The Politi

BY BERTIL LINTNER

Photos:
HSENG NOUNG & BERTIL LINTNER

"I don't think anyone would have chopped your head off. After all, we feared the white people," said Khun Lu Maha, the son of the last Saohpa (prince) of the tiny Wa state of Yawng Bang, as he scrutinised this correspondent's blond, Caucasian features. "But for others it would have been different, especially Punjabis. A Sikh's head, complete with a beard and a turban, could have fetched several hundred silver ingots when I was a child in the early 1950s."

That the head-hunting Wa of the wild and remote Sino-Burmese borderlands found Punjabi heads particularly interesting, and therefore valuable, has also been documented by historians. The Shan writer Sao Saimong Mangrai relates in his **The Shan States and the British Annexation** that "during the Wa States tour of a British officer in 1939, a Sikh doctor had to be rushed out of the headhunting area under an escort of a platoon of troops when it was learned that the Wa had come and offered 300 silver rupees to some of the camp followers for his head which, with its magnificent beard and moustache, they said would bring enduring prosperity to their village."

Other unusual and fashionable heads were also appreciated, so the Wa prince's remark about a blond-maned head could have been made simply out of tact. When Queen Victoria dispatched a boundary commission to the Wa hills in 1899-1900, two of its members had their heads cut off - and as a punishment, the British put a number of Wa villages to the torch.

The colonial authorities had hoped that the British heads would have been destroyed in the fire. But 25 years later, several reports said that these valuable trophies had been hidden and smuggled out long before the British assault came. The heads were still being cherished in a Wa village with "affection and reverence," according to Sao Saimong.

But the Shan historian warns of over-simplifications; he says that human heads were not sought for the sheer pleasure of hunting or collecting them, "as one collects curios or art objects." The heads were considered necessary by the Wa to protect their communities from evil spirits and to promote the general well-being of the villages.

The head-hunting season reached its peak in March and continued until the water festival – or Buddhist New Year – in April. In the early 1950s, when head-hunting was still rife among the Wa, there were already a few Buddhist converts but the head-hunting majority were certainly spirit worshippers and, for them, the water-festival marked the beginning of the rice planting season. Freshly cut heads, stuck on bamboo posts on either side of the approach to a Wa village, were believed to ensure good rice crops.

The origin of this agrarian Wa tradition is obscure and will most probably never be fully fathomed. One of the few foreigners to have travelled in the Wa hills during the head hunting epoch was Alan Winnington, Beijing correspondent for the communist paper the Daily Worker in the 1950s - whose writers were also among the only foreign journalists allowed in China at that time. He ventured into the hills in Yunnan on the Chinese side of the border in 1956 and wrote a book called The Slaves of the Cool Mountains. The title actually refers to the Norsu tribe in northwestern Yunnan, but it also includes a unique account of the Wa.

In this book, Winnington retells a Wa legend according to which decapitation began with a trick played on the Wa by Chu Ko-liang, the famous Chinese warrior at the time of the Three Kingdoms (AD 220-280). Chu is said to have given the Wa boiled rice to plant which, naturally, did not grow. He then told the Wa that their rice would grow only if they sacrificed human beings and cut off their heads. After tribesmen heeded this piece of astute advice, Chu gave the Wa proper rice seeds which grew.

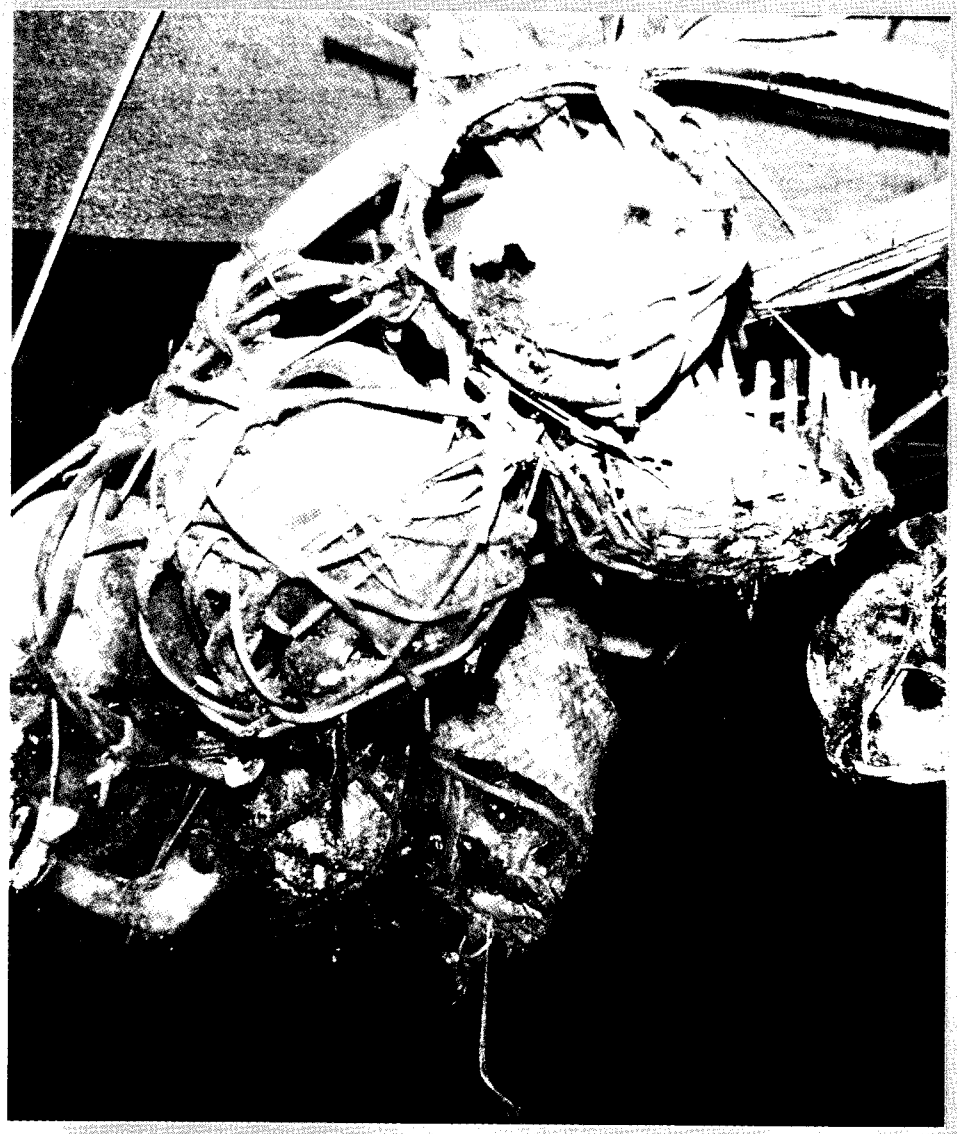
We all have a "story behind the story" when we travel the region - why don't you tell us yours?

We pay in coupons for drinks and meals at the Club!

Give our editor John Hail a call on tel. 238 5244, fax 238 4573 or email: johnhail@mozart.inet.co.th

s of Headhunting in Southest Asia

Human heads were not sought for the sheer pleasure of hunting or collecting them, "as one collects curios or art objects." The heads were considered necessary by the Wa to protect their communities from evil spirits and to promote the general well-being of the villages.



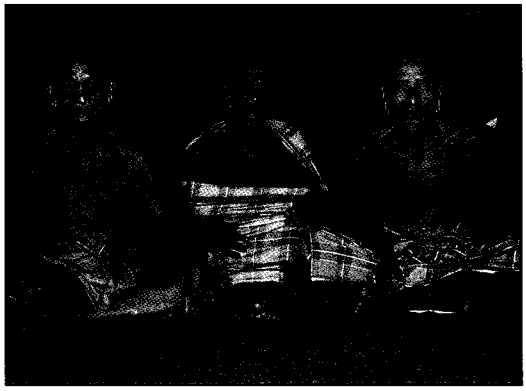
In this way, intra-tribal warfare with head-hunting expeditions became a yearly event among the Wa. This satisfied the Chinese, who wanted the Wa to be pitted against each other, thus making it easier to exploit them. And since the Wa depended on the Chinese merchants to buy daily necessities, Chinese heads apparently were not in danger.

If this story is to be believed, little has changed in the Wa hills for a millennium-and-a-half. Indeed, another Wa saohpa's son, Mahasang of Vingngun, during an interview in his jungle hideout some years ago, told me the very same tale. Whatever the real reason behind head-hunting, the story shows the bitter anti-Chinese feelings that the Wa have traditionally had, and the power they attribute to Chinese shrewdness.

The Chinese are said to have classified the degree of civilisation of the Wa by the way in which they collected heads. The most primitive ones were those who chopped off any heads, preferably belonging to strangers. Next came those who decapitated people with some pretence of justification: for instance heads of thieves. One step higher up on this social ladder were the Wa who bought heads without questions. The most civilised were those who were content with skulls of big game.

However, while tribal feuds and head-hunting weakened the Wa society and to a great extent also hampered its economic development, it seems to have worked to their advantage as well. The more "civilised" plains people feared them and, quite understandably, seldom dared to enter the Wa hills. The Wa were left more or less alone and they managed to maintain considerable autonomy in their areas well into modern times.

Their land was first surveyed by outsiders in 1935-36, when the Iselin Commission demarcated the border between the Wa states and China, which was finally agreed upon by the British and the Chinese in 1941. Even so, the Wa hills were



Retired headhunters, Sarawak.

never fully explored and they were only nominally under British and later Burmese sovereignty. The first road into the area was built in 1941, from Kunlong near the Salween river in the northern Wa hills, eastwards along the Nam Tong river to the Chinese border.

The British-initiated Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry – set up to ascertain the views of Burma's many minority peoples just before independence – reported in 1947 that the Wa states "pay no contribution to central revenues...there are no post offices...and the only medical facilities are those provided by the Frontier Constabulary outpost medical officers and by itinerant Chinese practitioners [non-certified]."

The Wa states, however, did send some representatives to the committee's hearings in Maymyo. Sao Naw Hseng came as spokesman for the Wa saohpa of Hsawnglong, Hkun Sai represented the chief of Mong Kong and Sao Maha was sent from Mong Mon. None of these principalities would be "states" in a modern sense, but the independence the Wa representatives demonstrated was quite remarkable. The hearings revealed the gap between the Wa way of looking at life, and the committee's perception of it:

"Do you want any sort of association with other people?"

[Hkun Sai] We do not want to join anybody because in the past we have been very independent. [Sao Naw Hseng] Wa are Wa and Shans are Shans. We would not like to go into the Federated Shan States.

"What do you want the future to be in the Wa states?"

[Sao Maha] We have not thought about that because we are wild people. We never thought of the administrative future. We think only about ourselves.

"Don't you want education, clothing, good food, good houses, hospitals?"

[Sao Maha] We are very wild people and don't appreciate all these things.

The aims of the enquiry was to unite the various parts of Burma into one political entity and discouraging head-hunting was part of this policy. In order to extend central, governmental power into the Wa hills near the Yunnan frontier, head-hunting could not be accepted - and that seems to be the main reason why the British in the late 1940s tried to put an end to it.

For, in a regional and historical context, there is nothing that really indicates that the British were against head-hunting as such: the Iban of Sarawak - another one-time British possession - were also head-hunters, and though the British eventually abolished it there, they had used head-hunting to "pacify" (the usual euphemism for conquest in British Imperial terminology) this territory.

When a Chinese uprising in Sarawak in 1857 had been put down by an Iban force loyal to the British, Mrs. Middleton, the wife of the then inspector of police in Sarawak's capital Kuching, on hearing that a large number of heads had been taken, exclaimed: "That is music to my ears!" It was only later, when the British Brook family had taken full control over Sarawak, and proclaimed themselves rajahs of the land, that an order was issued saying that local chiefs who continued "illegal head-hunting" would have their houses burned down.

Thus, head-hunting died out in Sarawak, though it briefly was revived during World war Two - and then not at all discouraged by the exiled colonial authorities, provided the heads were taken from soldiers belonging to the Japanese occupation forces.

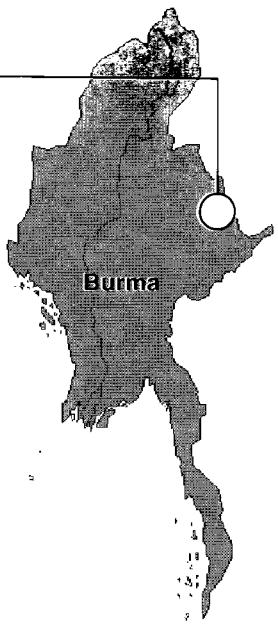
Head-hunting among the Iban of Sarawak differs from the Wa tradition in some respects. The taking of heads in Sarawak partly demonstrated the young Iban warrior's need to impress the young girls of his tribe. And no Iban girl with self-respect would take any young man into marriage without demanding at least a couple of skulls as proof of his love. Moreover, the spiritual power thought to be in the head of the victim would be transferred to hunter. Strikingly similar beliefs existed among the Naga tribes of the Sino-Burmese border, where headhunting continued well into the 1980s in some remote corners of Burma's northwestern Sagaing Division.

While head-hunting was firmly rooted in the cultures of the Wa, the Naga and the Iban, other peoples in the region, from time to time, have also taken up this practice for political or commercial reasons, or sometimes both. Decapitation was common during the Japanese occupation of Malaysia and Singapore, and severed heads of resistance fighters – or, more often, civilians who had been found aiding them – were put on display in public places as a deterrent.

There is no tradition of head-hunting in Cambodia or Laos - or Thailand, for that matter - yet during the Indochina War it was certainly not unknown among ethnic combatants. In Laos, the legendary CIA adviser Anthony Poshepny – better known as "Tony Poe" – reportedly offered his Hmong hilltribe soldiers Kip 1,000 (US$1 at that time) for an ear and Kip 5,000 for a severed Pathet Lao head - provided it was accompanied by an army cap. That, however, may have been much more the exception than the rule. But in Cambodia, it was quite common, judging from eyewitness reports and news pictures of soldiers carrying freshly severed heads.

Always, they belonged to North Vietnamese or Viet Cong soldiers, the reason being that the Vietnamese – like the Chinese – fear that such disfigurement will be carried over into the after-life. (The Cambodian taste normally runs to livers, and it is a practice continuing in warfare even today. If it is any consolation to the victim, the taking of his liver is a tribute to his heroism in battle.)

Head-hunting has now died out among the Wa, and the last heads are said to have been taken in the mid-1970s. Wa



While tribal feuds and head-hunting weakened the Wa society and to a great extent also hampered its economic development, it seems to have worked to their advantage as well. The more "civilised" plains people feared them and, quite understandably, seldom dared to enter the Wa hills. The Wa were left more or less alone and they managed to maintain considerable autonomy in their areas well into modern times.

Headhunting has been widespread throughout South East Asia. In Burma, also the Naga tribe continued the practice until only few years ago.

ng Naga former headhunters, utomatic rifles.

who live close to the towns have adopted Buddhism and accepted Shan or Burman customs; others have been converted into Christianity by American Baptist missionaries.

But the real transformation of the Wa society was set in motion by the insurgent Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which took over the hills in 1972-74 and turned them into a revolutionary base area for its guerrilla struggle against the government in Rangoon. The warlike Wa made excellent soldiers for its rebel army and, at that time, military supplies could easily be shipped over the border from China. Persuading the young tribesmen to fight against the government was not a difficult task. For generations, they had been defending their hills from what they perceived as outside invaders no matter who they were.

In April 1989, the Wa at long last also decided to drive the CPB out of their territory. Hundreds of aging Burman Maoists fled headlong across the Nam Hka border river into exile in China, while the Wa transformed the CPB's erstwhile people's army into a nationalist Wa force.

Many of the old princelings – among them Khun Lu Maha – were invited back to head their new units. And some old skulls, which the Wa had kept hidden in their villages to escape punishment by their CPB commanders, are now back again on bamboo altars in villages along the Yunnan frontier, as Bangkok-based photojournalist Thierry Falise was able to document when he visited the Wa hills only a few years ago. Blood and old traditions, it seems, are a lot thicker than ideological consciousness.