

A Regional Explanation of the Tai *Müang* as a City-State¹

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Is the Tai city-state, the *müang*, a unique historical form or a recurring natural one? That is the choice that divides the humanities from the sciences. It would have us study the Tai city-state either in itself wholistically or in relation to universals reductively. I reject that polarity. On the one hand, the *müang* is as much the creator of Tai culture as its creation. Invoking Tai "culture" in itself is thus no explanation. On the other hand, universals do not explain the *müang*'s critical features. As comparison with the Malay city-state will show, the *müang* is a response to specifically *regional* rather than universal conditions. My paper thus argues that the *müang* must be understood regionally, not just locally or globally. Understanding a region is a historical and comparative project.

Anthropology today is leery of comparison. A discipline that arose by fitting all the world's peoples into a single volume on, say, magic or matriarchy, is now happiest studying each people or place "in its own terms." We do self-righteously local fieldwork. What changed our style? We were pushed and pulled out of comparison. The push was revulsion at comparison's abuse. Diffusionists and evolutionists were equally bad. By ignoring context each managed to create evidence to confirm their theories. The pull was the attraction of fieldwork. It gave us authority, not to mention an impressive rite of passage, but it got us imagining that each field site made sense by itself. It cannot. Culture comes into consciousness comparatively (Boon [1990]). All explanation requires at least implicit comparison (Peel [1987] 89) so that even anthropologists who would study a culture "in its own terms" typically end up comparing it to a text or discourse (Parkin [1987]).

Our task, situating the Tai *müang* in a volume comparing thirty different city-state cultures, requires a series of comparisons. I begin by relating the *müang* to Tai culture comparatively and then I move progressively outward to Malay, Southeast Asian and global comparisons. My analysis unfolds in four steps. First, I describe the *müang*'s historical career and cultural shape. Second, using features identified in the first step, I describe another Southeast Asian city-state, the

Malay *negeri*. *Müang* and *negeri* prove to be so similar that my third step explains their similarities as independent responses to similar regional conditions. What explains those conditions? My fourth step suggests that the spread of agriculture and then the rise of temple-states, two earlier waves of change, created a region where the city-state prospered as an entrepreneurial third wave of change. I conclude that seeing states and peoples as regional constructions is necessary to escaping nationalist histories and their tautologies of race, culture and ethnicity.

The Tai *Müang*

"Tai" identifies the large family of peoples (Siamese, Lao, Shan, Lue and many others) who live largely in Thailand, Laos and the contiguous upland edges of South China, Vietnam, Burma and Assam (Fig. 1).² One Tai people, the Siamese, established the polity that grew into Thailand. As a nation state, Thailand's diverse citizens are all "Thai." Judging by language, the Tai date back roughly two thousand years (Gedney [1989] 191) to a wet rice niche (Chamberlain [1986] 6) in South China or northern Vietnam. Judging by culture, the Tai peoples are a late offspring of South China's Neolithic. Caught between powerful states, these wet rice cultivators became recognizably Tai when they organized politically in *müang*, presumably to secure a niche and protection. That ethno-genesis, quite possibly a reaction to a Han civilizing project (Harrell [1995] 6), might well be analogous to how "[t]he small states of Greece emerged *together*, pulling each other up by the bootstraps" in what Renfrew ([1986] 11) calls peer polity interaction. Early in the first millennium A.D., Chinese and Vietnamese expansion along the Red River split this Tai homeland to create northern and southwestern Tai groups. The southwestern Tai went on to create the *müang* that concern us here.

A *müang* was, as Hansen (*supra* 19) defines a city-state, "a micro-state composed of one town with its immediate hinterland." The word *müang* itself could refer to a city alone or a city together with the hinter-

land that it ruled. Ritually each *müang* created its own people although that identity was neither fixed nor exclusive. *Müang* was the only indigenous word for both city or town and state, making no distinction between them. Culturally every *müang* was a state, although as in much of Asia (Rudolph [1987]) lesser states were within greater ones. Indeed, using the metaphor of an umbrella, Papet ([1997] 220) suggests three tiers of *müang* within *müang*. Each had what Hansen (*supra* 18) calls “internal sovereignty” and neatly fits the city-state defined as a “self governing community, not necessarily an independent and autonomous state.”

In their heyday *müang* must have numbered into the thousands. Wyatt ([1984a] 34) characterizes a chronicle as seeing a Tai world “dotted with innumerable *müang*” and even into the nineteenth century the Shan state of Hsenwi, itself a *müang*, had 49 *müang* as substates (Leach [1970] 6). To be a *müang*, what mattered was not size but the political and ritual fact of governing a territory. Little is known about their population. In the seventeenth century the largest *müang*, Ayutthaya, had perhaps 200,000 people (Reid [1993] 70-3), but that reflects the consolidation that had already begun to end the era of *müang*. A few great cities aside, an ordinary *müang*'s population as a town likely numbered in the thousands. Thanks to Grabowsky (1998) we have a reasonably complete picture of *Müang Sing*, a Tai Lue principality situated in a small rice plain (10 to 12 miles in length, 4 to 6 miles in breadth) in what is today northern Laos. In the late nineteenth century, depopulated from endemic war and raiding, the town itself had shrunk to just under a thousand people and its surrounding villages held just twice that number again. Were *Müang Sing* granted its surrounding valleys, Grabowsky ([1998] 8 n. 2) estimates a territory of 14,000 square kilometers with 42,000 subjects.

As a town, a *müang* was a settlement physically clustered around a ruler's house and situated amid a rice plain that it ruled. A wall was not necessary although the town itself was ritually bounded space. Many early Tai settlements had triple ramparts with moats (Gosling [1991] 22) although nineteenth century *Müang Sing* had only a surrounding ditch and mud wall, making a square roughly 800 meters to a side (Grabowsky [1998] 21). The idea of a *müang* stressed its ruler's house, a shrine to the palladian spirit of the *müang* (*phimüang*) and, for the Buddhist Tai, one or more monumental temples (*wat*) housing a palladian Buddha relic or image. Many *müang* were on trade routes (Leach [1970] 38) and most if not all

must have had a market. In thirteenth-century Sukhothai, one of the first great *müang*, the market was outside the city wall and apparently was a permanent covered facility as opposed to an open-air temporary market (Prasert and Griswold [1992] 275 n. 89).

We might analyze the *müang* in many ways, but in the interests of comparison I shall initially distinguish the *müang*'s historical career from its cultural shape. By “historical career” I mean the developmental sequence whereby these city-states arose in hinterlands, spread widely and rapidly, and then, in an inter-urban efflorescence, established urban and religious legacies that still structure their successor states and peoples. By “cultural shape” I mean the configuration that placed the *müang* in relation to Tai culture. Unfortunately, as anthropology has no sure way to characterize even a contemporary culture, reconstructing an earlier one is an uncertain practice. In this risky but necessary procedure, I largely follow Condominas (1990), its most skilled practitioner. Using historical clues and ethnographic evidence, he identifies an indigenous Tai culture from the pattern of its later expressions.³

Historical Career. We do not know when the *müang* first appeared but its crystallization was integral to the wide and rapid spread of the Tai peoples that dates from perhaps the seventh or eighth century (Wyatt [1984a] 6; Papet [1997] 221). This essentially entrepreneurial dispersion (O'Connor [1996] 80-2) testifies to Tai skill in growing wet rice (O'Connor [1995a]) and the *müang*'s political effectiveness in organizing colonial groups that assimilated earlier peoples while securing wet rice land and trading sites. Condominas ([1990] 31) and Terwiel ([1981] 4) call this a conquest, an interpretation Leach ([1970] 39) flatly rejects. Indeed, by my reading the evidence strongly favors Coedes' ([1968] 189) “gradual infiltration.” Surely armed intimidation or even battle had their moments, but the Tai spread as political entrepreneurs and wet rice specialists, not conquerors.

By the thirteenth century Tai *müang* were scattered all across northern Southeast Asia. An arc of petty *müang* stretched from Vietnam's upland valleys to the upper reaches of Assam's Brahmaputra river. Each *müang* constituted its own people, but alliances and confederations were common (Rispaud [1937]). So was movement between *müang*. In their dispersed yet interconnected world, a peer polity culture (cf. Renfrew and Cherry [1986]) arose between these scattered *müang*. As that inter-urban culture strengthened or even established a larger Tai identity, it spread Theravada Buddhism to those Tai who, living on the

peripheries of Angkor and Pagan's empires, had already begun Indianization (Wyatt [1984a] 20-21). For these Tai, being Buddhist became integral to being Tai.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Siamese Tai capital of Ayutthaya and Burma's Toungoo Dynasty began to subordinate petty *müang* to their larger imperial designs. Even so, within the Siamese sphere of influence, the relative autonomy of petty *müang* remained as provincial practice or hinterland polity until the end of the nineteenth century. Today *müang* can mean nation as well as city. Its life as a city-state is long gone but its legacies live on in Thailand's Buddhist society and some aspects of Thai political practice.

Cultural Shape. Were we to abstract the *müang*'s cultural shape from its historical career, it would be defined by the set of similarities, differences and shared assumptions that placed this city-state in relation to the larger whole we might call Tai culture.

Society-defining Similarities: The *müang* was an analog of the village (*ban*) and house (*hüan*) or household (Condominas [1990]; O'Connor [1990]). Each was a center that could be equated with a leader or shrine. Each was also a ritually bounded physical space that acted as a container whose human contents constituted a group. Tai society was not the sum of its ever-changing individuals but the enduring reality of its containers and centers. In these society-constituting metaphors, the *müang* was just like the village and household.

Müang-distinguishing Differences. Against these metaphorical similarities were three *müang*-defining differences. First, the *müang* was a third tier of society that encompassed the village and house as second and first tiers. In ideology, size and eminence, the *müang* was superior to the other two. Second, a *müang* presumed a *chao* or ruler who was properly of royal blood. A *chao* protected and governed his people and, at least for some Tai, had privileged access to the *müang*'s spirit that protected and fertilized the land. Third, the *müang* was a political sphere that governed people and stood quite apart from the everyday rice-growing life of villages and households. Governing exerted power coercively while growing rice nurtured life cooperatively. These two activities were radically different and largely unconnected. Overall, "rule" and "rice" were symbolically, structurally and functionally incompatible (O'Connor [1996] 72-77).⁴

Unifying Political Assumptions. While these three *müang*-defining differences crosscut what the society-



Fig. 1. The map represents Tai majority areas in the mid 20th century and can only roughly approximate Tai settlement in the era of *müang*. Tai areas are taken from the maps by Lebar *et al.* (1964) and Levy-Ward *et al.* (1988).

constituting metaphors connected, the whole was unified by the understanding that groups and individuals were highly mobile beings that could come and go rather freely. Calling this the "freedom to contract anew," Hanks ([1962] 1250-1, 1257) observed that "the right to affiliate with another" extended to all people and every relationship. To be sure, honoring the authority of a leader meant denying an autonomy that most followers nonetheless had. In effect, dependence was displayed until independence was exercised. As a consequence of these fluid social conditions, the *müang* operated under what we may somewhat arbitrarily distinguish as three largely political assumptions.

First, like the household and village, a *müang* was a

largely voluntary association of what we might call citizens (Prasert and Griswold [1992] 675-98; Wyatt [1984b]) or free peasants (Condominas [1990]) and their second tier groups. Calling the polity “voluntary” sounds naive, especially when earlier and later states were coercive, but choice was built-in and openly acknowledged. In the late thirteenth century the earliest Tai inscription (Prasert and Griswold [1992] 241-90) is a royal proclamation that virtually advertises for followers and seems to assume choice. Certainly it assumes lesser leaders can choose their affiliation and that a prosperous and justly governed *müang* will attract citizens. Moreover, as Condominas ([1990] 63) observes, it is worth “stressing the active participation of the *pay* [free peasants] . . . in decisions concerning the community. In effect, the autonomy of the *ban* [village] . . . is expressed by the recognition that emigration to another *muong* is possible when disagreement between the lord and the group is too strong . . .” Indeed, the right to choose one’s superior and the freedom to leave appear to have been integral to how the *müang*, village and household all functioned.⁵ Quite apart from leaving physically, a person could opt out socially by becoming a slave. Not surprisingly, an early law code restricted slavery, saying “Citizens are rare and should not be wasted [by allowing them to become slaves]” (Prasert and Griswold [1992] 691). Judging by later times, yet another escape was to farm the hills rather than paddy land. A hill farmer had no corvée obligations (Condominas [1990] 60; Durrenberger and Tannenbaum [1990] 4-5), although giving up wet rice must have meant eventually losing one’s identity as Tai. A *müang* was thus also a voluntary association of free farmers who chose to meet the obligation of being Tai.

Second, the *müang* functioned as a joint enterprise whose members expected a reasonable return on their social investment. In that earliest inscription the king says his land is bountiful, trading is open to all and property is secure. In the aforementioned law code, another *müang*’s ruler promises to protect property from seizure and extortion. Judging by upland Vietnam, the free peasants who built the *chao*’s house and supplied his household expected hospitality and beneficence in return (Bourlet [1906]). True, this “reciprocity” may have been one-sided, greatly favoring the *chao*, but then the *müang*’s analogs – the village and household – did in fact typically operate as voluntary associations that shrank or grew by their ability to benefit their members. Quite apart from these everyday practices, the *müang* was also constituted as what we might call a commonwealth by its

defining ritual (the ruler performed rites for the common good), its likely origin (a colonizing group settled new land, taking risks in hopes of rewards) and the principle that the community owned the land and parceled it out by local standards (Condominas [1990] 56; O’Connor [1995a] 977-78).

Third, a *müang* oriented its inner workings toward outside adaptive conditions. We might attribute this realism to the fact that ineffective leaders eventually lost their followers. As a more or less voluntary association held together by benefits, the *müang* kept its integrity by responding readily to external conditions. Moreover, like its household and village analogs, a *müang* saw itself as “one among many”, not the “center of it all.” A group prospered by making deals with outsiders, not confronting or ignoring them. After all, whether spirits or humans, today’s outsiders might be tomorrow’s insiders or allies. Just as households cooperated to grow rice in local groupings, so too did *müang* confederates (Rispaud [1937]) in what Condominas ([1990] 38) calls “a constant feature of Thai political formations.”

A First Approximation: Our two sets of three features are only a first approximation. Will the six reduce to three? Might they double to twelve? I cannot say and, given their heuristic purposes, it does not particularly matter. What I can say is that the six are non-trivial and internally consistent features that embed the *müang* and Tai “culture” in each other. And what does matter is that we now have some reasonably apt characteristics to place the *müang* in a still larger comparative context.

Were we seeking laws, we would now compare the *müang* directly to a historically unrelated case like the Greek *polis*. That would be premature. The prior task is to situate the *müang* regionally. The next section thus focuses on another Southeast Asian city-state, the Malay *negeri*.

Comparing Malay *Negeri* and Tai *Müang*

In this volume Reid (417-29) describes the *negeri*’s heyday and decline, and so I need only sketch its antecedents and align the Malay case with the Tai one for comparison. I shall thus introduce the Malay as I did the Tai and then describe the *negeri*’s historical career and frame its cultural shape in relation to the *müang*.⁶

Identified by their language, the Malay are a Malayo-Polynesian people in the vast Austronesian family. As Austronesians, the Malay are ultimately offspring of the South China Neolithic. Leaving the

mainland in the late fifth or the fourth millennium B. C., the Austronesian dispersion reached the Malay Peninsula in the first millennium B.C. (Bellwood [1997] 241; [1992] 102). Over the last 1,500 to 2,000 years, in a later wave within this Austronesian tide, Malayic languages spread to the coastal and some inland areas of the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and Borneo, where they displaced earlier languages and Malay became the lingua franca of trade (Benjamin [in press] n. 43). That linguistic change is entangled in the creation of *negeri* as “outward-looking, sea-linked, socially stratified kingdoms” (Benjamin [in press]) that fed on maritime trade passing through the region.

The Negeri’s Historical Career. The long-distance trade that created *negeri* was heavily influenced by China’s politics and its trade policies (Wolters [1967], [1970]; Reid, *supra* 418-9). In the fourth century A.D., as trade linking South China to West Asia shifted from an overland to a sea route, Malay areas saw a political shift towards states. A state-making process, possibly involving peer polity interaction (Christie [1995] 271), culminated in the seventh-century creation of Srivajaya as “a pyramidal network of Malay rulers” (Taylor [1992] 174) solidified by the trading advantages of Chinese recognition. Later, changes in China appear to explain first the dissolution of Srivajaya’s network and then the Malay re-consolidation at Melaka in the fifteenth century.

From the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, as Reid (*supra* 417-27) describes, an inter-urban culture of city-states flourished among the Malay *negeri*. Islam spread rapidly and became integral to this urban efflorescence. Starting in the sixteenth century, in response to a more competitive environment (Reid, *supra* 419), stronger state forms began to undermine the *negeri*’s local autonomy as a city-state. Today *negeri* only means state, but perhaps its most important legacies are the Islamic character of Malay society and Malaysia’s differentiation into commercial and political entrepreneurs.

The Negeri’s Cultural Shape: Malay chronicles have no memory of Srivajaya (Taylor [1992] 173) and as this early *negeri* suggests Javanese rather than later Malay notions of power, I shall focus on the post-Srivajayan *negeri*. To facilitate comparison, I shall follow the six features that I used to characterize the *müang*’s cultural shape. Also, to situate these two city-states regionally, I shall contrast them to their predecessors and rivals, the Khmer and Javanese temple-states.

First, like the *müang*, the *negeri* was a third tier

social grouping. It presumed the relative autonomy of the household (first tier) and a local group or village (second tier). In relation to the other two tiers, the *negeri* was a distinct and complete whole. Lest that sound obvious, we cannot say the same for early Javanese and Khmer.⁷

Second, like the *müang*, the *negeri* properly had a royal ruler or *raja*. He or she might only be a figure-head but the position remained nonetheless. Which royal claimant ruled could be hotly contested, but in the Peninsular Malay sultanates the principle of royal rule was so well accepted that out of more than four centuries of internal struggles, perhaps all but one dispute was in the name of some royal person (Khoo [1978]).⁸ Again, we need only look to the Khmer to see that a simple and accepted royalty/commoner distinction was not inevitable.⁹

Third, like the *müang*, the *negeri* was a specifically political domain, although it did not stand as distinctly apart from local life as the Tai state did in the rice/rule split. In Benjamin’s ([1985]; [n.d.-a] ch.2) analysis, “the ‘Malay’ tradition” aimed to combine the contrary requirements of farming and forest collecting. Where “farming requires the joint cooperation of the men and women within the village sphere, . . . collecting-for-trade requires the dispersal of the men away from the village . . .” The latter sphere’s extra-village links between males created a domain of politics. Again, that contrasted to the temple states. Javanese power (Anderson [1972]) and Khmer “men of prowess” (Wolters [1982]) obliterated any distinction between politics and the whole of life. Quite unlike these unitary notions of power, Drakard ([1990] 176) suggests that a tension between unity and duality or centralized autocratic rule and egalitarianism might better represent the Malay.

Fourth, like the *müang*, the *negeri* was a largely voluntary association of first and second tier groupings. We might attribute that to the ease of flight (Scott [1998]); to the essentially religious attraction of joining the ruler’s projects and winning his honors (Milner [1982]); or to the sheer difficulty of securing the good will of local chiefs, the cooperation of inland collectors and the loyalty of the *raja*’s followers. By any of these explanations, coaxing or coopting would likely work better than coercion. Indeed, Reid’s observation (*supra* 422) that the *raja* “ruled either in a councilial fashion . . . or . . . rather briefly” suggests the rejection of authoritarian rule. Here again, we cannot say the same for Javanese and Khmer.

Fifth, like the *müang*, the *negeri* operated largely as a mutually beneficial commonwealth for its politically

privileged members. Here too its origin and ongoing weakness appear critical: only by cooperating could the *raja* and local chiefs create a polity that could attract the foreign trade that would benefit them all (Wolters [1967], [1970]; Watson Andaya and Andaya [1982] 26). Javanese and Khmer inscriptions tell a different story: allocating and protecting private rights was the very nature of states that arose from temples (O'Connor [forthcoming-a]).

Sixth, even more than the *müang*, the *negeri* oriented its inner workings to outside adaptive conditions. Again, that was a condition of establishing *negeri*, attracting trade, and keeping the foreign merchant community. To be sure, any entrepot must be outward-looking, but the *negeri* did in fact change internally to accommodate outsiders and outdo its rivals. In contrast to this "one among many" attitude, the temple-state operated as if it were still as it had begun, "the center of it all." Benjamin (n.d.-b) characterizes Khmer and Javanese civilizations as "immanent cultural regimes," orientations that do not "pay any serious attention to issues situated outside their own immediate concrete reality."

A Regional Question. We have now placed the *müang* in its region, situating it alongside the *negeri* and apart from Khmer and Javanese. In all six features the *negeri* is similar to the *müang* and these similarities generally distinguish these city-states from neighboring temple-states.

What explains this pattern of similarities and differences? It is too systematic to explain by chance, and the cases are too independent for common origin or simple borrowing to explain much. Is this the nature of city-states? Here again, leaping from the local to the universal would be premature. Having identified a regional pattern, we now need to see what it can explain.

Explaining the *Müang* and *Negeri*'s Similarities Regionally

Where earlier we sought only to characterize the *müang* and *negeri*, in this section we seek to explain those characteristics and the reasons for their similarity. To model how *müang* and *negeri* functioned as ongoing traditions, I shall treat them as paradigms.¹⁰ That concept comes from Kuhn's (1970) study of scientific change and Wallace's (1978) work on technology and social change. In my usage a paradigm begins when a group's response to external adaptive conditions crystallizes to become its enduring inner principles (O'Connor [1995a]). A *müang*'s "cultural

shape" would thus embody its initial formative conditions. Once established, a paradigm has a life of its own. It does not adapt directly to external conditions but reinterprets (Herskovits [1973]; Hamer [1994]) its inner principles to accommodate adaptive needs. So, for example, an ambitious *negeri* that can no longer afford the voluntary participation of its beginnings neither denies choice nor demands servitude. Instead it reinterprets simple allegiance as character-defining loyalty (e.g. Milner [1982]).¹¹ Using paradigms to study *müang* and *negeri* suggests four similar stages in their development: crystallization, dispersion, efflorescence and subjugation.

Crystallization – Establishing a Paradigm. When *müang* and *negeri* appear clearly in history, each already comes complete. To be sure, there would be many local adaptations, but from early on each city-state has the cultural shape it would keep for several centuries. That shape suggests *müang* and *negeri* crystallized as interstitial polities that began in sparsely populated and weakly organized hinterlands.

Interstitial Influences. Early *müang* arose in scattered mountain valleys between distant imperial centers. Each valley was too small to create a great state and yet too valuable in rice and trade for outsiders to ignore. In this hinterland the *müang* prospered as an interstitial polity that mediated between local groups and the outside's threats and opportunities. The Malay *negeri* was also an interstitial hinterland polity although it mediated between foreign traders and local collectors as well as between Malay leaders and the Chinese state. Just as China's trade policy set the *negeri*'s economic climate, so too did Han border politics define the *müang*'s political environment. Given these formative conditions, the ability of *müang* and *negeri* to orient their inner workings to outer conditions is not surprising.

Acceptance of royal rule appears to be a further consequence of adapting to this interstitial niche. Critically significant outsiders – imperial powers, foreign merchants, their own Austroasiatic underlings – likely expected royal rule, or the stability and coherence it promised.¹² Tai came out ahead if their "first among equals" were treated as ruler and outsiders could not play Tai against Tai. Were that pragmatic response to external conditions to persist until it was institutionalized, we might expect the relatively unconflicted acceptance of royal rule that we described earlier. That also fits royalty's seemingly casual attitude toward legitimizing myths as well as the pattern of secondary state formation.

Secondary State Formation. For our purposes a

secondary state crystallizes as an adaptive response to a primary or at least prior state. In these terms a secondary state is exogenous while a primary state is endogenous. As a new paradigm, a secondary state can appear quickly and function smoothly simply because it is a direct adaptation to the state-created conditions it must face. A primary state, on the other hand, arises slowly and remains embedded in earlier struggles and unyielding interests. It reinterprets an old pre-state paradigm to fit the new conditions that states create.

As secondary states, *müang* and *negeri* may have arisen more out of consensus than conflict. Bypassing primary state struggles, their new paradigms aligned the state and society by creating the two together. That adaptive leap helps to explain the relative autonomy of *müang* and *negeri* as third tier polities, as well as the clarity of their distinction from the second tier. We need only glance at Khmer or Javanese primary states to see polities that fought over the very distinctions that Tai and Malay polities accepted from the start. In particular, the Tai rice/rule split is exactly the disjunction that secondary state formation would create but that primary state formation, by arising from an agrarian base, could only deny.

Hinterland Influences. *Müang* and *negeri* both appear in sparsely settled hinterlands where, unlike a densely settled heartland, a state can succeed only by attracting people and resources that are otherwise dispersed. Each arrives at a similar solution: a more or less voluntary commonwealth that pays off in commerce for the Malay and, perhaps, protection and paddy land for the Tai. Were this their origin, attracting people and distributing benefits would have become societal values quite apart from any practical payoff.¹³ To be sure, every Southeast Asian state sought manpower, but in state-building we may at least tentatively distinguish the city-state's strategy of attraction from the temple-state's efforts at control.

Dispersion – Adaptation & Entrepreneurial Expansion. Once established, *müang* and *negeri* spread widely and relatively quickly. Expansion came spasmodically by cloning, not continuously by growth in size or complexity. By replicating their established cultural shapes, *müang* and *negeri* went on to displace or subordinate a variety of prior peoples and other subsistence schemes. Their success testifies to adaptive advantages that require external and internal explanations.

External Adaptive Conditions. Tai and Malay rose to regional prominence by filling an empty political niche. To be sure, the land was not always empty.

Malay met and displaced or subordinated other Austro-nesians as well as Austroasiatics (Benjamin [n.d.-a]; Bellwood [1992]). Tai did the same to Austroasiatic farmers (Izickowitz [1963]; Condominas [1990]). In the Tai case this was also a subsistence shift – an intensive wet rice specialization displaced the more broadly based extensive agriculture of earlier peoples (O'Connor [1995a]). As monocropping, the new subsistence may have been more precarious ecologically than the old, but the larger rice surplus made a hinterland state possible and indeed necessary.¹⁴ Overall, the *müang* and *negeri*'s major adaptive advantage in the hinterland was organizational: earlier peoples, being locally organized, lacked the size and strength to stop the entry of these state-making colonies.

Müang and *negeri* filled and then expanded a political niche between already well-established states. In effect, these secondary frontier states exploited a niche that their more powerful primary state predecessors had not reached or could not master. What had restricted these earlier states? The agricultural intensification that made temple-states possible arose around a fusion of ancestral spirits and chthonic forces (Mus [1975]) that sedentarized once highly mobile farmers (O'Connor [forthcoming-b]) and brought them under state control (Lehman [forthcoming]). In elaborating this localizing fertility cult, temple-states restricted not just their farmers' mobility but their own expansion. Controlling new lands required massive investment in temples. Such expansion was slow and, at least for the Khmer, ill-suited to many environments. Here Tai and Malay had distinct advantages. In their initial expansion, neither built massive temples and yet, judging by their rapid expansion, each had the religious self-confidence to settle where they liked. Apparently the locality spirits that bound earlier peoples to their villages and deterred settlement of new land did not impede the movement of Tai and Malay.

What were the newcomers' other adaptive advantages? In matching Tai against Khmer or Malay against Javanese, the newcomers had significant advantages in physical mobility, political flexibility, group solidarity and the acceptance of royal rule. The simple fact that *müang* or *negeri* were society-defining paradigms, not reinterpretations of pre-state forms, gave them an edge over Javanese and Khmer whose centralizing states remained within localizing agrarian paradigms. In the latter's fusion of fertility, potency and authority, every act was politically and religiously charged with the actor's power and the dominance or submission of others. Here Tai and Malay had a functional advantage: by more or less

distinguishing the state from religion and agriculture, each domain could follow its own principles. A religious crisis or failed crop need not have threatened the state's integrity (Kirsch [1985]). At least for Tai, pre-Buddhist religion must have suited expansion well. Dealings with spirits were apparently conventionalized and contractual, not charismatic and authoritarian.

Internal Dynamics – Entrepreneurial Expansion and Assimilation. Filling an “empty” niche gave *müang* and *negeri* their start, but they did not stop there. Indeed, the mere fact of adapting to external conditions can hardly explain the enormous expansive energy that eventually obliged their neighbors to adapt to them.

Arguably these city-states had entrepreneurial paradigms from the beginning. Certainly expansion was more piecemeal and entrepreneurial than continual and demographic. Unlike the Vietnamese, whose expansion relieved population pressure and extended wet rice cultivation methodically, Tai and Malay dispersed to fill the scattered niches opened up by their subsistence and entrepreneurial skills. Of course establishing a *müang* or *negeri* was less a commercial than a social venture: political entrepreneurs organized resource-colonizing groups that took risks in hopes of rewards.

Expansion was opportunistic, not imperial. Small leader/follower groups coalesced to exploit opportunities, not necessarily conquer land or neighbors. To be sure, in a dangerous world, getting and keeping opportunities required a militarily effective group. Accepting a *chao*, *raja* or other leader thus carried a military obligation. At least for the Tai of Vietnam, the right to bear arms was a privilege of free men that was denied to slaves and other dependents (Condominas [1990] 60).

To fill far-flung niches, Tai and Malay had to have a willingness to move. Given the sedentary nature of paddy cultivation, Tai are remarkably mobile (Fukui [1993] 315), and even today Thai-Lao villagers strike their Austroasiatic neighbors as overly mobile and ambitious (Hayashi [1998]). Malay are much the same. Embracing movement, their mobility is surely more than trading and collecting require (Carsten [1998]; Benjamin [1985] 228). Is this restlessness new? Judging by their cousins – the incessantly mobile Iban and the colonizing Minangkabau – mobility would seem to be basic and ancient to the Malayic peoples.

Expansion presumed not only physical mobility but social ambition. Today Tai move readily to secure

trade, new land, or even an advantageous marriage (Izikowitz [1963]; Hayashi [1993], [1998]). Was it the same five hundred or a thousand years ago? Were it not, it would be hard to explain why Tai and Malay took the risks to venture so widely. Apparently each had a secure subsistence and there was no population pressure. At least for Malay or some of their cousins, earning the status of free men (*maharlika*) was reason enough for groups to hive off (Lynch [1963]; Reid [1998a] 143).

Historically this expansion entailed the assimilation of subordinated peoples. *Müang* and *negeri* both had three class systems: actual and potential rulers (including royalty and nobility); free peasants; and various slaves and other dependents. The top two classes were politically privileged. The lower class included the land's early occupants or outsiders drawn in as slaves or hired labor. Their assimilation through Tai-ization (Condominas [1990]) or entry into Malaydom (Reid, *supra* 425; Benjamin [1993] 352; Drakard [1990]) made rapid expansion possible. It also presumed and strengthened a Tai and Malay sense of ethnic superiority (Condominas [1990] 74; Wyatt [1984a] 41; Milner [1982] 11) and suggests the societal expectation that people could and should improve their social position – or what we have just described as ambition.

Efflorescence – Differentiation and Religious Integration. Once Tai and Malay expansions had largely run their course, each group's scattered city-states developed a dynamic inter-urban culture.¹⁵ Tai elites seem to have shared “a community of discourse and rhetoric” (Kirsch [1984] 254) that is evident, for example, in a Shan chronicle that “treats the Tai world as a single entity, dotted with innumerable *müang* in communication with one another” (Wyatt [1984a] 34). As royalty, political entrepreneurs, holy men, merchants and craftspeople moved between city-states, their flexible and dispersed lateral exchanges reasserted a regional pattern of heterarchy (White [1995]) as opposed to the temple-states' fixed and centralized vertical exchanges of hierarchy. We might thus distinguish these “open” peer polity cultures from the “closed” court-centered cultures of earlier and later centralizing states. In effect, where the countryside once copied a court that itself copied the cosmos, city-states were now copying each other's innovations and playing off of one another's distinctions.

Peer polity interaction helps to explain the efflorescence of a cosmopolitan urban culture into an era of creativity and institution-building in art, politics and religion. In the broadest sense Reid's “Age of Com-

merce” was a regional efflorescence and his essay (*supra* 417-27) describes its Malay expressions, including the institutionalization of Islam and legal codes and artistic flowering in literature and performance. Tai city-states saw similar developments. In their golden age, spanning the thirteenth to fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries, Tai institutionalized Buddhism and legal codes (Kirsch [1984]; Wyatt [1984b]), indigenized Indic scripts (Hartman [1986]) and epics (Reynolds [1982]), and created distinctive Tai styles in religious art, architecture and practice.

Each peer polity culture arose with and through a world religion. As Kirsch ([1977] 261) says for the modern era, “Buddhism provides the Thai with a unitary set of values and a common ritual and expressive language, uniting them in a larger Buddhist moral community that transcends particularistic and local loyalties and attachments.” That unity and openness began in the city-state era and fed its flowering. Theravada Buddhism for the Tai and Islam for the Malay spread as popular religions that displaced or subordinated earlier cults that gave royalty proprietary privileges. Under these new religions a city was constituted by laws, not just its ruler’s rites or power. Being Buddhist for Tai and Muslim for Malay became a source of communal integrity as well as personal identity. A proper city now required a palace, a “public” open space (Thai *sanam*; Malay *padang*), and a main temple or mosque. Ruler, citizenry and religion were each represented separately and yet understood as a set. While their unity as a set integrated the city-state as a single Buddhist or Muslim community, their separation divided authority. That separation deterred absolutism, encouraged achievement and kept the city open to innovation.

In that separation’s openness, a cosmopolitan *intra*-urban culture of pluralism arose. To be sure, diversity was nothing new. After all, in their expansion *müang* and *negeri* had grown by absorbing other peoples. But now in their efflorescence *müang* and *negeri* attracted or generated new groups which did not assimilate to the politically privileged core. To pursue their trade, merchants and craftspeople kept or created ethnic and occupational distinctions. Too well-placed or well-off to be simple inferiors, these resident “outsiders” exerted influence through Tai or Malay as insiders. Assimilation still conferred the insider’s political privilege, but the city’s effective culture was now not “Tai” or “Malay” in any simple sense. Instead, symbolic differentiation organized urban groups into a cultural division of labor (O’Connor [1995b]). In this culture of pluralism, the politically exclusive *müang*

and *negeri* each flourished as an economically open and religiously inclusive “society of societies.”

What explains this flowering? Using paradigms we explained “crystallization” as an adaptation to external conditions and then “expansion” as the interplay of external opportunity and internal dynamics. In this sequence the third step, efflorescence, is an internal elaboration of the paradigm’s possibilities that is equivalent to Kuhn’s (1970) “normal science.” As a developmental step, elaboration requires resources and an openness to innovation. Clearly, *müang* and *negeri* had resources, thanks to wealth from trade as well as tax, tribute and their own entrepreneurial synergy. Openness, on the other hand, is less easily explained. Surely it was less an abstract principle of tolerance or pluralism than built-in (i.e. paradigmatic) impediments to absolutism as well as peer polity conditions that frustrated closure. After all, while any single *chao* or *raja* might seek the closure of absolutism, the presence of comparable competing *müang* and *negeri* gave innovators other possible patrons. Moreover, the more pluralistic *müang* and *negeri* were, the larger the internal market for innovations became. New groups or old, all needed symbols to keep their place and compete for status in a changing urban arena.¹⁶

Encapsulation – Subjugation and Decline. Eventually imperial states ended the peer-polity era of *müang* and *negeri*. As Reid (*supra* 419) explains it, the entry of European powers intensified the competition for trade monopolies at the same time as guns and trade wealth gave a few successful states new centralizing advantages. At least for the Tai, the initial consequence was the encapsulation of *müang* in a few imperial states, particularly Ayutthaya. Myths that gave each *müang* a unique and sacred identity now gave way to dynastic chronicles recording kings and royal deeds (Charvut [1976]). Erratically but inevitably, centralizing eroded the relative autonomy that gave the *müang* its life as a city-state.

Going by paradigms, we get three possible readings: centralizing states were [1] the logical conclusion of peer polity competition in the city-state paradigms; [2] a reassertion of the paradigm of the temple states; or [3] a new paradigm that combined city-state and temple state elements. In weighing these possibilities for the Tai, I favor the third reading. While the first stresses Tai continuity and explains the persistence of various city-state patterns, it cannot explain Ayutthaya’s Khmer borrowings and order-imposing style. The second possibility is basically the reverse of the first. It stresses the continuity of Khmer-style rule

in the Central Plains and thereby explains Ayutthaya's authoritarian style and centralizing policies. It cannot, however, explain the entourage-building within Ayutthaya and its deal-making with the outside. That political pragmatism suggests city-states.

Alone of the three, only the third possibility – a new paradigm – fits the picture of Ayutthaya as a new polity that combined trading and manpower interests. Of course, in calling this a paradigm, I presume a specific discourse of city-state and temple-state modalities, not their mere amalgamation. In earlier work (O'Connor [1978], [1983]) I argued that the Siamese and perhaps the region could be understood by the interplay of community and hierarchy as idioms and institutions. I would now suggest that, at least for the Siamese, community is a city-state legacy and hierarchy descends from temple-states. Their conjunction created the paradigm that met the West.

Regional Explanation. In this section, I have modelled *müang* and *negeri* as paradigms. My purpose was to situate them in the region and capture their pattern of change within continuity. As we have seen, the two paradigms have numerous specific and significant similarities. Tai *müang* flower a century or two ahead of the Malay *negeri*, but the rise of both the Tai and Malayic peoples beginning roughly two thousand years ago is close in time and closer still in regional sequence. The simplest explanation for their similarities is that *müang* and *negeri* are independent paradigmatic responses to that era's regional conditions. What explains these regional conditions? To answer that question we need to consider the region's historical development.

Regional Sequence and Global Parallels

City-states were a third wave of regional change. The first wave was the dispersion of early agriculture that peopled the region with Austroasiatic and Austro-nesian farmers. The second wave was the temple-states of the Javanese, Khmer, Pyu and Cham (O'Connor [forthcoming-a]) that indigenized Indic civilization. Later city-states spread as an entrepreneurial third wave. In this region-shaping change, *müang* and *negeri* established state hegemony and developed trade or agriculture in sparsely settled and weakly organized hinterlands.

These three great changes came by the succession of groups and not simply the diffusion of ideas. Agriculture spread by one group displacing another or assimilating earlier peoples to the newcomer's paradigm. Temple-states spread by conquest or intimidat-

tion. And city-states spread more by Tai or Malay imposition than other peoples' imitation. These were "ethnic" successions, not necessarily biological displacements. Were we to consider Thailand's Central Plains, we would find many of today's Thai have Mon ancestors. At some point a Tai identity became politically attractive or agriculturally advantageous.

These successions must be understood sequentially and regionally. *Müang* and *negeri* could not have developed as *hinterland* states until temple-centered or other imperial states had created *heartlands*. Moreover, the city-state not only presumed the state-level politics that preceded it, but the *müang*'s rice/rule split and the *negeri*'s dependence on imported rice suggest each had to await the agricultural intensification and market exchange that developed along with temple- or other primary states. Obviously these prior external conditions cannot explain the *müang* and *negeri*'s subsequent internal development or their far-reaching consequences, but we can hardly say that these city-states had a completely independent origin. Why do their strengths match temple-state weaknesses so neatly? Is it chance that, as Wyatt ([1984a] 30) observes, "early Tai kingdoms seemed almost perversely to devise public institutions that contrasted sharply with Angkorian institutions" In fact *müang* and *negeri* must be understood as regional adaptations, not Tai or Malay projects. Of course the temple-state was not an entirely independent creation either. The rigidity and fixity of its land endowments and monumental temples countered the fluidity and mobility of pre-state agricultural societies (O'Connor [forthcoming-b]). Equating the sacred with permanence did the same. Once sanctity was objectified as an essence, leaders and temples could possess the sacred sites and objects that attracted people. It is all so neat we might suspect an elite plan, were that degree of control and foresight not virtually impossible. In fact adaptive advantage is explanation enough. Were we to assume a wide variety of leaders and locales, the consequences of their competition would explain the temple-state's particular configuration. So like the city-state, the temple-state was deeply and enduringly marked by the regional conditions of its creation.

Are these successions unique to Southeast Asia? I doubt it. Elsewhere agriculture also spread by dispersion (Renfrew [1987]). In exploiting this new subsistence, we would expect mobile groups to have a selective advantage over any more sedentary rivals. Later, once these mobile farmers had settled the land widely but thinly, the agricultural intensification that states

required would then occur in groups that developed more sedentary customs. At least in Southeast Asia it is those sedentarizing customs that fused places and groups (Mus [1975]) and apparently culminated in temple states (O'Connor [forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b]). Other regions, facing a similarly centrifugal agriculture, may have developed around temples as a similarly centripetal solution. Whether for that or other reasons, the fact that early civilization arose around monumental architecture kept early empires close to heartlands that could support such massive investment. City-states then exploited the hinterland opportunities that were open to an already civilized but ambitiously mobile group. Independently other regions such as the Mediterranean could have followed the sequence we have described for Southeast Asia. If that is so, then understanding the *polis* will require studying the region, not just the Greeks and their culture.

Conclusion

Müang, *negeri* and *polis* all show striking similarities that must now be weighed against some equally obvious differences. In that task I would suggest that we consider regional explanations rather than the usual local or global extremes. Certainly the Tai *müang* is best understood as a hinterland adaptation to the specific regional conditions created by earlier and greater states. Moreover, from these beginnings came an efflorescence that was itself a regional phenomenon and created its own specifically regional conditions.

Regions are hardly new to anthropology and history, although they have typically been understood as political or economic realities that arise between discrete peoples and distinct states. What I am proposing is a cultural dialectics set in time. At any moment peoples as well as states and other institutions are all creating each other even as they manipulate their earlier creations. That is not an entirely original thought – others have studied Southeast Asia's interplay of peoples (Benjamin [1985]; Boon [1990]; Gibson [1986]; Kirsch [1973]) – but it is a necessary project. Just consider the alternative. If peoples and states are not regional constructions, then we have little defense against today's teleologies of nationhood. Worse, we are caught in their tautologies of race, ethnicity and culture that deny a regional tradition of pluralism (Reid [1998b]) that once flowered in the city-state era and still flourishes where locals are left to their own devices.

Notes

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2. The Map represents Tai majority areas in the mid 20th century and can only roughly approximate Tai settlement in the era of *müang*. Tai areas are taken from the maps by LeBar *et al.* (1964) and Levy-Ward *et al.* (1988) and plotted on a map based on Lepoer (1989).
3. To discern the character of pre-Buddhist *müang* that were small-scale states, Condominas stresses the non-Buddhist petty *müang* of upland Vietnam. That is a significant but unavoidable bias. Some reconstructions cite these cases as if they were pristine *müang*, unchanged from the past, but Condominas is well aware of outside influence. His theory of social space privileges these *müang* not for their historical purity but for the restricted locale that kept these polities small-scale affairs.
4. Were we to take royal rites literally, we could say the *chao's* protective and fertilizing powers benefited the village and household. Indeed, as in Bali (Lansing [1991] 130-1), "rule" denied the autonomy "rice" nonetheless had. In everyday life, rice-growing was an intrinsically local community-based practice that could do without the *chao's* mediation.
5. A society that constituted itself as its enduring centers and containers, not its evanescent individuals, could tolerate a great deal of movement. At the same time, that "freedom" to leave may have been the obligation to depart to avoid conflict.
6. I am not, then, defining the *negeri* simply in relation to its larger culture as I did with the *müang*. Were we to take this perspective we would find that the *negeri's* meaning for Malays differs from the *müang's* meaning for Tai. As we shall see, that difference is not directly significant for our larger conclusion.
7. For the Javanese, see Christie (1991) on the development of social complexity without cities. For the Khmer the absence of a distinct term for village (O'Connor [1995a] 978-9) combines with micro/macrocyclic copying to undermine clear first, second and third tier distinctions.
8. Quite unlike the Tai, Milner (1982) shows that a *raja* could function perfectly well without a *negeri*; and the state, at least as *ke-raja-an* (literally the condition of having a *raja*), could be a city-less and effectively placeless kingdom. In this autonomy of third tier parts, Malay differ from the Tai. Tai *chao* who had no *müang* soon ceased to matter, and *müang* that had no *chao* (e.g. Lamphun, Champassak) soon found them.
9. Khmer "men of prowess" (Walters [1982]) undermined any clear and enduring royalty/commoner distinction. The *deva raja* cult sought to establish the principle of a single sovereign that Tai took for granted.
10. Paradigms allow us to model change *within* continuity instead of our earlier division between change ("historical career") and continuity ("cultural shape"). While that diachronic/synchronic distinction is quite conventional in the social sciences, it creates an illusion of static traditions and cataclysmic change that hides how *müang* and *negeri* functioned as ongoing traditions.
11. The more Malay texts praise loyalty, the more they presume the person has a choice. The initial principle of voluntary participation is thus maintained even as it can no longer be tolerated.
12. On the Austroasiatics as subordinates, see Archiambault (1964). On foreign traders' royalty-creating expectations, see Andaya ([1993] 35) on European merchants in the Molukus.

With imperial powers Malay and Tai had somewhat different reasons for the same response. For Malay, the Chinese trade policy that favored state-to-state trading fostered royal authority for the most successful leaders. For the Tai, Wyatt ([1984a] 7) suggests the Han and Vietnamese may have "preferred dealing with a limited number of *müang* rather than a virtually limitless number of villages."

13. Or we might say these practices pay off twice: once by fulfilling *müang* and *negeri* values and again because material rewards solidify any human group. I would not, however, reduce the former to the latter. To do so denies the moral basis of society and makes differences between societies inexplicable.
14. A surplus that allowed state exploitation also made state protection valuable. We have no direct evidence to say one is prior to the other.
15. At least for Tai, whose separate *müang* had begun to adapt to differing local conditions, the emergence of an inter-urban culture suggests reintegration after divergence. So does the evidence of creolization for the Malay (Benjamin [n.d.-a]).
16. Any city creates a market for symbolic distinctions, but we need only imagine the closure of absolutist rule to realize that urbanism is no guarantee of efflorescence. After all, in an entirely court-centered city, new ideas have no larger market. Every innovation's worth is only how it places the king or pleases the elite.

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