The Flavour of Empire: Tea Production and the Ta'ang World in Highland Southeast Asia

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author's knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Michael R. Dunford (28 June 2024)

Abstract

This is a thesis about why and how social formations endure in the face of cataclysmic political-economic changes. I focus on the centuries-old relationship between the Ta'ang (Palaung) people and the tea plant (Camellia sinensis), a relationship that endures despite decades of war, capitalist encroachment, and ecological collapse. My research employs collaborative ethnographic research methods, semiotic analysis, and insights from botany and biology to revise classic anthropological debates about highland-lowland political relations in Southeast Asia. Beginning from the Ta'ang cultural ecology of tea, I shift this debate from a focus on binary relations between "imperial" lowlands and "anarchic" highlands to an exploration of intra-highland political complexity. The peoples who call themselves Ta'ang have been cultivating tea for centuries across the highlands of present-day Myanmar, China and Thailand. As lowland empires have given way to modern nation-states, as tributary relations have given way to capitalist economies, tea and Ta'ang have remained bound to one another. Although some Ta'ang people see tea as a burden, there is a recent movement, especially since Myanmar's 2021 military coup, to reframe the tea industry as a potential means to Ta'ang political-economic self-sufficiency in a federalized post- revolutionary Myanmar. This political-economic vision rewrites an exploitative relationship in emancipatory terms: tea cultivation, which has long tied Ta'ang farmers to predatory debt relations with lowland brokers, could be refigured as a way for Ta'ang people to profit from their own expertise and traditions. However, this political vision hinges on the reification of the Ta'ang tea cultivator as an ideal ethno- racial type. In this context, I ask how Ta'ang people navigate the tension between these two political projects, between emancipation (from debt relations, from racism, from Bamar hegemony) and reification (of Ta'ang people as tea cultivators, and the suite of stereotypes that go along with this image). I answer this question with two main ethnographic findings, based on multi-sited and mixed methods research carried out in Myanmar, Australia

and Thailand between early 2020 and the end of 2022. First, I find that Ta'ang people use myth-making and storytelling as a form of political theory. Myths (and people's commentaries on them) provide a way of expressing ideas about power: myths can be used to explain past and present subjugations, and also to theorize emancipatory political potentials, the casting off of overlords. Second, I find that ethno-racial reification in the Ta'ang world is a by-product of brokerage and mediation: the people most invested in reifying Ta'ang as a legible and clearly-bounded social order are those people who must pass in and out of it for one reason or another. These findings emerge from the present revolutionary moment in Myanmar, shaped by ongoing wars, the military coup, and the impact of the 2019 coronavirus pandemic.

Acknowledgements

So many people have been so generous with me over the last five years that the list of acknowledgements could be endless. There are guaranteed to be people who know they played a role in helping me finish this project, but about whom I have forgotten, and who will be frustrated to see their name omitted from this list. I apologise in advance to all those looking for their names here, only to be disappointed when they do not appear. I have endeavoured to be comprehensive, but I know that some errors are inevitable. In that sense, this acknowledgement section (like this thesis) is *under*determined: every single community I mention below has been necessary for bringing this project to completion, and the absence of any one of them may have led me to failure.

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taught me to be patient with the theory: I wanted to see revolution everywhere, and from Alan, I learned the importance of continuity.

This thesis would not exist without ANU Anthropology's Thesis Writing Group (TWG). More than anything, TWG taught me the value of learning writing with others: writing can be the loneliest job in the world, but it doesn't have to be. A special thanks to Dr. Annika Lems for organizing TWG and for reading all of our work, every single week. I am also grateful to Dr. Yasmine Musharbash, Dr. Matt Tomlinson, and Dr. Assi Doron, each of whom provided invaluable feedback on particular chapters. Colleagues Justin Lau, Ruonan Chen, Jodi Neale, Ele Williams, Mohammad Ibrahim Khalad, Kylie Wong Dolan, Philip Weinstein, and Ayesha Chaudhry have been the life support system for this thesis over the last 18 months. I could not have done this without their generous feedback and their weekly encouragement. Showing one's peers a work in progress is an act of vulnerability, and I am lucky to have had such a supportive crew with whom to be vulnerable. I am grateful to the wider ANU anthropology community for their friendship over the years, including (but not limited to) Dr. Owen McNamara (whose advice shaped more than one chapter here), Maddie Dove, Chris Marcatili, Louise Nisbett, Dr. Nur Newaz Khan, Dr. Elvin Xing, Diana Tung, Dr. Kirsty Wissing, Mamta Sachan Kumar, Giti Datt, Ranu Kunwar, Remeen Firoz, Joe Clifford, Kathryn Allan, Dr. Kathryn Robinson, and Dr. Francesca Merlan.

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* * *

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Note on Language

I conducted research for this thesis in English, Thai, and Burmese. There are many transliteration systems for representing Thai and Burmese in Roman script. These systems are not always readily intelligible to an English language reader; likewise, for a speaker of Thai or Burmese, the Roman transliteration of a non-English word might be ambiguous, as Roman script does not have an easy way of communicating phonological tone. As a workaround, I have followed Geoffrey Aung (2022) by transliterating Burmese and Thai in such a way that they could be readily pronounced by an English reader, and immediately following the transliteration with the with the word in the original script. Naing Oun conducted parts of interviews (and some whole short interviews) in various Ta'ang languages, which I do not speak. When Ta'ang words come up, I transliterate them in the same way that I transliterate Burmese and Thai, i.e., with readability in mind. When relevant, I identify in which language a conversation took place, and in all cases translate it to English. In the case of Burmese and Thai, translations are my own; in the case of Ta'ang languages, translations are Naing Oun's.

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Figure 1: The overall geographical scope of the thesis. Map by ANU CartoGIS.

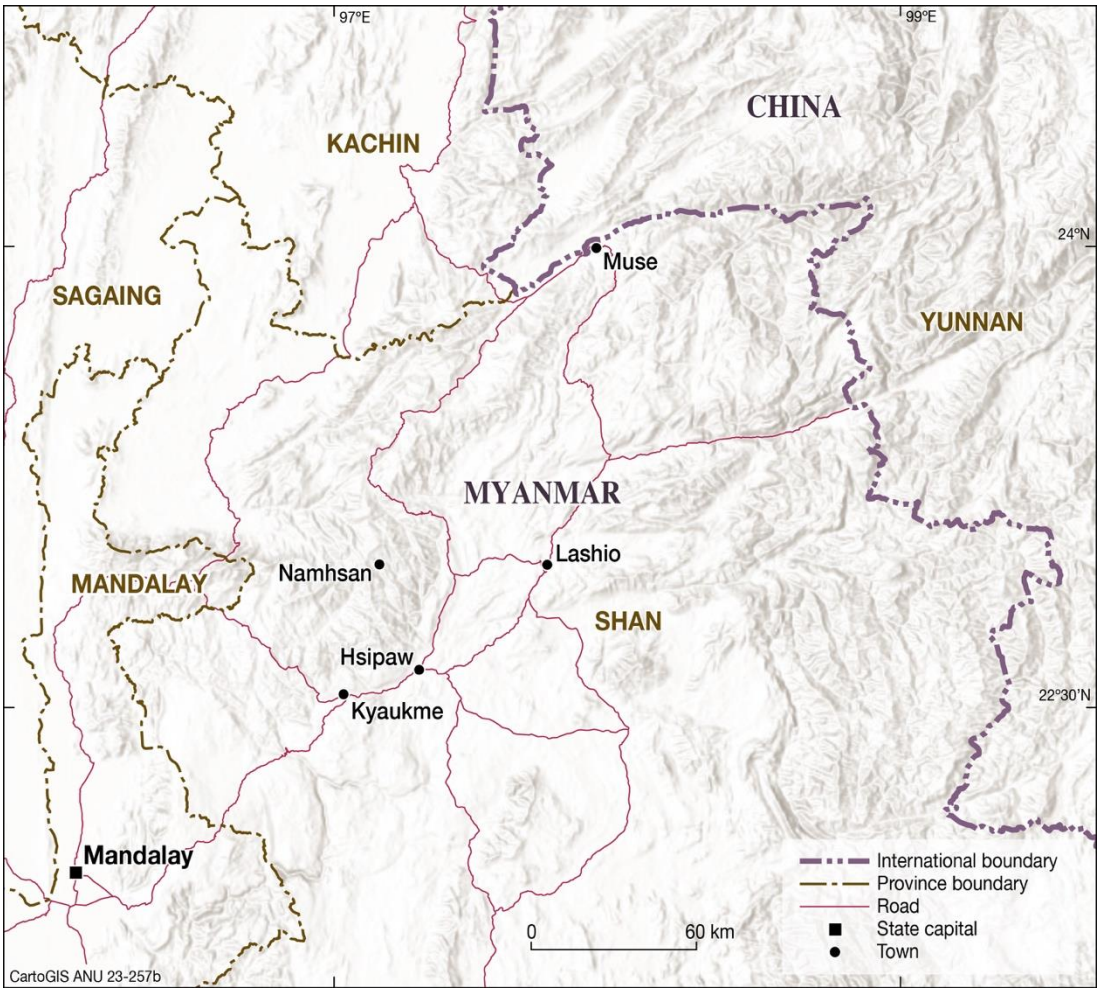

Figure 2: The area of Myanmar discussed in this thesis: Mandalay and Northern Shan State. Map by ANU CartoGIS.

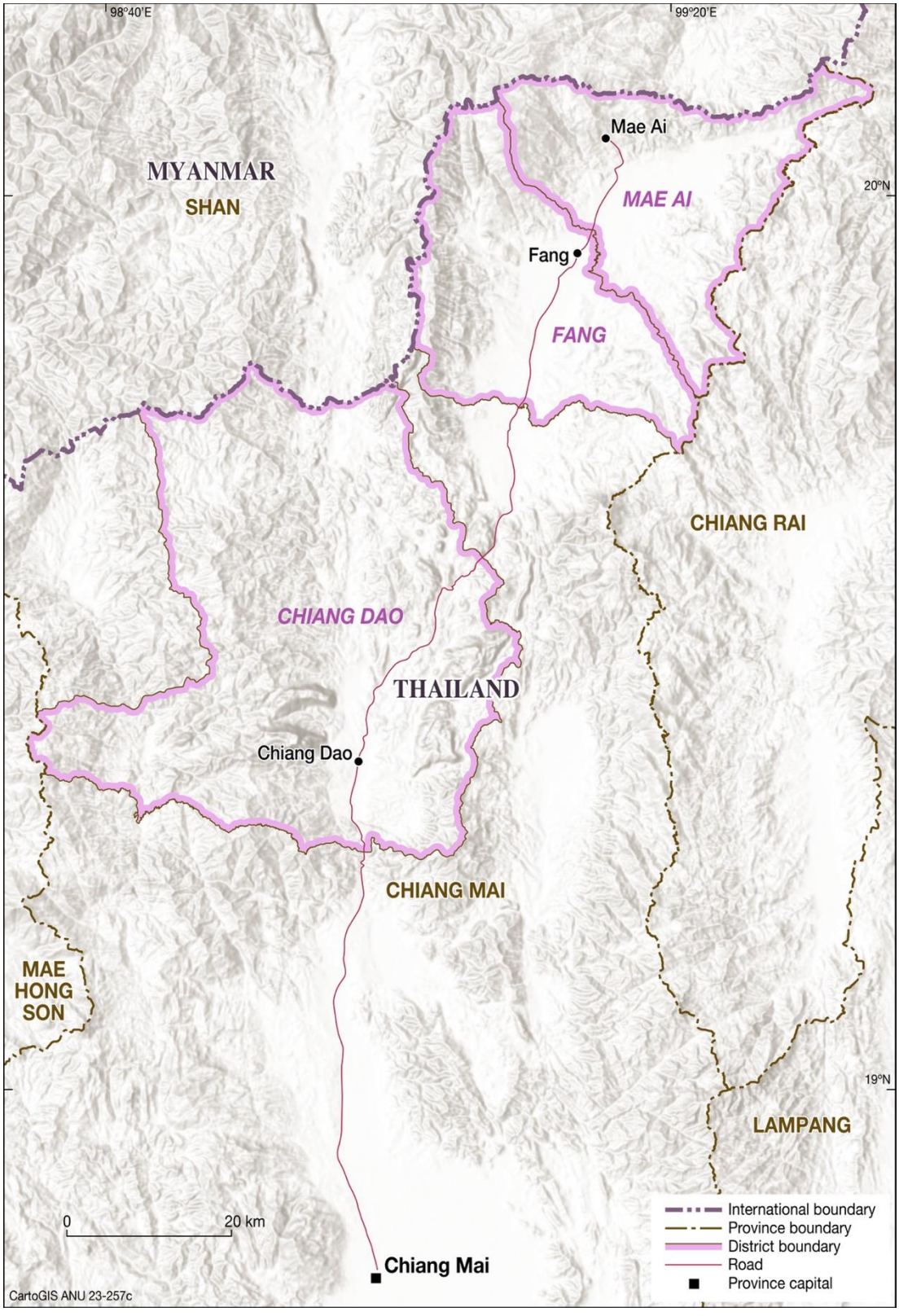

Figure 3: The area of Thailand discussed in this thesis. Map by ANU CartoGIS.

Introduction

This thesis traces the political-economic consequences of Ta'ang people's relationship with Camellia sinensis, the tea plant. This is an ancient relationship, but one that persists. As Southeast Asia's empires have given way to modern nation-states, as tributary relations have given way to capitalist economies, tea and Ta'ang have remained bound to one another. In this context, I ask how and why tea cultivation has remained so central to the Ta'ang lifeworld for multiple centuries—and what has happened in situations where Ta'ang people have stopped cultivating it. To answer this question, I pay close attention to the way that Ta'ang people narrate their own history, their relationships with the tea plant, and the way they explain the kinds of political-economic configurations that tea production facilitates. In other words, I use tea to tell the story of Ta'ang lifeworlds. At stake in this story are the ways that people conceptualize origin points, traditions, and historical continuities. Tea has shaped the way that upland Ta'ang communities are connected to lowland cores of political-economic power, but power relations have changed much faster than Ta'ang tea cultivation practices. Compared to Ta'ang relations with the tea plant, contemporary patterns of statecraft and market-making are relatively new. Ultimately, I argue that novel political-economic processes do not erase previously existing arrangements, but exist alongside them: sometimes in parallel, sometimes in conflict.

My research for this thesis has been indelibly shaped by the 2019 coronavirus pandemic and Myanmar's 2021 military coup. Field research for this project began in Myanmar in December 2019, before anyone was taking the pandemic very seriously, and continued in Australia during 2020 and 2021 and in Thailand during 2022. My ethnographic data was collected over this time. Unlike a traditional ethnographic project, the dual crises of the

pandemic and the coup forced me to take a multi-sited and mixed-methods approach. My data ultimately comes from across the Ta'ang world, stretching from the Myanmar-China borderlands, through Myanmar's Shan State, and into northern Thailand. In this time of crisis, my research methods have felt less like ethnographic tools and more like a set of techniques to cling to friendships and research relationships that are always on the verge of dissolution, always being pulled apart or pushed underground.

The pandemic and the coup have unfolded in front of me in real time as I have researched and written this thesis, but their consequences have been shaped by pre-existing political-economic processes in Myanmar and its neighbours. War is the most prominent among these processes, especially from an outside perspective. Myanmar is home to one of the world's most protracted civil wars, a multilateral conflict that began in the 1940s and continues to this day. The Ta'ang lands, and the heart of Myanmar's tea industry, are one of the major frontlines in this war (northern Shan State; see map on page xv). Myanmar's national borders do not quarantine the effects of the civil war, and its consequences have long implicated communities and armed organizations on the Thai side of the border as well. The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), a Ta'ang ethno-nationalist organization, has emerged in the last decade as one of the major combatants in this war (Buscemi 2021; 2022). Even before the emergence of the TNLA, the protracted wars centred on Myanmar's Shan State have played a major role in shaping the life chances and choices of nearly all Ta'ang people. Every person who participated in my research has been touched by war in some way. However, for most people in Myanmar and many in northern Thailand, the war—and the military cultures that have grown around it—are not a front-of-mind concern, but a part of daily life. As catastrophic as the war has been, it is not an emergent crisis: for anyone under the age of about 50, Shan State's multilateral conflicts have been ongoing for their entire lifetime. My thesis does not

address the war headlong, but the spectre of militarized violence is always there in the background.

More than war, this thesis engages with the way that statecraft and empire-building have unfolded in the Southeast Asian hinterlands. Although my ethnographic data focuses on the 21st century, I analyse the present with reference to the *longue duree* of statecraft going back through the colonial period to Southeast Asia's precolonial empires. Using tea as a focal point, I show how the pandemic and the coup have unfolded across these long-contested and ongoing processes of state-building and state evasion in the Southeast Asian highlands, with particular attention to the ethno-racial position and cultural ecology of the Ta'ang. This general object of study—the intersection of ethno-racial difference, cultural ecology, and state formation in Highland Asia—has been part of the anthropological canon for so long that it could reasonably considered a subfield of the discipline (Wouters 2019). This subfield of political anthropology has considerable overlap with the Cold War tradition of Southeast Asian "area studies": texts like Edmund Leach's (1964) *Political Systems of Highland Burma* and Stanley Tambiah's (1977) *World Conqueror, World Renouncer* (Tambiah 1977) are part of both canons.

I offer a reassessment of upland social formations that is largely inspired by the semiotic anthropology of Susan Gal and Judith Irvine. In their recent monograph *Signs of Difference* (2019), Gal and Irvine offer a way for anthropology to engage in comparative research that avoids the pitfalls associated with the unquestioning reification of stories that are already in circulation. Southeast Asian area studies has been widely criticized for falling into this trap, for reifying spatial and cultural concepts that have little relevance for the ways that people actually live their lives (van Schendel 2002; Sadan 2013; Jonsson 2014; Karlsson 2019). While I bear these criticisms in mind, I also attempt to rehabilitate some of the useful pieces of the highland Asia anthropological canon. There is value in the conceptual work that has already been done

to hold this vast region together. This thesis, like the area studies work to which I am alluding here, has required me to do a great deal of holding-together: as a product of the COVID-19 era, this thesis depends on my ability to connect disparate sites through "patchwork" (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020; Cardoza et al. 2021; Günel and Watanabe 2022), on combining apparently contrasting stories to create a pointillistic (K. A. Bowie 2018) picture of the social formations I set out to analyse.

Comparisons across time and space are at the core of this project. To make my own comparative thinking explicit—and to bring sites in northern Myanmar into dialogue with sites in northern Thailand—I turn to the tools provided by semiotic anthropology. Susan Gal and Judith Irvine (2019. 22) demonstrate that the ethnographer's potential objects of study are effectively "limitless" in a particular site. The question they ask, given this limitlessness, is how an ethnographer determines what matters and what does not, to the ethnographer and to their interlocutors. This determination comes via acts of comparison, which allow people to identify (or build) connections and differentiations. An ethnographer's interlocutors will have their own ways of identifying and explaining what is important, what is worth noting, and what ought to be ignored (which is itself a certain way of identifying importance). At the same time, the ethnographer brings along their own set of semiotic strategies, their own ways of making sense of situations and connecting them to others. To the data I present below, I bring along the decades-long anthropological conversation about socio-cultural differentiation, highland ecologies, and struggles over political power mentioned above. My interlocutors have their own ways of categorizing and making sense of the situation, sense-making strategies to which I have tried to do justice. To put all of this differently: Gal and Irvine's commitment to comparison as a technique for analysis and theory-building has inspired me to read my interlocutors' set of emic touchstones for cultural analysis as a working body of social theory.

This introductory chapter will proceed in three sections. The first section is the longest, and is designed to give the reader an overview of the sociological context in which this project has taken place. The purpose here is to familiarize the reader with the Myanmar's tea industry, the Ta'ang people, and the Ta'ang role in tea production. Myanmar's tea industry contains several products and processes that are likely to be unfamiliar to readers without prior context in the region, so I have also included a glossary of tea terminology to assist in orientation and readability. Following this sociological overview, the second section of this introduction will explain the methods I used for data collection, and how my methodological approach was shaped by the twin cataclysms of the COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar's 2021 military coup. Having contextualized my research in time and place and provided the reader with a methodological overview, the introduction will end with a description of the thesis as a whole—how the chapters are structured, and how they relate to one another.

Sociological Context: The Politics of Tea and Ethno-Racial Difference

Tea in Myanmar and northern Thailand: Flavour and Empire

This thesis will focus primarily on tea in Myanmar, given its centrality to the Ta'ang economy and way of life; however, the tradition of tea production and consumption in northern Thailand is also part of this story, and occasional reference will be made to Thailand's tea traditions (especially in the north), which are distinctive from those in Myanmar but have deep historical connections to them. "Tea" is a diverse category in both places. In English, the word "tea" by itself primarily indexes to a beverage brewed from *Camellia sinensis* leaves that have been steeped in water. In Myanmar, the word for tea (*lahpet*, လက်ဖက်) readily indexes one of three distinctive forms of processed *Camellia sinensis* leaves: granulated black tea, whole-leaf

green tea, and wet-fermented (i.e. "pickled") tea, for eating. When *lahpet* (i.e. "tea") is referred to on its own in Myanmar, without any other modifying word, the speaker is almost always referring to wet-fermented "eating" tea. These three basic forms of processed leaves—black tea, green tea, and pickled tea—are made into a dizzying array of consumable preparations. To aid the reader in understanding the discussions of tea that follow, a glossary of relevant tea preparations and their descriptions can be found on page 17.

The overwhelming majority of tea in Myanmar is grown on small farms run by individual farmers or groups of families: although large-scale tea plantations do exist, they are the exception and not the rule. In Pindaya, a tea-growing hub in Myanmar's southern Shan state, the average farm size is about three acres (Somji and Than Than Sein 2019); in Myanmar's primary tea-growing hub of Namhsan, the average farm size is around five acres according to surveys conducted for this project. In Assam, by comparison, the average farm size is over 1400 acres (Biggs et al. 2018). The vast number of smallholders who make up Myanmar's tea industry engage in diverse supply chain arrangements to get their leaves to market. In many cases, smallholder tea farmers—the majority of whom are Ta'ang—might produce pickled tea or dried green tea at home, or in small communal production facilities, and sell home-processed green tea and pickled tea to brokers. There are also factories of various sizes that specialize in both pickled and green tea: farmers might sell raw leaves directly to those factories, or to traveling brokers and other middlemen who maintain relationships with both farmers and factories. Unlike green tea and pickled tea, black tea is never produced at individuals' homes, but only at factories. In the case of Kwan Hal, a village in northern Shan State's Namhsan township, there is a large black tea factory in the centre of the village, and landowners sell some leaves directly to the factory (unless the factory's prices are low).

Each of the three forms of tea produced in Myanmar has a distinctive history and carries particular cultural associations, within Myanmar and across its borders. I suggest that we might

make sense of the geographical spread of each of these forms of tea by associating them with a particular imperial formation: hence the title of this thesis, *The Flavour of Empire.* I will begin with pickled or "wet" tea, whose zone of intensive consumption is coterminous with the precolonial Burmese empire. It is also the product least likely to be familiar to readers without prior knowledge of Myanmar, and by far the most culturally significant form of tea in Myanmar as a whole and for the political-economic history of the Ta'ang people. From there, I will move on to dried whole-leaf tea, usually referred to colloquially as "green tea" or "Chinese tea" in English. Although the consumption of whole-leaf green tea is ubiquitous throughout Myanmar, it is useful to think of it in relation to the enduring influence of Han Chinese empires to the east. I finish with black tea, which is always consumed with milk and sugar, and is the iconic product served in Myanmar's equally iconic tea shops. The emergence of sweet, milky black tea in Myanmar is coterminous with British colonization and imperial expansion in Myanmar in Myanmar, and flourishes in the post-colonial period. Myanmar's milk tea culture is instantly recognizable as a relative of South Asian chai/chiya culture, which share a common preparation mode and imperial-historical origin point.

Pickled Tea: Lahpet Soe (and Miang)

In the whole of Myanmar and across many of the highland regions that border it, tea is not only drunk as a beverage, but also consumed as a food. The general word for tea in Myanmar, *lahpet* (လက်ဖက်), connotes wet-fermented tea for eating if other modifiers are not attached to it. The specific word for this form of tea is *lahpet soe* (လက်ဖက်စို), literally "wet tea", usually called "pickled tea" in English:

Figure 4: Lahpet soe fermenting in a rice bag. Photo by the author, 2018.

The production technique for making lahpet soe is relatively simple: raw lives are steamed or pan-roasted (to halt oxidation), rolled, and then packed into a fermentation vessel and compressed to remove air. The compressed leaves are left to ferment for as little as several weeks but ideally for several months, resulting in wet and wilted tea leaves to be eaten whole, with a refreshing flavour raging form mildly astringent to strong and tart. Given the simplicity of the process, some tea producers make lahpet soe at home. In the above photo (Figure 5), a tea farmer is depicted showing me some home-fermented lahpet. He sold the majority of his family's tea harvest to a travelling broker in the form of raw leaves, but kept about a quarter of his harvest to ferment at home, to be consumed by family and friends, given as donations to a local Buddhist monastery, or sold at a market later in the year if a need arose for quick petty cash.

Figure 5: Raw tea leaves being roasted before fermentation. These leaves became lahpet soe for home use. Photo by the author, 2018.

Once fermented, wet tea is made into a wide variety of preparations. It can be eaten by itself, or made into a salad (*lahpet thoke*), mixed with fried beans and other ingredients (tomatoes, shredded cabbage, chilies, garlic). It is almost always mixed with oil (usually peanut oil) prior to consumption. It is found both in whole-leaf preparations and as a paste made from pounded or pureed leaves. The image below (Figure 7) shows both varieties, alongside assorted fried legumes, served on a ceremonial platter known as a *yun oak* (ယွန်းအုပ်). Lacquerware food vessels (and especially the yun oak) have royal and liturgical connotations: they are generally used in the most formal settings, and considered ideal for presenting food to monks. The shape of the yun oak is recognizably a mandala, a circle of objects around a clearly-defined centre. The mandala shape is cosmologically important to Burmese Buddhism, and has been widely used as a metaphor for precolonial conceptions of political territory (Tambiah 1977, 102). It is no coincidence that lahpet soe is at the centre of the yun oak, given its ritual importance. In the pre-colonial period, the mutual consumption of lahpet soe by disputing

parties signalled a resolution of grievances: although this usage is now obsolete, the phrase *lahpet sa* (လက်ဖက်စား), to eat tea, was an idiomatic phrase that used to mean "to settle a dispute" (Lei Shwe Sin Myint 2020, 219). Gifts of lahpet were (and still are) also used to signify the sealing of a marriage.

Figure 6: Lahpet soe (centre, bottom left) with assorted accompaniments. Photo by Shaun Dunphy, obtained from Wikimedia Commons (Creative Commons license).

Serving lahpet to guests is one of the most common gestures of hospitality in Myanmar (Han and Aye 2015). I had heard this many times, but I did not understand its affective importance until I offered it to Burmese guests in my own home. In 2018, I was working as a consultant on a city planning research project in Yangon that had an ethnographic component. One day, when we were supposed to have a team meeting, our usual office space was occupied and I agreed to host the team at my apartment (I was the only foreign colleague in an otherwise

entirely Burmese research group). The meeting ran long, and started to cut into dinner time; everyone was getting hungry and cranky. By pure coincidence, I had spent the morning visiting tea brokerages and factories, starting the research that eventually grew into this PhD thesis; along the way, I had accumulated a huge bag of lahpet soe and various accompaniments. I pulled it out, and there was an instantaneous sigh of relief from my colleagues, who then commandeered my kitchen and prepared a family-size bowl of lahpet thoke. We made some rice to go along with it. One of my colleagues, almost agitated in his relief, said in English: "Thank God. Thank God, you have real food in your house!" When I met up with some of these same colleagues in Chiang Mai in 2022, they remembered this instance, and brought it up, apropos of nothing. Although I frequently got cultural norms totally wrong in Myanmar, in this one instance, I accidentally got them right.

In the present day, different preparations of lahpet soe have taken on class connotations. Processed lahpet soe paste, mixed with a huge dose of chili and other ingredients, is universally available in plastic packets reminiscent of those that contain ketchup at fast food restaurants. The tea paste in these packets is colloquially known as *shuu shae* (ရှုရှဲ). For those who cannot afford prepared curries at a restaurant, a packet of shuu shae can be mixed into a plate of rice to create a delicious meal on the go. For Myanmar historian Tharaphi Than, the social transition of lahpet soe from a special delicacy to an everyday rice seasoning is a profound example of the postcolonial emergence of Myanmar's working classes (Than 2022). For years, shuu shae packets have been at a fixed price of 50 *kyat*, which corresponds with the smallest monetary denomination currently in circulation in Myanmar. In 2023, shuu shae manufacturers raised their prices enough to impact the street price of shuu shae for the first time, with prices increasing to 150 kyat or more depending on the region. The shuu shae price increase sparked intense conversations on social media, not only about shuu shae itself but about how the inflation crisis (and the political crises that precipitated it) was placing even the most basic

pleasures out of reach of working people. The point here is that lahpet soe is capable of bringing to mind a range of associations, from the royal and imperial to the working class. Its ubiquity cuts across geographic and demographic lines, making it a culinary common point across much of Myanmar.

Thailand has its own history of eating wet-fermented tea, with a divergent history and different range of preparation styles compared to those in Myanmar. Although miang and its Thai cultural connotations are not as important to the Ta'ang story as Burmese lahpet soe, it is worth mentioning it here as it provides evidence of the extent tea eating as an integral part of multiple socio-cultural formations across mainland Southeast Asia. Miang is exclusively produced and consumed in Thailand's northernmost provinces, abutting the border with Myanmar, and—at least in recent years—has stereotypically rural and working-class connotations. Although it was once a preferred snack by northern Thai royalty (วราภรณ์ เรืองศรี 2564), today it is imagined as the rural working person's follow-up to a meal—ideally accompanied by a traditional banana leaf cigarette (ธเนศวร์ เจริญเมือง 2562). Unlike in Myanmar, where tea is mostly eaten whole, wet-fermented tea in Thailand is often chewed in the same manner as betel quids or tobacco leaves, held in the mouth for long stretches of time (Khanongnuch et al. 2017). In Thailand, wet-fermented tea has been overshadowed by the dramatic expansion of high-quality tea grown from imported Chinese, Japanese and Taiwanese cultivars, grown on tourist-friendly plantations and mostly destined for export (Khaokhrueamuang and Chueamchaitrakun 2019).

Green Tea: Ahka Chaut and Yay Nwe Gyan

If one walks into any random restaurant in Myanmar, there is likely to be an insulated water flask on every table. The liquid inside is called *yay nway gyan*—literally, "rough warm

water", but colloquially referred to as "green tea" or "Chinese tea" in English.[1] The leaves for brewing this tea are called *lahpet ahka chaut* in Burmese, or more commonly just *ahka chaut*, meaning "bitter [and] dry". Although ahka chaut and the yay nway gyan brewed from it are integral parts of Burmese cuisine, there is a second order of signification attached to ahka chaut that connects it to China. The best ahka chaut is widely said to come from the Kokang region, a Chinese-majority area of Shan State that immediately borders China's Yunnan province. The proximity to China (or to Chinese tea production styles) of a given batch of ahka chaut correlates directly with its perceived level of distinction (when speaking to tea brokers and people in Myanmar with an interest in tea). Myanmar does have some native styles of ahka chaut with a degree of distinction, such as *lahpet hkauk hnyin hmwe*, literally "sticky rice fragrance tea", which has a light and nutty aroma reminiscent of freshly cooked glutinous rice. However, in tea markets across the country, ahka chaut fetches the best prices and has the most cachet amongst connoisseurs when it can claim some kind of connection to Chinese production methods or tea plant varieties.

It is easy to imagine the ubiquity of green tea in Myanmar as a consequence of historical attachments to the Han Chinese heartland. The vast empires of Han China have never directly ruled the area of present-day Myanmar, but the expansion and contraction of Chinese imperial formations has played a defining role in Burmese politics, visible from the earliest historical records written in what is now Myanmar (Giersch 2006, Kaung 2008, Scott 2009). Although there is extensive evidence for indigenous tea practices in Myanmar that are not "imported" from China, the lasting cultural influence of Han China echoes throughout Myanmar's tea

[1] People familiar with English naming conventions for Chinese tea often refer to "ahka chaut" as "oolong tea" rather than "green tea". Chinese-style green tea undergoes immediate processing to halt oxidation (usually by the application of heat), resulting in leaves that are usually very bright green in colour. Oolong tea is allowed to oxidize slightly, resulting in partially-browned leaves, but not so dark brown as to resemble what is called "black tea" in English (referred to as "red tea" in Chinese contexts). Like oolong tea, the leaves used in ahka chaut are often slightly oxidized, giving the tea a more complex and astringent flavour compared to tea that undergoes no oxidation.

industry, especially where green tea (lahpet ahka chaut) production is concerned. Even today, much of the machinery and methods used for producing lahpet ahka chaut—especially when it is produced in a large scale—are imported from China; when tea farmers and processors in Myanmar want to improve the quality of their ahka chaut growing and processing techniques, they often look toward the Chinese tea industry for examples of what to do.

Improving the green tea (lahpet ahka chaut) industry is one of the goals of Ta'ang nationalist groups like the TNLA, as it is seen as a possible pathway to Ta'ang economic autonomy. Industry groups like the Myanmar Tea Cluster (MTC) and Palaung Tea Association (PTA)[2] also have sweeping visions of what an improved tea industry could do for the economy of Myanmar in general but especially Myanmar' Shan State, where most tea is grown. When I first began fieldwork for this project, tea company leaders—e.g., MTC and PTA members—viewed high-grade green and oolong tea as the tea commodities most likely to generate profit in the export market. However, green tea is generally not seen as a prestige good within Myanmar itself. Although the average consumer in Myanmar is certainly aware that there are levels of distinction within whole-leaf unoxidized or partially oxidized (as in "oolong") tea, green tea plays a much more quotidian role as a beverage for casual consumption, a beverage so ubiquitous that it is literally given away for free. To profit from the production of ahka chaut, tea producers and market-makers will either need to tap into the Chinese market and secure a niche for Burmese tea, or work to develop Myanmar ahka chaut as a prestige good in the domestic market. Many of the actors introduced in Chapter 3 of this thesis are making headway in both of these processes, but their efforts have been severely hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar's 2021 coup and subsequent anti-junta revolution.

[2] Also known as the PTGSA, Palaung Tea Growers and Sellers Association.

Black Tea: Acho Chaut and Lahpet Yay

In the mid-20th century, both Thailand and Myanmar adopted sweet milky tea into their cuisines. Here, I am primarily concerned with the Myanmar version, known as *lahpet yay* (လက်ဖက်ရည်). Lahpet yay literally means "liquid tea" in English, but is usually referred to as "milk tea". It is the drink consumed in Myanmar's ubiquitous and iconic tea shops. It is made from It is black tea, served strong, sweet, and milky, almost always hot. Lahpet yay is a product of the colonial period, and its ubiquity in Myanmar is inseparable from British colonization and the strong socio-cultural and economic connections to South Asia that emerged during that period. In present-day Myanmar, milk tea is seen as something totally localized, and not a product that comes "from" South Asia as such.

If lahpet soe (pickled tea) indexes the precolonial Myanmar empires, and green tea indexes the culinary influence of the vast Han Chinese imperial formations, the emergence of milk tea in Myanmar (as in India) is inseparable from British colonial industrialization programs taking place at the turn of the 20th century. From the early 1900s, the Indian Tea Association and other colonial tea producers' groups worked to build a domestic (i.e., Indian) market for Indian-grown tea by arranging for the installation of "tea canteens" initially in factories and workshops, then later in military installations and railway stations (Collingham 2006, 195–98; Arora 2023, 16). At first, the Tea Association would provide vendors with kettles, leaves, and preparation instructions; they discouraged mixing tea with spices or with milk and sugar (to create masala chai, spiced and sweetened milk tea). In the 1950s and 1960s, however, the explosion of chai consumption redirected the aims of the ITA and the government Tea Board such that they actively encouraged production of granulated black teas suited for the preparation of masala chai—sweetened, spiced, milky tea (Besky 2020, 123). What began as

an offshoot of colonial market-making had become a regional culinary institution, localized as chai (in India) and lahpet yay (in Myanmar).

As will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis, the black tea used for preparing lahpet yay is big business in Myanmar. The processed leaves used for producing lahpet yay are called *lahpet acho chaut* (လက်ဖက်အချိုခြောက်, literally "sweet, dried tea") in Burmese, usually translated as "black tea" in English. The "sweet" in the name implies the product's final use, as the leaves used for making sweet milk tea; by themselves, the leaves produce a bitter and tannic liquor like most tea leaves. Unlike lahpet soe (wet tea) and lahpet ahka chaut (green tea), which can be produced in the home in small quantities, acho chaut production benefits disproportionately from an economy of scale. There are two main methods for producing acho chaut: the orthodox method, which produces "cylindrical twists of tea that resemble the botanical material from which they are derived" (Besky 2020, 7), and the crush-tear-curl or cut-tear-curl (CTC) method, which produces tightly-rolled granules of black tea that resemble instant coffee. Whichever method is used, the end goal is the same: small broken portions of fully-oxidized tea leaves, which produce a rich, malty and mildly bitter flavour and (ideally) a deep red-orange colour when mixed with milk.

The orthodox method produces batches of tea leaves that are more variable than those produced by CTC; for this reason, CTC acho chaut is generally preferred both by tea shop owners and general consumers. However, CTC tea production requires the use of enormous tea processing machines imported from India, and only the largest and most profitable tea factories in Myanmar can generally afford to purchase and maintain them. Such is the demand for acho chaut (black tea) that domestic suppliers have been unable to keep up, despite several tea factories' recent establishment of CTC systems. To meet demand, brokers have turned toward Chinese sources Myanmar's tea market has been flooded with black tea produced in China. For

Ta'ang tea producers, this is a crisis, and has sparked a political-economic movement to improve tea productivity in Myanmar and ban Chinese tea imports (Radio Free Asia 2023).

Glossary of tea vocabulary in Burmese and Thai

Types of processed leaves

Lahpet soe, or simply **lahpet** လက်ဖက်စို	Tea leaves that have been fermented in wet, anaerobic conditions (see Figures 5 and 6). When the word "lahpet" (tea) has no other modifier, "lahpet soe" is implied. English: literally "wet tea", colloquially "pickled tea".
Lahpet ahka chaut လက်ဖက်အခါးခြောက်	Dried whole-leaf tea that is unoxidized or partially oxidized. In everyday speech, "lahpet" is omitted, i.e., "ahka chaut". English: literally "bitter dried tea"; colloquially "green tea" or "Chinese tea".
Lahpet acho chaut လက်ဖက်အချိုခြောက်	Dried, broken, fully oxidized tea leaves, produced according to either "orthodox" or "CTC" methods (for details on the difference between orthodox and CTC, see Besky 2020, 7). English: literally "sweet dried tea"; colloquially "black tea".
Miang (Thai) เหมี้ยง	Wet-fermented tea consumed in northern Thailand and northern Laos, connected to the former northern Thai kingdom of Lanna. Miang is always sold as a thick cylinder of leaves bound by a bamboo strip. English-language discussions tend to use the Thai word untranslated (cf. Reichart and Philipsen 2005, Khanongnuch et al. 2017).

Types of ready-to-consume preparations

Lahpet thoke လက်ဖက်သုပ်	A salad made from **lahpet soe**, prepared with peanut oil and various other ingredients. Common ingredients include fried beans, dried shrimp, sesame seeds, chilies, tomatoes, and shredded cabbage. Styles vary in different regions. English: "tea leaf salad", literally and colloquially.
Yay nway gyan ရေနွေးကြမ်း	**Lahpet ahka chaut** (green tea) brewed in hot water, a ubiquitous beverage in homes and at restaurants. English: literally "rough warm water", colloquially "green tea".
Lahpet yay လက်ဖက်ရည်	Sweet milky tea, similar to South Asian chai/chiya. The name literally means "liquid tea" in Burmese, but is usually called "milk tea" in English.

Shuu shae lahpet ရှုးရဲ့ လက်ဖက်	Ground or pounded **lahpet soe** mixed with oil, a large amount of chilies, plus garlic, ginger, and starfruit pulp. It is ubiquitously available in plastic packets reminiscent of those used for ketchup in the English-speaking world. The name "shuu shae" is a mimetic word meant to imitate the breathy sound of someone reacting to the taste of spicy food.
Lahpet htamin thoke လက်ဖက်ထမင်းသုပ်	Cooked rice mixed with ground or pounded **lahpet soe** and sometimes other ingredients. Topped with a fried egg, it is ubiquitous as one of the cheapest meals available in Myanmar. English: literally and colloquially "tea rice salad".

The Ta'ang in Myanmar and Thailand: Pockets Across the Reef

When one attends a formal event in Myanmar, they are likely to witness a dance performance in which each dancer is wearing a stereotypical version of the "national costume" of one of Myanmar's so-called "national races". The dancers may or may not have heritage that corresponds with the ethno-racial group whose clothing they wear. The purpose of the dance is to display a flatly apolitical multiculturalism emblematic of the civic ideology that Myanmar consists of a harmonious union between diverse ethnicities (145, according to Myanmar government rhetoric). These 145 ethnicities are in turn categorized into nine "national races"—the official English-language translation for the Burmese word *taingyinthar* (တိုင်းရင်းသား), which is also often used as a synonym for "indigenous" (Cheesman 2017, Dunford 2019). Although the national races dance is *de rigeur* for many formal events, many of my friends within Myanmar discussed it with sarcasm, and even cynical humour: although Myanmar has striking ethno-racial diversity, "the dance" is so obviously a cartoon version of the way that ethno-racial difference plays out on the ground that it is almost funny.

The point here is that "diversity" is a concept with wide circulation in Myanmar. The nation-state is always-already understood to be "diverse". However, imagining diversity is only possible when there is a categorical "whole" in opposition to which individual elements can be

re-categorized as different, and as constituting diversity. To identify as Ta'ang is to position oneself in relation to not one, but two highly diverse wholes: Myanmar as a nation state, for one, but also Ta'ang, as an umbrella category with its own internal diversity. Like many of Myanmar's encompassing ethnonyms—so-called "national races" like Bamar, Karen, or Chin—the word "Ta'ang" is an umbrella term that has only gradually and unevenly come to be seen as a valid encompassment for the peoples to whom it purportedly refers (Thawnghmung 2011; Ferguson 2015; Dunford 2019; Prasse-Freeman 2023). In that sense, making Ta'ang cohere is a project, something that people must engage in actively; at the same time, for people who already identify as Ta'ang, it is obviously a relevant and meaningful category with a degree of objectivity. It is a way of imagining ethno-racial relatedness that is deeply meaningful to tens of thousands of people, but the boundaries of Ta'ang identity are blurry. It is, in other words, a "porous social order" (Gershon 2019, 405): one of many "patterned, perduring, interwoven, and transportable repertoires of interactions that are available for reflexive explication", the boundaries of which are subject to negotiation.

With these blurry boundaries in mind, it is still worth accounting for some of the most salient modes of relatedness that allow the Ta'ang ethno-racial order to cohere. Most groups who identify as Ta'ang speak one of many related Mon-Khmer languages (Mak 2012; Kojima and Badenoch 2013; Kojima 2016). A project is underway to create and disseminate a unified standard Ta'ang language, but it is still a long way from being used as a language of daily life throughout the Ta'ang world. The Ta'ang homeland stretches from China's Yunnan province in the east, across most of Myanmar's Shan State, and southward into the provinces of Thailand that border Myanmar (see Figure 1, page xiv). The most comprehensive text to date—in terms of texts that try to encompass all the possible ways of being Ta'ang—is Mai Aik Kaw's (2017) *Ta'ang History* (တအာင်းသမိုင်း). He opens with a discussion of categories. The word Ta'ang, as

Mai Aik Kaw explains, is also not uniform across the Ta'ang world, but has slightly different

cognates depending on the dialect spoken by a given community: "Ta'ang, A'ang, A'eng, Ra'ang, La'ang, Dara'ang, [and] Ri'ang, to start with, according to the region" (Mai Aik Kaw 2017, 17).[3] Within the encompassing category of Ta'ang (or its many cognates), there are dozens of "lineages" (*myo nwe su*, မျိုးနွယ်စု), each of which is stereotypically associated with a particular style of women's formalwear (Mai Aik Kaw 2017, 17).

Even in Myanmar, the word "Ta'ang" has only recently become a common term of reference amongst non-Ta'ang people, and it has not totally replaced the alternative: Palaung. The words "Ta'ang" and "Palaung" refer to the same group of people, although Ta'ang is generally considered polite and Palaung is considered derogatory. Despite its derogatory connotations, the word Palaung is so common in Myanmar that even some Ta'ang ethno-nationalist organizations use the word in their name—for example, the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), a prominent political party focused on Ta'ang issues. Throughout this thesis, I will exclusively use the word Ta'ang except in situations where it is necessary to use Palaung (as in the aforementioned political party). Still, even "Ta'ang" has its own history of hegemony. Ta'ang is the umbrella term used in the dialects of the Rumai and Samlone, arguably the two most active lineage groups in the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist movement. Both of these dialects, but especially Samlone, are viewed as prestige variants. In Thailand, the majority of Ta'ang people come from the Rujing lineage group; they are aware of the name Ta'ang, and while some do use it, many in that community prefer to use the term Dara'ang. The extra phoneme—the "ra"—"completes" the name, in their view, according to an oft-repeated etymology story. When I refer to the Thai-side Ta'ang community, I will continue the convention of using "Ta'ang" rather than "Dara'ang" to avoid confusion, although I am aware that doing so reproduces a pattern of hegemony internal to the Ta'ang world.

[3] Original in Burmese; translated by the author.

Figure 7: The Cover of Mai Aik Kaw's Ta'ang History, on which women's formalwear are used as an icon for Ta'ang diversity.

Apart from self-identification as Ta'ang (or one of its many cognates) and as a member of a particular lineage, there are several other ways that Ta'ang identity is expressed and made coherent. Across the Ta'ang world, a great deal of time and attention is spent discussing women's traditional formalwear. At first, I was wary of discussing women's clothing: I could not find a way to talk about how Ta'ang women dress, or ought to dress, without feeling like I was participating in a gross essentialization of both gender and ethno-racial identification. Still,

the conversations seemed inescapable: when research participants would show me photos from an event or ceremony at which there were many Ta'ang people present, they would go through the photos and identify which women were from which lineage, based on their clothing. The cover of Mai Aik Kaw's vast history of the Ta'ang people, mentioned above, depicts 16 women in different traditional outfits (Figure 4, page 21). For my interlocutors, the extensive conversations about women's formalwear were not mere essentializations, but powerful ways of thinking about the large geographical scale and extreme diversity in their cultural world.[4]

In addition to clothing, Buddhist religious practice is one of the core modes of relatedness that Ta'ang people practice. They are mostly Theravada Buddhists (Kojima and Badenoch 2013; Ashley 2013). Although many Ta'ang monks are trained in monasteries that practice the hegemonic styles of Buddhism in Myanmar and Thailand, Buddhist practice in the Southeast Asian uplands is heterodox: charismatic Buddhist saints are popular, and many of the monks that Ta'ang people revere are considered iconoclastic (and even dangerous) by the state-aligned Theravada establishment in Southeast Asia (Cohen 2000; Ashley 2013; K. Bowie 2014; Taylor 2020; Hayami 2022). There is a Christian minority within the Ta'ang world, who have varying degrees of integration with their Buddhist neighbours. In Myanmar, some Christian friends complained that their religious choices had stymied their political and professional ambitions within the Ta'ang community, explaining that Ta'ang political parties like the PSLF and Ta'ang National Party (TNP) would only support candidates who practiced Buddhism. In Thailand, I met many more Christian Ta'ang people than in Myanmar, but they were still a minority: two Christian Ta'ang friends living in Thailand—Julia and Ah Dang—

[4] In his ethnography of ethnicity and sex work in Kenya's Samburu community, George Paul Meiu (2019) describes going through a similar process. His interlocutors regularly described Samburu identity in essentialized and even stereotypical terms; however, Meiu gradually realized that these apparent self-stereotypes were not "strategic essentialisms" (a term usually attributed to Spivak, which she now repudiates—see Spivak 2008, p. 260) as much as they were "strong affective claims to a particular cultural identity and to specific genealogical and territorial attachments" (Meiu 2019, 13).

felt pressure to justify how they could call themselves culturally Ta'ang while also professing Christianity.

The status of the Ta'ang as Theravada Buddhists presents something of a conundrum for Edmund Leach (1964). He observes that Ta'ang villages are ubiquitously located on the highest mountain ridges, and that Ta'ang landscape management practices are characteristically suited to the mountain ecosystems where they live. However, in Leach's (1964, 30) view, no "true" hill people could be Buddhists. He is quick to explain the conundrum away, and ultimately concludes that Buddhist religious development is a consequence of the generational wealth accumulated by many Ta'ang communities over their long engagement with Myanmar's tea industry. Kojima and Badenoch (2013) revisit this question, but are more circumspect in ascribing a particular causality to the Ta'ang adoption of Buddhism. Ultimately, in their perspective, the development of Ta'ang Buddhism is partially due to tea wealth, but is less of a spontaneous reaction to money that it is the product of long-term relationships *between* the highland and the lowland, which have simultaneously produced capital accumulation and Theravada Buddhist lifeways.

To explain the cultural and political complexity of highland Southeast Asia, anthropologist Jane Ferguson (2021, 33) compares the Shan plateau to a "complex coral reef at a gigantic scale, with holes and pockets separated by serious, but sometimes surmountable, divisions". These divisions are ecological, as in the reef itself, but also cultural. When swimming across a coral reef, one might notice that similar groups of organisms might repeat in several different places, separated by other ecosystems, other groups of organisms. However, even if the same ecosystem appears in two different places, the two will be shaped by their neighbours in different ways—and they may have very different neighbours.

Following Ferguson's (2021) reef metaphor, one can develop a picture of the cultural ecology of the Ta'ang world. Ta'ang people live in discontinuous pockets of population

distributed across the majority of Myanmar's Shan State, from Mandalay in the west to Chiang Mai in the south, and across the borders of Myanmar into China's Yunnan province (see map, Figure 1, p. xiv). Across this vast land area, the Ta'ang do not form the majority of the population, but are one of a plurality of ethno-racial groups. The axes of ethno-racial differentiation are different in distant parts of the Ta'ang world. In Namhsan, for example (see map, Figure 2, p. xv), the majority of the population *is* Ta'ang; identifying as Ta'ang is to be part of the hegemonic ethno-racial group. By contrast, in Lashio, the de facto capital of northern Shan State, the Ta'ang are a relatively small group in relation to much larger Shan, Burmese and Kachin populations. On the southernmost end of the Ta'ang world, in Thailand (see Figure 3, p. xvi), Ta'ang people rarely deal with Burmese or Kachin people, and the salient axis of differentiation is between Ta'ang people and Shan, Thai, and Lahu people. Inasmuch as any racial order is constructed by building schemas of differentiation, the point here is that the content of these differentiations—between Ta'ang and non-Ta'ang—might look very different depending on where a someone enters the Ta'ang world.

The Ta'ang and Tea

Like making elaborate women's formalwear and practicing heterodox Theravada Buddhism, the Ta'ang attachment to tea is also a kind of stereotype, but one that has deep affective value for many Ta'ang people. As my Ta'ang friends and research participants often put it—especially in Myanmar—Ta'ang people and tea are "inseparable". Ta'ang people also frequently refer to tea leaves as their "blood" (Yee Yee Cho 2012), an intentionally complex metaphor that connotes both a life-giving substance and a genealogical relation. Ta'ang people's relationships with and attitudes toward tea—and toward their connection with it—are equally complex. In some cases, tea is a point of pride; for others, especially when the tea

market in Myanmar is performing poorly—tea is a burden, keeping people stuck on unprofitable farms. However, tea also represents political possibilities: in Myanmar, an emerging class of Ta'ang grower-broker-entrepreneurs views tea as a pathway toward political-economic autonomy. For them, tea is about the future as much as the past.

In Thailand, Ta'ang people mostly do not produce tea as a main source of income, but tea is still woven into many rituals and plays a central role in ideas about hospitality. In Thailand's Ta'ang community, people who see themselves as "preservers" of Ta'ang traditions (*phu raksa watthanatham*, ผู้รักษาวัฒนธรรม, literally "people who look after the culture") often make a point of serving tea to guests, or cultivating small stands of tea trees for home use. Still, as much as tea is a source of nostalgia, it is also a symbol of the "bad old ways". In describing to me how Ta'ang gender relations in Thailand are better than in Myanmar, one interlocutor explained that in Thailand, "Ta'ang men and Ta'ang women go to the farms together, we work together, we work as a team. But as you know, in Myanmar, Ta'ang men just drink tea. They stay at home, drink tea, women do the work, men just keep the money".

Leslie Milne, a British colonial ethnographer who lived in Namhsan for much of the 1920s, remarks that her friends and neighbours "recognize the fact that the introduction of tea to their country is comparatively modern" (Milne 2005, 224). Her evidence for this is the relative lack of ceremonies connected to tea cultivation in comparison to the extensive ones connected with rice cultivation. I would suggest a different reading of the situation, drawing on Sidney Mintz's (1985) classic analysis of staple starches and the spicy relishes that accompany them. As Mintz explains, there is a nearly universal human reliance—in sedentary cultures, at least—on staple starches of various kinds; the protein-heavy diet of the Anglophone world is an exception to this widespread pattern. Many of these staple starches are considered too bland on their own, even verging on inedible; they must be mixed with a "flavour-fringe supplement" (Mintz 1985, 9) something that gives them a taste. These "supplements" are

important, but one could never survive on these relishes alone. Survival hinges on the base starch—in the Ta'ang world, on rice. Tea, although important, is not the staff of life; it forms a flavour-fringe supplement.[5]

Tea is big business in Myanmar, but the majority of tea farmers—including many Ta'angs—do not see much profit from it. The liberal economic explanation for this is that tea farmers are set back by a lack of market knowledge (Somji and Than Than Sein 2019). The tea farmers interviewed for this thesis would tell a different story: they know very well how the market works, but material barriers (rather than knowledge) get in the way. For tea to travel from Namhsan to Mandalay, it must either be shipped by train or traverse several exceptionally dangerous mountain passes—most notably the famous Gokteik Gorge, about halfway between Kyaukme and Mandalay. This driving is best handled by mountain road specialists; brokers have access to such specialists, but the average farmer generally does not. Beyond this, tea wholesalers and aggregators generally do not pay farmers much better than a broker would. Even when farmers do make the arduous journey to urban centres to sell their tea, as often as not, it results in the same price outcome (for the farmer) as dealing with a local broker. This is less of a knowledge gap between rural farmers and savvy urban businessmen than it is a form of structural exploitation.

Methods: Patchwork Ethnography and Writing by Pointillism

This thesis is a product of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fieldwork began in 2020, and finished in 2022. The socio-political responses to the pandemic often took the form of sudden borderings and immobilities: shelter-in-place rules, "lockdowns", movement restrictions of

[5] Tea is used *in* rituals; however, it does not receive the same complex spirit propitiation rituals during planting and harvest cycles as rice.

many kinds. There were also equally abrupt demands for movement and displacement: people rushed to join distant friends and family; those working abroad were called back to home base. Above all, digital communication became one of the primary modes of social interaction, as face-to-face contact suddenly bore ethical and epidemic risks. Many, myself included, spent unprecedented amounts of time at home. Beginning from the assumption that time is experienced through motion, the unexpected new routines of enforced stasis and "suspended waiting" (Ruse 2023) meant that time seemed to stand still—even as weeks and months were ripped from the calendar. These spatio-temporal changes made strange circumstances for conducting ethnographic fieldwork, which—according to the hegemonic model in anthropology—excels above all at tracing and analyzing the contours of face-to-face social relations as they unfold "in real time".

In this section, I reflect on the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar's military coup shaped the methods that were available to me. Somewhat paradoxically, the repeated disruptions to this project have forced me to take a larger-scale and more encompassing view of the Ta'ang world and the Southeast Asian tea economy than I might have come to if my original plans had continued. I did not begin this project with the intention of carrying out a "patchwork ethnography" (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020), or engaging in what Katherine Bowie (2018) has called "pointillism": assembling seemingly-disparate, often contradictory ethnographic data over a protracted period of time. To the contrary, this project was initially designed in accordance with the hegemonic model of anthropological fieldwork, certainly fulfilling a stereotype, bordering on caricature: a lone white able-bodied cisgender man (me) engaging in long-term participant observation in a difficult-to-reach part of the world (Myanmar's northern Shan State). Instead, my ethnographic data consists of a sprawling patchwork: detailed participant observation notes from Myanmar and Thailand, endless internet message chat transcripts, and several different kinds of archival sources. From

early 2022, I was also able to hire a research collaborator, Naing Oun, who carried out tens of hours of interviews and took hundreds of photos according to a collaborative research plan that fulfilled his own goals as a documentarian of the Ta'ang communities of Northern Shan State while also providing crucial data for this project.

Anthropologists have questioned the utility of this hegemonic model since at least the *Writing Culture* era. Mary Louise Pratt's (1986) classic essay from that classic volume demonstrates how ethnographic writing is unable to totally renounce its history of tropes—which basically come from travelogues, descriptions of what is in a place or narratives about how a place changed a writer—but it *is* able to take new ones on board. In this section of my introduction, I do not necessarily offer an alternative to the hegemonic model of fieldwork, but I do offer an account of the ways that my project responded to the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar's military coup. Although I have drawn on a wide array of methods to accumulate the data I analyse here, my richest and most nuanced data comes from face-to-face relationships nurtured over long periods of time. At the same time, the wide geographic scope and long historical timeline that I trace in the chapters that follow would not have been visible to me if I had completed long-term physically embedded fieldwork in a single community. The patchiness of my data is integral to my wider argument: people work hard maintain meaningful social formations over time and space, in the face of duress and violence, by telling stories about how the world is (and ought to be). In the Ta'ang world, many of these stories return to tea, to multigenerational relationships with cultivated land, and with the political projects engendered by these long-term relationships.

2020: Mandalay

After a brief preliminary research trip in 2019, I arrived in Myanmar to begin fieldwork in earnest in January 2020. It was an exciting time for many reasons. First and foremost, the project was to be a long-term extension of tea industry research that I had begun while working as a university lecturer in Myanmar in 2017 and 2018. My friends in the tea industry and in the Ta'ang community were happy that I was making good on my promise to come back, and I was thrilled to be returning to them. Furthermore, just before I left Australia, I learned that my partner Kate was pregnant. I could not wait to share this joyful news with friends in Myanmar; I would even be able to tell them in person. Kate and I had big plans, ratified by my hosts at Mandalay University: I would spend about four months developing relationships with my research participants and setting up a place to live. After the baby was born, Kate and I (and the baby) would return to Myanmar as a family and stay for a year or more.

The first two months of research in Mandalay were extremely productive, despite a low rumble of pandemic-related paranoia. This time was crucial for developing a basic understanding of Myanmar's tea industry and how Ta'ang people engaged with it. My friends and contacts in the tea scene were excited to have me back in the country, and even had work for me to do. By the middle of February, I was spending nearly all of my time with tea growers, agricultural brokers, and Ta'ang community activists. I spent long hours in tea brokerages, chatting to the people who came and went; I accompanied brokers and farmers on their trips between farming areas and trade hubs, employing the ride-along methodologies I had been so excited to use. Two Ta'ang tea cultivators asked me help them fill out USAID agricultural extension grant applications; a major tea broker-cum-producer asked me to help apply for a factory improvement grant. I started to learn in detail how tea businesses work, and how Ta'ang people viewed them in relation to wider political projects. I was lucky to be offered a place to

sleep inside Mandalay University, at the foreign faculty guesthouse. Two anthropology professors at the University—Lei Shwe Sin Myint and Sandar Aung—were already engaged in a research project similar to mine, and I also spent many hours with the two of them, discussing how our findings overlapped and differed.[6]

As news about the dire situations in Wuhan and Milan began to dominate public conversation, everyone (myself included) started to worry. The Mandalay University tea symposium, scheduled for the last weekend of February 2020, lost 75% of its attendees as travel bans impacted China and India. Mandalay's primary agricultural brokerage market—a place where I had met several friends and research contacts—very suddenly stopped allowing foreigners through its doors in early March. This was primarily a Sinophobic move, targeting the large Chinese business community of Mandalay, but one that kept me out as well. Restaurants started to close. People in the tea scene began to whisper about a market collapse: if people couldn't travel or hang out, when were they going to drink tea? What was going to happen?

In late March, after ten weeks of fieldwork, my department asked me to return to Canberra. I was (and am) permitted to stay in Australia on a temporary student visa, and the university had it on good authority that I might be denied re-entry if I delayed my return. I started to worry about Kate, and the baby, and whether I would miss the baby's birth; furthermore, rumours were circulating in Myanmar about the possibility of the military using the coronavirus as an excuse to declare martial law. The pandemic, which had been creeping in the background, was suddenly at the front of the stage. When the ANU asked me to come home, I was in Lashio, northern Shan State, visiting a tea farm. Without much of a long-term plan, I hastily returned to Mandalay, packed a bag, and flew to Australia.

[6] See Lei Shwe Sin Myint (2020, 2021), also with Sandar Aung (2021).

2020: COVID-19

Back in Australia, it was unclear how the project would proceed. As much as I could, I stayed in touch with people back in Myanmar, although people quickly grew fatigued of long-term zoom calls. Preparation for the baby's arrival started to take centre stage. Sidney, our first son, was born in June. Over the remaining months, life slowly returned to something like normal in Australia; in Myanmar, however, things were anything but normal. My friends' and research participants' fears had largely come to fruition: the tea market bottomed out around the middle of 2020 as restaurants and marketplaces closed, or were reduced to an extremely limited capacity, and strict social distancing measures were announced across Myanmar. In the Ta'ang tea-producing areas, and especially areas controlled by the TNLA, many villages were manually sealed by the construction of barricades, or dragging huge logs across roads. Given these circumstances, I had no intention of hiring research assistants or asking people to carry out face-to-face research on my behalf; it seemed unethically risky, and too much of an imposition in that uncertain time.

In a strange way, the pandemic gave me (remote) access to places in Myanmar that I had written off as research sites. One place, in particular, stands out: Namhsan, northern Shan State. Namhsan is the spiritual and political centre of the Ta'ang world, and the unequivocal centre of Myanmar's tea industry. However, it has been strictly off-limits to foreigners since 2016, because of the TNLA's activities in the area. Although I knew that Namhsan would be a leitmotif throughout many conversations during my field research, before the pandemic, I was not planning to focus on it. However, as my Ta'ang friends gathered in Namhsan to ride out the pandemic—and I was sheltering in place in Australia—I used this time as an opportunity to learn as much as I could about the place, and the people in it. This likely would never had happened in a counterfactual world without COVID; in this case, the communicative

affordances of pandemic-related movement restrictions gave me a certain kind of access to a field site that was otherwise off-limits to me.

By April 2020, my interactions with my research participants were no longer embodied hangouts, but a vast constellation of text message histories, phone calls, and other sorts of online errata. I no longer kept a running notebook of what I did on a given day, but started to take notes on recurrent themes when they emerged. Sometimes I would go several days without contacting research interlocutors. Making sense of this data required me to engage in what anthropologist and historian Katherine Bowie has called "pointillism" (2018, 856). As an anthropologist of history, Bowie is concerned with creating a picture of the social formations of the past: by interviewing hundreds of people and receiving their distinct views—individual dots of colour—she is able to create a coherent picture from individual components that may not seem to hang together when they are compared at a small scale. This is a methodology that emphasizes the role of the ethnographer as a writing subject. Two particular conversations, for example, might not "cohere" until dozens more conversations have taken place, and other parts of the ethnographic picture have been "coloured in". In Bowie's view, such an approach acknowledges that any encompassing view of a social formation inevitably contains contradictions. Rather than explaining these contradictions away, pointillism allows them to be parts of a whole.

Online fieldwork places a different kind of burden on research participants than face-to-face fieldwork. If anything, hanging out online is more arduous; it requires a familiarity with the tools, a technical expertise that in-person hangouts do not. I realized this in the first month after my return to Australia, when I spoke to two friends in Namhsan in back-to-back Zoom calls. The first call was with Soe Kyi, a famous Ta'ang tea broker and tea business entrepreneur. In person, Soe Kyi is a larger-than-life figure: he is a tactile talker, a thigh-slapper, quick to put his arm around his interlocutor or jokingly elbow them in the ribs. Although he is physically

small, his booming voice fills whatever room he is in. When we went out for meals together, usually with other tea businesspeople, he would arrange the seating for maximum boisterousness, marshalling beers and plates of barbecue with the extravagant gestures of an orchestra conductor. Online, he was diminished: sitting too far from the camera, he was hard to hear, a small round face in front of a giant green wall.

The second call was with Zaw Lin, a bookish community organizer, also based in Namhsan. As soon as Zaw Lin picked up the video call, his grinning face and shoulder-length hair filled the screen. He immediately started laughing, as did I; he leaned away from the camera to show me where he was sitting, a veranda overlooking a Buddhist monastery, and then his face filled the screen again. Zaw Lin, unlike Soe Kyi, had mastered the form of the Zoom call. We caught up about personal things, then switched to business. Like Soe Kyi, Zaw Lin was (and still is) deeply invested in my project, and took a personal stake in making sure I got things right. He could be described as a "power user" (Bright et al. 2020) of Google Maps, constantly exploring new features and extensively labelling settlements and landforms in patchily-documented Myanmar; as we talked, he shared his screen, walking me through villages that had been blockaded, showing me where the military was active, walking me through places that had *not* been blockaded, where he was hoping to travel. Hanging out with Zaw Lin in person is sometimes a silent affair: he is liable to lapse into a map investigation, or embroiled in several simultaneous text message discussions. On Zoom, he came to life in a totally new way.

Zaw Lin was already using a wide variety of distance communication tools before the pandemic began. He likes using them, and is adept with them. However, most of my interlocutors are closer to Soe Kyi. They are happy to have chats over text message, but real-time interviews are burdensome. I gradually stopped doing initiating them, but would always pick up when an interlocutor chose to call me; when that happened, though, I was less inclined

to speak directly about research questions and more interested to catch up as a friend. It was around this time that I began regularly reading *Shwe Phee Myay*, a Burmese-language Ta'ang news service run primarily on Facebook. *Shwe Phee Myay* offers partially crowdsourced and partially in-house reporting on northern Shan State and on Ta'ang issues across Myanmar, China and Thailand. From *Shwe Phee Myay*, I learned to develop an encompassing perspective on the Ta'ang world: the tumultuous reading and writing public that contributes to *Shwe Phee Myay* provided me with hundreds of pointillistic "dots" of information across the Ta'ang world. When tea prices went up or down, when the TNLA was carrying out a particular operation, and when landmines were discovered in particular tea fields, *Shwe Phee Myay* would usually be the first to report on it. The comment sections on *Shwe Phee Myay* articles taught me a great deal about where there was consensus and where there was disagreement in the Ta'ang reading public. However, I was always a "lurker", a person who observes an online community but does not interact with it. Apart from using Facebook's "reaction" system to like, love, or express my anger over a particular post, I never felt comfortable commenting on them directly. *Shwe Phee Myay* is thus not a primary "object of study" in my thesis, but a crucial backdrop for the things I have learned ethnographically.

By late 2020, Zaw Lin began to encourage me to hire research assistants to start conducting interviews on my behalf. COVID-19 outbreaks seemed to have slowed down; as the monsoons receded, roads became passable again. Zaw Lin introduced me to three young Ta'ang people who were searching for part-time work: Aike Lwun, Ah Hninn, and Naing Oun. From December 2020, we started meeting once a week, to discuss how the project might work; we agreed that we would start small, beginning with socially distanced outdoor interviews with people who lived in the immediate vicinity of the three young Ta'ang researchers, who all lived in the same neighbourhood of Namhsan. We would begin with general interviews about how tea farmers' and brokerage workers' lives had changed since the onset of the pandemic; together,

the three young researchers and I prepared a set of research questions. I sent some money to Zaw Lin via Western Union, which he disbursed to Aike Lwun, Ah Hninn, and Naing Oun. The first few interviews were a success; I received a small grant to cover their salaries; and by January 2021, it looked like we were going to be able to expand the project into a systematic data-collection program co-designed by myself and the three Ta'ang researchers.

2021: Myanmar's Military Coup

On 31 January 2021, a Sunday, I received some unsettling text messages from Maung Kabar, a friend in Yangon. First came a series of photos of one of Yangon's major intersections, depicting tanks and armoured troop carriers parked on every corner; then, photos of Sit Tat[7] soldiers standing around in busy areas of Yangon, many of them armed. Other friends had mentioned troop movements in Lashio and Mandalay. I asked Maung Kabar what was happening. "Looks like a military coup to me", he said. Then, "Hahaha", as if he was hoping that he was wrong, hoping that what he said was just a joke.

On 1 February 2021, messages started pouring into my phone from friends in Myanmar. Beginning in the middle of the night, the Sit Tat had arrested dozens of politicians, political activists, and public figures. Some of my friends went to their offices—in government, in the media, at think tanks—to find the doors locked, and soldiers standing guard; in some cases, their bosses and colleagues had been arrested in the night. Some people went into hiding immediately. Others began stocking up on food. "The streets are quiet, for now", said my friend Yan, "but I don't dare to go outside". The mood was one of quiet panic.

[7] In scholarship on Myanmar, the state military has generally been referred to using the English transliteration "Tatmadaw" (Callahan 2002). "Tat" means "military", but the suffix "daw" indicates something worthy of respect or veneration. In the wake of the 2021 military coup, many in Myanmar have chosen instead to use the phrase "Sit Tat" instead of "Tatmadaw" (Aung Kaung Myat 2022, Desmond 2022). Throughout this thesis, I will follow the new convention of referring to state forces as the Sit Tat. The reasons behind this shift are discussed in more detail in several chapters of the edited volume *Myanmar in Crisis* (Chambers and Dunford 2023).

In the weeks that followed, a new social movement was born. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in every major town and city across Myanmar. In addition to street demonstrations, there were mass civil servant strikes, which are still ongoing; protestors shut down street traffic in Mandalay and Yangon. The mood was often exuberant, as heterogeneous public opposition swelled. The coup galvanized political dissatisfaction across the political spectrum into a single public, as many began referring to the movement as the Spring Revolution (Chambers and Dunford 2023; Hedström et al. 2023). Within a week of the protests beginning, there were sudden and apparently total internet and phone blackouts. I started to lose touch with some people. Friends started to move around, especially anyone affiliated with liberal or left-wing political projects. Phone numbers changed, people locked or deleted their social media accounts, and even when the phone lines were back up, people would only rarely pick up the phone.

By the end of February 2021, the possibility of peaceful protest largely came to an end. The Sit Tat began using violent force against protestors, and I lost touch completely with most of my friends. March was a particularly bad month, as the number of casualties soared into the thousands. Most of my friends went silent for long stretches of time. Between March and May, the majority of my daily "notes" consist of when I lost contact with someone, when they reappeared, and whether they were safe. It was during this time that I realized the danger of digital ethnographic methods in a time of political upheaval. Although internet communication technologies had provided the majority of my social life in 2020 and 2021, I saw firsthand how all internet communication technologies are also surveillance technologies. Even tools like VPNs and Tor messengers were risky: at military checkpoints, people were occasionally asked to unlock their phones and hand them over for examination; any record of political activity—or activity that could *seem* political—could be used as grounds for punishment.

As the rainy season began, toward the end of May, people began to re-emerge. Almost as soon as they did, the Delta wave outbreak of the coronavirus struck in Myanmar. The results were apocalyptic. Nearly everyone I knew contracted the virus; oxygen was in short supply across the country. The Ta'ang areas, which had mostly avoided the virus during 2020, were now being ravaged by it. By August, the Delta wave had mostly crested; by the middle of 2021, many of those with the means to leave Myanmar were making plans to do so. Thailand was (and is) the preferred destination, given its massive Burmese expatriate population and the long history of Thai-based Burmese dissident movements (Allden et al. 1996; Olivius 2019).

I knew that there was already a Ta'ang population in Thailand. Around 10,000 Ta'ang people had lived there full-time in since the 1980s, fleeing forced conscription and other war-related problems in Myanmar. Until very recently, the majority of English-language scholarship about Ta'ang people focused on these Thai-based communities (Ashley 2012, 2013; Deepadaung 2015); there is also an extensive corpus of Thai-language research on the livelihoods and cultural heritage of the Thai-side Ta'ang community (สุจริตลักษณ์ 2008; พิเชฐ 2009; พรรณี 2016). As the situation in Myanmar continued to deteriorate, I began communicating with Ta'ang people based in Thailand, and Thai-based researchers who had worked with the Ta'ang community. I learned that several Ta'ang villages in Thailand were especially amenable to participating in social research projects: as one Thai researcher put it, "those villages are so accustomed to anthropologists that they basically have a research industry—they make a livelihood on anthropologists." Around the end of 2021, the Australian National University began to relax its lockdown policy for off-campus research. Given that many of my Myanmar-side friends had relocated to Thailand, and I was beginning to cultivate separate research contacts there, I decided to pursue fieldwork in Thailand to round out the patchy data I had accumulated over the course of 2020 and 2021.

2022: Thailand

It is difficult to describe the affective shift between conducting long-distance fieldwork from Australia and face-to-face fieldwork in Thailand. They are almost incomparable. This project would not have been possible without the time I spent in Thailand, the reconnections it provided to Myanmar, and the new connections I was able to build while there. My family and I arrived in Thailand in March 2022, for a six-month stint. We stayed in Chiang Mai, Thailand's "second city" and the major metropolis of the north of the country; it is also arguably the most important centre of Myanmar cultural life outside of Myanmar itself. We were surrounded by friends from Mandalay and Yangon. At every social event, I ran into people who I worried I might never see again; students from Yangon and Mandalay, some who I had not spoken to since the early days of the coup, appeared suddenly at my house. Although the pandemic was still raging—at this point, mainly in the form of the less lethal but much more contagious Omicron variant—it occasionally felt like we had returned to a more optimistic past.

In our quarantine hotel in Bangkok, just before we settled in Chiang Mai, I called Naing Oun. He was one of the three research collaborators that I had met with in 2020, before the military coup, and after he got back online in late 2021, he and I had been in touch with some regularity. He was finishing a contract working for a civil society organization in Namhsan, and wondered if there was any possibility of us working together. Before arrival in Thailand, I had told him that this was unlikely, given the near impossibility of transferring money between Australia and Myanmar during 2021.[8] Being based in Thailand, the situation was completely different: especially in Chiang Mai and other Myanmar hubs, there are a range of informal

[8] It was technically still possible to use Western Union throughout 2021, but only small transfers were possible, and all were under scrutiny from the Sit Tat regime. When Zaw Lin went to receive my first post-coup transfer of cash, he had to wait in line for more than five hours, beginning at dawn; he was also worried about thieves, who were known to wait outside certain banks and transfer points. I did not want to put him through that again, for the relatively small amounts of money I was sending.

support services that move money and other resources across the Myanmar-Thai border. With a small (but useful) grant in my hand and Myanmar's informal money transfer system at my fingertips, I asked Naing Oun if he was still unemployed. He told me that he was. I asked him if he wanted to work with me again. He shouted "yes!", and from then on, we met nearly every week until the end of 2022. Without his insights and his collaboration, this thesis never would have happened.[9] He remains a close friend.

My plan, then was to re-start the long-distance project I had begun in Myanmar in 2020, focusing on Namhsan, where Naing Oun was based. I would supplement this as much as possible with face-to-face fieldwork in the Ta'ang community of Thailand.[10] The goal, in this case, was to explore how related sets of research and interview questions played out at two different points along the vastness of the Ta'ang world. As word got around that I had arrived in Chiang Mai, an acquaintance I had met online invited me to stay in Ban Nam Tok,[11] a village in Chiang Mai Province's Chiang Dao District. What I learned there surprised me. Although the residents of Ban Nam Tok had once cultivated tea, they had given it up two decades beforehand. The tea gardens were overtaken by the forest. Tea did still play a prominent role in social life, as a ubiquitous offering to guests and a part of many rituals; however, the people in Ban Nam Tok made their livelihood on other products (predominantly longans and sesame). Here, I had arrived at the second part of my central research question: what has happened in situations when Ta'ang communities give up tea production? How do those communities view this change? In terms of loss, or the shedding of a burden? Alongside these questions, other

[9] The data presented in Chapters 2 and 4 consists roughly half of material collected by Naing Oun in response to questions that we generated collaboratively.

[10] For general coverage of the Ta'ang community in Thailand, see Deepadaung (2015) and Howard and Wattanapun (2001)

[11] Ban Nam Tok is a pseudonym. In general, I use the real names of major cities and well-known sites, but refer to most smaller villages with pseudonyms. I have done this to prevent undue scrutiny on particular people who spoke and spent time with me, whose names (if published) may attract unwanted attention.

ethnographic questions emerged: when do the Ta'ang communities of Thailand and Myanmar communicate with one another? How (and when) do they cross the border, and for what?

As I made new Ta'ang friends in Thailand, I started to develop answers to these questions; however, the dual spectres of COVID-19 and Myanmar's intensifying internal conflict meant that field research in Thailand was not perfectly seamless. When I arrived in Ban Nam Tok, the village was clear of COVID, but a neighbouring Ta'ang village was struggling to contain an outbreak. I took a rapid antigen test before travelling to Ban Nam Tok, and adhered to two-meter social distance practices while I was there. Still, Ban Nam Tok eventually experienced a sever COVID-19 outbreak in the wake of a large ordination ceremony that brought together novice monks from several surrounding villages. During that time, I stayed away. When Sidney (my son) contracted the virus and spread it to Kate and I, we all quarantined for three weeks in our Chiang Mai apartment.

Although Thailand is generally a safer place for Myanmar political activists than Myanmar itself, the Chiang Mai area still presented some socio-political hazards to my Myanmar friends and even to the long-settled Ta'ang communities. For one, Chiang Mai was rife with spies. Community activists were occasionally harassed by supporters from rival political factions; the situation made people wary, and I was occasionally turned away from interviews (or cancelled them myself) when the mood was not right. Furthermore, rumours started to spread about armed groups in Myanmar coming into Thailand to conscript soldiers from the recently-arrived migrant population. This presented some danger for the Ta'ang community. When arriving in Thailand for the first time, many Ta'ang migrants would gravitate towards Ta'ang villages: even if their dialects were different, there was enough relatedness between Ta'ang villages in Myanmar and Thailand's Ta'ang villages to provide a basis for recent migrants to make friends and find a way to earn a living. However, new arrivals were

seen as something of a risk, potentially smuggling in the political problems that most of Thailand's Ta'ang community had tried to avoid in the first place.

Despite the dual hazards of COVID-19 and Myanmar's political problems, my time in Thailand was invaluable for the completion of this thesis. This is why I cannot present a full-fledged counter to the hegemonic model of anthropology as a discipline based in long-term face-to-face relationships: although much of my fieldwork was conducted over phone lines and digital communication platforms, the data I present in this thesis largely comes from Myanmar in 2020 and Thailand in 2022. Without those experiences, I would struggle to make sense even of the very rich data collected by Naing Oun; I would struggle to understand how the coup and the pandemic actually played out in the places where my research participants live their lives.

Outline of the Thesis

The chapters that follow are grouped into two parts based on their conceptual relation to my central research questions. In the broadest possible terms, I set out to understand why and how the relationship between Ta'ang people and tea has endured, how tea production shapes Ta'ang culture, and what has happened in situations where tea cultivation is not of central economic or cultural importance to Ta'ang people.

Part 1, "Myths", considers how the tea-Ta'ang relationship is imagined as a process with a long historical duration. With historicity in mind, I address how various actors narrate the relationship between tea and Ta'ang, and how these narratives form a body of political theory that situates the Ta'ang in relation to Southeast Asia's precolonial lowland empires, to other highlanders, and to the colonial and postcolonial state-building projects. This section also points toward a provisional answer to questions about what role the Ta'ang might have played in the global tea domestication process. Put differently, Part 1 of the thesis demonstrates how

narrating the long history of tea in mainland Southeast Asia provides a way of thinking about the emergence and consolidation of Ta'ang identity.

Part 2, "Mediators", explores the material political-economic consequences of the tea-Ta'ang relationship. If Part 1 is concerned with imagining the deep past, Part 2 is concerned with the political-economic stakes of the immediate present: What meanings do people in Myanmar and northern Thailand actively ascribe to tea and Ta'ang in the present, and how do they translate those significations into political and economic actions? To explain this act of translation, I build on Mazzarella's (2006, 476) succinct theorization of mediation: the process by which the incommensurable and often intangible particularities of lived experience are momentarily made to cohere into something concrete and explicable. I focus on two types of mediators: tea brokers—who work to make tea and ethno-racial identity simultaneously commensurable—and the people who Rogers Brubaker (2002) calls "ethno-political entrepreneurs", who do the work of promoting projects of ethno-racial identity and widening or contracting those projects' boundaries.

Part 1: Myths

In Chapter 1, "Mandala Logic", I explore how tea is folded into narratives about Ta'ang political relations in Myanmar and Thailand. The chapter begins from the premise that myths—and stories told with mythologizing in mind—are a form of political theory. When people narrate the origins of a social or ecological formation, they are expressing ideas: in this case, ideas about power relations, and their connection to the very old Ta'ang relationship with tea. The chapter builds on a conceptual model developed in the vast corpus of Cold War-era Southeast Asian area studies: the so-called "mandala" system (Wolters 1999; Scott 2009; Ferguson 2021), and the related concept of the "galactic polity" (Tambiah 1977). These are

spatial models, which explain how sovereignty works in the hinterlands of Southeast Asia: polities on the imperial hinterland—like the major Ta'ang cultural centres of Namhsan (Myanmar) and Nor Lae (Thailand)—have a great deal of flexibility in choosing how to relate to distant centres of military and economic power. However, this flexibility comes with a high degree of precarity: peripheral polities are constantly engaged in appeasing *multiple* power centres simultaneously. The mandala model is mainly a way of conceptualizing precolonial Southeast Asian political formations; here, I bring it into dialogue with contemporary Ta'ang stories about power works in their world, to show how the double-bind of flexibility and precarity plays out in the 21st century.

Chapter 2, "Since My Grandparents' Time", centres a very different kind of origin story, which is not usually couched as a "myth": the scholarly debate about how and where the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*) was domesticated. Here, I compare the domestication accounts provided by scientific botany with the tea cultivation and land use practices employed by Ta'ang tea farmers and other highland tea cultivators in mainland Southeast Asia. I find that scientific accounts of where and how tea domestication occurred have been shaped by imperial claims of originality: people writing and speaking on behalf of the Han Chinese and British imperial projects make claims about "discovering" tea in particular places. The biologies and geographies of tea that have unfolded from these imperial origin stories have silenced the role of the highlanders who cultivated tea in between these imperial poles, both temporally and geographically. There is a shift underway in both domestication biology and in the anthropology of domestication that emphasizes domestication as the product of multigenerational relations of care, in which the primary agent—plant or human—is somewhat ambiguous (Zeder 2015, 3191; Lien et al. 2018). Still, the chapter does not fully present a counternarrative to what anthropologist Bengt Karlsson has described as the "imperial crop hypothesis" (Karlsson 2022, 105): that there is something about the ecosystemic and human

labour requirements of tea that make it particularly apt for usurpation by imperial political-economies. Even in the pre-colonial period, the Ta'ang attachment to tea seems to have been facilitated in part by Ta'ang relationships with distant imperial cores.

Part 2: Mediators

Chapter 3, "Brokers Make the Market", explores the people who do the labour of connecting Ta'ang tea farmers to lowland tea consumers: agricultural brokers. Brokers of all kinds, known as *bwesa* (ပွဲစား) in Burmese, are mostly a reviled archetype in Myanmar popular culture. However, bwesa are critical market infrastructure: bwesa excel at making connections between groups of people who are nominally in conflict with one another, or even at war. In Myanmar's exceptionally gappy economic landscape—where large parts of the country are currently (and historically) engaged in multilateral conflicts of extraordinary complexity—middlemen are necessary for accomplishing just about anything. This chapter draws on fieldwork conducted with tea brokers in Mandalay in 2020. I centre a scandal that highlighted ethno-political faultlines in the brokerage community: Myanmar's emerging dependence on Chinese-made CTC black tea. This is most scanadalous for tea brokers who identify as Ta'ang, and who are engaged in the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist project: for them, tea production is a possible means to Ta'ang political-economic autonomy. In their telos, consolidating Myanmar's tea market in Ta'ang hands provides an economic basis for an autonomous Ta'ang state within a future federated Myanmar. The vast amounts of Chinese tea flooding into Myanmar are necessary for fuelling Myanmar's lively teashop culture; brokers avoid dealing in it at their own economic risk. However, choosing to deal in Chinese tea—especially as a Ta'ang tea broker—opens one up to potential political risk, as Chinese tea dealers could be seen as duplicitous (at best) or even traitorous.

Chapter 4, "Making a *Lumyo*", explores the way that people navigate and negotiate the Ta'ang ethno-national project on the ground in Myanmar and Thailand. "Ta'ang" is an umbrella term used to identify a wide range of ethnic groups who speak related languages, share one of several interrelated kinship systems, and share common livelihoods, mostly related to the production of tea. However, despite the unity implied by this umbrella term (and its many cognates), distant groups of Ta'ang people may have very little to do with one another. Some "ethnopolitical entrepreneurs" (Brubraker 2002, 166) see value in building an encompassing Ta'ang identity, which would shift the term from implying a loose sense of affiliation-across-diversity to standing in for a reified cohesive whole. Although some Ta'angs abhor this encompassing project, and correctly recognize it as a violent nationalist project of the same kind that has given them trouble (either because they are forbidden to participate, as in Thai citizenship, cannot pass, as in Myanmar, or forced into conscription, as in RCSS), others recognize the emancipatory potential opened by an opportunity for belonging that eschews the hegemonic categories available in Myanmar and Thailand. I argue that the presence of these different projects of Ta'ang participation and Ta'ang eschewal—which are in tension with the everyday practices that actually constitute ethnicity and race—have consequences for the forms of belonging that are available to people who identify as Ta'ang (or not). "Ta'ang" and "not Ta'ang" sit at the tangled intersection of ethnicity, race, and nation, categories which are sometimes made to overlap and sometimes actively differentiated. To clarify how they work together in the Ta'ang case, I will draw on work that follows Trouillot's (2021, 350) injunction to theorize these concepts simultaneously.

Part 1: Myths

1. Mandala Logic: Mythologizing Statecraft Across the Ta'ang World

Prehistory: The Myth of the King and the Castrated Fish

Towards the end of my fieldwork in Thailand, I was sitting on the veranda at Ah Dang's house with his family and some of our mutual friends. Ah Dang is one of the village headmen in Ban Nam Tok, a Thai-side Ta'ang village about an hour south of the Myanmar-Thai border. He is 34 years old, and converted to Christianity about a decade ago. His family were once considered experts in Ta'ang Buddhist and animist ritual practices, but now eschew them; Ah Dang runs weekly church services in Ban Nam Tok and another nearby Ta'ang village, and is developing a reputation as a pastor. Throughout my time in Ban Nam Tok, Ah Dang would balk whenever anyone referred to Ta'ang mythology or animist practices, as he considered them blasphemous and Satanic. At one point, when discussing astrological phenomena, he went on a frustrated rant about lunar eclipses: "Ta'ang people think that during a lunar eclipse there's a giant frog trying to eat the moon. They shoot fireworks and blank rifle shots to try to scare away the frog. There's no frog! I know this—the sky, space, it's all God's creation. A frog eating the moon! Can you imagine what I'm up against?"[12] In Ban Nam Tok and many other Ta'ang communities, animist rituals and traditional cosmological beliefs are taken very seriously; Ah Dang's conversion to Christianity caused violent controversy in the village at first, but his family is still held in high esteem and takes responsibility for many important

[12] Said to the author in Thai; paraphrased and translated by the author.

leadership functions in the village. He takes pride in his unusual position as a charitable and well-respected iconoclast.

Although Ah Dang is an excellent authority on many things, I would never turn to him with questions about legends or traditional rituals. He understood that I would generally approach others with these questions. Among Ban Nam Tok's proud Buddhist-animist majority, there was no shortage of people who were happy to discuss Ta'ang traditional beliefs with me, and Ah Dang would usually politely excuse himself from those conversations. It was therefore surprising when, one day, he wanted to talk to me about tradition. Ah Dang was asking me: "Did you get all of the information you need? Is there anything else you want to know?" I told him that I would always need more information, more stories, that the project would never end and I would need to come back when I could. Ah Dang laughed, and said, "Okay, well, I'll tell you a story that you probably don't know. Myanmar Ta'ang people, especially the northerners, don't know this story, because they had a king.[13] But down here, it's a story that everyone knows. It's the story of why the Ta'ang don't have a king. By the way, have you ever heard of a castrated fish?" (he laughed; his mother and some of our friends also laughed). The following was told to me by Ah Dang in Thai, and reconstructed from my fieldnotes:

> A long time ago, the Ta'ang had a king. The king had immense power, and he could eat whatever he wanted. He could eat animals from the farm and he could also eat wild animals; people would hunt for him, grow food for him, and even search for mushrooms. He loved rare foods in particular. One day, the king told his hunters that he wanted to eat a castrated fish. There's no such thing as a castrated fish! The king told the hunters to go out and look for it anyway. Eventually, one of the hunters came back, and told the king, in fact, there *is* a castrated fish: the hunter said, "a mermaid in the river will give it to you, but you have to go down to the river

[13] That is, a Ta'ang king—the Namhsan sawbwa. "Sawbwa" is the title given to the traditional hereditary lords across present-day Shan State, Myanmar. It comes from "sao pha" ("chao fa" in Thai), literally "lord of heaven".

> yourself. She would not give it to me." The king was worried, because he could not swim, but he also would not relax until he tasted the flesh of a castrated fish. He went down to the bank of the river, accompanied by the hunters, and the mermaid swam up to the riverbank. She told the king: "I can catch the fish, but I cannot take it out of the water. You have to take it out of the water yourself." The king leaned out towards the water, but he could not reach the fish. He asked the hunters to hold his legs, and he reached out towards the mermaid. "I can't hold the fish for much longer, it's going to swim away", she told him. The fish was starting to escape; the king leaned out of the hunters' grasp, and fell into the water. He was carried downstream after the fish, and never seen again. This is why the Dara'ang don't have a king; the events of this story also led to the Dara'ang being called "Palong" by the Shan [author's note: "pa" means fish in Shan and most dialects of Thai; "long" is a verb that means to follow a river's current downstream, i.e., "long phae", to send a raft downriver].

I was struck dumb by the story. Was it meant to be a fable about kingship, or greed more generally, or was I meant to focus on the folk etymology? How should I understand this, and furthermore, why would Ah Dang set aside his Christian-inspired aversion to legends and folklore in order to tell me this? I asked Ah Dang to teach me the meaning. He went over the key details and provided some exegesis: this is a legend about kings, he told me, and why the Ta'ang do not have one. That's the first point. The etymology story was a secondary point; it was coincidental to the bigger point about kings. As Ah Dang expanded on the point about kingship, it became clear that this was not a fable about kingship in general, but about the specific ways that the Ta'ang community organizes itself in different places.

This chapter shows how people across the Ta'ang world use stories to explain the operation of political power. Specifically, I argue that people use stories to explain the simultaneous existence of apparently competing socio-political formations—especially when those formations are imagined as following an evolutionary historical trajectory. Storytelling

allows people to make sense of an ecumenical political formation where defunct tributary practices can be brought to bear on 21st century bureaucratic techniques, and the recent historical present can be clarified by casting it in a mythological light. Social formations can expand, contract, and change their nature, but as long as the people invested in them are still alive, and the metanarratives that explain their existence (or their necessity, or why they must be avoided), those social relations do not simply disappear.

Of particular interest are stories that are *told with mythologizing in mind*: these might be "proper" myths, but they could also be stories about concrete historical events that have mythic or fabulistic qualities. Here, I am building on Leach's (Leach 1964, 268) classic analysis of myths and storytelling in highland Asia. Leach found that stories recounted to him and to others may contain the same characters, but opposite plots: in one version, the older brother might be jealous and wrathful, bringing misfortune on his younger sibling; in a different version, the roles might be reversed. Leach's argument is that myths in particular (and storytelling in the mythic mode, more broadly) should be understood first and foremost as "ideas" about particular social arrangements, rather than simplistic "rules" about ritual order (ibid.)—in other words, fabulistic stories should be approached as a form of political theory. Like political theory, "the structural implications of [any] myth are wholly ambiguous and vary according to the vested interests of the individual who is citing the story" (ibid. 276); stories told in the mythological mode are "a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony" (ibid. 278). Stories like the ones I address here are not historical relics, but active theorizations of the political present: they are ways of thinking through the contradictions and ambiguities of lived political experience. The process here is similar to the one that Joe Ellis (2024) describes, in the context of Mongolia: knowing the legends means knowing history and above all belonging to a particular community; *using* the legends, by contrast, is a way of explaining differences and engaging in political debate.

As far as I can tell, "the King and the Castrated Fish" is a one-off improvisation, possibly composed by Ah Dang on the spot. Although it has the quality of a myth, and the etymology fable it contains (about the origin of the name "Palong") comes up in some other popular Ta'ang folktales, I have been unable to find anyone else in the Ta'ang world who has heard of the particular story of the sterilized fish or the king falling in the river. It is also absent from journalist and folklorist Ludu U Hla's (1965). For my purposes, the potential for improvisation is part of the point. Although the stories common to the Ta'ang world build on similar themes and have recognizable types of characters, they are all told from particular positionalities and mobilized to demonstrate particular interests.

All of the Ta'ang stories that I reproduce here have some relation to tea. As this thesis is broadly concerned with the relationship between Ta'ang people and the tea plant, I pay attention to where these stories make explicit use of tea cultivation, and also where tea stories intersect with the stories in implicit ways. As I retell these stories, I make a case for "mandala logic" as a way of thinking about politics, and about the way that tea has facilitated highland Ta'ang political relations with lowland empires. The concept of mandala logic comes from a classic paradigm in Southeast Asian studies, which draws on the metaphor of the mandala to theorize precolonial patterns of statecraft (Tambiah 1977). The mandala paradigm emphasizes the flexibility (and the precarity) of peripheral polities operating in places where central state power "retrogresses" (Sadan 2013, 23). Ta'ang people mostly live in such places; however, tea cultivation and distribution—for tribute or for profit—has served as part of the connective tissue that binds their out-of-the-way communities to centres of imperial power. The stories that follow (even, as I show, "the King and the Castrated Fish") all engage with the way that people think about highland-lowland relations, and the way that tea production figures in these relationships, and how both processes—highland-lowland relations, and tea production—have changed over time.

To analyse these stories, I draw inspiration from Susan Gal and Judith Irvine's (2019) Perceian methodology for ethnographic analysis. While I draw broadly on their semiotic methods of analysis, I am particularly indebted to their theorization of historical change. In the fifth chapter of their recent monograph, *Signs of Difference*, Gal and Irvine demonstrate how socio-political change necessarily begins with narratives that are already in circulation. The opportunities for resignification are not infinite: people must work with what they already have. When Ah Dang tells the story of the King and the Castrated Fish, he is reproducing Shan condescension towards Ta'ang people, by reproducing the origin of the name "Palong". At the same time, he is innovating the myth: *his* version emphasizes Ta'ang autonomy, but he does not do away with the power relation that is sedimented in this story. My argument here is similar to that of Grant Evans (1998) in his ethnography of the post-war Lao state, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*: the communists can depose the king and declare a classless society, but such a declaration—such a socio-technical change—does not immediately do away with the patronage networks and long memories of ritual veneration that are attached to a monarchy. The king can be deposed, sent to France, stripped of his titles, but it will not stop people from venerating his images with candles and incense; it will not stop his extended family from using their influence. Similarly, in the hills of northern Thailand and eastern Myanmar, the state—the institutions that attempt to establish territorial hegemony—have not simply overcome all other forms of social organization. The echoes of earlier formations carry on; memories of flight and evasion (on one hand) and memories of feudal patronage and dependence (on the other) remain central to the way that people make sense of their social worlds.

Theorizing The Greedy King

On the northern end of the Ta'ang world, near the Myanmar-China border, there was once a hereditary Ta'ang sawbwa who ruled an important principality, centred on the city of Namhsan. This dynasty may have begun as early as the first millennium CE and ruled until 1948 (cf. Kojima and Badenoch 2013). Now, there is a Ta'ang ethno-nationalist organization based in the same region (the Ta'ang National Liberation Army or TNLA), with ambitions of political autonomy. From Ah Dang's point of view, the Namhsan sawbwa and the generals of the TNLA are both analogous to the king who fell into the water: driven by greed and an obsession with obtaining the impossible, they were (and are) doomed to failure. Their actions are unrepresentative of the "correct" way to live as a Ta'ang person, according to Ah Dang's view: one should work hard, focus on one's immediate community, and not get involved with the games of kings and statecraft—unless doing so is unavoidable. Although Ah Dang as the other residents of Ban Nam Tok are all (in principle) now subjects of the Thai king, he uses this story to explain the ethos behind Ban Nam Tok's relatively acephalous political structure in comparison to the way he imagines the Ta'ang community of Myanmar. Although Ban Nam Tok is certainly connected to wider structures of political power—both in Thailand and in Myanmar—the village has an ethos of self-sufficiency and a history of thwarting and bamboozling the projects of lowland statecraft when they encroach. Ah Dang's story provides a fabulistic framing of these political choices as inevitable, given the alternative: kings and their ilk are doomed to fail, but when they do, life in the village will keep going.

Although Ah Dang's own exegesis largely glosses over the etymological aspect of the story, it is worth returning to it. Although I could not find anyone else who knew the story about the King and the Castrated Fish, I have come across plenty of stories that involve fish-releasing, or other fish-related plotlines that coalesce around the phrase "pa long" or a similar-sounding

variant of it. Some Ta'ang people use the words "Palong" and the related "Palaung" to identify themselves, but most find it condescending, even though it is far more commonly used than "Ta'ang" by people outside the community, a tendency that usually elicits a gentle correction and sometimes is allowed to slide. In a sense, Ah Dang's story reproduces the etymology of an offensive word through the medium of a story told with irreverent pride. The contradiction here, between pride and self-deprecation, is one that Ah Dang is willing to live with. This is why his exegesis is important: the etymology story about the word "Palong" is widespread enough to form a genre. By shifting the emphasis from the punchline (Palong) to the setup (the gluttonous king), Ah Dang redirects the story to make a political point.

There is also a tea story lurking on the sidelines of Ah Dang's story. Across the Ta'ang world, tea production is associated strongly with kingship, and with Ta'ang connections to the royal courts of Myanmar and, more recently, with the royal family of Thailand. Ban Nam Tok, where Ah Dang lives, used to be in a slightly different area, several kilometres deeper in what is now a national park. At that time, it was a regional centre of tea production, and the tea fields there were widely known in the Ta'ang migrant community as a place where recent arrivals could go to work and make use of the tea cultivation skills that many brought with them from Myanmar. The tea produced in Ban Nam Tok was processed and marketed by a Chinese broker who also lived in the village, but who has long since left. For various reasons, the village relocated to a different site, half a day's walk away (but retaining the same name), and the tea gardens at the old village site are now overgrown. Some people still trek back to the tea forest to collect the leaves, but it is no longer the village's main economic engine. In a way, it the story of the King and the Castrated Fish serves (obliquely) as an explanation for why the community at Ban Nam Tok no longer lives on tea, inasmuch as tea production has bound Ta'ang people to distant power centres for centuries. In the stories that follow, royal patronage and tea production go hand-in-hand. In Ban Nam Tok, where Ah Dang described a king being

tossed in the river, the tea plantation has been overtaken by forest. By giving up on the tea forest without planting a new one, the people of Ban Nam Tok were eschewing an old political-economic relation in favour of new ones more suited to their circumstances in Thailand.

In addition to the above story about the "King and the Castrated Fish", I will examine two more stories in detail (the "Story of the Tea Seeds", and the "Story of the Formalwear"). Like the King and the Castrated Fish, the common thread in all of these stories is that they are mobilized to make points about why the Ta'ang world is politically organized in one way or another. Through these stories and the commentaries on them that people have given me, I demonstrate that while there are some common political tropes in the Ta'ang world—for example, the situation of the Ta'ang as a highland group with a tributary relation to a lowland king—there is a very lively culture of debate about the political future of the Ta'ang community and how to conceptualize it in relation to neighbouring peoples. It is an open topic of discussion, and stories like these are one of the ways that the stakes of these political relations are debated and theorized.

Mandala Logic and Political Ecumenism

If the stories I address in this chapter are forms of political theorization, what sorts of politics do they theorize? According to the rich historiographic tradition in Southeast Asian studies, pre-colonial kingdoms in what are now Myanmar and Thailand took an approach to statecraft that differed sharply from the recently-arrived Euro-colonial model, which followed a "Westphalian" model of territorial sovereignty.[14] The technologies of Euro-colonial statecraft

[14] The "Westphalian system" is a mode of statecraft in which states theoretically occupy a known and demarcated territory, over which they exercise absolute control, a system usually said to have developed in mid-17th century Europe in the wake of the Thirty Years' War. As the standard story goes, the series of multilateral treaties that ended the war—many of which were negotiated in the region of Westphalia—established the conceptual basis for modern territorial sovereignty, in which states all have the same *kind* of power over the territory that they claim,

appear to be ubiquitous in Myanmar and Thailand: official border crossings are clearly demarcated and always heavily fortified, with large military checkpoints. These checkpoints are often accompanied by images of the king (in Thailand) or the official crests and formal Burmese names of the immigration ministry (in Myanmar)—reminders that Bangkok and Naypyidaw are ostensibly in charge, right up to the territorial limit of a given country. The assumption that any given state is in control of its mapped territory—its "geo-body"—is by now so entrenched in the popular imagination that it is difficult to separate the concept of a nation-state from the sign-image of a bounded geographical whole (Winichakul 1997). Border demarcations and their attendant trappings suggest: beyond these limits is a different country; however, they have the same type of absolute territorial control as we do, extending right up to the borderline.

Historians and social scientists have often referred to the vernacular Southeast Asian model of statecraft as the "mandala" system (Tambiah 1977; Winichakul 1997; Wolters 1999; J. C. Scott 2009; Aung-Thwin 2019). It is important to note that the kings and chiefs of Southeast Asian antiquity might not have used this exact term; instead, it is a "hermeneutic aid" (Reynolds 1995, 427) employed by present-day social scientists to theorize the political patterns of precolonial Southeast Asia. There are two main characteristics of the mandala system that distinguish it from modernist Euro-colonial statecraft: first and foremost, it is a *spatial* model, which emphasizes the centripetal spatial organization of precolonial states. From a king's point of view, the most salient feature of the state was the capital itself, beyond which his power retrogressed rapidly. In addition to this spatial orientation, the mandala model

as opposed to the more variegated practices that existed under feudalism. According to Osiander's rich analysis, this is also a story with mythological characteristics, an invention of 19th and 20th-century lawyers invested in the intensification of central state administrations (Osiander 2001). The intensification of central administrations was of course facilitated by the emergence of the nation-state and its attendant imaginary of neat correspondence between a culture, a territory, and a government (Anderson 1991). The "myth" of Westphalia allows those invested in state centralization to point to a primordial origin of modern territorial sovereignty as an historical justification for enacting particular types of border regimes, especially when those border regimes produce a surplus population for the labour force (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

emphasizes the tendency for power to be understood as something held by specific individuals—deified Buddhist kings, warrior-monk-monarchs whose power was conceptualized as a personal accomplishment rather than a set of rights attached to a particular position (Tambiah 1977). In a rationalized bureaucracy, political power is ostensibly in formal institutions, which people use like a tool; in the mandala model of statecraft, political power is ostensibly something that is bound to a particular person's will, charisma, and ability to solve problems and manage resources.[15] The kings of medieval Southeast Asia would structure their court as a fractally recursive (Gal and Irivne 2019)[16] version of the centre of the universe according to Buddhist cosmology; continuing this fractal pattern, the lords of hinterland principalities would model their own smaller courts on the pattern established at the imperial centre. The power of the mandala king did not project outward to the hinterlands as much as it formed a point of gravity at the centre; governing the hinterland was less important than building up the centre.

The focus on centripetal accumulation at the centre—rather than projecting power outwards toward imagined borders—afforded a degree of flexibility (but also precarity) to peripheral polities and hinterland villages. According to the mandala pattern of statecraft, many small-scale communities were not within the particular realm of any single polity as much as they were within multiple spheres of influence of multiple polities—or multiple mandalas, as it were. This would have been especially true for villages located at some distance from any major power centre. Villages in the hinterlands of, say, Chiang Mai and Toungoo—today, the Myanmar-Thailand borderlands—might choose to pay tribute to Chiang Mai at some times,

[15] I acknowledge that this is an oversimplification of the situation, and that even modern bureaucracies have a great deal of room for improvisation and charisma (Caple James 2012; Martínez and Sirri 2023).

[16] "Fractal recursion" refers to the process by which an axis of differentiation—in this example, between king and commoner—is replicated at multiple scales. According to the mandala model of statecraft, the relation between a king and his realm is an earth-scale replication of the cosmic-scale relation between Buddhist deities and humanity. Likewise, tributary lords repeat the fractal again, in their relations to both larger-scale kings and to their own people.

and Taungoo at others, depending on the strategic needs of the particular village. Military recruiters from *both* Chiang Mai and Taungoo might conduct conscription campaigns (or indeed raids) in the same villages, leaving village leadership to navigate two competing sovereigns at once. In some cases, hinterland villages could have simply shot the messenger of any distant power centre, and attempted to remain autonomous. There is a great degree of political flexibility here in compared to something like the Westphalian model, but a flexibility that could also be perceived as risk: hinterland communities may be able to play bigger powers off of one another, and maintain a certain degree of autonomy, but their safety and security would not necessarily be guaranteed in the way that is theoretically achieved by states with total territorial sovereignty.

Although the mandala model of statecraft is nominally a description of the past, I argue that mandala logics of political organization were not erased wholesale by the introduction of modernist Euro-colonial (i.e., Westphalian) bureaucratic models of statecraft.[17] The mandala logic of power endures, even as those who work according to its logic must also employ the strategies and technologies of modernist statecraft. Border operators in present-day Southeast Asia enact an ecumenical political form that simultaneously operates according to the flexibility of mandala logic but also employs contemporary bureaucratic technologies: paying rents to multiple political actors on both sides of the Thai-Myanmar border, for example, or issuing ID cards—a classic tool of modern rational bureaucracies—that do not name an abstract office for legitimation (e.g., the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) but name a person ("If this individual gives you trouble, call Ah Win, who will take responsibility: [phone number]"). The myths that I present in this chapter are all fundamentally myths about kingship; to that end, they are reiterations of the mandala logic of political organization. However, they are all used

[17] My argument can here be read as a response to James Scott's famous claim that the flexibility afforded by precolonial models of Southeast Asian political organization had mostly disappeared by 1950 (Scott 2009). Although the postcolonial period has been one of massive state expansion in the hills of upland Southeast Asia, precolonial ways of adapting to state expansion do endure in some cases.

to explain Ta'ang political relations in the present, which exist in states that theoretically work according to the Euro-colonial model of territorial sovereignty.

12th Century CE: The Myth of the Tea Seeds

"The King and the Castrated Fish", despite its mythic qualities, may have been a one-off improvisation. "The Myth of the Tea Seeds", however, is a well-established myth in the classical anthropological sense, replete with ritual instructions and cosmological baggage. It is also by far the widest known of any of the stories I mention here. It's something that Burmese friends would casually reference when I mentioned my research on the Ta'ang community, or on tea in Myanmar; it is a story of great relevance to the Ta'ang community in particular, but it is also part of the mythic background of Myanmar culture more broadly. Ostensibly, "Tea Seeds" explains how the Ta'ang came to be tea-growers, and why their tea production places them as subjects of a lowland king. Kojima and Badenoch (2013) suggest that this myth may have been a kind of retroactive fabulation, a means to make sense of the explosion of commercial tea production in Namhsan, which appears to have happened around the 15th century CE (Lieberman 2003, 175). Kojima and Badenoch's suggestion echoes an earlier observation made by British colonial ethnographer Leslie Milne (2005), who observed that Ta'ang people in and around Namhsan performed elaborate animist rituals related to rice production, but relatively little in the way of ritual practice related to tea production.

From roughly the ninth to the thirteenth century CE, the central valley of the Ayeyarwady River played host to the Pagan Empire, one of the most powerful political entities in the history of Southeast Asia. Many of the vast temple complexes of Pagan are still standing, and are one of the most iconic historical sites in Myanmar. The kings of Pagan are common cultural reference points for their glorious traits—bravery, ingenuity, diplomatic acumen, and

so on. The king of relevance to Namhsan is Alaung Sithu, the grandson of Anawrahta (who founded the Pagan dynasty). Like his grandfather, Alaung Sithu was well-traveled, having passed through much of the territory of present-day Myanmar and beyond it, including a trip to Nanzhao (a former kingdom near present-day Dali, Yunnan). On this trip to Nanzhao, Alaung Sithu would have passed nearby (if not directly through) the Ta'ang lands. The specifics of the story vary widely depending on who is writing or telling the story; it has been written and referenced dozens of times in Myanmar-language literature. The following is a synthesis of the different versions I have heard since 2017:[18]

> Alaung Sithu, the King of Bagan, travelled far and wide. He travelled past Nanzhao in the northeast, and to the headwaters of the Brahmaputra in the northwest; he travelled the whole length of what is now Myanmar, and even across the ocean, across the Indo-Malayan archipelago and as far west as Sri Lanka. On his travels—some say in China, to the north, and some say in Malaya, to the south—he acquired some magical seeds. The seeds were found in the stomach of a duck caught by a divine ogre; the ogre, impressed by the king, gave Alaung Sithu the seeds as a gift. Alaung Sithu continued on his travels—to spread the Buddhist religion, to consolidate his reputation throughout the countryside, and to learn about his kingdom. Eventually, Alaung Sithu decided to find a suitable place to plant the seeds that he had been given; he knew that whatever grew from the seeds would have incredible properties, and so the recipient of the leaves needed to be a worthy person. At that point, Alaung Sithu was building a pagoda in the land of the Ta'ang—the Lway Saing pagoda, which still stands today in Namhsan's Taung Ma village. The Ta'ang helped Alaung Sithu in his efforts; impressed by their piousness, Alaung Sithu presented their leader with one of the seeds produced by the magical duck. When Alaung Sithu handed the seeds to the leader of the Ta'ang, the leader accepted the seeds with one hand (*let ta hpet*,

[18] I am here particularly indebted to Yee Yee Cho's (Yee Yee Cho 2012) doctoral dissertation, which lays out some of the key differences between the different versions of the myth and points to a wide range of Burmese-language source texts.

လက်တစ်ဖက်); this is why tea is called lahpet in Burmese.[19] When the seeds grew into plants and began producing leaves, the Ta'ang presented Alaung Sithu with a tribute of the leaves. He declared the leaves especially delicious, and praised their ability to cure drowsiness; from then on, the Ta'ang cultivated the plant that grew from the magical seeds.

The story of the tea seed—and the tributary relations it implies—place Namhsan squarely within the mandala of the dry zone courts. Trade and tribute have bound the two places for centuries: it is unclear if this was happening already in the Bagan period (11th-13th centuries CE), but certainly by the 15th century, the area around present-day northern Shan State became dominated by the production of tea (Lieberman 2003, 175), both for commercial purposes and for tribute. Milne (Milne 2005, 19) found—in the Namhsan chronicle, which records the lives and deeds of Namhsan's sawbwas—that the court at Namhsan paid tribute to the lowland courts at Ava and later Mandalay, largely in the form of tea. The legend of Alaung Sithu and the tea seed, combined with the actual material history of tea tribute paid from Namhsan to the dry zone, establishes a special relationship between Namhsan and the Bamar heartland replete with the cosmological grammar of Buddhist kingship. Still, the myth does different work for different people; it is mobilized in contradictory ways. According to the mandala logic of political power, the story links Namhsan to the cosmological circuits of power transmitted through Buddhist kingship; the grove of trees supposedly planted from the seeds given by Alaung Sithu is a sacred site in the Namhsan area. At the same time, some of my interlocutors felt disgruntlement towards the prevalence of the story (even as they reproduced it)—they sensed a congruence between the myth and colonial and post-colonial economic development narratives: highland farmers were dependent on the largesse of cash crops introduced by

[19] The Burmese word for tea is *lahpet*, which can be reasonably imagined in Burmese as a contracted form of the phrase "*let ta hpet*".

officials from the lowlands. The story has also been folded into the grammar of branding and marketing in Myanmar's tea industry, where it has been deployed to cast tea as the product of ethno-racial harmony and *"pyidaungsu"* (ပြည်ထောင်စု, literally "union") ideology, the notion that Myanmar consists of a harmonious multicultural and multiracial union.

Namhsan as a Cosmological Centre

The myth of Alaung Sithu and the tea seed figures tea as a circulatory object that binds different places and cultures into a common political-economic circuit imbued with the cosmological potency of Buddhist kingship. To mention "Namhsan" in Myanmar is always to invoke images of tea production; in the Ta'ang community, it also invokes a sense of economic and cosmological centrality. One of the characteristics that makes Namhsan exemplary is the fact that people there mostly make their living on tea cultivation and production, which I frequently heard described as the "true" Ta'ang livelihood when talking to people about Ta'ang communities in different areas of the country, some of which rely on different sources of income.[20] When I would tell people that I was studying the relationship between Ta'ang people and tea, I was frequently told varations on the theme of: "then you have to go to Namhsan, where the people are genuine tea growers. If you go to other places [such as southern Shan State], people do have tea, but they grow other things as well. They're not pure tea people." Tea is of enormous economic importance to many Ta'ang communities across all the regions where they live, and it also plays prominent roles in all kinds of rituals, including marriage, spirit propitiation, and the welcoming of guests of settling of disputes. However, particularly

[20] For example, interviewees and interlocutors in Myanmar would regularly use words like "*ahman*"/အမှန် (true) and "*takeh*"/တကယ့် (genuine) in Burmese when describing tea as Ta'ang people's livelihood: "a true Ta'ang village would make a living on tea".

in Namhsan, tea is the medium that confers the cosmological power of Buddhist kingship from a lowland imperial centre to the highland centre of Namhsan.

Alaung Sithu's tributary enfranchisement makes Namhsan a legible site of political power according to the cosmological logic of Buddhist kingship—mandala logic, in short. The physical space of classical Burmese polities was built as a "miniature representation of the cosmos" (Tambiah 1977, 109), in which the king was simultaneously a *bodhisattva*—a future Buddha—and a god, a "cosmic liberator" (Tambiah 1977, 73) whose tributary lords were understood as subordinate *devas*. One can imagine a kind of fractal replication here: the king at Bagan, for example, is an earth-scale representation of one of the *lokapala*, the Buddhist guardians of the universe, sitting atop the centre of the cosmos at Mount Meru (represented by the royal palace); the king at Namhsan and his court enact a similar representation, but one whose power and divinity are at least partially ascribed by their relationship with the superior (but logically congruent) power held by the king at Bagan. At certain points in Namhsan's history, this tributary link with lowland power centres—and the prestige it conveyed—was a source of pride. When the British colonialists were attempting to understand the political relationships between the various polities of the Shan plateau and the lowland courts, they found that the sawbwa of Namhsan was proud to pay tribute directly to the court at Mandalay, rather than to a more powerful local lord (for example, the powerful sawbwa of Hsipaw). Via the logic of the mandala system, Namhsan's special relationship with the dry zone courts allowed it to "leapfrog" larger intermediary powers.

One of the Namhsan region's notable tea-producing villages, Taung Ma, contains a shrine to Alaung Sithu—the Mani Sithu Haw Nan—and a sacred grove of tea trees alleged to have descended from the seeds given by Alaung Sithu to the Sawbwa of Namhsan. Every September, there is a festival in Taung Ma (the Lway Saing Paya Bwe) where the trees are propitiated with massive offerings of rice and the construction of sand pagodas.

Representatives of communities from across the Ta'ang world come to venerate the tree and the shrine to Alaung Sithu. According to Yee Yee Cho's observations, the symbolic structure of the festival configures the tea plant itself as the literal "lord" of the Ta'ang people, who venerate the tea tree with the same reverence given to shrines associated with the Namhsan Sawbwa (Yee Yee Cho 2012). At the same time, it seems important that the spirit shrine associated with the tea tree does not venerate an abstract spirit of tea trees in general, but the specific spirit of Alaung Sithu. While the Lway Saing Paya Bwe works as a celebration of the tea plant and its importance for the Ta'ang community, it also reinforces how tea binds Namhsan to a distant source of power—a source of power that must be propitiated, a source of power that is also a source of danger and latent domination. Festivalgoers who Naing Oun interviewed invoked the "protective" aspect of Alaung Sithu's relationship with Namhsan: after centuries of fleeing from war, as Ta'ang mythology goes, Alaung Sithu became the "protector" of the Ta'ang people. However, without correct propitiation (or, historically, correct tributary procedure), that protection could lapse, or turn into violence.

Mythologizing Subordination: Pyidaungsu for Who?

There is a tension between the story's relevance to mandala logics of power and the story's inherent condescension toward Ta'ang people: although it does the important work of incorporating Namhsan into cosmological and political power circuits, that incorporation involves a degree of subordination; it also shifts the "authorship" of the tea plant out of Ta'ang hands. For this reason, many of my Ta'ang friends and research participants do not like the story of Alaung Sithu and the tea seed. One night, while eating dinner with some friends—one of whom was Ta'ang—I brought the story up to see what they thought about it. My friend Zaw Lin, who identifies as Ta'ang and is proud to be from a tea-growing family, seemed annoyed

by the story. He said in English, "I think this story is kind of Bamar propaganda—it's like a development story, like a UN development project story." In his and others' eyes, the story of Alaung Sithu and the tea seed places the Ta'ang in a subordinate position to the Burmese, who the story casts as their benefactors. In tributary terms, the story of Alaung Sithu and the tea seed casts the Ta'ang as a minor duchy, politically and economically dependent on the benevolence of an imperial center; in contemporary terms, it casts the Burmese as donors and the Ta'ang as proponents in a rural agricultural development project. Either way, the relationship is condescending. It does not imply a union between equals, as in state-led pyidaungsu ideology, but a relationship of subordination.

From the perspective of Zaw Lin and others, the story of tea in Namhsan should be understood in terms of local botanical ingenuity and traditional economic knowledge. As explained to me by Naing Oun, my Namhsan-based research collaborator, this is a movement that is building slowly, but has increasing traction amongst the TNLA and others who hold political-economic power in Namhsan and in northern Shan State more broadly, such as Ta'ang tea entrepreneurs. Zaw Lin, like many others, would like to see tea as a point of pride in Namhsan, not because of the way that it ties Namhsan to distant places but for what tea represents in terms of Namhsan's historical importance and continued value vis-à-vis the rest of Myanmar. However, even if one is trying to emphasize an emic Ta'ang perspective about the representational possibilities of tea, it is hard to break out of the mandala logic reinforced by the Alaung Sithu story. When we discussed this, he talked about the accumulated wealth of Namhsan in the past: Namhsan's tea industry—and the capital that it has produced at certain periods—has enabled the development of rich material culture, in the form of elaborate traditional clothing (especially for women) and large Buddhist temple complexes. It is difficult to separate this glorious past from the tributary enfranchisement that enabled it; the historical wealth of Namhsan was not solely the result of tea cultivation, but on the hierarchical (albeit

profitable) political relations that subordinated Namhsan to the dry zone. Although downturns in Myanmar's tea market after 2010 have caused serious economic problems and demographic shifts in Namhsan (and across Myanmar's Ta'ang communities), In Namhsan, tea profits provided the material foundation for the funding and construction of Buddhist temple complexes, which are the foundation of Buddhist statecraft (Jordt 2007); if this tea wealth is the result of a Bamar "donation" to the Ta'ang community, then the merit accumulated by Namhsan's elites has its "true" origin in Bamar patterns of kingship.

By contrast, when told from the perspective of mainstream Bamar culture, the story of Alaung Sithu and the tea seed is basically a happy one: at its most benign, it has been mobilized as a parable about ethno-racial harmony; more insidiously, it is sometimes used to depict Ta'ang people as necessarily limited to the niche of tea cultivation. Sometimes, these two interpretations combine. When I was meeting with the Bamar executive of a large tea company in Yangon, she showed me large paintings she had commissioned to illustrate the story of Alaung Sithu and the tea seed, painted in the distinctive style of Buddhist temple murals. The paintings depicted Alaung Sithu in the full regalia of classical Buddhist kingship, and the Ta'ang recipients—although allegedly royals in many versions of the story—dressed simply, and humbly receiving the gifts from the great lowland king. Despite this clear dynamic of superiority/subordination, she told me that the messaging around the branding would be to emphasize the pyidaungsu (union) of Myanmar's various ethno-racial categories. At various points, I heard other tea businesspeople explain similar stories about the marketing potential for tea as an example of ethno-racial harmony. However, as in the images shown to me by this tea company executive, the "harmony" exemplified by this story—in its most common formation, that is—is not a lateral harmony, a harmony among equals. It looks more like a harmony of acquiescence, in which Ta'ang people accept their position as tea cultivators on behalf of a distant king.

Naing Oun and Zaw Lin are also aware of the *pyidaungsu* potential in Namhsan's long history of tea production, but they (and many of their friends) do not see it in relation to Alaung Sithu. The "union" element of Namhsan's tea history, from their perspective, is not the hierarchical union between a superior Bamar polity that encompasses Namhsan as its subordinate; instead, the *pyidaungsu* potential is between the various highland groups who have an enduring relationship with Namhsan's tea industry: the Ta'ang may be the largest of these groups, but they are accompanied by the Lisu, Shan, Kachin, and others who live throughout the hills of present-day Shan State. Importantly, this is not purely a grassroots reclamation of the myth of the tea seeds, but one that is implicated in local projects of insurgent state-building. While attending the Lway Saing festival in 2022—after two years of a COVID-related festival ban in Namhsan—Naing Oun spoke to some of the festival's sponsors, most of whom were ranking officers from the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). One soldier, a colonel, explained to Naing Oun that they were especially proud of the number of Shan and Lisu guests in attendance at the festival, in addition to the wide array of Ta'ang groups. From the colonel's view, the veneration of Alaung Sithu was "just something that people believe"; he explained that by invoking a Bamar king under the auspices of the TNLA, the festival was in fact not a veneration of Alaung Sithu as an exemplary figure, but a declaration of Ta'ang freedom from lowland oppression. From the colonel's view, the open demonstration of the TNLA's power—a material thing, not "just a belief"—superseded the festival's ritual role as the veneration of a distant Buddhist emperor. The particular power that TNLA claimed to demonstrate here has a strange parallel with Myanmar state pyidaungsu discourse: repeatedly throughout the interview, the colonel emphasized the TNLA's role in building not just a Ta'ang polity, but an inclusive polity that could accommodate many ethno-racial groups. He pointed to the Lisu, Kachin, and Shan festival attendees as evidence.

1986, CE: The Myth of the Formalwear

If the Myth of the Tea Seeds demonstrates how mandala logic enacts circuits of cosmological power, the Myth of the Formalwear demonstrates the second salient aspect of mandala logic: the political flexibility of peripheral polities. Mandala logic provides a means for navigating situations where multiple sovereignties overlap, or in places and at moments when statecraft in the Euro-colonial Westphalian model has retreated or failed to take hold. Even in places where there are "bright" borders that have the technologies of total territorial sovereignty—border fences and armed checkpoints, staffed by armed forces claiming to operate under the auspices of a national capital—peripheral communities still have some room for flexibility in locations where mandala logic applies. The Myth of the Formalwear provides an explanatory basis for the special relationship between the Ta'ang community of Thailand, and particulary the border community centered at Nor Lae village, on Doi Angkhang, and the Thai monarchy. Formerly residents of Myanmar, the Ta'ang community of Nor Lae (in particular) and in Thailand more generally use the Myth of the Formalwear to show how they established a relationship with Thailand—and more precisely the Thai monarchy—not through the bureaucratic language of refugeehood and asylum, but through the mandala logic of tribute as a means to political enfranchisement and cosmological legibility.

In the mid-1980s, the political landscape of what is today the Myanmar-Thai border was in rapid flux. For centuries, the border had been only loosely demarcated, and sovereignty passed back and forth between British Burma, Thailand, and third-party groups not affiliated with either state: most notably, the Kuomintang, who had fled southward from China in the 1940s and 50s, and the emergent Shan nationalist insurgent groups. Khun Sa, heroin tycoon and militia general, was consolidating his power by pushing back the long-entrenched Kuomintang, while simultaneously overseeing the merger of his own Shan United Army (SUA)

with the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) to form the Mong Tai Army (MTA) in 1985 (Ferguson 2021, 130). As the MTA increased in size and reach, so did the severity of the clashes it faced against the Thai and Myanmar militaries. Forced conscription into unwanted armies was a fact of life for the Ta'ang communities of Southern Myanmar long before the formation of the MTA, but the MTA's increasing demands for conscripts were rapidly making life impossible in many upland areas around the border. As the legend goes, ongoing clashes and conscription in Myanmar led a group of Ta'ang[21] to Doi Angkhang in 1985 or 1986 (depending on who is telling the story). From there, the most common version of the story is as follows:

> The Ta'ang knew that the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej had a special interest in Doi Angkhang, and reportedly spent a great deal of time there, regularly flying to the mountain by helicopter to have breakfast. Doi Angkhang was (and is) the site of a major installation of the Royal Agricultural Project, often simply called "the Royal Project" (โครงการหลวง, *khrong gan luang*), a rural development program which also serves as the Thai state's metaphor for its relationship to ethnic minorities. In the imaginary of the royal project, ethnic minorities are generally held to be "from Myanmar", and therefore noncitizens, but also as ethno-racially differentiated; their presence in Thailand is facilitated by the tremendous prestige and magnanimity of the late King. The Royal Project has maintained a sprawling crop research and tea-processing facility at Doi Angkhang since 1969, which provided a destination for the Ta'ang communities who sought respite from the political chaos of the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. On one of his visits to Doi Angkhang, the recently-arrived Ta'ang refugees presented the king with a set of women's formalwear as a tributary offering, and asked for permission to remain in Thailand. King Bhumipol was so impressed by the humbleness of the Ta'ang and the fine quality of the clothing that he agreed to make a special arrangement with the Ta'ang, allowing them to establish

[21] In Thailand, the name "Dara'ang" is preferred over "Ta'ang", but I will generally use "Ta'ang" here to avoid confusion.

> a permanent settlement on a ridgeline of Doi Angkhang, only a kilometre away from some of the main facilities of the Royal Project. The King and his Royal Project advisors helped the villagers establish tea plantations on Doi Angkhang, growing improved varieties of oolong tea imported from Taiwan. For the villagers' home use, the Royal Project developed hybrid tea seeds that blended the properties of local landraces familiar to the Ta'ang with these improved varieties. Having fled war, the Ta'ang were presented with a peaceful place to live and a prosperous agricultural economy established by the Royal Project.

Like the story of Alaung Sithu and the tea seed, the story of the founding of Nor Lae village once again configures a spatio-political arrangement where an upland Ta'ang settlement is founded under the auspices of a distant lowland king. As several people explained to me, the women's formalwear presented to the late King Bhumibol was in the elaborate style of Namhsan. Across the Ta'ang world, women's traditional clothing is a major point of local pride and, along with language, is one of the most salient ways that particular communities are differentiated from one another. The most common form of dress worn by women across the Ta'ang world is a cylindrical skirt—in black or red, depending on the particular community—with horizontal stripes. This is usually accompanied by a velvet jacket; both the skirt and jacket can be made at home in a matter of days, and household weaving with backstrap looms remains a common practice in many Ta'ang villages. The Namhsan women's formalwear, by contrast, must be made by a specialist. It entails multiple layers of velvet tunics covered in kaleidoscopic embroidery, accompanied by a heavily embroidered velvet headdress which hangs down the back like a cape. Unlike the simple hoop skirts and velvet jackets worn by women throughout much of the Ta'ang world, Namhsan formalwear cannot double as workwear; it is not for casual occasions. It also has royal connotations, given its association with the court of the Namhsan Sawbwa.

Figu: Women in Namhsan formalwear attend the Lway Saing Paya Bwe. Photo by Naing Oun, used with permission.

By presenting king Bhumibol with a tribute of Namhsan formalwear in return for recognition by and protection of the Thai monarchy, the Ta'ang community on Doi Angkhang linked themselves into the cosmological circuitry of Buddhist kingship. Although the specific connotations associated with Namhsan may not have been clear to the Thai monarch and his advisors, most Ta'ang people would have immediately understood the symbolism of presenting the Thai king with one of the classic emblems of Namhsan's status as a cosmological and political power centre. As a Ta'ang origin story, the Myth of the Formalwear establishes the Thai King—not just the Thai state in general, but the King specifically—as the arbiter of the Ta'ang's fortunes. This is a *personal* relationship between the King and the community at Doi Angkhang, rather than a *bureaucratic* relationship between two different kinds of institutions. From the Ta'ang perspective, the explicit reference to Namhsan-style formalwear reinforces

Nor Lae as a kind of ideal form or "prestige variant" of Ta'ang settlement. In view of a longer historical timescale, the tribute in this story flows from the now-deposed Sawbwa of Namhsan to the King of Thailand. By entering into tributary relations with the Thai King, the Ta'ang community at Doi Angkhang redirects the flow of tributary patronage and cosmological power established between Namhsan and Alaung Sithu; in maintaining cosmological links to not one but *two* distant imperial power centres, they make use of one of the key affordances of mandala logic—the way it enables political flexibility.

The *Myth of the Formalwear* originated in the 1980s: by that point, Thailand had spent decades adopting and refining many of the territorial state-building practices associated with Euro-colonial governance, particularly regarding the relationship between state sovereignty and the imagined "geo-body" of the state (for extensive coverage, see (Winichakul 1997)). After World War Two, special paramilitary police units (the Border Patrol Police, colloquially *Tor Chor Dor*, and the Rangers, colloquially *Tahan Phran* or *Seua Dam*) were created for the express purpose of projecting Bangkok's power to the full northern and northeastern limits of the Kingdom; the central government views Thailand's border crossings and refugee camps as places and processes regulated by institutional rules, rather than individual authority (Saltsman 2014, Hyun 2023). On the ground, the peripheries of Thailand and Myanmar are governed according to an ecumenical political formation in which peripheral communities have social ties and engage in political negotiations that coexist (and come into friction) with the institutional rationality of the Euro-colonial model of territorial statecraft. In Nor Lae, this ecumenism comes in the form of simultaneously paying tribute to the Thai monarchy *and* taxes to the Myanmar military; it is a configuration that allows village leadership a degree of relative autonomy compared to villages closer to the old imperial cores of Myanmar of Thailand, but a precarious autonomy that requires the constant appeasement of multiple political actors whose sovereignty sometimes overlaps.

Starting From Contradictions

The "Myth of the Formalwear" is a story told with mythologizing in mind: although it is ostensibly a story about the recent historical past, its purpose is not to recount the facts of what happened as much as it is to place the Ta'ang and the Thai monarchy into a particular relation. The reason that people have mostly accompanied this story with an eyeroll is because they know that it covers up the much messier and more incremental reality of the Ta'ang migration to Thailand, a process that was already slowly underway long before the establishment of Nor Lae village in the early to mid 1980s. According to Lway Kila, a Ta'ang community organizer and local historian of her community, the earliest Ta'ang settlement in Thailand was not Nor Lae, but a much larger village called Huay Mak Liam. Huay Mak Liam was once a Shan village; Ta'ang people began spending the night there when coming into Thailand to sell tea, at least as early as the 1970s (if not earlier). Over time, some Ta'ang people started settling there permanently. Today, Huay Mak Liam is much larger than Nor Lae, and this has apparently always been the case; however, Huay Mak Liam does not have the royal cachet of Nor Lae, which has long been the site of the Royal Agricultural Project; it is also a busy and hard-working town, with most of the residents working in light industry in nearby Fang, a lowland city and major crossroads for people travelling between larger centres further afield in Myanmar and Thailand.

Regardless of Huay Mak Liam residents' quibbles with "The Story of the Formalwear", some people there still repeated it to me as the received explanation for how Ta'ang people had ended up Thailand; others did not even acknowledge it when I asked if they had heard it. Likewise, in an extended series of all-nighter interviews with Ah Tun[22]—the headman of Nor

[22] A pseudonym.

Lae village—he repeated the story even as he acknowledged that the "real" history of Nor Lae was more complicated. The lived reality of the Ta'ang migration into to Thailand has been gradual, complex, and often very painful. The "Formalwear" story enables its tellers to explain how things ought to be, even while there is every indication that things do not exactly work this way. Ah Dang, for instance—gleefully describing the Ta'ang king being sucked downstream after a castrated fish—has little patience for or interest in the pageantry of the Thai monarchy, and no nostalgia whatsoever for the Namhsan sawbwa (much less king Alaung Sithu). However, even he knew a version of the Nor Lae story, citing it as part of the evidence for why Nor Lae is so conspicuously wealthy: "see, Mike, they have that *special* relationship to the king!" Regardless of the accuracy of the historical facts in the "Formalwear" story, the normative relations it implies—Nor Lae shall have the prestige of Namhsan, and this prestige shall provide a link to Bangkok—ring true as an explanation for the way that power relations currently play out in Nor Lae. The story highlights an important aspect of what makes Nor Lae interesting, and such a complicated place to govern.

Political Ecumenism in Practice: Governing Nor Lae

When I first met Ah Tun, the community was in a state of chaos. That morning, 12 August 2022, a raging monsoonal storm had washed out most of the dirt roads in Nor Lae and felled multiple large trees, blocking most of the routes in and out of the village. Power lines were down, as were mobile phone signals. That date was also the 90th birthday of Sirikit, Queen Mother of Thailand; the villagers Nor Lae, who have an especially close relationship to the Thai royal family, were expected to engage in a range of collective public activities—for example, planting symbolic grasses along the roadside—in honour of the Queen Mother and her family. To complicate matters even further, 12 August 2022 happened to coincide with the

full moon of Savana, a Buddhist holiday, and Ah Tun was in charge of organizing a massive collective meal in Nor Lae's monastery. Hundreds of elderly residents of Nor Lae and nearby villages gathered for the meal; despite the chaos unfolding from the storm and the Queen Mother's birthday festivities, Ah Tun was expected to take the stage at the front of the monastery and deliver a Ta'ang-language sermon and Pali-language prayer with the gravitas and charisma considered correct for a Buddhist leader. He did so without batting an eyelash or breaking a sweat. I was impressed, especially given the mudslides and birthday-related chaos unfolding in the village centre. When the temple festival wound down, the celebratory collective works were completed, and all roads had been cleared of downed trees, Ah Tun invited me to join him and a friend, Ah Awn, for a cup of tea. The tea was grown at Nor Lae's estate, in which Ah Tun has a considerable stake, and he was proud to show it to me. As we drank and chatted, however, it became clear that none of the complexities of the 12th of August even registered as difficulties for Ah Tun; his worries were all concentrated on the following morning, the 13th.

Nor Lae village sits squarely on the border of Myanmar and Thailand. Most of the village's agricultural fields are technically on what is now the Myanmar side of the border; however, the populated portion of the village is entirely on the Thai side. The area immediately around the village itself is heavily militarized, with a border crossing run jointly by the Thai military and Myanmar military; slightly deeper on the Myanmar side, but still visible from Nor Lae, are two enormous bases run by insurgent armed groups (the United Wa State Army and the Restoration Council of Shan State). In order for the Nor Lae villagers to access their farms on the Myanmar side, they must pay a toll directly to the captain of the Myanmar military base. It is up to Ah Tun to negotiate the terms of this toll; he receives no assistance from the Thai military or from any other part of the Thai government, who see the situation in Nor Lae as a local issue rather than an international one. Ah Tun is thus in a constant state of negotiation

between the Myanmar military, the Thai military, Thai local administrative bureaucracy, and the Thai monarchy, who are not *de jure* a part of the government but have *de facto* influence over all parts of it. Woven throughout all these negotiations are Ah Tun's relations with the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist movement in Myanmar, who want to stem the flow of Ta'ang migrants out of Myanmar in order to ensure they have a large enough base of potential conscripts. It is up to Ah Tun to balance and manoeuver between these competing factions, sometimes appeasing all of them, sometimes playing them off of one another, at all times trying to ensure that life in Nor Lae can go on with minimal interference from any of them.

The cosmological grammar of Buddhist kingship—one side of mandala logic—is part of the ecumenical symbolic order of the Ta'ang world. In Namhsan, the veneration of Alaung Sithu is "just a belief", according to the TNLA, the arbiters of local insurgent statecraft; in Nor Lae, by contrast, the Thai royal family are an active component of everyday political life. The endurance of the royal family's importance for Nor Lae is partially because Thailand still has a living king, whose position vis-à-vis his subjects is still imbued with the cosmological grammar of Brahmanical and Buddhist power. The tea estate at Nor Lae is a point of pride for Ah Tun in part because owning a tea estate is part of what establishes exemplary status as a Ta'ang elite, but also because it is explicitly linked to the royal patronage that Nor Lae has received over the years: the tea garden is one of the late King Bhumibol's favourite places, and the tea garden's observation deck was his chosen location for meals and receiving guests when he visited Nor Lae. These are stories that I was told regularly whenever I spent time in Nor Lae: the "Myth of the Formalwear" is just one chapter in an extensive myth-making project that provides multiple royal origins for the existence of Nor Lae village—a central site in the Ta'ang ecumene, but a peripheral backwater from the Thai government's perspective. The "Myth of the Formalwear" links Namhsan to Nor Lae, and rewires the cosmological circuitry from one that binds Namhsan to central Myanmar to one that binds Nor Lae to central Thailand.

Still, the cosmological grammar of Buddhist kingship is not universally understood to have material political-economic consequences: for the TNLA, it is "just a belief"; for Ah Tun and the community of Nor Lae, tributary links to Bangkok have been important for providing Nor Lae with certain privileges—access to lucrative royal-sponsored supply chains, access to land, a degree of protection from harassment by Thailand's wide array of paramilitary border patrols—but it does little to resolve the ongoing problems that Ah Tun has with the Myanmar military. Although Ah Tun is surrounded by (and must negotiate with) varying types of political actors, he mostly operates in a mode of frustrated autonomy (see also Ong 2021). Nor Lae's privileged connection to the Thai monarchy gives him a degree of symbolic capital when dealing with the Thai government, but the Thai government will not send an official to help him negotiate with the Myanmar military. As a community ostensibly centred on the Thai side of the Myanmar-Thai border, the Myanmar military does not dare exploit the residents of Nor Lae to the same way that they have exploited and harassed Nor Lae's neighbouring villages on the Myanmar side. Although the residents of Nor Lae may not be Thai citizens, they are nonetheless subjects of the Thai king.

Conclusion: Storytelling and Living with Contradiction

When people mobilize narratives to express political ideas, there is a great deal of room for improvisation—but not infinite room. People work with what they already have and already know. When Ah Dang narrates the folly of kingship, he still reproduces a condescending etymology; when the TNLA sponsors the Lway Saing Paya Bwe, they invoke Namhsan's vassalage to Bagan. Nor Lae's story about the formalwear also draws on a long tradition of ideas about Buddhist kingship, even as it is ultimately deployed to grant Ta'ang people a modicum of official recognition by Thailand's vast immigration bureaucracy. When Ah Tun

manoeuvers between the Thai state, Myanmar Sit Tat, and multiple insurgent groups, he employs strategies that are at once novel and also as old as Southeast Asian kingship itself. Ta'ang communities across Southeast Asia have to engage in these kinds of negotations. Power, in the Ta'ang world, does not function according to the neatly-nested bureaucratic hierarchies imagined as the operating system of the modern nation state, but unfolds in messy ways that are often as personal as they are official.

Even in Thailand, where most Ta'ang people do not make their living on tea, the "Myth of the Formalwear" concludes with the Royal Project providing hybrid tea trees for the villagers of Nor Lae, mirroring the tributary circuitry established in Namshan a millennium ago by Alaung Sithu. Perhaps, as anthropologist Bengt Karlsson (2022) has argued, tea is a recurrent indicator of imperial expansion. As tea cultivators, Ta'ang people have spent centuries employing mandala logic to manage their relationships with imperial expansionism: requesting protection in some cases, avoiding the state's gaze in others. The exceptional political complexity of places like Namhsan and Nor Lae demand equally complex conceptual tools. As I have shown in this chapter, the conceptual tools employed by Ta'ang communities across the Southeast Asian highlands consist of the stories they tell about power, kingship, and tea.

2. "Since My Grandparents' Time": Rethinking Tea Domestication in Highland Southeast Asia

> "For sushi in Chicago to amaze us, we need to silence the fact that the Franciscans were in Japan as early as the fifteenth century. For Muslim veils in France to seem out of place, we need to forget that Charles Martel stopped Abd al-Raman only three hundred miles south of Paris, two reigns before Charlemagne". Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2002), "North Atlantic Universals: Analytic Fictions, 1492-1945".

Introduction

One of the phrases that Ta'ang tea farmers say most frequently when discussing their work is *aphoe aphwa kateika* (အဘိုးအဘွားကတည်းက) or "since my grandparents' time".[23]

This is the answer to many questions: How long has tea been grown on this land? How long has your family cultivated this hill? When did this technique come about? The answer to all these questions, more often than not, is "aphoe aphwa kateika" or a variant of this phrase. The implication here is not that a practice originated in their grandparents' era, but that their grandparents were *already* doing things in this way—in their grandparents' era, the practice or object in question was already part of established tradition. Given that the average age of tea farmers interviewed for this thesis is over 50 years, it is likely that the way tea is cultivated in Namhsan has been consistent for at least a century (but probably longer). In some cases, "since my grandparents' time" was invoked to indicate rapid changes and sudden shifts in the tea

[23] That is, a phrase they say when they are speaking Burmese, which is generally not their first language. Still, the phrase comes up dozens of times in interviews conducted by Naing Oun.

cultivation situation: we did things this way since my grandparents' time, but not any longer. Things are different now, different from the way they were done for centuries.

I found the same situation to be true in northern Thailand. In villages that produce *miang* (เหมี้ยง), the traditional tea product of northern Thailand, people I interviewed had already been cultivating tea for several generations. Although the specific labour of tea picking has changed with the times—shifting between local Muang and Lahu villagers who lived amongst the tea fields, to lowland Thais hired as day-labourers, to more recent migrants from Myanmar—there are always families and individuals present in the tea regions who can trace a family history of tea cultivation and tea and miang production that goes back centuries. It seemed obvious to me that this was the context in which tea domestication had occurred: where farmers are constantly experimenting with local landraces, employ centuries-old propagation methods, and work in often polycropped tea farms under forest canopies, which often look disorganized in comparison to the stereotypical image of a tea plantation, consisting of vast uniform hedges.

With these encounters in mind, in this chapter I argue that the domestication history of tea should be understood as a multigenerational process of ecological experimentation, centered on the highlands of Southeast Asia. The primary protagonists in this story are the indigenous peoples of the southern Himalayan foothills; their tea work has frequently been usurped by imperial projects, who make their own claims to the discovery or creation of the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*). Put differently, I claim that the peoples of the Southeast Asian highlands have played an integral role in the domestication and spread of the tea plant. I build this argument by examining how Ta'ang and other highland tea cultivators manage tea landscapes. I also consider how the lexicon of "tea words" in the Southeast Asian highlands differs from the global tea lexicon, a difference that suggests a cultivation history that predates long-distance Han Chinese mercantile networks. These examinations are based on my own participant observation fieldwork conducted in Myanmar and Thailand in 2020, and one year

of collaborative research with Naing Oun. Although Ta'ang people are not the only ones in highland Southeast Asia who cultivate tea according to multigenerational traditions, they form the overwhelming majority of tea farmers in Myanmar (Lei Shwe Sin Myint and Sandar Aung 2021); their deep history of tea cultivation is also well-established in China (Li 2010; Hung 2013; Ma 2018). Ta'ang tea cultivators, along with a wide range of other highland tea cultivators, have practiced seed-saving and experimental hybridization for generations, and probably centuries, if not millenia. Their tea stories contrast sharply with the tea stories told by various imperial regimes—most famously, the Chinese and British empires.

A second component of my argument here concerns the way that present-day geo-political borders and boundaries can obfuscate historical political-economic processes. This chapter attempts to clarify the domestication history of tea as a political-economic process, by following tea backwards in time through several political-economic regimes: from the present-day tea cultivation practices in Myanmar and Thailand, to the emergence of the British colonial tea industry in Assam (now northeast India), to the pre-colonial highland empire known as Mong Mao. To return to the quote from Trouillot (2002) with which this chapter begins: I argue that the British tea industry in Assam only appears revolutionary if we forget that they received tea from people who were already cultivating it in that region, and had done so for centuries; the similarities between the tea-eating traditions of Myanmar and northern Thailand only seem surprising if we forget that the present-day border between the countries was only demarcated in the last half-century, and still is not fully reified.

This thesis is concerned with the way that people narrate origins, and the way that the past and present are imagined through myth-making. This chapter uses tea as a focal point for pursuing this project. In light of the full trajectory of this thesis, I want to make it clear that I am not simply arguing that Ta'ang and other upland indigenous tea farmers had tea *first*, and that my issue with the loud British and Chinese claims to have "invented" tea are

chronologically inaccurate. While this may be true, the point is less about chronological priorness and more about the way that plants and other beings are viewed: I do not think that any Ta'ang person would claim to have "invented" or "discovered" the tea plant. That is not how they characterize their relationship to it. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot puts it, "chronological primacy is itself a central tenet of North Atlantic imagination" (Trouillot 2002, 853): making the scope slightly wider, I suggest that this this not only a central tenet of the North Atlantic imagination, but of colonization and imperialism more broadly. To put Trouillot's argument in different words, any revisionist history that attempts to establish a serious critique of imperialist logics by making new claims to priorness and discovery is ultimately trying to beat the colonizers at their own game. This is especially true for the historicization of organism domestication: Donna Haraway (2003) has argued that the popular Anglo-European imaginary of domestication is steeped in masculinist ideologies of individual self-invention and dominance; this baggage is ultimately the reason that Haraway develops "companion species" as a kind of counter-concept to "domesticate". What I offer here is a way of thinking about the history of the tea plant in line with Haraway's: a way of thinking about the tea plant as a companion species.

I do not intend to set domestication aside. Instead, in this chapter, I seek to understand the current state of bioscientific knowledge on tea domestication and then use the counterpoints made by Haraway and her fellow travellers to consider how the relationship between humans and the tea plant is one of mutual dependence (rather than mastery). Present discussions about the origin of *Camellia sinensis* identify two domestication events: one in China, and a secondary one in India (Zhao et al. 2014; M. K. Meegahakumbura et al. 2016; Xia et al. 2017; Muditha K. Meegahakumbura et al. 2018; Wambulwa et al. 2021). These studies largely rely on various genomic techniques for identifying domestication events, which in turn rely on the collection of plant material from particular places: access to these places is shaped by political

factors as much as scientific ones. Meegahakumbura et al. (2016) rely primarily on samples collected in Southwest China (300 samples), and to a lesser extent on samples collected in India (92 samples). India and China are enormous exporters of tea, and their tea markets have long been subject to capital intensification and industrial expansion (Liu 2020); these developments have been accompanied by a vast scientific research apparatus related to tea cultivation. Although tea cultivation takes up a significant amount of space in Myanmar—at least 220,000 acres (Somji and Than Than Sein 2019)—cultivation and production are largely carried out according to traditional methods and sold domestically. I hypothesize that if Meegahakumbura and his colleagues were to have had access to tea samples from Myanmar, they might be able to paint a much clearer picture of how the plant spread around the region.[24] Building on their genetic analysis, and aware of the way it has been shaped by political-economic affordances, I offer ethnographic and historical "connective tissue" between the two "events" they identify. In Myanmar and in Thailand, through fieldwork conducted by Naing Oun and through my own participant observation fieldwork, I regularly encountered tea production ecologies have that a great deal in common with those in western Yunnan provice (Ahmed et al. 2010; Hung 2013; 2015) and the pre- and early-colonial tea ecologies of what is now Northeast India, as described by colonial botanists (W. Chambers and Chambers 1840; Kingdon-Ward 1950). Rather than conceptualizing these tea ecologies as the result of separate human interactions with the tea plant, I hold them together as a single and ongoing process.

Building on recent anthropological conversations about the social relations of domestication (Lien, Swanson, and Ween 2018), I suggest that domestication ought to be written about in terms of "processes" rather than "events". This is less of a direct critique of biological writing practice than it is an attempt to translate the language of biology into terms

[24] There is growing interest on tea in Myanmar's botanical research community, but their work is only rarely published in journals that are not overtly Myanmar-focused. See (Han and Aye 2015; Kyaw Kyaw San and Kalaya Lu 2020; Durighello et al. 2021; Kalaya Lu, Kyaw Kyaw San, and Aye Mya Nyein 2021)

that make sense for describing the social processes I encountered in the Southeast Asian uplands. When biologists write about domestication as an "event", they do not mean a one-off occurrence punctuating an otherwise stable situation; they mean something closer to the definition of event as espoused by Marshall Sahlins and others writing in a post-Manchester School and post-structuralist mode: events, conceptualized this way, are not exceptions to the course of daily life inasmuch as they work as indices for longer processes of change (Kapferer 2010). By translating biological theories of domestication into an anthropological mode of thought, this chapter shows how tea domestication is a process that is both ancient and currently ongoing.[25]

Empirically, I show how tea cultivators in Myanmar and Thailand engage in the production of *landraces*. Landraces are plant and animal cultivars that have been very closely adapted to particular ecological conditions over the very long term. The landraces of highland Southeast Asia—and not "wild" tea as such—are what British colonialists encountered in the early 19th century: the vast tea fields of Assam were not the result of *de novo* discovery of an untapped resource, but the colonial usurpation of an ancient (and still ongoing) tea operation. Still, this is not to say that the indigenous cultivation of tea in highland Southeast Asia has been free from imperial political formations and economic exploitation. As I demonstrate below, tea cultivation has been repeatedly folded into empire-building processes in mainland Southeast Asia that predate European colonization. Long before British colonials set up their vast plantations in Assam, tea was implicated in imperial projects of tribute extraction and landscape management. One such imperial formation was Mong Mao, a vast network of tributary states whose greatest extent roughly matches the probable domestication range of *Camellia sinensis*

[25] To the extent that this chapter considers the long-term relationship between people and plants, it could be considered part of the emerging multispecies canon in anthropology, which has recently undergone a "plant turn" (Chao 2018; Chudakova 2017). However, the affective relations that I found between Ta'ang farmers and their tea plants is different enough from the kind regularly analysed by these scholars: Ta'ang farmers view their plants more like factories, and less like family members (cf Archambault). For now, I put the ontological debates about human-plant relations to one side, and focus more on the political-economic realm.

var. *assamica*. By tracing tea from the Southeast Asian present to the pre-colonial imperial past, I make a case for tea domestication as an ongoing process across what might be called the greater former Mong Mao empire.

Troubling Domestication: Event as Process

"Domestic" connotes home and kinship, but also tameness and subservience. It is a synonym for "tame", the opposite of "wild". Domestication, then, is a process: making something tame, making something suitable for the home. In biology, domestication can cover a wide range of possible meanings, which are sometimes contradictory. Zeder (2015) offers a possible synthesis: in all cases, domestication is a "multigenerational" relation of care between two or more kinds of organisms, usually in order to secure a particular "resource". The multigenerational aspect is important here: to meaningfully distinguish domestication from other possible multispecies relations—e.g., captivity—a domesticated relationship must be understood as one that is sustained through time and across multiple life cycles of each organism in question. This observation about the nature of domestication may sound odd when compared to the language generally used in the biological sciences, where domestication is spoken of in terms of events: given Zeder's definition, with its emphasis on multigenerational relations, it may sound odd to speak of domestication in terms of an "event" (a singular occurrence at a particular point in time)—rather than a "process" (something that extends through time, can be iterative, and can take one particular direction or another).

The problem here—the apparent tension between "event" versus "process"—is mainly one of translation. Anthropology has long debated what constitutes events, and how to make sense of them. Bruce Kapferer (2010), in compiling a genealogy of anthropological theories of the event, finds that events have long been characterized as exceptional or unusual situations,

which stand out temporally and socially from ordinary daily life: from the Manchester school's work in the 1940s through 1960s up through the beginning of the 21st century, events have mostly been conceptualized (in anthropology) as punctuations rather than as ongoing processes. These punctuations, such as a riot in the streets or a particular ceremony, have often been read as contexts where the unspoken structures of social formations are made literal. Kapferer identifies the work of Marshall Sahlins as something of a counter-current to this prevailing trend, in which events signify a social change: the riot or the ceremony are not singularities, but spatio-temporal points at which inter-cultural contact and social transition are made visible; during and following events, new cultural categories or new social formations can emerge (Kapferer 2010, 14). The common point across all anthropological theories of the event—and they way that they might tie to biological theories of domestication events—is that they have what Kapferer (2010, 19) calls a "locus": events must occur in a particular place, at a particular time.

Ceremonies and rituals are classic anthropological examples of events. However, ceremonies and rituals are very different kinds of social processes compared to, say, the domestication of a plant. The locus of a ceremony or ritual (as an event) is relatively easily defined, and in most cases is a departure from the routines of everyday life for the people involved. One can imagine an invitation to a ritual, or an announcement of where and when it will take place, in public or in private; the event will have a defined audience of some kind, be it a network of family members or the residents of a particular town. There is anticipation before the event, and a memory of it afterward. Ceremonies and rituals do require a great deal of behind-the-scenes maintenance, but what makes them events are the concrete aspects of their loci: they have a beginning and end, which happen in particular places. Although the knowledge of how to correctly carry out a ceremony might be transferred across multiple generations, the event-ness of the ceremony itself is contingent on its differentiation from the

patterns of everyday life. By contrast, domestication *incorporates* nonhuman organisms into the patterns of everyday life. The event-ness of domestication must thus be a different kind of event-ness than a ceremony or ritual.

This section will engage in some translation of biological terminology into concepts that are anthropologically meaningful. I do not think that contemporary biologists intend to cast domestication processes as one-off events, unidirectional in nature, although that was once the dominant model of thinking about domestication processes (Van Tassel et al. 2020).[26] Biologists are well aware that domestication is an accomplishment achieved gradually and under extraordinary human creativity and effort, and yet the language of "event"—which implies a singularity or an exception—has stuck around. Some biologists are aware that this language has implications for the way that past and future domestications are conceptualized, leading to an erroneous (but apparently widespread) view that domestication processes are almost instantaneous, and new domestications can be accomplished *ad hoc* through the correct combination of technical innovations (Van Tassel et al. 2020). However, if one pays attention to the *process* entailed by what biologists call a "domestication event", it becomes clear that they are also thinking in terms of processes.

In Meyer and Purugganan's rich review article on the topic, they suggest that "single event" domestication models are not as simple as the language implies, and should be understood as making a geographic claim first and foremost. The temporal aspect of a domestication event is a second-order consideration, because domestication necessitates multigenerational relationships. It happens over the long term. When biologists write about a "single domestication event", they are describing a multigenerational project unfolding in a

[26] Although outside of the purview of this chapter, a related argument could be made about how the history of scientific botany—like socio-cultural anthropology—is inseparable from the history of European colonization (Geppert; Schiebinger). The imperial logics of "discovery" and unilinear progress are part of the reason why domestication is described in terms of "events", and why the popular imaginary of domestication processes looks more like a relation of domination than a relation of multilateral entanglement (Lien Ween Swanson, Haraway)

particular area, in which the beginning of the project may be somewhat vague. Domestication events, conceptualized this way, can be understood as processes in which a cultivated species is frequently re-crossed with wild species, hybridized, and subject to extensive experimentation over time (Meyer and Purugganan 2013). "Multiple domestication events", then, are those "in which one wild species undergoes domestication in different regions or at different time points" (Meyer and Purugganan 2013, 844). To use Kapferer's anthropological language, domestication events also have "loci", but those loci are necessarily wider in scale than those typically analysed in anthropological analyses of the event. The domestic cow is a famous case: one domestication event started to unfold around 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Cresent, resulting in *Bos taurus*; some 1,500 years later, another event unfolded place in the Indus Valley, resulting in *Bos indicus* (Pitt et al. 2019). The relevant timescale here is the millennium; the relevant geographical scope is at the level of entire river basins. These loci are much wider than any individual human could observe in real time. The temporal and geographical boundaries between these two events have blurred over multiple centuries, especially as migration and trade spread both domesticates across the African continent, where they interbred with one another and with local aurochs populations, leading to some ambiguity about the origins of the two species. Although there are two identifiable loci of cow domestication, the process has taken millenia, and its origins have been tangled.

The botanical work being done on tea domestication is undoubtedly important for clarifying how the plant has spread around the world, and establishing a sense of the places where it has long been a part of life. With some exceptions (Kingdon-Ward 1950; Hasimoto 1985), this work has mainly been based on genomic analsysis of tea plants in China and India (Zhao et al. 2014; M. K. Meegahakumbura et al. 2016; Xia et al. 2017; Muditha K. Meegahakumbura et al. 2018; Wambulwa et al. 2021). Although botanist Selena Ahmed's work is not concerned with tea domestication as such, her analyses of tea forest landscapes in

the Myanmar-China borderlands are an important step towards clarifying how humans have created the tea plant over the *longue duree*. *Camellia sinensis* is the product of millennia of experimentation, introgression, and agricultural work at the margins of the wild and the domestic (Ahmed et al. 2010; Ahmed and Stepp 2012; Ahmed et al. 2018). When one reads Ahmed's work with domestication in mind, it becomes clear how the tea plant is not something invented or discovered, but something that has been made over time.

The Mutual Affordances of Plants and Culture

So far, I have been considering domestication mostly from a human perspective, and primarily from an angle that presumes more or less total human control over the domesticated companion species in question. However, emerging perspectives in anthropology suggest a different possible view: when humans choose to live in ways that are tied to the affordances of a particular non-human organism, are the humans really in control? For scholars from the emerging multispecies tradition in anthropology, the answer to this question is ambiguous. Domestication is a multilateral process that impacts all organisms who take part in it, leading to a wide spectrum of multispecies configurations (Lien, Swanson, and Ween 2018). It is easy to over-emphasize the human side of domestication, to the erasure of non-human organisms' roles in changing human lifeways.

Tea is an excellent example of a plant that has redirected human culture in particular ways. Although tea plants are relatively hardy and can survive in a wide variety of habitats, they seem to flourish and to produce the most desirable leaves when they are situated altitude (1000-2000 meters), in a particular climate (warm-ish: ideally humid subtropical), with particular soil and other ecological characteristics—partial shade, with well-draining soils but constant access to water. This limits tea cultivation to particular places: if one wants to cultivate

tea, one must go to places with these characteristics. These criteria perfectly describe the ecosystems of large swathes of upland Southeast Asia, China's Yunnan province, and northeast India. This transboundary region is the ecological homeland of the tea plant, and it is here where I focus my attention.

Over time, the affordances of the tea plant and the cultural ecology of upland Southeast Asia have co-produced the preferred landscapes of tea-producing communities. Put differently, the ecological requirements of tea have cultural consequences for tea producers. This is especially apparent in the ideal form of Ta'ang villages, which almost always involve tea production—either as a cottage industry for home use, or as the primary economic enterprise. In its ideal form, a Ta'ang village should be fairly high in the mountains, not in a valley or on the plains. It should ideally be built on a ridgeline, with a prominent central road lined by houses, shops, and administrative buildings. This layout is visible throughout Myanmar's Shan State, from small villages up to major towns like Namhsan, the cultural and political centre for much of the Ta'ang world. All but the smallest hamlets will have a Buddhist monastery on one end of the main road, usually on a piece of land at a slightly higher elevation than the main populated area of the village; there will also be a central shrine, a *haw tsao moeng*, which is propitiated during major village ceremonies. In the highest form of the Ta'ang ideal, the slopes adjacent to the village will also be planted with tea.

For centuries, the tea plant and the Ta'ang lifeworld have been inseparable, a connection whose weight is equally shared by Ta'ang cultural preferences and the ecological preferences of the tea plant. It is not coincidental that the ideal form of the Ta'ang village is suited to tea cultivation: the geography of the Ta'ang village and the ecological conditions of the tea plant have co-produced one another. Shan State's extensive tea forests are a hybrid product of the ecological characteristics of Shan State's topography and the cultural affordances of the Ta'ang people. Following Swanson et al. (2018) and Haraway (2003), there is every possibility that

the tea plant may have impacted Ta'ang cultural ecology as much as the Ta'ang have impacted the agricultural ecology of the tea plant.

The tea plant has a long life cycle, potentially outlasting multiple human generations; the Ta'ang cultivate it in places that are right in the middle of its botanical homeland (Kingdon-Ward 1950). This combination means that tea farms can potentially be abandoned for years, if not decades, and still produce useful leaves. With human effort, long-abandoned tea forests can return to economic productivity; left untouched by humans, and given the presence of adequate pollinators, tea trees will fruit and produce seeds on their own. This affordance of the tea plant—enabling cycles of human coming and going over the long term—is what could be called a "marginal" case of domestication. Focusing on Norway's Vega Islands, anthropologist Marianne Lien (2018, 118) argues that humans and ducks interact at just such a margin. Eider ducks, a migratory species that breeds in the wild, rely on human-built shelters during the winter. Humans, in turn, collect eider down, a valuable commodity. This If the humans stopped maintaining the shelters, the ducks would still come to roost: although the life cycles of people and eider ducks have been intertwined in Vega since ancient times, they do not *need* one another for survival—but both species' lives are made better through this relationship.

In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James C. Scott (2009) argues for certain plant species and cultivars as "escape crops", in contrast to "state crops". State crops are those like rice, which are labour-intensive, calorically dense, and of high market value. State crops have served as a basis for taxation and trade for millennia, and they are strongly correlated with high population densities. Put differently, state crops are associated closely with money itself, and with the governmental projects that require it. Escape crops, by contrast, are plants that have one or more characteristics that make them difficult to expropriate or raid: for example, a preference for growing in out-of-the-way places (like mountains), an ability to grow underground, or an ability to mature without specific seasonal requirements. Tea does not fit

this definition very well; anthropologist Bengt Karlsson (2022) has even argued that tea's agro-ecological affordances make it especially well-suited to imperial expansion. While this is apparently true, the fact that tea forests can thrive in a state of abandonment seems to place them in a third category, neither a state crop nor an escape crop. A community, like the one in Ban Nam Tok, northern Thailand, could abandon a tea forest for years but still return to collect the leaves. Although it would require a great deal of collective labour, the villagers of Ban Nam Tok could theoretically return to the tea forest and collect the leaves for sale, or re-establish a village there and re-start tea production. Unlike yams or maize—two classic escape crops (Scott 2009)—tea is of little caloric value. Tea cannot sustain the hard work of highland labour by itself; however, it can certainly help.

Caffeine is the main resource that people get from the tea plant. In that sense, tea is a drug, and one that does make labour easier. Across the world, the most highly-prized and expensive component of the tea plant are the youngest just-unfurled leaves, usually referred to as "buds" or "tips".[27] Although these are generally prized for their delicate flavour, it is no coincidence that they are also by far the most caffeinated leaves on the plant (Lin et al. 2003). Although the practice is declining, several Ta'ang research participants mentioned that there "used to be" a tradition of chewing eating fresh, unprocessed tea leaf tips while doing farm work, or walking from place to place via tea forests. I have tried it several times: the raw young leaves are refreshing, gently astringent, and release a hit of caffeine that can be quite intense depending on how many leaves one puts in one's mouth. Caffeine makes hard labour endurable, and fuels sociality: these affordances make a caffeinated plant worth keeping around, worth propagating, worth growing. In this way, through the provision of caffeine, tea plants have long ensured their own presence in human-modified forests.

[27] "Buds" are not true flower buds, but the terminal point of new vegetative growth on the tea plant. Tea plants do also produce actual flower buds, which turn into small seed-containing fruits.

The relationship between humans and tea is not a straightforward one of human dominance, but a two-way street: tea plants offer humans certain affordances—caffeine, refreshment, income—and humans in turn must abide by the tea plants' own requirements. The particularities of human inhabitation in the tea worlds are determined as much by the tea plants and the shape of the mountain slopes as they are by human choice. There is no doubt that the tea plants in Ta'ang communities are domesticated, but the domestication process is an ongoing one that co-produces plant forms and human lifeways. Nowhere is this long-term co-dependence clearer than in Myanmar's Ta'ang hills, where tea and people have produced one another for centuries, if not millennia.

"Since my Grandparents' Time": Landraces in the Making

Figure 8: U Kham Hlaing and his granddaughter walking through his land. Photo by Naing Oun, used with permission.

U Kham Hlaing is 50 years old, and has been farming full-time since his twenties. Humble to a fault, he is reticent to speak very much about himself, but is happy to talk about his tea farm. The farm is old: U Kham Hlaing knows for certain that his parents and other relatives had been cultivating tea there since before the second World War; according to his best guess, the farm—like many other farms in the Namhsan area—probably predates the British colonial period. Although the specifics of *how* he farms tea are in the process of changing, his grandparents were already farming tea here—as were their grandparents, he believes. He did not start the tea farm: the tea farm was always-already part of his family's social reproduction process.

On the right hand side of the above photo (Figure 8, p. 60), one can see the now-typical tea cultivation pattern in much of Myanmar. U Kham Hlaing describes the technique as a blend of "traditional methods" (*yoe yar nei kya*, ရိုးရာနည်းကျ) and "scientific methods" (*theippan nei kya*, သိပ္ပံနည်းကျ). It is "traditional" because all of the trees have been propagated from seeds according to a traditional three-stage method of seed germination and tree transplantation. The "scientific" aspect of this tea field comes in the arrangement of plants, which are planted in triangular formations that follow the contour of the hillside. He also prunes back his plants so they remain at a convenient height for harvesting. This differs from the traditional arrangement of plants on Ta'ang tea farms, which are typically allowed to grow to enormous sizes—taller than two adult humans, with branches thick enough for a child to climb—and intercropped with a wide range of fruit trees or partial-shade crops like ginger or turmeric.

The traditional method of seed production and germination is of particular importance to the present argument. No two trees on U Kham Hlaing's farm are genetically identical: they share some similarities, since most are grown from seeds produced by just a few favoured trees, but they are not clones. Like many tea farms throughout the Southeast Asian highlands, U

Kham Hlaing and his family have been saving and re-propagating tea seeds in this same location for generations. Although he has occasionally experimented with seeds from other places, the majority of trees on his farm are the descendants of trees cultivated here for centuries. They are highly adapted to this particular place; they have not been improved for widespread commercial use. In other words, U Kham Hlaing's plants are a *landrace*.

Landraces are domesticated lifeforms that have adapted to a particular place (and a particular culture) through selection, partially by farmers themselves and partially by ecosystemic factors. They are snapshots into the "engine room" of domestication: unlike commercially-produced plant cultivars, for example, landraces are specifically the outcome of long-term multigenerational relationships between humans and nonhuman organisms (Villa et al. 2005). Botanists who specialize in domestication research differentiate between "conscious" and "unconscious" selection in plant breeding: conscious selection entails the careful selection and intentional maintenance of particular phenotypic traits over successive generations of plants; unconscious selection entails the haphazard selection of traits due to less volitional factors. The processes of making landraces, like the processes of domestication itself, entail a combination of these factors. Some traits may be specially selected (e.g., vigorous production of terminal leaf "buds"); some may simply be "along for the ride," as it were: traits that happen to accompany plants that are particularly suited to their environmental conditions (Meyer and Purugganan 2013). These could be coincidental phenotypic traits, for example: Kalaya Lu et al. (2020) found that different landraces of tea in Myanmar had significantly different leaf shapes and sizes. These phenotypic differences may not have been intentionally cultivated by tea farmers, but are a consequence of favouring certain trees over time.

U Kham Hlaing tends to prune off most flowers to prevent his trees from growing too many seeds. He chooses older trees for seed production: when older trees are still flowering, but not producing leaves as vigorously as they once were, he will stop pruning them, allowing

them to flower and grow quite large. These older trees are kept around for a decade or more as seed producers. Therefore, only trees that have a long productive lifespan in Namhsan's particular climate will be selected for seed production; trees that do not survive to old age will never have a shot at seed production—environmental selection at work—and farmers will cut down or ignore trees that are un-vigorous leaf producers, focusing on mature trees with a strong history of leaf production (the farmers' straightforward selection technique).

In *The Darjeeling Distinction*, Sarah Besky (2013, 17) explains that care relations on Darjeeling's tea plantations play out in terms of a "tripartite moral economy". The three parts in this moral economy are the plantation managers, the labourers, and the agricultural ecology of the plantation. Workers care for tea plants as though they are relatives: seedlings are "babies", and unproductive older plants are admonished with the "light reprimand" that tea workers—overwhelmingly women—would use with their own husbands (Besky 2013, 61). I did not encounter such overtly kin-based language like this, during my own interviews or while studying those conducted by Naing Oun, but the schema that Besky outlines—in which "babies" and "old men" are marked, but "middle aged" plants are the invisible workhorses of the tea plantation—bears a striking resemblance to the way that tea plants are viewed in the Ta'ang world. Like Ta'ang tea farmers, the tea harvesters of Darjeeling are often part of multigenerational lineages of tea workers, who "inherit" (Besky 2013, 85) the tea landscape of the plantation from their ancestors.

Most Ta'ang tea farmers have a wide array of possible choices in how they manage their agricultural landscape, especially in comparison to tea harvesters who work on an industrial tea plantation. U Kham Hlaing, like many Ta'ang tea farmers, has adopted a plant-spacing strategy from horticultural science. Some farmers allow their plants to grow freely, without serious pruning, leading to tea groves that are indistinguishable from secondary forests or fallow swidden fields. Although these forests often appear wild, they are nonetheless the

product of human intervention, but can slide into a state of self-perpetuation even when humans are not around. In Chiang Dao, northern Thailand, I spent time in a Ta'ang village (Ban Nam Tok) that had once been engaged in the large-scale production of tea. When the nearby tea-processing factory closed down, it made more sense for the village to relocate nearer to major roads and market centres; the old village centre is overgrown now, and nobody lives there. The tea forest, however, is still growing strong: although it looks like a wilderness to the untrained eye, Ban Nam Tok residents can recognize it as a human project, an economic production site. Several groups of Ban Nam Tok residents return to the tea forest every hot season, to harvest the leaves when they are at their best. They maintain that his "forest" tea tastes even better than the "farm" tea they can buy at the market.

By paying attention to the traditional tea cultivation methods still employed in upland Southeast Asia—and comparing those methods to the historical record of local (non-colonial, not for export) tea production in the region—we can develop a sense of the *longue duree* tea domestication process that enabled the circulation of tea across the vast region connecting present-day China and present day-India. The result of extensive landrace cultivation in the Southeast Asian highlands means that tea varietals in areas with a long history of tea production will be very closely adapted to the ecological conditions of that area. Tea varietals are simply named after the place where they are cultivated (Kwan Hal, Zayan Kyi, and so on) rather than given unique names, as they are in China. Botanists working in Myanmar have even identified a degree of speciation between tea landraces in different parts of Shan State (Kalaya Lu 2020): although *Camellia* species hybridize freely with one another—in other words, they have a tendency to "outbreed"—Lu (2020) hypothesizes that the large differences in leaf shape and tree growth pattern in different parts of Myanmar's tea cultivation era may indicate some speciation. Put differently, the relationships between some of Myanmar's tea cultivars and the

farmers who grow them have endured for long enough that those cultivars have evolved highly distinct traits even from other landrace cultivars in Myanmar.

Tea and Language: Naming the Plant in its Homeland

One of the effects of the long-term processual relations between Southeast Asian tea cultivators and the tea plant is a striking diversity of names for tea. The majority of people in the world use one of two Chinese-derived names: variations on "cha", which are derived from Mandarin Chinese, and variations on "teh", including the English "tea", derived from the Minnan dialect cluster of China's south-eastern coast (Sonnad 2018; Wambulwa et al. 2021). The general hypothesis expressed by Wambulwa et al. (2021) is that a given culture will use a "cha" derivative or "teh" derivative depending on that culture's historical trade links with China: if the trade networks were overland to the west, and therefore dominated by Mandarin speakers, that culture will use "cha" (with the notable exception of Japan); cultures with primarily maritime connections to China use derivatives of "teh".

In the Southeast Asian highlands, the cha/teh binary falls apart. In central Thai the word for tea is indeed *cha* (ชา). However, there is another word for tea in Thailand, used only in the north: *miang* (เหมี้ยง).[28] Miang, spelled this way in Thai, refers to two things: the tea plant itself, but also wet-fermented (i.e. pickled) tea leaves, which are chewed whole as an after-dinner stimulant (among other culinary uses). Thai scholar Thanet Chalernmuang (ธเนศวร์ เจริญเมือง 2562 [2019]), in his comprehensive overview of northern Thailand's miang culture, goes to great lengths to explain the meaning of miang for a Thai-speaking audience. He emphasizes

[28] My Thai-language spelling here follows Thanet (2562 [2019]), who spells it this way to differentiate it from the central Thai snack also known as "miang" but general spelled เมี่ยง.

that the word predates not only the word "cha" in Thai, but also the word "tea" in English. His point here is not that northern Thai culture[29] ought to be able to claim a longer historical engagement with the tea plant, but that northern Thailand has long been linked into cultural patterns, trade networks, and agrarian complexes that are *different* from the globalized culture of trade that has provided the Thai word "cha" and the English word "tea". Returning to Trouillot (2002), Thanet is not claiming chronological primacy as much as he is emphasizing a historical pathway that pushes against the mainstream story of tea in Thailand.

"Miang" is just one of the wide variety of names for tea used across the Southeast Asian highlands. In the table below, I compile a list of just the ones that I have personally come across; there are doubtlessly more variants. Some of these names—most notably "lahpet", the Burmese word for tea—are not even limited to the highlands.

Language	**Word for tea**
Mandarin Chinese (and many others[30])	*cha*
Minnan Chinese (and many others[31])	*teh*
Burmese	*lahpet*
Jinghpaw/Singhpo	*hpalap*
Samlone Ta'ang	*myam*
Ruching Ta'ang	*anyur*
Tai Long (a Shan dialect)	*neng*
Northern Thai (a.k.a. Muang, Lanna)	*miang*
Ao Naga[32]	*sungo*

[29] There are various names for northern Thai culture: it is sometimes referred to as "Muang" culture, referring to the loose ethnonym for people who live in the north; it is also sometimes referred to as "Lanna" culture, referring to the historical empire centred on the north. Throughout this thesis I will mostly use "northern Thai culture", but will use Muang and Lanna interchangeably when referring to the cultural complex of northern Thailand.
[30] Also found in Japanese, Korean, Thai, South Asian and Central Asian languages.
[31] Also found in English, most Romance languages, and maritime Southeast Asian languages.
[32] Ao Naga and Konyak Naga terms were explained to me by Jane Ferguson. Personal communication, 19 November 2023.

Konyak Naga	*kalop*

There are some patterns among these words that hint at histories of language contact and the cross-pollination of botanical knowledge. The Samlone Ta'ang "myam" sounds an awful lot like the northern Thai "miang", even though those communities are geographically distant from one another. The similarities between Burmese "lahpet" and Jinghpaw "hpalap" seem to be coincidental, as the words have two different etymologies.

All of these languages—from Jinghpaw in the north to northern Thai in the south—have had extensive language contact with Chinese speakers over the centuries, especially varieties of Mandarin Chinese. Many people who speak the above languages live in China's Yunnan province. Although Yunnan was not firmly under Han Chinese hegemony until the 17th century (Giersch 2006), China's various imperial projects had been experimenting with expansion into Yunnan for millennia (Yang 2009). Given this long history of contact, why do the tea-growing communities of upland Southeast Asia use words that are so distant from Chinese?

Recent research in palaeobotany has demonstrated that the presence of high lexical diversity for plant names in a particular area can correlate with that plant's probable domestication site (Kraft et al. 2014). Although detailed historical-linguistic analysis of the type employed by Kraft et al. is outside the purview of this thesis, their work points to several possible implications for the lexical diversity of tea words in the Southeast Asian highlands. First and foremost, the extensive presence of tea in the Southeast Asian highlands cannot only be explained by Han Chinese expansion. The names of tea outlined above suggest other inter-cultural relationships of trade and consumption: trade between the highlands and the imperial cores of Bagan and Chiang Mai, for example, or long histories of home and community use outside of commodity networks. With this in mind, I also suggest that the long-term history of

the tea plant ought not to be understood in terms of an identifiable "origin" and subsequent "proliferation", but in terms of a set of still-ongoing set of relational processes of making a plant and consuming it—a set of distinct but related plant cultures, in other words. The ancient Chinese relationship with "cha" is one such process; so is the Ta'ang relationship with "myam", so is the Jinghpaw relationship with "hpalap", and so are the countless other ways that communities have conceptualized the tea plant across the vast space between southwest China and northeast India.

Silver Shortages and Highland Elites

The subspecies of tea grown in Myanmar, Thailand, and western China's Yunnan province is known scientifically as *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*: meaning, the Assamese variant of *Camellia sinensis*. This naming convention has the situation backwards, in a way: Assam's colonial tea industry owes its origins to the multigenerational landrace cultivators of highland Southeast Asia—the ancestors of the tea cultivators I met in Myanmar in Thailand—rather than the other way around. However, the particular historical conjuncture that resulted in the creation of the vast Assam tea industry—a moment of local political tensions and rapid British colonial expansion—led to a peculiar framing of the Assam tea industry as a moment of "discovery". As I aim to show, that moment could be more precisely framed as one of imperial usurpation (cf. Karlsson 2022).

By the middle of the 18th century, tea consumption was already a crucial part of daily life across all classes in the United Kingdom (Sahlins 2021, 418; Mintz 1985, 112–15). The British East India Company (BEIC) had a monopoly on its import, a source of major profit for the Company. However, by the early 19th century, the BEIC faced a trade balance crisis: Chinese merchants—then the only source of bulk tea leaves—would only accept silver bullion

as payment. Rapidly-expanding silver mines in the Americas could not refine silver fast enough to meet Company demand for bullion, and the British market for tea would not have withstood significant price increases (Liu 2020; Sahlins 2021, 419). The BEIC was desperate for a solution.

According to one contemporary British source, mercenary and arms trader Robert Bruce "found [tea] growing" (Chambers and Chambers 1840) in 1823 in what was then the Ahom kingdom, present-day Assam, India. Robert, along with his brother Charles Alexander Bruce, hoped to position themselves—and their allies on what was then British India's northeast frontier—as the providers of a solution to the Chinese tea crisis, and the recipients of enormous profits. Robert passed away in 1824 at the age of 35; botanical exploration and tea commercialization efforts were carried forward by Charles Alexander, who also reported the "discovery" of extensive "wild" tea throughout the Ahom kingdom and its hinterland over the years following Robert's death. It is worth quoting Charles Alexander's description of "wild" or "natural" tea:

> "It is amidst the widespread natural woods or jungles which cover a large portion of the country, and under favour of their shade, that Mr Bruce has found the tea-plant growing. It generally grows in tracts, a few hundred yards in extent, with occasional trees forming a sort of connection between one tract and another. Mr Bruce has now found a hundred and twenty such tracts. They are all on plains." (Chambers and Chambers 1840, 2)

To an observer familiar with tea cultivation practices across the wet tea ecumene, the description is obviously one of traditionally-prepared tea fields: in both Myanmar and Thailand, I repeatedly encountered "tracts" as described by Bruce, complete with "occasional trees forming a sort of connection" between the tracts (see Figure 9, p. 96). Some have been on

plains; some have been on hills. In all cases, they are intentionally-cultivated tea fields. In village areas where tea is cultivated, tea trees are ubiquitous, even outside of demarcated "fields": they line pathways and dot secondary forest areas, plonked down wherever there is space, for casual harvest on the way to or from somewhere else.

Figure 9: A tea landscape on the Myanmar-Thai border. Photo by the author, 2022.

In light of the Southeast Asian method of tea cultivation, there are two possible readings of Bruce's claims—one naïve and one skeptical. In a charitable (naïve) reading of Bruce's description of tea plants in a "natural" or "wild" state, one might assume that he was simply unaware of the traditional tea cultivation techniques of the wet tea ecumene: the tea forests he came across would not have looked like plantation agriculture in a form recognizable to him, like the plantations employed to produce sugarcane or other large-scale cash crops. Perhaps the

landscape was illegible to him. However, I think it is more likely that Bruce was well aware that he was repeatedly encountering intentionally cultivated tea tracts, and he had secondary motivations for describing them as "wild" and "natural": according to other colonial sources, Robert Bruce did not learn about tea by walking through the forest and encountering it by chance—he was told about the presence of tea by a Singhpo chief who cultivated tea and promised to provide Bruce with some samples (Gait 1906, 346).

The story of the Bruce brothers and the birth of the Assam tea industry is not a story about discovery and development, but a story about competing political futures in upland Asia. If one takes a more sceptical approach, it is easy to see how the Bruces' claim to have "discovered" tea is part of a wider process of racializing the inhabitants of what would become Assam as "savages" incapable of capitalizing on the resources that surrounded them (Sharma 2011, 30). As Mandy Sadan (2013, 43) demonstrates, a group of Singhpo[33] elites in Ahom—led by the famous Bisa Gam—were aware of the Company's predicament, and viewed tea as an opportunity to secure a political-economic future by capitalizing on the needs of the British. The Singhpo did not claim a monopoly on the cultivation of tea—it was simply already part of the suite of crops they cultivated, and was also cultivated by many neighbouring cultural groups across Ahom and Manipur and throughout the highland areas of the Konbaung Empire (present-day Myanmar). Naga elites were also aware of the BEIC's predicament, and tried to establish themselves as tea brokers "along similar lines" (Sadan 2013, 43).

Despite these links to already-established tea cultivation and trade networks, the story of the British encounter with tea is constantly couched in the language of "discovery" (Fromer 2008; Sharma 2011, 30; Sohail 2019; Karlsson 2022, 107). The story of tea in Assam is less one of "discovery" than it is of British usurpation of the fruits of an agricultural and trade

[33] Singhpo is the term used in India to refer to an ethno-linguistic group that overlaps with the Jinghpaw in Myanmar, more commonly known as Kachin (Sadan 2013, 1).

complex that had been maintained for centuries across the subtropical and tropical highlands south of the Himalayas, today's upland Southeast Asia. When the Bruces and their colonial colleagues started the Assam tea industry, it was not a *de novo* project of tea cultivation in the region but—as Abu Lughod has described European colonial expansion in Asia—"an upstart peripheral to an ongoing operation" (Lughod 1989, 12). In the case of tea, that operation was the widespread cultivation of *Camellia sinensis* landraces—an operation that has been unfolding for centuries.

Discovery is an "event" in the most literal sense, something that occurs at a precise locus in time and space. The Bruce's encounter with tea was not a discovery of something unknown, but a colonial usurpation of an ongoing process. It can only be understood as an event in the more abstract sense, a moment where ongoing shifts in social formations are made visible. Discovery has been at the core of European colonial logic since its outset (Singh 1996). When colonials claim to have "discovered" something, they are reconfiguring an object already laden with localized meanings as something not only new, but newly part of the "national fabric" of the metropole (Edwards 2007, 21). Discovery, with its connotations of a singular event, elides the very conditions of possibility of reading colonial encounters from the perspective of the colonized. The Bruce brothers and their successors did not discover a plant and domesticate it: they are one glimmer—albeit one with catastrophic human and ecological consequences—in a vast kaleidoscope of engagements with the tea plant across the Southeast Asian highlands.

Mong Mao and the Wet Tea Ecumene

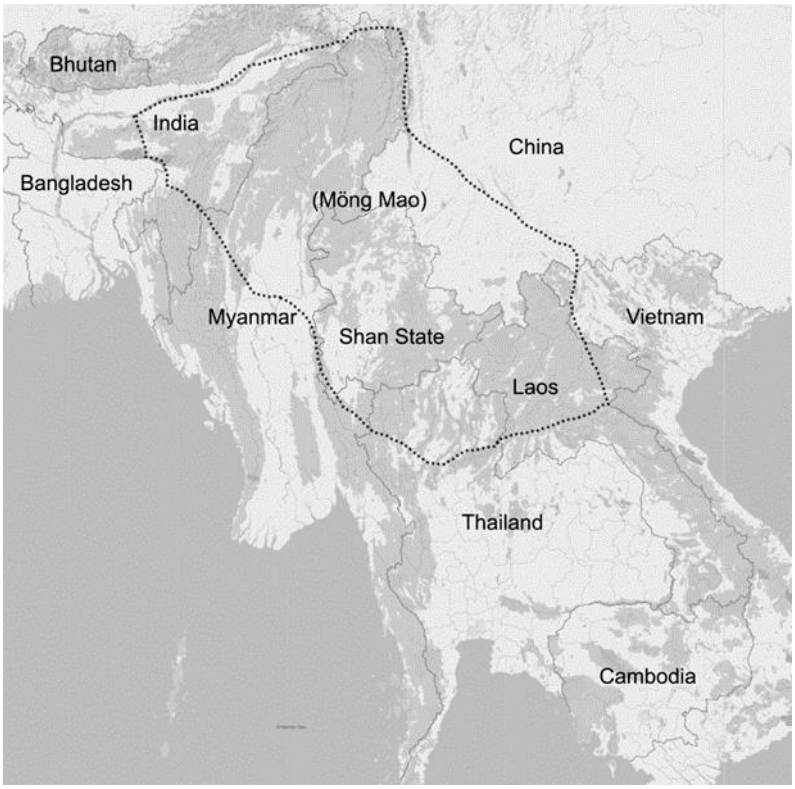

Figure 10: Approximate territorial extent of the Kingdom of Mong Mao, with present-day administrative boundaries added for context. Map by Jane Ferguson (2021), used with permission.

The above is a map of the territory attributed to the ancient kingdom known as Mong Mao, founded by the Shan King Suerkhan Fa. The boundaries of this map have been compiled by Jane Ferguson (2021) based on historical data from across the region. From around the year 1000 until 1604, polities within the region of this map owed varying degrees of fealty to Mong Mao, which would have acted as a major centre of religious and economic activity across the region. The reader will note that the territory attributed to Mong Mao would have included parts of present-day Myanmar (including nearly all of Shan State), northeast India, Southwest China, as well as much of northern Laos and northern Thailand. At the height of its territorial

expansion, as in the map depicted above, the highland regions of the territory attributed to Mong Mao have an almost one-to-one correspondence with the endemic cultivation area of *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*.

I argue that the correspondence between former Mong Mao and current landrace cultivation of *assamica* tea trees is not coincidental. The three tea stories I mention above—in what are now Myanmar, Thailand, and India—all have a common political-economic history: the precolonial history of tea production in each place is directly linked to highland engagement with one of the many tributary states that formed the Mong Mao Empire. The present-day areas encompassed by the historical Mong Mao are now peripheries, frontiers, and borderlands (with the exception of Laos); the area is shot through with multiple borderlines and fortified checkpoints. However, at one time, these now-peripheral areas constituted a centre—the central polity of the highlands beyond the south-western frontier of imperial China. Mong Mao acted as a central point of trade and transit for the kingdoms who paid it fealty, the nerve centre of a vast web connecting places that seem disparate today: for example, Chiang Hung (Jinghong), in present-day Yunnan; Lanna (Chiang Mai), in what is now northern Thailand; and the Ahom kingdom, eventually encompassed by the Indian state of Assam. Crucially, all of these places—Chiang Hung, Chiang Mai, and Ahom—were and are major tea-producing centres. This is also true of what was once Mong Mao's heartland, the Shweli River. Today, the Shweli forms part of the border between Myanmar and China; the Shweli valley is packed with tea-producing villages, and various forms of tea from each country regularly criss-cross the river to be sold where there is a demand.

The Ahom kingdom, which eventually became the central districts of Assam state and the centre of the Assam tea industry, was founded in the 13th century by a Tai-speaking prince from Mogaung, one of the principalities that constituted Mong Mao (Guha 1983, 4) (Guha 1983, 4). Mogaung is itself roughly halfway between Ahom and the Mong Mao "heartland" in

the Shweli River[34] valley; multiple sources speculate that this area—near the confluence of Myanmar's Irrawaddy river—is the approximate region where the tea plant originated in the prehistoric past (Kingdon-Ward 1950; Hasimoto 1985; Baruah 2017).[35] Guha's (1983) detailed history of state formation in Ahom does not mention tea; rice, the caloric foundation of statecraft, steals the show. However, given the Bruces' description of the region's tea ecologies and local peoples' extensive knowledge of tea, it is safe to assume that tea formed part of daily life in the Ahom kingdom, although there is some ambiguity about what that role may have been.

In the southernmost principalities of Mong Mao, there is no such ambiguity about the role of tea in the establishment of the polity. In the Lanna kingdom, connected to Mong Mao through marriage and tributary ties, tea was one of the most lucrative market commodities and one of the foundational components of the economy, beginning from the earliest available records of market activity in the kingdom. Worapon Ruangsri (วราภรณ์ เรืองศรี 2564 [2021]), historian of Southeast Asian overland trade, explains that this phenomenon was not limited to market activity, but had wide-reaching cultural and ecological consequences. During the consolidation and expansion of Lanna in the 13th to 15th centuries CE, wealthy lowlanders claimed large parcels of land in the hills above Lanna's various princely cities (importantly Chiang Mai and Chiang Saen), establishing extensive tea gardens; in many cases, where tea was already being cultivated by neighbouring highland peoples, tea production and trade formed one of the bases for regular interaction between non-Tai highlanders and elite lowlanders, whether merchants or nobility (วราภรณ์ เรืองศรี 2564 [2021], 164–65).

[34] Also known as the Nam Mao, or Mao river, as in Mong Mao.

[35] Hasimoto (1985) acknowledges the consensus that the tea plant originated in the Irrawaddy headwaters, but prefers a slightly different location for the main tea domestication event, suggesting the border areas of present-day Yunnan and Sichuan provinces in China. However, he qualifies his preference by stating that the actual site may be anywhere "between Southeastern China including Taiwan and Assam in India" (ibid., 6).

Ta'ang research participants in Myanmar and Thailand do not historicize their tea cultivation in terms of Mong Mao. They tend not to frame tea in relation to a point of origin at all. Even Ta'ang historian Mai Aik Kaw (2017, 57), who is deeply concerned with origin stories of all kinds, describes tea cultivation in relational terms: Ta'ang people and the tea plant are "inseparable",[36] in his words, and he leaves this inseparability unresolved in light of Chinese claims for a Chinese origin of the tea plant, which he finds plausible. Returning to the map of historical Mong Mao, it strikes me that the long-term heartland of the Ta'ang people is directly in the geographical centre of this map, occupying roughly its middle third, with the longest history and widest extent of tea production taking place directly in its centre, in what is now Myanmar's northern Shan State. If tea domestication can be reconceptualised not as a singular event, or even a series of multiple events, but a millennia-long process with multiple (if not innumerable) loci, the historical map of Mong Mao can serve as a guide to imagining the geographical spread over which that process might have taken place.

By centring Mong Mao, I suggest that understanding the history of tea domestication will require decentring present-day understandings of what constitute economic centres and peripheries. I also present a counter-narrative to the oft-retold story of the Bruce brothers' encounter with tea in Assam: tea may have long been associated with empire-building, but the imperial formations that gave way to the vast tea complexes of highland Southeast Asia did not emerge suddenly in the 19th century. By tracing tea forwards in time from the historical vantage point of Mong Mao, a different picture emerges, and one that has less to do with British economic crisis than with centuries of intra-Asian economic circulation and horticultural experimentation.

[36] *Khwe kya ma ya thee* (ခွဲခြားမရသည်), translation by the author.

Conclusion

Donna Haraway, in *Companion Species Manifesto*, rails against depictions of domestication-as-discovery. In the popular-scientific imaginary, she argues, domestication is presented as "the paradigmatic act of masculine, single-parent, self-birthing, whereby man makes himself repetitively as he invents (creates) his tools" (Haraway 2003, 27). To return the quote from Michel-Rolph Trouillot with which this essay began, this just-so story requires us to forget that domestication is a group project. To imagine domestication as the spontaneous "self-birthing" of the domesticator and his mastery over the domesticate, we are required to forget the long histories of multigenerational labour that have gone into every domestication relationship.

Here, I make a case for attention to those multigenerational histories, which intersect with different political formations at different times. From ancient China to Mong Mao to the British Raj, imperial formations have harnessed the agricultural ecology of tea production and wired it into imperial political economies. These imperial histories should not erase the work of upland indigenous tea cultivators: by holding the two stories together—the imperial usurpations and discovery claims surrounding tea, and the Ta'ang narratives that express ideas about multigenerational interrelations—we can simultaneously learn how domestication unfolds on the ground and how it is taken up into political projects. Domestication is itself a long process; when someone claims ownership over a domestication process, or tries to reconfigure it as a singular moment of discovery or invention, they are making a political claim as much as a biological one.

I suggest that when biologists describe domestication in terms of "events", they are already thinking processually. However, as Haraway (2003) argues, the unpredictable and processual nature of domestication relationships is often lost in public discussions of the matter.

As Haraway demonstrates, the *longue duree* story of domestication is hardly one of human mastery over subordinate species: it is a much messier relationship than that, and a relationship in which it is not fully clear who is in charge. For many of the Ta'ang (and other) tea farmers of the Southeast Asian highlands, tea does not have an origin as such. Tea is something that their ancestors were already cultivating. From their perspective, the "origin" of tea is less important than what it means for their family histories, their future incomes, their way of life. Its point of emergence is less important than their history with it, which precedes living memory.

By some accounts, there is no such thing as "wild" tea (Kingdon-Ward 1950): everywhere it is found, it is comorbid with current and past human settlements or tea cultivation experiments. To that extent, there is no question that tea is a domesticated crop. However, the specific mechanics by which it was domesticated—and the sites that played a role in its domestication—are very much open for further investigation. Anthropologists have a role to play in this investigation, but so do scholars from other disciplines. Camellia pollen is highly distinctive, and archaeologists working on pollen would have much to teach us; so would geneticists and genomics researchers. Genomic research on tea seems particularly promising, especially because there is already a base of scientific work to build on. There is also an appetite for it in the Ta'ang community: several of the tea farmers that I interviewed expressed interest in participating in genomic research, as much for understanding large historical questions about the Ta'ang relationship with the tea plant as for clarifying the parentage of particularly productive trees, or understanding the genomic characteristics of trees that produce the tastiest leaves. This research is a long way off, especially as Myanmar's revolution unfolds in Shan State in unpredictable ways; travel to and from Shan State is dangerous. In the meantime, my hope is that this chapter provides a jumping off point for researchers in the Southeast Asian highlands who suspect that there might be more to the story of tea than the widely-circulated imperial narratives of discovery and domination.

Part 2: Mediators

3. Brokers Make the Market: Face-to-Face Infrastructure and the Politics of Provisional Commensuration

Introduction

When I first started background research for this project in 2018, I heard a story about a Ta'ang tea farmer who was fed up with brokers, and decided to take matters into his own hands. He purportedly got together with a group of friends, rented an entire boxcar on a train from Hsipaw to Mandalay, loaded the car with their tea, and rode inside the boxcar the whole way to Mandalay. When the train arrived, he personally organized the transportation of his tea leaves around the city, selling them to wholesalers and retailers himself. I felt some disbelief at this story: why would someone go to such great lengths and expense to bypass the centuries-old system of ad hoc logistics that makes Myanmar's tea industry happen? My friend's answer: brokers are parasites, and tea farmers will do anything to avoid them.

This story was told to me by a tea broker. Why would a broker imagine his own obsolescence? The answer is partially to do with the archetypal role of the broker in Myanmar culture. Brokers are known as *bwesa* (ပွဲစား) in Burmese. Bwesa are something of a paradox, as demonstrated by this story and its narrator. Try as some might, including the aforementioned bwesa, it is impossible to imagine Myanmar functioning without them. The word "bwesa" literally translates to "[someone who] eats the dish": in contemporary parlance, this secondary meaning is lost—"bwesa" just means "broker"—but many bwesa are well aware of the connotations of the term, providing an image of someone who eats from others' plates (Brac de la Perriere 2014).

This chapter explores why bwesa endure in Myanmar. I argue that bwesa are a structural necessity for both economic and political life in Myanmar: in economic terms, they are a critical part of market infrastructure; in political terms, bwesa serve as the connection point between social formations that are ostensibly in conflict with one another. Bwesa who deal in tea are in a particularly complicated position, because of the ethno-racial connotations that attach to tea and the violent politics they index. In the Ta'ang community, which forms the ethno-racial majority of Myanmar's tea farmers, the tea industry is increasingly thought of as a possible post-revolutionary basis for Ta'ang political autonomy. At the same time, Myanmar's enormous tea market depends on Chinese imports: domestic production is not enough to keep up with the insatiable demand for tea, a fact that troubles the political ambitions of the Ta'ang people who see tea as a pathway to the future.

Tea brokers play off the connection between ethno-racial alignment and the webs of semiotic attachment that coalesce around particular tea products. Tea bwesa in Myanmar come from a wide range of different ethno-racial alignments; at the same time, different tea products—and tea from different provenances—carry connotations that connect them to particular social formations and particular political projects. As discussed in the introduction, the history of tea in Myanmar is a history of competing imperial formations, each of which has contributed a distinctive tea product to the gustatory landscape. If the first two chapters of this thesis concern the narratives that people use to explain political relations, this chapter explains the way that political-economic narratives attach to tea products, and how tea bwesa traffic in these narratives. The Chinese and Shan bwesa of Mandalay and Kyaukme have in many cases been involved in brokerage for multiple generations. However, recent changes in Myanmar's tea market have cast Chinese bwesa in a particularly suspicious position: Myanmar's tea market has been flooded with cheap Chinese black tea, and Myanmar's largely Ta'ang tea farmers have taken a major economic blow as a result (Radio Free Asia 2023). This Chinese tea controversy,

and the Ta'ang responses to it, are at the centre of this chapter's argument, which maintains that brokerage is simultaneously political and economic.

Over the same time that the Chinese tea controversy has unfolded, a new generation of Ta'ang broker-farmer-entrepreneurs has started to form. This new generation often run vertically-integrated tea businesses, overseeing every step of the tea production process from field to retail storefront. However, given that demand for tea (and especially black tea) surpasses what their businesses are able to produce alone, they must also engage in brokerage, particularly in tea sourced from China—an action that puts Ta'ang bwesa at risk of being seen as two-faced. The growing Ta'ang ethno-nationalist movement places great importance on tea, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)—an icon of the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist movement—is playing an increasingly active role in the tea trade. For the TNLA and brokers who support their vision, the tea trade is seen as a possible foundation for an autonomous Ta'ang polity within a post-revolutionary federated Myanmar. Ta'ang tea bwesa are thus caught between capitalist imperatives to expand their businesses—which often rely in part on Chinese-sourced tea rather than only Myanmar-sourced tea—and ethno-nationalist imperatives to consolidate Myanmar's tea industry into Ta'ang hands.

At the same time that brokers manage their own positionality, they also work on tea as a "boundary object" (Star and Griesemer 1989) capable of bridging or dividing social orders. As transaction managers, they are constantly flattening tea into an exchange value, analysing a unit weight of leaves as a congealed site of multiple price negotiations. Simultaneously, they must be acutely aware of the qualitative properties of tea: not only its use values, but the dense webs of signification that are attached to tea in the Myanmar context. These webs of signification are different for each form of tea commonly consumed in Myanmar: wet-fermented tea (lahpet soe), green tea, and black tea. All of these forms of tea will be mentioned

at certain points throughout this chapter, although the main object of concern here is dried black tea, because it is both the most economically lucrative and most politically sensitive tea product.

Many tea consumers in Myanmar are aware that the tea they drink in the country's iconic tea shops incorporate imported Chinese leaves. It is a regular topic of conversation amongst anyone with even a passing interest in the tea industry, and is a frequent topic of discussion in the Myanmar news media. At the same time, it is a situation that many regard with unease. This is partially due to latent Sinophobia, which has long served as one of the repertoires for expressing Myanmar nationalism (Ni Ni Kyaw 2020). From a Ta'ang perspective, the importation of Chinese tea indexes the dire situation of many Ta'ang tea farmers, and also the relatively low productivity of Burmese tea cultivation techniques—a source of open frustration for Ta'ang tea bwesa.

In Myanmar, discussion of bwesa in particular and brokerage more generally has largely focused on brokerage in the political sense (Meehan and Dan 2023). The word "bwesa" in Myanmar does also refer to economic brokers, but it also refers to the vast cottage industry of people who make money by making connections across the gaps between social orders. These bwesa include bureaucratic fixers (Brac de la Perriere 2014), political brokers who go between community organizations and international aid organizations (Décobert 2022), and even para-state militias who negotiate the middle space between the Sit Tat (the junta armed forces) and local power structures in Myanmar's border regions (Meehan and Dan 2023). These political bwesa have received much more scholarly attention than the also-ubiquitous economic bwesa, but the theoretical discussions generated by political bwesa also apply to the economic bwesa I describe here. Political and administrative bwesa are necessary because Myanmar's political system is riddled with gaps and inconsistencies; in Myammar, politics *is* brokerage. The same is true of economic bwesa: although tea farmers could theoretically form cooperatives capable of bypassing bwesa to access the market directly, they do not do this, because bwesa *are* the

market. It is my goal to connect this discourse about political brokerage to the more straightforward sense of brokerage as a mercantile activity, i.e., economic brokerage.

In classical microeconomic terms, the cut taken by brokers would be considered a deadweight loss—a market inefficiency, or a factor in market failure. However, in the context of Myanmar, to do business at all is to engage in some form brokerage. One reason for this is Myanmar's ongoing civil war. In this context of conflict, where different social segments of a supply chain are thought to be literally at war with one another, brokers are critical. Ta'ang people are generally imagined as aligned with the TNLA. When I spoke to friends and acquaintances outside of the tea scene, they often warned me that Ta'ang people were "terrorists" (*akyan hpet thama*, အကြမ်းဖက်သမား). Likewise, the ongoing civil war in Shan State was an oft-cited reason for leaving the tea industry, when I encountered people (especially Bamar people) who had previously worked in tea but had since left. All sides know that tea must flow in order to profit, but direct contact between producers and consumers is not desirable, or in some cases not even possible.

After this introductory section, I will bring together political and economic anthropologies of brokerage by drawing on William Mazzarella's (2006) "mediation" concept. For Mazzarella, mediation is the social process of making things commensurable—in other words, tradable, if not objectified. Tradability is a quality that brokers imbue in objects, and also in social relations. This theoretical exploration will help foreground the complicated position of bwesa in Myanmar, and their ubiquity: bwesa are political mediators and economic go-betweens, a kind of human market infrastructure who build Myanmar's economy through the "phatic labour" famously conceptualized by Julia Elyachar (2010).

Ethnographically, this chapter explores three different brokerage stories, each of which demonstrate the ways that economic brokerage construes and mobilizes particular political alignments. First are the stories of two Ta'ang bwesa: Soe Kyi, who is willing to deal in

Chinese-produced CTC tea, and Mai Kham, who refuses to touch it. Despite their different political attitudes toward the most profitable form of tea currently traded in Myanmar, they have very similar political-economic ambitions related to tea. For many Ta'ang bwesa, tea production represents a possible post-revolutionary political-economic future. Tea brokerage has long been the province of Chinese, Shan, Burmese, and other ethno-racial groups stereotyped as lowlanders and as comparatively wealthy relative to the Ta'ang; by opening Ta'ang-run brokerages, Soe Kyi and Mai Kham see themselves as part of a new generation of Ta'ang tea businessmen working to put tea profits back in the hands of Ta'ang people. By point of contrast, the chapter finishes with the story of U Hein, a Chinese tea bwesa, who has dense kin and business connections to the Ta'ang world but distances himself from it politically. Unlike Soe Kyi, who views Chinese-produced CTC tea with cynicism—and Mai Kham, who despises it and will not touch it—U Hein is actively working to expand the market for Chinese tea in Myanmar. Held together, these three bwesa stories show three different views of the way that tea works as a site where political and economic projects coalesce; by dealing in tea, these bwesa must simultaneously deal in political projects and economic ones.

Theorizing Brokerage

William Mazzarella (2006), in theorizing the social process of "mediation", provides an incidental summary of the reasons that bwesa are a structural necessity in Myanmar. As mediators, brokers do not accomplish the "harmonization of divergent interests"; instead, they render contrasting subject positions "provisionally commensurable" (Mazzarella 2006, 856). In other words, brokers—like all mediators—do not actually *close* the gaps that necessitate their existence. Instead, brokers provide a provisional verisimilitude of coherence. In the particular case of Myanmar, brokers do not end the war between resistance groups and regime

forces, but they ensure that commodities continue to flow around the country in spite of wartime blockages. Wars of various forms have been ongoing in Myanmar since the 1960s, and arguably since the first British invasion of the Konbaung Empire in the 19th century. These wars have long been a cause of logistical friction, straining the economic connections between different parts of the country. Particularly since the 2021 military coup, socio-political life in Myanmar is increasingly Manichean: one cannot feasibly express a neutral political stance, but must state one's political alignments openly (Wittekind 2021). The main axis of differentiation here are between people who support the resistance, and people who support the coup; refusing to condemn the coup is widely considered tacit support for the junta. In this context, where ambiguity is treated with suspicion, brokers are a structural necessity. As they are adept at maintaining social connections across the lines of conflict, bwesa take on an infrastructural role: even as they are viewed with distrust, they are fundamental to the provision of everyday commodities across lines of conflict.

The fundamental problem with brokers is that their loyalties are suspect. Given their interstitial position, and their constant passing through the gaps in social orders (Gershon 2019),[37] it is often unclear who brokers "really" work for. Above all, brokers work for themselves: this is the foundation of the classical view of brokers as parasitic, as a source of deadweight economic loss. Marx, for his part, views brokers as a "worst of both worlds" outcome: brokers are simultaneously "parasites" (Marx 1990, 695) and also workers in their own right. Brokers are effectively a type of worker who subleases other workers' labour power, accomplished by inserting themselves between capitalists and producers. However, unlike

[37] In Gershon's own terms, social orders are "patterned, perduring, interwoven, and transportable repertoires of interactions that are available for reflexive explication" (2019, 405). For an extended discussion of Gershon's work in relation to Myanmar, see the following chapter (Chapter 4). I use the terms "social orders" and "social formations" more or less interchangeably throughout this thesis, but here draw attention to Gershon's formulation because of her emphasis on "porosity". The "repertoires" she identifies are the more or less concrete entities between which tea bwesa must travel: tea farmers vs. tea buyers, for example, or Ta'ang politicians vs. multiethnic bwesa who must collaborate to make Myanmar's food market but whose political alignments might be staunchly opposed.

capitalists who exploit workers directly, brokers must engage in the (often arduous) task of brokering the piece-work they collect from productive labourers, producing a perverse situation in which the exploitation of productive workers is conveyed through the "medium" of another worker's (the broker's) own labour.

For Marx, brokers are superfluous by definition. The question, then, is whether there are circumstances in which brokers are structurally necessary. In situations like Myanmar, where there is some chance that transacting parties are literally at war with one another, it is possible to imagine how middle operators like brokers are the fundamental infrastructure of the market itself. However, this is a role that brokers can play up: in his ethnography of land brokers in Nepal, Andrew Haxby (2021) demonstrates how brokers often do a great deal of work to keep transacting parties *away* from one another. Brokers' autonomy—and potential profits—are greatest when they have more market knowledge than either of the parties they deal with. To ensure their own necessity, these land brokers intentionally obfuscate the nature of land transactions, so that the seller and the buyer each deal primarily with a broker (rather than dealing with one another directly). In this case, brokers play a role in *maintaining* the gaps that make them necessary in the first place.

Nevertheless, brokers must retain some degree of trust on both sides of a given transaction. To put it in Mazzarella's (2006, 856) terms, brokers must have some grounds on which their transactions are made "provisionally commensurable". All the parties in the transaction must agree—however temporarily—that the transaction is worth their time. However, this commensurability does not result in transparency, in a situation where transacting parties have the same understanding of the transaction taking place—this is why the situation is one of *provisional* commensurability. Indeed, one of brokers' primary mediation strategies is to "elide coherency in favour of agreement" (Haxby 2021, 249). In other words, brokers emphasize consensus rather than clarity—an obfuscation that is often intentional,

inasmuch as the gaps that brokers exploit are usually gaps in knowledge about the market. As mediators, brokers provide an appearance of connectivity between two parties—for example, tea farmer and tea-eater—while eliding the actual relations on each side that make a transaction possible.

Patrick Meehan and Seng Lawn Dan (2023), scholars of Myanmar's borderlands, find that brokerage thrives in times of violence and conflict. However, they argue that this finding points to a lacuna in the political anthropology of brokerage more generally: instead, theorists of brokerage have emphasized connection, mediation, and mobilization (Meehan and Dan 2023, 567). Their claim is that brokers can and do make connections and provide mediation (in the sense of negotiating settlements between disputing parties), but these actions are most necessary between social formations that are fractious, gappy, and afflicted by violence and conflict. Put differently, brokers do work as mediators, but they do so specifically because the parties who they travel between do not get along with one another. I build on Meehan and Dan's claim by exploring its applicability to *economic* brokerage, which fundamentally begins with the act of buying cheap and selling dear.

Tea bwesa and other agricultural bwesa in Myanmar do occasionally engage in obfuscation and wilful incoherence. Nearly every tea farmer has a story about being ripped off by an untrustworthy bwesa. This trope reappears—in the negative—in the way that bwesa pitch themselves: many bwesa acknowledge that their profession has a bad reputation, and will also acknowledge some of the dirty tricks and tactics used to cheat farmers out of money. As a pitch, these acknowledgements end with the bwesa announcing something to the effect of, "but *I'm* not like those other bwesa—I would never cheat you". When particular bwesa are trustworthy and pay fair prices, tea farming communities will go out of their way to establish strong relationships with them, reserve better quality leaves for them, and engage in a range of other tactics to ensure future transactions (Lei Shwe Sin Myint 2021). Unlike the bureaucratic bwesa

that form the basis of many of the negative stereotypes around brokerage in Myanmar, economic bwesa—and especially agricultural bwesa—do not only appear in certain times and places, when one wants to accomplish a particular task, but are the fundamental market infrastructure that people use to make their livelihoods.

Bwesa in Myanmar

Bwesa are everywhere in Myanmar, and play a wide range of intermediary roles in commerce and government. However, the word "bwesa" itself conjures two basic images: agricultural produce dealers and bureaucratic go-betweens. Although I am primarily concerned with agricultural bwesa, it is worth mentioning the bureaucratic bwesa, since people's negative views of them are the main reason why the word bwesa has such negative connotations.

In the early days of my fieldwork, when I was applying for a Myanmar driver's license, I was approached by dozens of bwesa as I entered the Department of Transportation office. I brushed them off, thinking of my friends' and colleagues' admonitions to stay away from them. After several hours inside the building, and having my application repeatedly rejected for vague reasons, I ruefully went back outside and requested the help of a bwesa. For a small fee, they rapidly reformatted my application documents and changed the order of my employer certificates. They rushed me back through the building, spending less than a couple of minutes at each counter, and in less than thirty minutes I was holding a driver's license in my hand.

Most of my friends hold these bureaucratic fixers in contempt. The main reason for this contempt is that bureaucratic bwesa apparently solve a problem that they themselves create. Bwesas' ability to develop long-term relationships with officials—which involve passing small monetary commissions along to those officials—builds a bureaucratic reliance on brokers that prevents people from directly accessing basic administrative services. However, as Benedicte

Brac de la Perriere (2014) explains, many people do not *want* to deal directly with Myanmar's government, especially during periods of military rule. During times like these, when any interaction with government services potentially opens one to the scrutiny of military intelligence gatherers, dealing with a bwesa might be preferable to showing one's face in a government building. When the people and the government have a hostile view of one another, bwesa are at their most useful. At the same time, it is obvious why bwesa in this circumstance would be viewed by both sides with suspicion.

Brokers as Infrastructure: Nalehmu, Guanxi, and Phatic Labour

A few days after I got my driver's license, recently arrived in Mandalay, I went out to dinner with my friend Tony, his uncle Thiha, and a large group of Thiha's friends. Most of Thiha's friends were agricultural bwesa of different forms: peanut bwesa, sesame magnates, and corn dealers. Eventually, they became one of my main social circles. Hanging out with them was tremendously fun, because their business hinged on extended socializing. As we would eat and chat, friends and clients on both sides of the brokerage divide would stop by. The clients all had interesting stories, and ties to many places in Myanmar; hanging out with brokers allowed me to accumulate friends. Through brokerage, I was repeatedly reminded of how small Mandalay was, socially, despite its vast size: one potential client who stopped by our dinner table that evening turned out to be the brother-in-law of an anthropology professor in my host department.

As I saw again and again, the workplace aesthetic of a broker is one of excess. Warehouses piled high not only with a given bwesa's specialty products, but with other things that they might be able to flip. The bwesa I spent time with in Mandalay were also regularly putting on shows of generosity and extravagant consumption: eating out at restaurants in big

groups, or finding excuses to bring clients and competitors into their homes for sumptuous meals and industry gossip. In part, these bwesa hangouts are a forum for acting successful: they are a context where bwesa can make clients and other bwesa feel good, and feel like they are entering into a relationship that will be to their mutual benefit. As Sarah Besky illustrates, tea brokers in India—particularly those from a slightly older generation—make a point of openly declaring their status as gourmands, reconfiguring brokerage work as a kind of generalized passion for gustatory connoisseurship (Besky 2020, 28–29). In both contexts, eating well with friends—and knowing *how* to eat well—is one of the ways that brokers build their networks and establish credibility with one another.

In this way, collective meals and other hangouts that involve eating and drinking are where bwesa build *nalehmu* (နားလည်မှု). "Nalehmu" literally means "understanding" in English, but it has complicated connotations in Myanmar's business world. It is the outcome of the phatic labour of brokerage, the substance that connects bwesa to one another, forming the networks described by Myanmar studies scholars Jayde Roberts and Elizabeth Rhoads (2022, 10). Roberts and Rhoads theorize nalehmu as a form of social infrastructure "supported by relationships rather than law": nalehmu arrangements are built on mutual trust, with participants' mutual reputations as the collateral. According to their research with businesspeople in Yangon, they found that people tend to distinguish transactions based on nalehmu from transactions based on a "business mindset" (စီးပွားရေးအစိတ်) even though nalehmu transactions are often financial in nature. When bwesa engage clients with a "business mindset", rather than an approach based on nalehmu, they risk making the financial-ness of the transaction too explicit in a way that diminishes the trust accrued through the performance of friendship.

Spending time with bwesa regularly presented various types of "small world" phenomena: seeing the same faces in unexpected places; discovering mutual friendships; hanging out in places where we would be likely to encounter other bwesa or potential clients, both of whom invariably showed up. This is not coincidental, but is a consequence of the structural necessity of bwesa in Myanmar, and evidence for bwesa as a form of market infrastructure. Although bwesa are not usually marginalised people as such, there is an element here of the "phatic labour" described by Julia Elyachar (2010). As Elyachar argues, marginalized people—women in Cairo, in her example—expend a great deal of effort to maintain connections largely for the sake of maintaining connections. Although these connections may appear extra-economic, they are part of the critical infrastructure stitching together Cairo's more mainstream economic activities. Similarly, up to half of a bwesa's workday consists of maintaining connections for connetions' sake. Bwesa are always hanging out with one another; really, they are always hanging out more generally, even when they are working. "Working" can consist of a five hour meal in an open-air restaurant, hanging out with friends and colleagues as clients come and go. Any hangout can become a business transaction; any business transaction has the potential to turn into an evening of chatting. Even when the work is more serious, such as discussing plans for a new warehouse or negotiating an investment in their business, bwesa often welcome company.[38]

AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) shows how marginalized people in Johannesburg—especially migrants from elsewhere in the African continent—employ vast networks of face-to-face relationships, which form an "infrastructure". This infrastructure is especially dense in Johannesburg, but it connects geographically disparate places across the African continent and the globe, linking Lagos to Nairobi to London. Johannesburg's migrant neighborhoods provide

[38] There are exceptions to this, of course: as in all businesses, some strategic decisions and other particular plans are made in private. However, I was not privy to those conversations (for obvious reasons), and do not have sufficient data to make a claim about what bwesa tend to keep secret. However, secrecy in brokerage would make an excellent topic for follow-up research.

a spatio-temporal platform for the carrying-out of Elyachar's "phatic labour", a space where people from across class and ethno-racial lines can build "a unity made by talking" (Sopranzetti 2017). Crucially, Elyachar (2010), Simone (2004), and Sopranzetti (2017) all emphasize their interlocutors' marginality. In Cairo, Johannesburg, and Bangkok, the people who build human infrastructure through phatic labour do so because, in one way or another, they are all excluded from hegemonic and formalized political-economic access.

In the case of Myanmar, tea brokers are not generally marginalized: they are overwhelmingly men operating in highly patriarchal social formations, and are adept at mobilizing particular different modes of sociality depending on the situation they are in. They can slip into hegemonic modes of hanging out, or marginal ones, depending on the situation. Wherever they go, they seem to belong there. The reason that they rely on the phatic labour and human infrastructure that other scholars associate with marginalized communities has more to do with the general informality of Myanmar's economy. In Myanmar, there is relatively little legislative, juridical, or physical infrastructural regulation for how business occurs, and all but the largest-scale economic processes tend to unfold according to what is usually called the "informal economy" (Danquah and Sen 2022). What this means is that bwesas' face-to-face connections *are* the institutions that make and regulate the market. My argument here is similar to Wen-Chin Chang's (2004) analysis of Chinese jade brokers in Myanmar's borderlands: *guanxi*, the Chinese term for a network of beneficial personal contacts, is less of a Chinese cultural particularity than the regulatory mechanism of markets in places and contexts that are out of the way of state-led economic regulation processes.

In the context of bwesa, heterosexual marriages are one of the "regulatory mechanisms" that undergirds the enduring position of the broker in the Myanmar tea market. As far as I am aware, every single one of the project participants mentioned in this chapter is in a heterosexual marriage. This is not coincidental. Although Myanmar's bureaucratic bwesa tend to be a mix

of both men and women, agricultural brokerage is mainly a homosocial world run by husbands—at least in public places. In many cases, agricultural bwesa are not truly lone operators, but part of husband-wife teams that work together to build the business. In the most common scenario, the husband is tasked with long-distance travel, maintaining contacts and relationships with farmers and big-ticket buyers, and carrying out most of the negotiations over price. He is the "face" of the bwesa operation. The wife manages the financial and logistical details of the business. This almost always involves keeping track of bank and cash accounts, and for the largest bwesa—those who verge on wholesaler status, with large staffs and vast warehouses—managing order fulfilment and payroll issues.

This husband-wife corporate structure is not ubiquitous, but common enough to be something of a stereotype. A directly related stereotype in the bwesa-sphere is the business alliance marriage: as the stereotype goes, bwesa like to marry partners from different ethno-racial group, because it will provide the bwesa with access to a wider array of different social orders, and hence, different opportunities for profit. This pattern of intermarriage is reflected in several of the stories below, and I encountered it repeatedly while spending time with Mandalay's tea brokers; it was such a prevalent arrangement that the first time I met a Ta'ang bwesa married to another Ta'ang person, I actually felt surprised. On the occasions when I spent time with these husband-wife teams, jokes about the marriage as a "business partnership" came up so frequently that they became stale.

The trope of bwesa using marriage as an alliance is not limited to ethno-racial intermarriage. As some of my friends expressed, cynically, the ideal marriage partner for a bwesa is someone with connections in the Sit Tat. This is especially useful if the bwesa has family connections with a group who is at war with the Sit Tat: in this arrangement, where the bwesa and their partner each have kinship connections across the synapse formed by the warring parties, giving them a reasonable excuse to continue operating in both of the

communities that are ostensibly at war with one another. For a bwesa, the tensions inherent in the political economy of the marketplace often play out as one of the social formations that they must navigate at the level of the household.

Brokerage and Ethno-Racial Difference

Tea farmers often bring up the lumyo (ethno-racial identification) of the bwesa they deal with. Sometimes, brokers' ethno-racial backgrounds are associated with particular stereotypes about the style of business they conduct, but more often, these categories are brought up as a way of placing people within the extreme diversity of Myanmar's Shan State. Brokers themselves are also aware that they may be seen differently depending on the ethno-racial identity that they mobilize during transactions. In the last two decades, a new group of Ta'ang tea bwesa are emerging. They are often much more than bwesa alone, engaging in tea farming, processing, and branding; however, in order to participate in the tea business, they have to engage in some brokerage. Being a bwesa means putting on a particular type of show. Although bwesa are a reviled class, they are still expected to perform according to people's expectations. If a bwesa were to come across as credulous, paradoxically, potential buyers or sellers might be *less* inclined to trust them than if they put on an elaborate show. In the context of the tea industry, the performance of bwesa-ness indexes certain kinds of ethno-racial performances. The emerging Ta'ang bwesa must enact a visible Ta'ang-ness that is nonetheless not *overly* Ta'ang to the point that they become unintelligible to their largely Bamar customer base; they must also abide by the wider norms of bwesa-ness, which bridges gaps between social orders—including ethno-racial orders.

To illustrate how brokers engage in differentiated performances, and what these performances accomplish, I turn first to Soe Kyi. During early 2020, when I spent two months

in Mandalay, I spent countless hours in Soe Kyi's offices and warehouses. He was extremely generous with his time, and—like a true bwesa—immediately clocked how my presence would be useful to him. In exchange for letting me engage in participant observation, I helped him with English-language reports and investment applications. A voracious reader with a keen interest in the history of tea, our exchanges—especially after business hours—often turned towards abstract discussions of domestication, landrace production, and the shifting socio-political alignments of the tea industry.

Mediator Spaces: Performing Difference and Identity in a Brokerage

It is difficult to generalize the backgrounds of Ta'ang bwesa, and even of agricultural bwesa more generally, because their life histories are all so different from one another. Part of the reason for this is the historical trajectory of Myanmar's political economy over the last four decades. Soe Kyi's personal story is a useful example. Like many people who came of age in Myanmar in the 1990s, his first decade of adulthood was tumultuous: inflation skyrocketed through the 1980s; despite reform attempts carried out in the 1990s, Myanmar's economy completely collapsed in 2002 (Turnell 2009, 297). People trying to start their careers at this time had limited options. Soe Kyi was from a tea farming family, but saw little immediate future in continuing to stay in Shan State. He went to Mandalay and attended a trade school, then worked in a factory overseas. While overseas, he accumulated enough capital to start "some kind of business related to tea", in his words; in 2012, during Myanmar's so-called "transition" period—a period of liberal democratic political reforms and sweeping economic liberalization—he returned home to Shan State to re-enter the tea business as a bwesa and farmer-entrepreneur.

In addition to tea connoisseurship, Soe Kyi is a connoisseur of the act of brokerage itself. He can mobilize different brokerage styles and tea tasting styles at a whim. Although his overt political relationships are primarily in the Ta'ang world, he loves to make a show of his globally-encompassing knowledge of tea brokerage styles. Soe Kyi manages to run his brokerage simultaneously as a site for launching Ta'ang ethno-nationalist projects and for carrying out an ecumenical vision of the Myanmar tea industry as one that could be poised to compete with the biggest players in the world, India and China. To demonstrate how he does this, I present a condensed version of one afternoon and evening spent in Soe Kyi's Mandalay brokerage, in mid-March 2020. It is not a "typical" day. Given his highly mobile lifestyle and the rapidly changing political-economic stakes of his enterprise—which demand him to be in many places and accomplish many tasks simultaneously—no two days are the same. However, the interactions that came and went over the course of the day illustrate how he positions himself as both a political and economic operator. From there, I explain how his ethno-racial positionality (and his flexibility) influence the ways that he helps build the tea market.

I've lost track of the number of cups of tea, the number of cigarettes, the number of betel quids. It's after 4:00 p.m. and we haven't had lunch yet. We're waiting for a potential seller, and a group of tea farmers from Mogok who have, Soe Kyi assures me, something special to show us. I'm in Soe Kyi's office with Ko Thit—Soe Kyi's friend from Namhsan—and a few of Soe Kyi's employees. The room is heaped with industrial-sized bags of tea, bags big enough for two people to sit in, and this isn't even the main warehouse—it's just the office. Everyone's head looks heavy as the smoke in the air settles into a thick haze.

We have run out of cigarettes, and Soe Kyi sends an employee off to get a packet of betel quids. A change of pace. As the young man opens the door, the air starts to clear, and Soe Kyi starts brewing a new batch of tea. He brews it in the Chinese style: a small pot, filled to the brim with leaves, into which he pours boiling water. It only steeps for a few seconds before he pours

it into our tiny cups, barely bigger than a golf ball. Soe Kyi brightens as he pours it, and starts holding forth. He is in the educational mode once again, speaking animated English.

"Chinese guys drink tea like they don't care about the taste. They drink it in one shot and then spend five minutes sniffing the cup. Like this," he said, demonstrating. "You see, this one has a honey aroma." He sniffed again. "A honey aroma, also floral, a little smoke. These must be good quality leaves," he said, nodding to himself. "And then the Indian guys and the Nepali guys, they bring their own milk. They only care about tea with milk, they don't give a shit about green tea. They mix the tea with the milk, and then they slurrrrrrp it. Like this," he said, slurping and swishing the tea around his mouth. "But they don't swallow it! They make all of this slurping, they spit it into the bin, they mix more milk, they try it again."

My own cup has gone cold in my hand. Soe Kyi has finished three cups in this time, brusquely topping himself up to continue demonstrating tea tasting styles. Ko Thit hasn't touched his cup, and is hunched over his phone, poring over something on Google Maps. Soe Kyi berates him in Samlone, their shared dialect of Ta'ang. Ko Thit takes a distracted sip, says something in Samlone, and then says "it's good" in Burmese, for my benefit. Soe Kyi looks up at me, beaming, with a hint of mockery: "it's good!", he exclaims in English, laughing.

Brokerage is a lively undertaking. Making buyers and sellers feel good, and bolstering their confidence, is a major part of the game. During all my time conducting participant observation in Myanmar's tea industry, Soe Kyi was by far the most adept and skilful broker I came across. He identifies as Ta'ang, and he sees himself as doing something different from the Chinese and Indian tea bwesa he caricatures: although his goal is ultimately to turn a profit and build a tea empire, he sometimes refers to his business as a "social enterprise": expanding the tea industry, from Soe Kyi's perspective, is part of a political vision for the Ta'ang community. If Ta'ang tea can come to be understood as a prestige good, and the profits from Ta'ang tea can remain in Ta'ang hands, it will ameliorate some of the social problems in the Ta'ang world: the war, the drug problems, the flight of young people to cities and foreign

countries. He sees most tea brokers as just interested in turning a profit. While Soe Kyi is definitely also seeking a profit, his vision extends beyond building the family business.

Soe Kyi also believes that his position as a Ta'ang tea broker gives him insight into tea farmers' lives in a way that non-Ta'ang tea brokers struggle to understand; he also correctly sees market potential for tea products that overtly tie into cultural ideas about indigeneity and ethno-racial difference (cf Zhang 2014; Ives 2017; Ma 2018). Soe Kyi's attempts to Ta'ang-ize the tea industry are at once a sincere vision of economic autonomy for Ta'ang people, and an almost cynical self-awareness that racializing his products make them more desirable in certain markets.

> Soe Kyi's employee returns with a big bag of betel quids and another pack of cigarettes; "the seller is here," he announces in Burmese. Soe Kyi snaps into action as the seller arrives. I vacate my seat, and the seller takes my place, pulling out a sandwich bag packed with green tea leaves. They don't look very good: they're not uniform in colour or size, and there are broken leaves and visible dust mixed in with some good-quality leaves. Soe Kyi takes out a few leaves, crushes them in in his fingers, and sniffs his fingers. He ruffles the tea in the bag, and inhales deeply from the bag, then hands it back to the potential seller. He switches into business mode, taking on an imperious tone, and the Burmese becomes too fast and complex for me to track. Eventually, the prospective seller takes back his bag and departs, looking frustrated.
>
> "What is this he wants to sell me?" Soe Kyi asks the room in Burmese. He switches to English, and says to me, "I don't know what he wants. Nobody would buy that. That's the stuff you give people for free when they buy something else. Why would I want to buy that? Why is he wasting my time?"

I wondered why Soe Kyi was so anxious to shut this meeting down. As of early 2020, Soe Kyi was still in a hurry to accumulate as much tea as he possibly could. He was especially

keen to purchase high-quality whole-leaf white and green tea:[39] the Palaung Tea Association, a Ta'ang run tea producer's cooperative, had agreed to send 70 tons of high-grade tea to a broker on the Chinese side of the border. At the same time, Soe Kyi was also anxious to supplement his directly-from-farm tea supply with the maximum available amount of Chinese-produced black tea, to keep up with the then-insatiable demand generated by Myanmar's ubiquitous tea shops. As he told me later, Soe Kyi deemed that potential seller's tea knowledge to be insufficient to distinguish between the particular products he was looking for; despite his interest in accumulating a maximal supply, this seller was not worth his time or the effort it would have taken to figure out if the potential seller did have any of the high quality leaves that Soe Kyi was looking for.

The presence of Chinese-produced tea on the Myanmar tea market is something of a scandal—especially for Ta'ang tea farmers and some Ta'ang tea producers, Soe Kyi included. Soe Kyi has visions of a politically autonomous Ta'ang sub-state within a federated Myanmar; this Ta'ang federal entity would be funded by the tea industry. To that end, he is actively involved in improving the efficiency and quality of tea production in the Namhsan area—not only in his own factory, but in the tea operations of many friends and acquaintances connected to the Palaung Tea Association. Although Soe Kyi's own expression of ethno-nationalism is relatively tame compared to hard-line Ta'ang nationalists, his corporate and political ambitions are bound up in his identity as a Ta'ang man. Nonetheless, as we became close friends, I asked him about how his extensive trade contacts with China squared with his political visions for an autonomous Ta'ang homeland fuelled by tea.

In response, he invited me to walk around his warehouse with him. It is small compared to the warehouses of Myanmar's largest tea brands, but still enormous in human scale,

[39] In this context, "white tea" refers to tea that has been picked during the hot season and processed only by rolling and sun-drying, unlike green tea which is usually pan-roasted (to stop oxidation).

occupying nearly an entire city block of Mandalay's sprawling rectilinear grid. The warehouse was piled nearly to the ceiling with huge bags of tea. Some of the bags were labelled with types of tea, accompanied by an origin location or processing site. More than half, however, were just labelled with the letters "CTC".[40] "If it doesn't say where it's from, that's because it's from China", he told me. When I asked him how he acquired it, he dodged the question, and just shook his head in apparent self-disgust. "I have to sell this stuff," he responded. "Everybody has to."

When I pressed him on why this was a necessity, he expressed his frustration with a double-bind in Myanmar's tea industry. What his Chinese buyers want, and what he wants to build a market for in Myanmar, is top-quality green tea grown on century-old tea trees. However, these trees are large and gnarled and do not produce a high volume of leaves. They are not efficient producers of leaves, and do not make efficient use of tea-growing space. Furthermore, Chinese buyers are a small part of his market, and there is limited local interest for high-quality Myanmar green tea. He makes his money from black tea. However, having spent some time in Assam—where he purchased his own CTC machine—he did not think that Assam-style tea production would be viable in the Ta'ang lands. The land is too hilly; the cost of processing machinery is too high; and the tea-plucking communities he saw in Assam did not square with his utopian visions of a Ta'ang tea state.

The tea that Soe Kyi prizes most from the Ta'ang lands are teas grown on *pin kyi* (ပင်ကြီး), literally "old trees" or "great trees". These are tea trees that have been continuously maintained for more than one human generation. As day turned to night in Soe Kyi's brokerage, a delegation of Ta'ang tea farmers arrived from Mogok.[41] As soon as they arrived, Ko Thit,

[40] "Cut-tear-curl", or CTC, is an industrial black-tea processing technique that originated in Assam, producing tight balls of leaf material that resemble instant coffee (cf Besky 2020, 7).

[41] Mogok is a busy mountain town in the extreme northeast of Mandalay Region, which is culturally and ecologically closer to Shan State than the rest of Mandalay. There is a large Ta'ang population there; while Mogok

along with Soe Kyi's staff, made a big fuss of bringing out extra chairs and passing around snacks and betel quits. Soe Kyi welcomed them with a deference that I had never seen him perform before: lowering his head, shaking the men's hands slowly and smiling warmly at the women with a bow. He spoke primarily Ta'ang with them. The Mogok farmers brought with them several bags of their finest pin kyi white tea, Soe Kyi's personal favourite, and one of the Myanmar teas that he saw as a potential for economic growth. With the help of these farmers and some of his business contacts in China, Soe Kyi was hoping to build up a market for Mogok Ta'ang white tea both domestically and abroad. Seeds produced from those original pin kyi could also be reproduced and sold as a Myanmar-specific cultivar. However, the relationship that Soe Kyi had built with these farmers was clearly a tenuous one: I had never seen Soe Kyi display such deference to a client.

There were Chinese buyers interested in the Mogok white tea, and Soe Kyi knew that he could get the farmers an excellent price for their leaves, as he explained to me in English after the meeting. Tea from Myanmar was purportedly seen by Chinese tea buyers as an interesting and exotic alternative to home-grown pu'er tea, made all the more enticing by the imaginary of Myanmar as a relatively "unspoilt" and un-industrialized tea industry relative to the heavily financialized Chinese pu'er industry (cf Zhang 2014). The Chinese buyer offered to pay the equivalent of 120,000 Myanmar kyat for a kilogram of Mogok white tea; in 2020, this was roughly ten times the market rate for mid-grade green tea and four times the market rate for the most expensive black tea.[42] However, as pandemic-related border closures were already starting to pop up in the news media, he was worried that the Chinese border would

is primarily known for its role as the site of Myanmar's largest ruby mines, it is also famous for producing fragrant green tea.

[42] Tea quantities in Myanmar are usually measured in the *beiktha* (ဗဲသား), Anglicised as "viss", an endemic Burmese measurement unit equivalent to roughly 1.68 kilograms. Here, I have converted units to kilograms for easy reading, and converted prices accordingly. I also note that the tea prices quoted here will look very different to tea prices in 2023, due to devaluation of the Myanmar kyat and changes in the tea industry wrought by the pandemic and the coup. Tea prices and their consequences for consumers are a regular topic of conversation in Myanmar, outside the purview of this chapter but a fruitful possibility for future research.

close, and the deal would be thrown into uncertainty. Soe Kyi was willing to buy a relatively small amount of their tea himself (17-25 kilograms) at the price they had previously discussed, but he could not afford to match the amount of tea requested by the Chinese buyers, who were willing to buy 40 kilograms. He did not know what he would do with the Mogok white tea after he bought it; he assumed he would drink some of it himself, and give some of it as gifts to business partners who would appreciate it. The reason that Soe Kyi was willing to purchase the Mogok tea at a potential loss—and the reason he acted so deferentially toward the Mogok farmers—was because their tea played a role in his political vision.

Ta'ang Bwesa and Ethno-Protectionism: The Case of Myit Nge Tea Company

Unlike Soe Kyi, some Ta'ang tea brokers are unwilling to live with the potential socio-political consequences of dealing in Chinese CTC tea or engaging Chinese buyers for Myanmar tea. This is especially true for Ta'ang brokers who are more visible as core members in the Ta'ang national movement. However, choosing to avoid engagement with the Chinese industry is almost a guarantee of economic hardship for any broker who tries to make a living solely on tea. Unlike Soe Kyi, who has ethno-nationalist aspirations but takes a relatively ethno-agnostic approach to running his business, the family who runs Myit Nge Tea Company operates their brokerage from a specifically ethno-protectionist standpoint.[43]

I felt intimidated walking into Myit Nge's storefront for the first time. Although I was accompanied by a Ta'ang friend, Tony, I was worried that I would be rebuffed. At the same time, despite my intimidation, I felt obligated to speak to someone from Myit Nge. Again and again throughout the early days of my fieldwork, interlocutors told me I needed to hear Myit Nge's perspective on the tea industry and on Ta'ang political issues. They have a reputation for

[43] "Myit Nge" is a pseudonym.

producing some of the highest-quality lahpet soe (pickled tea for eating) in all of Myanmar: as one Bamar friend put it, Myit Nge is the "connoisseur's choice" of the Mandalay tea lahpet soe dealers. At the same time, the proprietor of Myit Nge has intimate (if fraught) connections to the highest levels of Ta'ang ethno-nationalist politics, including the TNLA. The Myanmar government considers the TNLA to be terrorists; however, given Myit Nge's clout in the tea industry, the proprietor has also cultivated many friendships with Bamar elites, ubiquitously connected to the Myanmar Sit Tat. This put Myit Nge in an extremely delicate position. In the fraught post-2019 Ta'ang political climate, I knew that there was a risk I would simply be sent away.

In principle, Tony shares some cultural intimacy with the Myit Nge family. He has elite Ta'ang relatives; from spending time with his uncle Thiha, he is also at ease hanging out with bwesa. However, when I asked him to accompany me, he became unusually serious. "Yes, yes, we should go there, it would be good for me to know them as well," he said in English, nodding gravely. Then he added, "You have to approach them with a Ta'ang person. This is the real situation. If you came there with a Bamar person, they would tell you to go away for sure." Things would have been different if I was there to place a large order of tea, or to otherwise engage in business—my reasons for being there would have been obvious. If I wanted to come in and ask questions or engage in conversation, I needed someone who Myit Nge could trust.

When Tony and I walked in to Myit Nge's Mandalay storefront, we were greeted by a 30-something man with long hair and plug earrings, covered to his chin in tattoos. On the wall behind the counter were various posters and calendars from Ta'ang ethno-nationalist organizations, and an enormous portrait of a grave and genteel-looking man in traditional Ta'ang formalwear. Tony introduced himself in Samlone (the prestige dialect of the Namhsan area). The man behind the counter nodded, unmoved. Flustered, I started explaining my project

in broken Burmese. The man with the guitar motioned to the portrait behind him, and interjected in English, “I am Mai Kham. This is my father, the owner of Myit Nge”.

As the three of us chatted—Mai Kham, Tony, and I—Mai Kham gradually softened. He seemed to appreciate Tony’s sincerity and was unexpectedly grateful to see the paperwork documenting my status as an affiliate of Mandalay University. He was still obviously wary of our presence, though: when a delivery team arrived to fulfil an order of tea, he shepherded us into an alcove out of sight of the main storefront. I was starting to think of ways to end the interview, when quite suddenly his younger sister Lway Ei joined us.

Unlike her brother, Lway Ei seemed immediately comfortable speaking to Tony and I. She had attended university in Thailand and worked as a consultant for a number of local community-based organizations and international NGOs. As we chatted to Lway Ei in a mix of Burmese and English, she told Mai Kham to go in the back to prepare some lahpet soe and green tea for us. With lahpet soe and green tea on the table—iconic Myanmar snacks that symbolize congeniality and friendly host-guest relations—the conversation shifted from the day-to-day workings of Myit Nge to the political situation in northern Shan State. Mai Kham became sullen and started playing with his phone, but Lway Ei became animated. In a long and roundabout question, Tony asked how their father came to be involved in Ta’ang politics.

Mai Kham and Lway Ei’s father entered elite Ta’ang politics due to his connections in the tea business. Although other sources told me very different stories, Mai Kham and Lway Ei said that tea businesses are often heavily taxed by the TNLA: depending on the size and complexity of the enterprise, the TNLA could demand as much as US$20,000 as a startup fee for tea businesses in their areas. They told me they did not have to pay, given their father’s connections, but that the tax (and its irregular application) created some resentment towards Ta’ang tea producers from people who do not identify as Ta’ang but would like to get involved in the tea business in northern Shan. As this was clearly a sensitive topic, I decided not to pursue

it much further than this; however, since we were already in the realm of tricky conversations, I felt it would be appropriate to change the subject to the recent explosion of Chinese black tea importation. What did they think about it? Did this change in the black tea market have any impact on their lahpet soe trade?

My questions immediately killed the atmosphere. I had made a mistake.[44] Mai Kham looked up from his phone at Lway Ei, scoffed, and got up from the table. Lway Ei sighed. Mai Kham pulled out a bag of ultra-high-grade CTC tea, slapped it on the counter, and told me to come look at it. The quality was immediately evident from the rich, complex smell and the uniform, almost crystalline appearance of the small nodules of curled black tea. "This is premium *shwe phee oo* tea", he said to the room in Burmese, "this has a better color *and* flavour than any Chinese tea. It's a beautiful red. It's not bitter. And it comes from Ta'ang lands." Lway Ei interrupted him, speaking in English: "The Chinese tea guys are some really big brokers, and when you go to just any tea shop in Mandalay, you're drinking Chinese tea. Except for the good tea shops, who buy the real stuff, like this. But most tea shops don't want to pay for top-grade shwe phee oo.[45] They just sell whatever." Mai Kham kept grumbling under his breath, and brought the bag over to Tony, who also looked through it.

According to Mai Kham and Lway Ei, Myit Nge only produced a tiny amount of black tea, and sold it to VIP customers and tea shops owned by friends. They processed their leaves at a CTC facility owned by a different tea company, but could not produce a high enough volume for it to make economic sense to go into the black tea business full-time. They already had a customer base who relied on them for lahpet soe; furthermore, they took it as a point of

[44] For an extended discussion of blunders as productive ethnographic moments, see Stéphane Gros' (Gros 2010) analysis of the topic.

[45] "Shwe phee oo" is the Burmese name for the peak tea-harvesting season, and is also the word for the tea produced during this time. The tea-picking calendar is divided into four parts: three harvesting seasons—shwe phee, khar kant, and khar nan—and an unnamed fourth period when tea forests are weeded, cleaned, and transplanted.

pride that their tea production focused primarily on shwe phee oo leaves, the highest grade of tea produced in Myanmar.

Although Myit Nge is famous for their tea, I got the impression that Myit Nge's main owner—Lway Ei and Mai Kham's father—prioritized politics over business. Despite Myit Nge's high reputation, it was hard for me to imagine how they could make much money from selling lahpet soe alone, especially when every other tea bwesa I had spent time with had expressed frustration that they *needed* to deal in black tea to stay afloat. Although Mai Kham and Lway Ei knew a great deal about the tea industry, I got the impression that Myit Nge serves a different purpose than tea concerns like Soe Kyi's. Whereas Soe Kyi is first and foremost a tea bwesa who mobilizes his Ta'ang identity—and indeed has a real interest in Ta'ang tea culture and Ta'ang livelihoods—Myit Nge seemed to exist in a state of defiance, attempting to prove that a Ta'ang-run tea business could stay afloat while also staying above the inconvenient realities of bwesa-hood.

Cultivating New Tastes: Making a Market for Chinese CTC in Myanmar

Chinese tea bwesa—and especially small-scale bwesa—have easier access to Chinese black tea than to Myanmar-grown black tea. Chinese black tea is cheaper per unit weight, and available through market channels that are less socially complicated for than those that enable the movement of Myanmar black tea, which often involve Ta'ang or Sit Tat-aligned networks. Myanmar-grown black tea production is dominated in part by companies affiliated with the Myanmar Sit Tat, a reviled institution, and in part by emerging Ta'ang tea processers like Soe Kyi, who come with their own tricky set of political alignments. By contrast, Chinese black tea moves through Mandalay's enormous Chinese mercantile community, which dominates Mandalay's sprawling Myo Thit (literally "New City") district. To access it, a Chinese bwesa

only needs to go to Myo Thit with decent command of the Chinese language and ask around. The complicated part of their work comes in recasting their product as something palatable and desirable to consumers and tea shop owners.

In this section, I explore how U Hein, a bwesa with Chinese heritage, draws on his Chinese business contracts and knowledge of Myanmar's black tea market to make Chinese CTC tea literally palatable to a Myanmar market. Unlike Soe Kyi and the owners of Myit Nge, U Hein did not enter the tea industry due to a family history of tea farming; instead, he entered the tea market first and foremost as a businessman. Part of his family has lived in Namhsan for several generations, and have married Ta'ang people; these connections provided the initial social contacts for U Hein to enter the tea business in the 1970s. As Myanmar's tea market has changed and Shan State's conflict has reconfigured the politics of the tea business in Namhsan, U Hein has also adapted. His main concern, when I spent time with him in 2020, was figuring out how to deal mainly in Chinese CTC tea without running afoul of his Ta'ang family members or alienating the customer base he has built up in Mandalay over the last four decades.

U Hein identifies as Chinese. Although his family has lived in Mandalay for generations, he still speaks the Yunnan dialect of Chinese with his immediate relatives. He has a vast network of family and friends across Shan State and in the Kokang region, right on the border with Yunnan province. Although he also speaks Burmese, he is proud of his Chinese heritage. When we spoke, he foregrounded this in his explanation for his business practices: he openly mixes Chinese-produced and Myanmar-produced tea, and is trying to develop a blend of the two that appeals to consumers in Mandalay. He is agnostic about the sources of his tea, and open about buying processed black tea from competing parties. He buys from Chinese distributors, bwesa who work with the Myanmar Sit Tat, and Ta'ang tea producers. He is well-known in Mandalay for his blending skills, and has a storefront where tea shop owners can

come taste his works in progress. When I met with him for the first time, I asked him to sell me some tea as though I were a tea-shop owner.

Figure 11: U Hein's tea tasting setup. Photo by U Hein's nephew on the author's phone (2022).

U Hein summoned his daughter, who laid out an array of four black tea preparations (see Figure 11 above). U Hein then started giving me a sales pitch for each blend, but omitted the ratio of Myanmar-origin to Chinese-origin leaves until I had tasted each in turn. He told me that he was trying to get tea shop owners to switch to a new blend he had made, that he thought would be the right balance of a good flavour and a good colour. First, I was given the four tea blends mixed only with water (the larger bowls in the above photo); second, I was given each blend mixed with a small amount of sweetened condensed milk and evaporated milk (the small saucers). The four were very different, but one was a clear favourite for me: it turned out to be a 70-30 blend of Chinese-grown and Myanmar-Grown tea, without the inclusion of tea dust (more on dust below). My preference turned out to be for the highest concentration of Chinese black tea of any of U Hein's blends; the other three were a 50-50 blend, an 80-20 Myanmar-to-Chinese blend, and a pure Myanmar blend.

My preference pleased U Hein, but I felt somehow disappointed in myself, given how often Chinese tea imports were often cited by my Ta'ang informants as a reason for deteriorating livelihoods in the Ta'ang areas. I had taken on the ideological prejudices of my informants. Without fully acknowledging it, I had hoped to prefer the locally-produced tea to the Chinese-made tea. Naturally, U Hein thought this was hilarious, and in hindsight, I do too. At the time, though, I was conflicted.

The Chinese black tea washing around Mandalay's bwesa districts does have different characteristics from Myanmar-produced black tea, even given the "flattening" effect that CTC produces. In general, the Chinese-made tea tends to produce a richer red colour than Myanmar tea, but has more astringent and "rough" (*gyan*) flavour. Part of the reason that I liked a higher concentration of Chinese tea may be due to my own taste in tea, which would be considered idiosyncratic for a Myanmar person, but is considered common "for a foreigner".[46] The more astringent Chinese tea was more suited to my personal taste. U Hein told me that the brilliant red colour produced by Chinese tea is prized by tea shop owners; lower-grade black from Myanmar can sometimes have an insipid brownish-orange color. However, the astringent flavour produced by Chinese tea is still unpopular compared to the "nutty" (*seint*) flavour of Myanmar-grown tea, which is why he—like most tea bwesa—has resorted to selling blends. As Sarah Besky (2020) has demonstrated, "grades" of black tea cannot be arranged in a simple hierarchy from best to worst, but are better understood as locations on a three-dimensional gradient of taste profiles. In the case of Assam's highly institutionalised tea market, black tea grades have a wide range of names, each of which index a vast lexicon of flavour characteristics (Besky 2020, 38–41). When one becomes fluent in this lexicon, a description of a tea and its

[46] I usually order "kya seint" or (literally "strong and nutty"), which is usually more bitter, more milky, and far less sweet than a standard cup. A "pone man", which literally means "standard", tends to be much milder and sweeter than a kyat seint or other more bitter orders ("kya kya", extra strong, or "gate sone", literally "last gate on the [bus] line", brutally strong and astringent black tea with no milk or sweetener). My working hypothesis for the popularity of "kyat seint" amongst some foreigners is that is has a flavour profile roughly closest to western barista coffee products (lattes and cappuccinos and the like).

grade index specific information about the growing conditions of the tea field, along with the production and storage conditions of the dried tea. In Myanmar, although some brokers (Soe Kyi, for example) were familiar with the Indian language of grades and flavour profiles, in Myanmar, discussions about flavour profile were often dominated by discussions about the geographical provenance of a particular batch of tea, and the ethno-political alignments associated with it. Dealing in tea, in Myanmar, nearly always entails the commensuration of identity.

Although U Hein identifies as Chinese and deals in large amounts of Chinese tea, he also has deep connections to the Ta'ang community. His connections are complex. Two of his siblings are married to Ta'ang people, and he does order bulk green ("bitter dry" tea, used for making green tea) from Ta'ang tea producers. However, he gave me the impression that his orders of Ta'ang tea were placed to appease certain social connections; he doesn't sell it for profit, but includes huge bags of it as a gift when customers place bulk orders of his black tea. In spite of his Ta'ang connections, U Hein expressed revulsion at the Ta'ang nationalist movement and is dismissive of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), laughingly calling them "terrorists" (*akyan hpet thama*), but also "hicks" (*taw thar*). The ethno-protectionist claims that I heard openly expressed at Myit Nge—and more implicitly by Soe Kyi—were wholly absent from my conversations with U Hein. The way he described his connections to the Ta'ang community cast them as almost coincidental, a biographical fact about his life that did have something to do with tea but was not the full story. When I tried to press him about his position on the TNLA, he said he that they were a nuisance, but that he was more worried about climate change. This brought him back to emphasizing the importance of the Chinese tea industry: the more technologically advanced breeding programs and production methods in China, from his perspective, meant that Chinese tea would probably be of more predictable quality in the future than tea in Myanmar, which is largely cultivated according to

traditional methods. Bringing Chinese tea to Mandalay is not an instance of U Hein exercising pride in Chinese tea as such, but a result of the pragmatic affordances of the black tea market in Myanmar.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to show how bwesa simultaneously accomplish political and economic work. Soe Kyi works to make the stereotypical association with the Ta'ang into a site for potential profit; at the same time, he quietly deals in Chinese CTC tea, an act that make others in the Ta'ang ethno-political world—such as the owners of Myit Nge—view him with some suspicion. Just as particular ethno-racial categories (Ta'ang, Chinese) index particular stereotypes, the figure of the bwesa also comes with its own archetypal baggage. Bwesa can come across as shapeshifters, slippery characters whose loyalties and self-performances apparently change from context to context. However, to the extent that bwesa also become known through reputations, certain aspects of their identity are stickier than others: their ethno-racial identification is one of these stickier aspects. As a bwesa's reputation grows, they become known for particular aspects of their trade practice, but their ethno-racial identity always remains a salient part of any conversation about them.

U Hein, who is open about and proud of his Chinese heritage, is less famous for his status as a *Chinese* bwesa—an unremarkable fact in Mandalay—than he is for his experiments with tea-blending. However, it is exactly his engagement in blending that brings his ethno-racial alignment into question. Soe Kyi, who has cordial relations with U Hein, chuckled off and on about U Hein's blending practices: "he doesn't even hide his sources!", he remarked to me once, laughing. However, when I met with U Hein, he *did* hide his sources, but only once the controversy of Chinese tea was already part of our conversation. I did not bring up U Hein

by name when I spoke with Mai Kham at Myit Nge, but their generalized revulsion toward the very existence of Chinese tea imports indicated their likely attitude toward his practices.

There is a pragmatism to U Hein's and Soe Kyi's mediations that seems to be absent from Myit Nge's approach. Although all three bwesa are well aware of the political content trafficked along with tea, U Hein and Soe Kyi seem more aware that the practice of political brokerage always involves *provisional* commensuration (Mazzarella 2006). Soe Kyi would not be able to afford his purchase of Mogok white tea—at a probable loss—if the purchase was not offset by his trade in Chinese tea. Likewise, U Hein does not see his Chinese tea trade as somehow shoring up a Chinese political project, but as the logical result of the current conditions of the tea market. He is less concerned with the "Chinese-ness" of his tea, or what that might mean politically, than he is with turning a profit.

As the political situation in Myanmar continues to change in the wake of the 2021 military coup, bwesas will only increase in importance. They are not marginalized figures, but they enact many of the face-to-face social infrastructural processes described by Elyachar (2010), Simone (2004), and Sopranzetti (2017), who *do* emphasize their interlocutors' marginality. The agricultural produce market in Myanmar, like state governance itself, depends less on centralized institutions that follow legislated norms than it does on vast networks of face-to-face relationships. In this context, bwesa form a critical political-economic infrastructure.

4. Making a *Lumyo*: Reification, Mediation, and the Ta'ang Ethno-Racial Order

Introduction

The Ta'ang are a "porous social order" (Gershon 2019) par excellence. One can identify as Ta'ang, or identify the presence of the Ta'ang as an ethno-racial other: in those senses, Ta'ang has a certain objectivity. Still, it is difficult to draw a clear line around the boundaries of that Ta'ang community. The word "Ta'ang" and its many cognates denote a vast ethno-racial constellation. Across the Ta'ang constellation, there are some repeated patterns common to most communities: speaking a language from the Mon-Khmer family; cultivating tea; building villages on a prominent mountain ridgeline; practicing Buddhism; making elaborate, colourful women's formalwear. However, if one were to take any two villages across the Ta'ang world and compare them, the specifics of these patterns may look very different. The two communities may not even be immediately recognizable as parts of the same social formation. The languages spoken across the Ta'ang world may be from the same family, but they may be as mutually unintelligible as Romanian and Portuguese. Any attempt to forge a common sense of Ta'ang identity is an enormous project with unpredictable consequences. Nevertheless, such a project is underway: there is a growing ethno-national movement, mainly in Myanmar, which is attempting to build a vision of a pan-Ta'ang nationality. By far, the most prominent icon of the Ta'ang nationalist movement is an armed group, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA); they are accompanied by a wide range of civilian organizations who have varying degrees of affiliation with the armed group.

When Naing Oun and I initially began working together, the focus of our research was overwhelmingly on tea. Naing Oun had recently been working on a different tea-related project,

and was excited to build on what he already knew. However, just a few weeks into working together, Naing Oun proposed that we broaden the theoretical scope of the research question to include an investigation of the Ta'ang world from an ethno-racial standpoint. This concern was already on my mind, but the concreteness of the tea industry had given me much more traction for planning interview questions and participant observation sessions: asking someone what they are doing leads to more concrete answers than asking someone who they are. However, I realized that Naing Oun had a point, esepecially after his trip to Arrum, a large village in the Namhsan area.

Naing Oun had never been to Arrum before, but it is one of Namhsan's notable tea-producing villages, so he decided to make a trip and check out the situation. He timed his arrival to coincide with a Buddhist festival, which meant that there would be a lot of people out in public to speak with and possibly get to know. While watching the festival proceedings, he realized that the traditional practices of Arrum village were radically different from those he had witnessed in other parts of Namhsan, or those of his hometown. The traditional formalwear was different, the language was almost unintelligible, and the religious practices shocked him. Unlike the strict Theravada order to which Naing Oun had belonged as a monk, the villages of Arrum practiced a tantric-style Buddhism: monks in Arrum were allowed to eat after midday, used a different set of Pali chants, and organized their monastery in a way that baffled Naing Oun. Still, the villagers at Arrum considered themselves Ta'ang.

Naing Oun was already aware of the diversity within the Ta'ang social order. He identifies as Rumai, and grew up in Man Tone, where the majority of Ta'ang people speak Rumai; he lives in Namhsan, where Samlone is the hegemonic Ta'ang dialect (Mak 2012). However, it started to seem like every hamlet he visited in the Namhsan region introduced him to new ways of presenting as Ta'ang. Through our conversations, we came to a question: how could all of these people, whose cultural practices were so distinct, come to see themselves as

part of a single Ta'ang social order? What might be the boundaries of this social order, and how are they negotiated?

If the thesis traces tea across the Ta'ang world, this chapter lays out the political contents of the Ta'ang world in terms of identity: what projects are attempting to draw the Ta'ang world together, and how do people take them up (or avoid them)? When one says (as people do) that the Ta'ang are "internally diverse", what exactly does this mean, and what would it take to tie them all into a single political-economic project? To make sense of the ways that Ta'ang people relate to the category of Ta'ang, I draw from the anthropological literature that co-theorises the production of race, ethnicity, and nation (Trouillot 2021; Woodard 2022). In this case, it is also necessary to consider how identity and difference are explained in vernacular terms in Thai, Burmese, and Ta'ang; these "local theorizations" of difference are necessary for bringing anthropological theories of race/ethnicity/nation to bear on the particular contexts where Ta'ang people live. These vernacular theorizations of identity and difference shape the kinds of claims that people make about ethno-racial identity, especially in relation to ethno-nationalist movements. My empirical data mostly comes from the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist project, with some reference to the way that it engages with others: Myanmar nationalism, Thai nationalism, and the ways that ethnicity and race are imagined as articulating with each of these nationalisms. Drawing on Gal and Irvine's (2019) semiotic terminology, I pay attention to moments of differentiation and encompassment: in other words, moments when individuals or groups are intentionally or unintentionally marked as different; and, by contrast, moments when apparently differential categories are "spliced" together (Gal and Irvine 2019, 144).

The peoples who identify as Ta'ang are a constellation of dialect groups and cultural orientations, the majority of whom live in a vast area stretching from China's Yunnan province through north-eastern Myanmar and down into Thailand. Local traditions within the Ta'ang

world are stunningly diverse, and the content of Ta'ang traditional practices in one village might be unintelligible in another village—even one that is only a few miles away, in the case of Arrum and Namhsan. There are at least 34 distinct divisions within the Ta'ang umbrella (Mai Aik Kaw), and Naing Oun's research in Namhsan township suggests that there might be many more. The Ta'ang world is a "porous social order" (Gershon 2019) par excellence: identifying as Ta'ang is wholly intelligible, but the boundaries of the Ta'ang world—and who counts or does not count as part of it—are extremely blurry and subject to regular negotiation. At the same time, Ta'ang ethno-nationalist groups have an active stake in reifying Ta'ang identity as a discrete encompassment.

This chapter will begin by considering how vernacular conceptions of ethno-racial difference play out in Myanmar, in dialogue with anthropologies of difference that co-conceptualize ethnicity and race. The chapter then returns to Naing Oun, my research collaborator, and his encounter with the almost-overwhelming internal diversity of the Ta'ang world. While attempting to conduct a broad survey of the ethno-racial demographics of Myanmar's Namhsan township, he and I realized that any attempt to generate encompassing knowledge of the Ta'ang world is nigh on impossible. As we learned, the ways of being Ta'ang are almost too numerous to count, and the lines between family, ethno-racial alignment, and nation become blurrier the more one tries to focus on them. Following Hjorleifur Jonsson (2014, 35), any nationalist project in the Ta'ang world must begin from a position of "negotiation across difference". I then turn to just such a negotiation: the inclusion of the Riang—a Ta'ang subgroup—into a Ta'ang New Year's parade run by a Ta'ang nationalist organization. The example of the New Year's parade demonstrates the parallax between unmarked elite Ta'ang views of what Ta'ang can encompass, and the views of the project from a marked subgroup. The chapter ends with three views into the project of Ta'ang ethno-nationalism—iconized by the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)—and the ways that people take up this project

(in a language standardization program), refuse it outright (in the case of recent Ta'ang migrants to Thailand), and resignify it to mean something other than Ta'ang resistance to the Myanmar state (in the case of conscripts who have fled armed conscription, but use the TNLA as a means to imagine an alternative to their present circumstances). Held together, these ethnographic examples help me explore how people live their lives in relation to Ta'ang ethno-nationalist projects: whether analysing those projects, actively taking part in them, or expressing ambivalence or indifference toward them.

Explaining Difference Across the Myanmar-Thai Border

In his landmark essay "Adieu, Culture," Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds anthropologists that "culture" was initially theorized by early 20th century anthropologists (notably Boas) as an "anticoncept" (Trouillot 2021, 350)—the negation of race. If race was everything that was imagined as biologically heritable, culture was imagined as everything that could be learned, or achieved through practice. By the middle of the 20th century, population groups engaged in the process of political differentiation along the lines of cultural practice became known as "ethnic groups" (Barth 1998). The problem, again following Trouillot, is that there is considerable conceptual slippage between race and ethnicity: even if ethnicity is understood as something that someone *does*, with an emphasis on practice, ethnicity is still inseparable from imaginaries of shared descent and lineage, and the biological baggage that goes along with those imaginaries. Viewed in reverse, even if race is a way of imagining what someone *is*, phenotypically and biologically, racial categories are strongly attached to cultural categories. It is possible to say that someone is "acting white" ("behaving like" a race); it is also possible to say that someone "looks Australian" ("looking like" a cultural category).

To help clarify these slippages, Trouillot forcefully argues that race and ethnicity "need to be conceptualized together" (Trouillot 2021, 359), as a set of overlapping practices of differentiation, rather than as separate concepts. When race and ethnicity are conceptualized separately, ethnicity—which is to say, culture—can be recruited to do the work of racism while giving the racist a way to plausibly deny that are indeed being racist. Someone commenting on "cultural difference," for instance, can make racist distinctions between population groups while simultaneously claiming that they are not making a comment on race, but simply commenting on differences in cultural practice. The way around this is to remember that ethnicity always has racial baggage, and race always has cultural baggage. When we speak and write about ethnicity, we *should* make explicit the racial baggage that is always being carried inside of ethnicity.

In the anthropology of highland Southeast Asia, difference has overwhelmingly been explained in terms of "ethnicity". I hypothesize that this is a hangover from the colonial administrative imaginary of racial difference, in which the highly culturally diverse peoples of Southeast Asia were imagined to have "descended" from the same "racial stock" (S. J. G. Scott 1963; Milne 2005); difference came to be framed in cultural terms. However, there is a growing body of literature—mostly in Myanmar studies—which argues that vernacular discourses of difference in Southeast Asia should be reframed in terms of race (Walton 2013; Callahan 2017; Campbell and Prasse-Freeman 2021). The logic for this reframing is strikingly similar to Trouillot's injunction to conceptualize the two concepts simultaneously: when difference between populations is discussed in Burmese and Thai, for example, racial metaphors like "blood mixing" and "parentage" are readily invoked.

To understand how the Ta'ang see themselves and how they understand the valences of ethno-racial identity and difference in their own community, it is worth briefly mentioning how ethno-racial differences are explained in Burmese and Thai. This explanation is necessary

because "ethnicity" and "race" are English-language terms, with English-language conceptual baggage. In many cases, there is considerable ambiguity about how to translate local explanations for difference into English; this ambiguity is further complicated by the radically divergent vernacular conceptions of ethno-racial difference used on either side of the Myanmar-Thai border, and within the Ta'ang community that straddles it. In Myanmar, the structuring metaphor for the politics of ethno-racial diversity is the Panglong Agreement, a multi-lateral treaty between ethno-racial groups that are imagined as belligerents in a war (Walton 2008; Dunford 2019). In Thailand, ethno-racial diversity is understood through the metaphor of a development scheme, the so-called Royal Agricultural Project: non-Thai ethnic groups are imagined also as non-citizens, who—through economic development and the gradual acquisition of citizenship—can eventually achieve Thainess.

In Burmese, the basic word used to explain all types of ethno-racial difference is *lumyo* (လူမျိုး). Literally, lumyo means "type of person." In the precolonial period (before the 20th century), it had connotations closer to "social class" (Ferguson 2021), but in the 150 years since then, lumyo has come to mean something much closer to the English-language concepts of race and ethnicity: lumyo denotes population groups who are imagined to share biological characteristics and descent (as well as culture, and often nationality in the bureaucratic sense). This shift is partially due to colonial reconfiguration of vernacular concepts through technologies like censuses (Ferguson 2015) and through the work of colonial social research bodies within British Burma (Prasse-Freeman 2023). Today, acceptable answers to the question "what is your lumyo" could reasonably include "Australian," "Black," "Ta'ang," and even

"Muslim" or "Buddhist", to the extent that religious categories have been racialized in the Myanmar context.[47]

Ta'ang people speak of Ta'ang as a lumyo; there is a sense that "lumyo" has certain connotations of scale. To use Ilana Gershon's (2019) terminology, lumyo is a porous social order capable of encompassing "smaller" social orders, but it is less common to imagine a social order that could encompass a lumyo. It is the largest "scale" of the social formations that are usually discussed in Burmese. When Ta'ang people talk about the various ethno-racial groups encompassed by the umbrella term "Ta'ang," they tend to use different terminology other than lumyo, usually "lineage" (*myo nwe su,* မျိုးနွယ်စု) in Burmese, and *hkreu* in Ta'ang).[48] In some ways, this terminology—lumyo and myo nwe su/hkreu—does away with the confusion of the English language terms: in the Myanmar context, lumyo is always already both racial and cultural. It is also capacious enough to include the "national".

Lumyo are the focal points around which "ethnopolitical entrepreneurs" (Brubaker 2002) in Myanmar launch their projects of interpellation and reification. The particular challenge for ethnonationalist groups—Brubaker's "entrepreneurs"—operating in Myanmar is that many lumyo (and especially the Ta'ang) are imagined as highly internally diverse. This is largely congruent with the point made by Brubaker in "Ethnicity Without Groups": any project to increase the cultural coherence of a population category is inherently a political project, and there will always be tension between people who endorse these political projects and people who disagree with the project's terms. Even if two communities both see themselves as Ta'ang,

[47] It is worth noting here that the main "axis of differentiation" (Gal and Irvine 2019) in the racialization of religion in Myanmar is between Buddhists and Muslims. The sizeable Christian minority in Myanmar is basically erased from this schema, which places Buddhists as the unmarked racialized majority and Muslims as the marked racialized minority. The reasons for this outcome are complex and merit further investigation.

[48] "*Hkreu*" literally means "lineage" and is used to explain both agnatic kin groups—e.g., "the Dunford family"—and also subgroups of the Ta'ang totality, as divided up by cultural practices (dialect, mode of dress, religious or ritual practice). The question "what *hkreu* are you?" could lead to a discussion about family and marriage relations; it could also lead to a discussion about ethno-racial identity.

and even identify with the same subcategory, they may not agree about the terms of a pan-Ta'ang identity.

Nationalism and Violence: the TNLA

As Anderson (2006) argues, ideologies of sovereignty are at the core of the nationalist imaginary. For a marginalized and widely racialized group like the Ta'ang, especially in the heavily militarized context of Myanmar's Shan State, violence is a necessary part of achieving that sovereignty. This is one of the reasons why the TNLA work as an icon for the Ta'ang ethno-national movement: as armed revolutionaries, they are engaged in the work of violently ending the subjugation that many feel with regard to other political actors trying to establish hegemony in the region. However, the fact that the TNLA are first and foremost an armed group seems to foreclose some of the the political possibilities of the Ta'ang nationalist movement. Separating (from Myanmar, from Thailand, from the Shan) by force is still an act of force; uniting the Ta'ang by force is still an act of force. The Ta'ang Culture and Literature Committee, the many educational programs, and the robust legal aid network set up by the TNLA cannot undo the fact that they are fundamentally an armed group that survives on taxation and conscription, which may sometimes appear to operate via mechanics of ransom and kidnapping, respectively. Likewise, the astounding diversity of Namhsan township—the cradle of Ta'ang nationalism—points to a very different ethno-racial politics than the one that is necessarily sold by a singular ethno-racial organization.

The problem, however, is that an ethno-nationalist movement seems to answer several pressing questions for the Ta'ang community, but people who identify as Ta'ang do not necessarily agree about the answers it provides. The Ta'ang are racialized and marginalized in Myanmar in particular; in Thailand, where their numbers are much smaller, they are also

persecuted, albeit in different ways that are less specifically racist against Ta'ang people in particular and more generally in ways that are common to many of Thailand's ethnic minorities. At the same time, the ethno-nationalist movement is by necessity a violent movement, an armed movement: the violence inherent in reifying commonalities across groups is made open and explicit when "national sovereignty" is the end goal. People thus invoke the TNLA with pride even as they actively hide from it. Others, like my own research collaborator, Naing Oun, see different possibilities: the TNLA is not beyond reproach, and they do cause some problems; at the same time, they have the organizational capacity to enrich Ta'ang cultural life and deliver services to communities that are neglected (or even reviled) by Myanmar state agencies. Brubaker's entrepreneurial metaphor for ethno-politics is particularly apt in the case of Myanmar's Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs).[49] Most of these organizations are not solely military operations, or ethno-nationalist ones, but complex organizations that also contain business interests in everything from tollways to nightclubs to cattle exportation.

The most prominent ethno-nationalist group working to reify a sense of unified Ta'ang identity is one such ERO, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), governed by the Myanmar-based Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF).[50] The PSLF is a revolutionary political group; the TNLA is their armed wing. In popular media in Myanmar, the TNLA receives a great deal more press than the PSLF and ends up working as a kind of icon for the Ta'ang nationalist movement writ large. However, the TNLA has a particular vision of what a Ta'ang "nationality" might look like, and one that is not necessarily shared by all Ta'ang people. The PSLF and TNLA are illegal organizations under Myanmar law, considered terrorists by the

[49] In political science, this type of organization is usually referred to as an Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO). However, groups like the TNLA are increasingly referred to as EROs in Myanmar, both in academic contexts and in popular media, as a way of differentiating them from the Sit Tat and their allies. Reframing revolutionary groups as EROs also allows the Sit Tat itself to be reframed as an EAO, albeit the largest one. Framing the Sit Tat as an EAO rather than as "state forces" is another angle of the metapragmatic attack waged by using the phrase "Sit Tat" rather than "Tatmadaw".

[50] Although most Ta'ang people consider the name "Palaung" derogatory, it lingers in the names of many Ta'ang organizations in order to increase their legibility to outsiders.

pre- and post-coup governments. They are accompanied by (but not identical to) the Ta'ang Literature and Culture Committee (TCLC) and Ta'ang National Party (TNP), law-abiding organizations who nonetheless share a rough political vision of the PSLF-TNLA. For this reasons, the TCLC, TNP, and other pan-Ta'ang political organizations are viewed with a high degree of suspicion by the state. State scrutiny of Ta'ang organizations increased significantly in late 2019, after the TNLA attacked several key military checkpoints along the Mandalay-Muse highway, the main artery between central Myanmar and the Chinese border. In the wake of Myanmar's 2021 military coup, the TNLA openly declared their support for the popular resistance movement, and any group seen as aligned with the Ta'ang nationalist movement—even legal ones—have had to move underground to avoid state harassment.

The blurry boundaries between the TNLA and non-military Ta'ang interest groups are not a fabrication of the Sit Tat. When I would ask my Ta'ang friends about the links between, say, the Ta'ang Student and Youth Union (TSYU)—an education-focused Ta'ang NGO—and the TNLA, they would sometimes laugh. My friend Mai Myo Aung, a Ta'ang man from Lashio, put it sardonically: "Links? Haha! What do you mean, *links*? They're the same thing! The TSYU *is* the TNLA!" This is not how the TSYU would describe itself, of course, but it is true that there is a long history of the TNLA recruiting soldiers from civilian Ta'ang organizations, and of TNLA soldiers moving into prominent positions in civilian cultural organizations. For example, Naing Oun estimates that "about half" of the Ta'ang Literature and Culture Committee (TCLC), a Ta'ang literature organization, were TNLA soldiers for years before they got involved in cultural work (cf. Kojima and Badenoch 2013, 122).

Adding further legitimacy to the TNLA is their support for the popular resistance movement in Myanmar, a political move which casts them not merely as the face of Ta'ang ethno-nationalism but also as potential collaborators in the governing of post-revolutionary Myanmar. The TNLA signalled this almost immediately: within days of the coup, photos began

to circulate on Facebook that depicted senior TNLA generals giving the three finger salute of the Myanmar resistance (Figure 12, p. 126).[51] Shortly thereafter, a video began to circulate of a large group of men and women—all in TNLA uniforms—singing a quintessential Burmese protest song: "*Ayei Gyi Byi*", or "It's Important". The song has graphic lyrics about shedding blood for a political cause; however, the imagery and symbolism associated with the song are icons of the National League for Democracy and the colonial period independence movement (MacLachlan 2023), which carry specifically *Bamar* nationalist connotations. Seeing TNLA soldiers in uniform, singing this song, sends a complex but immediately intelligible message: the Myanmar revolutionary struggle is also a Ta'ang struggle, and the TNLA is prepared to fight for its realization.

Nationalism in the model sold by the TNLA automatically entails physical violence—inasumch as the TNLA are are an army, fighting for territorial sovereignty. There is a risk, here, that as a resistance organization, the TNLA reproduces the same kinds of structures they have been fighting against for decades—that is to say, the racial-nationalist and imperialist structures of the Myanmar Sit Tat (cf. Woods 2011). However, the relations of power and hegemony that are required to increase Ta'ang ethno-racial coherence are not automatically violent. From here, I explore ways that the Ta'ang nationalist movement has sought to encompass its margins through ideological means, whether by making those very margins legible, or engaging in taxonomies, or using entities like the TNLA as an index of solidarity.

[51] The three-finger salute, adapted from the Hunger Games media franchise, began to be used by anti-military protestors in Thailand in 2014, following the military coup led by Prayuth Chan-Ocha. The salute has been banned in Thailand, and has been reproduced in different locations in Asia (Hong Kong, and now Myanmar) as a symbol of anti-authoritarian solidarity.

Figure 12: The TNLA secretariat displaying the three finger revolutionary salute. Image circulated widely on Facebook.

Naing Oun's Survey: Learning Indeterminacy

In 2022, as the TNLA established territorial hegemony over much of northern Shan State, Naing Oun felt increasingly comfortable with (and curious about) pursuing tea research across every part of Namhsan Township. His experiences at Arrum had inspired him: what other hkreu (Ta'ang lineages) were out there? Did they also farm tea? Did they think of themselves as Ta'ang? After batting around these questions for a few days, Naing Oun made a

proposal to me: he wanted to conduct a survey of every village in Namhsan Township. He wanted to go to every village with a battery of questions about livelihood, lumyo alignment, and—for Ta'ang people—their hkreu. The goal of the survey would be to get a rough sense of the ethno-racial makeup of the township in terms of self-identification, and also test the cultural stereotype that Ta'ang people in Namhsan mostly make their living on tea.

When Naing Oun initially pitched the survey idea to me, I thought it sounded too ambitious for one person to carry out alone. Whichever way we designed this survey, it was going to be rife with category errors and filled with messy questions about how to divide up places and people. There are approximately 85 established villages in Namhsan Township, depending on how one cuts up village clusters—like Zayan Kyi, for example.[52] Zayan Kyi is a well-defined place on its own, but potentially consisting of several parts; some people consider it contiguous with Namhsan, and others consider it to have its own sense of village identity.[53] Furthermore, we both already knew that Namhsan was a site of extreme diversity. Off the top of our heads, we could think of at least ten different hkreu who lived just in the immediate vicinity of Namhsan town. Some of them spoke languages that were not easily intelligible to Naing Oun, even though he was already fluent in several Ta'ang dialects. How would he communicate with them, especially if they did not speak fluent Burmese?

While I debated the merits of Naing Oun's survey project, he had already begun to plan it. A few days after pitching it to me, he had begun a list of questions; he had also enlisted some of his friends to help create a rough map of Namhsan and the location of every known village and hamlet. When he showed me these plans, I agreed that we may as well give the survey a

[52] "Zayan Kyi" is the Burmese name; in Samlone Ta'ang, Zayan Kyi is know as Jawng Nawng. In everyday usage, the two terms are interchangeable; most project participants and interviewees used "Zayan Kyi" with me, and would switch back and forth when speaking with one another.

[53] Urban and quasi-urban neighbourhoods in Myanmar have complex boundaries that are partially defined by government administration, but also by patterns of religious circulation (e.g., association with particular temples) and by hybrid forms like the dhamma-youn (dhamma office)—see Roberts (2022) for detailed coverage of these complexities.

try. In the end, Naing Oun visited 86 villages, and encountered more than 30 different *hkreu*. He asked people to self-identify: sometimes people told him their clan name; sometimes people gave him an ethnonym. Sometimes, as far as Naing Oun was able to ascertain, these two categories were indistinguishable. Some of the findings were surprising to Naing Oun, especially regarding the sheer diversity of khreu and lumyo affiliations throughout Namhsan township. Samlone, the hkreu imagined to the be majority of the Namhsan area, were just one of a plurality of hkreu; two villages identified as Ruching, a hkreu commonly associated with a different region, hundreds of kilometres to the south. Although most people identified as Ta'ang, Naing Oun also regularly encountered a large handful of people from other lumyo—predominantly Lisu, Kachin, Shan, and Bamar. In many cases, they had intermarried with Ta'ang people, or lived in villages that had already had a mix of different ethno-racial groups for several generations.

By choosing self-identification as the method for eliciting lumyo and hkreu, Naing Oun and I were well aware that the results of the survey would be too unwieldy and indeterminate to draw hard demographic conclusions; across the border in China, attempts to collect ethno-racial data via self-identification resulted in census data that was so complex as to defy tabulation (cf. Mullaney 2010). In our case, however, the point was not to create an accurate "map" of the ethnic makeup of Namhsan Township, but to get a rough sense of the distance between the popular imaginary of Namhsan's ethno-racial makeup (an imaginary dominated by the Samlone) and the way that people actually identify when asked. What we learned is that the ways of being Ta'ang are numerous and indeterminate; any attempt to codify or unify them would be to swim against the current. Although most of the people interviewed in our survey would identify as Ta'ang, the particular way that they present and live out their Ta'ang-ness varies widely. To return to Brubaker (2002), the vast internal diversity and the porousness

(Gershon 2019) of the Ta'ang social order mean that any attempt to increase coherence of the Ta'ang concept is a question of power and hegemony.

Encompassing the Margins: The Riang and the Ta'ang Ethno-Nationalist Movement

By starting with Naing Oun's encounter with the tremendous internal diversity of the people under Ta'ang umbrella, I want to highlight the challenges inherent to any project for reifying a unified sense of Ta'ang-ness; Here, I turn towards people who are actively swimming against the current of social reality, and attempting to reify a particular vision of Ta'ang-ness. In spite of the challenges, there are many "ethnopolitical entrepreneurs" (Brubaker 2002, 166) in the Ta'ang world who sell a cohesive vision of Ta'ang identity. There are multiple reasons people take up these projects, which do not necessarily overlap. In some cases, the movements to create a unified sense of Ta'ang-ness have qualities of encompassment: some groups are engaged in bringing Ta'angs into the ethno-nationalist cause; some are engaged in expanding the definition of who counts as Ta'ang. These "encompassing" movements are what might be called "classical" ethno-nationalist movements. Their framing of Ta'ang-ness is positive: "you have certain characteristics, therefore you are Ta'ang; we are working to build a unified vision of what it means to be Ta'ang." However, research participants occasionally had cynical (rather than positive) responses to this type of organizing: for some, participating in Ta'ang ethno-national politics is less about creating a positive vision of a Ta'ang world than it is a means to generating a sense of belonging when faced with other alternative social formations—the Thai State, the Shan separatist movement, the Burmese resistance—where they do not feel they have a place.

In December 2018, on the invitation of my friend Zaw Lin, I attended a celebration for Ta'ang new year held in Yangon, Myanmar. The event was organized by a group of Ta'ang

ethno-nationalist organizations—civilian groups, like education NGOs and Ta'ang student unions—who had reserved several acres of Yangon's People's Park for the occasion. There was an enormous stage for music and dance performances, fronted by a parade ground, all of which was surrounded by endless rows of food stalls and handicraft merchants. Zaw Lin, one of Yangon's most involved Ta'ang community organizers, was in rare form: he was running around with a clipboard and a walkie talkie, directing groups of people with alacrity: huge smile, reflective safety vest, Ray Ban sunglasses. He was running logistics for a vast parade of youth delegations from Ta'ang communities across Myanmar, all of whom were decked out in the formalwear representative of their particular Ta'ang sub-groups: women in a kaleidoscopic array of headdresses, embroidered jackets, and hand-woven sarongs, men in the uniform black suit and pink turban used during Ta'ang formal events. While they waited, some delegations played barrel-shaped hand-drums and took turns dancing; others loaded up on snacks.

I was hanging back, near the entrance to the park, trying to keep out of the way. Suddenly, a pickup truck roared up, the bed packed with a group of men in totally unfamiliar costume: they all had waist-length (or longer) hair, small brightly coloured coats, and long skirts; their teeth were covered in gold plates with elaborate engravings. This was a radical departure from the black coat/black pants uniform worn by all the other men at this event. Although I had attended many similar pan-Ta'ang events, I had never come across people dressed this way before. They were quickly ushered out of the truck, and the driver sped away. Unlike most of the youth delegations, who were bubbling with the excitement of the festival, this new delegation looked wary and out of place. I walked up to them and said hello in Burmese; they didn't respond to me. I then said "hello" in Samlone Ta'ang—I knew Samlone might not be their dialect, but figured it was worth a shot. One man responded to me, sounding bewildered. Before either of us had time to continue, Zaw Lin spotted us and ran over. He started speaking to them in a mix of Ta'ang and Burmese, while making sweeping

gesticulations to show them how to arrange themselves. Slowly, this newly-arrived delegation took their place in the parade.

Once the parade was underway, I asked Zaw Lin: "Who were those guys?"

He said, "Oh! They're from Kho Lam![54] They call themselves Ri'ang."

"So they're also Ta'ang?"

"Yeah—I think they're a type of Ruching."

"They seem sort of scared to be here…"

"Oh, it's a complicated situation—remind me to tell you about the news story, we have to show solidarity with them."

Zaw Lin moved on, and the parade continued for over an hour. Gradually, the event turned into a more formal sit-down affair with speeches and tightly choreographed dance performances; I went home but made plans to hang out with Zaw Lin a few days later and debrief about the event.

We met at a barbecue restaurant in Zaw Lin's neighbourhood. First and foremost, I wanted to know about the "news story" that Zaw Lin referenced in relation to the Riang people, of whom I had been ignorant until that evening. As Zaw Lin explained, in the news story was an incident that had taken place some months earlier, in August 2018. Daw Khin May Tun, a Burmese Facebook personality, posted a live video of a group of Riang men wearing their traditional clothing and participating in a night-time ritual. She was mocking the men in openly racist terms, calling them "man-eating ghosts…who can only be seen on moonless nights" (Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint 2018). She repeatedly circled the group in her car while laughing and mocking them, filming the whole time. The video was viewed more than 300,000 times, and sparked heated discussions on social media about the problem of racist views being disseminated on Facebook. Remarkably, several Ta'ang ethno-nationalist organizations took it

[54] A town in Southern Shan State.

upon themselves to act as the representatives of the Riang: an ethno-nationalist youth group approached video poster Daw Khin May Tun at home, and demanded an apology; even more remarkably, Nan Moe, a Ta'ang parliamentarian, filed multiple parliamentary complaints against Daw Khin May Tun, and met with the Minister of Ethnic Affairs to insist that legal sanctions be brought against her. These efforts were remarkable because even within the Ta'ang community, I had never heard people stand up across hkreu lines like this before; it appeared to be unprecedented as a demonstration of pan-Ta'ang solidarity. The Riang presence at the Ta'ang New Year parade was meant to be a demonstration of solidarity with the Riang, orchestrated by Ta'ang ethno-nationalist groups. However, it was not clear to me that the Riang men who attended the parade had a positive experience, or viewed their group as being unilaterally part of a wider Ta'ang movement. Some of them joined the festivities, made new friends, and had a good time, as Zaw Lin showed me via photos on his phone. Others left in a hurry, as I saw on the day of the event.

In this example, Zaw Lin and other proponents of the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist cause view themselves as "showing solidarity" with, or even "protecting" the Riang. On a more basic level, their actions are aimed at "inclusion," at expanding the rubric of who "counts" as Ta'ang, and demonstrating the possible benefits of being counted this way. What is less clear, however, is what the Riang think about this same action. Although I did not spend much time actually talking to them, I can imagine that they felt rather out of place. Being Ta'ang—identifying with the umbrella category—did not seem like a sufficient criteria for comfortably belonging at the Ta'ang New Years' festivities in Yangon's People's Park. As Gal and Irvine (2019, 143-145) demonstrate, encompassments like this one, which involve unification across difference, require a great deal of ideological work—especially when the encompassing category, Ta'ang, is understood to contain both the unmarked (general Ta'ang, iconized by Samlone and Rumai elites and the TNLA leadership) and marked (in this case, Riang) categories. Zaw Lin and the

other Ta'ang nationalists must simultaneously foreground Riang-as-different but also Riang-as-Ta'ang.

When I asked Zaw Lin how he saw the Riang in relation to the wider Ta'ang community, he invoked a metaphor of multiple scales. He explained it this way in English: "Myanmar, Shan, Ta'ang. Then the Riang, I don't think a lot of Ta'ang people know them, but they're still part of us". What Zaw Lin meant by "us" was clear in context: he meant that the Riang were part of the Ta'ang community as understood by Ta'ang ethno-nationalist groups in Myanmar. However, at the same time, Zaw Lin acknowledged that he did not totally agree with his own metaphor: he certainly does not see himself "as Shan", even though the ethno-racial schema invoked by the Myanmar government generally positions Ta'ang people this way.[55] Furthermore, when we discussed the extent to which he identifies as a Myanmar person, he emphasized that it was "just the word on the passport". "Myanmar" is a slippery word, which is the formal (i.e. literary) ethnonym for the ethno-racial majority of the country ("Bamar" is the spoken form, "Myanmar" is the literary form); however, there is some public discourse that identifies "Myanmar" as an encompassing term—not just the formal word for "Bamar", but a civic nationality for all citizens of Myanmar regardless of their ethno-racial alignment. These slippages in signification are enabled in Burmese by the very flexibility of the term lumyo, and the concepts of myo nwe su/hkreu. In a way, the slippage (encompassment) of Zaw Lin's Ta'ang identity into the civic nationalist notion of "Myanmar" is not completely distinct from the Ta'ang nationalist cause of incorporating Riang-as-Ta'ang.

Although Zaw Lin is not from a rich family, he is from the same clan as the former Ta'ang royal family (the Samlone); he is also from Namhsan, the centre of the Ta'ang nationalist movement and historically the largest and wealthiest Ta'ang community. In other

[55] In Myanmar, there is an oft-invoked racial categorization exercise whose origins are somewhat obscure; see Ferguson (2015), Cheesman (2017), and Prasse-Freeman (2023) for more detail.

words, he is a Ta'ang elite in many ways. As Benedict Anderson famously argued, nationalism almost always begins as an elite project, intended to shore up bourgeois interests in times of intense social change. Although nationalists often use populist rhetoric, and their support depends on cross-class alliances, nationalist movements have often been employed as a way to *prevent* subaltern peoples from organizing revolutionary movements of their own (Anderson 2006, 49-50). In the fractious political landscape of Myanmar, and especially Shan State, it is plausible that Ta'ang nationalist groups may be courting the Riang as a way of declaring them off-limits to rival groups, or as a means of dissuading them from creating an ethno-national organization of their own. However, as the TNLA are what might be called "resistance nationalists" (cf. Klein 2001), they are also in a position where it is useful to widen the rubric of who counts as Ta'ang. The problem, for people who want to see the TNLA and the Ta'ang nationalist movement as emancipatory, is that even this resistance nationalism is not immune to the politics of elite hegemony. To explore hegemony within the Ta'ang nationalist movement, I turn to the project of language standardization.

Erasure and Hegemony in the Ta'ang Language Standardization Program

When Zaw Lin and the Ta'ang organizations of Yangon include the Riang in their New Years' festivities, they are engaging in a form of "taxonomic" (Gal and Irvine 2019, 130) inclusion: the point is less about how the Riang differ from a hegemonic Ta'ang whole—reproducing the marked/unmarked dichotomy already established by the racist Facebook videographer—but rather how the Riang can be included as a new type within the single scalar unit of the Ta'ang lumyo. However, the Ta'ang world has its own patterns of hegemony and axes of differentiation, which come to the fore at moments of standardization. Unlike taxonomic inclusion, standardization is a fractal process where differential part-whole relations

on one scale (say, Riang versus Myanmar) are reproduced on another scale (Riang versus Ta'ang), and then erased via "subsumption" (Gal and Irvine 2019, 133). Put differently, standardization is the process by which a marked differential category within the Ta'ang lumyo are converted—by meeting institutional criteria—into an undifferentiated part of the unmarked whole. Here, I explore the tensions that arise between people already fully engaged in the Ta'ang nationalist movement as they wrestle with a process of standardization.

In late 2018, a friend invited me to enrol in a Ta'ang language class in Yangon, Myanmar. His explanation of the class was slightly confusing to me, but I decided to go along with it: when I tried to ascertain what dialect we would study, he explained in English that it was a "combined one". I knew that ultimately, for fieldwork in Shan State, I would need to learn one of the three most common dialects used by tea growers and traders—Samlone, Rumai, and Ruching—which are not mutually intelligible. Knowing which dialect we would learn would have helped me envision particular field sites: the Ta'ang community imagines each of those dialects as corresponding to a particular area. What was I going to do with a "combined" language? Moreover, a language combined by whom? And to what end?

It turned out that I was attending a course co-sponsored by several Ta'ang ethno-nationalist organizations, all roughly under the umbrella of the Ta'ang Culture and Literature Committee (TCLC). The "combined" language is a codified version of the emergent Ta'ang lingua franca spoken by soldiers in the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and workers from the wide variety of Ta'ang civil society organizations, including the Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO) and Ta'ang Student and Youth Union (TSYU). The TCLC learned that a pidgin form of Ta'ang was emerging in these contexts, where Ta'ang people from different dialect groups were brought together by a common cause, and a major part of their mission—aided by the Ta'ang Sangha Association, a network of Ta'ang Buddhist monks—has been to codify this language. The course that I was attending was not simply a language training course,

but a course designed to identify and train potential teachers of this combined Ta'ang language. The goal of the course was only partially to learn the combined Ta'ang language, but more than anything an opportunity for young Yangon-based Ta'ang people to identify who else in Myanmar's metropolis took the Ta'ang nationalist cause seriously.

The TCLC has explicit "language priorities" that are part of a broader "language plan", which the TNLA has begun to enforce at public events as of 2022. As of 2018, the language priorities were as follows, written in English on the whiteboard at the head of the class and rehearsed periodically by a boisterous representative of the TCLC:

[Written on whiteboard] Priority 1: Mother tongue

([Spoken, in English and then Burmese] "Your mother tongue is so precious. Keep it sacred, close to your heart, like your real mother.")

Priority 2: Standard Ta'ang ("part of building our community")

("This is to build our community: standard Ta'ang is the language made to build the Ta'ang people.")

Priority 3: English

("As you can see, English is to build Ta'ang as part of an international community.")

Priority 4: Burmese

("This is not really a priority, because it's too easy to learn—Myanmar is our national state, so we have to use it, but we do not have to prioritize it.")

Since 2018, these priorities have been modified slightly: teachers in TNLA-run schools told me that English has been replaced by Chinese—a surprisingly pragmatic move. However, the overall plan remains the same. However, one of the most important omissions to the above language plan is now being filled in.

Anyone familiar with northern Shan State—and especially the trade culture of northern Shan—will notice a glaring omission from this list of priorities. There is no mention of Shan language. Shan is the lingua franca of trade and everyday administration across much of Shan state, including in the Ta'ang lands: the enormous diversity and dispersal of Ta'ang dialects in comparison to the relatively wider spread of Shan has meant that Shan has often been necessary as a trade language—even between groups of people who identify primarily as Ta'ang. Many of the Ta'ang tea brokers with whom I spent time in Mandalay—in mostly Burmese-speaking environments—would switch to Shan when discussing prices or the specifics of business deals. Furthermore, a kind of Ta'ang-ized Shan language was the chronicle language of the Ta'ang court at Namhsan, which is still the reference point for the prestige variants of Ta'ang clothing, language, and ritual practice. Why omit Shan from this list of priorities?

I argue that Shan has been erased here specifically because differentiation from Shan is the core of—rather than an accessory to—the project of Ta'ang nationalism as envisioned by the TCLC and TNLA. Erasure is core to the semiotic establishment of what has *not* been erased: when participants in an ideological project exhibit "confounding evidence" (Gal and Irvine 2019, 127), they are usually erased, or considered exceptional. In this case, erasing Shan (by ignoring its presence) was more efficacious than mentioning it, but accompanying it with admonitions and caveats. Mentioning Shan would require negation—i.e., do not speak Shan—which would be anathema to the TCLC's insistence on a "positive" framing of Ta'ang-ness (positive in the sense of affirmative). It is well-established that ethno-nationalist movements are often framed in the negative, established by who is *not* part of the nation (Barth 1998;

Anderson 2006). Resisting this negative framing in favour of an affirmative one seems to be an especially important ideological move for the Ta'ang cause, where diversity within the category of "Ta'ang" is so high: the indeterminacy of the internal structure of Ta'ang-ness would seem to require some kind of negation to demarcate who is *not* Ta'ang. However, there are other reasons why no mention was made of the Shan language. One possible reason is that the TNLA's main enemy and primary political-economic competitor is a military organization that styles itself as explicitly Shan nationalist: the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS). Although the TNLA is allied with a different Shan ethno-nationalist group—the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP)—the conflict between the TNLA and RCSS is often framed explicitly along ethno-racial lines (i.e. as "ethnic conflict"), as a conflict over the right to establish a "homeland." This framing is complicated by the ethno-racial makeup of the RCSS, especially in the eastern parts of its territory: around Mong Kung and Mong Pan, many of the RCSS' conscripts are reportedly ethnically Ta'ang. When the RCSS and TNLA come into conflict with one another, the soldiers fighting on the front lines may both self-identify as Ta'ang. For the moment, though, Shan language is more notable for its absence from official conversations about Ta'ang language than for its inclusion in them.

Shan erasures aside, there is a certain savviness to the TCLC/TNLA's official language program: their attention to "mother tongues" is an acknowledgement of the internal diversity of the Ta'ang world. As Naing Oun found, there are dozens of Ta'ang "ethnic groups" even in the relatively small area of Namhsan township, let alone across the vast transnational arc of the Ta'ang world (encompassing western Yunnan in China, all of Myanmar's Shan State, and parts of northern Thailand). There seems to be some kind of awareness on behalf of the TCLC that their project of Ta'ang linguistic unification inevitably has internal patterns of hegemony that could impact the degree to which participants see themselves belonging to a pan-Ta'ang ethno-racial order. Throughout the course, I was repeatedly surprised when students whose mother

tongue was Samlone had an easier time understanding the course materials than those whose mother tongue was Rumai or Rujing. Samlone is the main dialect spoken in Namhsan, and the prestige variant of Ta'ang (Mak 2012); however, dialects from the Rumai and Rujing branches of Ta'ang are much more widely-spoken than Samlone, which is geographically limited to the Namhsan core. At nearly every lesson, Rumai and Rujing students would take turns standing up and "translating" some of the course materials from standard Ta'ang into Rumai and Rujing. Although I cannot say for certain that standard Ta'ang is skewed towards Samlone speakers, it certainly felt that way. It is easy to imagine how this situation would have been alienating for students from non-Samlone dialect groups—especially students from linguistic backgrounds that were neither Samlone nor Rumai/Rujing, whose presence was doubly erased. By emphasizing the importance of students' mother tongues, the TCLC seems to have pre-empted some of the awkward conversations that could have arisen from these gaps and erasures.

When Hegemony Trumps Altruism: Thailand's Ta'ang Culture Network

While in Thailand, I spent much of my time with people involved in the Thailand Ta'ang Cultural Network, which members usually referred to as "the Network" (*khreua khai*, เครือข่าย). They specifically chose this word—network—so that their organization would not have the connotations of hierarchy associated with words like "association". Network, in the founders' opinions, sounded looser and more approachable. The founders were well aware of the potential pitfalls associated with the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist movement, especially given the TNLA's iconic status as a kind of synonym for Ta'ang ethno-nationalism, and the hegemonic place of Namhsan within TNLA ideology. If the TCLC's language program was marketed with an emphasis on the validity of mother tongues—a kind of token gesture towards the internal diversity of the Ta'ang world—the Network took this a step further by actively

distancing their project from anything like Ta'ang "unification" in the political sense. Although the founders knew that they could be seen as s kind of Thai-side analogy to organizations like the TCLC, they tended to avoid organizing events that echoed Ta'ang nationalist practices in Myanmar (for example, celebrating Ta'ang national day). The Network's mission was explicitly focused on making life easier for migrants: unlike the TNLA or its affiliates, they had no intention of creating alternative governance structures, but simply to help make life in Thailand more hospitable for Ta'ang people, and especially people without correct documentation or many social connections in the country.[56]

It was during my time talking to members of the Network that I encountered Ta'ang people who explicitly eschewed any connection to Ta'ang nationalist movements. More precisely, it was during this time that I encountered what might be called the absent presence of these people. I had heard from a friend in Myanmar that there was a large group of recently-arrived Ta'ang people from northern Shan State in Thailand's Chiang Rai province, who had recently established a village. They were purportedly planning to grow tea there. I was curious to meet with them; however, every attempt I made to contact them failed. My friend in Myanmar gave me a Thai phone number that did not work; when I asked a friend involved with the Network, Julia, if she had made contact with that group in Chiang Rai, she scowled. "Yeah", she said, "but they want us to stay away". I asked her why. "Maybe I introduced myself the wrong way", she said. It turned out that Julia and her friends had attempted to contact the group in Chiang Rai and welcome them; when she explained the Network, however, the village's leader told her in no uncertain terms that nobody in the village would be getting involved with the Network, and asked her not to contact him again. I asked her if she knew what had happened; from a friend, she thought that she did. Through the grapevine, Julia had heard that some people

[56] I use the past tense here because the fate of the Network is unclear: they elected new membership immediately before the COVID-19 outbreak, and the new leadership has struggled to gather funding and maintain the momentum initiated by the founders.

in the group in Chiang Rai had been involved in the Ta'ang National Party in Myanmar, and something had gone wrong; they viewed the Network as a similar kind of project, and wanted to be left alone.

In the Ta'ang community in Myanmar, most of my friends are elites of various kinds: tea brokers, tea growers, academics, businesspeople. Even if they may disagree with the TNLA's approach, they do not feel comfortable openly dissenting with TNLA's mission. This is especially true in the wake of Myanmar's 2021 military coup, in which the TNLA has emerged as one of the ethnic insurgencies that most openly and unequivocally supports the rebel government headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. In Thailand, this is not the case. Although the TNLA has some presence in Thailand, and I saw Ta'ang nationalist flags in several Ta'ang villages, I rarely encountered people who openly supported the TNLA or their mission. A feeling of belonging to a wider Ta'ang world is not sufficient cause for people to want to get involved in a Ta'ang nationalist movement: in Thailand, where the TNLA's reach is less hegemonic, it is much easier for people to see how the two projects—being Ta'ang, and Ta'ang nationalism—are not one in the same. One can relate to the umbrella category of Ta'ang as a mode of belonging, as a way of imagining one's relationship to both their immediate community and distant others, without simultaneously imagining how those relationships could (or should) also be a basis for territorial sovereignty.

Away from the centres of Ta'ang ethno-politics, it is easier for people to acknowledge that the TNLA is the same *kind* of project as any other ethno-nationalist military. This possibility emerged very clearly during a conversation with my friend Tee. Tee was born in Myanmar, but has lived in Thailand for most of his life. Although his family have mostly made a modest living as labourers on orange plantations, Tee joined the Buddhist monkhood as an adolescent and managed to leverage his monastic connections to receive a university scholarship. When we met, he had just graduated from university, but was facing some trouble

finding a job because his Thai documentation was patchy and incomplete. Our conversation about Thai bureaucracy morphed into a more general conversation about nation-states. While we were on the topic, I asked him what he thought about the TNLA, and a Ta'ang state in Myanmar. "Isn't that the same thing?" he asked me. The same as what, I asked him. "Thai state, Ta'ang state, Thai army, Ta'ang army, I don't know!" he said with an exasperated tone. I asked him what he meant. He shrugged. "Some people just want power, and they have to give it a name". Our conversation drifted away from the topic, and I was hesitant to press the issue; some hours later, though, Tee brought it back up of his own volition. "Before, you asked me about the armed group",[57] he said. "What I mean is, the Thai army comes to our villages and collects people. You can fix your Thai documents if you join. But the TNLA also collects people. What do you get if you join? In both armies, you have to pick up a gun and fight".

I often wonder if this conversation might have gone differently if I had begun by naming another Ta'ang organization, rather than the TNLA. Perhaps by bringing up the TNLA, I shifted the focus of the conversation towards violent actors, when really what I wanted to know was what Tee thought about pan-Ta'ang ideology in a broader sense. However, I am not sure if Tee would have even known of something like the Ta'ang Culture and Literature Committee or the Ta'ang Women's Organization: for practical purposes, the TNLA is an icon of the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist movement writ large. However, even if I had taken a different approach, I am not sure that the conversation would have proceeded very differently. From Tee's perspective, the TNLA is a Myanmar political issue that happens to have consequences for his particular community; for him, "being Ta'ang" is just something that he does on a daily basis, with his family and with his friends, something that comes into relief when he explains himself to his Thai and Shan friends, but not a determining factor for his conception of politics. He is

[57] People often refer to the TNLA as "the armed group" or "our armed group" in order to avoid saying the name out loud. They are explicitly considered terrorists by the government of Myanmar, and while the government of Thailand doesn't seem to have a formal stance on them, people generally seem to consider it safer not to mention them by name in public.

interested in Ta'ang issues inasmuch as they are his particular community's issues; he is not interested in a wider political project that encompasses all Ta'ang people. Like the Ta'ang village in Chiang Rai who bristled when Julia contacted them, Tee also has some desire to keep Ta'ang nationalist projects at arm's length.

Tee's life in Thailand was considerably more comfortable than the lives his parents left behind in Myanmar; however, his citizenship status gave him some resentment towards the Thai state. As he put it to me once, "I can be Thai, but I don't feel Thai". Although he operates in a largely Ta'ang social world—his best friends at the monastery and the university all had Ta'ang backgrounds—his Ta'ang identity is not always a big part of his daily life, and his family chides him for his urbane demeanour and bookish tastes, developed during the decade he spent as a monk and a university student. He works as a waiter in a famous café in Chiang Mai, listens to Thai pop, and lives in a shared apartment with some Thai acquaintances; to a casual observer, he would come across as no different from any other Thai 20-something making a living in the city. However, his experiences of childhood precarity and his marked status as a migrant worker prevent him from feeling a strong sense of belonging in Thailand.

Evading Emancipation: Soldiers on the Wrong Side

Some research participants—especially in Thailand—simultaneously want to keep the violent aspects of Ta'ang nationalism at arm's length, while still leaning on it as a possible way of thinking about the political future and imagining the world otherwise. TNLA conscripts are often coerced; even when they are voluntary, joining the TNLA is tantamount to taking one's life in one's hands. There are limited political options for Ta'ang people who want to engage in imagining pan-Ta'ang solidarity, let alone an autonomous Ta'ang community in Myanmar. Options are even more limited in Thailand, where the majority of Ta'ang are recent migrants

with varying degrees of official residence status. What can the TNLA offer to these people, many of whom are in Thailand for the express purpose of avoiding conscription? In this context, I found relations to the Ta'ang national project that are neither acceptance nor eschewal, but different ways of mobilizing the TNLA and its symbols. For some, the project of an encompassing ethno-national Ta'ang identity is not about imagining unity with other Ta'angs as much as it is about imagining an alternative to social formations that erase the existence of Ta'ang people—the Thai state, the Myanmar junta, and predatory migrant labour arrangements. One night, in a tiny Ta'ang village in northern Thailand, my friend Mai Bon Aung introduced me to a former soldier named Tun Tun, who had expressed interest in my project. "Former soldier" was how Tun Tun identified himself to me at first; but as I got to know him, I learned that his story was even more complicated.

Before he was a soldier, Tun Tun was an interpreter for the United Nations and other top-flight NGOs working in the borderlands of Myanmar and China. Tun Tun told me that he spoke seven languages fluently (two dialects of Ta'ang, along with Thai, Burmese, Wa, Chinese, and Shan) and several more conversationally, and had a series of lucrative contracts before he was forcefully conscripted. He was not forthcoming about which group he had fought in, but repeatedly hinted that it may have been the TNLA; he was using phrases like "after I finished my service to the Ta'ang armed group," which gave me the impression that it had been so. Eventually, though, after we had been drinking, he quite suddenly and tearfully explained that he had been a soldier in the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), and that most of the young Ta'ang men in his village—not far from Mong Kung, in the centre of Myanmar's Shan State—had also been conscripted by the RCSS with the threat of reprisals against potential conscripts' families. He went on a bitter rant about his hatred for the RCSS establishment.

"They're not an army," he said in Thai. "They're…you know…they don't follow the rules. They're like…"

"Gangsters?" suggested Mai Bon Aung in Thai, smiling serenely. "Yeah!" Tun Tun yelled. Mai Bon Aung, usually hyper-gregarious, had been listening to Tun Tun and I in silence up to this point. He suddenly went on, in English, a language that Tun Tun did not understand:

"Tun Tun sometimes pretends to have been a TNLA soldier, but he never was. I also never was. But I think we both like to think about what it would be like to fight for our people." I asked him what people he meant. "Our Ta'ang people," he continued. "Thailand, this place, I can survive here, and I don't want to go back. But if I do go back, back to Myanmar, I want to fight for my people. I think this is what Tun Tun is thinking about."

Like Tun Tun, Mai Bon Aung also fled to Thailand to avoid a life as a forced conscript. This was a biographical thread that connected almost every Ta'ang person I met in Thailand. Some were fleeing villages that had been burned or destroyed in the course of northern Shan State's multilateral war, but this circumstance was the minority: in most cases, people fled to avoid conscription. Most armed groups operating in Myanmar, even when they operate under the auspices of an ethno-nationalist project, will in practice conscript anyone who suits their needs, regardless of their ethnic background. This is how Tun Tun, a Rujing Ta'ang, ended up in the RCSS. The RCSS is one of two major armed groups in Myanmar operating under the banner of Shan nationalism, the other being the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP). Although armed groups throughout Myanmar often employ ethno-nationalist symbolism, the actual demographics of conscripts can be highly diverse. In the particular case of the RCSS, I regularly heard rumours that the majority of low-ranking soldiers in many units are Ta'ang, not Shan. When the RCSS and TNLA come into clashes, there is considerable likelihood that the soldiers facing one another on the battlefield might be from the same villages, if not the same ethno-racial background.

Although most of the TNLA's soldiers are Ta'ang, there are reportedly large minorities of Kachin, Lisu, and Shan soldiers in the TNLA, who are also accompanied by Arakan Army

(AA) soldiers. The Arakan, or Rakhine, are an ethnic group that is geographically and culturally distant from the Ta'ang, but whose parent organization is in a close alliance with the TNLA. The fact of the matter is that most EROs are poly-ethnic to a degree, especially at the lower ranks, even though they often claim to represent a single group. In the particular case of the TNLA, the close relationship between TNLA leadership and the administration of civilian cultural organizations—added to the TNLA's post-coup revolutionary clout—adds to their iconic status as the vanguard of the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist movement.

Still, this vanguard status does not mean that aligning oneself with the TNLA is straightforward. Taking up arms as a TNLA soldier entails risking death. While Tun Tun and Mai Bon Aung invoke the TNLA, they do not want to actually take up arms. The possibility of Ta'ang autonomy and pan-Ta'ang solidarity were part of the reason why both Tun Tun and Mai Bon Aung invoked the TNLA with pride, in spite of the fact that they are both actively hiding from TNLA recruiters. Neither Tun Tun nor Mai Bon Aung is a fully documented citizen of Thailand; at the same time, neither felt safe going back to Myanmar, or saw much opportunity there after their life chances had been so aggressively curtailed by forced conscription and the multiple threats of violent reprisal that surround it. Given their precarious situation, stuck between two governments that openly harass them, the TNLA worked more as a way of imagining an alternative to their frustrating day-to-day situation than as a real political possibility.

Conclusion

The vernacular concept of lumyo works as a vehicle for co-conceptualizing race and ethnicity in Myanmar; in the hands of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, lumyo becomes a focal point for contestations of sovereignty. In Thailand, lumyo discourse is less relevant to the way

that Ta'ang people live their lives than the wider axis of differentiation between Thai citizens and noncitizens, with the latter category racialized and marked. At the same time, lumyo ideology is at play on both sides of the border. The capaciousness of the lumyo concept allows it to encompass very porous social orders, and to allow very different kinds of social orders to be considered as scalar equivalents. Using lumyo as a theoretical lens, Ta'ang is the same "type" of object as Bamar or Thai. However, the project of making and reifying a lumyo requires people to employ semiotic processes of encompassment, creating boundaries that do not necessarily match the lived reality. Sometimes, these encompassment processes are inclusive, as in the case of enrolling the Riang in the project of Ta'ang ethno-nationalism; sometimes, these processes are exclusive—even tacitly—as in the case of erasing Shan from the possible languages that Ta'ang people ought to speak and understand, and in the consequences of Samlone hegemony.

As an armed group, the TNLA are at least honest about the violence inherent in projects of national sovereignty. However, this overt violence turns people away who might otherwise be interested in joining the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist project. At the same time, although the TNLA works as an icon for the Ta'ang ethno-nationalist movement, there are alternative institutions working to make connections within the Ta'ang umbrella category. There is room for creativity in the ethno-political landscape of the Southeast Asian highlands, and—following Brubraker's entrepreneurial metaphor—room for expanding civilian ethno-political projects and recruiting new "clients". These entrepreneurs are mediators who make Ta'ang identity provisionally commensurable with other lumyo-scale social order. The way that these ethno-political entrepreneurs' projects play out depends largely on how they market their projects, and the strategies they use to make Ta'ang identity commensurable. The TCLC makes an attempt to display unity across diversity, emphasizing the importance of mother tongues while policing correct use of a novel Ta'ang dialect; the Network, by contrast, aims to meet people

exactly where they are, but is unable to get rid of their image as a Ta'ang ethno-nationalist organization.

As the post-coup revolution intensifies, the TNLA are increasingly seen not only as Ta'ang ethno-nationalists but as revolutionaries working for a post-authoritarian federated Myanmar. The iconic association between Ta'ang people and the TNLA has historically been the source of racist suspicion, leading to stereotypes about Ta'ang people as violent actors and terrorists. My hope is that the TNLA's experimentation with emancipatory political ideologies—and their flexible definition of who counts and does not count as Ta'ang—are not limited to the temporal period of the revolution, but mark a change in the way that ethno-racial politics are conducted in Myanmar.

Conclusion

Hegemony and Myth-Making in a Time of Revolution

This is a revolutionary time for Myanmar. In late October 2023, during the final days of writing and revising this thesis, alarming news started to pour out of northern Shan State. Nearly four years to the day after the TNLA's infamous 2019 attacks, the Brotherhood Alliance led massive bombardments of Sit Tat targets in northern Shan. The military operation known as "1027" was underway. The Brotherhood Alliance consists of the TNLA, the Arakan Army (AA), and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)—each groups with their own particular interests in fighting the Myanmar military and resisting junta control. In addition to overrunning several Sit Tat targets, the Alliance took control of Lashio's civilian airport—one of the last places I saw before leaving Myanmar in 2020. Friends with strong anti-junta politics cheered the attacks; others lamented the inevitable collateral damage. When I asked one friend in Lashio if he was all right, he responded: "this one was louder than before".

In the intervening weeks, my social media feeds have been flooded with footage of resistance solders overtaking Sit Tat bases. The resistance seems to be making progress, but the future is still uncertain. In comparison to the politics of the resistance movement, I realize that my theoretical agenda in this thesis may come across as conservative. My central claim is that any individual subject cannot singlehandedly rewrite a myth or re-signify a symbol: stories pick up societal baggage as they circulate, and that baggage often reflects the entrenched power structures at play. I do not mean for this argument to stand against the revolutionary potential in Myanmar. I think that it *is* possible to rewrite stories and re-signify symbols; however, these are necessarily group projects, and projects that require enormous effort. Although some Ta'ang people are trying to rewrite the stakes of the tea industry, and turn it into an emancipatory political-economic project, carrying this project will take a long time. It is also dependent on a

political future in Myanmar that many people hope for—a political future without the Sit Tat, and more broadly without war. For now, the war is intensifying.

This thesis has asked how and why the relationship between Ta'ang people and the tea plant has endured over the centuries, and explores the political-economic consequences of this relationship. Tea has bound Ta'ang people to lowland empires. In the story of "The King and the Castrated Fish" (Chapter 1), I found that renouncing tea production can index a kind of emancipation for some. At the same time, many Ta'ang ethno-nationalists view tea production itself as a possible route towards an emancipatory Ta'ang future. For people like U Kham Hlaing (Chapter 2), ambivalence reigns: he lives comfortably enough on tea, as his family has for generations, but the work is extraordinarily hard, and he has not pushed his children to carry on farming tea. Still, across all of these different positions toward the act of making a living on tea, the affective attachment to tea remains strong across the Ta'ang world. Tea from the Ta'ang hills is a central component of Myanmar cuisine, from the precolonial tradition of lahpet eating to the post-industrial passion for milk tea. The future of the tea industry in the Southeast Asian uplands matters not only to Ta'ang people but to the whole of Myanmar and much of northern Thailand.

I have written this thesis with some expository goals in mind, goals that are made most explicit in the introduction but which carry through to the substantive chapters. I have narrated Myanmar's position within the global tea industry in terms of its relation to three empires with overlapping histories: the Burmese empires of the dry zone, the Han Chinese empires, and the British colonial empire. I have also narrated the position of the Ta'ang in relation to these political formations and (to a lesser extent) the Thai state, which is also imagined as imperial. I hope that others can go further with these topics in the future. During times of war and dictatorship, it is easy to lose sight of the way that Myanmar and its myriad cultures are connected to global flows of people, objects and ideas. As the stories above demonstrate,

centring tea and Ta'ang people in and out of Myanmar can facilitate a view of cultural and economic processes that push past the boundaries of the nation-state and confounds straightforward definitions of categories like race and ethnicity.

Theoretically, what I hope I have shown is how the relationship between a particular object and a particular social order can illuminate all sorts of other relations beyond this apparently straightforward two-part system. Susan Gal and Judith Irvine's semiotic approaches have been profoundly useful to me along the way, as has the tradition of anthropologists who subject the historical record to anthropological methods (Wolf 1982; Trouillot 2002; J. C. Scott 2009; Sadan 2013; Bowie 2018). I found it impossible to speak and write about "Ta'ang people" without questioning the boundaries of that social order; likewise, I found it impossible to speak and write about "tea" without questioning the ontological and epistemological boundaries of *Camellia sinensis*. Although I began this project by trying to understand concrete set of relationships in a very particular place, the strange affordances of the COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar's military coup have required me to reverse the "implosion" (Dumit 2014) of the tea-Ta'ang relationship, and trace it across a much wider set of geographies and social formations than I ever would have imagined in 2019.

Empire and its Margins: Crossing the Upland-Lowland Interface

If state structures favour grains, empire may well favour the tea plant (Karlsson 2022). Myanmar's tea culture is certainly the product of many layers of imperial cultures laminated on top of one another: one can begin day with a plate of rice mixed with the lahpet soe (eating tea) favoured by the Burman empires of the dry zone, accompanied by the green tea associated with Han China, followed by a silky sweet cup of milk tea, one of the archetypal foodways of the British imperial colonization of Asia. Indeed, for the Ta'ang people who produce most of

Myanmar's tea, political relations in 2024 take the form of localized (and racialized) resistance against the Myanmar junta, which positions itself as a colonizing power in Myanmar's borderlands. For tea to travel from the Ta'ang hills to the Bamar lowlands, a vast network of people who are ostensibly in conflict with one another must work together.

To profit from tea, one must be able to cross the lowland-upland divide. This entails literal boundary crossing, in the sense of maintaining good enough relations with soldiers on both sides of every checkpoint; it also entails cultural boundary-crossing and a wide repertoire of code-switching. What I offer in the figure of the Ta'ang bwesa and other border operators—like the headman of Nor Lae—is a vision of mediation between the imperial lowland and autonomous highland that is neither a wholesale model of state evasion nor a teleological story about state enclosure. It appears that the tea industry has, for centuries, granted Ta'ang people a set of economic affordances that provide them with a qualified (and at times frustrated) autonomy relative to the imperial and state-building projects of the lowland empires. In that sense, the political ambitions of people like Soe Kyi and the owners of Myit Nge are not a completely novel concept, but a relatively old one, albeit translated from the imperial political grammar of tributary relations and suzerainty to the thoroughly modern notion of an autonomous federal entity within a Westphalian state.

The difference between the present-day postcolonial political formations of Myanmar and Thailand and their colonial and precolonial predecessors is in the deadliness of the weapons employed. State-making in 2024 is literally explosive, and the stakes of forced conscription—still one of the preeminent tools of state-making in this region—are extraordinarily high. Although recent developments in northern Shan State make it seem like the TNLA and their allies have thoroughly destabilized the Myanmar junta, many friends fear that the hardest times are yet to come. Here, I draw inspiration from people like Naing Oun, who firmly believe in tea as a possibility to future Ta'ang autonomy. It is all too easy to view Myanmar's tea industry

as part of the "rot that remains" (Stoler 2008) from long histories of imperial domination; it is all too easy to imagine the Ta'ang as trapped in a centuries-long cycle of racial capitalism. Following the lead of Naing Oun, Zaw Lin, Soe Kyi, and others, I want the tea industry to carry on in the spirit of hope, which is always oriented towards the future (cf. Dunford and Adikari 2023).

Next Steps: Where This Research Can Go

The "unfolding" of a seemingly straightforward relationship between a social formation and an object is a classic starting point for research in the Science and Technology Studies (STS) tradition (Mol 2002; Dumit 2014; Mol 2021). Although I have not actively incorporated an STS approach—much less made extensive use of the emerging canon of explicitly multispecies anthropology—these are possible theoretical avenues for subsequent research. These approaches will be especially important for understanding how climate change will impact the upland Southeast Asian tea economy, and Ta'ang people's livelihoods. As I slowly make my way through Naing Oun's research, I find that the topic of climate change comes up repeatedly in his conversations with tea farmers, but I was unable to incorporate it into my arguments here. As it stands, the thesis barely mentions the topic: a major omission that merits extended future research.

In addition to the possibility of a science studies approach for further research on this topic, I suggest two other ways that the research I present in this thesis could be taken up as part of future work. First, I argue for the possibility of changing the terms of debate about the history of tea domestication, a possibility that could open up interdisciplinary collaboration between anthropologists, archaeologies, (ethno)botanists, geneticists, and a range of other scholars. From there, I discuss how my findings in could point towards the utility of using

theories of racial capitalism for untangling the ethno-racial formations that are currently unfolding on both sides of the Myanmar-Thai border. Finally, I consider the emergent decolonial turn in Myanmar-focused research. Myanmar's Spring Revolution has been indexed by increasing demands from Myanmar scholars to fundamentally change the terms of engagement in academic writing about Myanmar, and I consider how this thesis fits into that conversation.

Reclaiming Tea

While I compiled my PhD research, I realized that I myself (in the form of this thesis) am one of the "mediators" described above, making "myths" commensurable to a particular reading public. This is a risky position: I am probably unknowingly reifying certain aspects of Ta'ang culture and sociality that certain interlocutors would take issue with. I hope that I have not—I have endeavoured to be careful—but ethno-racial identity is a slippery concept with many stakeholders, not all of whom agree about how the concept should work.

That said, the global history of tea production and consumption is one area where my project can point toward a potential resignification of entrenched narratives. I cannot singlehandedly rewited the global history of tea production: it appears that imperialist plantation relations and the global machinery of racial capitalism are too intimately connected to the story of tea for it to be effectively resignified in the first place. However, I have approached the story of tea with decolonial intentions. I acknowledge that imperial formations have been integral to the proliferation of tea, but by carefully examining the origin points of those imperial formations, I ultimately hope to decentre them. By centring the origin story of tea on the peoples of the Southeast Asian highlands instead—the people who have been cultivating tea for uncountable generations—I suggest that it is possible to read history against

the repeated claims of discovery and invention that frame imperial narratives of tea's origin. *Camellia sinensis* was not invented by any empire, but was made, through generations of perspiration.

The Ta'ang story is just one possible story that could be told about tea and it is one that bears further elaboration than what has been possible during my doctoral research. Ta'ang tea farmers do not claim to "own" the tea plant, nor to have discovered it; their claims are different, and focus on multigenerational relationships, affective attachments, the tension between pride and burden that come with carrying out a tradition. However, many of my research participants were interested in the ways that botany—more than anthropology—could tell them new stories about their traditional livelihood. Or, if not new, at least stories from a different perspective. Some research participants, like Soe Kyi and his friends, suspect that there may be much to learn from genomics and evolutionary biology. I share their suspicions, although genetic and other in-depth botanical research was impossible to carry out during the period of my fieldwork. Serious botanical research on Myanmar's tea industry would clarify the situation immensely.

That said, I hope that if such research can eventually take place, that it does not lapse into the same kinds of ownership claims that states have long used to argue that their heritage of territorial domination is the oldest and the best. There are countless other highlanders who are not Ta'ang people but who have equally valid claims to have participated in the domestication of the tea plant, to have played a role in circulating it around the Southeast Asian highlands; it just happens that the Ta'ang have something like a hegemonic position in Myanmar's tea industry, at least at the level of the farmer. Furthermore, I worry that at the core of the Ta'ang relationship to tea is a history of what is now often theorized as racial capitalism: the co-production of racial difference and capital, with the capital being produced at the expense of people in a marked racial category (Hammer 2023). To rewrite the story of tea in an emancipatory way, the tea industry cannot *only* be shifted into Ta'ang hands; the mode of

production must also shift, away from the entrenched model of farmer-broker-buyer, with the broker taking the biggest cut of the profits.

Ethno-race, Class, and Upland Labour

In this thesis I have considered how the Ta'ang lumyo is reproduced, both in terms of the ideologies that stitch together the Ta'ang social order and the material attachments to tea that provide the basis for livelihoods across the Ta'ang world. Lumyo encapsulates both ethnicity and race as a concept for explaining difference and relatedness. I have not overtly considered how lumyo ideology attaches to modes of production to produce something akin to racial capitalism (Robinson 2005, 9–24; Melamed 2015; Hammer 2023; Kelley 2023). Tea production in Myanmar is certainly a racialized production system, in which upland-lowland tributary relations have given way to an upland-lowland relationship of capital exploitation that unfolds along ethno-racial lines. I do not have enough data to support this reading, but it is an important consideration for future research. It is unclear who are the primary people profiting from the tea industry, and who is being exploited.

Studies that have explored economic exploitation in the Ta'ang areas have focused more on debt relations than on ethno-racial ones; it is also difficult to think in terms of class relations, given that farmers are often in debt to other farmers (Ikoma 2014), and bwesa have the biggest debts of all. The politics of land ownership and labour relations are confusing, and the relationship between profiteer and exploited labourer in the Ta'ang hills does not play out in the way that one would expect. While there are upland Ta'ang farmers exploited by lowland bwesa from unmarked or less-marked ethno-racial groups, there are also instances where Ta'ang farmer-landholders hire teams of Bamar labourers to climb the hills and work on tea farms at an exploitative daily rate—oftentimes simply for a cut of the tea that they pick (usually

around half of a day's produce). Such arrangements are reportedly prevalent, but most of the data that Naing Oun and I collected comes from farmers who hire their neighbours, or who do the picking themselves.

In Thailand, I met many Ta'ang people who work (or previously worked) as labourers on Thai orange plantations and live in Thailand without the full suite of necessary immigration documentation. They faced heavy stigmatization and regularly experienced racism. However, their ethno-racial identiy as Ta'ang people was not as salient as the fact that they were undocumented migrants from Myanmar; the lines of ethno-racial differentiation in Thailand's citrus industry do not single out the Ta'ang, but single out anyone with a precarious immigration status. This is certainly an instance of racial capitalism and an example of what Mezzadra and Nielsen have called "the multiplication of labour" (Mezzadra and Neilsen 2013), the process by which border formations and bureaucratic precarity are exploited by capitalists to create an ever-increasing surplus labour force. However, the toolkit that one would use for investigating racial capitalism in Thailand would need to be different form the toolkit necessary for unpacking the situation in Myanmar, which seems to have a different (and longer) history. Both of these lines of inquiry—the specifically racial capitalist dynamics of Myanmar's tea industry and the racial capitalist dynamics surrounding Thailand's citrus fruit industry—would help clarify the situation of Ta'ang people across the region. They are, however, different projects to the one I have presented here.

Agrarian labour is filled with gloomy stories, seemingly endless cycles of exploitation, violence, and indebtedness. It is far too early to tell what the outcome will be of Myanmar's Spring Revolution, but I am cautiously optimistic that a rebel victory could provide a basis for reconfiguring the tea industry in a way that provides more secure livelihoods to Ta'ang tea farmers and incentivizes precarious Ta'ang workers in Myanmar's cities and in China and Thailand to return to their tea farms. However, that will depend in large part on what kind of

governance systems would emerge. Although the TNLA is slowly shifting from an insurgent armed group to a hybrid military-bureaucratic organization capable of providing state services, I worry that this model is already the one that the Sit Tat has tried (and failed) to implement in Myanmar on a national scale.

Decolonizing Myanmar (and Thai) Studies

In the post-coup period, there has been a surge of scholarship about Myanmar that openly aims to rewrite the terms of engagement of Myanmar-focused research.[58] This surge simultaneously indexes the current revolutionary movement unfolding on the ground in Myanmar and the long-ongoing conversations about the fraught ethical and methodological conditions of carrying out research there (Brooten and Metro 2014). I do not claim to decolonize Myanmar studies or Thai studies through this research project; I have not earned it. The material conditions in which I have written this thesis are basically colonial: I am a white man writing from the comfort of a university library, in a country with a relatively stable political position; my research collaborators—especially Naing Oun—do not have the luxury of flying off to Australia to avoid the violence of the revolution. People who spent time with me in Thailand, and particularly undocumented migrants, stand to benefit little from our conversations apart from the basic enjoyment of hanging out with someone new.

What I can offer, however, are a set of methodological interventions that take inspiration from the emerging decolonial movement in Myanmar studies. The doctoral dissertation in anthropology is a form that requires a single author, but subsequent publications that come from this thesis could (and will likely be) co-authored: both Naing Oun and Zaw Lin are

[58] For a summary of the decolonial turn in Myanmar studies, see (Dunford and Adikari 2023). For examples of decolonial and anti-colonial scholarship on Myanmar, see (Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung 2021; Zin-Maung-Maung-Thein and Khin Zaw 2021; Dunne et al. 2022; Than 2022; Toomey 2022)

interested in pursuing research careers, and I fully intend to write with them as co-authors, rather than circumscribing their names to in-text shout-outs. This could include traditional journal articles disseminating the research that I have presented in this thesis; it could also include non-traditional outputs, such as targeted translations of some of the findings of this thesis into Ta'ang languages, Burmese, and Thai. Another possibility within the scope of the work already accomplished toward this thesis is for Naing Oun and I to co-author a practical guide for researchers working with collaborators in times and places of political conflict: this would build directly on the behind-the-scenes work that made this thesis happen, and be an opportunity to revisit and repair the problems we encountered.

The decolonial turn in Myanmar studies indexes not only the revolution unfolding inside Myanmar, but innovations in the field of anthropology itself that decenter the received "truisms" (Günel and Watanabe 2023, 2) of the discipline, which continue to prioritize the lone fieldworker embedded in a particular place for an extended period of time. Although I was forced to abandon this truism due to the consequences of the pandemic and Myanmar's military coup, the emergence of a new anthropology that emphasizes *commitment* to a place or a process—rather than constant residence inside it—could potentially fit with the decolonial goals expressed by Chu May Paing (2021), Than Toe Aung (2021), and Tharaphi Than (2021). Some scholars have advocated for low-impact approaches that allow anthropological research on Myanmar (for example) to proceed without on-the-ground research, such as using anthropological tools to analyse historical and archival sources (Venker 2023).

The point here is that the stakes are extremely high for people in Myanmar, and people in Thailand with continued attachments to Myanmar. The future of research on these communities will depend on careful ethical and methodological considerations to ensure that anthropology and other social scientific disciplines do no harm to them. There may be times when the most ethical choice is not to conduct any research at all, but to let people live their

lives unimpeded by a prying ethnographer. When the time is right for anthropology to proceed, it seems to me that the most ethical way to establish an "object of study" (Trouillot 2001) is to focus on what one's established interlocutors think is important, is worth writing about, is worth saving. Although not all Ta'ang people would agree that tea is such an object, I have endeavoured in this thesis to show what it *does* mean to the people who do take pride in it.

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Note on Burmese and Thai authors: Most people in Myanmar do not have surnames, so Burmese authors' entries will be alphabetized by the first letter of their full name—for example, "Yee Yee Cho" will appear under "Y", and "Ludu U Hla" under "L". Rare exceptions include established Burmese authors who already use a particular name for author-date citations—for example, Tharaphi Than is listed under "Than". Thai authors will here be listed by their preferred name for parenthetical citations: in many cases, this is the surname (e.g. "Winichakul"), but there is a recent movement to cite Thai authors according to their first name. Thai-language sources not translated to English are cited and organized according to first names in Thai, in Thai alphabetical order, at the end of the Roman alphabet.

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