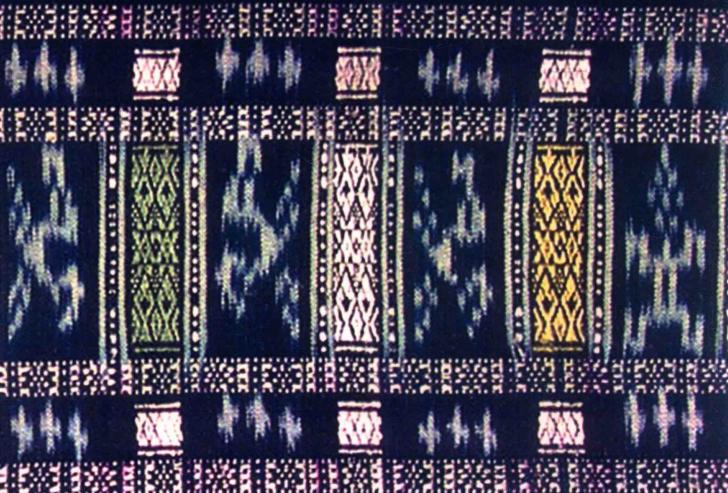


Lao – Tai Textiles:
The Textiles of Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan



Patricia Cheesman



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To Lao-Tai weavers and their ancestors whose courage prevailed through unimaginable hardships and whose hands created these wondrous textiles.

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Master weaver Phaeng Nanthavongduangsy and her daughters, Viengkham and Kongthong, who are master weavers in their own right, have been of immeasurable help. I would like to thank Douang Deuane Bounyavong for her constant support and extensive knowledge and Mr. Houmphan Rattanavong for his time and brilliant explanations of the Lao-Tai ethnic question and history. To Amphay Doré I extend my gratitude and respect for assisting me with Lao-Tai origins and history, and for encouraging me to study Lao textiles so many years ago. Mr. Boualin Phommasin has been most helpful with information of Muang Phuan history and regional Buddhist aspects, acting as my guide in the Xiang Khoang province, together with Mr. Vandy Saengsoulin. The task of driving and sending messages and photographs back to villagers fell on Mr. Saylom Saengsoulin and Mr. Bualai Khammanivong, whose safe and kind assistance was of great comfort to me.

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Finally I would like to thank my daughters: Tara for helping me with the database and all her encouragement; Aire for her insights into weaving techniques; Lamorna and Susira, for your unquestioning support of my travels and time spent away from home. Your understanding and love has given me strength and encouragement. Please forgive me for the days when, overtired, I was unable to give you my full attention. To my granddaughters Namfon and Sita, please take these pages and remember the lessons we had when you were very young. The future is in the hands of your generation; I gladly pass on this knowledge in the hope it will bring greater understanding among all peoples, promoting peace.



I. Detail of phaa tuum lightweight blanket with entwined ngueak horn (crested river dragons) motifs.



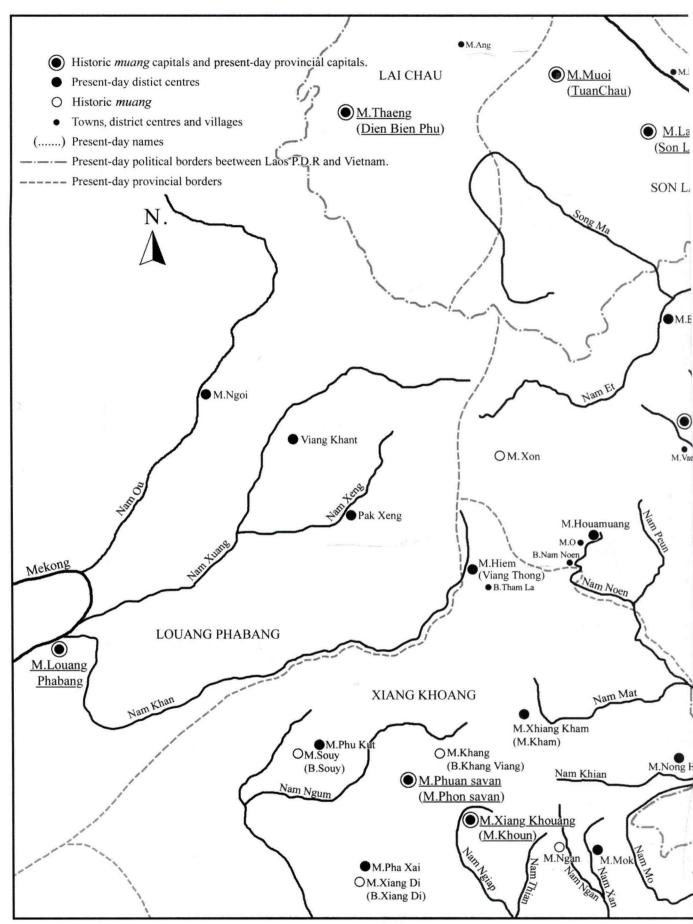
### **FOREWORD**



Like many scholars, curators and enthusiasts of the textiles of Southeast Asia, I was first introduced to their beauty and variety by Patricia Cheesman. In 1984, a small exhibition of indigo dyed fabrics from Laos held in Sydney, curated by Patricia Cheesman, was not only my personal introduction to a field of Asian art which I would pursue for the next twenty years: it also marked a major shift in the collecting policy of the National Gallery of Australia (then the Australian National Gallery) from its path-breaking but still narrow interest in Indonesian cloth, towards the institution's now world-renowned focus on the broad range of textile arts of South and Southeast Asia. Some of those early acquisitions appear in this publication.

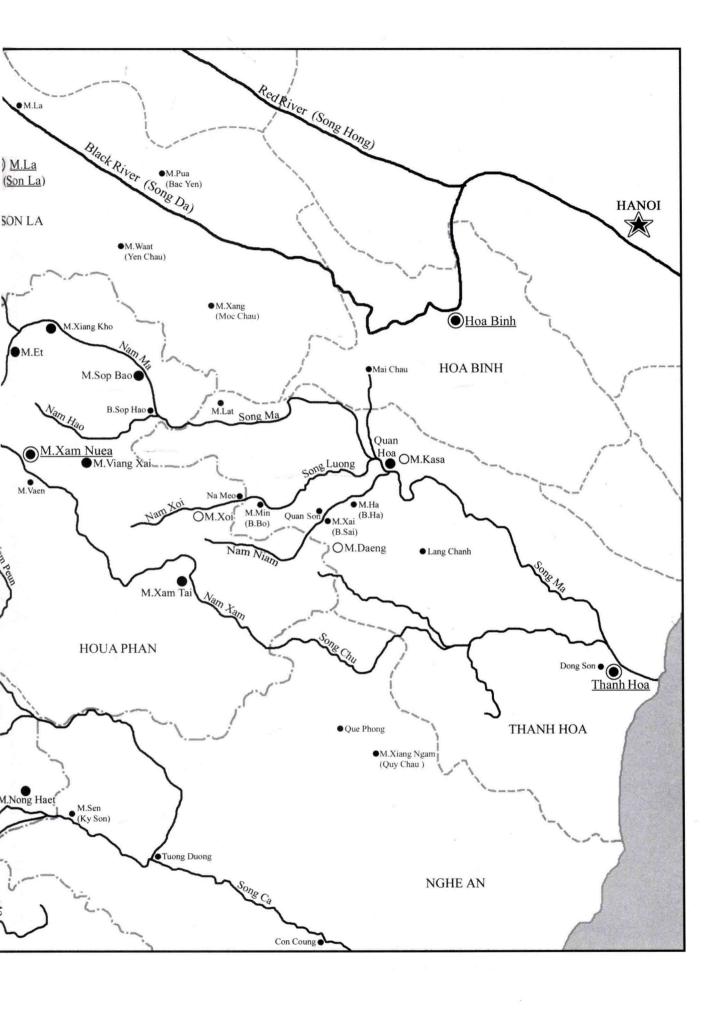
Patricia Cheesman's understanding and commitment to the textile arts of Laos and Thailand in particular has, over the intervening years, produced a wealth of resources for the new-comer and the better informed, for the art historian and for those interested in the practical aspects of weaving and dyeing. Of course the two cannot truly be separated, but Patricia Cheesman's background as a practising crafts person illuminates her publications. When she began to write on Lao and Tai textiles, there was little available on the topic. Today there is a wealth of material - in Thai and English for those seeking to understand something of the technical and cultural foundations of arguably the region's most dynamic art form. There is, however, always a place for a publication such as this, born out of a long involvement with the textiles and their creators. As she has done before, Patricia Cheesman concentrates on bringing clarity, recognition and cultural understanding to yet another set of the region's traditional textiles in an engaging and accessible style.

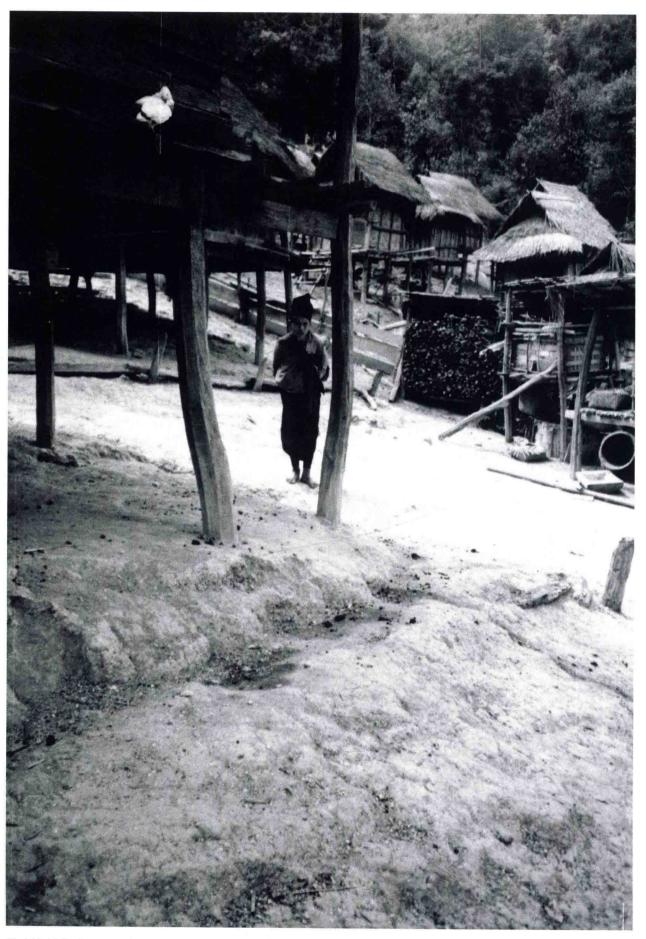
Robyn Maxwell Senior Curator of Asian Art National Gallery of Australia



Map 1. Map of the region of research and documentation showing the current provincial capitals and the position of ancient *muang* capitals.

<sup>©</sup> Patricia Cheesman 2003





II. A Tai Moei woman in the early morning at a village on the Noen River. Lao-Tai houses are built on stilts to escape flooding. The underneath of the house is cool during the day while the upstairs is cool at night. The house on the left has a pet bird.

#### 6 Lao-Tai Textiles

#### NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

When I started writing the revision of my first book 'Lao Textiles – Ancient Symbols, Living Art' five years ago, I had no idea that it would become a completely new book. Discovering new depths of information in the fascinating world of textiles from Laos has been nothing short of a love affair. Although at times facing hardships in the field, the magic of the textiles and culture has kept me intent and eager to continue. I selected the northeast region of Laos first, expecting to eventually cover the whole country and publish in one volume. Instead, I have covered barely half of the area intended and, for the sake of an in-depth study, decided to give each region its due coverage in separate volumes. I began with the same opinion of most researchers, that ethnic groups had their own explicit identities, and I was going to fathom the characteristics of the numerous ethnic groups in Laos. This rigid and seemingly archaic concept was gladly shattered by the fluidity of the actual material I observed in my field research.

I have been studying Lao textiles for twenty-nine years, ever since I made my first purchase of a red silk healing cloth from Xam Nuea at the gate of my house in Vientiane. I was working for the United Nations on ceramics development projects at the time when many families were moving to Vientiane from Xam Nuea, bringing with them their sacred heirlooms, the bulk of which were textiles. On arrival in Vientiane they were forced to sell their textiles to buy food since they no longer had farms and forests to sustain them. Although a potter by training, the compelling beauty and artistic excellence of my first textile experience sparked an interest in weaving that has led to my textiles research and my own dyeing and weaving art. Many outstanding examples of Lao-Tai textiles are now in international collections, but little is known of their history or origins and invariably they are misidentified and misinterpreted. One of the purposes of this book is to present a system for the understanding and identification of these textiles.

The decision to research only historical textiles older than fifty years led to the conclusion that this study could not be restricted to present-day political boundaries and that their identification by provenance rather than ethnicity was so much more accurate. I needed a title that would not restrict my research to the country of Laos, but at the same time I was aware that I would not have time to cover all the textiles in the region. The textiles of the Tai-Kadai language group have always been my passion and it was useful to restrict my research to the historical textiles in my own collection most of which are Lao-Tai, as these have proved to be most useful for identification in the field. Scouts for antique dealers scoured every corner of Xam Nuea and the whole of Laos buying without making any records of their provenance, dating or function leaving very little in the field. I was able to bring textiles on my research trips for first hand identification. Photographs of textiles have not proved so useful as the majority of my informants were over sixty years of age and had poor eyesight. Even bringing gifts of eyeglasses did not overcome this problem as the two-dimensional image was unfamiliar to them.

I admit that my research methods have been subjective but am of the opinion that this has been to great advantage. The result is first hand data, vibrant with all the exceptions-to-the-rule that is the fabric of life, hopefully without the pitfalls of idealistic abstractions. I have purposely avoided what Gedney called 'academically fashionable' theorisations and concentrated on a fundamental, informative documentation. It has been indispensable to follow-up real life scenarios such as the practical impact of dowry textiles from a different region to a village in the case of intermarriage. I

have had the advantage of fluency in the Lao language and an intimate knowledge of Tai culture gained from eight years living in Laos and nineteen years in Thailand. I was born in Singapore and have lived in Asia all my life. The food, life styles and the climate are familiar to me. The physical conditions on this research have been challenging since the locations were mountainous with narrow near-impassable tracks leading to far off villages where no running water or electricity is available in the houses and the pot-bellied pigs follow you into the bush. Bathing in rivers, sharing local delicacies from the forest with extended families and listening to stories of miraculous healings, strange happenings, myths and gossip around the women's fireplace has been a thrilling experience. But without this involvement in the village life, none of this information would have been so gladly related to me. The history of the region has been so tragic and it is understanding that a certain amount of mistrust exists. It has been important to gain people's trust before attempting to ask questions. The only drawback in all the villages has been the generous consumption of homedistilled firewater that flows freely from dawn to night at each meal. Blessings are exchanged with every glass, which passes from host to each of the guests in turn. To refuse the honour is insulting and detrimental to a good friendship. Luckily, being a woman has given me the excuse for smaller portions, but in the end automatic cameras and good tape-recording equipment saved the day. This research has taken many years of returning to the same villages again and again, not demanding instant results but building lasting friendships that mean a great deal to me. I admire and thank the women who have spent hours answering my tiresome questions and ask their forgiveness for my sudden intrusion into their lives. Many of the women I have interviewed were in their eighties and nineties. Their gracious generosity will never be forgotten. When I think of the things they have witnessed in their lifetimes, the tragedies they have suffered, the homes and children they have lost, I am amazed at their sharp minds and clear memories.

I would never have been able to meet these wonderful people without the assistance of my companion and friend Thong, who herself lived in a cave in Xam Nuea during the Second Indochina War for five years and is a master weaver. Thong accompanied me on most trips and interpreted the local dialects and meanings of obscure cultural information given to me in the field into our common language - Vientiane Lao. She became so familiar with my research requirements that often she could read my mind and guide me through difficult situations such as assuring village security members of my integrity or arranging for the masses of children that flocked to see me to play else where. Her extended family seemed to reach every village where there always seemed to be at least one person who was a distant relative. This opened doors that would never have been possible on my own and gave me a sense of belonging. Thong taught me to trust my intuition and pay respect to the ancestors. She introduced me to shamans and the world of the supernatural where the spirits of the dead look on and guard their families if they are happy but torment and play tricks on them if they are not. The textiles come to life in this perspective and the symbolism of the mythical creatures takes form. I hope this text pleases the ancestors. After all, it was the ancestors who wove the textiles and created the myths. This documentation is a record of their ancient knowledge, their origins, their moral codes and their skills, which were passed down from generation to generation.

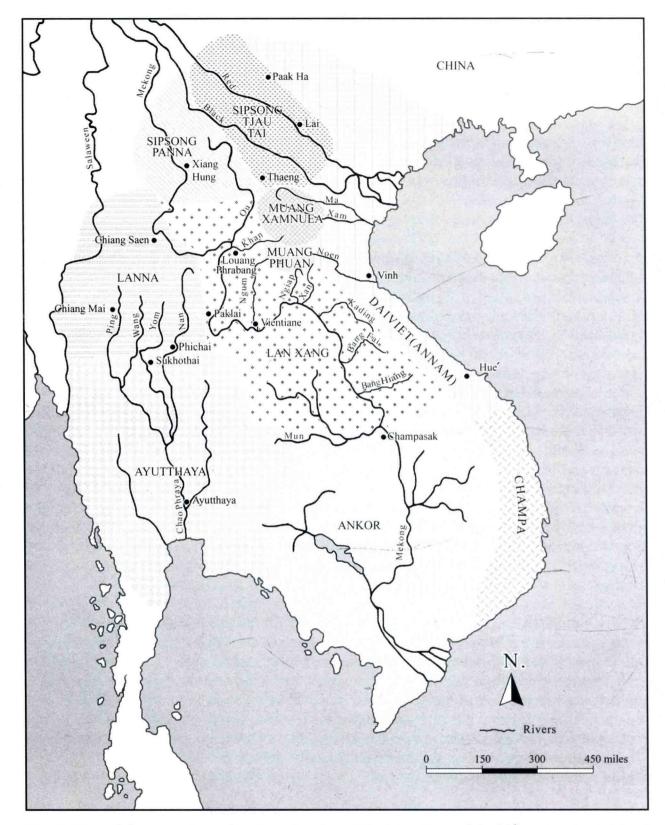
Today it is a different story. Commercialisation of textiles, which only began in earnest about ten years ago, has harnessed the deep pool of technical skills of Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan weavers to create endless interpretations of the historical textiles. The imaginative abilities of the weavers have brought about what is known in the trade as 'product development' and today it is virtually impossible to find a textile with an original structure or colour combination. The old way was to copy elements in historical textiles but rearrange them to suit the weaver while maintaining a fairly strict structure according to the end use. For this reason textiles from certain villages maintained their homogeneity for centuries. The process of extracting a design or motif from a textile was made simpler with the presence of an old one. However, with the loss of their prototypes, all of which were sold too cheaply to scouts from the cities, the weavers have had to fall back on memory or

suggestions from market vendors. In some cases foreign designers have employed their skills to promote their own brand names without giving credit to the weavers. In extreme cases entrepreneurs claim they have had to teach women how to weave because the weaving skills had been lost. Perhaps they were looking in the wrong place because this is a false historical fact as I am witness to it. With greater knowledge of the regional styles and the matching technical skills to create them, appropriate weavers can be found in Laos for practically every weaving technique that exists in the hand weaving spectrum. Weaving skills have never been lost but what is lacking among the younger generation is the ancient knowledge of the history and cultural background of the textiles as well as their meanings and their original structures. For this reason I am writing this book trusting that one day they will seek this information. Perhaps the pages of this book have already been torn out and distributed in a village to use as templates. This has occurred with my other books and I am glad.

For myself, the mystical allure of the historical textiles and the life styles that generated them are of so much more value than the alternatives, which in the case of most of the young generation in Asia, is the complete embracing of Western dress and life styles. While beautiful textiles are still being woven in Laos, they are being sold and are not worn except on rare occasions by the creators themselves. Traditional everyday clothing has been replaced almost completely by T-shirts and jeans with exception of the school uniforms, which still include the traditional girls' tube skirts. Gladly the older generation are still wearing their tube skirts every day, but in the village context it is seen as backward by the younger generation. Their teasing and peals of laughter must have been daunting to the elders when I insisted on photographing their original clothing styles. It has been very distressful for me to see the ancient knowledge that has nurtured these people for generations, being so openly belittled. There is a concept of modernisation in Laos that all forms of imported materials and ideas are 'developed' and therefore good. The opposite, being their own materials and ideas, are consequently labelled 'primitive' and therefore bad. This concept is furthered by international 'development' agencies and of course the multi-national companies and foreign investors who can easily take advantage of the situation. The destruction of the forests that sustained people for generations and the increase in population has led to a switch from self-sufficiency to dependence on a cash income. Textiles can provide this to a certain extent and today every young woman is weaving in the villages of Houa Phan and Xiang Khoang provinces for this reason.

The location for the research for my first book published in 1988 was Vientiane province, as travel to other provinces was restricted. However, so many people from Houa Phan and Xiang Khoang had been re-located in Vientiane at different times in history that I was able to gather information about those provinces from these displaced peoples. I was very lucky to have started my research before the commercialisation period and even luckier to have witnessed the revival of traditional textiles that occurred after the 1975 Revolution. Prior to that, many home-produced textiles had been replaced by mass-produced imported items, but after 1975 everyone had to be self-sufficient in every way including weaving. The market place was full of hand-woven textiles and many families supported themselves by weaving.

This book is so much more extensive than my first, as I have been able to travel freely in the areas of research and my own knowledge of weaving has increased. I have required a minimum of five persons to confirm each piece of information and conducted hundreds of interviews. I compiled comparative studies using photographs of textiles from each village pinned on huge boards lining the walls of my office. It became obvious that most textiles categories were common to every Lao-Tai group living in the same geographical location. The logical conclusion was to identify these textiles by their most recent provenance, and since they were historical textiles it was necessary to give those localities a historical setting. Out of this came a stylistic categorisation according to the provenance of the textiles and their historic period using an indigenous system. I hope this book poses as many questions as it answers, which after all is the true nature of knowledge.



Map 2. Map of the approximate location of socio-political structures of the  $14^{th}$  century in mainland Southeast Asia.© Patricia Cheesman 2003

### INTRODUCTION

The Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic, hereinafter referred to as Laos, is a country whose borders were established by the French in the late nineteenth century when it became part of French Indochina. Prior to this period there was no concept here of nation or geography as we know it today and therefore I have chosen to use the indigenous names for the geographical spaces whose peoples produced the textiles targeted in this research: Muang Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan. These two important Lao-Tai administrative entities existed in the approximate geographical regions known today as Houa Phan and Xiang Khoang provinces in Laos, but whose areas of influence and jurisdiction spread into the present-day provinces of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An in Vietnam. For the purpose of understanding the textiles, I ask readers to familiarise themselves with the history and culture of the Lao-Tai peoples detailed in this book and to shed any pre-conceptions of current political borders and nationhood. I have chosen to research the textiles produced before and during the Indochina period ending after the Second World War, because this was an important turning point in the stylistic components of the textiles and clothing including design, raw materials and dyestuffs due to commercialisation. Some photographs and records from the early twentieth century have been instrumental in this research, but I gathered the bulk of the information through empirical research conducted in the field.

My use of Lao-Tai is in preference to simply Tai, which is more commonly used in academic research referring to those speakers of the Tai-Kam-Sui-Kadai language group that was first classified by P.K. Benedict as a linguistic hyper-group (Benedict 1942). The term Lao is the oldest known reference to these peoples and was used continuously in Chinese historic documents from 271 B.C. to 1067 A.D. (Cam 1997 pp. 104-105). The indigenous people of the northeast of Laos use the word Tai to refer to peoples using the non-aspirated dialectic form of 'p' and 't' such as the Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, Tai Nuea and Tai Khao. The Lao on the other hand use aspirated 'ph' and 'th' as do the Phuan, Tai Khang and many other groups not included in this research. This seems to be a regional, rather than ethnic aspect and as languages are easily transferred, I do not base my studies on linguistic classifications. Chamberlain and other linguists have recognised the two dialectic branches of Tai known as 'p' and 'ph' (Chamberlain 1972 p. 234) and these are both represented by my classification of Lao-Tai. These points are expanded in the text.

This research is concerned with the identification and classification of Muang Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan textiles and clothing styles. I have maintained the indigenous word for these administrative entities as 'muang' rather than attempt any equivalents, which are often adopted by researchers on Tai culture and history, such as 'states', 'feudal systems' or 'mandalas'. None of these fully satisfy the concept of muang, which was essentially concerned with the control over manpower, not the ownership of land, although muang were established in certain geographic regions and utilised

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The word 'mandala' is a Sanskrit word meaning 'circle' with symbolic philosophical connotations and although it has become increasingly popular in academic works to represent Southeast Asian political entities such as muang I see no need to introduce another foreign word.