

## Traditional Culture and Local Society : Lahu Food Culture as a Cultural Resource

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This paper examines the potential of Lahu food culture to become a cultural heritage, and in doing so it offers a reconsideration of the concept of “culture”. It argues that the possibility that Lahu food culture can become a cultural heritage is very low and that, for this reason, we may regard Lahu food culture as one of the failed cases in which a people’s material culture has failed to be recognized as valuable enough to be labeled a “cultural heritage”. Yet, by studying this failed case, we are able to reconsider the very problematic concepts of “culture” and “cultural heritage” from a different angle than those we usually take.

### Culture lived and culture objectified

More and more often today we hear the terms, “cultural heritage” and “cultural resources”, as people around the world compete to have their own cultures placed on the cultural heritage list. Cultural resources possess the possibility of discovery, evaluation, and utilization; they may be found, regarded as things with value, and registered as cultural heritages. These, in turn, may help people earn cash income through tourism and serve as a basis for ethnic, local, or national identity.

We speak of “culture” and “cultural heritage” frequently in everyday life, and we can generally identify two different kinds of cultures in our usage – *culture lived* and *culture objectified* (cf. Sekimoto 1994, Ohta 1998). Culture lived is a culture in a traditional meaning. Euro-American anthropologists in the first half of twentieth century sought out remote, small, non-Western societies in order to study the people’s cultures. Culture in this meaning is one embedded in people’s lives and people usually do not cast reflective eyes on their own culture. Culture lived is, in other words, customs.

However, regarding a certain “culture”, both outsiders and insiders (people of that culture) have begun to talk about that culture in new ways. This is culture objectified, and it indicates a culture that people talk about, one that is performed for viewers, and one that is exhibited in a museum;

in other words, this is culture toward which people cast reflective eyes and that which is objectified by the reflection. Culture objectified is very often different from culture lived. When we talk about “cultural heritages” and “cultural resources”, these cultures are usually culture objectified.

There are both tangible and intangible cultural heritages, and here I will focus on the latter. Specifically, I take up the case of Lahu people in Thailand, primarily, and also some in China, secondarily, in order to study their food culture and re-examine the concept of culture.

### Lahu food culture

Lahu are a highland dwelling ethnic minority living in an area ranging from Southwest China through northern Thailand. In this region, ethnic Tai/Thai peoples tend to occupy the lowlands while non-Tai/Thai peoples live in the highlands. The former generally grow Indica and glutinous rice by wet rice cultivation, while many of the latter raise Japonica and glutinous rice by swidden farming. Lahu people are among these highland ethnic minorities and historically practiced pioneer swidden cultivation, yet have been inclined more and more to employ rotational swidden methods. At present, the Lahu living in northern Thailand grow both dry and wet rice and also work as wage laborers in town.

The Thailand Lahu traditional house is made of bamboo,

with a thatched roof. Floors are made high by building on long piles, so that the people can raise domestic animals such as pigs and hens under the floors. As Walker (1995:9) writes, “Lahu households most often comprise a small family group: husband, wife and unmarried children, who share a single hearth, the focal point of every Lahu house”. Around the hearth, one finds cooking instruments, such as steamers, pots, pans, and mortars (*a hpe te tu* in Lahu). Lahu people store seeds above the hearth to keep them dry. In recent years, however, more families are building a separate kitchens, to which the fireplace is usually moved.

Lahu eat three meals a day, and generally regard breakfast as the most important meal, then dinner as the second, and lunch as the least. Taking as an example the Ca K’ehs, a Red Lahu family in northern Thailand: for breakfast, Na Ka, the housewife, gets up before dawn, takes about two hours to cook rice by a steaming method (*aw sha ve*), and cooks various other dishes to accompany the rice. Lunch is most simple, as they pack the rice left over from breakfast in plastic bags and take them to the field. During the day they are very busy with farming or other work, so they often do not cook proper dishes, frequently only making *a hpe* or chili paste (see below) to accompany cold rice. Na Ka cooks rice again for dinner, this time, by boiling (*aw ca ve*), and also prepares other dishes.

Such dishes that accompany rice are called *aw chi* in the Lahu language, yet, in its usage, *aw chi* often means dishes made of animal or fish meat. In the past, Lahu say, they did not eat meat very often. Even today they cannot necessarily afford to eat meat every day. Getting by with a few extra dishes, they eat a large amount of rice.

Meals for special days, on the other hand, are quite different from ones served on normal days. On such special occasions as the Lahu New Year days, annual festival days, and days when rituals are held, Lahu consume meals full of pork and chicken. In other words, in the course of a year, they usually eat much rice with little meat, while engaging in intensive meat consumption on special days (cf. Rappaport 1968). Clear contrast between simple everyday meals and luxurious special day meals have been seen in many other places in the past. For example, the Japanese began to eat meat daily only after the country achieved rapid economic growth in the 1950s. Compared to meals served before the 1950s, Japanese now feast every day, as they consume ani-

mal flesh in almost every meal (Namihiro 1986).

When a family sits down for a meal, the Thailand Lahu do not necessarily gather at a table. If there is no guest, they usually sit on the floor and put plates of rice and dishes on the floor to eat. Many Thailand Lahu eat with one spoon, while some use their hands, and others – especially those who came from China – use chopsticks. They normally eat without drinking, but then sit up and drink from a bottle of water after finishing the meal. Some take their own bowl of rice topped with side dish items and go outside to eat. Even when gathered around a table, “you can go away when you have finished your meal. This is a Lahu custom”, as one elder explained.

After dinner or in the evening they usually enjoy chatting with tea or cigarettes. It is a relaxing moment at the end of a busy day. Lahu tea is similar to Chinese tea. First, the tea leaves are lightly roasted, which people say makes them smell better. People then put the tea leaves in boiling water and boil them again to make strong tea.

Many Lahu men, and some women, smoke tobacco. Some buy cigarettes from a market. But most villagers buy tobacco only and then roll cigarettes on their own with a corn leaf. As for alcohol, most Thailand Lahu do not make it themselves but rather purchase it from other groups nearby. Recently, they have begun also to drink beer. Betel nut chewing is also witnessed among some elders, while younger people generally do not chew them today.

## Techniques in and Characteristics of Lahu food culture

Lahu meals are comprised of rice (the staple food) and side dishes. Lahu eat non-glutinous rice on most days of the year, and stickier glutinous rice is consumed during the New Year celebratory period, which usually lasts eight to twelve days. Lahu consume much rice with a relatively small quantity of dishes. They do not often consume noodles, and even when they do eat instant noodles – often found in villages today – they eat them as a dish to accompany rice. Below I outline Lahu rice-cooking methods and the ways in which they prepare other dishes, as these techniques are important characteristics of Lahu food culture.

Among Thailand Lahu I have documented two kinds of cooking techniques for non-glutinous rice; “boiling rice”

(*aw ca ve*) and “steaming rice” (*aw sha ve*). Many among the Thailand Lahu only use the “boiling” method to cook rice, but some, like Na Ka, “steam rice” for breakfast and “boil rice” for dinner.

In the morning Na Ka puts the rice that has been in water overnight into the steamer. Roughly mid-way through the process she takes the rice out once. While pouring hot water over it, she mixes the rice, and then puts it back into the steamer. This method is the more time-consuming way, but according to Na Ka it produces better-tasting rice.

For dinner, Na Ka “boils the rice”. She puts rice and a lot of water into a pot and places it over a high flame. When the rice is almost cooked, she pours out the water and then puts the pot beside a low flame to make the rice crispy. As she does this, she turns the pot in order to heat the rice evenly. This is called “turning the rice” (*aw jaw ve*).

Lahu people mostly boil, stir-fry, and grill to cook dishes. They rarely deep-fry; nor do they usually make sauce or dressing. The most distinct feature of Lahu cooking is a chili-based spice called “*a hpe*”. A *hpe* is made of chili peppers, herbs, salt, MSG, and other ingredients. They lightly grill the peppers first and then mix them with the other ingredients and pound them all in a mortar. They may also use red onion, lemongrass, grilled tomatoes and other items.

Although *a hpe* literally means chili, it also means a chili paste made in the abovementioned way. A *hpe*, the chili paste, generally has two usages. Firstly, rice and *a hpe* together make the most basic Lahu meal. Herbs and vegetables are dipped in *a hpe*. When they have no meat or fish, they eat only *a hpe* with edible plants and vegetables they collect themselves. It is extremely rare for a Lahu meal not to include *a hpe*. For the Lahu, *a hpe* forms the most basic dish. Secondly, *a hpe* is a versatile spice which is also used in cooking a variety of dishes, by boiling or frying. Almost all Lahu dishes are seasoned with *a hpe*. In this sense, *a hpe* is a symbol of the Lahu culture itself, as I will explain below.

What do Lahu people themselves think of Lahu food? Many times I have heard Lahu say, “Lahu dishes are bad” (*La Hu aw chi ma da*). Perhaps the speakers are simply humbling themselves before a guest, or perhaps they truly mean it, or possibly both are the case. “Most Lahu dishes are made by boiling”, a Christian Lahu woman once said to me. In fact, they do not often use oil to cook dishes. Today, they can buy cooking oil from lowland markets, but oil used to

be quite scarce and it was much more valuable in the past. Lahu typically used lard to cook when they needed oil, but they only had lard when they slaughtered a pig – not a very frequent occurrence.

There is a common saying among Thailand Lahu: “For Lahu, it’s chili” (*La Hu a hpe*). They also say, “For Lahu, it’s chili, fermented soy beans for Shan, and pork for Chinese” (*La Hu a hpe; Pi Chaw naw hkèh; Heh Pa va sha*). In villages, I often heard a patterned dialogue: “Have you eaten?” – “No, not yet” – “What are you cooking for side dishes?” – “We don’t have meat or fish so we’ll only have *a hpe* with rice” (“*Aw ca o la?*” – “*Ma ca she*” – “*A ma aw chi te ca ve le?*” – “*Aw chi ma caw, a hpe teh leh ca ve*”). This saying characterizes the Lahu as a poor people who can only eat *a hpe*, for they cannot afford meat or fish. By this, they define themselves negatively.

There have been many recent changes in Lahu food culture. Thailand Lahu have sometimes told me that they had far fewer chances to eat meat before, that meat they ate in the past usually consisted of wild game and domestic animals, and that they did not buy meat at markets or from peddlers in the old days because they lived high in the mountains.

At present, while there is still no market in Pa Long village, a Karen food seller comes on a motorbike every morning. The Ca K’èh family runs a small shop themselves, to which villagers come to buy snacks or drinks. Because this village has electricity, the store has cold drinks and even beer in the refrigerator. A weekly market is held off the highway, eight kilometers from Pa Long village. Villagers go there by motorbike to buy things. These days, since many people have a motorbike, more people travel outside the village to buy goods.

Indeed, the Lahu today do have a variety of cookware purchased outside the village. The Ca K’èh family even has a propane gas stove for cooking. Things bought from outside include cooking oil, MSG, and instant noodles.

In short, Lahu meal consists of rice (the staple food) and side dishes. They consume a large amount of rice with relatively few side dishes. Their daily meals are simple, often without meat or fish, but they do engage in intensive consumption of pork on special occasions, which makes quite a contrast. Thailand Lahu have unique techniques for cooking rice and side dishes. It is extremely unusual for the Lahu

to not eat a *hpe* with a meal. A *hpe* is a symbol of the Lahu people, by which they tend to define themselves negatively. In the next section, I will reconsider the concept of “culture” by referring to the case of Lahu food culture discussed above.

### Lahu food culture as a cultural resource

At the beginning of this paper, I pointed to the two different kinds of culture: *culture lived* and *culture objectified*. When we talk about “cultural resources”, we are talking about culture that is used for something or that has potential to be used for something. This implies a process in which culture lived becomes culture objectified. In this process, the former is discovered by people, evaluated as culture that has potential for some usage, and then utilized for some purpose. Lahu food culture discussed above is basically a culture lived, for it has not undergone this process and remains a custom upon which people, both insiders and outsiders, hardly cast reflective eyes.

Certainly, Lahu culture in general also has been objectified by both outsiders and insiders, yet Lahu customs related to food and eating have not yet been included among the cultural elements that people endeavor to fix. In the process in which culture lived is made culture objectified and utilized, outsiders and/or insiders choose certain items from the people’s culture, and evaluate and fix them as essential elements that comprise the culture of that people.

If the objectification is done by insiders, cultural items which are evaluated must be “good culture”, for culture is utilized for purposes that will improve the people’s image and social position, such as for economic benefit (tourism, etc.), as a basis for group identity, and to revitalize an ethnic community. As shown by the Lahu proverb “For Lahu, it’s chili, fermented soy beans for Shan, and pork for Chinese”, Lahu food culture has undergone some degree of objectification by the people themselves, but the objectification so far reflects their negative self-consciousness about Lahu customs regarding food and eating.

Behind all this, there is an essentialist view on culture shared both by outsiders and insiders. Views of culture as essential and changeless now prevail all over the world. In this view, culture is comprised of items, such as history, language, festivals, songs, dances, religions, clothing, and

ethnic laws.

The “fixing” and utilization of culture is more a matter for elites than for ordinary people, who are usually too busy making living to think about culture. In many cases, only the elites are literate and have access to the media, which are necessary to objectify and make use of culture.

There is also a problem with the ownership of any given culture: Who is the owner of the culture and who benefits from it? Lahu food culture shares many characteristics with ones of other ethnic groups, and this is one of the obstacles for cultural utilization. Rice-cooking methods (“boiling” and “steaming”) are interesting but are found among other ethnic groups, too. A *hpe*, chili paste, may be a symbol of Lahu people, but we find *nam phrik* among Thais and *terasi* among Indonesians, both of which are very similar to Lahu *a hpe*. Lahu festival food is not much different from ones of the neighboring peoples including Akha and Lisu.

If we consider Thailand Lahu food culture as a possible cultural resource, its potential to be utilized is still very low. There is little interest in intangible cultural heritages in Thailand and there is no Thai word for it, or if there is, it is hardly known among Thai. There is even less interest in discovering an intangible cultural heritage from highlanders of northern Thailand called *chao khao* (the hill tribes). On the other hand, there have been active discussions on the indigenous knowledge of villagers (*phum panya chao ban* in Thai), including Karen swidden agriculture (regarded as being environmentally friendly), rituals for propitiating mountain spirits among highlanders (seen as having a function of protecting the forests from destruction), and traditional herbal medicines. In order for Lahu food culture to be recognized as valuable indigenous knowledge of villagers, the negative mental image of Lahu food culture as bad and backward must be converted to a positive one. One way this might be achieved is by redefining it as a healthy, natural, and slow food culture.

### Concluding remarks

The situation for Lahu living in China is quite different from that for Thailand Lahu regarding the issue of intangible cultural heritage. The Chinese government has been very active in making inventories of cultural heritages in China and safeguarding them. *Mvuh hpa mi hpa* (oral creation

myth), gourd pipe dancing, gourd pipe craft techniques, and the Lahu gourd festival (*hulujie* in Chinese) are registered in China's national and provincial intangible cultural heritage lists. Of these Lahu intangible cultural heritages, the most important may be the oral creation myth which has been recorded, translated into Chinese, and published as books in Lahu and Chinese (Liu and Zhang 2010). Contrasting the case of Lahu culture as a cultural resource in China and that in Thailand shows that culture is regarded as comprising many cultural elements, some of which are more suitable for being made into intangible cultural heritages than others. In this sense, food and eating customs of Thailand Lahu may be called a failed case in which one of the cultural elements remains only as culture lived and is still to be discovered, evaluated as "good culture" and utilized for certain purposes. As we have seen, Thailand Lahu have a negative consciousness of their food and eating customs and, if they are to be utilized, there will be a problem concerning ownership. Both of these are obstacles to Lahu food customs' recognition as cultural resources and subsequent registration as an intangible cultural heritage.

In the world today, cultures of local and ethnic societies are seen more and more as cultural resources. Increasingly, culture is viewed as something to be used for certain purposes and opportunities to benefit from it are recognized. This begs the question, "Why and in what situations do people want to utilize culture, and for what purposes and for whose benefit?" We also have to pay attention to any changes that occur after a certain culture is objectified and utilized, and what differences exist between the *culture objectified* and the original *culture lived*, if the two are not the same.

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**Fig.1** View of Pa Long village, north Thailand



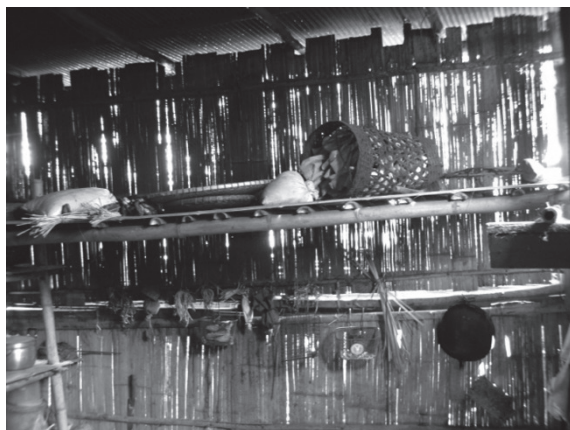
**Fig.2** A traditional Lahu house made of bamboo



**Fig.3** A traditional Lahu hearth



**Fig.4** A detached kitchen



**Fig.5** Seeds have been placed above the hearth to keep them dry



**Fig.6** Ingredients for making a hpe



**Fig.7** A method for steaming rice



**Fig.8** Steamed rice



**Fig.9** A method for boiling rice



**Fig.10** Pounding a *hpe*



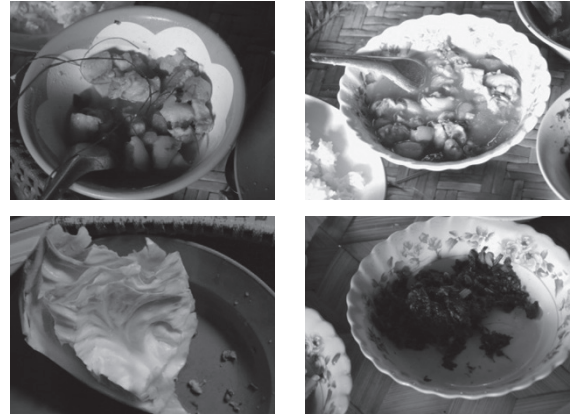
**Fig.11** A *hpe*, or chili paste



**Fig.12** A Lahu dinner on one particular day



**Fig.13** Food on a day when a ritual was held



**Fig.14** Sumptuous food on the day of a ritual



**Fig.15** A Lahu family eating around a table



**Fig.16** Lahu dining etiquette



**Fig.17** An elder enjoying cigarettes



**Fig.18** A food seller on a motorbike





Fig.19 A grocery store in Pa Long village



Fig.20 A gas stove



Fig.21 *Mvuh hpa mi hpa*, in China's national intangible cultural heritage inventory (source: The Intangible Cultural Heritages in Yunnan" <http://www.ynich.cn/Index.html>)



Fig.22 Lao Da Bao village, Yunnan, China – a base for safeguarding the Lahu epic myth *muvh hpa mi hpa*

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