Digital Media in the Borderlands : National Media, Stateless Subjects, and Video Production at the Thai-Burma Border

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Abstract

While the Thai government under the Thaksin administration claims increasing vigilance of media piracy, and the Rangoon censor board strictly enforces its mores on Burmese media production,border areas have become a hotbed for independent media production and distribution. Theplatform of choice, particularly in historically underrepresented languages such as Shan, is the VCD. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a Shan village at the Thai-Burma border, this paper will discuss competing forms of media, and the implications of digital media production and consumption among stateless subjects in the borderlands.

Text

From gun-toting revolutionaries in hilltop camps near the Thai-Burma border to construction workers in urban Thailand, the Shan constitute one of mainland Southeast Asia's largest ethnic nationality groups, with the lion's share of them, about 4 million people, residing in the Shan Stateof Burma, or what is also known as Myanmar. The Shan are ethnically and linguistically distinct from Burmans, and have several distinct written scripts, a point I will return to in detail later in this paper. The Shan princes or q0fjZMG had traditionally ruled the area of what is now Northeast Burma, and were allowed to maintain semi-autonomous rule over their subjects as part of the frontier areas of British Burma during the colonial period. Following the close of the Second World War and independence agreements with the British, the Burmese politicians and Shan princes signed the 1947 Panglong agreement which provisioned for the Shan States initial membership in the newly-formed Union of Burma, but with the right to secede following one decade under the Union government authorities (cdl0f;oFef 1996:351 351).).
Even before independence from the British, Shan politicians and scholars had convened to simplify the (southern) Shan script, which has its roots in Pali/Sanscrit and Mon, and debatable Burmese influence, with the aspiration that it would be the official language for their regional administration. Though the Shan had been the traditional rulers of the area, they were one among many ethnicgroups in what became called the Shan State. An education officer from the Shan State Education Department presented the argument that only with an education can the Shan people survive as a race in the modern world (Sai Kam Mong 2004:320) and therefore Shan political and intellectual leaders fought to make Shan the language of bureaucracy in the area. It is important to bear in mind that these political leaders in the Southern Shan State simplified a version of the Southern Shan script, and that other Shan princes were not necessarily in agreement, or even

involved with this decision. Nevertheless, the initial period following independence marked a flourishing of Shan printing, and during the 1950s there were a total of 20 Shan presses, publishing an estimated 250 kinds of publications. At the same time, however, the Rangoon authorities, partially because of significant gains in military power, sought more decisively to incorporate the Shan State under their bureucratic and military authority. In 1952, the Burmese military sent troops to the Shan State to displace the Sao Pha, (Callahan 1996:30) and before long, Shan resistance groups were up in arms with the Burman authorities. By the 1950s, there were numerous other ethnic militia at war with Rangoon, such as the Karen, Mon, Karenni, Chin, Kachin, and Naga, as well as a communist insurgency movement, and the KMT nationalists who slipped across the ill-defined border from Yunnan following Mao's revolution. Although central support for Ne Win's military takeover of the civilian government in 1962 was based on the widespread hope that his Burmese Socialist Program Party would bring peace to the country, his nationalization of the economy not only created scarcity of consumer durables, but also opened the door for the ethnic militias to make tremendous economic and military strides through the trafficking of goods on the black market, with guns, gold and opium being the most lucrative goods, consumer goods taking the back seat, but still a key part of border trade. This had a remarkable effect on Shan media production.

Because of the scarcity of paper on the legitimate market, output in the 20 civilian Shan presses
plummeted by 1963. But, the establishment of Shan liberated territory encompassing the area East of the Salween River, or a 150 mile expanse along the Thai border, and the ethnic-resistance forces'control of certain key economies of the area also set the stage for what was later to become one of the most powerful ethnic resistance forces in the region. The numerous Shan armies held this territory for roughly 30 years, and turned it into a hotbed for radical Shan media, Burmese junta opposition media in particular, with bold assertions of the Shan language, culture, and literacy.

From here, I will describe how the wresting of territory from the Burmese military, together with
the machinations of black-market economies and the ideology of ethnic national liberation,
contributed to the creation of what could possibly have been the largest shadow-state media empire in recent mainland Southeast Asian history.

While on the Burmese side of the border, all media productions must pass through the Burmese
censor board, and materials which were not approved are subject to heavy fines and punishments
for those found in possession of them, particularly if the materials are politically sensitive. But the tentacles of state censorship only reach as far as the soldiers of the state, which is why, particularly in the era of print capitalism, in this struggle, acquisition of geographic territory created the possibility not only for politically revolutionary texts to be published, but also for the language of those texts to be taught in schools, if only under the supervision of the ethnic nationality resistance forces.

In the 1980s the Shan United Revolutionary Army obtained a moveable Shan type printing press
from the Shan printing office of Lung Tang Gae in Taunggyi, the Shan State and staffed the press
to publish documents such as the Army's weekly newspaper and related political books, as well as contract work such as funeral announcements and bill invoices for the paperwork of the military. In 1983, they opened a hospital on the Thai side of the border, and the Shan army sponsored a total of 18 primary schools providing instruction to children from grades one to four in the Shan language.
At their height, the 15,000 strong Shan forces presented the fiercest resistance to the Burmese military. Some scholars of the Shan movement under Khun Sa have presented the argument that Khun Sa was able successfully to manipulate "...a variety of social, ethnic, economic, political and geographical situations in order to create a shadow state that on occasion threatened to emerge as a viable national polity in its own right". (Gallant 1999:45). Perhaps this may be the case, but Khun Sa was not the one with literary or media savvy, as were the intellectuals affiliated with the Shan United Revolutionary Army. The Shan shadow media empire was their impetus, and Khun Sa ultimately gained from it, but perhaps in terms of political and financial power at the time. Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army controlled not only the drug trade of the area, but also commerce in general. It is estimated that 60% of the MTA's income came from drugs, but another 40% came from taxes (!"#$% 2005:83). Although Khun Sa surrendered to the Rangoon authorities in 1996, the Shan state-building and Shan literacy is a major long-term effect, and one which continues to persist to this day, and other Shan resistance groups have persisted, though not on the same scale as that of Khun Sa's MTA at its height. Freedom's way is a journal originally published under the direction of the Shan United Revolutionary Army in the town of Mai Soong, about a kilometer inside the Shan State from the border crossing at Piang Luang, Thailand. In the late 1980s they moved publication to Chiang Mai, Thailand, where they could use color separation, offset printing technologies and gum binding to produce a slick, more professional-looking volume. Each annual print run numbered 3,000 issues. Precisely because alternative media are outside the commercial logic of these larger power
structures, they are able to give voice to those not considered by the mainstream to be demographically desirable or politically legitimate (Dyer-Witheford 1999:120). Radical alternative media have the privilege that they do not need to censor at the behest of media conglomerates, nation-states, or religious authority (Downing 2001:44).
As Sittipong Kalayanee, founder and managing producer for Images Asia, a human-rights media
center in Chiang Mai, Thailand, points out "the stateless are privileged because they don't produce media under the laws of the nation-state". This example is clear in the lack of ISBN book registry, the scanning and borrowing of other publications' photographs, or the outright copying and appropriation of rock songs or movie images. Everyday acts of media piracy through the use of the personal computer with the CD-R drive contribute to the decommodification of information flows.
While on the one hand one can make the argument that certain television dramas

or VCDs are produced, complete with advertisements, in the effort to produce consumerist desires, the slippage that occurs when a VCD seeps across the border into Thailand means that the program's
commercials are unrealizable, as many of the products advertised are available in Burma only.
Nevertheless, there is a comic awareness amongst Shan villagers about the issue of piracy; and a
rather odd example illustrates this point. The fermented bean, the xl0fbe0fj is the quintessential
ingredient in much of Shan cuisine, to the extent that Burmese sometimes mockingly call the Shan rHm\;pEput\ or "Shan fermented bean". One of the convenient ways for storing the beans is to press and dry them, with spices and other preservatives, into a disk, or a cFyf;xl0fbe0fj Due to national news' influence about the issue, some local Shans in this border town will jokingly call the fermented bean disk a CD &'()!$ or a pirated CD. Precisely because alternative media are outside the commercial logic of these larger power structures, they are able to give voice to those not considered by the mainstream to be demographically desirable or politically legitimate (Dyer-
Witheford 1999:120). Radical alternative media have the privilege that they do not need to censor at the behest of media conglomerates, nation-states, or religious authority (Downing 2001:44).
However, when border tensions heat up, those mainstream media *are* indeed interested in acquiring news from the area, though even the bravest of foreign correspondants often cannot stay at the front lines with the Shan State Army. Here is where digital video technology has begun to play an important part. As has been so well illustrated by media work done by participants in the Zapatista and East Timorese movements, the so-called "wretched of the earth are neither entirely outside the mechanisms of high-technology production or (more important) completely powerless to appropriate them. (Dyer-Witheford 1999:232).
Over the past two decades, the leadership of the Shan armies have repeatedly sought to generate international awareness of their plight by inviting foreign news correspondents to their camps for
interviews. In addition to hosting foreign correspondents, the present commander of the Shan State Army (South) Jao Yod Serk (at the suggestion of Shan intellectuals) encouraged a small team of SSA soldiers to acquire skills in the operation of a mini-DV video camera and basic video editing.
The initial video training for the SSA soldier I'm talking about here took place in 2000, and when
fighting heated up in March, 2001, a Shan soldier was on the front lines, with tape rolling, which they later sold to Reuter. In addition to acting as a foreign correspondent broker, of sorts, the Shan State Army video team has also produced longer documentaries, which they distribute in VCD format. For the context of this presentation, I would like to show a clip from a feature-length video produced by the Shan State Army. Its tone is that of a solemn documentary, with little narrative, but briefly highlighting the activities of an SSA medic tending to villagers in rural villages in the Shan State, along with brief interviews of villagers who have been victims of Burmese army raids and pillaging.

The interview style, as you will see, is quite formulaic: What is your name? What village are you
from? How many houses are in that village? What did the Burmese soldiers do? When? What patrol number?

(SHOW CLIP OF THE OLD MEN IN THE BURNT VILLAGE)

For decades under Burmese authorities, often the door to the rest of the world was through the Burmans, and as we see from this particular interviewee's response, he wants the world to know what happened to his village at the hands of the Burmese army. Although this interviewee does not know how and where this footage will be distributed, he sees the lens of the camera as a window out from his decimated village in the Shan hills. Perhaps this quotation reminds us that even when we are talking about indigenously produced media, there is often still privilege in that production, and whether the less privileged who might be the subjects of this media invest hope, desire, or ambivalence in this production demands further analysis. Though these farmers do speak Shan, lest we forget, the Shan nation-building project might not have been in their imagination either; nearly every villager in this documentary seems to have the simple desire for peace, or to be allowed the basic means for subsistence. As the political scientists Ben Anderson once claimed, "I don't see any real sign at the low level of society that there's been seething, raging nationalism. The people who are making all the noise are the media and the politicians" (Nance 2003:9).
So in spite of the incredible obstacles that the soldiers of the Shan State Army have needed to surmount in their endeavor to produce Shan media, we must still be careful in our analysis not to lend too much credence to their production merely because it is outside the production controls of
mainstream national or commercial interests. Indigenous media, as the anthropologist Faye Ginsburg has argued, "offers a possible means - social, cultural, and political - for reproducing and transforming cultural identity among people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption" (Ginsburg 1991:94). But as this Shan example illustrates, it would be hasty to conclude that "indigenous" would be monolithic in its ambitions. This example of Shan- Shanproduced media does, however, point to an important post-colonial independence struggle, and produced through the interviews, keys into the hopes and desires of people who have been historically underrepresented in political discourse.
For the Shan soldiers, though an independent Shan nation may not be on the immediate horizons,
the production of Shan media, from novels, to magazines, to karaoke VCDs continues in the numerous printshops and studios on both sides of the Thai-Burma border. Here, the role of Shan media is "to keep alive the vision of what might be, for a time in history when it may actually be feasible (Downing 2001:9). For the villagers, of whom an estimated 30% are literate in the Shan language, the video camera means a kind of hope that they are not forgotten, and perhaps encourages them to believe that they might eventually be able to live in peace.

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