

(Im)Mobilization and hegemony: 'hill tribe' subjects and the 'Thai' state

Katharine McKinnon

Department of Human Geography, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

In the mountains of northern Thailand the constraints and restrictions placed upon 'hill tribe' people and their bodies are often counter-posed to a legendary past where people could move freely across borders, where refuge in the mountains represented freedom from oppressive state powers, and where highlanders could come down from the mountains and integrate. This paper explores how highland subjects have been transformed as the emergence of the Thai state has imposed concrete and regulated boundaries demarcating Thailand, and a Thai people. Building on historical narratives in which the freedoms of the past are counterpoised with the closely governed present, I present a more complex and contradictory picture of the national subjects in Thailand. I discuss the citizenship movement, in which activists have been fighting for citizenship status for highlanders through a strategy that seeks a place for highland people within hegemonic discourses of the nation-state and belonging. The citizenship movement establishes a new 'Thai hill tribe' subject position, formed in opposition to its constitutive outside—the 'non-Thai hill tribe'. And as highlanders find new ways to fit with the hegemony of the nation-state, both more fixed and more mobile subject positions open up as Thai-ness and its 'others' are redefined.

Key words: hegemony, citizenship, subjectivity, embodiment, Thailand.

Introduction

Khun Wandii¹ is a high-profile activist working to get citizenship issued for highland minorities in Thailand. She is herself a Thai citizen and a highlander, identifying herself as Akha (one of several highland minority groups). In July 2002 she was met on arrival at Chiang Mai international airport off a flight from China by plain clothes policemen and escorted to her

home. The house was searched thoroughly and she was arrested—accused of dealing in illegal narcotics. The charges were eventually dropped but she was left terrified after police had threatened retribution should she go public. Weeks later, on the advice of a friend working with an international human rights organization in Bangkok, she went to the media with her story (*The Bangkok Post*, 8 and 10 August 2002). There was no retribution;

instead high-ranking police officers, embarrassed, denied all responsibility.

This story highlights both the problems and possibilities that overdetermine being a highlander within the Thai state. A highlander with citizenship crosses an unofficial boundary between Thai (citizen) and non-Thai (highlander/‘hill tribe’). By accusing her of dealing narcotics, officers placed Wandii firmly under a ‘hill tribe’ identification by invoking one of the most prominent stereotypes about ‘hill tribes’—that they grow opium and traffic in narcotics. Highlanders are seen as a distinct group by Thai authorities, who use the term ‘hill tribe’ (*chao khao*) to set highlanders (Akha, Lisu, Lahu, etc.) as a group against and different to lowland Thai. The term ‘hill tribe’ invokes a set of stigmatizing discourses of exotic nomadic tribespeople and of a problematic (and polluting) non-Thai population within the Thai geo-body.² Since the state first took steps to directly police the mountains in the 1950s, the ‘hill tribes’ have been linked with cultivating opium and dealing narcotics, destructive ‘slash and burn’ agricultural practices, and as a dangerously mobile non-Thai presence on the nation’s borders. The term ‘highlander’ has been adopted by academics and activists like Wandii, and is the term I use here, to denote in as unstigmatized a way as possible people whose lives and livelihood have in the past been based in the highlands and who are culturally and linguistically distinct from lowland Tai.³ ‘Highlander’ is used in opposition to the term ‘hill tribe’ and the stereotypes it invokes.

The story of Wandii’s arrest and harassment repeats a familiar pattern in relationships between highland activists and Thai authorities. During the course of research in Thailand I worked often with Wandii, and at the offices of her organization—one of the first

non-governmental organizations (NGOs) run entirely by highlanders. These activists have sought to overturn the stereotypes about highland people (as being associated with narcotics, environmental destruction and a national security risk) that have guided government policy for decades, while Thai officials have worked to limit the voice of highlanders in larger national politics. Wandii’s story brings attention to the problematic status of highland people within a discourse of the Thai nation-state. Highlanders are, on one hand, inscribed with a set of stereotypes that emphasize their foreignness and outsidership to the Thai kingdom. On the other hand, approximately 60 per cent hold Thai citizenship—their presence within Thailand legitimated as a ‘bearer of rights’ (Mouffe 1992: 4). Citizenship papers bring subjects into the governing gaze of the state, but also enable freedom of movement between towns and provinces within that state as well as to locations beyond (such as China). In Thailand, where nation builders have utilized discourses of a bounded homogeneous geo-body (Thongchai 1994) of a Thai-land for a Thai-people, Wandii’s simultaneous embodiment as both outsider (‘hill tribe’) and insider (Thai citizen) is problematic and disruptive.

This paper focuses on how highland people have been constructed as ‘national’ subjects *vis-à-vis* the nation-state, and what implications these constructions have had on their ability to move and travel both within and beyond Thailand. These considerations emerge from a larger research project into the work of researchers, developers and activists in the highlands of northern Thailand.⁴ In this project I investigate how these well-intended interventions have acted in multiple ways as mechanisms of governmentality, while providing at the same time new openings for counter-hegemonic possibilities.

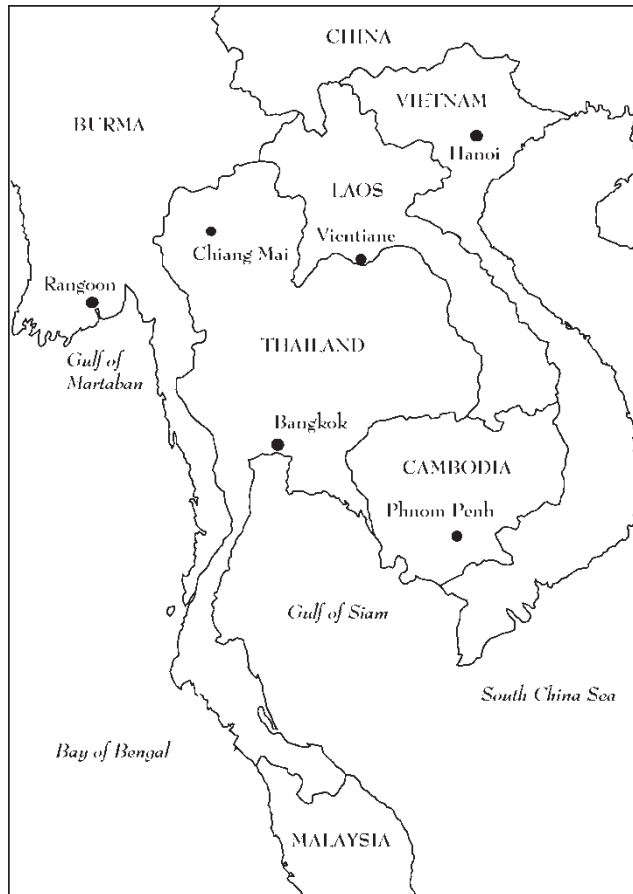


Figure 1 Map of Thailand and South-East Asia (after Wyatt 1984).

For this research I spent one year based in Chiang Mai, the capital of Thailand's north (see Figure 1). From bases in Chiang Mai a great number of community development programmes and research projects in the mountains have been carried out over recent decades. I sought an understanding of the geo-political and personal dynamics around these projects, and in particular the modes of representation running through interactions between highlanders, these 'outside' projects and the state. I spoke with as many people as possible who had worked in the highlands

over the years, forming closer relationships with one research programme, one multi-lateral aid project and one highlander-run NGO. I returned often for repeat interviews with key informants involved in these programmes, accompanied them on working trips into the mountains, and acquired as many papers and reports related to these projects, programmes and organizations as possible.

The empirical material I present here is based on repeated interviews and conversations with staff of the Highland Association⁵ and my

observations during several months volunteering in their offices and accompanying Khun Wandii on her work in the mountains. The Highland Association was one of the first pan-tribal highlander-led NGOs to be established in Thailand. The pan-tribal embrace of the Association was a recognition of shared concerns and experiences of all highland groups in Thailand. When it began in the late 1980s, it was envisioned as a cultural and educational organization which would work to keep traditional knowledge and traditional cultural practices of all highland groups alive. With time, and with the flourishing of Thai civil society following democratic reform in the early 1990s, the Association has become increasingly politicized. Members of the Association continue to identify themselves with their tribal group, and to work to support and encourage traditional practices. However, the Association has also played a key role in activism on behalf of all highlanders, and by 2001 two of the Association's directors sat on a special committee established to advise the Prime Minister on citizenship issues. As part of their work in the citizenship movement, these activists have engaged a strategy focused on shifting the way highlanders are identified as a non-Thai 'other' within a dominant discourse. As the citizenship movement seeks ways to fit with the hegemony of the nation-state, highlanders move into both more fixed and more mobile subject positions as Thai-ness and its 'others' are redefined.

Cultural geographies of mobility

The majority of literature on mobility in geography has emerged from transport and political geography, and has been primarily concerned with issues of migration or

questions of access to transport (for a review see Law 1999). This largely empirical tradition has recently been enriched by the application of feminist and post-structuralist theories, which have investigated the discursive constructions of the migrant and migrant identities (see Law 1999; Lawson 2000; Secor 2002; Tesfahuney 1998). Following this body of work, cultural geographies of mobility place the focus on power and its actualizations through readings and representations of mobility and the mobile subject (see e.g. Cresswell 1997; Norindr 1994; Massey 1994; Sibley 1999). Cultural geography opens up representations of mobility—as freedom and emancipation, as transgressive and threatening—to interrogation as discursive constructions with powerful performative effectivity (Butler 1993; Nelson 1999).

This paper is in part a reply to recent calls in cultural geography to redress the apparent neglect of a material 'real' world in favour of disembodied theories focused in texts, narrative, discourse and representation. Philo (2000, quoted in Nash 2002: 219-220) argues that cultural geography's 'preoccupation with immaterial cultural processes, with the constitution of intersubjective meaning systems, with the play of identity politics', has led to a neglect of the material processes 'which are the stuff of everyday social practices, relations and struggles, and which underpin social group formation, the constitution of social systems and social structures, and the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion' (see Longhurst 1997; Moss and Dyck 1999; Nash 2002; and also Jackson 2000 on rematerializing cultural geography). Rather than seeing text and representation as disembodied and separate from embodied practice, my aim is to examine how the spaces of texts, signs, symbols and imaginings are grounded in everyday social practices, thus focusing on the materiality of

discourses as they are practised, performed, inscribed on, in and through the social world. In this way I follow other cultural geographers who have explored the materiality of discourse (see Cresswell 1997; Duncan and Ley 1993; Longhurst 2001; Monk 1999; Remmler 1994).

Foucault's work on the way a modern governmental rationality is visited upon the body is crucial to this line of approach. Both in the regulatory acts of institutionalized powers, and in self-government and self-discipline, the subject (and the body) are constituted in ways that fit within normative discourses of identity. The intersection of logics of governmentality and the regulation, indeed transformation, of bodies in Foucault's work points to the intimate relationship between the discursive and the material.⁶ This paper addresses this point of intersection, where normative discourses of the nation-state and its subjects are materialized, and become tangible realities in the body of the subject and the body of the state.

For highlanders the shift in discursive and political identification from 'highlander' to 'citizen' subject positions has huge implications for their freedom to travel. Both discursive and physical movements are intimately intertwined. Representations and their materiality are here one and the same as the embodiment of certain subjectivities has real impact on the ability to move both discursively and physically. The mobile subject of this paper then is not the migrant or the traveller. Rather, this paper looks at the construction of national subjects—the Thai citizen and its ambiguous 'Other Within' (Thongchai 2000), the Thai 'hill tribe'/'highlander'. Here I discuss the discursive mobility of a 'hill tribe' or highlander subject from outsider to insider, and the implications of this movement for their physical mobility.

Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) reconceptualization of hegemony provides the starting point for my analysis of this transformation (for a good introduction to the work of Laclau and Mouffe see Torfing, 1999). Hegemony is a term most commonly associated with Gramsci for whom the term describes an alliance of ideology, identity and power in a singular dominant formation that defines and becomes the State. Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist re-interpretation is in part an anti-essentialist critique of Gramsci's idea of hegemony, and emphasizes the necessary incompleteness of hegemonic formations and the partiality of their processes of subjection. Hegemonic formations, such as the modern nation-state, are seen as discursive rather than natural formations, which never quite achieve fullness in actuality. In part this is because hegemony is formed in an antagonistic relationship to a constitutive outside. The constitutive outside provides both the conditions for hegemony's existence, yet at one and the same time demonstrates the incompleteness of hegemony. Taking up the idea of the 'constitutive outside', it is possible to see how national subjects are constructed in and through the concomitant and dependent construction of extra-national subjects—the outsider, the non-citizen (for geographers writing on the constitutive outside see Natter and Jones 1997). In this case the outsider, the 'hill tribe,' is also sometimes the insider, the Thai citizen. I am interested in the ways movement is possible in the incomplete hegemony of the nation-state, and the national subjects it produces.

Nation-state subjects

Recently published histories of Thailand have contrasted representations of the modern

national subject with those of a pre-colonial era, and have juxtaposed the modern racially, and territorially, fixed and bound subject to a more mobile and fluid subjectivity that characterized South-East Asian state formations prior to the colonial period. The common characterization of ‘hill tribes’ as problematic and potentially dangerous, places highland people outside and in opposition to the sense of Thai-ness that has emerged in and through a colonial and post-colonial era construction of ‘Thailand’ and a Thai national identity. ‘Thailand’ (so named in 1939) began to take its current shape in the mid- to late 1800s as the ruling elites in Bangkok began to consolidate their territory in response to the British and French colonial presence in Burma and Indochina (see Turton 2000; Reynolds 1991; Wyatt 1984).

Thailand’s construction as a modern nation-state was founded in ideas of one territory, one nation, one race brought back to Thailand by Siamese elites educated in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thongchai (1994) has argued convincingly that this transformation introduced a different sense of the body of the state, as an entity mapped out and fixed in Cartesian space, within which land and people were uniformly part of ‘Thailand’. At the same time a new concept of a Thai race (*chat Thai*) was introduced. As such, a new Thai geo-body emerged along with a new Thai body. A national identity was fixed in the flesh and blood of this new subject, and the lowland peoples of southern, northern and north-eastern Thailand—whose dialects and customs were previously seen as related, but not the same—were re-presented as fundamentally and innately connected through a shared Thai-ness. For these new subjects the status of Thai citizenship was embedded in the body, in its racial birthright

(see Renard 2000; Reynolds 1991; Thongchai 2000; Wyatt 1984). One of the groups historically and systematically excluded from that notion of Thai-ness are highland people. Those that made their homes in the mountainous northern borderlands of the Thai geo-body were, and are, excluded from *chat Thai* yet became unavoidably part of Thai-land when the national boundaries were finally set down in their present form in approximately 1907.⁷

The emphasis on race and ethnic identity that has characterized a modern Thai nation-state exists in contrast to the more fluid approach towards identity characteristic of previous centuries (see Renard 2000; and also Bowie 2000; Thongchai 1994, 2000). In the Tai Kingdoms that pre-date modern Thailand the terms ‘Tai’ and ‘Kha’ distinguished groups in a much more fluid way than contemporary differentiations based on race or ethnicity.⁸ The mountains and forests were considered wild territories and in those ‘outer’ regions the grip of city-based Tai Kingdoms was much weaker. The people that dwelt in the ‘wilds’ were named Kha, while city dwellers were referred to as ‘Tai’. These terms ‘were ultimately not racial ethnic denotations’ (Renard 2000: 67), rather, the difference between social groups was conceptualized as spatial rather than ethnic—whether a subject was Tai or Kha was a matter of inhabiting spaces close to or far away from the city, a space of wildness or a space of civility. Movement between groups was a matter of moving between the spaces of wildness and of civilization, between faraway forests and the city states, and a subject could be mobile between the designations of Tai and Kha, though one’s status within either society would be lower according to how recently one had arrived (Renard 2000: 67; see also Thongchai 2000).

In contrast to the Tai city-states of the nineteenth century, in the newly formed 'Thailand' of the twentieth century definitions of belonging and the right to citizenship were much more fixed. With the notion of the Thai race, and the renaming of Siam as 'Thailand' under Prime Minister Phibun's strongly nationalist government in 1939, the space within the borders of the Thai Kingdom was reconceptualized as belonging to only one kind of person—the Thai. This moved the criteria for belonging to a different epistemology of space—from concern with one's relative proximity to the city, to one's inclusion or exclusion to a national space. Inclusion became dependent on inscriptions of ethnic identities that were fixed in new ways in the body. Physiological differences (such as the shorter stature and wider 'Tibetan' facial features of the Akha), differences in traditional dress (such as the distinctive embroidered batik pleated skirts of the Hmong) and differences of language (with many highland languages classified under a Tibeto-Burman ethno-linguistic group with roots unrelated to Thai) became signifiers for racial and ethnic difference embedded in the bodies of national subjects. Where it had been possible for a 'wild' subject to become 'civilized', for a forest dweller to become a subject of the state (and vice versa), under a discourse of race and ethnicity such movement became much more difficult—one cannot move between ethnic designations of Akha and Thai.

The imposition of new fixities was crucial in the construction of the new Thai nation-state. This new political formation enacted a modern hegemony of the nation-state which seeks to parcel the social into discrete national bodies, placed (both in the sense of located in space, and belonging to place) in discrete physical territories. The hegemonic discourse of the nation-state demands that all subjects be

defined as citizens, with belonging located in national territories. It also insists on shared and homogeneous national subjections. The Thai citizen is marked by a distinct (if undefinable) Thai-ness, loyal to *chat* (race), *sasana* (religion) and *mahakasat* (King).⁹ The citizen-subject is taught, through public propaganda, mass media and most importantly the school system, to self-regulate in accordance with that national subject position (see Anderson 1983; Thongchai 1994; Wyatt 1984). Government commissions on Thai culture even went to the point of prohibiting traditional clothing and the traditional practice of chewing the betel nut, while prescribing that citizens should wear European-style clothing (such as trousers or skirts) and that husbands should kiss their wives before going out to work in the morning (Thongchai 1994: 4).¹⁰

The highlands and highland people, having previously lived largely without the need for such close relationships with lowland Tai kings, found themselves drawn into the Thai state through Department of Public Welfare programmes, community development projects and ethnographic research. Through these processes they were defined *vis-à-vis* the Thai state as peripheral 'hill tribes', definitively outside the new Thai citizen-subject position, but ambiguously inside the territory of the Thai state.

'Hill tribe' subjects and citizens

New ideas of fixed racial and ethnic differences between 'Thai' and 'not-Thai' are embedded and have become reified in the term 'hill tribe' (see Sturgeon 1997). Official definitions of 'hill tribes' speak of tribes with distinct languages, cultures and traditions, who 'raise and sell opium, practice shifting

cultivation and always keep on moving to hunt for new pieces of land for cultivation which have greatly resulted in the forest and watershed destruction' (Department of Public Welfare 1964: 1). In addition, the 'hill tribes' are represented as 'generally illiterate', 'economically deprived' and with 'ill health' (1964: 1). These 'semi-nomadic' (Manndorff 1965: 2) tribal subjects are problematic—a security threat, harmful to the environment due to their farming practices and dangerous to the wider population as suppliers of narcotics.

National security, drugs and environmental destruction were the concerns strongly emphasized in Thai government documents from the 1950s on. To address these 'problems' the Thai government secured international aid for northern Thailand from the USA, Australia, the Netherlands and Germany—most of which was focused on changing agricultural practices away from opium production and 'harmful' slash and burn farming, and to encourage highlanders to cease their nomadism and settle permanently in villages that could be more easily accessed by the Thai authorities. In apparent contradiction to the governing aims of these activities, which would suggest that the state sought to bring highland populations within the embrace of the state (see Torpey 2000), very few of those 'hill tribes' were ever issued with the appropriate paperwork which would give them citizenship.

Citizenship was first formalized in legislation passed in 1956 to register citizens through a nation-wide Household Registration. This was the first legislation which formally distinguished between Thai and non-Thai, and determined citizenship by place of birth. Highlanders were not registered under this act (Suppachai 1999: 3) and in the following decades were instead issued with Temporary Household Registration and

special 'hill tribe' identification cards. These cards placed severe restrictions on highlanders' mobility within the Thai state. One could not travel between provinces without special letters of permission, and one could not obtain a passport or therefore travel outside the country legally. Issued with temporary registration papers and cards identifying them as non-Thai, highland people were also constantly under threat of expulsion.

The citizenship movement

Over the years a proportion of highlanders did succeed in obtaining citizenship papers. However, a vast majority remained without.¹¹ In 1999, the government designated as aliens all 'hill tribe' people without citizenship papers. In response, highlander activists and academics, along with the powerful people's organization The Assembly of the Poor (Missingham 2002), organized a Rally for Rights in which thousands gathered in the northern provincial capital of Chiang Mai to call for a delay in the process, and to 'ask the government to register hill tribe people as Thai citizens and therefore to grant nationality' (Chainarong and Suppachai 1999). The movement emphasized the right to citizenship based on the status of many highlanders as 'second and third generation Thai' (Chainarong and Suppachai 1999) and their recognition in the past as *de facto* citizens. The movement also took pains to distinguish between 'native hill tribe and highland peoples and immigrant or refugee hill tribe groups' (Suppachai 1999: 6).

Wandii has been at the forefront of this increasingly successful effort to shift the content of the bounded Thai subject to include highlanders. She and her colleagues work against the construction of 'hill tribe' subjects as a threat, as clearly not-Thai, and aim to get

highland people included under the Thai 'we'—the civilized, sophisticated subject who belongs in Thailand. The transformation is not so easy as the 'hill tribe' outsider has been cast as a constitutive outside, aiding the construction of 'Thai-ness' in its 'un-Thai-ness' (see Thongchai 2000 on the 'Other Within'). The work of Wandii and her organization has focused on shifting where that boundary between Thai and its other lies. These activists counteract inscriptions of otherness inherent to representations of highlanders as 'hill tribes' by re-presenting 'hill tribes' as highlanders and Thais—as 'Thai hill tribes'.

The conscious construction of a 'Thai hill tribe' subject position is in part a response to the perceived scapegoating of 'hill tribes' by the Thai government. I asked Wandii once why she thought the government did not give highlanders citizenship. She replied that:

If the hill tribes were Thai then there would be no scapegoat for *yaa baa* [methamphetamines], environmental damage, no-one to accuse of being refugees from Burma who are thieves etc. If the state couldn't speak like this [about hill people] then they would have to address these problems directly. (Wandii, personal communication, 15 February 2002)

The extent to which 'the state' does speak like this about highland peoples was evident in many incidents during my fieldwork. The following example highlights the degree to which activities—such as (harmfully) cutting down forest—are associated with being non-Thai.

The following incident occurred during my stay in a Lahu village north of Chiang Mai. After the 1999 Rally for Rights, citizenship legislation had been altered to allow citizenship to be granted to those not 100 per cent fluent in central Thai, the language of

Thailand, that is taught in school across the country in preference to local Thai dialects.¹² However, the application form still has to be completed in central Thai, and activists succeeded in campaigning to make it legal for someone other than the applicant to write the necessary paperwork. In an effort to meet the new deadline for citizenship applications Wandii forged alliances with the local government authorities—whose responsibility it is to initially process applications—to set up citizenship application days. On these application days Amphur (district government) officials would carry their registration records into a central location in the hills, set up in a school hall or under tarpaulins, and with the help of Wandii and a team of volunteers (usually young highlanders who had been educated in lowland cities, many of whom were studying community development at technical college and volunteered as part of their course requirements) acting as scribes and advisors slowly worked to evaluate and process the applications of the hundreds of highlanders that showed up.

It was at one of these meetings that the local District Chief (*Nai Amphur*) showed up. Citizenship applications are processed at the District level, and thus the *Nai Amphur* holds the power to accept or reject applications. In this case his visit was to endorse the proceedings of the day, and his conduct served to remind applicants of the efforts he believed they should make in order to become Thai. Wearing dark glasses and the stiff public servants uniform he made his way through the crowd with beer in hand, making loud comments like, 'what are they all doing speaking Lahu, now they are Thai citizens they must speak Thai', or, 'see those fields over there on that hill—isn't it terrible what they've done, clearing the forest like that?' (field notes, 29 April 2001). He was referring

to the ever-popular assumption that highland people can be blamed for deforestation in Thailand's watershed regions due to their traditional practice of clearing pockets of forest for their rice fields. Here a man on the verge of obtaining legitimacy as a Thai citizen is reminded of his 'hill tribe' status, its necessary subjectivity—the hill tribe who cuts the forest down—and admonished to abandon that identity and change his ways in the process of becoming Thai. Moving on through the crowd the *Nai Amphur* admonished applicants that they must also cease speaking Lahu, 'now that they are Thai'. Contrary to the current law—which recognizes the right to maintain distinct languages and cultures—the *Nai Amphur*, wielding all the considerable power of his position, admonishes these fledgling Thai that difference and diversity (of the kind celebrated in Thai tourism posters and leaflets) is not appropriate. The highlanders body must be purged of all that identifies it as 'hill tribe'.

Not much more than an hour after the *Nai Amphur* and his entourage had climbed into their sparkling four-wheel drives and departed, two Border Patrol Police personnel arrived. Ignoring the presence of district officials they went immediately to Wandii and pulled her aside to inform her that 'you can't possibly give these people citizenship, they are drug dealers and they cut the forest down' (Wandii, personal communication, 26 April 2001). Previous laws had stated that anyone with drug-related convictions, or anyone who had practised rotational (slash and burn) farming was ineligible for citizenship, but these laws had been overturned. One could still apply for citizenship, however any naturalized citizen (not given citizenship at birth), if found guilty of narcotics-related crimes could have their citizenship status revoked. In this discourse one cannot be both

Thai and a criminal of this kind. Or at least, such crimes show plainly that one does not deserve to become Thai. But where does this leave those who have no connections to status and territory beyond Thailand? Where are the in-between spaces they may slip into, where their lack of belonging to any nation-state no longer matters? There are, of course, no such spaces, and as such the response of advocates like Wandii has been extremely pragmatic. Accepting the hegemony of a nation-state political system, activists have sought a way to find a space for highland people within that system as legitimate subjects of the state.

The strategy adopted by activists has put forward a 'Thai hill tribe' identification that seeks a place for the highlander within the definition of the 'good' Thai subject position of nationalist discourses. Activists have emphasized the legitimate status of 'Thai hill tribes' as distinct from outsiders and refugees, and in doing so have succeeded in constructing for themselves a constitutive outside—the non-Thai (and not-legitimate) 'hill tribe'. To this effect the whole effort of the citizenship movement is geared at:

working between government and NGOs and villagers to try and get the maximum applications through and find the best system for getting citizenship to those eligible, to *true Thai citizens* who were born here. (Wandii, personal communication, 15 February 2002)

Dividing 'hill tribe' subjects into 'true Thai citizens' and 'not-true' Thai citizens has been an effective campaign. It is effective in part because it works within, rather than challenging, the Thai state's discourse of nationhood and belonging. Boundaries inscribed by this discourse remain unchallenged, and subject positions thus remain contained in the same ways. The battleground is not over the

containment of subjects or inscriptions of fixed boundaries, but of what the contained legitimate national subject consists. The effect of course is that the boundary remains in place, and there are still clearly demarcated categories of the legitimate insider (the Thai citizen) and the illegitimate alien (the *not*-true Thai citizen).

The way that the citizenship movement has engaged a moral discourse of belonging in order to obtain the paperwork that Thai law dictates these highlanders should have, reveals what Laclau terms the parodic nature of political movements (see Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000). Here, the effort to get citizenship repeatedly ceases to be about straightforward legalities and is overwritten with a complex set of moral encodings around what it means to be a citizen, what it means to be a 'good' Thai or a 'true' Thai—whether one is 'hill tribe' or not. Activists, highland advocates, government officials and Border Patrol Police come together in this trope in which legal matters are taken beyond their simple literality, and made moral matters. Subjects on their way to becoming legally defined entities (either Thai citizens or irretrievably not-Thai citizens) must also become moral subjects.

For Laclau, 'the Subject is the distance between the undecidability of the structure and the decision' (2000: 79), in other words the subject is made in those spaces between identification ('I am hill tribe, I am Thai') and the symbolic system that renders those identities meaningful, that overdetermines the simple act of naming oneself within a complex set of shifting moral and ethical codes (to be a true Thai citizen is to be 'good', not a criminal, not a drug dealer). The moment of decision fixes the subject to an identity—it forces the embodiment of a subject position binding *this* physical being to *this* meaning.

The paradoxical easing of mobility while becoming fixed in a legal national identity as the citizen subject articulates well the room to move provided in the necessary ultimate undecidability of the hegemonic terrain (see Laclau 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The process of becoming a national subject, and the hegemonic project to which national subjects are articulated, is always incomplete. When Wandii is accused of drug trafficking her accusers invoke a morally encoded 'hill tribeness'—the highlander as drug dealer and trouble maker. It is an inscription she does not choose (in fact one she actively battles) and though she carries a Thai passport the strategy of intimidation used by the police is to pull her out of that position of legitimacy and re-name her, re-fix her as a 'hill tribe', albeit temporarily. Likewise, when she travels with passport in hand her identity is checked at immigration points and she is identified, fixed in that moment, as a Thai. The partiality and temporality of these points of fixity exemplifies the moment of possibility within the undecidability of the hegemonic terrain. While the nation-state aspires to universality—as this discussion demonstrates—it is never achieved. If universality were achieved no highlander would be without a national identity, nor could the nationalist discourse be shifted to accommodate them.

It remains problematic to representatives of the state that one may shift from one subject position into another—and it is the desire for clean divisions to be reinstated between 'Thai' and 'non-Thai' that seems to drive this authoritative re-inscription of the 'hill tribe' other upon the body already transformed into a Thai 'we'. One of my favourite photographs of Wandii comes from the front page of *The Bangkok Post*, one of Thailand's English-language papers, which shows her with her colleagues, each dressed in their full

traditional regalia, carrying a petition to present to the Thai parliament. In Wandii the rights and responsibilities of the citizen subject and highland subject are very publicly embodied as, in full Akha dress, she presents the petition calling for the government to ‘clarify its position on giving [highland people] Thai nationality’ (*The Bangkok Post*, 28 August 2001). At this moment, as at the moment in which she is arriving home from China as a Thai traveller with a Thai passport, she fully embodies this hybrid identity, this ‘Thai hill tribe’ subject position. The interventions of the undercover police who arrest her and accuse her of drug trafficking threaten to dissolve that united identity. The accusation itself invokes her ‘hill tribe-ness’, and if taken to trial and convicted she would formally lose her Thai-ness in the loss of her citizenship. While the highland citizen seeks to move beyond such problematic identifications, escape is not (yet) possible. The constitutive outside for this new legitimate highlander remains as a condition of its being as much as the ‘100 per cent Thai’ Thai with which it is allied.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways in which changing conceptualizations of highlander’s national subjectivities have enabled different kinds of mobility in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Thailand. As the construction of national subjects continues, highlanders have come to embody contradictory and contested subject positions within the Thai state. Subjects like Wandii are both enabled and disabled in their embodiment of a confluence of opposing discourses. While she chooses to identify herself as a card-carrying citizen and highlander, she cannot avoid the inscription of a ‘hill tribe’

identity—the problematic troublemaker, the potential drug trafficker. These competing positions have vastly different implications for her subjectivity and mobility. The deliberate struggle towards a Thai citizen subject position brings her into the fixed and bounded geo-body of the nation, and engages the nation-state discourse that is constitutive of and embodied in ‘Thailand’, shifting its outer boundaries to include rather than exclude ‘Thai hill tribes’. Possession of a citizen identification card is indicative of the success of this strategy, and while it fixes identities in new ways aligned with the nation-state it also allows for new mobilities. The citizen subject is physically mobile—she can move freely within the nation and through regulated pathways to countries outside. The citizen subject is also politically mobile—she can exercise her rights by campaigning in an activist movement. Opposing discourses of citizenship and national subjectivities are embodied in the highland citizen, and in their mobility between subject positions—between the outsider (‘hill tribe’) and the insider (citizen). In Thailand, constructed by discourses of Thai-ness and the Thai race, such mobility between inside and outside subject positions is intrinsically threatening to representations of the Thai ‘we’, a Thai hegemony—one people, one land, one nation.

While the discourse moves, its outer boundaries remain, and this new citizen subject does not escape its own constitutive outside—the non-Thai ‘hill tribe’—which is still inscribed upon the body of the ‘Thai hill tribe’, the highland citizen. While mobilities open up for new citizen subjects, those inscribed as ‘non-Thai hill tribes’ are immobilized absolutely, as they can neither move to a legitimate subject position nor move within or beyond the nation-state, be it Thailand or Burma, deprived as they are of identification papers and of a non-nation-state space to

move into. For these ‘non-Thai hill tribes’ there is no longer a ‘wilds’ to flee into, no more forests and mountains that do not fit within the boundaries of a nation-state. In the absence of room in-between nation-state boundaries the non-Thai (and non-Burmese, Chinese or Lao) highlander’s only refuge must be in invisibility, to inhabit the boundary-less and uncertain space outside the gaze of the state. Without papers, without identification, one does not exist in the modern state. But one cannot escape one’s body, and in these borderlands in the twenty-first century it is nearly impossible to live life beyond that gaze which so eagerly finds a place for highland bodies as ‘hill tribes’, as un-Thai, dangerous and strange as ever.

Yet, as long as national subjects are formed and made meaningful in relation to each other, they remain necessarily incomplete. The nation-state hegemony to which both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ subject positions are articulated consistently and necessarily fails in its attempts to achieve universality. In these failures, in the always incompleteness of the nation-state and its subjects, there is possibility. Possibility for movement, for shifting boundaries and changing shapes.

Acknowledgements

Enormous thanks is owed to the Cultural Geography Speciality Group (CGSG) of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) for the honour of Best PhD Student Paper Award which was granted for an earlier version of this paper, presented at the AAG Annual meeting in New Orleans in 2003. Many thanks also to the Australian National University for support to undertake this research, to the National Research Council of Thailand for granting permission to do

research in Thailand, and to Ajarn Chira Prangkio of Chiang Mai University for his sponsorship and support during my time in Chiang Mai. I am extremely grateful to the Highland Association, and Dr Chayan Vaddhanaphuti of Chiang Mai University for giving me the opportunity to participate and learn. Finally, I would like to thank Vincent Del Casino, Katherine Gibson and Linda Malam for their comments, critical insights and support; and the five anonymous reviewers of the CGSC student paper competition and two anonymous reviewers for *Social & Cultural Geography* for their generous comments and suggestions.

Notes

- 1 ‘Khun’ is a title of respect in Thai, like Mr or Ms, and ‘Wandii’ is a pseudonym. In the rest of this paper I will refer to ‘Wandii’ by her first name, as is customary in the Thai context.
- 2 For discussion of the term ‘geo-body’ see Thongchai (1994). Thongchai introduces the term to capture the diffuse meanings associated with the territory of the nation such as ‘integrity and sovereignty; border control, armed conflict, invasions and wars; the territorial definition of national economy, products ... culture, and so on’ (1994: 17). His study traces the history of the emergence of a Thai geo-body, and in doing so presents a unique and significant challenge to notions of a pre-given ‘Thai-ness’.
- 3 ‘Tai’ is an ethno-linguistic category which refers to the Tai-speaking people who are spread across the valleys of South-East Asia between Thailand, southern China, Laos and Vietnam. It is a group with which the modern ‘Thai’ national identity is linked.
- 4 A more detailed discussion of my methodologies is provided in my PhD dissertation, McKinnon (2004).
- 5 ‘Highland Association’ is a pseudonym for an NGO with which I worked during doctoral field work in northern Thailand.
- 6 The term ‘governmentality’ originates in the last works of Michel Foucault. It is a way of speaking about how the operations of modern governments began to extend beyond simply collecting taxes and managing territory, to managing society, populations,

to governing good citizens. These new *modes of rule* exist both within and beyond the formal apparatus of the state. Foucault's studies focus famously on institutions in which (prisoner, patient) subjects are formed and regulated. But the formation and regulation of subjects spreads beyond the institution also—to practices of self-regulation and self-rule. The term governmentality encapsulates these complex processes of rule, describing the ways in which the process through which human beings are formed as subjects (citizens, patients, criminals, etc.) are processes of power, acts of governing. I consider in much more detail the work of Foucault, the concept of governmentality, and the relationship between knowledge and power in my PhD dissertation (see McKinnon 2004). For a good introduction to the work of Foucault see Rabinow (1984). For a good introduction to governmentality see Foucault (1997) or Rose (1999), and for work more specifically on the regulation and transformation of bodies see *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977) and *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1990).

- 7 The year 1907 marks the last of a series of treaties between the Siamese state and the French and British that hinged on drawing detailed maps of the Siamese border (Thongchai 1994: 128). Give or take a few ongoing disputes over small parcels of land, the borders drawn at this time remain the borders of present-day Thailand.
- 8 The terms 'Tai' and 'Kha' appear in various chronicles kept by the royal court about key events such as battles and journeys during the King's reign. There are two key types of chronicles: *tamnan* which are more traditional and are usually religious in nature; and *phongsawadan* which are more modern and perhaps more 'factual' (R. Renard, personal communication).
- 9 The slogan 'race, religion and King' was adapted from the British slogan 'God and Country' by King Vajiravudh who also introduced the concept of the Thai nation and the concept of Thai race or *chat Thai* (see Renard 2000; Wyatt 1984).
- 10 Such detailed stipulations on the practice of daily life suggest that, in its efforts to shape a new citizen-subject, the State was looking to Europe as the exemplar of modernity and civilization.
- 11 Estimates ranges from 60 to 80 per cent of highlanders without citizenship in 1999.
- 12 I have not successfully located the exact document that states that an applicant no longer has to prove

fluency in central Thai, and am relying on information provided during field work by the *Nai Amphur* of Fang District who has taken a special interest in the details of citizenship laws due to the high proportion of highlanders residing in Fang District; as well as information provided by Khun Wandii.

References

- Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities*. London and New York: Verso.
- Bowie, K.A. (2000) Ethnic heterogeneity and elephants in nineteenth-century Lanna statecraft, in Turton, A. (ed.) *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*. Richmond: Curzon Press, pp. 330–348.
- Butler, J. (1993) Critically queer, *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 1: 17–32.
- Butler, J., Laclau, E. and Zizek, S. (2000) *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Phronesis.
- Chainarong, S. and Suppachai, J. (1999). Citizenship, ethnic identity and state policy: Thai or non-Thai for the hilltribe people?, Special Round Table: Citizenship and Forest Policy in the North of Thailand, 7th International Thai Studies Conference, Amsterdam.
- Cresswell, T. (1997) Weeds, plagues, and bodily secretions: a geographical interpretation of metaphors of displacement, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87: 330–345.
- Department of Public Welfare (1964) *A Brief on Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Program, in Northern Thailand*. Bangkok: Ministry of Interior.
- Duncan, J. and Ley, D. (eds) (1993) *Place/Culture/Representation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Allen Lane.
- Foucault, M. (1990) *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1997) Governmentality, in Burchell, G., Gordon, C. and Miller, P. (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 87–104.
- Jackson, P. (2000) Rematerializing social and cultural geography, *Social and Cultural Geography* 1: 9–14.
- Laclau, E. (2000) Identity and hegemony, in Butler, J., Laclau, E. and Zizek, S. (eds) *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Phronesis, pp. 44–89.

- Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso.
- Law, R. (1999) Beyond 'women and transport': towards new geographies of gender and daily mobility, *Progress in Human Geography* 23: 567–588.
- Lawson, V.A. (2000) Arguments within geographies of movement: the theoretical potential of migrants' stories, *Progress in Human Geography* 24: 173–189.
- Longhurst, R. (1997) (Dis)embodied geographies, *Progress in Human Geography* 21: 486–501.
- Longhurst, R. (2001) *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Manndorff, H. (1965) *The Hill Tribe Program of the Public Welfare Department, Ministry for the Interior, Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Division of Hill Tribe Welfare, Bureau of Self-help Land Settlement, Department of Public Welfare.
- Massey, D. (1994) Double articulation, a place in the world, in Bammer, A. (ed.) *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 110–121.
- McKinnon, K. (2004). Locating post-development subjects: discourses of intervention and identification in the highlands of northern Thailand, PhD dissertation, Department of Human Geography, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University.
- Missingham, B. (2002) The village of the poor confronts the state: a geography of protest in the Assembly of the Poor, *Urban Studies* 39: 1647–1663.
- Monk, J. (1999) Gender in the landscape: expressions of power and meaning, in Anderson, K. and Gale, F. (eds) *Cultural Geographies*. Melbourne: Longman, pp. 153–172.
- Moss, P. and Dyck, I. (1999) Body, corporeal space, and legitimating chronic illness: women diagnosed with M.E., *Antipode* 31: 372–397.
- Mouffe, C. (ed.) (1992) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*. London and New York: Verso.
- Nash, C. (2002) Cultural geography: postcolonial cultural geographies, *Progress in Human Geography* 26: 219–230.
- Natter, W. and Jones, III, J.P. (1997) Identity, space and other uncertainties, in Benko, G. and Strohmayer, U. (eds) *Space and Social Theory: Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 141–161.
- Nelson, L. (1999) Bodies (and spaces) do matter: the limits of performativity, *Gender, Place and Culture* 6: 331–353.
- Norindr, P. (1994) 'Coming home' on the Fourth of July, in Bammer, A. (ed.) *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp.233–250.
- Rabinow, P. (1984) *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Remmler, K. (1994) Sheltering battered bodies in language: imprisonment once more?, in Bammer, A. (ed.) *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 216–232.
- Renard, R. (2000) The differential integration of hill people into the Thai state, in Turton, A. (ed.) *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*. Richmond: Curzon Press, pp. 63–83.
- Reynolds, C. (ed.) (1991) *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand 1939-1989*. Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University.
- Rose, N. (1999) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Secor, A.J. (2002) The veil and urban space in Istanbul: women's dress, mobility and Islamic knowledge, *Gender, Place and Culture* 9: 5–22.
- Sibley, D. (1999) Outsiders in society and space, in Anderson, K. and Gale, F. (eds) *Cultural Geographies*. Melbourne: Longman, pp. 135–151.
- Sturgeon, J. (1997) Claiming and naming resources on the border of the state: Akha strategies in China and Thailand, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 38: 131–144.
- Suppachai, J. (1999) *Citizenship and State Policy: How We Can Move Beyond the Crisis*. Chiang Mai: Legal Aid for Marginalized People (LAMP) Project.
- Tesfahuney, M. (1998) Mobility, racism and geopolitics, *Political Geography* 17: 499–515.
- Thongchai, W. (1994) *Siam Mapped, A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Thongchai, W. (2000) The others within, in Turton, A. (ed.) *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*. Richmond: Curzon Press, pp. 38–62.
- Torring, J. (1999) *New Theories of Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Torpey, J. (2000). *The invention of the passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turton, A. (ed.) (2000) *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*. Richmond: Curzon Press.

Wyatt, D.K. (1984) *Thailand: A Short History*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

Abstract translations

(Im)Mobilisation et hégémonie: les sujets «tribu des collines» et l'État «thai»

Dans les montagnes du nord de la Thaïlande, les contraintes et les restrictions imposées sur la population «tribu des collines» et sur leurs corps sont souvent représentées en contraste à un passé légendaire. On imaginait ces gens voyageant librement outre frontières, où la montagne servait de refuge pour se libérer des pouvoirs tyranniques de l'État, et où les montagnards pouvaient quitter les cimes et s'assimiler. Cet article explore comment les sujets montagnards ont été transformés au moment où émerge un État thaï qui impose des frontières précises et fixées par des règles qui délimitent le pays thaï et le peuple Thaï. À partir de récits narratifs historiques dans lesquels les libertés d'antan font contrepoids à la rigidité administrative courante, je vais présenter une image plus diffuse et contradictoire des sujets nationaux de la Thaïlande. Je reviens sur la question des militants engagés dans un mouvement favorisant le statut de citoyen pour les montagnards. Le mouvement repose sur une stratégie qui cherche à positionner les montagnards à l'intérieur de discours hégémoniques sur l'État-nation et sur l'appartenance. Il fait émerger une position sujet «tribu thaï des collines» établie en contrepartie à son élément constitutif opposé—la «non tribu thaï des collines». Pendant que les montagnards découvrent des moyens pour s'intégrer dans le cadre hégémonique de l'État-nation, des positions sujets plus établis et plus mobiles se présentent lorsque l'état d'être Thaï et de ses «autres» sont remis en cause.

Mots-clefs: hégémonie, citoyenneté, subjectivité, représentation corporelle, Thaïlande
(In)Mobilización y hegemonía: súbditos de 'la tribu del monte' y el estado Tailandés

En las montañas del norte de Tailandia las restricciones y limitaciones que se han impuesto sobre el pueblo del monte son muchas veces contrastadas con un pasado legendario en que el pueblo cruzaba libremente las fronteras, una época en que refugiarse en las montañas significaba estar libre de los poderes opresivos del estado, y los montañeses podían bajar de las montañas e integrarse. Este papel examina cómo los súbditos montañeses han sido transformados con la creación de un estado tailandés que impone fronteras concretas y reguladas, las cuales demarcan la tierra tailandés y un pueblo tailandés. Añadiendo a narrativas históricas en que las libertades del pasado contrapesan el presente estrictamente gobernado, presento una visión más compleja y contradictoria de los súbditos nacionales de Tailandia. Hablo del movimiento de ciudadanía en el que los activistas luchan por el estatus de ciudadano para los montañeses, a través de una estrategia que trata de conseguirles un lugar dentro de los discursos hegemónicos sobre la nación-estado y sobre el concepto de pertenecer. El movimiento de ciudadanía establece una nueva posición de súbdito, concretamente 'la tribu de monte tailandesa', que contrasta con 'la tribu de monte no tailandesa'. A medida que los montañeses encuentran nuevos modos de hacerles parte de la hegemonía de la nación-estado, se van abriendo posiciones de súbdito más fijas y más móviles y se va redefiniendo lo que es ser tailandés u otro.

Palabras claves: hegemonía, ciudadanía, subjetividad, encarnación, Tailandia