200 households went to the South. With the interruption of another conflict with the Southern Shan Army in the early 2000s, the UWSA has not engaged in direct battle again. In 2004, the UWSA's main ally in the Burmese government and army, Khin Nyunt, was arrested, and since then, the relationship with the Tatmadaw and central government remains tense. The main reason to maintain a strong army, then, is to protect the Wa State against the Tatmadaw. In the last decades, civil government has also expanded

substantially, yet the main features of the Wa State government are still those of a military state.

The new institutions of the military state: schools, police, and prison

The new institutions of schools, the police and prisons were also directly linked to the expansion of the military state: schooling expanded to the extent that by now most villages have at least a primary school (even though not every child attends school), and most districts have a middle school. Graduates of the middle schools are often directly sent to army units, where generally they would enter higher positions because they are able to read and write. In every army regiment there are schools, and schooling within the army has played a very important role since the days of the CPB. Police stations were established by the first local governments of the CPB, and they continue to be the main local points of contact for the army, and help in, or completely taking over, local recruitment and capture. In fact, the local police also frequently ‘captures’ people: As I mentioned at the beginning, the cases of people who committed some mistake or crime, such as crossing the border without papers, or adultery, are arrested and held for a while before their cases are dealt with. And if there are conflicts with outsiders, simple ‘capture’ is also a favourite treatment: Chinese traders, bootleggers, and labour contractors, who don’t pay local people or the government, for instance, might be simply kept in the police station or in the local government offices, until they pay.

But Chinese outsiders generally are not kept long-term in local prisons. Since the 1970s, a prison system has emerged, and there are prisons and labour camps at every district and county, and in every army regiment base. Most of the people in prison are there because of minor offences, such as drug abuse, drug trade, or theft. Deserters, or their captured relatives,

sometimes also have to enter labour reform. In fact, all prisons operate a system of labour reform, modelled on the People's Republic of China, and called by its Chinese name, *laogai*. Most prisons have some gardens, rice paddies, and plantations, and elsewhere prisoners work on government projects (predominantly road construction). But they also work on the larger plantations of the elite. The rules for such labour services are not very transparent; in some cases the services of prisoners might be passed on for free, whereas in other cases local headmen or businessmen can hire prison labourers, which is generally cheaper than employing wage labour.¹³

The new institutions of the military state are overseen by the new elite of the Wa State, which emerged at the same time. Before the arrival of the CPB some charismatic leaders had formed local militias that attracted members and followers from a number of villages. After these 'tribal militias' had joined the CPB, their heads slowly rose in the ranks of the communist guerrilla. Even though on the whole, there was clearly an ethnic division within the CPB with Burmese intellectuals at the top, Chinese and Kachin commanders, and Wa, Shan, Lahu foot soldiers, by the late 1980s, several Wa had also become regiment commanders close to the central government of the CPB. The same commanders led the mutiny against the Burmese leaders in 1989, and established the UWSA. And it was those commanders, their relatives, and later other Wa and Chinese men, who from the 1980s onwards also accumulated substantial personal wealth.

¹³ In 2017 in the Northern Wa State local headmen usually paid 20 Chinese Yuan per day per prisoner for manual work, mostly to work in rice paddies and plantations.

At some point, the members of this new elite also stopped participating in farm work. The chiefs and warlords of the past had still worked in agriculture, when they returned to their home villages. Even the charismatic Tax Cao Dae, who at the apex of his powers in the 1960s, had followers in dozens of villages, and was respected in ways similar to a Shan prince, still went to labour in the fields together with his relatives when Chinese researchers visited him in the 1990s (Xiao 2010: 103). But his sons, who are army commanders and government officials in the UWSA now, do not participate in physical labour any longer. Instead, they employ wage labourers, their own followers, and sometimes prisoners on their farms and other enterprises.

This elite controls substantial business assets, including in plantations, mining, trade, and other industries not only in the Wa State, but also elsewhere in Myanmar, in China, and in Thailand. Some members of the elite have been involved in drug production and trade (Chin 2009). And in all their business, the elite relies to some extent on the protection of the army.

The new elite emerged together with a new class of followers. Relationships of patronage are both an expansion of earlier connections of kinship and village, but they also rely on the new acquaintances that were formed in the new institutions of the army, prisons, schools, and local government. The new acquaintances also became the channels of knowledge distribution of government institutions; and, paradoxically, the spread of such acquaintances, also created the possibility of anonymity. Those who are not members of these institutions, are simply ‘ordinary people’, called by the Chinese label ‘*laobaixing*’. Ordinary people, most commonly, have only very limited networks of acquaintances, and by and large they remain anonymous, literally ‘nameless’, to the members of the institutions of state and government. In this way, anonymity emerged as the flipside of the expansion of networks of acquaintances

in the institutions of army and state. Both kinds of ‘stranger-relationships’ are operational to the exercise of state violence: rather than any specific conviction of *raison d’etat*, what matters in conscription by capture is that acquaintances know each other, and that they do not personally know others, who are anonymous to them.

The emergence of supra-local acquaintances and anonymity are common features of any state. Yet the emergence of new acquaintances and anonymity – knowing and not knowing the name of others – does not necessarily happen in cities or in government bureaucracies (as much writing about the emergence of the state would assume). The particular ways in which these stranger-relations developed in parallel to new patronage networks within the military state in the Wa hills have to do with previous institutions of war capture and adoption, which I will describe in the next section.

Local Institutions: war capture, slavery, and adoption

The institution of the army was in many respects similar to the new institutions of the school; and the similarity of the relationship of submission and dependence in all these institutions is obvious in some of the words used in the Wa language. The word for ‘soldier’ in standard Wa, *kawn: lien*:¹⁴, means also ‘domestic’ or ‘servant’. Like common expressions for

¹⁴ There are several spelling systems used for writing the Wa language, including the orthography used by the Christian missionaries (the so-called “Bible orthography”) and the orthography devised by Chinese scholars in the 1950s (the “PRC orthography”). I follow the official Wa orthography approved by the UWSA/UWSP as recorded in Justin Watkins’ dictionary of Wa (2013).

‘student’, *kawn: gau lai*, and ‘Wa people’, *kawn: vax*, it contains the root ‘child’, *kawn:*. Yet the word for ‘servant’ or ‘slave’, *cawng*, which directly refers to a relationship of submission, has a very negative connotation, and is generally not used to describe child soldiers or students, but rather in expressions such as ‘I am not your servant’.

The same word for ‘servant’, *cawng*, is the word that was commonly used in the past for war captives and children who were sold. In the Wa hills, and especially in the Wa periphery, there was a market for people, in particular for sons from poor families who were sold to families who didn’t have a male heir. The only permanent slaves in Wa history were mine slaves, who worked in the silver and gold mines of the Wa periphery during the last Chinese dynasty. These mines were mainly operated by Chinese businessmen, and the forced labourers in those mines remained outsiders to Wa society. More common in Wa society were war captives, children and women captured in inter-village feuds, who were gradually incorporated into Wa lineages. Often their position remained ambiguous – both enemy/slave and potential kin. The foremost ethnographer of Wa society, Magnus Fiskesjö summarizes this ambiguity as follows:

The qong [= *cawng* in official Wa orthography] children were temporarily like slaves, but in the Wa view they figured in a very temporary “slave-to-kin continuum” where their potential kin status as fellow Wa was emphasized for ideological reasons—outright and permanent slavery was not acceptable for fellow Wa, so [sic] as slaves they would no longer be Wa. (2011: 10)

While war captives had been common for centuries, the expansion of the trade in people was part of larger processes of commodification in Wa society, spurred by the spread of opium

since the second half of the 19th century. Opium accounted for much of the cash income of ordinary farmers until the 1950s in China and the early 2000s in Myanmar. Fiskesjö points out that emerging differences in wealth within Wa society were balanced by the relative autonomy of individuals and lineages, including “distributive feasts and rituals”, which “continued to reinforce the existing framework of warrior-farmer patrilineages” (p. 11). These egalitarian tendencies notwithstanding, the opium trade exacerbated social inequality and facilitated the ‘sale’ of children:

When despite these arrangements some Wa fell into relative poverty and others fortuitously became richer (due to illness, capricious weather, or the like), the poor would “sell” children to the rich, under the influence of the model provided by the opium business. These sales were said to be for adoption (as in the idealized war captive prototype), and not for slavery. (ibid.)

Fiskesjö emphasises that children were bought as adoptive children, and not as slaves.¹⁵ The only persons who could be ‘bought’ were male heirs, and there were no ‘slaves’ who permanently remained outsiders to Wa society. Without a centralised bureaucracy and a system of taxation, and land rents and money loans not very common in local communities,

¹⁵ He convincingly argues his case against the misunderstandings of Chinese ethnographers, who in the 1950s understood the war captives and adoptees in Wa society as the bearers of an emerging ‘slaveholder society’.

debt bondage and slavery, which was common in China and Thailand, did not emerge in Wa society (cf. Watson 1980a).¹⁶

Hence, when children were sold – mainly as male heirs – this was modelled on adoption within the lineage (and continues to be so). Most of the cases of adoption I know about are of sons given to relatives – typically a paternal uncle, who didn't have a son himself. The adopted son will then change his name, and become the son of his new adoptive father. But because everyone knows about the adoption, and some relatives also remember the previous

¹⁶ This is broadly in line with Meillassoux's classic argument (1991, cited in Fiskesjö 2011: 14) that slavery is generally incompatible with stateless societies based on kinship politics – the societies which Meillassoux called 'original domestic societies'. What could be found in Wa society resembled a 'slave-kinship continuum', in which war captives and bought sons were gradually incorporated into local lineages. In the comparative frame that James Watson (1980b) has suggested between 'open' African and 'closed' Asian systems of slavery, Wa slavery and kinship clearly resemble more the open 'African type'. Following Jack Goody, Watson had drawn a broad comparison between relatively open kinship systems in Africa, in which power was based on people, and therefore social institutions aimed to bring people in, and relatively closed kinship systems in Asia, where land was scarce, and therefore social institutions tended to keep people out. In the former, slavery often blurs into kinship, whereas in the latter, slavery and kinship are fundamentally separated and opposed – here slavery is 'anti-kinship'. As in other 'African modes of slavery', the 'slaves' in Wa history, in particular war captives, often gradually became kin, even though their status often remained ambiguous.

name of the adopted son, he remains in a somewhat ambiguous kinship position. If this is done between close relatives, there is generally no money involved.

Wealthier families can also directly buy a 'son'. Such a 'transaction' generally takes place across a distance – at least from a neighbouring village, if not further away – and through an intermediary. In the central Wa hills in the past, baby sons were generally bought from other Wa villages, but during the turmoil of the last century, families also adopted and bought children from other ethnic groups, including Han Chinese.

Adoption now

In the village of Yaong Rai, where I did fieldwork, there are quite a few cases of sons that were 'bought' or adopted young; the most recent case of a boy who is now a teenager. In general, sons were 'bought' by families of higher social standing from people outside the village. For families that aren't very wealthy or do not enjoy much prestige, it is almost impossible to "buy" a son. In such cases, a man might still adopt a son from one of his own brothers.

But if the adopting father is just an ordinary farmer, the bond between father and son sometimes might remain tenuous: there is one man in Yaong Rai, Ngoux Han, who is a respected member of the community, but he and his wife are quite poor and they never had children. A number of children of his patriline spent almost their entire childhood in his house, but he never "formally" accepted a son. One of these children, Ni Soi, is now a young man in his early twenties. Every time he returns to the village, he stays with Ngoux Han, and helps him in farm work. This man was an orphan, and after his parents had died, he stayed with Ngoux Han for several years, until he was recruited into the army at age twelve. Some

relatives and neighbours say that it is a pity that he didn't become Ngoux Han's son (at which point he would have gotten a new name) – even though somehow he seems to assume this position when he comes back to the village. When Ni Noi returned to the village for a few days this spring, some old men killed a chicken and ate rice porridge at the house of Ngoux Han 'to welcome the soul of Ni Noi' (*riap miang Ni Noi*) – which is what you customarily do when a son comes home.

Ngoux Han, in his early 60s now, still works extremely hard – much harder than some younger villagers – and during the planting season ploughed more terraces than other men who have larger families. Ni Soi sometimes helped him, but still, villagers would never call him Ngoux Han's son. Part of the reason might be that even though he is very hard working, Ngoux Han is not wealthy. As long as Ngoux Han is not 'formally' recognised as the father of Ni Soi, nothing will happen to Ngoux Han either, should Ni Soi commit a crime or run away from his army unit. And Ni Soi might be able to find more powerful patrons in the army himself. Most of the big leaders in the army and in government keep huge households, with many children and men, who are either their own relatives or sent by army units.

Patronage: the children in the houses of the elite

Some of the children in the grand mansions of the elite are sent by poor relatives of the big families, and others are assigned via their army units. The boys and girls working in such mansions often arrive at a very young age – sometimes only 10 years old. Then they spend years working there, in some cases the boss sends them to school, they might manage to learn

some trade, but often neither is the case. They mainly do domestic work, and help on the fields – most of the leaders have farms and sometimes large plantations. Having a large entourage of people is clearly a sign of status and prestige. Taking children of relatives, of one's village, or from the army, into one's household is never talked about as duty, let alone wage labour; instead leaders emphasise that they support these children.

In the best circumstances, such children can become trusted assistants of the family, and in some cases they can achieve powerful positions as the 'right hand' of some leader, or as leaders in their own right. Most of them, girls in particular, will leave the household, once they get married. In principle, a child from a relative is closer and has better chances of promotion, but even children from the home village of the leader, or those who are unrelated by birth, can make a career of their own when they grow up serving in the house of a 'big man'.

In fact, there are quite a few examples of 'successful upward mobility'. In Yaong Rai, there were two young men who worked as drivers and bodyguards in the houses of regiment commanders in the army. It was always an event when they returned in their Army SUVs to the village, loaded with presents for family and relatives. They would then host relatives and neighbours, and sometimes the headman and village officials. One of these men had built a large new house for his parents, and the other one had taken his old mother to live in town, where he rented an apartment for her not far from the army base where he worked.

I have been guest to a few weddings that were organized and paid for by army commanders for their most trusted soldiers. In two cases, the parents and relatives of the groom also attended the wedding, but the 'host' was clearly the army leader himself, and he and his wife

stood next to the couple during the ceremony when bride and groom, and their relatives, were presented on stage to the assembled guests.

But if in the best case, the children in the houses of the elite become adoptive children, sometimes they are also deeply unhappy and desert. While I have never heard of children escaping who were relatives of a leader, I know of a number of cases of children running away who were unrelated to the big families. Depending on circumstances, this might be reported to the police, and then the relatives of the deserter in the village could be held hostage – basically the same treatment army deserters get. But success in the army is not determined by the origin or kinship background of young soldiers; in fact, some of the most powerful men had been orphans. There are quite a few stories about orphans given to the army, who would then become extremely loyal soldiers. This story is of course not unique to the Wa hills – only think of James Bond, another famous orphan.¹⁷ Not held back by his parents, for the orphan the army becomes a family. The Burmese Army has a saying that ‘only the army is your real father mother’, and in China another famous song proclaims that the ‘party is my mother’. Indeed, of two Wa leaders who were orphans I have heard a similar story: their parents left them as babies, because the oracles at their birth were so tremendous that the parents were afraid of them.

The liminal oracle at their birth and the separation from lineage and village portend the radical potential of a new leader. Not every Wa leader was an orphan (some were simply the brothers or sons of leader), but all leaders, as well as ordinary soldiers in the CPB and then the UWSA, were separated for long times from their families and local communities. Even

¹⁷ In *Skyfall*, M tells Bond that ‘orphans make the best recruits’.

though they maintained some local allegiances, in the army they built new alliances, working under Chinese and Burmese superiors, and together with Wa, Lahu, and Shan from former enemy villages. We might say that to an extent, the forced separation from family and the village, produced an estrangement, and for the army commanders, a ‘stranger-king’ dynamic (Sahlins 1985; 2008): At a distance from their home villages and lineages, for the new army leaders the esprit de corps, army discipline, and personal relations within the new army mattered more to them than village-level allegiances. The fact that they were partly estranged from their home villages, facilitated the exercise of force, for instance when imposing communal work, tax leverage, and conscription. The power of the new ‘stranger-soldiers’ did not just come from the ‘barrel of a gun’, but also from a new potency associated with alterity, powers that the new armies had brought to the Wa hills since the 1950s. While this is true for ordinary soldiers to some extent, the alterity of the Wa elite is blatant and radical: their estrangement from lineage and village is exacerbated by their wealth and lifestyle – as mentioned above, they don’t participate in farm work any longer – and by the new relationships of patronage formed at their courts.

The same separation of the new elite from ordinary villagers is also what makes them coveted patrons. Ordinary people, as far as this is possible, sometimes chose a patron higher up and further away: this might be the case with Ni Soi (mentioned above, the orphan who was not formally adopted by his uncle), for instance. The possibility of creating a patronage relationship with someone higher up is also motivating people to reject mutuality with others; this is in particular the case for middlemen, such as the headman we met earlier, who did not answer to the phone call from a co-villager. Such rejection of mutuality is a rejection of the possibility of establishing patronage; this rejection is possible because of the proliferation of

patronage relationships – often modelled on adoption – that took place with the emergence of the new elite since the 1980s.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, several Wa expressions for relations of submission, such as students and soldiers, contain the root word for ‘child’, *kawn*. Like war captives and adopted children, students and soldiers are consigned to the care of people other than their parents. The ways in which those children pass into such a relationship might have been voluntary, or forced – they might have been simply captured. And being a student is not only similar to being a servant or a war captive, it is also not very different to being a soldier – at least in the words of my friend Sam Sin. When I asked him why not a single one of the five sons of the headman had been recruited, he explained to me that one son actually had run away from his unit, but the army had done nothing about it. And three other sons are still at school – “and being at school is just like serving in the army, isn’t it?”

Ever since the arrival of the Communist Party of Burma, the military was the primary force of state building in the central Wa hills. The CPB, and later the UWSA, built institutions of civilian government, including schools and prisons, according to Chinese models and with support from China. But the Wa State today is more than a ‘copy’ of the People’s Republic of China. Whereas in China, civilian government operates independent of the army, in the Wa State, military government takes priority, both in practice and in perception (as per Sam Sin’s quote). Schools, prisons, and local government are not only reliant on the military, but also operate themselves according to military principles: in all these institutions, military exercise is common, and ultimately the same institutions support the army in recruitment. But, as I

have described above, recruitment, even in these institutions, largely operates according to the features of personal networks of acquaintance and patronage. Additionally, the history of state building in the Wa hills cannot be separated from the local dynamics of patronage that have to do with acquaintance, kinship and adoption. Conscription by capture relies on the logics of expanding personal networks of acquaintance and patronage that emerged together with the new institutions of army and state. New acquaintances beyond lineage and village opened up the possibility of anonymity; and the proliferation of patronage relations made it possible for people to choose between different patrons, and to reject mutuality altogether. Conscription by capture embodies the changing logics of personal networks along those four lines: acquaintance, anonymity, patronage, and the rejection of mutuality.

Those who served in the army spent long times away from their villages. Correspondingly, the acquaintance networks of both ordinary people and the elite changed a lot. People acquired new acquaintances outside their own lineage and village (as can be seen in the spread of marriage networks, too: in the old days, people generally married within the village according to the customary rules of patrilineal cross-cousin marriage, whereas now marriages across villages have become increasingly common also amongst ordinary people). On the other hand, local ties of lineage and village also weakened, in particular for the emerging elite, who had managed to rise in the ranks of the CPB and later the UWSA, and who had gradually acquired substantial personal wealth.

Both the expansion and contraction of acquaintance networks were necessary corollaries of the institutions of the state. The new elite of the military state was estranged from their connections of kin and village, and ordinary people are not part of the acquaintance networks of army and state. The resulting anonymity, in particular of the most disadvantaged villagers,

enables the use of violence against fellow Wa. It is much easier to use violence, such as taking someone's children away, when dealing with people who are from other villages, and whose kinship addresses one doesn't know. As mentioned earlier, Sam Lao half drunk and sobbing, just repeated, 'there was the head of the district. I don't know his name'.

Networks of acquaintances provide access to knowledge about recruits and deserters, and such knowledge is necessary to capture people. But for the same purpose, it is also very helpful if the ordinary people themselves remain anonymous. If they are not, then it will be necessary for someone in the process to actively reject mutuality with the victim of capture.

New, supra-local acquaintances and patron-client relationships were made possible by the establishment of the new institutions of army and government since the times of the Communist Party of Burma. If these new institutions provided the setting where people from different villages could meet, they also formed the building ground for new relationships of patronage around an emerging elite. Patronage relationships in the Wa State were sometimes modelled on earlier practices of war capture and adoption. Like the war captives and bought sons of the past, soldiers are dependent children, and their position between their own families, their army units, and their patrons often remains ambiguous.

The politics of conscription by capture rely on networks of acquaintances, anonymity, patronage, and the rejection of mutuality. In the absence of effective registration and census, and given the general weakness of civilian government and bureaucratic mediation, these same networks provide a functional equivalent to 'state legibility' in James Scott's (1998) sense: through these networks knowledge about local individuals and households is accessed,

and decisions about capture are taken. Soldiers themselves might be able to advance in the army hierarchies through relationships of patronage modelled on adoption.

In this article I have not dealt with the promotion of ethno-nationalism in the Wa State. It is conceivable that some children and youth enter the army because they have become convinced of the necessity to defend the Wa State. But ordinary villagers, when discussing recruitment and service in the army, only very rarely would consider such a possibility. The ways in which people deal with recruitment, be it voluntary or forced, much rather corresponds to the logics of personal networks and patronage described here: some, like Sam Lao, have little chance to resist when their children are captured. But others, such as Ni Soi, might try to choose the right patron, and build a strong relationship with him. Possibilities for social advancement are generally limited to networks of patronage.

In fact, the most common criticism villagers voiced about capture and hostage taking confirms that the army as a whole is seen as a network of patronage; or at least that ideally, it is 'like a family': if army commanders take the relatives of deserters hostage, these families are doubly wronged. First, their parents gave their children into the care of the army, as their second family, only for them to then be mistreated there – and the deserters must have been mistreated in the army, otherwise why would they have run away? And because they deserted, their own parents and brothers were arrested, even though really it had been the fault of the army commanders who so mistreated the soldiers that they ran away.

The analysis of the politics of conscription in the Wa State suggests some core features of the workings of informal sovereignty, that is, sovereignty outside, beyond, or underneath the level of the nation-state (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Acquaintance, anonymity, patronage,

and the rejection of mutuality are core mechanisms through which it is possible to understand the exercise of ‘de-facto’ sovereignty in the Wa State, instead of reducing it to the absence of the institutions of the Burmese nation-state (as does Callahan 2007, for instance).

Recruitment by capture broadly contrasts with recruitment by popular consent in European nation-states (Levi 1996), or recruitment as market choice in Ming dynasty China (Szonyi 2017). Either concept is predicated on the existence of a level-playing field and impersonal relations, backed up by bureaucratic means of state legibility, that barely describe the realities of the Wa State. Here instead anonymity and the refusal of mutuality are created as the flip-sides of networks of acquaintances and the relationships of patronage. Paperwork comes afterwards: once soldiers have been recruited or captured. The absence of bureaucratic mediation in the rules and procedure of capture throws into relief the reliance of state violence on anonymity and rejection: and it is this violent simplification of a social situation which in other contexts is achieved through bureaucratic means. Perhaps the non-recognition of the social complexity of individuals’ lives is the core effect of bureaucratic paperwork (Graeber 2012), but it can be also achieved through the management of personal relationships in a military state.

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