Note on *Kep Phak Sai Sa Kep Kha Sai Müang*
Volker Grabowsky

**Abstract**
Kep phak sai sa kep kha sai müang is widely regarded as an old Northern Thai saying that characterises the forced resettlement of war captives from various regions in the Burmese Shan States and Sipsong Panna to present-day Northern Thailand during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The purpose of this note is to discuss the meaning of the saying, popularised by the late Kraisri Nimmanhaeminda, and to trace its possible origins. The only written evidence that clearly proves the authenticity of the saying is found in a Bai cum (official letter on textile) manuscript from Luang Prabang, dated June/July 1853.

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Note on

*Kep Phak Sai Sa
Kep Kha Sai Müang*

Volker Grabowsky

*Kep phak sai sa kep kha sai müang,*
(เก็บผักใส่ช้ายกเข้าเมือง)
is widely regarded as an old Northern Thai (Yuan) saying that characterises the forced resettlement of war captives from regions in the present-day Burmese “Shan States” and Sipsông Panna to present-day Northern Thailand during the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Grabowsky 1999). The saying was popularised by the late Kraisri Nimmanhaeminda who rendered it into English as “Put Vegetables into Baskets, put People into Towns” (Kraisri 1965 and 1978). Turton suggests that the most literal translation might be “Gather vegetables (and/to) put [them] into basket(s), gather kha¹ (and/to) put [them] into müang”. Suggesting an ethnic connotation of kha referring to non-Tai autochthonous groups in the region of present-day Laos and Northern Thailand, Turton (2000, 16) argues:

At this stage we have a sufficient sense of how we might gloss *kha* and *müang* so that “non-Tai people into Tai domains” has a more appropriate resonance than say “slaves into cities”. The fact that *kha* may be pronounced *sa* in some Tai (e.g. Tai Khao) languages would conceivably make the saying even more euphonious to some Tai ears.

Although a possible connotation of *kha* related to ethnicity in the proverb above cannot be dismissed, it seems nevertheless more reasonable to suggest that *kha* should rather be interpreted here as a reference to the population at large including different ethnic and social groups. In Tai usage *kha* (as a social
category designating serfs) is often used on a par with *phrai*, i.e. commoners liable to military service and corvée. In fact, the Tai policy of conducting raids, and even wars, to carry off whole civilian populations from one *mūang* to another was not restricted to specific ethnic groups or social classes.

As Kraisri did not provide any written evidence for the saying, suspicions arose that it might have been composed by Kraisri himself. However, there does exist historical evidence which proves its authenticity. The first one is a passage in the Nan Chronicle. In 1708 Lao and Kaeo (Vietnamese?) troops raided Nan causing the flight of many people into the “wilderness”. When the invaders retreated they “took people away to Müang Lao as prisoners”. To rebuild the country and in particular its administrative centre the Burmese King ordered the governor of Nan “to gather people and put them into the *mūang*” (*kep rôm phrai thai sai ban sai mūang*). Although this is not exactly the wording of Kraisri’s saying, it nevertheless comes very close to it.

The second evidence has been uncovered only very recently. In 2000, the Thai National Library (Department of Fine Arts) has published a fine volume called *Bai cum: saranithet bon singthô* (*Bai cum*: official letters on textiles). This volume contains altogether 21 *bai cum* documents all written in “Old Lao” (*lao buhan*) or *thai nòi* script. The *bai cum* document no. 9 is of particular interest. It is an official letter of the ruler of Luang Prabang, a vassal of the Siamese King, to Praratcha Phrachaiyawongs, *uparat* of Müang Lan Mat, dated “seventh month of the *ka pao* year [Cula]sakkarat 1215” (June/July 1853). The *bai cum* document, running over 47 lines and confirmed by a royal seal, deals with several aspects of local administration in Müang Lan Mat, a dependent *mūang* of Luang Prabang situated in present-day Hua Phan province. One main aspect of this document concerns the control of manpower. The Lao King admonishes the local administration not to exploit the population by raising excessive taxes. On the contrary, the work force had to be treated decently. Moreover, the local authorities are given advice to encourage people who had fled to outlying regions to return to areas under government control. In this very context the saying *kep phak sai sa kep kha sai mūang* appears. The text shall be quoted in full length (lines 35-37) to understand the context of the saying:

[35] ถ้านั้นสูญไปอย่างมากมาย จะหาขัดขืนยุทธการต่างๆ เพราะอยู่บริเวณอาวุธ ไม่สามารถทราบพระองค์นั้น สมบัติให้ต่ำสมบัติให้ตีสมบัติให้กุมภามา ใส่ราช [36] การถ้านั้นสูญมากถ้าจะเก็บกลับให้แก่กลับยิ่งเสียหายสำาการ อย่างอนาคตอภิปรายอาวุธ อย่างรักษาแผนไทยให้รักษาแผนเสียเงิน หลังให้ พระมหากษัตริย์ให้พระมหาก ชีว ให้พร้อมกัน แก่ผู้เก็บข่า ใส่เมือง เข้ามันได้จักเป็นบ้านเป็นเมืองเป็นรัฐเป็นคลอง...
If anyone stubbornly resists the corvée, then reprimand him, beat him or tie him, if necessary. If he has been tied, you must untie him after having reached the workplace, so that he can do his work. Don’t take his money. Instead of loving enthusiastically the people’s money (ngoen thai), you shall love enthusiastically the people (phrai miiang) [themselves]. You have to stick together in bad times, you have to stick together in good times. GATHER VEGETABLES AND PUT THEM INTO BASKETS, GATHER PEOPLE AND PUT THEM INTO MÜANG. Thereby the ban-müang (country, political domain) and the hit không (written rit khlông: customary laws, administrative rules) will be built up.

This appears to be indeed the first documentary evidence of a saying which is still closely associated with the late Achan Kraisri Nimmanheminda and his popular writings on forced resettlements in Lan Na during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It has to be stressed that this evidence comes from a Lao, not a Yuan, source. However, given the close political, cultural and ethnic bonds between Lan Na and Laos, notably between Nan and Luang Prabang, this does not come as a surprise. Like Lan Na, the Lao kingdoms of Luang Prabang and Vientiane had been facing chronic shortages of manpower. To solve this problem people had to be “gathered” to enlarge the workforce at the disposal of the government. Relocations by military force was just one method, incentives for voluntary migrations another one. The text quoted above obviously refers to the second method. It bears clear testimony to the vital importance of manpower in the construction of traditional Tai polities.

Although one cannot dismiss the possibility that Achan Kraisri had come across bai cum document no. 9 during his archival researches in Bangkok, this seems highly unlikely. Thus he probably must have had access to other, still unknown, sources. Perhaps, kep phak sai sa kep kha sai müang is an old saying which once had been quite popular both among the Lao of Luang Prabang and their Yuan brethren in Lan Na.

Notes

1. Kha (✚) is a generic term used by the lowland Lao to designate the autochthonous – predominantly Mon-Khmer speaking tribes of the highlands. Today they make up almost one fourth of population in Lao PDR. In pre-colonial times the “Kha” probably consituted even a majority of the population, notably in the Luang Prabang region (note that the first Lao census under Sam Saen Thai in the early 15th century counted 400,000 Kha but only 300,000 Tai-Lao!). Many “Kha” moved to the lowlands where they increased the agricultural workforce of the Lao rulers and – over several generations – eventually became “Lao”.
2. Quoted from Sathaban wicai sangkhom, Phûn wongsa mahakrasat thang lai... (SRI, 82.107.05.043-043), f° 122/4-5. English translation in Wyatt 1994, 75.


4. The phrase ya ao bia ya ao ngoen could be understood as a request not to accept bribes from people who would like to be exempted from corvée.

5. The phrase ya rak ngoen saen thai hai rak phrai saen mûang is a rather complex parallel structure composed of a combination of several parallel pairs: saen + rak (to love exceedingly); phrai + thai (commoners, population at large); phrai + mûang (commoners, population at large). As for an excellent analysis of the frequent use of parallelisms in traditional Lao literature see Koret 1995. Ignoring the parallelism of the sentence discussed above, several alternative translations might be theoretically possible. Saen, literally “hundred thousand”, can also denote a high rank in government service. However, the rank of saen thai is unknown both in Lan Na and Lan Sang. Another alternative focusses on the suggestion that the word thai, written in in the original form and interpreted by Phimphan (2000, 123) as lam, should be read in adding the tonemarker mai ek which is often missing in old manuscripts. Then thai would mean “cloth” or “fiber bag”, and the whole phrase could be rendered as follows: Instead of loving the money [filled in] numerous bags, love the people (phrai, commoners) of numerous mûang. This translation, however, has to be regarded as rather improbable.

6. The last sentence, which defies a too literal translation, means that a political domain or mûang only deserves its name if a strong population base exists, strong enough to ensure the viability of a stable political administration.

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