



From soldiers to farmers: The political geography of Chinese Kuomintang territorialization in northern Thailand



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ABSTRACT

This paper engages with the concept of territorialization through telling the story of the transformation of Chinese former Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers of Yunnanese origin and their descendants living in northern Thailand, from being opium and heroin traders and smugglers, to becoming mercenaries fighting against the Communist Party of Thailand in northern Thailand on behalf of the Thai military, to finally transforming into tea farmers and traders through receiving development aid support provided from the Republic of China (Taiwan). Taiwan's development aid was ostensibly only for humanitarian purposes, but in reality also had important underlying political objectives. We argue territorialization is a more-than-human political technology. In particular, it is argued that territorialization frequently combines both military politics and development politics, even though the literature often separates these two elements, as if they are not frequently intertwined and interrelated. Here, we show how these two forms of politics, one explicit and one much less so, can come together to create new social and economic realities, ones with important geographical and geopolitical implications.

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Introduction

The so-called “Golden Triangle”, a largely mountainous area generally considered to include parts of northern Thailand, north-eastern Myanmar or Burma, and northwestern Laos, has been a major opium-growing area since the nineteenth century (Trocki, 2011). Today, Myanmar still produces the second most opium of any country, surpassed only by Afghanistan (UN News Centre, 2014). At the northern Thai borderlands of the Golden Triangle, however, the once extensive landscape of opium poppies has been substantially transformed over the last few decades. Instead of hosting extensive plantations of poppy flowers, the high uplands of the northern Thailand border in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai Provinces are now dominated by various other kinds of cash crops, including temperate climate vegetables and fruits, coffee, decorative flowers, and crucially for this article, tea. In accordance, the upland ethnic groups in northern Thailand, including the Akha, Lisu, Lahu, Lu Mien, Hmong and others—all of whom previously cultivated poppy—now mainly grow non-opium crops. This article

relates to these changes, but is specifically about a group of Chinese soldiers of Yunnanese origin associated with the Kuomintang Party (KMT) and their dependents living in the uplands of northern Thailand along the border with Myanmar. After their defeat at the end of the (post-World War II) civil war in China, these KMT troops crossed into Burma in 1950. They stayed in the border region during the 1950s, until being forced into Laos and Thailand in 1960–61 by the Burmese military, with the assistance of the communist People's Republic of China.

The transformations from opium poppy fields to alternative cash crops, and from being Chinese KMT soldiers to becoming Thai farmers, are the outcome of a complex set of intertwined geopolitical circumstances, beginning with civil war conflict and politics, to opium smuggling and trading, to becoming mercenary fighters for the Thai army against a largely ethnic Hmong insurgency in northern Thailand linked to the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), and then finally to becoming Thai subjects and farmers growing legal cash crops. We examine how particular types of territorialization occurred during these periods, and we demonstrate that over time the KMT's territorializing processes involved shifting from being primarily linked to Cold War conflict against communists and frontier drug trading, to becoming increasingly associated with modern agricultural development, supported by Thai Royal

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Projects but also the government of the Republic of China (Taiwan). The Thai Royal Projects were initially launched to promote the eradication of opium and its substitution with legal upland crops, as well as to support the provision of improved education and health services, and rural infrastructure more generally. The Royal Projects developed within the context of counter-insurgency, and were implicitly designed to isolate the CPT. The projects also, however, indirectly and significantly acted as territorializing agents, ones designed to more closely link the KMT and other upland ethnic minority groups in northern Thailand to the nation state (Rossi, 2012; Walker, 2010).

This article, therefore, traces the historical processes of transformation amongst the KMT in northern Thailand, following their complex historical trajectory in the northern Thai borderland highlands. In particular, we argue that the political territorialization that has emerged has simultaneously been a result of both political and economic reterritorialization, and that these changes have gradually connected the northern Thai borderlands where many of these KMT continue to reside, to the global market economy, albeit no longer with the illegal market for opium, but instead the legal market for tea, particularly in Taiwan. These changes necessitate that we remain attentive to various forms of politics, including politics related to development.

The article therefore interrogates the idea of territory as an analytic tool in political geography. We proceed with a theoretical examination of the concept of territory. In addition to approaching territory as a “political technology” (Elden, 2010), we also argue that territorialization is a fundamentally historical process associated with both human and nonhuman elements and involving explicit and non-explicit politics and the politics of development. After an extended consideration of theoretical debates on territory, we then separate the empirical data into five parts based on different periods of the over half century of KMT inhabitation of the uplands of northern Thailand, although we stress that these periods are closely linked and frequently overlap.

The authors combined their relative strengths in order to conduct this research. On the one hand, Po-Yi is a Chinese native speaker from Taiwan and has done extensive research in Yunnan Province in mainland China regarding tea. However, until this project he had not worked in Thailand. Ian does not speak Chinese and has not conducted research on tea per se. However, he speaks Thai fluently, and has been doing research in Thailand for many years. He has also been conducting research about Hmong involvement in the CPT, including the role of former KMT in that conflict. When we first went to the field together in northern Thailand together in 2014, we initially conducted five interviews with four former KMT soldiers at Mae Salong. These interviewees were chosen because of their knowledge of the KMT's involvement in fighting against the CPT. Sometimes Po-Yi conducted interviews in Chinese, and translated for Ian, and sometimes Ian conducted interviews in Thai and translated for Po-Yi. Later in both the summers and winters of 2014 and 2015, Po-Yi conducted additional fieldwork in Mae Salong, Wawi, and Phayaprai, interviewing 39 former KMT and their children in Chinese. These interviews were focused on understanding the development of tea in former KMT areas. Po-Yi also went to different agricultural areas in Mae Salong, Wawi, and Phayaprai to observe farming and production activities, including tea cultivation, processing, and marketing. Later, the Po-Yi also interviewed nine people in Taiwan regarding links between Taiwan and northern Thailand in relation to tea. Ian also conducted more research about the KMT and CPT in northern Thailand between 2012 and 2016, including interviewing 90 Hmong, Thai, Lu-Mien, and Khmu people who were either allied with the Thai military and the former KMT when they fought against the CPT, or who fought with the CPT against the Thai military and the former

KMT. Ultimately, a total of 138 interviews were conducted by both researchers.

Territorialization as a more-than-human political technology

Territory has been an important analytic concept in political geography and allied fields for decades (Delaney, 2005). Echoing recent shifting attentions to the relational flows of populations and goods (Amin, 2002; Murdoch, 2006), geographers, and social scientists more generally, have urged scholars to reconsider the unproblematic definition of territory as a boundary-fixed space and power entity for the state (Allen & Cochrane, 2007). However, taking a relational approach does not necessarily conflict with territorial thinking (Antonsich, 2009; Jones, 2009; Painter, 2010). In fact, to rethink the uncritical definitions of a static and bounded territory does not, and should not, mean ignoring states, since they still have the political power to territorialize sovereignty (Jonas, 2012). Indeed, as Elden (2010) argues, territory is a “political technology” employed by the sovereign authority of states to measure land and control terrain.

Territory, as a “political technology,” must be understood through its relation to both land and terrain. As Elden (2010: 804) states, land is “a relation of property, a finite resource that is distributed, allocated and owned, a political-economic question.” And terrain is “a relation of power, with a heritage in geology and military, the control of which allows the establishment and maintenance of order.” Territory, as terrain, is therefore a “political-strategic question” (Elden, 2010, p. 804). However, Elden (2010) pushes further to argue that “land” and “terrain” are necessary but insufficient to thoroughly catch the meanings of territory. “Measure and control – the technical and the legal – need to be thought of alongside land and terrain,” (Elden, 2010, pp. 811–812). In other words, territory as a political technology requires the political-legal dimension for the state to authorize the power to maintain order inside its territorial sovereignty. Meanwhile, a political technology also comprises the political-technical dimension involved with surveying and mapping techniques for producing a “legible” territory (Scott, 1998).

While acknowledging the significance of taking territory as a political technology in controlling and measuring geographical space, Antonsich (2011) points out that the issue of agency should be emphasized more when thinking about the production of territory. To highlight this, Antonsich (2011, p. 424) argues that territory is a “social space, produced by specific social practices and meanings which turn territory into both ‘semiotized’ and a ‘lived’ space.” Nevertheless, Antonsich's emphasis on agency only considered human agency, without explicitly addressing the potential influence of nonhuman elements in the production of territory. Furthermore, Antonsich defines human agency as bottom-up practices realized through people's everyday lives. Although perspectives from people's everyday practices are certainly necessary, conceptualizing agency as only bottom-up could risk a simplified binary that divides top-down and the bottom-up conflicts in non-nuanced ways. We want to avoid this potential trap. Moreover, complex relations between human and nonhuman elements could be lost through employing this simplified dichotomy.

To grasp meanings of territory, we take territory as a political technology associated with both human and nonhuman agency. As Jonas (2012, p. 270) argues, geographers need further examinations “both of relational thinking about territorial politics and of territorial thinking about relational processes.” In line with this, recent scholarship has approached territorialization as a relational process containing both human and nonhuman elements. For example, Dittmer (2014) has applied the concept of assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; see also; DeLanda, 2006) to propose a

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