

## OBITUARY

### Leh Tsan Kway

by Tim Forsyth

Leh Tsan Kway (also known as Jungway, or Laolu Saellii) was one of the highest-ranking high priests of the Lu Mien (or 'Yao') ethnic group living in Thailand. He was also an influential assistant for academic research on 'hill tribes' in northern Thailand for nearly 40 years. Some of the most famous and authoritative texts and monographs about highland culture, language, and livelihoods in northern Thailand were compiled with the help and knowledge of Leh Tsan Kway.

Leh was born in Laos in the northern province of Houei Xai in 1919. Like most Mien villagers at the time, Leh grew up in a remote mountain village, and helped his family cultivate rice, corn and opium, as well as raise pigs and cows. He married Juetso Saelli at the age of 16 (when she was 15) and over the next 20 years, they raised 10 children. Following classic Mien shifting cultivation, Leh and his village sought to relocate villages every 10 to 20 years in order to find fertile soil. Because of this, and increasing harassment from lowland soldiers in the 1940s, they decided to relocate to Thailand in 1947. Their new village, named Phalae (later Pha Dua), was in Mae Chan District (later Amphoe Mae Fah Luang) of Chiang Rai Province. At this site, and as village headman, Leh helped villagers make the transition from transient shifting cultivators to permanent settlers. This transition included some important socio-economic changes, such as establishing a village woodlot for the first time, and a new land tenure system. Eventually, the village also increased trading links with the lowlands. It abandoned opium as a cash crop in the 1970s.

Leh's contribution to scholarly research started in the 1960s. When the Thai government and foreign researchers were keen to learn more about the growing numbers of ethnic minorities in this region of northern Thailand, Leh, with

his in-depth studying of Lu Mien religion and Chinese language, proved to be a willing and enthusiastic informant concerning the Lu Mien and all topics of upland life. Some of the earliest research conducted with Leh's close, personal help included the Cornell University ethnographic study of the Mae Chan area by Jane Hanks, Lucien Hanks, and Lauriston Sharp, published initially as *Ethnographic Notes on Northern Thailand* (Cornell University, Ithaca, 1965). This collection included a personal description of Leh and his participation in a Mien wedding ceremony in Phalae in Jane Hanks' widely quoted paper, 'A Yao Wedding.' Further work included Herbert Purnell's *Yao-English Dictionary* (Cornell University, Ithaca, 1968); Peter Kandte's research on the Lu Mien (published in Peter Kunstadter's edited collection, *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations*; Princeton, New Jersey, 1967); and Robert Kickert's research on the Akha (published in Peter Hinton's *Tribesmen and Peasants in Northern Thailand*; Tribal Research Center, Chiang Mai, 1969). In all cases, the researchers lived in the houses of Leh or his family, and became intricately involved with village life.

Further researchers came to Pha Dua because of Leh's reputation, or because of the village's convenient location close to other 'hill tribe' villages and the Chinese Kuomintang base at Doi Mae Salong. Reflecting the strong military preoccupations of the time, Leh assisted with the comprehensive (and controversial) *Minority Groups in Thailand* (Department of the Army Pamphlet, no. 550-107, US Army, 1970). Alfred McCoy's *Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (Harper and Row, New York, 1972, p.352) contains a detailed description of Leh's house in Pha Dua where Kuomintang soldiers from Doi Mae Salong smoked opium next to the symbol



Leh and his family in 1973. (Photo by Yoshiro Shiratori)



Leh and some Yao women in Pha Dus, outside his home. (Photo by Tim Forsyth)



Leh and his second wife, May Seng, in Pha Dua. Leh aged 70. (Photo by Tim Forsyth)



Leh and his first wife, Juetso, taken in the 1940s when both were in their 20s.

of the US Navy Seabees engineers who had recently constructed a road in the region. Yet there was also other research on different themes: Leh's wife and daughters assisted with Jacqueline Butler's *Yao Design of Northern Thailand* (The Siam Society, Bangkok, 1970), which focused on the embroidery of Mien women.

Much general work on upland cultures and life was conducted at Pha Dua. Yoshiro Shiratori, with a team of researchers from Sophia University in Japan, spent more than a year compiling important work on the Yao and highlanders in general in the early 1970s (see Yoshiro Shiratori's *Ethnography of the Hill Tribes of South East Asia*, Sophia University, Japan, c1973). Perhaps most famously, Leh assisted and is pictured in Jacques Lemoine (with Donald Gibson)'s *Yao Ceremonial Paintings* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1982), and Paul and Elaine Lewis' *Peoples of the Golden Triangle* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1984), which includes perhaps the most graphic photographs of Leh, his house and village. Leh also worked closely with researchers from the Thai Tribal Research Institute, notably Somkiet Chamlong and Chob Kucha-Ananda, who published findings in John McKinnon and Wanai Bhruksasri's *Highlanders of Thailand* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983). Some later works compiled with Leh's assistance include John McKinnon and Bernard Vienne's *Hill Tribes Today* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1989); my own research on environmental change and tourism in Pha Dua (published in journals in the 1990s); and Jess Pourer's *The Yao, the Mien and the Mun Yao in China, North Vietnam, Laos and Thailand* (River Books, Bangkok, 2002). There are probably many other books and papers. Leh and his family also assisted, and were pictured in, many tourist guidebooks and postcards.

Most researchers who knew Leh appreciated his intelligence, his willingness to communicate, and his liking for rice whisky tinged with local herbs and wood chips. Leh and the late Donald Gibson (the ex-British Consul in Chiang Mai), for example, jokingly called each other 'brothers' as they were born in the same year, and Gibson helped educate some of Leh's sons. Leh also entertained visitors with colorful anecdotes. In 1967, for example, during the so-

called Second Opium War, a Kuomintang commander woke Leh in the middle of the night to demand that Leh take him to the battlefield near Chiang Khong on the back of a motorbike left with Leh by Peter Kandre. Leh duly took the general, fell off en route, injuring his foot, and then watched the battle with interest. Khun Sa, another participant in this battle, also visited Pha Dua occasionally, and was entertained at Leh's house. Leh met the King of Thailand twice. Towards the end of his life, Leh increasingly participated in academic meetings, attending international conferences on Yao studies (often assisting with translation between Yao, Mandarin, and Thai), and finally visiting Yao groups in Guangdong in the mid 1990s. At other times, he simply enjoyed sitting and talking with tourists who arrived at Pha Dua in coaches en route for Doi Mae Salong or Mae Sai. He often posed for photographs with his second wife, May Saeng Saelit, with whom he lived after the death of Juetso.

Leh's death in 2000, in Pha Dua at the age of 81 because of goiter-related problems, does not simply mark the passing of a remarkable scholar and informant. In many ways, Leh's death also marks the transition that virtually all 'hill tribes' have undergone in Thailand during the last 30 years. In his early life, Leh and his family had little contact with lowland cultures: they relied purely on agriculture and they lived in such isolation that they took bells into forests to ward off bears or large cats. Now, Leh's sons and grandchildren work at factories in Japan and Taiwan, attend universities in Bangkok, and live in two-storey concrete houses with televisions and mobile phones. The cultural distinctiveness of so-called 'hill tribes' that drew many of the original researchers is now much decreased. But despite this loss, Pha Dua remains a strong community partly because of Leh's leadership. In spiritual terms, villagers in Pha Dua have continued to practice Lu Mien weddings and rituals (a fact often not realized by many tourists who seek instead to buy cheap souvenirs). In political terms, Pha Dua has also so far avoided some of the worst cases of government intervention. In 1988, for example, government workers burnt houses in Akha villages close to Pha Dua and forced their residents to move to Burma. In the following

five years these, and some additional Lahu, villages near Doi Fung had agricultural land reforested with pine plantations by the Royal Forest Department. It is possibly because of the respect afforded Pha Dua by lowland authorities, and the positive image developed during Leh's time, that Pha Dua has been able to avoid such intervention.

Leh Tsan Kway's remarkable achievement was in his ability to bridge many social divides and assist both highland people and diverse foreign researchers. Despite his involvement in

writings that have focused on "hill tribes" as distinctive or disappearing ethnic groups, Leh always stressed that the success of communities did not lie in just the continued use of old customs and clothes, but also in access to the means of development, such as land and trade. His legacy remains in combining these two themes: he helped create a prosperous family and village; and—perhaps more than any other informant—he contributed to a vast diversity of written information about highland life and cultures.