

Conscription by Capture in the Wa State of Myanmar: Acquaintances, Anonymity, Patronage, and the Rejection of Mutuality

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The sun was about to set, when Sam Sin and I saw the first houses of the village of Yaong Rai. We had been to his rice fields on the hills on the other side of the *Rhom Lo* stream, two-hours walk from the village. Sam Sin was telling stories about his adventures outside the village—he had spent almost twenty years in the army, and then five in Burmese prisons, before he had returned to the village three years before. He raised his hand and pointed back to the hills, “That’s where I was hiding when the army came to recruit soldiers.” It had been the time of the Chinese New Year, in the spring of 1990, the year after the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) had been dissolved and the emblem on the uniforms had been changed to “U.W.S.A.”—the United Wa State Army. The CPB leaders, mostly ethnic Burmese intellectuals, had been sent back to China, where they had come from in the late 1960s, and former mid-level commanders, mostly Wa and some Chinese, had taken over the leadership of the new army. Soon after, the various divisions of the CPB split up into new,

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independent armed movements. The strongest was the new Wa army, based in the former CPB headquarters at the Chinese border.

During the 1980s, CPB units had been involved in battles elsewhere in the Shan State of Myanmar, competing for control over the drug trade in the center of the Golden Triangle at the Thai border. There they had fought the Mengtai army of Khun Sa, the biggest armed force in the Golden Triangle at that time. With the CPB in disarray, Khun Sa sensed a chance to increase his area of influence and attacked various former CPB units in the Golden Triangle. But the commanders of the new Wa army quickly retaliated. Trained for almost twenty years by Burmese and Chinese officers and equipped with weapons from the CPB, they assembled several new regiments, including an “independent regiment” directly responsible to the headquarters in Pang Kham. The independent regiment quickly began conscripting soldiers in the Wa hills and in the spring of 1990 arrived in Yaong Rai.

When Sam Sin heard that the army would register at least one son of every household to enter the army, he fled into the hills a few hours from the village, but he was reported by another villager who was a driver to the commander who had just arrived. The soldiers threatened to arrest his parents if he did not return to the village, and his father ascended to where he was hiding and convinced him to go back. Sam Sin registered his name and age, and twenty days later a truck came again to pick him up along with fifty others. After two months of army training they traveled to the Thai border—a fifteen-day journey on the dirt roads—where over the next five years he served in different UWSA units fighting Khun Sa’s Meng Tai army. Sam Sin was about seventeen when he left the village, but he had already married and built his own house. He missed the birth of his first son and his father died before his return.

In June 2017, like every year, the government of the Wa State held half-year meetings across all government levels. Village governments conduct a census of every household and deliver the data to the district, then the district government holds a meeting at which all the data are collated, and central government reports are read out. Another meeting is then held by the county government in Meng Mao, followed by a central government meeting in the Wa State capital of Pang Kham. For the Taoh Mie district meeting the district clerk had prepared a five-page report about the work of the different government offices in the district during the first half of the year. It included item number 13:

Regarding the relationship between the military and the civilian population, every time a mass meeting is held, everything is conscientiously communicated, and diligently implemented, according to the relevant policies of the central government, so that the army and the people are as inseparable as fish and water, and so as to allow them to cooperate whenever necessary. During the past half year, the leaders of our district have cooperated with various regiments of the Army to capture deserters; there were

six persons who went on holidays and did not return to their army units, altogether five persons who had deserted were captured and arrested.¹

The expression of “the troops moving among the people like fish in the sea” was coined by Mao Zedong and has become proverbial in China.² But that the ideal of a smooth relationship between the people and the military has always been difficult to achieve is obvious when we look at the actual practices of recruitment and desertion. Below the same entry, the report notes the following “suggestion of the masses”: “Regarding the problem of family members having to replace deserters, it is hoped that the higher leaders will continue to consult with the frontline of the relevant army units.” This was just one item in a seven-page report, written in Chinese, which the scribe simultaneously translated and read out in the Wa language to some 150 village officials from across the district, who sat quietly and showed little reaction.

According to the 2017 census, there are 11,649 people living in Taoh Mie, and 2,452 soldiers from the district serve in the army. Given these numbers, six deserters in one year might not seem a lot, but in fact there were probably many more. Some did not appear in the statistics, including some who had already been “replaced” by family members, often their brothers. If a son or a daughter does not return to their army unit, the local police will capture a family member and keep him or her until the deserter returns. If they do not, then the captured relative, or another son of the family, will be taken to the same army unit in which the deserter served. In Yaong Rai, one of twelve villages in the district, there were two such cases during the same half-year period. Such “replacement captures” can cause much anger and grief, hence the “suggestion of the masses” in the document.

Whereas in some households, fathers or brothers of the deserters are arrested, some men who abandon their army units are simply taken “off the books.” Families with relatives in army units, or otherwise powerful connections, might plead for their children. If they succeed, their child’s name might simply be taken off the lists that army units pass on to the local police. Similarly, children of those who have good relationships with the elite might avoid being recruited altogether or end up in relatively comfortable positions in the army. The most important decisions about recruitment (Who

¹ The same half-year report of June 2015 included a shorter note about the “situation of troops and people”: “In the last half year, the leaders of the district already have received enquiries about deserters six times, respectively from the 618, 318, and 468 brigades, and others; altogether about thirty-five deserters. We have already received four phone calls enquiring about deserters.” All translations from Chinese and Wa are mine, if not otherwise noted.

² Mao first used the metaphor in “On Guerrilla Warfare,” chapter 6: “Many people think it impossible for guerrillas to exist for long in the enemy’s rear. Such a belief reveals lack of comprehension of the relationship that should exist between the people and the troops. The former may be likened to water and the latter to the fish who inhabit it. How may it be said that these two cannot exist together? It is only undisciplined troops who make the people their enemies and who, like the fish out of its native element, cannot live” (Mao 1961 [1937]: 92–93).

must serve? How many children per family?) and desertion (Should the case be followed up?) do not follow written rules known to everyone, but rather the logics of acquaintanceship and patronage. In both cases, written documentation is generally prepared *after* decisions about capture have been made.

The UWSA today employs various strategies to capture fugitives, which include arresting close kin of deserters or criminals to force them to return.³ The police and the military capture people not only for military conscription, but also in cases of legal conflict. In fact, arresting wrong-doers or their kin seems to be the general way of dealing with crime and conflict. For instance, in Yaong Rai village in the spring of 2017, an adulterous woman and her lover were interned in a labor camp for three months before a delegation of relatives and local officials went to the district to negotiate their case. In another case, a group of sixteen teenagers, the youngest ones about ten years old, who had crossed the border into China to work on tea plantations without legal papers, were returned by the Chinese police and imprisoned for three months before the village headman negotiated a settlement of 200 Chinese yuan⁴ for each, to be paid to the district police. Yaong Rai also saw at least two “replacement” arrests of brothers of men who had deserted their army units. The mere threat of arresting deserters’ fathers had led two other deserters to turn themselves in; they spent a week under arrest in the local police station, before they were returned to their unit or assigned to another. When someone is captured, the police and government officials usually take their time, keeping them prisoner for at least a month or two before they start dealing with their case. The head of the Taoh Mie district government told me that the main reason for waiting so long is to find a suitable moment when all parties can participate in court dealings. But surely another important side-effect is to instill respect and fear in the minds of prisoners and their relatives.

One reason for capturing people, sometimes by arresting relatives, is that the registration and documentation of the population by government offices is patchy, and it is difficult for the Wa State authorities to chase deserters or delinquents who have left the areas governed by the UWSA. Even though many people have household registration papers and ID cards, and a census is done intermittently, data from these are not typically compared or collated, and instead new data sets are collected. Most ordinary people have no Chinese or Burmese ID cards, and those of the Wa State are not always recognized as identification in China and elsewhere in Myanmar, but it is relatively easy to enter China or Myanmar proper avoiding the official border crossings.

³ I employ “capture” as a catch-all term referring to detention, arrest, and enlistment that are forced and extra-legal. This is essentially the same as what is meant by the colloquial terms *giex* in Wa, and *zhua* in Chinese.

⁴ The Chinese yuan is the common currency of the Wa State, except that in the areas bordering the Shan State the Myanmar kyat are used, and in the Southern Command at the Thai border, Thai baht. The exchange rate in 2017 was about 1 yuan renminbi to 0.12 pound sterling.

Chinese and Burmese police sometimes capture “illegal” immigrants and return them to the Wa State, but the Chinese and Burmese governments do not recognize desertion from the UWSA as a legal offense. So long as the population cannot be made “legible” (Scott 1998) by bureaucratic means, the Wa State authorities must capture people, sometimes by taking their relatives hostage.

This article examines the politics of such conscription by capture. The first section introduces conscription as a core challenge for state-building. Throughout human history, states have required knowledge about local populations for purposes of conscription. In the case of today’s Wa State, conscription by capture is made possible by the personal networks of acquaintances and patrons, and it reproduces those same networks. These personal networks both connect and separate ordinary people and representatives of the military state: they connect those who have served together in the army, who work together in government, or who have formed patron-client relationships; they exclude others, who are not acquaintances, or with whom relationships of mutuality are refused. I suggest that state violence relies on networks of acquaintances and relationships of patronage, as well as on the absence of acquaintances—that is, anonymity—and the absence of patronage—that is, the refusal of mutuality. I will show the combination of these four relationships (acquaintances, anonymity, patronage, refusal of mutuality) at work through a case study of the army’s capture of one boy soldier. The sections that follow describe the historical emergence of current practices of capture in the Wa State, as a combination of Maoist state-building and local institutions of war capture and adoption. I conclude by summarizing the workings of acquaintanceship and patronage in the politics of conscription, and underscore the importance of personal bonds, as a corrective to theories of state formation that focus exclusively on knowledge and bureaucracy.

STATE-BUILDING, CONSCRIPTION, AND LEGIBILITY IN THE WA HILLS

Before the 1960s, there was no centralized government in the Wa hills, but today, with approximately thirty thousand soldiers, the United Wa State Army has become the strongest of Myanmar’s numerous “non-state armed groups.” Most of the UWSA’s rank and file are ethnic Wa, whose grandparents lived in a society of peasant-warriors organized along connections of lineage and village. The UWSA is a successor of the Communist Party of Burma, a Maoist guerrilla army that fought local warlords, the Burmese national army, and other armed groups and then governed much of the region in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵ The foundations of contemporary governance in the Wa hills of Myanmar were laid by the Maoist guerrillas, following Chinese models,

⁵ For a concise history of the CPB, see Lintner 1990.

guided by Chinese advisers, soldiers, and Red Guards, and supported with rice, weapons, and equipment from China.

Chinese observers have described the Wa State as a cheap copy of the People's Republic of China, a "mountain fortress China," using a popular Chinese neologism for a cheap brand copy, *shanzhai* or "mountain fortress." Comparing the Wa State with other non-state armed groups in Myanmar, the political scientist Mary Callahan identifies a situation of "near devolution of power to networks of former insurgent leaders, traditional leaders, businesspeople, and traders" (2007: xiv). Callahan's term "devolution" basically defines the political regime of the Wa State by an absence—the absence of the Burmese central government. To describe this regime *sui generis*, the present article aims to disentangle some of the mechanisms central to the exercise of power in the Wa state. To this purpose, I will analyze conscription by capture as a combination of Maoist state-building and local institutions, particularly war capture and adoption.

The institution of conscription is an excellent place to study and compare varieties of state-building. Most states have armies and need to deal with the problem of how to recruit soldiers, by either force or persuasion. Writing about nineteenth-century Europe, the political scientist Margaret Levi (1996) suggests four basic models of conscription: a professional army; universal conscription; conscription that allowed for exemption by finding a replacement; and conscription that allowed one to buy oneself out of service. The last two disappeared over the last two hundred years in Europe, according to Levi, basically because people increasingly perceived them as unfair. This shows consent was necessary and important, and in most states some form of negotiation of the duty of conscription has been possible. Historian Michael Szonyi (2017) describes the strategies available to military households (*junhu*) in Ming-dynasty China to deal with the obligation of conscription. In such households, one son in each generation had to serve in the imperial army, at the time the world's largest army with probably two million soldiers. Szonyi shows how families measured the benefits and costs of conscription: even though military service meant hardship and possible death, there were also potential material gains, such as control over border trade and smuggling. Lineages often found intricate arrangements to compensate recruits, for example by offering their families parts of the lineage estate. Analyzing official accounts and local history, particularly family genealogies, Szonyi argues that the military households made market-like choices when they assessed the costs and benefits of sending sons to the army. The "art of being governed" that he describes is basically the art of "regulatory arbitrage," of taking advantage of the differences between two or more markets.

Such a formulation—engaging with the state through market choices—implies that the politics and rules of conscription are transparent enough to be assessed like a market. This may have been true for the military households

of Ming Dynasty China, where government registration was relatively efficient, conscripts could find replacements or buy themselves out of service, and military households themselves were taking part in thriving market economies (none of which is true for the Wa State today). Yet even if we accept that those military households could make some “market-like” choices related to the state’s conscription policies, those policies themselves were rooted in violent actions, such as the setting of rules for conscription and the punishment for deserters.

The UWSA, like Myanmar’s other non-state armed groups and the Burmese national army (the *Tatmadaw*), have no transparent rules and procedures for conscription. In the colonial era, recruitment into the armed forces was often considered an “elite career choice,” and the recruitment campaigns in the Kachin hills, for instance generally relied on the cooperation of local communities and enlistment was largely voluntary (Sadan 2013: 218ff). But today many soldiers in Myanmar’s various armies are recruited by force, often as children.⁶ The armies are said to apply certain rules for recruitment; for instance, they will spare one child per family (in the Kachin Independence Army; Chen 2014: 25), or at least one son per family (mentioned by Wa State officials to me). But even these rules are not always followed, and in general the decisions of how many and which individuals from a certain district or household must serve are not transparent, which they would need to be for a politics of consent (Levi) or market arbitrage (Szonyi).

Whether enlistment is voluntary or forced, the institution of conscription fundamentally relies on mechanisms to make the population “legible” to the army. James Scott in his book *Seeing like a State* (1998) famously argued that for the most essential purposes of statecraft, that is taxation and conscription, states must make populations “legible.” Sedentarization, fixed surnames, and household registration are the most essential methods for creating such legibility. The UWSA, and before that, the CPB, applied all these methods of statecraft, but they have not been very successful so far (at least when compared with nineteenth-century European states in Levi’s account, or Ming-dynasty China in Szonyi’s).

In Wa society, even now, household registration remains patchy. Many Wa families have adopted Chinese surnames, but they often do not match exactly

⁶ While little data is available on the practice of recruitment among different armed forces in Myanmar, without doubt most of them practice forced recruitment, including of children. According to an estimate by Human Rights Watch in 2009, about one-fifth of soldiers on duty in Myanmar may have been children under eighteen (Chen 2014: 22). UN agencies and NGOs have frequently denounced forced recruitment of and violence against children in Burma, and various UN reports list Burma’s Army, the *Tatmadaw*, and seven non-state armed groups, including the UWSA, as parties that recruit child soldiers. See, for instance, the reports by Child Soldiers International (2015a; 2015b) and the annual reports of the UN secretary general on children and armed conflict (2014: 48).

the Wa lineage names that are used locally. In the central Wa hills, in both China and the Wa State, many individuals have no surnames on their ID cards, so that in a village of a hundred households you might find ten men called “Ai Ga,” for instance.⁷ While both the Chinese and the Wa states work hard to improve the documentation of their population with ID cards, registers, and census, the most common form through which “legibility” is established is through channeling personal knowledge about individuals, households, and kinship relations. A census is done by most village governments every year, yet census papers are rarely or only sporadically used for conscription or taxation purposes. Instead of consulting the papers, higher-level officials will consult the headmen of village governments directly.

There have been public levies in the Wa State since the days of the CPB. Today, many children are recruited directly from schools. But decisions about who will be recruited do not follow scripted rules or procedures; at most, there might be a target for a specific locale or school to recruit a certain number of soldiers. Recruits are captured and only after that are their names written into lists of draftees by the scribes in government offices and army units. The logic of capture is not arbitrary but follows the dynamics of networks of acquaintances and relationships of patronage in the military state. Networks form based on acquaintances in the units of the army and the state. Such networks connect people beyond village and lineage, but they also separate those who know each other from others who the same people do not know, and thus make anonymity possible. On the basis of new acquaintances formed in the units of the military state relationships of patronage can develop, but at the same time relationships of mutuality with acquaintances are actively rejected.

I will show how conscription by capture relies on networks of acquaintances as well as the recognition of anonymity, relationships of patronage, and the rejection of mutuality. First let me give a concrete example of the replacement capture of one boy in 2017 to illustrate how knowledge is channeled, and violence exercised, through networks of acquaintances and relationships of patronage.

CONSCRIPTION BY CAPTURE

For a few days a rumor had been making the rounds that the army was looking for Ngoux Kai, the son of a farmer in the village. Headman Nap had told me that the district police had called to tell him that he had left his army unit and had not returned for two years. One day the step-mother of Ngoux Kai

⁷ See Bao (2003), Fiskesjö (2009), and the *Reports on Wa Society and History* edited by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (2009: 18–26) for reviews of Wa naming practices, including the spread of permanent family names. Scott, Tehranian, and Mathias (2002) situate the promotion of permanent surnames within Scott’s broader framework of state legibility.

called me over to her house, talking constantly about her son Ni Er. She seemed agitated and it took me some time to realize why: the police had taken her eleven-year-old son away the day before as a replacement for his older half-brother Ngoux Kai.

The woman kept talking to me and insisted that I call the headman, Nap, and invite him to their house for some rice wine, which I eventually did, but he said he was busy. Her husband Sam Lao and a few other neighbors arrived and told me about the family: Sam Lao had six sons and two daughters with his first wife; the daughters had both married and three of the sons had died. One son had moved to the Southern Command with the army and had not returned to the north for about ten years. Another, Luk, worked in the house of Geeing Cing Pao, a wealthy businessman and official who is originally from the village of Yaong Rai. But after only a year Luk returned to the village, irretrievably damaged. He came back “crazy,” Sam Lao said—he would do some work, but only when you told him, and he barely ever said a word. And then there was Ngoux Kai, who had deserted the army and was with his wife in China, without papers. After his first wife died Sam Lao had taken a second wife, the woman who had called me over. He had had two sons with her: the eldest was in the district middle school, and the younger, named Ni Er, was at home. The day before, three policemen had come and taken Ni Er to the district. Sam Lao had gone with his son and stayed in the police station for a night, but in the morning, he had to leave and Ni was put on an army truck that would take him with other recruits to the same garrison of the same brigade in which his half-brother Ngoux Kai had served.

The woman offered me liquor and cigarettes, constantly talking, and crying, “My child.” The men told her to be quiet and finally she lay down on the bed, still sobbing. The men told me about the family relations of Sam Lao. His brothers and cousins were members of the village militia and Sam Lao’s first wife was the sister of Tax Seng, who had worked twenty years in the district government. Someone said that Sam Lao had many sons, and in the past he could harvest much more rice than the family could eat. But after his first wife died misfortune and misery arrived. One man said that the second wife—lying next to us sobbing on the bed—drank too much and did little work. After a few more glasses of rice wine, Sam Lao, who had been quiet most of the time, began talking about the policeman and the officials he met in the district—he did not know their names. His eyes were glassy when he talked, and at some point, he started crying too. Tax Seng, the oldest man in the room, comforted him, saying that there is no point in complaining. Sam Lao repeated a few times that there was the district head, “but I don’t know his name.” Tax Seng and I, who knew most of the officials in the district and the police, told him the names of the district head and the head of the police station, but Sam Lao just repeated, “There was the district head. I don’t know his name.”

Anonymity is crucial here: Sam Lao does not know the name of the district head, and the district head probably did not know his name either. It is this anonymity that makes possible the exercise of violence—taking his son away. Such anonymity is the flipside of the networks of acquaintances in the army and state through which knowledge about draftees and deserters is channeled. The names and villages of origin of all soldiers are registered once they have been recruited. In principle, it should be easy for army and police to find the family of a deserter, but they need the help and guidance of local acquaintances, that is village-level leaders and officials. Even though, in principle, every individual appears in household registrations and the census, those are not very reliable, and there are mismatches between the official data (much of which is in Chinese) and the local names (which are mostly Wa).

The management of personal relations in this case crucially depends on the headman of the village, whom the district police had called in the first place. But the headman is not just an acquaintance of the police officers and district-level officials, but also a neighbor and distant kinsman of Sam Lao. As such, headman Nap disregarded the relationships of mutuality with Sam Lao and his family, and simply said on the phone that he could not come now because he was busy.

Village-level officials such as headman Nap are crucial mediators in the relationships of acquaintanceship and patronage that make capture possible, including sometimes by rejecting mutuality with co-villagers. Every administrative village in the Wa State has a number of officials who are generally appointed by district-level officials: a headman and his deputy, a scribe, the head of the local militia, the women's representative, and then the heads of the various village groups. As locals, village officials divide their loyalties between their neighbors and kinsmen in the village, and higher-level officials and army commanders outside. In their meetings with higher-level officials, the hierarchy of government levels is constantly enforced and re-enacted. A large part of the speeches at the public reunions in which the village officials participate, especially when guests from the district or higher government levels are present, are basically top-down reprimand: higher-level officials scold lower-level officials, and everyone chides the ordinary people. In some of the village-level meetings that had been held in preparation for the half-year meeting in the district (mentioned at the beginning), the names of deserters were read out by a district-level official, implying a clear challenge to the village officials.

Besides such "public" pressure, an official also might simply want to ingratiate himself with the higher levels by "delivering people." A village headman who wants to make sure he is on good terms with the district officials, or a district head who wants to give a favor to a regiment commander in the army, might "hand over" a few soldiers. In fact, such practices are not even limited to the areas governed by the UWSA: the army also operates in some

of the surrounding regions, where it supports its allies, particularly the Shan State Army-North and the National Democratic Alliance Army in Mengla. A Wikileaks cable in 2010 reported that an employee of the Save the Children Fund in Namkham in neighboring Shan State trafficked at least five young persons to become soldiers in the UWSA. According to the cable, “The alleged perpetrator apparently acted out of political motivations rather than for financial gain.... All of the victims and the perpetrator are members of the Palaung ethnic group. There have been reports that the Palaung State Liberation Organization is allied with the UWSA, which may have levied manpower quotas.”⁸ If this case is at all similar to recruitment in the Wa State itself, the “political motivation” of the Save the Children Fund employee was probably based on a relationship of patronage. When local officials in the Wa State help the police and army find soldiers, they fulfil their duty, but they also act within their own personal networks. This is not only relevant for how information about families reaches higher levels of government, but also for which people are chosen: if someone has powerful connections in government and army, his children might not be conscripted at all, or their case might not be followed up if they run away from their army units.

There is a lot of gossip about such cases, but there is also a general consensus that the reason children were not recruited, or relatives not captured as replacements, was that the family had powerful relatives or a wide network of friends and business partners. I never heard of any money exchanged in such cases. The favors of “handing over people” to a regiment commander or “not reporting a deserter” are sometimes talked about as a “give and take” between powerful people. A district-level official, for instance, might get a business concession (say, to open a market stall) from an army commander. But perhaps most fundamentally, it is about knowing and recognizing people across the hierarchy of army and state. In fact, in all the cases I knew of individuals being recruited or captured against the will of their families, the family did not have a powerful network, and in fact did not even know the head of the district and the head of the police station. Sam Lao, half-drunk and sobbing about his son Ni Er, said again and again, “There was the head of the district, but I don’t know his name.”

Knowledge management is essential to statecraft and sovereignty, and in the absence of other means of producing state legitimacy officials must access local knowledge about individuals, their residence, and their kinship relations through personal acquaintances. Yet the exercise of sovereignty also needs absence of acquaintance—anonymity. Someone like Sam Lao has no chance to change the situation by invoking kinship when he deals with the police and the other people in the district. He does not even know their names. On

⁸ See https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10RANGOON50_a.html (accessed 1 June 2018); and Allchin 2011.

top of this logic of acquaintance and anonymity, another logic of patronage and the refusal of mutuality is at work here: decisions about which people are to be captured often rely on patronage relations of the family or of local officials. Local officials sometimes actively reject their mutuality (that is, the possibility of enacting a patronage relationship) with co-villagers and kin, as did the headman: he simply did not respond to the invitation to be hosted at Sam Lao's place.

These logics of personal relations along the lines of acquaintances, anonymity, patronage, and the rejection of mutuality have evolved on the basis of the long history of state-building in the Wa hills. Prior to the 1950s, in the central Wa hills relationships of acquaintance and patronage were broadly limited to the circles of lineage, village, and neighbors. Since then, such relationships have proliferated and expanded and this expansion, in turn, was a precondition for the possibility of relationships of anonymity and the rejection of mutuality with co-villagers and kin. New relationships of acquaintance and patronage were formed in the local armies and the emerging government institutions, where soldiers and officials spent increasingly long periods away from their villages of origin. These developments began when modern armies moved into the Wa hills in the 1950s.

MAOIST STATE BUILDING

After the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-Shek lost the Chinese civil war, several regiments of the Chinese nationalist army, the KMT, retreated into Myanmar and stayed in the Wa hills and in the "Golden Triangle" (where Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos meet) (Gibson and Chen 2011). The Chinese Communist Army also moved into the Wa hills in 1950, and only in 1960 retreated behind the recently agreed national border between China and Myanmar. At the same time, the National Army of Independent Myanmar established local militias, the so-called Ka Kwe Ye. Sometimes supported by those different armies, local Wa headmen established their own militias, and some of these militias unified various villages. The CPB, which had been active throughout Burma since independence, retreated into the Shan State in 1967 and 1968 and conquered Kokang, the Wa hills, and neighboring areas along the Chinese border in 1971 and 1972 (Lintner 1990). Trained and supported by the Chinese government and the PLA, the CPB quickly captured the Wa hills, drove out all the competing armed groups, and established its local government structure throughout what is now the Wa state.

Forced conscription was a core topic of Communist propaganda in China. The Red Army used thought-work and the mass line to unify the peasant masses, whereas the KMT simply captured young men. There was even a theatre play about it performed in Yan'an, which in 1963 was made into a film. Among the generation who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, many people had seen it in public screenings, in the cinema, and on television.

Many saw it so often that they paid no attention to its ideological message and watched it for its comic quality, which goes to show the ideological oversaturation of the topic among this generation in China.⁹ It is most probably true that the KMT and the warlord armies relied more heavily on forced conscription than did the Communists, but it was difficult to convince peasants to join the army and sometimes the Communist Army, too, forced local men to become soldiers. Desertion was also a problem for the Chinese Communist Army, if perhaps not to the extent it was in other armies. In general, army officers would try to enlist the help of local governments to find deserters. In the process, army units sometimes applied considerable brutality, and there are cases reported of officers attacking and arresting the relatives of deserters, but official accounts say such practices were severely criticized because they caused too much resentment in the local population.¹⁰

Probably the main difference to the situation in the Wa State is that in the 1930s and 1940s the Base Areas of the Chinese Communist Army already had relatively effective local governments, and because of the relatively quick success of the Communist army there were soon more soldiers who wanted to serve in the army than were needed. In the Wa State local government is not very efficient even now, at least in terms of registers and census, and the UWSA seems to need more soldiers than there are volunteers.

Most of the Chinese Red Guards who joined the CPB between 1969 and 1974 did so voluntarily; most of them had “bad class backgrounds” and were escaping the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in China, hence, as one memoir says, “no conscription was necessary” (Lao 2007). Yet inside the guerrilla army, facing internal class struggle sessions, corrupt commanders, or simply the hardship of warfare, some soldiers deserted and went back to China or joined other armies, including the marooned KMT regiments at the Thai border that by then had started trading opium (Sun 2009; Zheng 2013: 39–57). Yet the archival material and the memoirs written by Chinese Red Guards provide little information as to why Wa men joined the CPB.

Several Chinese veterans of the CPB I interviewed said that Wa soldiers joined the CPB simply to make a living. The Wa were extremely poor at the time, and at least in the army they had basic food, some salary, and good uniforms and weapons. Also, it soon became obvious that the CPB, with Chinese support, was much better equipped than the other armies and militias in the region. From the 1970s onward, the CPB constantly fought the Burmese national army, the Chinese nationalist army, and other warlord armies in the

⁹ *Conscription (Zhua Zhuangding)*, by Wu Xue et al. I thank Zhou Yufei, who did a quick survey on Wechat (the Chinese version of Whatsapp) and consulted her parents and their friends about the film.

¹⁰ In his comprehensive study of recruitment and desertion in the Communist army in North China in the 1930s and 1940s, Qi Xiaolin mentions that army units scolded and arrested deserters' relatives (see Qi 2015: 331).

region. Already in the 1970s the CPB had established the rudiments of a civil government, with village, district, and county governments, and departments responsible for finance, propaganda, agriculture, traffic, and a “United Front department” at the county level. In the 1980s, police, tax, food, education, and health departments were added. All were accompanied by party units—those of the CPB and later the “United Wa State Party.” At the village level, headmen and local militias had to respond to the higher government levels and the army. Since the establishment of the United Wa State and Party in 1989, civil government has expanded further and it now includes a party youth league and a women’s federation.

The CPB made a huge effort at building schools and teaching literacy in the Wa hills, mainly using Chinese as language of instruction. There are many elderly men who learned to read and speak Chinese using Mao’s Little Red Book and other canonical texts of the Communist Party. Another important new policy in the villages was the introduction of large-scale compulsory labor, especially for building roads, dams, and paddy fields. Much schooling was done in the military itself, rather than in villages. For at least some Wa families, it became clear that, compared to toiling in the village, the army offered wealth and power. Possibly the “honor” of service and recognition from leaders were also important factors. Various men who joined the army as teenagers in the 1970s told me that their fathers had insisted that they should go and personally brought them to the army barracks.

Infrastructure development, literacy campaigns, and communal labor to a large extent followed the Chinese model of state-building at the time, which might be called Maoist militarism. The main difference from China, both in the past and now, is that party government is much less effective; at the grass-roots there are party members, but no party secretaries, and on higher levels secretaries are generally not as powerful as the heads of government (the reverse is the case in China). Today, the leaders of government from the district upward are all very wealthy, and among Chinese businessmen in the Wa capital the saying circulates, “In the Wa State you have to be rich first before you can become an official.” All those leaders also have close relations with the leaders of the army, and generally they are relatives.

This new elite emerged during the later years of the CPB, when several Wa commanders had risen to regiment commanders and some of them had accumulated significant wealth and prestige. These commanders stood up against the Burmese leadership of the CPB and established the new UWSA in 1989. Almost immediately, they started consolidating the power of the new army, fighting other armies in the Golden Triangle, particularly the Mengtai Army of Khun Sa. For almost a decade, the UWSA enjoyed a very good relationship with the Burmese national army, the Tatmadaw, and its leaders, most notably the then-chief of intelligence Khin Nyunt, who visited the Wa State at various times. From the Tatmadaw’s perspective, a core consideration was to

deter an alliance between the democracy movement in Myanmar proper and the ethnic insurgencies in the periphery. Additionally, both the Burmese military and Wa commanders benefited from business deals in mining and drugs. The Wa, in turn, helped in fighting Khun Sa's army, which at the time was effectively governing much of the Golden Triangle.

To fight Khun Sa and other armed groups in the Golden Triangle in the 1990s, the new UWSA conscripted a large number of soldiers from the villages in the Wa heartland, including Sam Sin, mentioned in the beginning. During the 1990s, forced conscription became very common and the battles in the Golden Triangle took a large toll. For example, Yaong Rai, then a village of about five hundred households, during every year of the mid-1990s lost about thirty soldiers in battle. Once Khun Sa's army had been decisively defeated, the UWSA forcefully resettled more than a hundred thousand people from the Northern Wa to the area in the Golden Triangle that became now the "Southern Command" of the Wa State (LNDO 2002). From Yaong Rai alone, more than two hundred households went to the south. Excepting the interruption of another conflict with the Southern Shan Army in the early 2000s, the UWSA has not engaged in direct battle again. In 2004, the UWSA's main ally in the Burmese government and army, Khin Nyunt, was arrested, and since then the relationship with the Tatmadaw and central government has remained tense. The main reason to maintain a strong army, then, is to protect the Wa State against the Tatmadaw. In the last decades, civil government has also expanded substantially, yet the main features of the Wa State government remain those of a military state.

The New Institutions of the Military State: Schools, Police, and Prison

The new institutions of schools, the police, and prisons were directly linked to the expansion of the military state: schooling expanded to the extent to which, by now, most villages have at least primary schools (even if not every child attends), and most districts have a middle school. Graduates of the middle schools are often sent directly to army units, where generally they enter higher positions because they are literate. Every army regiment has a school, and education has been important in the army since the days of the CPB. Police stations were established by the CPB's first local governments and for the army they continue to be the main local points of contact, helping in or completely taking over local recruitment and capture. Local police frequently "capture" people. As I have said, when people are arrested for mistakes or crimes, such as crossing the border without papers, or adultery, they are held for some time before their cases are dealt with. If there are conflicts with outsiders, simple "capture" is a favorite treatment: For example, Chinese traders, bootleggers, and labor contractors who do not pay local people or the government might be held in the police station or local government offices until they pay.

But Chinese outsiders are rarely held for long. Since the 1970s, a prison system has emerged, and every district, county, and army regiment base has prisons and labor camps. Most prisoners are being held for minor offences such as drug abuse, drug trade, or theft. Deserters, or their captured relatives, sometimes must enter labor reform, and all prisons operate a system of labor reform, modeled on that of the People's Republic of China and called by its Chinese name, *laogai*. Most prisons have gardens, rice paddies, and plantations and in some places, prisoners work on government projects, predominantly road construction. But they also work on the large plantations of the elites. The rules for such labor services are opaque; in some cases, prisoner services might be provided for free, whereas in others local headmen or businessmen hire prison laborers, typically more cheaply than wage laborers.¹¹

The new institutions of the military state are overseen by the new elite of the Wa State, which emerged at the same time. Before the CPB's arrival some charismatic leaders had formed local militias that attracted members and followers from many villages. After these "tribal militias" had joined the CPB, their leaders slowly rose in its ranks. Even though there was a clear ethnic division within the CPB, with Burmese intellectuals at the top, Chinese and Kachin commanders, and Wa, Shan, and Lahu foot soldiers, by the late 1980s several Wa had become regiment commanders close to the CPB central government. Some of these same commanders led a mutiny against the Burmese leaders in 1989 and established the UWSA. It was those commanders, their relatives, and later other Wa and Chinese men who from the 1980s onward accumulated substantial personal wealth.

At some point, the members of this new elite also stopped participating in farm work. The chiefs and warlords of the past had still worked in agriculture when they returned to their home villages. Even the charismatic Tax Cao Dae, who at the apex of his powers in the 1960s had followers in dozens of villages and was respected in ways similar to a Shan prince, was still laboring in the fields with his relatives when Chinese researchers visited him in the 1990s (Xiao 2010: 103). But his sons, who are now army commanders and government officials in the UWSA, no longer participate in physical labor. Instead, they employ as wage laborers their own followers, and sometimes prisoners on their farms and other enterprises.

This elite controls substantial business assets, including in plantations, mining, trade, and other industries not only in the Wa State, but elsewhere in Myanmar, China, and Thailand. Some elites have been involved in drug production and trade (Chin 2009). In all their businesses elites rely to some extent on army protection.

¹¹ In 2017, in the Northern Wa State local headmen usually paid 20 Chinese yuan per day per prisoner for manual work, mostly to work in rice paddies and on plantations.

The new elite emerged together with a new class of followers. Relationships of patronage are an expansion of previous connections of kinship and village, but they also rely on the new acquaintances formed in the new institutions of the army, prisons, schools, and local governments. These new acquaintances became the channels of knowledge distribution for government institutions and, paradoxically, the spread of such acquaintances also created the possibility of anonymity. Those who don't belong to these institutions are simply "ordinary people," labeled with the Chinese term "*laobaixing*." Most ordinary people have very limited networks of acquaintances and by and large they remain anonymous, literally "nameless" to members of state and government institutions. In this way, anonymity emerged as the flipside of the expanded acquaintance networks from army and state institutions. Both kinds of "stranger-relationships" are operational for the exercise of state violence: rather than any specific conviction of *raison d'état*, what matters in conscription by capture is whether those involved are acquainted or do not know each other.

The emergence of supra-local acquaintances and anonymity are common features of any state, yet they do not necessarily appear only in cities or in government bureaucracies, as much writing about the emergence of the state assumes. The particular ways in which these stranger-relationships have developed in parallel to new patronage networks within the military state in the Wa hills arose out of previous institutions of war capture and adoption there.

LOCAL INSTITUTIONS: WAR CAPTURE, SLAVERY, AND ADOPTION

The institution of the army in many respects resembled the new institutions of the school and the prison. The similarity of the relationship of submission and dependence in all these institutions is obvious in some of the Wa language words used to describe them. The word for "soldier" in standard Wa, *kawn: lien*,¹² also means "domestic" or "servant." Like common expressions for "student," *kawn: gau lai*, and "Wa people," *kawn: vax*, it contains the root "child," *kawn:*. Yet the word for "servant" or "slave," *cawng*, which directly refers to a relationship of submission, has a negative connotation. It is not generally used to describe child soldiers or students, but rather in negative expressions such as "I am not your servant."

Cawng was commonly used in the past to refer to war captives and children who were sold. In the Wa hills, and especially in the Wa periphery, there was a market for people, especially sons from poor families who were sold to families who had no male heir. The only permanent slaves in Wa history were

¹² Several spelling systems are used for writing the Wa language, including an orthography used by the Christian missionaries (the so-called "Bible orthography") and another devised by Chinese scholars in the 1950s (the "PRC orthography"). I follow the official Wa orthography approved by the UWSA/UWSP, as recorded in Justin Watkins' *Dictionary of Wa* (2013).

mine slaves who worked in the silver and gold mines of the Wa periphery during the last Chinese dynasty. These mines were mainly operated by Chinese businessmen and those forced to work in them remained outsiders to Wa society. More common in Wa society were war captives, children and women captured in inter-village feuds who were gradually incorporated into Wa lineages. Often, they held an ambiguous position as both enemy/slave and potential kin. The foremost ethnographer of Wa society, Magnus Fiskesjö, summarizes this ambiguity as follows: “The *qong* [= *cawng* in official Wa orthography] children were temporarily like slaves, but in the Wa view they figured in a very temporary ‘slave-to-kin continuum’ where their potential kin status as fellow Wa was emphasized for ideological reasons—outright and permanent slavery was unacceptable for fellow Wa, so [i.e., because] as slaves they would no longer be Wa” (2011: 10).

While war captives had been common for centuries, the expansion of the trade in people was part of larger processes of commodification in Wa society, spurred by the spread of opium from the second half of the nineteenth century. Opium accounted for much of the cash income of ordinary farmers until the 1950s in China and the early 2000s in Myanmar. Fiskesjö points out that emerging differences in wealth within Wa society were balanced by the relative autonomy of individuals and lineages, including that grounded in “distributive feasts and rituals” that “continued to reinforce the existing framework of warrior-farmer patrilineages” (ibid.: 11). These egalitarian tendencies notwithstanding, the opium trade exacerbated social inequality and facilitated the “sale” of children: “When despite these arrangements some Wa fell into relative poverty and others fortuitously became richer (due to illness, capricious weather, or the like), the poor would ‘sell’ children to the rich, under the influence of the model provided by the opium business. These sales were said to be for adoption (as in the idealized war captive prototype), and not for slavery” (ibid.). Fiskesjö emphasizes that children were bought as adoptive children and not as slaves.¹³ The only persons who could be “bought” were male heirs, and there were no “slaves” who permanently remained outsiders to Wa society. Without a centralized bureaucracy and a system of taxation, and land rents and money loans not very common in local communities, debt bondage and slavery, which was common in China and Thailand (Turton 1980; Watson 1980b), did not emerge in Wa society.¹⁴

¹³ Fiskesjö convincingly argues his case against the misunderstandings of Chinese ethnographers, who in the 1950s understood the war captives and adoptees in Wa society as the bearers of an emerging “slaveholder society” (2011: 7).

¹⁴ This is broadly in line with Meillassoux’s classic argument (1991, cited in Fiskesjö 2011: 14) that slavery is generally incompatible with stateless societies based on kinship politics, which he called “original domestic societies.” What was found in Wa society resembled a “slave-kinship continuum” in which war captives and bought sons were gradually incorporated into local lineages. In the comparative frame that James Watson (1980a) has suggested between “open” African and

Hence, when children were sold, mainly as male heirs, this was, and continues to be, modeled on adoption within the lineage. Most of the cases of adoption I know about are of sons given to relatives, typically a paternal uncle, who had no son of his own. The adoptee will change his name and become the adoptive father's son. But because everyone knows about the adoption, and some relatives also remember his previous name, he remains in an ambiguous kinship position. When this is done between close relatives there is generally no money involved.

Wealthier families can also directly buy a "son." Such "transactions" generally take place across a distance, at least from a neighboring village if not further away, and through an intermediary. In the central Wa hills in the past, infant sons were generally purchased from other Wa villages, but during the turmoil of the last century families also bought and adopted children from other ethnic groups, including Han Chinese.

Adoption Today

In the village of Yaong Rai, where I did fieldwork, there were several "sons" who had been "bought" or adopted when young; the most recent case being a boy who is now a teenager. In general, sons were bought by families of higher social standing from people outside the village. For families that are not very wealthy or enjoy little prestige, it is almost impossible to "buy" a son. In such cases, a man might adopt a son from one of his brothers.

But if the adopting father is an ordinary farmer, the bond between father and son may remain tenuous. One man in Yaong Rai, Ngoux Han, is a respected member of the community, but he and his wife are quite poor and never had children. Several children of his patriline spent most of their childhood in his house, but he never "formally" accepted a son. One of these children, Ni Soi, is now a young man in his early twenties, and every time he returns to the village he stays with Ngoux Han and helps him with farm work. Ni Soi was an orphan, and after his parents had died he stayed with Ngoux Han for several years, until he was recruited into the army at age twelve. Some relatives and neighbors say it is a pity that he never formally became Ngoux Han's son (at which point he would have taken a new name), even though he seems to assume this position when he comes back to the

"closed" Asian systems of slavery, Wa slavery and kinship clearly resemble more the open "African type." Following Jack Goody (1971), Watson drew a broad comparison between relatively open kinship systems in Africa, in which power was based on people, and therefore social institutions aimed to bring people in, and relatively closed kinship systems in Asia, where land was scarce and therefore social institutions tended to keep people out. In the former, slavery often blurs into kinship; in the latter, slavery and kinship are fundamentally separated and opposed—here slavery is "anti-kinship." As in other "African modes of slavery," the "slaves" in Wa history, especially war captives, often gradually became kin even though their status often remained ambiguous.

village. When Ni Soi came back for a few days in the spring of 2017, some old men killed a chicken and ate rice porridge at Ngoux Han's house "to welcome the soul of Ni Noi" (*riap miang Ni Noi*), which is what customarily is done when a son returns home.

Ngoux Han is in his early sixties now but still works extremely hard, much harder than some younger villagers. During the previous planting season, he had ploughed more terraces than other men who have larger families. Ni Soi sometimes helped him, but villagers would never call him Ngoux Han's son. One reason might be that even though Ngoux Han works very hard, he is not wealthy. So long as Ngoux Han is not "formally" recognized as Ni Soi's father, nothing will happen to Ngoux Han should Ni Soi commit a crime or desert his army unit. Furthermore, Ni Soi might be able to find more powerful patrons than Ngoux Han in the army. Most of the important leaders in the army and the government keep huge households that include many children and men who either are their relatives or were sent to them by army units.

PATRONAGE: CHILDREN IN THE HOUSES OF ELITES

Some of the boys and girls working in the grand mansions of the elite were sent there by poor relatives of the big families, and others were assigned there via their army units. They often arrive at a very young age, some as young as ten. They spend years working there. In some cases, their boss sends them to school, and they might manage to learn some trade, but often neither occurs. They mainly do domestic work and help in the fields; most of the leaders open farms and sometimes large plantations. Having a large entourage of people is clearly a sign of status and prestige. Taking into one's household the children of one's relatives or one's village, or from the army is never spoken of as duty or in terms of wage labor, and instead leaders emphasize that they support these children.

In the best circumstances, such children become trusted assistants to the family, and in some cases, they achieve powerful positions as the "right hand" of some leader, or even as leaders in their own rights. Most of them, especially girls, will leave the household once they marry. In principle, a child acquired from a relative is closer and has better chances of promotion, but children from the leader's home village or even those unrelated by birth sometimes build careers of their own when they grow up serving in the house of a "big man."

There are quite a few examples of such "successful upward mobility." In Yaong Rai there were two young men who worked as drivers and bodyguards in the houses of army regiment commanders. It was always an event when they returned to the village in their Army SUVs loaded with presents for family and relatives. They would then host their relatives and neighbors and sometimes the headman and village officials. One of these men had built a new, large house for

his parents, and the other had taken his elderly mother to live in town, where he rented her an apartment near his army base.

I have been a guest at a few weddings that army commanders paid for and organized for their most trusted soldiers. In two such cases, the parents and relatives of the groom attended the wedding, but the “host” was clearly the commander himself, and he and his wife stood next to the couple during the ceremony when bride and groom and their relatives were presented on stage to the assembled guests.

Still, if in the best case the children in elite houses are adopted as children, sometimes they are deeply unhappy and run away. While I have never heard of children escaping who were a leader’s relatives, I know of several cases in which the children ran away who were unrelated to the big families. Depending on circumstances, this might be reported to the police and the deserter’s relatives in the village could be held hostage, receiving the same treatment as army deserters’ families. But success in the army is not determined by a young soldier’s origin or kinship background, and in fact some of the most powerful men were orphans. There are numerous stories about orphans given to the army who became extremely loyal soldiers. Such tales are not unique to the Wa hills—think only of James Bond, another famous orphan.¹⁵ The army becomes the orphan’s family. The Burmese Army has a saying, “The army is your father and mother,” and in China a famous song proclaims that the “party is my mother.”

I have heard a story of two Wa leaders whose parents deserted them as babies because the oracles at their birth were so powerful that they feared them. The liminal oracle at their birth and their separation from lineage and village portended the radical potential of a new leader. Of course, not every Wa leader was an orphan, and some were the brothers or sons of leaders, but all leaders, and ordinary soldiers in the CPB and then the UWSA were separated from their families and local communities for long periods. Though they maintained some local allegiances, in the army they built new alliances, working under Chinese and Burmese superiors and together with Wa, Lahu, and Shan from former enemy villages. We might say that the forced separation from family and the village to some extent produced an estrangement, and for the army commanders, a “stranger-king” dynamic (Sahlins 1985; 2008): Distanced from their home villages and lineages, for the new army leaders the esprit de corps, army discipline, and personal relations within the new military mattered more than village-level allegiances. That they were partly estranged from their home villages facilitated the exercise of force, for instance when imposing communal work, tax leverage, and conscription. The power of the new “stranger-soldiers” came not just from the “barrel of a gun,” but also

¹⁵ In Sam Mendes’ film *Skyfall*, M tells Bond that “orphans make the best recruits” (Mendes 2012).

from a new potency associated with alterity, powers that the new armies had brought to the Wa hills since the 1950s. While this is true to some extent for ordinary soldiers, the alterity of the Wa elite is blatant and radical: their estrangement from lineage and village is exacerbated by their wealth and lifestyles and by the new relationships of patronage formed in their courts.

The same separation of the new elite from ordinary villagers is also what makes them coveted patrons. Ordinary people, as far as this is possible, sometimes chose a patron higher up and further away: this might be the case, for instance, with Ni Soi, the orphan mentioned earlier whose uncle did not formally adopt him. The possibility of creating a patronage relationship with someone higher up also motivates people to reject mutuality with others. This is particularly the case for middlemen, such as the aforementioned headman who did not answer his co-villager's phone call. Such rejection of mutuality rejects the possibility of establishing patronage, and it is made possible by the proliferation of patronage relationships, often modeled on adoption, that took place with the emergence of the new elite starting in the 1980s.

CONCLUSION

As I have said, several Wa expressions for relations of submission, such as students and soldiers, contain the root for "child," *kawn*. Like war captives and adopted children, students and soldiers are consigned to the care of people other than their parents. The ways in which those children passed into such relationships might have been voluntary or forced—they might have been simply captured. Being a student is not only similar to being a servant or a war captive, it is also not so very different from being a soldier, at least in the view of my friend Sam Sin. When I asked him why not one of the headman's five sons had been recruited, he explained that one son had actually run away from his unit, but the army had done nothing about it. And three others are still at school, "and being at school is just like serving in the army, isn't it?"

Ever since the arrival of the CPB, the military has been the primary force of state-building in the central Wa hills. The CPB, and later the UWSA, built institutions of civilian government, including schools and prison, according to Chinese models and with support from China. But the Wa State today is more than a "copy" of the People's Republic of China. Whereas in China a civilian government operates independent of the army, in the Wa State military government takes priority both in practice and in perception (as per Sam Sin's quote). Schools, prisons, and local government are not only reliant on the military, but they themselves operate according to military principles: in all these institutions, military exercise is common, and ultimately the same institutions support the army in recruitment. That said, we have seen that recruitment, even in these institutions, operates largely according to the features of personal networks of acquaintance and patronage. The history of state-building in the Wa hills cannot be separated from the local dynamics of patronage that

involve acquaintance, kinship, and adoption. Conscription by capture relies on the logics of expanding personal networks of acquaintance and patronage, which emerged together with the new institutions of army and state. New acquaintances beyond the lineage and village opened the possibility of anonymity, and the proliferation of patronage relations made it possible for people to choose between different patrons, and to reject mutuality altogether. Conscription by capture embodies the changing logics of personal networks along those four lines: acquaintance, anonymity, patronage, and rejection of mutuality.

Those who served in the army spent long periods away from their villages. Correspondingly, the acquaintance networks of both ordinary people and the elite changed considerably. People acquired new acquaintances outside their lineages and villages.¹⁶ At the same time, lineage and village ties also weakened, particularly for the emerging elite, who had managed to rise in the ranks of the CPB and later the UWSA, and who gradually acquired substantial personal wealth.

Both the expansion and contraction of acquaintance networks were necessary corollaries of the institutions of the state. The new elite of the military state has become estranged from their kin and their villages, and ordinary people are not part of the acquaintance networks of army and state. The resulting anonymity, especially of the most disadvantaged villagers, enables the use of violence against fellow Wa. It is much easier to use violence, such as taking someone's children away, when dealing with people who are from other villages and whose kinship addresses one does not know.

Networks of acquaintances provide access to knowledge about recruits and deserters, and such knowledge is necessary to capturing people. But for the same reason and purpose, it is also helpful if the ordinary people remain anonymous. If they are not, then it becomes necessary for someone in the process to actively reject mutuality with the victim of capture.

New, supra-local acquaintances and patron-client relationships were made possible by the establishment of the new institutions of army and government starting with the CPB. If these new institutions provided the settings where people from different villages could meet, they also formed the building ground for new relationships of patronage around an emerging elite. Patronage relationships in the Wa State were sometimes modeled on earlier practices of war capture and adoption. Like the war captives and bought sons of the past, soldiers are conceived as are dependent children, and their position between their families, army units, and patrons often remains ambiguous.

¹⁶ This can be seen also in the spread of marriage networks. In the old days, people generally practiced village endogamy according to customary rules of patrilateral cross-cousin marriage, whereas now marriages across villages have become increasingly common also among ordinary people.

The politics of conscription by capture rely on networks of acquaintances, anonymity, patronage, and the rejection of mutuality. In the absence of effective registration and an accurate census, and given the general weakness of civilian government and bureaucratic mediation, these same networks provide a functional equivalent to “state legibility” in James Scott’s (1998) sense. Through them knowledge about local individuals and households is accessed, and decisions about capture are made. Soldiers themselves can sometimes advance in the army hierarchies through relationships of patronage modeled on adoption.

I have not dealt in this paper with the promotion of ethnonationalism in the Wa State. It is conceivable that some children and youths enter the army because they are convinced of the necessity to defend the Wa State, but ordinary villagers when discussing recruitment and army service very rarely mention this possibility. The ways in which people deal with recruitment, be it voluntary or forced, corresponds to the logics of personal networks and patronage I have described. Some, like Sam Lao, have little chance to resist when their children are captured. But others, such as Ni Soi, try to choose the right patron and build a strong relationship with him. Possibilities for social advancement are generally limited to networks of patronage.

The most common criticism villagers voiced about capture and hostage taking confirms that they see the army as a network of patronage; or at least that, ideally, it is “like a family.” They say that if army commanders take hostage the relatives of deserters, these families are doubly wronged. First, their parents gave their children into the care of the army, as their second family, only for them to then be mistreated there; the deserters must have been mistreated or why would they have run away? And because they deserted, their own parents and brothers were arrested, even though the fault really lay with the commanders who so mistreated the soldiers that they fled them.

Analysis of the politics of conscription in the Wa State suggests some core features of the workings of informal sovereignty; that is, sovereignty outside, beyond, or beneath the level of the nation-state (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). It is possible to understand how the Wa State exercises “de facto” sovereignty through the core mechanisms of acquaintance, anonymity, patronage, and the rejection of mutuality. The scene cannot be reduced to a simple absence of the institutions of the Burmese nation-state (as does Callahan 2007, for instance).

Recruitment by capture is in broad contrast with the recruitment by popular consent in European nation-states (Levi 1996), or recruitment as market choice in Ming dynasty China (Szonyi 2017). Either of those concepts is predicated on the existence of a level playing field and impersonal relations, backed up by bureaucratic means of state legibility that hardly describe the realities of the Wa State. There, anonymity and the refusal of mutuality are created as the flip-sides of networks of acquaintances and the relationships of patronage. Paperwork comes afterward, once soldiers have been recruited or captured.

The absence of bureaucratic mediation of the rules and procedure of capture throws into relief how state violence relies on anonymity and rejection; this is a violent simplification of a social situation which is in other contexts achieved through bureaucratic means. Perhaps the non-recognition of the social complexity of individuals' lives is a core effect of bureaucratic paperwork (Graeber 2012), but it can be also achieved by a military state through the management of personal relationships.

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Abstract: Capturing people, sometimes by taking relatives hostage, is a common practice for purposes of conscription and law enforcement in the Wa State of Myanmar. Given the unreliability of the local census, as well as the relative weakness of civil government, and registration in a de facto state governed by an insurgent army, the personal politics of capture provides a functional equivalent to state legibility. This personal politics operates based on the reorganization of personal networks between representatives of the military state and ordinary people: first, circles of acquaintances within the military state that provide access to local knowledge, and second, relationships of patronage formed on the basis of those new acquaintanceships, as well as connections of kinship and co-residence. Conscription by capture, however, also requires anonymity; that is, the passive non-recognition of mutuality with strangers and the active refusal of mutuality with acquaintances. This article describes the historical emergence of networks of acquaintances and relationships of patronage as a combination of Maoist state-building and local institutions of war capture and adoption. It demonstrates how conscription by capture relies on relationships of acquaintances and non-recognition, as well as on patronage and the refusal of mutuality. The politics of conscription by capture are contrasted with conscription in imperial states and contemporary nation-states.

Key words: capture, child soldiers, adoption, conscription, hostage-taking, state-building, acquaintances, patronage, anonymity