



# Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) Village Temples and their Buddhist Affiliations<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The Lahu peoples of the Yunnan-northern Southeast Asia borderlands are remarkable for the immediate importance they attach to their high-god, *G'ui-sha*, some communities building and staffing (with part-time priests) village temples for the worship of this creator-divinity.

This paper argues that the Lahu Nyi temples and temple worship in north Thailand have antecedents in a Mahāyāna Buddhist movement that swept through the Lahu and Wa areas of southwestern Yunnan, beginning *circa* the mid-eighteenth century. It argues also for Theravāda Buddhist influences emanating from Tai societies in Burma and north Thailand.

## Preamble

When I first began my study of Thailand's Lahu Nyi or Red Lahu mountain folk in 1966, I was struck by the prominence of one particular building (Pl. 1) in the village that I had chosen for my residence. Where all the other structures were raised on piles (Pl. 2), this one was built directly on the ground. Where the others, if enclosed at all, could boast no more than a relatively insubstantial bamboo or bamboo-and-wood fence, a wall of stout wooden posts surrounded this building, unequivocally demarcating its space from that of the rest of the village. Moreover, the building was fronted with a number of carved wooden posts and surrounded by tall bamboo poles, from the ends of which yellow and white strips of cloth fluttered in the wind. Inside, the focal point of the building was a relatively simple three-tiered altar (Pl. 3), above which hung yellow and white umbrella-like pieces of cloth, while, on either side, attached to the roof beams, were cloth streamers, rather like those fluttering from bamboo poles outside the building.

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<sup>1</sup> Dedicated to the memory of Pauline Hetland Walker (1.10.38 – 27.3.05), with eternal gratitude for more than thirty years of unceasing intellectual support and painstaking editorial assistance. If there be merit in the making of this work, then may it be transferred to her.

It was not long before I learned that this building, called a *haw<sup>ˉ</sup> yeh<sup>ˉ</sup>* (palace house) or *bon yeh<sup>ˉ</sup>* (merit house)<sup>2</sup>, was a special building put up principally for the worship of *G'ui<sup>ˉ</sup> sha<sup>ˉ</sup>*,<sup>3</sup> the creator high-god of the Lahu people, and tended by a hierarchy of part-time priestly officials (in everyday life they were highland farmers like everybody else in the village), who were responsible for the twice-monthly ritual activities held in it on new- and full-moon days.

Buildings (as opposed to simple shrines) designated for religious worship are far from common among the highland peoples of the northern Southeast Asia-Yunnan borderlands — that is, apart from those who have formally adopted Buddhism or Christianity. Even among the Lahu themselves, there are many village communities that maintain no such edifice. Moreover, while the concept of a high god, creator of the universe and all therein, is a common feature of Southeast Asian indigenous religious systems, the usual attitude that Southeast Asians demonstrate towards this supernatural entity is one of ritual indifference. Viewing their high god as remote from and quite unconcerned about human affairs, those Southeast Asians who have not embraced the theistic traditions of Islam or Christianity typically feel little, if any, need to propitiate their theoretically omnipotent deity, an ideology that sits well also with those who have added a theologically-disengaged Theravāda Buddhism to their older Southeast Asian world view. Of far more immediate and pressing ritual concern for these people are the spirits (in Lahu called *ne<sup>ˉ</sup>*, cognate with Burmese *nat*) that demand more-or-less constant ritual attention, lest they vent their spite on those who disregard them by inflicting sickness and other misfortunes upon them.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, as in most of my other academic publications on the Lahu peoples, Lahu words are transcribed according to the romanization pioneered during the first half of the twentieth century by American Baptist missionaries in Burma and China (cf. Walker 2003: 653–4, 663–72). This orthography is still widely used among Christian Lahu in Burma and Thailand, as well as in Yunnan (despite the official introduction there, beginning in 1956, of a “reformed script” that itself is based on the Baptist system [Liang *et al.* 1992: Ch. 9, pp. 21–22]). A monosyllabic tonal language, Lahu has seven tones or “pitch contours”, six of which are indicated in the Baptist orthography by super- and sub-script symbols (straight line, circumflex and hacek) following each syllable. The mid-level tone is unmarked, the high-rising tone is indicated by a superscript straight line, high-falling tone by a superscript hacek, low-falling tone by a subscript hacek, very-low tone by a subscript straight line, high checked tone by a superscript circumflex and low checked tone by a subscript circumflex.

<sup>3</sup> The etymology of this word is uncertain, but *g'ui<sup>ˉ</sup>* may be linked to an ancient Tibeto-Burman root, *\*ray*, meaning “being”, in the sense of “self-existing first cause” (Matisoff 1985); *sha* means “deity” [Matisoff 1988: 1155, *s.v. sa*]).

Certainly, the Lahu peoples — even those who have converted to a so-called “world religion” (in the Lahu case, Buddhism or Christianity) — accept the reality, and often fear the activities, of malicious spirits. But why, I wondered, were the Lahu or, more accurately, some Lahu — including those with whom I was living — apparently unique in their perceived need to erect a special building in which to perform ritual activities specifically to honour the high god they call *G'ui sha*?

As my fieldwork progressed, it became increasingly apparent — from the occasions on which these Lahu Nyi made use of their *haw yeh*, from the reasons they gave for its use, from the types of offerings they brought to it, and from the lexicon of the prayers that were chanted or sung inside the building — that there must once have been Buddhist liturgical affiliations that the people themselves now scarcely recognized. It was not, however, until my initial four-year ethnographic field study was over and my detailed work on the corpus of Chinese-language writings on Lahu history and ethnography was well under way that the links between Mahāyāna Buddhist temples in China's Yunnan Province and Lahu Nyi village *haw yeh* in North Thailand, as well as between Mahāyāna Buddhism's ideology of transcendental Buddhahood and the Lahu's *G'ui sha*-focused world view, became apparent to me. It is just these linkages that I wish to explore in this paper.

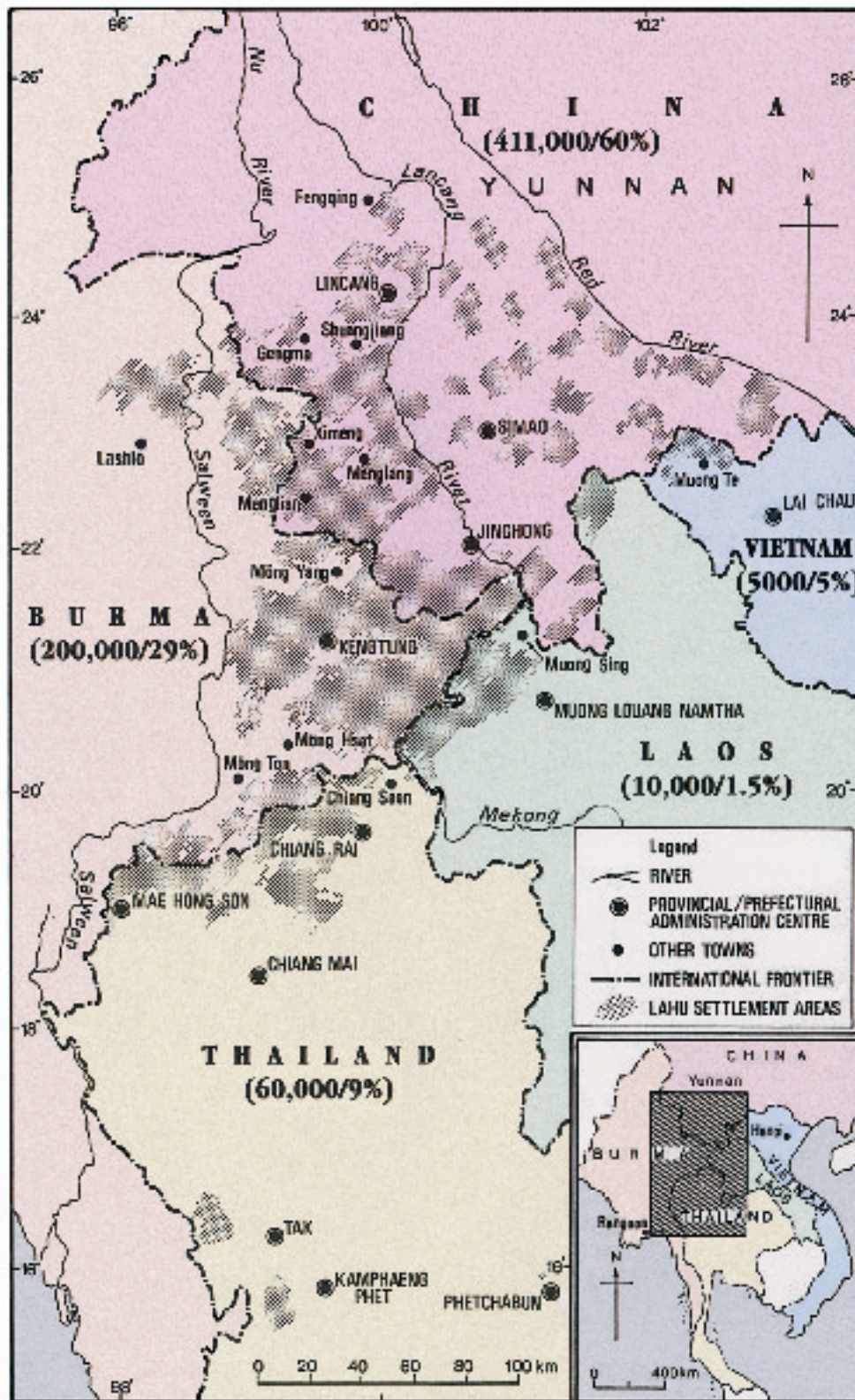
But, before doing so, let me provide a brief ethnographic background to the Lahu people in general and the Lahu Nyi in particular.

### An Introduction to the Lahu

The Lahu-speaking peoples, whose language belongs within the Central Yi division of the vast Tibeto-Burman family, number some three-quarters of a million, most of whom are upland-dwelling, traditionally swidden-farming folk of the Yunnan (Southwest China)-Northern Southeast Asia (eastern Burma, north-west Thailand, northwest Laos and northwest Vietnam) borderlands (Map 1).<sup>4</sup> They are a population having greater linguistic than socio-cultural unity; nonetheless, they all apparently recognize themselves as “*La hu ya*” or “Lahu people”, *vis-à-vis* peoples of other ethno-linguistic affiliations (among fellow mountain folk: people such as Lisu, Akha [Hani] and Wa; and in the valleys and urban centres: principally Tai<sup>5</sup> and Han).

<sup>4</sup> See Walker 2003: 50–108 for an ethnographic survey of the Lahu-speaking peoples.

<sup>5</sup> I use the unaspirated “Tai” to refer to all Tai-speaking peoples in (so far as this paper is concerned) Yunnan, Burma and Thailand. I use the aspirated “Thai” to refer (a) to citizens of the Kingdom of Thailand, (b) to Siamese or Central Thai, and (c) to Tai Yuan or Khon Müang, when I designate them as “Northern Thai”, in other words as the dominant Tai group in North Thailand.



Map 1. The distribution of the Lahu-speaking peoples

The major linguistic divide among “mainstream” Lahu is between Lahu Na or “Black Lahu” and Lahu Shi or “Yellow Lahu” (the basis for these particular colour designations is complex and its history still far from clear;<sup>6</sup> certainly it has nothing to do either with costume or with skin pigmentation). In addition, there are people known as Kucong (some, but not all of whom call themselves “La<sup>h</sup> hu<sup>l</sup>”), whose languages are quite closely related to those of the Lahu Na and Lahu Shi and who have rather recently been “identified” (i.e. officially designated) as “Lahu” by the central, provincial, prefectural and county administrations of the People’s Republic of China.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of religious culture,<sup>8</sup> the indigenous situation is one common throughout the Southeast Asia region. We may dub it “animo-theism”: animistic because it is premised on the supposition that all phenomena in the visible world — or, more accurately, all culturally-significant phenomena — comprise two, mostly conjoined, parts: material form and non-material or “spiritual” essence,<sup>9</sup> to which may or may not be attributed a special name and attributes; theistic, because this indigenous Southeast Asian world view also posits the existence of a number of deities, including (as already mentioned) a high god, the cosmic creator responsible for the genesis of all natural phenomena, including humankind and its principal social and cultural institutions.

The Lahu Nyi or Red Lahu are a southerly branch of the Lahu Na or Black Lahu; once again, it is far from clear just how the colour designation “red” came to be applied to them. Some people maintain<sup>10</sup> that, in this instance, it is indeed derived from traditional sartorial preferences. Red is the most striking colour in the traditional dress of Lahu Nyi women, resulting in Tai neighbours giving them the exonym “Mussur Daeng” (มูซอแดง, literally “Red Hunters”); other Lahu call them “Lahu Nyi”. Other people<sup>11</sup> believe the designation “red” indicates, as with meat, “rawness” and therefore “lack of sophistication” *vis-à-vis* the more northerly-dwelling Lahu Na. This interpretation probably evolved in Burma, a consequence of the meeting of educated, predominantly Christian Lahu Na, with their southern, traditionalist and preliterate neighbours. At any rate, the “Lahu Nyi” label is used in Burma, Laos and Thailand, but not in Yunnan. The religious culture of the Lahu Nyi, on the other hand, is clearly related to that of both Lahu Na and Lahu Shi still living under Chinese rule.

<sup>6</sup> See Walker 2003: 94–6 & esp. n. 166.

<sup>7</sup> For introductions to Kucong (𑜋𑜧𑜨𑜫 𑜇𑜨) see Shi (1993); Song (1981a,b; 1986) and Xu (1984).

<sup>8</sup> See Walker (2003:111–168) and Nishimoto (2003) for further details.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Benjamin (1979) for a discussion based on data from the Malay peninsula.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Woodthorpe (1896: 597), and informants in my Lahu Nyi study village.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Young (1962: 9).

## The Lahu Nyi Village Temple

At my study village in the mountains above the valley of Phrao in North Thailand<sup>12</sup> the villagers regarded the site of their *haw<sup>˘</sup>yeh<sup>˘</sup>*, or community temple, including its front courtyard (Pl. 4), as sacred space and, consequently, surrounded it with a fence of stout wooden posts. The temple building itself, as I have already indicated, was encircled by tall bamboo poles, each one flying a length of cloth, either white (symbolizing purity) or yellow (the sacred colour of a Buddhist monk's robes and, as such, symbolizing religious potency). The Lahu Nyi call such flags *hto<sup>˘</sup>pa<sup>˘</sup>*. I am uncertain as to the etymology of this word, but lean towards the Tai phrase *thawt pha pa* (ทอดผ้าป่า), literally “laying down [*thawt*] the forest cloth [*pha pa*]”, the whole referring to the Tai custom of hanging a length of cloth on a tree branch for any passing Buddhist monk to use as a robe.<sup>13</sup> In terms of their symbolic function, these Lahu *hto<sup>˘</sup>pa<sup>˘</sup>* are identical to the *thungchaj* (ตุงชัย) or “victory flags” that Tai Buddhists set up around their temples, “to avert ill or evil spirits and secure good fortune”, in the words of the celebrated Thai folklorist Phya Anuman Rajadhon.<sup>14</sup> In the symbolic idiom of the Lahu villagers themselves, these flags, representing the all-good, all-mighty *G'ui<sup>˘</sup>sha*, both frighten away malicious spirits and, as they flutter in the wind, “cry out” (Lahu *bvuh<sup>˘</sup>ve*) for the villagers' good health and prosperity.

In front of the temple in my study village stood a number of roughly-carved wooden posts called *kaw mo<sup>˘</sup>* (Pl. 5). My Lahu Nyi informants explained to me that these posts are earthly representations of *G'ui<sup>˘</sup>sha*'s divine prototypes. The headman of my study village volunteered, in addition, that the incisions carved into the poles represent the villagers' wishes respectively for good health, success in farming, and prosperity of livestock. But when we examine the origin of the Lahu word for these ritual posts, and observe the use that is made of them by other Lahu divisions,<sup>15</sup> and, for that matter, by other ethnic groups,<sup>16</sup> alternative symbolic meanings immediately suggest themselves. First, the etymology of the word *kaw<sup>˘</sup>mo<sup>˘</sup>*: it seems to lie in the Tai Yai (Shan) word *kawngmu*, meaning a Buddhist stupa or chedi;<sup>17</sup> it is tempting, therefore, to interpret the Lahu *kaw<sup>˘</sup>mo<sup>˘</sup>*

<sup>12</sup> See Walker (1970; 2003: 3–49) for more detail.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rajadhon (1986: 81).

<sup>14</sup> Rajadhon (1967: 179).

<sup>15</sup> See Walker 2003: 364–66 for a fuller treatment.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Kauffmann (1971) for Lua' (Lawa), Terwiel (1978) for Thai, Premchit and Doré (1992) for Northern Thai).

<sup>17</sup> Matisoff (1988: 344), s.v. *ko-mô*).

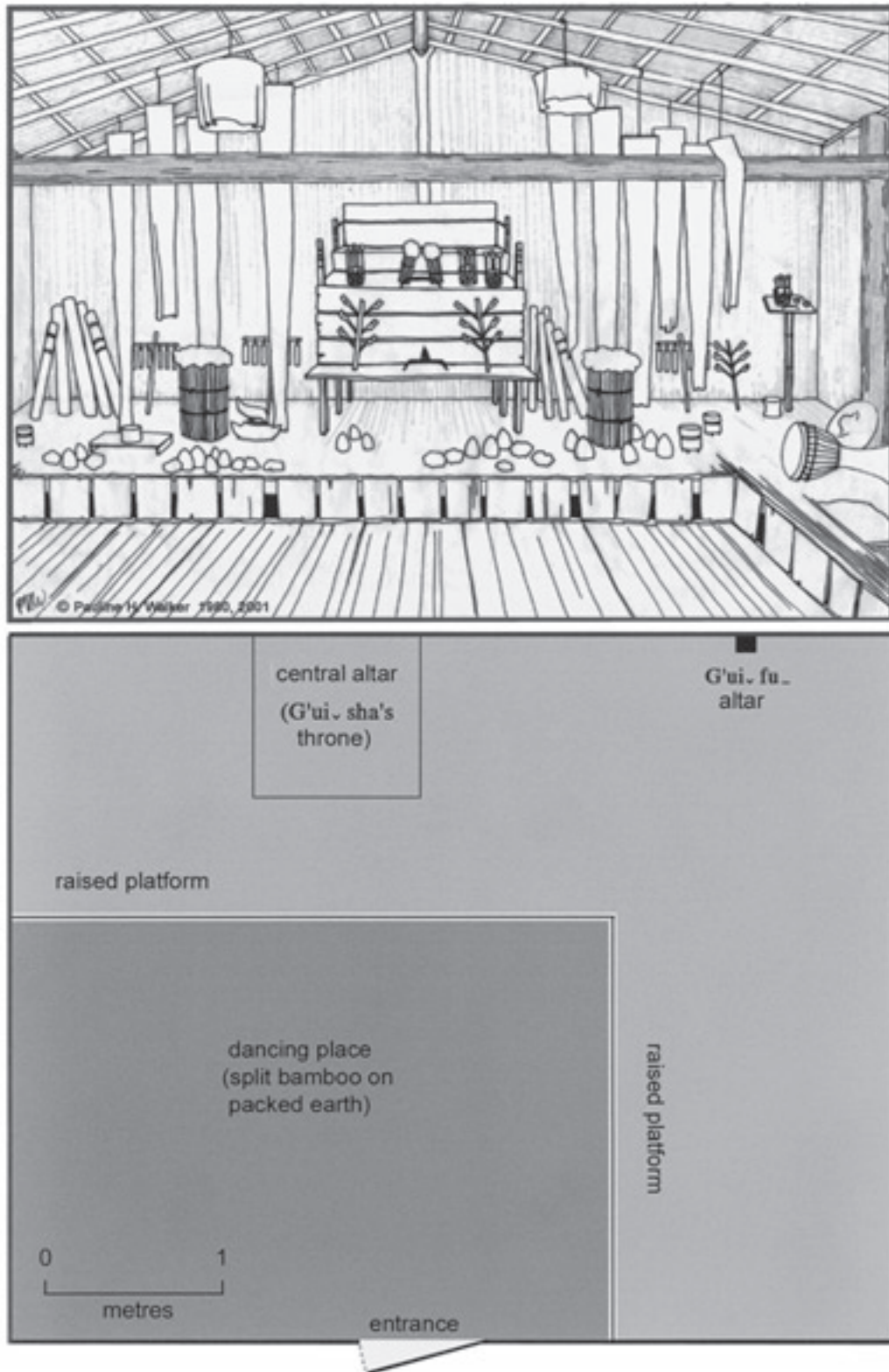


Figure 1. Interior and plan of Lahu Nyi village temple

as replica stupa, set up in front of their temples in imitation of the *chedi* that Tai Buddhists erect in the forecourt of their monastic complexes.<sup>18</sup>

The focal point of the temple interior (Fig. 1, Pl. 3), as mentioned at the start, was a wooden structure resembling a three-tiered altar. Informants explained that this was “*G’ui-sha’s* sitting place” (*G’ui-sha ve mui kui*), and I understood that it represented for them *G’ui-sha’s* heavenly throne. But my Lahu friends did not use their own word for throne (*k’aw jaw*), but rather the word *caw-tcuh* (probably from Chinese *zhuozi* (桌子), “a table, stand”<sup>19</sup>). If the Lahu Nyi *haw-yeh* is indeed, as I shall argue in this paper, the lineal descendant of the Lahu Buddha temples of the past, then this modern-day altar is doubtless the lineal descendant of the platform on which the Buddha image or images were once set (see below). (As a matter of fact, I have visited rural Tai Buddhist temples in Yunnan whose altars closely resembled that at my study village and the former indeed had several Buddha images set on them.) This seems the likely explanation for the Lahu Nyi’s continuing use of the Chinese word for “table” for their temple altar, rather than their own word for “chair” (*mui hk’aw*) or for “throne” (*k’aw jaw*).

From the temple’s roof beams hung a number of long white or yellow cloth banners interspersed with symbolic umbrellas of the same colours. My informants interpreted the colours in identical fashion as they did those of the cloth flags fluttering outside the temple: white symbolizing purity, and yellow, religious potency (literally, the power of the meritorious side, *bon hpaw ve kan pa*). But from Yunnan come data that hint at an older symbolism that Lahu Nyi in Thailand (now several generations removed from the Yunnan homelands) may well have forgotten. For in Yunnan one may still find Lahu village temples with similar banners on which are drawn images of the sun and the moon, symbolizing, according to one well-known Chinese ethnographer, “the fact that, with sun and moon shining above, the Buddhist rituals may be carried out without mistake.”<sup>20</sup> Here it is as well to point out that both flags and umbrellas are common furnishings in Tai Theravāda Buddhist temples, the latter a symbol of royalty in the Indic (hence Buddhist) tradition. The Lahu call the umbrellas either *hpa mi bon* or else *hpa caw*. The precise meaning of the first name still eludes me (*hpa* is from Yuan

<sup>18</sup> There are, nonetheless, other possibilities. One is that they equate with the *lak* or wooden posts that Tai peoples often set up “in the name of the highest political authority” (Terwiel 1978: 159). Another is that they represent “cultural survivals” of similar posts that Lahu and other peoples frequently erect in honour of the guardian spirit or spirits of the locality. It is, moreover, often averred that they are fertility symbols, the pointed ones being male and the rounded ones, female. And there is compelling evidence that many Lahu communities (although, apparently, not the one I studied) do ascribe a sexual symbolism to their *kaw mo* (cf. Walker 2003: 365).

<sup>19</sup> Matisoff (1988: 495), *s.v.* *c5 ci*]

<sup>20</sup> Xu (1993a: 5).



[Northern Thai] *pha*, Siamese *phra* (พระ), which variously may mean “god, lord, Buddhist monk, sacred object”), *bon* means “merit, blessing” (from Pali *puñña* through Tai *bun* [บุญ]), but the meaning here of *mi*˘ remains obscure to me. As for the second name, *hpa*˘ *caw*˘ “the *hpa*˘’s umbrella”, the umbrella, as a symbol of royalty, of course, is appropriate both for the historical Buddha and for the people’s own creator-divinity *G’ui*˘ *sha*, whom Lahu address in prayer as *mvuh*˘ *naw ma jaw*˘ *maw*˘, “Lord (or King) of Heaven”.

To the left of the central altar was a small trough of roughly carved wood known as *baw*˘ *ti*˘ *keh*˘. *Baw*˘ is almost certainly from the word *baw*˘ *k’o*˘, “a cylindrical container”, but from what, precisely, *baw*˘ *ti*˘ is derived I must plead ignorance; *keh*˘, on the other hand, means “clean, pure”. My Lahu Nyi informants told me that this water trough is for the *co*˘ *ngeh*˘ or “birds of life” to drink from — and the iconography indeed included a rough representation of a bird dipping its beak into the water (Pl. 6). The few people who could offer any deeper explanation of the *baw*˘ *ti*˘ *keh*˘ said that *G’ui*˘ *sha*, the creator-divinity, owned such birds and that they “cried out” (*bvuh*˘ *ve*) for the long life of the people, a notion that receives clear support from Lahu Nyi prayer. For example, a Lahu Nyi New Year prayer goes:<sup>21</sup>

*May the four eternal birds of the year nine times in one day and nine times in one night, cry out, count and look after these people of the year, people of the month.*

But if we remember, as I shall discuss below, that the likely historical background of Lahu Nyi village temples lies in Mahāyāna Buddhism, an additional explanation for these Lahu Nyi *co*˘ *ngeh*˘ is at hand, namely that they are the “birds of paradise” commonly represented in Mahāyānist art and traceable to the *Sukhāvātī-vyūha sūtra*, one of the principal Mahāyānist scriptures, where it is written:<sup>22</sup>

The Bhagavat [the Blessed One, Buddha Śākyamuni] said: ‘Do you see again, O Agita [a Bodhisattva], those flocks of immortal birds, making the whole Buddha country [the Sukhāvātī heaven or Pure Land] resound with the voice of Buddha, so that those Bodhisattvas are never without meditating on Buddha?’

<sup>21</sup> Walker (1975: 162, 168, 185) for the original Lahu language text.

<sup>22</sup> Cowell (1969: 61).

I shall not attempt here to provide a complete inventory of the sacred paraphernalia inside a Lahu Nyi temple; the details, with many accompanying line drawings and photographic plates, may be found in my book *Merit and the Millennium*.<sup>23</sup> But I will mention just a few more that demonstrate Buddhist affiliations. To the left and right of the main altar are placed or stacked numerous offerings that are presented to the temple on lunar festival days.<sup>24</sup> One kind of offering is called a *hpeu<sup>˘</sup> k'o<sup>˘</sup>*, a small, loosely-woven, bamboo basket with attached cotton-topped bamboo sticks; Lahu Nyi informants likened it to the bowls of flowers their Tai neighbours set in front of Buddha images. Another is a bundle of bamboo sticks, bound tightly together and with cotton wool on top. These are called *li<sup>˘</sup> tsuh<sup>˘</sup>*, literally “custom bundles”, and probably are symbolic bundles of incense, an important accompaniment to Buddhist liturgical practice, both Mahāyāna and Theravāda.

### Temple Rituals

Turning to the major ritual activities that take place in a Lahu Nyi village temple,<sup>25</sup> once again Buddhist prototypes are more or less immediately apparent.

Twice a month, at the time of the new moon and of the full moon, the temple in my study village became the centre of the community’s ritual life.<sup>26</sup> The ritual activity would begin on the eve of the new or full moon and continue through the following day and evening. The Lahu Nyi villagers called these twice-monthly lunar festival days *shi<sup>˘</sup> nyi* (literally “precept days”, from Tai *sin* [สีล], Pali *sīla*), but they interpreted the name as “making merit day” (“*aw<sup>˘</sup> bon aw<sup>˘</sup> shi<sup>˘</sup> te ve nyi*). (Here both parts of the Lahu couplet are derived, through Tai, from Pali; *aw<sup>˘</sup> bon* through Tai *bun* [บุญ] from Pali *puñña*, and *aw<sup>˘</sup> shi<sup>˘</sup>*, as just noted, from *sīla*.) The villagers also related a myth that accounted for their observance of such merit days, which went as follows:

A long time ago, there lived in a Lahu village a great hunter, whose name was *Sha<sup>˘</sup> ca<sup>˘</sup>*. The hunter said, “When we shoot wild animals and make our fields, we kill many insects and we kill many animals. To wash away the demerit [Lahu, *ven<sup>˘</sup> ba<sup>˘</sup>* from Tai *ween*, “bad deeds” and *ba*, through Tai from Pali *bap*], twice a month, at the time when the moon begins to grow and the time when the moon

<sup>23</sup> Walker (2003: 362–72).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, (366–7 and Fig. 30).

<sup>25</sup> See Walker (2003: 401–13), for further details.

<sup>26</sup> Walker (1981; 2003: 401–08).

begins to wane, we must observe a day of merit, on which we will prepare offerings to give to *G'ui-sha*, and perform the water custom,<sup>27</sup> in order to wash away our demerit.” So that is why we now do these things.

On merit days the villagers abstained from all agricultural and hunting activities and from slaughtering domestic animals; many people also observed a strict vegetarian diet on this day.

Given that the Lahu are among the most enthusiastic hunters in the Northern Thai uplands, it is clear that the reason they gave for their merit day observances is one they have derived from a once-alien ideology, that of Buddhism. Moreover, these merit days correspond not merely in name, but also in their occurrence with the *wan sin* or precept days of their Theravāda Buddhist Tai neighbours. It is true that the Khon Müang (Tai Yuan or Northern Thai) observe not two but four precept days, one at each quarter of the monthly lunar cycle, but those that fall on new and full moon days (the Lahu's *shi-nyi*) are the most important.<sup>28</sup> The principal liturgical observances during a merit day at my study village involved ritual ablutions (Pl. 7), fashioning offerings for the temple, formal presentation of these offerings by the senior village priest to the creator-divinity *G'ui-sha* (Pl. 8), and dancing inside the temple (Pl. 9), causing on occasion some villagers to become possessed, they said, by *G'ui-sha's* divine power. I will not burden this paper with all the details, but simply note that these liturgical practices represented a synthesis of Buddhist and indigenous (presumably pre-Buddhist) ideas.

Three times a year, the Lahu of my study community observed what they called *shi-nyi lon* or “great merit days”<sup>29</sup> Each occasion fell on a full moon rather than a new moon day and corresponded to a particular event in the agricultural cycle: the completion of firing the new mountain fields, the first harvesting of certain major side crops (maize, chillies, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, etc.) and the maturation of the all-important rice crop. But the names of the three great merit days were associated not with these indigenous Lahu agricultural events, but with major calendrical observances of their Theravāda Buddhist Tai neighbours. The first great merit day observance is called *Sheh-kaw-shi-nyi* or “sand-heaping great merit day”, a reference to one of the Tai New Year observances, in which people collect sand from a stream or river, bring it to a Buddhist temple courtyard and there model it into miniature chedi or pagodas.<sup>30</sup> The second of the three

<sup>27</sup> An elaborate ritual hand washing; for the details, see Walker (2003: 402–3); also Plate 46.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. for Tai Yai (Shan), Saihoo (1959: 276).

<sup>29</sup> For greater detail, see Walker (1984; 2003: 438–46).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Premchit & Doré (1992: 183–4).

*shi-nyi lon-* is called *Hkao<sup>∨</sup>shi-nyi lon-* or “going inside great merit day”, this time referring to the Buddhist festival that marks the beginning of the monastic retreat, when the monks go inside their monasteries to remain there throughout the rainy season.<sup>31</sup> Finally, there is *Aw<sup>^</sup>shi-nyi lon-*, or “going out great merit day”, corresponding to the Buddhist festival marking the end of the monastic retreat.<sup>32</sup> Lahu ritual observances during great merit days are essentially similar to those of ordinary lunar festival days. But there are a couple of notable additions, both of which are clearly of Buddhist derivation. One is the villagers’ participation in a vegetarian meal inside the temple; the second is the construction of a *sha-la<sup>^</sup>* (from Tai *sālā* [ศาลา], a pavilion set up in the courtyard of a Buddhist monastic complex for the benefit of visiting pilgrims,<sup>33</sup> or any rest pavilion or hut set up elsewhere for the use of weary travellers). Just as their Buddhist neighbours set up such buildings in order to acquire merit, so too do the Lahu build their own “merit huts” on major pathways leading to their village. Again, however, the Lahu Nyi have adapted Buddhist customs to their own indigenous world view. The vegetarian meal is offered first to *G’ui-<sup>∨</sup>sha* before being consumed as a “meal of unity” by the villagers themselves; as for the merit hut, it too is dedicated to the creator-divinity but, in addition, there are special shrines for the guardian locality spirit set up on either side of it.

### Temple Officials

It is in its associated priesthood<sup>34</sup> that the Lahu Nyi temple seems, perhaps, most at variance with those of the neighbouring Theravāda Buddhist Tai peoples. After all, the Lahu Nyi temple officials, who function in their ritual offices as husband-and-wife pairs, are in daily life ordinary farmers like every other villager. This is a very different situation from that of Buddhist monks and novices, whose celibacy, clothing and daily routine set them apart from the world of the lay man and woman. And yet, the names of the various Lahu Nyi temple officials have clear Theravāda Buddhist affiliations.

The senior priest in charge of a Lahu Nyi temple is the *to bo pa-*; his wife is the *to bo ma*. Until very recently, it has been my contention that the syllable *to* is from the Lahu word *aw-<sup>∨</sup>to*, “body”, while *pa-* and *ma* are the male and female suffixes respectively.<sup>35</sup> *Bo* (or *bon*), on the other hand, is from Tai *bun*, “merit”, the

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 258–62).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 45–50).

<sup>33</sup> See Kingshill (1991: 111).

<sup>34</sup> See Walker (2003: 387–400) for greater detail; cf. Nishimoto (2003: 125–7).

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Walker (2003: 388).

whole therefore meaning “meritorious body”.<sup>36</sup> I now suspect that the title, *in toto*, is derived from the Tai designation for certain holy men, *viz.*, *ton bun* (ตันบุญ), literally “source of merit”.<sup>37</sup> The *to bo pa* and *to bo ma* are known also as *paw hku*<sup>˘</sup> and *meh hku*<sup>˘</sup> respectively, names taken wholly from Tai: *phaw* (พ่อ) “father”, *meh* (แม่), “mother” and *khru* (ครู, from Sanskrit, *guru*) “teacher”, thus “father teacher” and “mother teacher”. In Northern Thai Buddhism *phaw khru* (พ่อครู) is a title given to the lay temple official otherwise known as the *archarn wat* (อาจารย์), *archarn* from the Sanskrit, *acharya*. Always a former monk himself, the *phaw khru* leads the lay congregation in temple rituals and is the master of ceremonies, representing the congregation, when it presents gifts to the monks for the purpose of merit-making.<sup>38</sup> Finally, the Lahu Nyi’s *to bo pa* is sometimes also called *pu* *cawn*<sup>˘</sup>, a name of impeccably Buddhist derivation, this time from Burmese through Shan. *Cawn*<sup>˘</sup> is from Burmese *chawng*, “temple” and *pu* (ผู้) is from Tai and means “man”, thus “man of the temple”.

There are other ritual officials who assist the Lahu Nyi’s *to bo pa* and *to bo ma* in the affairs of the temple,<sup>39</sup> but since their links to Buddhist prototypes are less evident than are those of the senior priest, I shall not discuss them in this paper.

I should, on the other hand, like to return — if only briefly — to the matter of the apparently fundamental dissimilarity between the rôle of the celibate Theravāda Buddhist monk and that of the necessarily married Lahu *to bo pa* / *paw hku*<sup>˘</sup> / *pu* *cawn*<sup>˘</sup>, all of whose names suggest Theravāda Buddhist affiliation. I suspect the answer to this anomaly lies in the prior encounter of many Lahu people with Mahāyāna Buddhism when, as we shall observe later, the men in charge of village temples were not ordained clergy (monks or novices) but married laymen. Another factor in the equation is that Lahu Nyi, among the most southerly-dwelling of Lahu divisions, have long been exposed to the Theravāda Buddhism of their lowland neighbours. I do not find it especially surprising, therefore, that a culture of temples and temple priests with, so I believe, clear-cut Mahāyāna antecedents has, among these southerly-dwelling Lahu Nyi, absorbed a Theravāda Buddhist nomenclature.

<sup>36</sup> The Thai researcher Sorot Sirisai (1989: 32) offers another thoroughly Buddhist etymology for *to bo pa*, saying that it comes from the Tai *tham bun* (ทำบุญ), “to make merit”, plus the Lahu male suffix, and thus “the merit-making man”. Although, in general, I am much in favour of seeking Tai Buddhist origins for a great deal of Lahu Nyi ritual behaviour, I am not quite convinced by Sorot’s etymologizing. If it were true, I suggest, the Lahu name would be *hta*<sup>˘</sup> *bo pa* (the Lahu aspirated *hta*<sup>˘</sup> from the Tai aspirated *tham*), not *to bo pa*.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Cohen (2001: 227).

<sup>38</sup> Swearer (1976: 156).

<sup>39</sup> See Walker (2003: 390–94).

But just what is my case for championing the Mahāyāna Buddhist antecedents of a significant part of Lahu Nyi religious culture? The final part of my paper seeks to answer this question.

### Mahāyāna Buddhism in the Lahu Mountains

Unfortunately, in the absence of historical documentation of definitive authority, the task of reconstructing the early history of Buddhism among the Lahu peoples is fraught with difficulty. There are many, mostly quite brief, accounts by modern Chinese writers,<sup>40</sup> but they are riddled with inconsistencies. Much of the difficulty rests in the fact that history and legend have become inextricably interwoven among the still largely-preliterate Lahu people, but many of the Chinese sources accord historical legitimacy to Lahu legends that, while they may certainly encapsulate the spirit of actual events, are not themselves historical documents.

From my own reading of the materials, I surmise that there were at least two major early Buddhist missions to the principal Lahu settlement area, which the Chinese formerly knew as the “Luohei Shan” ( 螺黑山)<sup>41</sup> or “Lahu Mountains”, and which roughly comprises the modern-day counties of Shuangjiang ( 双江) Gengma ( 耿马), Lancang ( 澜沧), Menglian ( 孟连) and Ximeng ( 西盟). Here I shall discuss only the first.<sup>42</sup>

This first visitation occurred sometime during the second half of the seventeenth century (a more precise dating eludes us) when Monk Yang Deyuan ( 杨德渊) travelled to the Lahu Mountains from the famous Mahāyāna Buddhist monastic complex on Jizu Shan ( 鸡足山, “Chicken-foot Mountain”) in Binchuan ( 宾川) County to the north of Dali. According to one relatively recent Chinese-language source,<sup>43</sup> “Yang had been a respected figure prior to the fall of the Ming dynasty”, while another Chinese source<sup>44</sup> describes him as “a former senior official under [Southern Ming] Emperor Yongli [reigned 1647–1661].” The implication for the recorders of both sets of data is that Monk Yang must have harboured resentment against China’s new Manchu rulers — indeed may even have come to the remote frontier region inhabited by Lahu and other mountain peoples for the purpose of fomenting revolt against the Qing usurpers. At any rate, at some time during the

<sup>40</sup> E.g., Anon. (1993); Chen *et al.* (1986); Li & Zuo (1983); Liang *et al.* (1992); Qin *et al.* (1988); Wang and Yü (1986); Xu (1993b); Xu *et al.* (1990).

<sup>41</sup> In Qing dynasty records the first character “*luo*” is rendered with the pejorative dog radical ( 犭) rather than the far more acceptable man radical ( 亻) used above.

<sup>42</sup> For a much fuller account of these missions, see Walker (2003: 310–33); the second mission is described on pp. 330–33.

<sup>43</sup> Liang *et al.* 1992: Ch. 2, p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> Xu *et al.* (1990: 344).

turbulent period that marked the collapse of China's last Han imperial house at the hands of the Manchu founders of the Qing dynasty, Yang Deyuan took ordination and, settling in Jizu Shan, became, according to one of the Chinese sources,<sup>45</sup> at once a learned monk and renowned medical practitioner.

If Monk Yang did indeed combine the attributes of a privileged Ming dynasty background, hostility to the new Qing rulers, and a commitment to the practice of medicine, this must have represented a heady mix in the minds of many Lahu who encountered him. For the Lahu are a people with a predisposition for following men of obvious religious merit, particularly when that is perceived also to include the ability to cure sickness.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, at the time of Monk Yang's arrival amongst them, many Lahu were doubtless beginning to feel the pressure of increasing Han Chinese incursion into their homelands, a consequence both of Han Chinese immigration from China's heartlands and the imperial government's decision to begin implementing the policy of placing Han Chinese bureaucrats in overall charge of the border regions.<sup>47</sup> It is not difficult, consequently, to comprehend why these mountain folk could readily embrace the teachings of a religious leader who preached a new world order as, simultaneously, he tended to their physical ailments. Unfortunately, Lahu themselves appear not to retain any memory of the name of the Chinese monk who first brought to them Buddhism of the Mahāyāna school. They talk now only of their great *fu-cu<sup>ˇ</sup>pa-* (from Chinese 佛主 *fozhu*, "Buddha Lord", with the Lahu male suffix *pa-*) or else of their *G'ui<sup>ˇ</sup>sha ye* (from the name of the Lahu's creator-divinity, plus the Chinese *ye* [爷], "grandfather"), the latter name clearly demonstrating that they had invested the Chinese monk with divinity. On the other hand, modern-day Lahu in Yunnan (some at least) do still aver that it was their *fu-cu<sup>ˇ</sup>pa-* who was responsible for the building of the grand *fu-yeh<sup>ˇ</sup>* (literally "Buddha house", from Chinese *fo* [佛] and Lahu *yeh<sup>ˇ</sup>*, "house") at Nancha (南栅),<sup>48</sup> the mother temple of Mahāyāna Buddhism among the Lahu, whose ruins (Pl. 10. 11, 12, Fig. 2) even today may be seen adjacent to the Lahu Na (Black Lahu) village that is still called Fofang Zhai (佛寺寨) or Buddha Temple Village in the largely Wa-occupied Angkang Township (安康乡) in the far north of Lancang County.<sup>49</sup> When the Nancha monastery was ready, so it is told,<sup>50</sup> *fu-cu<sup>ˇ</sup>pa-* called upon several of his disciples from Dali to join him in the Lahu Mountains. We may safely assume that these men

<sup>45</sup> Liang *et al.* (1992: Ch. 9. p. 28).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Walker 2003: 505–47).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 76–84 for a summary.

<sup>48</sup> The Mandarin pronunciation is "Nanzha" or "Nanshan", but local Lahu and Wa call it Nancha, hence the preferred Romanization here.

<sup>49</sup> Xu (1993b); Walker (2003: 314–24).

<sup>50</sup> Anon. (1993: 253).

were also, predominantly, of Han Chinese ethnicity, or else sinicized Bai (Minchia). At the same time a number of local boys — both Lahu and Wa — were ordained as novices and received Buddhist instruction.<sup>51</sup> With its fine buildings and active ritual life, it seems that the Nancha monastery soon became the centre for the dissemination of Buddhism among the neighbouring mountain peoples, mostly Lahu and Wa. “As soon as a disciple had been trained”, says one Chinese language source,<sup>52</sup> “he would be sent out to preach.” Moreover, it is also told that, for a time, *fu-cu<sup>ˇ</sup>pa-* left the affairs of Nancha in the hands of his fellow monks from Dali as he himself travelled widely through the Lahu Mountains to propagate Buddhism among the peoples.<sup>53</sup>

As former Nancha novices were ordained as monks and returned to their home areas, some of them set up temples of their own.<sup>54</sup> Thus Nancha became the mother temple of a monastic organization that spread widely over the Lahu Mountains (Map 2). In this organization Nancha and its principal daughter temples (e.g. Pl. 14, 15) became *da fofang* (大佛房) or “great Buddha houses” (*haw<sup>-</sup>yeh<sup>-</sup>lon<sup>-</sup>* in Lahu), each one heading a supra-local religio-political structure that descended, by way of a number of mid-level *fofang*, right down to the individual village communities.

The mother temple at Nancha, in addition to training Buddhist clerics who would go on to establish their own monastic complexes elsewhere,<sup>55</sup> soon became a major meeting point and pilgrimage destination for Lahu and Wa, who came here to listen to the teachings of their *fu-cu<sup>ˇ</sup>pa-* and his successors.<sup>56</sup> This, doubtless, was a principal reason for the evolution of the Nancha monastic complex and, subsequently, of its daughter temples into centres of political power.

Whether or not Yang Deyuan himself (as a disgruntled former Ming dynasty official) encouraged the Lahu to resist Qing authority seems impossible to substantiate.<sup>57</sup> What is certain, however, is that, by the end of the eighteenth century (by which time Yang Deyuan would likely have been dead about a century), Nancha had become an important focus of Lahu resistance to the rule of the Emperor’s proxy, the Tai Prince of Menglian.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Liang *et al.* (1992: ch. 9, p. 29).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 30).

<sup>53</sup> Anon. (1993: 253).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Walker (2003: 324–27).

<sup>55</sup> Xu (1993: 269).

<sup>56</sup> Anon. (1993: 254); Xu (1993b: 269–70).

<sup>57</sup> But see Xu *et al.* (1990: 344).

<sup>58</sup> Anon. (1993: 254); Xu (1993b: 267–8).





Map 2. Location of principal Lahu and Wa Mahāyāna Buddhist temple complexes in the “Luohei Shan” or Lahu Mountains, southwestern Yunnan

## Temple Organization in the Lahu Mountains

Every great temple controlled a number of subsidiary monastic complexes. These high- and mid-level institutions were built according to Chinese Buddhist architectural norms with, minimally, a public worship hall and residential quarters for the monks and novices. As a concession to Lahu tradition there had also to be an open space for gourd-pipe dancing.

The principal building was the worship hall (Fig. 2), whose focal point was an altar on which stood at least one, and up to three, Buddha images. Where there was only one image, it seems to have been that of Sākyamuni (the historical Buddha); where there were three images, they were of Guanyin (the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara), Sākyamuni and the future Buddha Maitreya,<sup>59</sup> a fairly common practice in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, since they represent, *inter alia*, past, present and future epochs respectively. There is some indication<sup>60</sup> that Lahu identified Sākyamuni iconographically with their creator-divinity, *G'ui-sha*. It is more certain that the two were identified ideologically.<sup>61</sup>

Just as high-level monastic complexes controlled mid-level ones, the latter, in turn, had jurisdiction over about a dozen or so individual village communities, each with its own local temple.<sup>62</sup> These village temples were simple wood-and-bamboo structures surrounded by thorny cactus bushes, trees or flowering shrubs that served to demarcate their sacred space (just as a stout wooden fence surrounded Lahu Nyi village temples in North Thailand for the same purpose). Inside, they had altars but no Buddha images; instead, set on the altar, were bamboo containers for holding incense sticks as well as offerings of “grains, gourds, fruits and sugar canes.”<sup>63</sup> Lahu village temples were called *fofang*, “Buddha halls”, in Chinese, but in Lahu they were known either as *fu\_yeh*, “Buddha houses” or else as *haw\_yeh*, the term, as we saw earlier, still used by Lahu Nyi in North Thailand.

Each of the major supra-village temple complexes constituted a regular Mahāyāna Buddhist monastic community that comprised a *foye* (佛爷), the senior monk or abbot, and a number of *heshang* (和尚), who included both fully-ordained monks and novices — all of whom observed a celibate life of meditation, study and the chanting of Buddhist texts. According to one Chinese-language source,<sup>64</sup> the temple bell would be rung four times each day, morning, noon, afternoon and night,

<sup>59</sup> Song and Wang 1981: 1–2).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Li and Zuo (1983: 28–9).

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Du (2003: 258).

<sup>62</sup> Liang *et al.* (1992, ch. 9, p. 41); also Wang and Yü (1986: 24).

<sup>63</sup> Li and Zuo (1983: 28); Liang *et al.* (1992: ch. 9, p. 41).

<sup>64</sup> Xu (1993b: 270).

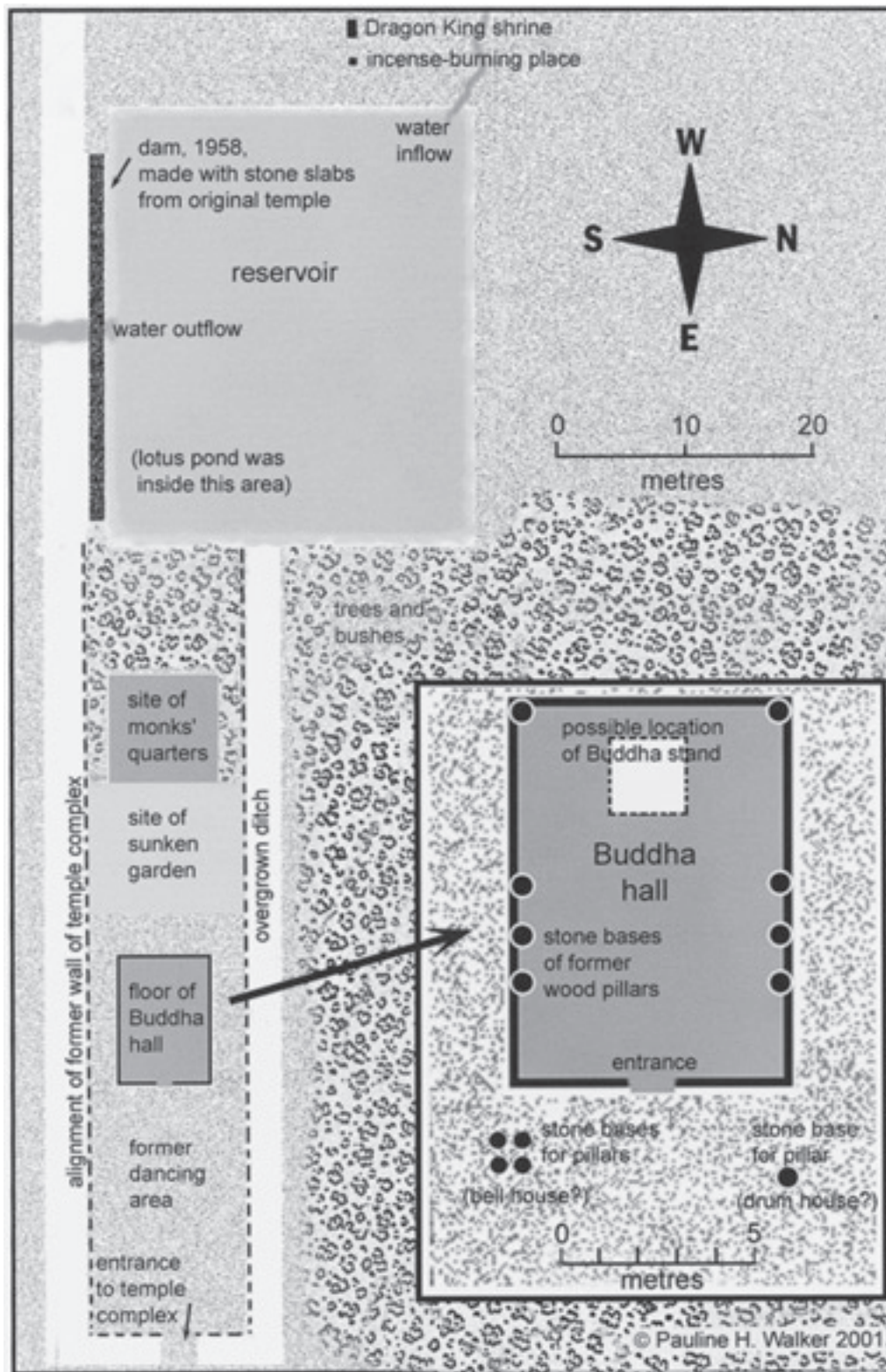


Figure 2. Plan of the remains of Nancha Buddhist temple in Lancang County, Yunnan

to announce the *sūtra*-chanting sessions. The texts were always read in Chinese, but instruction on their meaning was given in Lahu and Wa languages.

At the village level the situation was very different. Here there were no resident monks or novices and, doubtless for that reason, the village temples were devoid of Buddhist scriptures.<sup>65</sup> Instead there was a temple caretaker, often the community's headman himself, but sometimes another lay person could be appointed as *fu-sheh-hpa*, literally "master of the Buddha [hall]". Besides caring for the building itself, the principal responsibility of the man in charge of a village temple appears to have been to ensure that two days each lunar month, at the time of the new and the full moon (precisely the occasions when Lahu Nyi in North Thailand still celebrate their *shi-nyi* or merit days), his fellow villagers observed a more thoroughly Buddhist lifestyle than was required on ordinary days. On these occasions, the *fu-sheh-hpa* put on a simple robe and beat a gong to remind the villagers that this was a special day of religious merit when they must refrain from eating meat and consuming alcohol.<sup>66</sup> In addition, on these days, and at other times when they faced sickness or other misfortune, the villagers would come to their temple to light incense sticks and to make obeisance to the Buddha/*G'ui-sha*.<sup>67</sup>

Three times a year, at the lunar New Year and at the seasons for planting and harvesting the crops (still, as we have seen, important festive occasions for the Lahu Nyi), village headmen, temple caretakers and, on at least two of three occasions, ordinary villagers as well, would travel to their local monastic complex.<sup>68</sup> Here they would present offerings of food, light incense sticks and beeswax candles in honour of the Buddha/*G'ui-sha* and pay their respects to the abbot, who, besides chanting *sūtra* and sprinkling the devotees with blessed water, would also offer guidance to them on secular matters, settling disputes among them and instructing them on agricultural matters as appropriate to the season. Later the lay visitors would celebrate the occasion by dancing to the music of the gourd pipes outside of the Buddha hall.

This periodic and obligatory visiting by Lahu village headmen to their local abbots, who took the opportunity not merely to explain Buddhist doctrine and morality, but also to arbitrate unsettled disputes and to instruct the village leaders in the conduct of everyday affairs, provides clear evidence for the supra-local and extra-religious authority of the senior Buddhist clergy. The extra-village *fofang* became, in effect, the principal supra-local units of Lahu political organization, which in some places and during some periods challenged imperial Chinese rule as

<sup>65</sup> Liang *et al.* (1992: ch. 9, p. 41).

<sup>66</sup> Li (1991: 116).

<sup>67</sup> Li and Zuo (1983: 28).

<sup>68</sup> Li and Zuo (1983: 42); Liang *et al.* (1992: ch. 9, p. 42); Wang and Yü (1986: 25).

well as that of its proxies, the administrations of the local valley-based Tai princes. But Lahu Buddhism would pay dearly for its political confrontation with the might of the imperial Qing and of its surrogates. Inevitably, the clerics who led the Lahu in such confrontation, and the monastic centres from which they operated, were made to bear the brunt of imperial ire. As Chinese historian the late Fang Guoyu (方国瑜) of Yunnan University wrote,<sup>69</sup> “In the ten years of pacification during the reign of [Qing Emperor] Guangxu [1875-1908], almost all the *fofang* [temples] and *foye* [monks] in the Luohei [Lahu] Mountains disappeared; those that remained functioned very little.”

Whereas, as Professor Fang rightly observes, the principal extra-local Buddhist temples largely disappeared and, along with them, their associated clergy, the village temples and their caretakers survived. The latter, without formal Buddhist instruction and operating only as part-time specialists, became increasingly distant from the centres of Mahāyāna orthodoxy. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Buddhist heritage of the temples and those who served in them became less and less obvious, while their specifically Lahu, *G'ui sha*-centred, character became ever more pronounced. Today, the casual visitor to Lahu villages, whether in Yunnan, Burma or Thailand will be hard put to identify the people's Buddhist heritage. But, as I hope to have demonstrated in this paper, it is surely there. Consequently, Christian mission apologists Yamamori and Chan<sup>70</sup> are a little off the mark when they write, so definitively, that “The Lahus' ... unique folk religion has been mistakenly labeled Buddhism”.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have presented the historical scenario for the temple traditions that still survive among many Lahu communities in Yunnan, Burma and North Thailand. But for the Lahu Nyi whom I studied in the mountains of North Thailand, there is another historical circumstance that must be taken into account. Among the Lahu peoples, these Lahu Nyi are essentially “southerners” and, as such, have had long contact with the Theravāda Buddhist traditions of their Tai-speaking neighbours, whether Shan in Burma or Tai Yuan (Northern Thai) in Thailand. Consequently, although the Lahu people's temple tradition has its origins, I believe, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, Theravāda traditions have also influenced it, especially in the more southerly areas of Lahu settlement.

<sup>69</sup> (1943: 37).

<sup>70</sup> (2000: Ch. 5).

I contend also that it is precisely the *historical accident* of the Lahu people's exposure to Mahāyāna Buddhism — resulting in the canonically untenable but very real identification of *G'ui-sha* with Buddha Śākyamuni — that has provided the Lahu with a notion of immanent divinity so remarkably at odds with the nebulous conceptions of transcendent creator-gods that are commonplace among indigenous Southeast Asian peoples. For the Lahu, then, syncretism is evident both in religious architecture and in the most fundamental tenets of the people's worldview.

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Plate 1. A Lahu Nyi village temple: structurally unique and set apart from other village buildings



Plate 2. Bamboo and wood houses with grass- or leaf-thatched roofs and set on piles: Typical Lahu Nyi domestic architecture in upland North Thailand in the 1960s

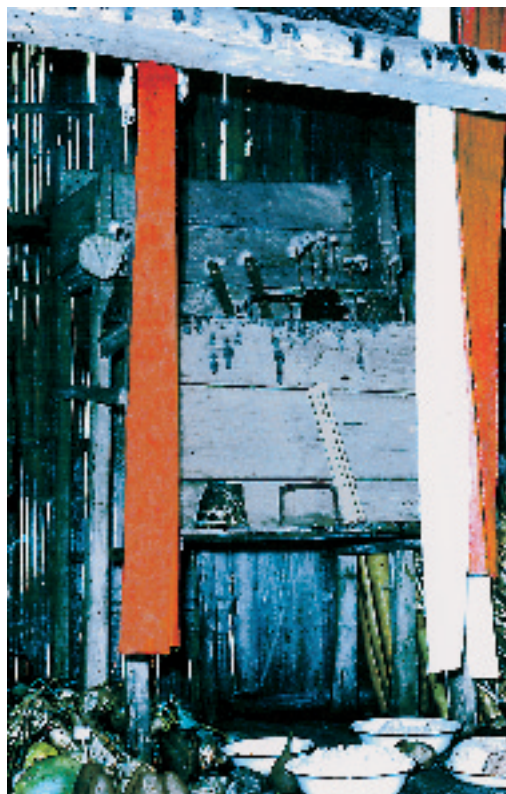


Plate 3. Simple wooden altar: the focal point of a Lahu Nyi temple



Plate 4. Lahu Nyi village temple surrounded by log fence and by cloth streamers flying from bamboo poles; carved sacred posts in front courtyard





Plate 5. Lahu Nyi village priest (right, holding candle) offers to the creator-divinity G'ui sha carved wooden posts newly set-up in temple courtyard for an annual festival



Plate 6. Carved wooden water trough with "life bird" inside Lahu Nyi village temple in upland North Thailand



Plate 7. Lahu Nyi village women, led by senior priestess (foreground) performing "water exchange" ritual



Plate 8. Senior Lahu Nyi village priest beating temple gong as he presents newly-made temple offerings to the creator-divinity G'ui- sha



Plate 9. Specially dressed and made-up Lahu Nyi village girls dancing at night inside the village temple on the occasion of a bi-monthly lunar festival day





Plate 10. Surviving remains of the main "Buddha hall" at Nancha, Lancang County, Yunnan



Plate 11. Brick (left) from Nancha temple embellished with image of mythical *qi lin* or Chinese unicorn (shown complete, for comparison only in modern ceramic on right)



Plate 12. Brick fragment with floral embellishments from Nancha



Plate 13. Shrine to the Long Wang, the Dragon King (still honoured, as indicated by incense sticks in foreground), behind remains of Buddha hall at Nancha (Fig. 2 indicates precise location)





Plate 14. The remains of the Mengka temple complex in Ximeng County, Yunnan



Plate 15. Modern-day local Lahu Na dancing in front of the Mengka temple remains at New Year time