

# POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF CHIANG TUNG: THE MANGRAI DYNASTY, 1750-1855

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**Abstract-** Chiang Tung (Kengtung) is a small city, located deep in the mountains of eastern Shan State in Burma. In the early nineteenth century, it was the site of an autonomous principality subject to Burmese, Chinese, and, for a brief period of time, Thai influence. The politics of this principality were based on a balance of external influences. Chiang Tung's positioning at a key highland crossroads between southern China and Southeast Asia meant that it was a site of great interest to the surrounding lowland empires. Its isolation from lowland centers of power, however, meant that direct military intervention was all but impossible. This led to a series of conflicts within Chiang Tung's Mangrai dynasty, in which highland rulers sought patrons in the lowland courts, while lowland interests attempted to play competing highland princes off against one another. The result was a series of low level conflicts between 1750 and 1855 which involved the rulers of Chiang Tung in a larger process of political expansion and territorial consolidation in mainland Asia.

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**Key Words-** Thailand, Burma, China, history, politics, dynasties

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## I. CHIANG TUNG AND THE MANGRAI DYNASTY

The rulers of Chiang Tung claimed descent from Mangrai, a thirteenth century Tai warlord who founded the expansive kingdom of Lanna in what is today northern Thailand. While Mangrai's empire fragmented after his death, his descendants continued to rule much of northern Thailand and northeastern Burma in the ensuing centuries. Due to this shared heritage, the culture and language of Chiang Tung is very similar to that of northern Thailand, a factor which influenced the Chiang Tung's gravitation towards Thailand in the early nineteenth century. While the Mangrai dynasty of Lanna came to an end when the Burmese subjugated Chiang Mai in the mid-sixteenth century, it continued in Chiang Tung, and the chronicles of Chiang Tung claim a direct descent from Mangrai to the last hereditary rulers of Chiang Tung in the twentieth century (Mangrai 1981).

These princes inherited a strategic crossroads between three centers of Tai civilization. To the west lay the Shan Plateau of northeastern Burma. To the south was Lanna in northern Thailand. To the east was Sipsongpanna in southern China and Lan Xang, in what is today Laos. Caravan routes from Yunnan to Thailand and the Burmese coast passed through Chiang Tung between Sipsongpanna and Lanna, making the small Chiang Tung valley a key gateway between the markets of China and Southeast Asia (Smith 2013). Despite this, Chiang Tung was very well sheltered. In the late nineteenth century, British surveyors described the terrain of what was then called the Eastern Shan States as "islands in a sea of hills." (Scott and Hardimann, 375)

Chiang Tung was therefore sheltered, resource-poor, and important. This defined the dynastic conflict that would break out in the mid-eighteenth century.

## II. 1750-1802: CHINESE AND BURMESE FACTIONS

In the mid-eighteenth century, Chiang Tung owed tribute to two powers. The first was a newly-resurgent Burma under the Konbaung Dynasty to the west, and the second was the Qing Dynasty in China to the east. The Chinese arrangement occurred through the intermediary of Sipsongpanna, the ruler of which held a higher position than the ruler of Chiang Tung. In the eighteenth century, civil war would divide the ruling line of Chiang Tung between pro-Burmese and pro-Chinese factions. Chiang Tung's troubles began in the 1750s with a rebellion against Maung Myo, a Burmese-backed ruler. Maung Myo's brother was Cao Muang Sam, who succeeded in winning the power struggle and subsequently winning Burmese recognition (Wyatt 1963, 253-5). While this conflict did not involve competing factions backed by different lowland powers, it nonetheless set the stage for the crisis that would plague Chiang Tung in the following century.

In the first stage of the Chiang Tung crisis, Cao Muang Sam, supported by the Burmese, would face off against the descendants of his brother Maung Myo, who had obtained Chinese support. In Cao Muang Sam's reign, a major conflict broke out between Burma and China, and the opening battle of this conflict devastated Chiang Tung. In 1764, the ruler of Sipsongpanna, which held a relationship of dual suzerainty between Burma and China similar to that of Chiang Tung, refused to pay tribute to Burma (Giersh 2006, 100). The Burmese responded by invading Sipsongpanna, and conscripted warriors from Chiang Tung on the way to attack Sipsongpanna's capital at Chiang Rung (Mangrai 1981, 255). The Burmese force, including people of Chiang Tung, attacked some cities in Sipsongpanna to the west of the Mekong and came back the following year in 1765 for another, similar assault

(Liew-Herres et al 2012, 216). The invasions of 1764 and 1765 prompted a Chinese response. In 1766, Qing forces retaliated by invading Chiang Tung. The invasion was successful, and the invaders placed Cao Bin, a son of Maung Myo, on the throne of Chiang Tung (Giersch 2006, 101). Having been driven into exile, Cao Muang Sam re-invaded Chiang Tung with Burmese backing, driving the Chinese-backed Cao Bin out in less than a year. He subsequently attacked the outlying principality of Muang Yong, unseating one of Cao Bin's brothers, Cao Kang Cai. Cao Bin and Cao Kang Cai retaliated in 1767, retaking Chiang Tung with the support of Sipsongpanna, burning the city, and forcing Cao Muang Sam to flee once again. The tug of war continued late in the same year as Cao Muang Sam retook the city for a final time, in a grueling month-long campaign that preceded a year of famine. During the final campaign, Cao Muang Sam obtained the support of his southern neighbors in Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai, two principalities subject to Thailand (Mangrai 1981, 255-6).

Cao Muang Sam died in 1786 and his son, Cao Kong Tai, succeeded him. Cao Kong Tai's reign lasted until 1804 and saw the start of Thai intervention in Chiang Tung. In 1787, the emerging ruler of northern Thailand, Cao Kavila, sent a letter to Chiang Tung, encouraging Cao Kong Tai to rebel against Burmese rule. Cao Kong Tai refused, stating that he feared for the safety of his people (Wyatt and Aroonrut 1998, 162-3). This set the stage for the first Thai intervention in Chiang Tung in 1802.

### III. 1802-1855: BURMESE AND THAI FACTIONS

In the nineteenth century, a rivalry emerged between Chiang Tung and Chiang Mai, the latter being the main center of power in northern Thailand. The rivalry began in 1802 when Cao Kavila sent an army to attack Muang Sat, a small principality subject to Chiang Tung. After easily taking Muang Sat and sending its population back to Chiang Mai, Cao Kavila's army advanced on Chiang Tung. Recognizing that this was a population raid that aimed to bring people back to Lanna to work rice fields, Cao Kong Tai evacuated the city and allowed the Lanna forces to enter unopposed. Unable to gather much in terms of manpower, the Lanna army returned to Chiang Mai (Wyatt and Aroonrut, 1998: 175). In 1803, Cao Kavila began a campaign to expel the Burmese from Chiang Saen, the last bastion of Burmese influence in Lanna. As part of this campaign, Kavila sent a small force to Chiang Tung to compel Cao Kong Tai and his family to evacuate Chiang Tung and move to Chiang Mai, a move which the Chiang Tung chronicles state was forced and which the Chiang Mai chronicles state was voluntary (Mangrai, 1981: 177; Wyatt and Aroonrut, 1998: 179). During this campaign, Cao Kong Tai's son, Cao Mahakhanan, escaped from the Lanna invaders and

took refuge at Muang Yong to the north of Chiang Tung. Thus began the second stage of Chiang Tung's dynastic crisis, in which Cao Kong Tai would support Thailand from exile in Lanna, while Cao Mahakhanan would shift his support from Thailand to Burma.

Cao Mahakhanan ruled Chiang Tung from 1804 to 1857, and his periodic shifts of loyalty ultimately established Chiang Tung as the arbiter of Burmese power on the Siamese and Chinese frontiers. This reign occurred in three stages. During the first, from 1804 to 1812, Mahakhanan ruled from a succession of centers to the south of Chiang Tung and served as a vassal of Lanna and Thailand. From 1812 until 1857, he ruled from Chiang Tung as a vassal of Burma. His reign was eventful and marked by repeated defense against aggression by neighboring states. Ultimately, he turned Chiang Tung into the primary seat of Burmese power east of the Salween River.

In 1804, Cao Mahakhanan stood in an awkward alliance with Chiang Mai, as an attack by the Burmese forced him into hiding to the south of Chiang Tung. What proceeded was a phase in which he supported Lanna, and opposed Burmese efforts to control the population of Chiang Tung and the highlands east of the Salween (Wyatt and Aroonrut 1995, 192-4). The Burmese ultimately stifled the efforts of Lanna and Thailand to gain a foothold in the Chiang Tung region, and the rulers of Lanna subsequently attempted to relocate Cao Mahakhanan to join his father in Chiang Saen (Smith 2013). At the same time, the Burmese made an overture to Cao Mahakhanan, offering him support as ruler of Chiang Tung (Mangrai 1981, 259-60). Cao Mahakhanan ultimately took the Burmese offer. After 1812, Cao Mahakhanan conducted a wholesale restoration of Chiang Tung's population and infrastructure. Chiang Tung's small size and close-knit community ensured that it did not need to conduct any aggressive raids into surrounding territories. By contrast, the Chronicles recall a period of stability in which its population managed to rebuild its fortifications without having to resort to aggression against their neighbors (Mangrai 1981, 261). This corresponded with a general period of peace and stability in the Tai principalities between 1813 and 1849.

In 1836, trouble began to stir in Sipsongpanna, with a succession conflict not unlike those experienced by Chiang Tung in the eighteenth century. Chiang Tung proved to be an independent player in this conflict, capable of overriding the decisions of their ostensive suzerains in Burma. Cao Mahakhanan's candidate of choice was a prince named Cao No Kham, the Burmese-backed rival to the appointed heir to the throne of Sipsongpanna, Cao Suchawan (Renoo 1998, 682-4). While Cao Suchawan ultimately won the succession struggle in Sipsongpanna and secured Burmese backing, Cao Mahakhanan continued to support Cao No Kham,

forcing Cao Suchawan to appeal to Thailand for assistance (Smith 2013).

Thailand's initial, failed efforts at intervention led to the revelation that they needed to control the highlands between Chiang Mai and Sipsongpanna in order to exert influence in Sipsongpanna. The major political center and crossroads of these highlands was Chiang Tung. The Thai kings proceeded to launch three successive efforts to control Chiang Tung, in 1849, 1852, and 1854 (Sarassawadee 2005, 161-2). These were all failures for the Thai, and failed to alter the political alignment of either Chiang Tung or Sipsongpanna. They were also sizeable campaigns that saw the final direct confrontation between Thailand and Burma until World War 2 (Smith 2013). Chiang Tung withstood the turmoil and proved its ability to both dictate Burmese policy and defend itself against the consequences of its decisions. Following the wars with Thailand and the death of Cao No Kham in 1850, Chiang Tung switched its support back to Suchawan (Renoo 1998, 689). Suchawan was subsequently able suppress his rivals and regain Chinese support. The long-standing dynastic crises of Chiang Tung and Sipsongpanna thus came to an end.

#### CONCLUSION: LOYALTY AND TERRITORY

Although a remote kingdom whose strategic position would soon be rendered obsolete by the advent of modern communications, Chiang Tung nonetheless serves as a microcosm of mainland Southeast Asian politics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Caught between expanding territorial empires, its story is not one of inevitable decline and defeat, but rather a story of ingenuity and agency in the face of

destructive force. While it was a small city, incapable of projecting independent military force and only capable of defending itself, it was nonetheless able to defeat sizeable Thai and Burmese invasions and to dictate Burmese policy on its eastern frontier. It therefore offers a counter-point to the narratives of colonialism and internal colonialism that define the nineteenth century. This dynamic remains the same to the present day, and local leaders in the Thai-Burmese border regions hold on to much of the autonomy that Cao Mahakhanan enjoyed (Sirinya 2017).

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