

Sublime Rock: Burmese Popular Music, Language Code Switching and Sentimentalism among Shan Migrants at The Thai-Burma Border

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ABSTRACT

While economic strife and internal conflict continue to drive migrants and refugees across the border from Burma into Thailand, one often uncounted aspect of this migration is that of the Burmese media texts and popular culture artifacts consumed by ethnic nationalities in exile. While many theorists of popular media and cultural studies alike have tended to look at the ways in which historically underrepresented groups might take their own renditions of popular musical forms and create symbolic acts of resistance, how, then can we understand people's relationships to dominant forms? Does the appreciation of a dominant form of popular culture necessarily imply subscription to dominant ideology? If popular music can be proven to be a mechanism for the creation of identity and place, what, then does it mean that Shan nationalists still listen to certain Burmese popular songs? Using ethnographic data

gathered in a Shan community at the Thai-Burma border between 2004 and 2005, this article will provide an overview of the various ways in which popular culture texts circulate in the borderlands, and also the ways in which Burmese popular music is subjectively understood by members of one ethnic nationality community.

Keywords: *Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Shan, ethnography, popular music, ethnicity*

INTRODUCTION

In a small town just inside the Thai side of the Thai-Burma borderlands, a group of young musicians are sitting with their guitars plugged into amplifiers, and the teenage drummer is twitching, playing nonsense while the others decide what to play next. Within a minute, someone shouts out "JOKER" and the guitarist and bassist thump out the crashing chords of a Shan rendition of the Creedence Clearwater Revival (CCR) classic, "Have you ever seen the rain?" (or what many Thai people call "Someone Told"). The band quickly drowns out the intermittent conversations that were taking place during the interlude, and the first verse starts with "*luk sao sao kwa len pai* Joker," or "I get up extra early to play the Joker card game." Later on, as the teenagers have gone home, the band starts to play popular Burmese rock songs. What is unique about this band, in addition to their multi-lingual repertoire, is that most of the band's members are Shan, born in the Shan State in Burma.

Due to economic poverty in the Shan State, as well as a decades-long internal conflict, hundreds of thousands of Shan people have migrated across the border into Thailand. While on the one hand, one might expect that Shan migrants, because of the cultural and linguistic closeness between Shan and Thai, would orient their popular culture consumption toward Shan and Thai artifacts, this is only partially the case. Certainly Thai television soap operas

are immensely popular amongst Shan audiences, but the vast majority of popular music consumption amongst these Shan State-born ethnic Shan migrants consists of recordings and tunes sung in Shan or Burmese. For the context of this article, I have chosen to focus on the consumption of Burmese popular music.

Popular music merits considerable scholarly attention because of its ability to cross borders, "...to communicate on multiple planes, and symbolically to encode and embody social identities" (Bilby 1999: 258). What Adorno has called the "culture industry" is hardly a purveyor of a monolithic ideology, as within any given narrative, whether intentionally placed or not, there are moments of potential for "...conflict, rebellion, and the drive for emancipation and utopia" (Adorno 1991: 18). Popular music is capacious, its consumption hardly monolithic, as various audiences might read the same text in opposing ways (Miller 1998: 188).

The anthropologist Ian Condry (2001) has examined the ways in which Japanese artists and audiences interpret and appropriate African-American Hip Hop music in sites, or "genba" where global forms are mediated through local language and performances (Condry 2001: 371). In urban Italy, local rap and reggae artists quickly incorporated Italian regional dialects and musical patterns such that the popular musical genres would more closely speak to their cultural milieu (Bilby 1999: 259). For American country music fans, the music offers "one path to a sense of identity" as the genre encourages listeners and performers alike to "imagine their own hard times and to imagine better ones" (Ellison 1995: xxiii). The popular genres of modern music create a multi-dimensional site of struggling/negotiating for cultural selves and identities (Pattana 2002: 7). How, then, are we to look at Burmese popular music the context of a Shan village, and what are the possibilities for understanding the ways in which negotiations of cultural selves might make use of certain popular music genres, especially when they are of international origin?

Although the majority of the people in this border village are Shan, and much of the music that the band I have briefly profiled plays is Shan as well, there are ways in which the Burmese language and culture are not only present, but vibrantly meaningful, even amongst the most adamant of Shan separatists. This particular village is home to numerous veterans of the Shan United Revolutionary Army, the troops of the Shan State Army (South) are often seen buying things in the local shops, or paying visits to villagers, and Shan ethno-nationalism sets a dominant tone for cultural activities in the town.

Some scholarship on the Tai peoples has presented the argument that in countries where Tai peoples are the minority, the modern state (ruled by the ethnic majority) uses technological and mass communication means in an effort to swallow (*kluen*) the Tai (Shan) minorities (Sompong 1998: 232). In the case of the Shan state, one scholar has argued that Burmese culture has intruded into every area of the state, especially in the Southern Shan State where Shan kids with Burmese friends are ashamed of their status as Tai, thus the Shan language is eroding, and gradually being replaced by Burmese (Renu 1998: 265). On the Thai side of the border, as a Thai anthropologist has argued, the Shan can use their language, culture and customs as a method to delineate an ethnic border to separate themselves from other groups (Wandi 2002: 78). But what about the Burmanization that I have detailed earlier? What does it mean, then, that Shan people on the Thai side of the border maintain an interest in, and an appreciation for, Burmese pop culture, music especially?

In his book, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, the historian David Marr makes the observation that in early 20th century Indochina, there was not a correlation between language preference (Vietnamese or French) and political alignment, whether toward the Vietnamese nationalists or the French colonial authorities (Anderson 1991: 134). For Shan political activists, especially on the non-governmental organisation (NGO) scene in towns like Chiang Mai or Mae Sot, fluency in Burmese is a necessary prerequisite to participate in many pro-democracy

meetings with other activists from other ethnic nationality groups such as Karen, Karenni, or Mon. Burmese is thus the lingua-franca for the conduction of anti-junta resistance, though some aspire to use English as the language for inter-ethnic communication at such political meetings.

While being fluent in more than one language is obviously useful, political and cultural circumstances often govern appropriate times and places for the use of certain languages. Are there junctures when Shan people would want to conceal their Burmese skills? Certainly. When many Shan come to larger Thai cities such as Chiang Mai or Bangkok to look for work, one of the questions Thais will ask all too painfully often is, "Where are you from? Oh, you are Burmese, right?" In these instances, it is imperative that the Shan migrant assert his or her Thainess (or Tai-ness), not only because many Shan are loathe to identify themselves as Burman (lest we forget that some of them are still at war with the Burmese military), but also because the Shan migrant worker is acutely aware of the ways in which Thai interlocutors have tended to regard the Burmese. The image of the Burmese as the evil enemy of the Thai nation is pervasive throughout Thai popular discourse, and is the result of powerful institutionalising and socialising processes in Thailand (Sunait 1992: 99). While for the Shan in Burma seeking work in Mandalay, for example, Tai-ness would be something they would desire to conceal, whereas those fighting the military junta, asserting Tai-ness through national dress, language and symbols is a strategy to separate and distinguish the Shan from the Burmans (Hseng Küng Mōng 1987: 20), in the hope for political autonomy. For the Shan seeking jobs in urban areas in Thailand, asserting Thainess, or Tai-ness is a strategy to demonstrate solidarity with Thais, if only partially for economic survival, and to avoid forms of bias or increased discrimination through association with the Burmese.

In the two latter cases, it would seem that a rejection of Burmese skills would be part of the equation. But is this true in the borderlands? The causative factors for the concealing

of Burmese expressive culture are not as acute as they are in places such as Chiang Mai or Bangkok. While Burmese music is not exactly booming, the villagers will seldom see anything seriously wrong with a fellow Shan singing a Burmese popular song at a temple event, and in every music collection I have seen in this village, there are examples of Burmese popular recording artists. This border area offers a unique space for Shans where it is accepted to sing in Burmese publicly, to dance Burmese traditional dance, and to listen to Burmese music, often interwoven with Shan forms as well.

In the Burmese context, articles on the subject of modern music plant the origins of the genre (for both Shan and Burmese "modern" singers) in the years of the Second World War. Shan musicians such as Lung Hkun Pa Nyan and Hkun Hkam Hkawng became known for their Shan language renditions of popular Japanese and English songs (Hsöng Hkam Haw 2002: 9). Following independence as well, especially in the 1950s, the guitar symbolised modern music, and the growing ranks of students, Burmese, Shan, and otherwise, began to play and sing the songs of this emerging genre. The popular music industry in Burma, however, is inevitably framed by the political economies of the military dictatorship which staged a coup in 1962, and subsequently nationalised the economy. With the government's "Burmese way to Socialism" all foreign imports were banned, and the regime established a censorship board, through which all musical recordings had to pass in order to be broadcast or distributed to the public. While the Burman authorities saw Western pop, even with Burmese lyrics, as degenerative social disease (Min Zin 2002), the irrepressible youth and technological innovations of the 1970s, such as stereo multi-track recording equipment allowed young Burmese musicians to bypass the government radio stations to distribute their recordings. The university context also provided an important venue for Shan singers to distribute their work, not only through live performances, but also by making use of university recording equipment.

By 1973, however, the Burmese generals had a change of heart toward popular music, and began to incorporate the "stereo stage show" as a boost for their own military agenda (Min Zin 2002). In the mid-1970s, original Burmese popular songs, called "own tune" started to take hold, and it was a band called The Wild Ones that were the pioneers in this movement. What is striking about this band is that its leader, Sai Htee Saing, as well as its composer, Sai Kham Lait, are both ethnic Shan. It is worth pointing out, also, at this time, there was a significant Shan armed insurgency movement against the Burmese military government, and Shan civilians were subject to political repression through ethnocentric Burmanization practices.

Along with Sai Htee Saing, it is impossible to ignore the influence of the best-selling Shan recording star, Sai Mao (Tanwaa 2005: 3). He has recorded many songs in both Burmese and Shan, and is immensely popular amongst Burman audiences, from the 1970s until today. In addition to crooning love songs typical of pop, a number of Sai Mao's songs explicitly deal with aspects of being Shan in a country ruled by Burmans. There are sentiments of nostalgia and romanticization for Shan life, also coupled with integration anxiety and resistance to Burmese cultural norms. The following songs are illustrative of these thematic patterns:

Shan Baung Bi Hnint Shan Taik Pun or "Shan pants and a Shan jacket" is one such song. In this piece, the protagonist is a young Shan man who sings that he is capable of wearing Western clothing. Before meeting his girlfriend's parents, his girlfriend says to him that if he doesn't wear Burmese clothing, her parents won't like it, and he would not be able to make merit with them. He is unhappy about this, broods over it, and then decides that he will wear a Shan outfit instead. The protagonist returns to speak to the girl, and asserts, *Myanma ma lay yay siang ha taung baw Shan ka lay tit yauk ba bay* or "Hey Burmese girl, I'm just a Shan guy from the hill-top!" An important point to note is the use of the word *saing* for self, which would be "man" or "*sai*" in Shan, not Burmese. He goes on to say that he is incapable of

wearing the Burmese *puso* (sarong) and thus it will be better to wear a Shan outfit. "You'll get it, you'll see," he croons to the girl.

Other examples of Sai Mao songs in Burmese which speak to such themes of Shan ethnicity in the Burman milieu, or Shan sentimentalism, include titles such as *Lun Ya Tay Shan Myay* or, "The Shan land that I miss;" or the all-time favourite, *Shan Be Bok Lay Kyantaw* or "I am just a Shan bean." The first verse of this song speaks to the peaceful beauty of the cool mountains. The singer croons to the listener to "call me a Shan bean if you wish, it is my heritage, and I am attached to the peaceful, cool, Shan country." How ironic in the context of ethno-nationalism, insurgency, and one of the longest-running internal conflicts in modern history, that the ideal of the cool and peaceful Shan land is iterated. One is left to wonder as to how many Burmese and Shan listeners make this connection as well, or whether it is even necessary to do so. Or perhaps the peaceful ideal Shanland is the point, or even the mask.

Followers of Japanese popular music would recognise *Shan Be Bok Lay Kyantaw* melody as one and the same with the classic enka song by Masao Sen, *Kitaguni No Haru* (or "Mountain Springtime," which was later "covered" in Chinese by the Taiwanese singer Theresa Teng (and later Sai Mao). Returning to the original version of this song, enka was a massively popular musical genre in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s, and its rhythms and melodies structurally incorporated elements of *wasei poppusu* and folk music (Okada and Groemer 1991: 283). Similar to country-western music, this genre tended to focus on the pains of urban migration, lovesickness and loneliness (Hughes 1990: 11). *Kitaguni No Haru* is an archetypical example. For *Shan Be Bok Lay Kyantaw*, though it is not a direct translation of *Kitaguni No Haru* the lyrics do resonate the stylistic genre of enka, as examination of the lyrics of both songs shows that there are important thematic overlaps, particularly in the romanticization of country life; whereas the Japanese song leaves the listener with the lingering question of whether to go home the Burmese song, on the other hand, speaks of the cool and peaceful Shan earth (*chan*

aye tay Shan myay) and invites the audience to come and enjoy the lovely smells of cherry blossoms, Shan songs, and pleasant life.

However, when making these connections between the "original" popular song and the "cover," drawing textual connections does nothing to elucidate how audiences such as the Shan migrants at the Thai-Burma border actually use and understand the themes in the songs, unless one wants to look at the popular song as a vector which points outward, but with no specific destination explicitly given. For most of my Shan and Burmese informants, they had no prior knowledge of the Masao Sen song; while largely there is common knowledge that artists such as Sai Mao liberally borrow from Chinese songs, the specific knowledge of the Japanese song *Kitaguni No Haru* was only demonstrated by a woman I met who had studied Japanese when she lived in Mandalay, and her Japanese teacher had played the song for the Burmese students of Japanese to learn. For some of my informants, when I played *Kitaguni No Haru* for them, they would comment, "it's a Sai Mao song!" The first listener went and asked other Shan people if they would like to listen to Sai Mao in Japanese. Even though they are fully aware that Sai Mao may have borrowed the melody from Masao Sen's song, for the Shan, it is still a Sai Mao song, because that is how they have heard of it, and through the reification process and cultural meaning-making associated with the popular song, it still is a Sai Mao song.

As a stylistic genre, enka has a rhythm which is in "intimate relation" with the rhythm of the Japanese language (Okada and Groemer 1991: 290). However, in the Burmese copy translation, one would therefore think that this intimate relationship would be gone, or would it? I might be the bearer of bad news in suggesting that enka's intimate relationship with the rhythm of the Japanese language is hardly an exclusive one, given the tremendous success of *Shan Be Bok Lay Kyandaw*. The translation of a song, or a re-lyricing would not necessarily preclude an intimate relationship with a rhythm, and it can be shown that between a given

rhythm and instrumentation, there can be multiple forms of intimacy with the rhythm of a spoken language.

Despite the global pervasiveness of explicit covering (though it is worth pointing out that all popular music is some form of "cover" as it incorporates familiar musical structures and rhythms) there is relatively little critical material available about this enormous phenomenon. It would seem, often enough, that original musical forms would somehow be deemed more worthy of scholarly attention. At this juncture, I would like to point out that such "cover songs" are not only symbolically rich because they can be creative interpretations of certain other texts, but also because they have the ability to simultaneously conceal (through covering) but also reveal (through invoking) the transnational character of popular music itself.

Theoretical speculation aside, can enka, as a stylistic genre of Japanese popular music, somehow be meaningful—in Burmese—to the Shan stateless migrant in Thailand? Indeed, through ethnographic research, it can be shown how important and richly meaningful this Burmese-through-Shan rendition of enka is to listeners across the Thai-Burma border, as they find their way through to the urban core of Thailand to look for work, even if it is no longer "enka" to them. Here, the power of the popular song is its capacity for aesthetic identification, or the process by which the listener fills the gaps in the narrative of the story with details from his or her own life, and thus identifies, or becomes part of the song. Perhaps this is part of the important reason that Sai Mao is really able to transgress the Shan market and enter the mainstream Burmese market; the symbolically flexible *Shan Be Bok Lay Kyantaw* romanticizes Shan-ness in a way which is appealing to both Burmese and Shan audiences, and the enka melody mystically links it to Japanese romanticism, perhaps foregrounding that nostalgia with industrialisation and discourses of modernity. Somehow, something uncanny has brought Masao Sen and Sai Mao together, and it is not just the Burmese cover version of *Kitaguni No Haru*. Throughout Masao Sen's rise to fame during the 1960s, his emphasis

on his country origins formed a key part of his image, and, conversely Sai Mao repeatedly emphasised his Shan background, his cultural (in)competence in Burmese mainstream culture, and Shan clothing and foods constitute a dominant theme in many of his songs.

The point of the song is that a Shan man is finding Burma to be a hostile environment for the signifiers of his ethnicity, namely the staple ingredient in Shan food, the bean, *Hto Nao* in Shan, or *Be Bok* in Burmese, and longs for a far-off peaceful place, Shanland. The Burman ethnic slur for the Shan is "*Shan Be Bok*," concurrent with *Kala Masala* (Masala Indian) or *Tayok wet-tha* (Chinese pork) that classifies people according to their stereotypical staple food. The Sai Mao song takes this ethnic slur, and turns it into a matter of positive identification. For the Shan listener in Thailand, where she or he has found an escape from the Burmese military, the Shan singer in Burmese can maintain a trajectory with the former life, which clings to the familiar and changing no more than necessary in a strange environment (Chang 2006: 61). Often, these Burmese songs are played, sung and followed by Shan people in the borderlands, in spite of the explicitly antagonistic stance toward the Burmese government taken by some of them, particularly those affiliated with the Shan resistance movement. From more than one informant, I would hear statements such as, "I know it's a Burmese song...but I really love it."

The range of Burmese music that people in this Shan village tend to be interested in, not surprisingly, coincides not only with age, but also with time of departure from Burma. Most 35 year old Shan in Thailand are not so interested in Examplez or Ringo Na Peggi, as might be the case in Burma as well. But, I did participate in a conversation about a recent album by the very popular contemporary Burmese pop artist, Htun Eindra Bo, which a woman I talked with had found out about through some teenagers who had migrated across the Thai border all the way from Panglong only seven months earlier. Talking with more recent migrants is one way to keep up with the popular music scene in Burma, and digital media is increasingly becoming

a ubiquitous alternative method; in particular several villagers had already purchased digital satellite television receivers and were watching Myanmar TV3 on their home sets.

Some of my informants, however, were more politically explicit than simply expressing likes and dislikes when they talked about the Burmese culture industries. One former Shan United Revolutionary Army soldier told me that "We aren't fighting them (gesturing at a Htun Eindra Bo CD on the table) we're just fighting the government. Besides, if we don't learn their language, how are we going to defeat them?" One can only wonder how much this individual sees maintaining linguistic connections to Burma through consuming the productions of the popular music industry as a method to retain an antagonistic stance toward the government, or at least be able to articulate it in the Burmese language.

More often, however, villagers would iterate that one has to be able to "separate" the good things from the "enemy," as it were. In this village's market, one can buy sundry Burmese imports, such as *let pet thob*, Burmese tea salad, Burmese medicines and spices. When I was talking about my plans to visit the border town of Tachileik, opposite Mae Sai in Thailand, Shan villagers quickly rattled off a number of Burmese snacks and sweets that they wanted me to buy for them, not to mention the names of various popular Burmese musicians whose latest recordings they would like to add to their collections. In other words, migrating to Thailand, for many Shan, hardly means purging themselves of Burmese-tagged elements, musical, culinary and the like. From limited ethnographic fieldwork in Thai urban areas, I would argue, that the presence of Thai interlocutors is more likely the main causative factor which would induce Shan people to mask explicitly Burmese-tagged cultural elements. What this situation also produces, as well, is over-compensation: whereas the Thai person might not see such a thing as *thanaka* as necessarily "Burmese" the Shan person avoids wearing it because she herself sees it as a Burmese signifier.

But can we mark a difference in Shan practices, Burmese signifiers, and public vs. private performance? The increasing ubiquity of the VCD player means that private consumption of such forms is possible for more people, and creating infinite "moments of consumption" as these disks circulate in licit (and hidden) markets in Burma, Thailand, and beyond. In the year 2005, in honour of Sai Mao's birthday, a number of Burmese popular musicians, together with Sai Mao himself, mounted a concert, which was made into a Karaoke VCD, *Sai Sai Mao Bawa Taing* and features 24 of Sai Mao's songs, mostly sung by these various Burmese artists. This album soon found its way to Thailand, and a Shan friend lent me the VCDs (which were already in pirated copy) to take a look at the Burmese bands playing Sai Mao songs.

One song that I particularly enjoyed was the love song *Ba Lo The Le Ah Chit Ye* or "What do you need my love?" because of its catchy rhythm and melody. When I was watching the version on this concert VCD, sung by the modern Burmese hip-hop group Examplez, one of my Shan informants, Sai Chuen, kept laughing at various moments, and I was at a loss to understand why. The lyrics were rather straightforward, as was the performance by Examplez.

When I asked Sai Chuen what was so funny, he said, "Their accents are cute! I know they are Burmans and singing in Burmese, but it is different from Sai Mao's Shan accent in Burmese. It is funny to see these guys singing it with their accents!" After watching the music video with me for a while, Sai Chuen walked off, mimicking the Burman accents of the Burmese language, chuckling to himself as he walked. So, what was meaningful in this instance was that the songs popularity and index of familiarity for this consumer, meant that the Burmese lyrics are to be sung with the Shan accent. The (authentic?) Burmese accent, for Sai Chuen, represents a transgression of the symbolic order established by Sai Mao. Even though the song *Ba Lo The Le Ah Chit Ye* is not thematically or symbolically tagged as a song promoting (or deprecating) Shan-ness, the fact that it is a Sai Mao song allows it the expectation that

it be sung with the Shan accent. Such is the power of this codification system and level of popular genre expectation.

Because of the diverse relationships which Shan people have with Burmese culture, I would argue that the staying power for a lot of Burmese music may be described in terms of the sublime. The catchiness and thematic association of some rhythms and melodies generate intense interest, and the border-crossing capacity of these Burmese songs implies that there is much more than a fleeting affection for a tune involved. According to Kant, the beautiful charms, whereas the sublime moves. The sublime also includes fear, which is a species of pain (Kant 1960: 34). In looking at the forces that drove many Shan across the border into Thailand, one can uncover horrific stories of poverty, violence, and abuse. For some, it is easy to see why some Shans would want to reject Burmese popular culture entirely, and instead only take interest in Shan, Chinese, Thai, or other forms of popular entertainment. But, Burmese popular culture, particularly movie stars and popular musicians are often remembered fondly, and there is a continued interest in the affairs and new recordings of Burmese stars such as Htun Eindra Bo, Lu Min or Dway. Recalling the success of Shan stars such as Sai Mao and Sai Htee Saing, and the way in which their songs became hits even among mainstream Burmese audiences, we can see why such Burmese recordings would stay with the Shan, through their migration across the border into Thailand. Popular music is a broad signifier, acting in more ways other than simply drawing the listener in. For many, it is concurrent with subcultural values (Bennett 1993: 3), and particularly amongst those for whom the guitar jam is a main form of socialising with friends, as is common in many other Southeast Asian contexts as well. One of my subjects, while heaving a nostalgic sigh, told me a story of how she and her friends ditched a day of high school when Sai Mao released a new Burmese song, so they could sit under a tree with a guitar and sing it together. Anyone who has spent much time with these informal jam circles will notice the ways in which jocular

plays on language and signifiers bring the meaning of these global texts closer to the local context, as illustrated by the Shan rendition of the CCR song at the beginning of this article.

Sai Mao, as a Shan, an outsider, has triumphed in Burmese, but he has not forgotten his Shan roots, and many Shan people are delighted to re-tell Sai Mao's involvement in Shan political movements, or his songs which refer to Shan independence or the Panglong Agreement which stipulated that the Shan State would be allowed to vote for independence following ten years' membership in the Union of Burma.

For the Shan in Burma, singers such as Sai Htee Saing and Sai Mao represent a kind of victory of the Shan character in a country ruled by Burmans, and many of my Shan informants in Thailand would repeatedly boast about the popularity of Shan musicians on the mainstream Burmese popular music scene, as well as comment about Sai Htee Saing's skill in the Burmese language in particular (comparing the two artists, however, one does quickly notice that Sai Htee Saing tends to have many more Burmese songs than Shan songs, and the opposite is true for Sai Mao). At the same time, many Shan people who had experienced the transition to Burman core cities such as Mandalay or Rangoon would talk about the stresses of integration, and how they would have wear the *pasò*, or Burmese sarong, out of fear of derision.

In Thailand, however, Shan migrants must assimilate into the Thai milieu, and learn to speak and act as if they are Thai. On the one hand, the transition for Shan migrants, acquisition of the Thai language, is not as large an obstacle as it is for other migrants such as the Karen or Burmese into Thailand, but Shan still face acute forms of discrimination, as detailed earlier. Perhaps in anticipation of migration to the Thai urban centres, where the Shan migrants anticipate facing the Thai police, do they recall the cosmopolitan, but strangely self-deprecating, Burmese songs of Sai Mao. Just as this border space presents an important site from which Shan can actively demonstrate Shan ethnicity, because Shan are the majority,

it is also a place in which the Burmese language can be at play, as other Shan will hardly find it contradictory that one can speak, sing or dance in Burmese. Language switching, and transitional competence, be it between Shan, Thai, or Burmese, is not only a tool for survival, but also an important part of the Shan social self. For perhaps only now in this different kind of hostile political climate (Thailand) can Shan listeners appreciate Burmese music with either genuine nostalgia, or the ironic detachment which comes from "getting" the lyrics while their Thai interlocutors are at a loss.

Popular culture, according to Antonio Gramsci, should neither be looked at as the site of people's cultural deformation, nor their self-affirmation, but as a force-field of relations (Bennett 1986: xiii). What this concept thus urges the ethnographer to do is not only to examine the symbolic meaning of the songs themselves, but also look at how people rework the meaning of the texts in relation to personal experience or other ideological forms, and in particular, whether they participate in acts of aesthetic identification with the songs. Burmese songs, especially those of Sai Mao, are able to key into the unique nostalgia experienced by a group of people twice in exile, pushed back from the core of economic activity in two larger nation-states, a new species of *kitaguni no haru* at the Thai-Burma border.

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