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"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 Saola (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 An nexation 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 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.
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 saolpa’s son, Mahasang of Vinggun, 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...
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 once 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 head-hunting 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 Pospehny - 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.
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Headhunting has been widespread throughout South East Asia. In Burma, also the Naga tribe continued the practice until only few years ago.

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.