



Jane Richardson Hanks; and Lucien Mason Hanks. *Tribes of the North Thailand Frontier*. Monograph 51. Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 2001, xlviii + 319 p. + map.

Eminent as pioneers of anthropology in Thailand, yet, the Hanks' extensive research in the northern hills from 1964 to 1979 is less known. This welcome book not only reveals that aspect of their work in Thailand, but also the versatility of their fieldwork and perspective. Whereas their initial experience in Thailand, the Cornell Bang Chan Project was, true to its times, a community study in its most elaborate form, their work in the hills was an extensive regional study. This contrasts, as pointed out by Tannenbaum in her Foreword to the volume, with most of the work of their contemporaries in the same area, which were primarily community studies among one specific group of the multi-ethnic hills. Their interest in the north was of an applied nature initially, to give recommendations to the government at the beginning stages of the "hill tribe" policies. However, this book, published almost two decades after the end of the actual field research, is once removed from such interests both in stance and in time, and looks at the relationship between various local lowland agencies and the hill people, and the process of their incorporation into the lowland administration. Interspersed with valuable excerpts from field notes and diaries, it is an informative account of the most tumultuous days of the region in the 1960s and 70s. It depicts as a most vivid interplay of agencies and forces, the period of changes which later ethnographers would simply wrap up in a short statement of *fait accompli*: "the hills became increasingly incorporated into the lowland state struc-

ture as the Thai administration launched hill tribe policies allegedly to counter forest degradation, opium production, communist insurgency in the hills and to assimilate the hill population into lowland society." In that sense, it is a MUST read for anyone involved in the area as researchers, policy makers, NGOs etc., as it reveals to us the complexity of the introduction of one agent, one project, one institution to the configuration of powers and forces operating in the region.

The book is a result of their work in the area west of the Chiangrai-Mae Sai highway, which they fictively designate as "Muang Kham." Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Karen, Yao and Miao as well as Shan, Chinese (mainly Kuomintang army remnants) and some Thai inhabit this area. Their research began in January 1964, and subsequently they stayed for eight months at five-year intervals in 1963-64, 1968-69, 1973-74, and 1979.

Chapter 1 begins with Chinese documentation related to the minorities or "barbarians" over the long history of empire, and then follows the hill population over the border into Burma's Shan State, Northern Laos, and Northern Thailand, relying on both colonial documents and travel records as well as the authors' interviews with migrants into Thailand from those areas. This sets the stage for discussion of the peoples in "Muang Kham" who had migrated into Northern Thailand from these areas, and locates Muang Kham within this wider spatial and temporal background. The second chapter begins by explaining the choice of the term "tribes" (rather than ethnic group). It is explained that the term "tribal people" distinguishes upland residents who were by birth not Chinese, Shan, or Thai, corresponding to the Thai *chao khao*, *khon pa* as opposed to *chao naa* and *khon muang*. "In our hill-valley setting, the broad term ethnic groups is less useful." Furthermore, while the term "ethnic" is avoided as

reflecting western contexts, the authors consider that the term “tribe” mirrors a different social setting, and reflects the emergence of self-sufficient groups who deal with others for strategic purposes. In that sense, one might say the authors chose to use the value-laden term itself in explaining the situation which gives birth to those values. Then, the various tribal groups as well as the lowlanders and the Chinese in the Mg. Kham region are introduced one by one. While it is an informative chapter with much field data as well as documentary research, some groups (Lahu, Akha, Lisu and Yao) are introduced in more detail from general distribution and history to the actual migration process into the region. In any case, migration into the Mg. Kham region accelerated especially after 1930, and the latter half of the chapter describes the area as it was around 1950 until 1964 when the authors first arrived. Having differentiated the tribes by their background, the “uplanders” ecological adaptation, leadership, inter-village arbitration, etc. are discussed as if they were one category. These first two chapters constitute almost one half of the entire volume.

The remaining six chapters deal with subsequent changes which were observed by the authors during their 15 years’ research. Chapter 3 introduces the newly arriving outsiders who become important local players in the 1960s, the Forest Department, the Border Patrol Police, Public Welfare, educational and health-related agencies, the UN, the royal family, and the world religions. Then the next two chapters discuss unsettling forces that had great impact on the region and the minutiae as well as the larger picture of the impact of their presence are depicted. Specifically, the arrival of the Kuomintang; opium production; the emergence of messianic cults in its opposition etc.; and the communist insurgencies and the details of the Hmong insurrection, are discussed. In 1971, the Forestry

Department prohibits the establishment of new settlements, leading to fundamental changes in uplander’s land use, instigating irrigated rice cultivation among some. The next two chapters describe changes in the early 1970s. Chapter 6 describes how in the early 1970s the Kuomintang were tamed and the scene surrounding the Mae Salong area changes, including the coming of a missionary Buddhist monk; the emergence of some new and younger effective leaders from among the tribes amid confusion and conflict as to who maintains authority and adjudicating role; and how emerging leaders attained official status within the Thai administrative system. Concomitant to this was the increasing opportunity for education as the people themselves began to realize the importance of gaining Thai education. Chapter 7 describes the “catastrophe” of ecological changes and the 1972–74 drought: the various ways in which villagers in the area were affected and coped with this, through economic diversification including wage labor; education; social and religious changes. Finally the concluding chapter describes the changing “ethnic” (here, this term is preferred rather than “tribal”) scene, with the emergence of mixed ethnic villages; changes in the uplanders’ attitude to land as mobility became unfeasible; the turn to cash economy especially spurred by the tourist trade; and even as changes closed the gap between the upland and lowland, the uplanders “saw no reason for blanket assimilation except on the lowest level.”

The volume succeeds in depicting the region with its multiple agents involved in the dynamics of political and ecological changes. Furthermore, it captures the individual agency of numerous leading personalities that are involved in the process. Even as the authors adhere to given notions of “tribes” as separate entities, their focus is not so much on the differences between these tribes, but what brings them to-

gether in ecological and political adaptation with their respective historical background, once they become inhabitants of this particular region. It is less concerned with the details of dynamics within the communities, including the nature of the relationship between varying leadership, ritual, political and administrative of the different groups. The details of internal dynamics of each tribe or community which would explain some of the varying form of adaptation to lowland projects and administration, are sacrificed in order to depict the larger upland-lowland relationship. Thus, on the one hand there are such statements that acknowledge only “fragile authority” among upland leadership, yet they are also said to share the same Chinese-derived features with the Thais as the muang system (with a heaven descended leader), hierarchy, and ethnocentrism. The authors do not provide any detail of the “tribes” leadership and ruling system that might explain these incongruencies. In arguing that the muang is the prevailing model for Thai political organization that is Chinese in origin (they mention in a pas-

sage that it is Confucian in its ideology), and that it is shared by the uplanders increasingly as they find inroads into the Thai nation state, there needs to be a finer discussion of the kinds of leadership within and between the hill communities, the similarities and differences with the Tai muang, as well as the present day state and administrative apparatus. Changing notions of territoriality would also be pertinent to the discussion of the continuation or discontinuation of the muang, and in convincing the readers of the relevance of the term “frontier” in the title, as well as the designation “Muang Kham” for the region.

These are points for argument that their discussion has provoked for further study. Issues of land and territoriality become pertinent in this region into the 1980s and 1990s, and this fine volume written by two exemplary fieldworkers/anthropologists, lay the ground for questions that present and future generations might pursue.

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