Lahu:

The Cultural Logic that Identifies "Two" as "One"

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Author: “Is Xeul Sha one or two?”

Cal Thid: [pauses] “One.”

Author: [stunned] “One?!” [takes a deep breath] “But you and the other elders told me before that ‘Xeul Sha is a pair, a male and a female.’ ”

Cal Thid: [smiling] “Xeul Sha *is* a pair. One is right, two is right.” [1]

This stimulating conversation about Xeul Sha, the Lahu supreme god(s), took place in a remote Lahu village I visited only briefly when I was conducting my doctorial fieldwork in Lancang Lahu Autonomous County in Southwest China in 1996. During my first visit to Lancang several years before, a famous Lahu folk singer had already informed me that Xeul Sha was a pair of male and female gods, rather than a male god only or one god with ambiguous sex identity, as had been misrepresented in some scholarly publications in Chinese at that time. My investigations had further convinced me that there were two gods referred to as Xeul Sha, although my survey questions on this issue were whether Xeul Sha was a pair or a single and what their gender identities were. During the aforementioned dialogue, I raised the “one-or-two” question for the first time, intending to open up a conversation about a slightly different issue, namely, the distinctions between the two gods. Assuming the mutual exclusivity of “one” and “two” as universal logic, I considered Cal Thid’s response a complete denial of Xeul Sha as a pair of male and female gods. It was his seemingly illogical reasoning, “One is right, two is right,” that opened my mind to an alien cultural logic that fuses “two” and “one” in a “pair,” or in a dyadic relationship.

When I revisited the village in 2005, the revered “senior elder,” Cal Thid, had already passed away a couple of years before. As I heard the sad news, I could not help gazing up at the village

burial site on the mountaintop and cherishing my memories of Cal Thid with special sentiment and gratitude. By then, the Lahu logic of pair, in which "two" equals "one," was no longer obscure and elusive to me:

The Lahu "pair" is both one conjoined entity and two distinguishable entities. In this sense, one is two, and two are one. Importantly, the one paired entity tends to outshine the two distinguishable entities, as reflected in Cal Thid's identification of Xeul Sha when he was obliged to choose between one and two. It is this dyadic principle that integrates the Lahu worldview, which revolves around the cosmological ideal: "Everything comes in pairs." The cultural code of male-female dyads also predominates in the social structures and cultural ideals of the indigenous Lahu traditions.

In this chapter, I will focus on how the principle of male-female dyads manifests itself in the initiation rites, life cycle, gender roles, leadership organization, kinship system, and romantic expressions of indigenous Lahu traditions. I will demonstrate the ways in which the dyadic principle contributes to gender-egalitarian constructions of the Lahu society, as is vividly encapsulated in the proverb: "Chopsticks only work in pairs." The dyadic nature of chopsticks suggests the positive value placed on male-female dyads with an emphasis on similarities between men and women. The data used in this chapter are primarily derived from my fieldwork in the Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, where most Lahu reside.

The Lahu are a Tibeto-Burman-speaking people living in the mountainous border regions of China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.[2] According to the 2000 census, the Lahu population in China was 453,705, which constituted about two-thirds of the total Lahu population.[3] The subsistence pattern of the Lahu is typically a mixture of farming, raising domestic animals, hunting and gathering, and fishing. Intensive agriculture (irrigated wet-rice) and the growth of cash crops

have been greatly increased in the last few decades. Households constitute the center of Lahu village life and serve as basic units for production and consumption.[4] The Lahu people practice monogamy, and married couples tend to jointly own and manage their households. The Lahu kinship system is fundamentally bilateral although there are varying degrees of matrilineal or patrilineal skewing in different regions or subgroups. Varying degrees of bilocal tendency mark the patterns of post-marital residence. Despite their regional differences and subgroup distinctions, the Lahu people share similar beliefs in Xeul Sha, the paired creator(s) of the universe and supreme parental god(s).

Dyadic Initiation and Life Cycle

By transforming boys into manhood[5] or girls into womanhood[6], initiation rites of many traditional societies typically highlight gender difference and division. While reinforcing the symbolic and ideological dichotomy between masculinity and femininity, some initiation rites also (re)produce and strengthen the structural and emotional bonding among males through sn age-grade system.[7]

In Lahu society, wedding ceremonies constitute initiation rites, which are centered around forming a male-female dyad and ensuring its endurance in the life cycle which includes the afterlife. In a Lahu wedding, a boy and a girl — a pair of socially defined "children" — are simultaneously initiated into adulthood and obtain the status of "elders (chaw mawd)." As a cultural definition of adulthood, the privileged status of "elder" depends solely on one's marital status and is totally irrelevant to both age and sex. Before the 1950s, some Lahu individuals in arranged marriages may have become an "elder" when they were

as young as eleven. In contrast, the social category of “elder” excludes all those who have never married, even if they are actually advanced in years.

Rather than socializing boys and girls into opposing values and roles of masculinity and femininity, Lahu wedding ceremonies symbolically and ritually bind the pair of cross-sex “children” together and transform them into a single social entity that is composed of two social adults. While simultaneously initiating a boy and a girl into adulthood, the symbolism and rituals of the Lahu wedding articulate the sacredness, endurance, and harmony of a husband-wife dyad.[8]

The sacredness of the transformation into a paired social entity is encoded in the Lahu terms for ‘wedding’, which include ‘lighting [beeswax candles]’, ‘kneeling down and bowing’, and ‘becoming a pair.’ In most Lahu areas, the wedding consists of two separate ceremonies, conforming to the dyadic ideology. The first and more elaborate ceremony is held at the home of the bride’s parents, and the second is held at the home of the groom’s parents. In each ceremony, a pair of beeswax candles is lit for Xeul Sha.

The connotations of the Lahu terms for ‘wedding’ derive from the major rituals of the ceremony, especially the joining of two lives in front of Xeul Sha. After lighting the paired candles on the altar, the bride and groom kneel down side by side facing the altar. In the Lancang area, the standard ritual texts include “Xeul and Sha make a pair, sky and earth make a pair, mountain and river make a pair, tree and bamboo make a pair, chopsticks make a pair. Today, this boy and girl become a pair as you Xeul and Sha.” Singers also perform ritual wedding songs, which trace the origin of human marriage to Xeul Sha’s arrangement of the marriage of the sun (female) and the moon (male). These texts suggest that by becoming

a pair, the new couple has conformed to the cosmic principle set by the paired god.

During the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom ritually close a traditional Lahu lunch box made of bamboo strips. The bride holds the container with her left hand, and the groom holds the cover with his right. Standing side by side, they cross their arms in an interlocked position to unify the box into one, representing their sexual and social unity. The bride and groom then ritually eat the sticky rice in the lunch box, symbolizing the cohesion of the couple throughout life, especially their joint role in work.

In addition to symbolically elaborating the sacred turning point when the boy and the girl join their lives in marriage, moral teachings are offered to the couple, emphasizing the social expectations of their newly acquired status as adults. According to convention, the oldest brother of the bride's mother offers the moral teachings when the ceremony is held at the house of the bride's family, and the oldest brother of the groom's mother gives the speech when the ceremony is held at the home of the groom's family.

Wedding speeches convey core ethics for the husband-wife dyad by underscoring the following three major motifs: First, the exclusive legitimacy of heterosexual monogamy is clearly declared by the principle that "A husband can have only one wife, and a wife can have only one husband." Next, the expectation of lifelong commitment to marriage is elaborated by stressing the impossibility of divorce under any circumstances. According to a common expression of this motif: "rather than treating each other as baskets or bags that one can carry and put down at will, the two of you should live together until [your] hair turns white and yellow. You can never abandon each other even if one suffers from sickness or pain." Thirdly, the couple is instructed to maintain harmonious relationships with each other

and with their relatives. Most importantly, the couple must share all the work of their household: "Whatever needs to be done in your family, the two of you should do it together with warmth and joy, rather than simply watching the other one [perform the task]."

A wedding speech typically concludes with a strong statement that abiding by these principles will result in abundance, and abandoning them will incur misery. Usually, when the couple ritually drinks water from one bowl, the elder explains that if the couple "listens to the words of the elders," what they drink will become the "water of blessings" in all dimensions of their life. They will have many offspring, will prosper in the crops they grow, and will enjoy abundance in the livestock they raise. If the couple disobeys, however, what they drink will become the blood of cattle, symbolizing the curse of pollution and destruction.

After the wedding ceremony, a couple jointly crosses the threshold that divides childhood and adulthood by being forged into a single social entity and remerges as a pair of "elders," or full members of society. According to the Lahu delineation of the life cycle, the stage of "elders" can be further divided into four sub-stages. In the first three sub-stages, which cover the time span from their wedding to their deaths, a married couple is jointly bestowed with corresponding sets of responsibilities, authority, and prestige. In the last sub-stage, the couple is expected to resume their shared responsibilities and prestige as "the spirits of deceased parents" when they reunite in the world of the dead.

1) Junior Elders (al niel, those who are married but have no grandchildren)

At the sub-stage of "junior elders," married couples are usually loaded with the heaviest responsibilities including feeding household members, raising children, and caring for elderly parents. At this stage, a couple also jointly goes through a series of

transformations and attains expanded autonomy and authority. The authority of a couple is closely associated with their position in the household in which they reside. In most Lahu areas, a newly-married couple is obligated by convention to reside in the household of the bride's parents for three years. After that, they move into the household of the groom's parents for two to three years. The length of bride-and-groom service is flexible and is determined by negotiations between the two sets of households and the labor and land situations of the couple's respective parents. During this time, the young couple serves primarily as laborers for the household in which they reside. Since each household is co-headed by the couple's parents, the couple has no formal authority in rituals and in decision-making. After the husband and wife complete their labor obligations in serving both sets of parents, they eventually establish and co-head their own household.

2) Elders (chaw mawd, those who have grandchildren and still co-head their households with their spouses).

During this sub-stage of life, a couple has fulfilled the responsibility of raising their children, and the struggle to feed their household members is generally lessened. They begin to receive labor input from their unmarried children and newly-married children and children-in-law. The social authority of the couple reaches its peak when they become elders because many of their children have become co-heads of their own households. During the Lahu New Year Festival and the Festival of Tasting New Rice, such elders are invited to feasts at the households co-headed by their children and enjoy a revered ritual status that is second only to that of Xeul Sha and the spirits of deceased parents.

3) Senior Elders (chaw mawd qo, retired elders whose children have all established their own households.)

In Lahu terms, a couple becomes "senior elders" when their "children have divided the household completely." At the moment when a couple is transformed from "elders" to "senior elders"—when their last child and child-in-law have inherited their house and household—they are formally retired from the position of household co-heads. Although "senior elders" often offer advice to their children and children-in-law, formal responsibility and authority to make decisions for the household are shifted to their successors. At the same time, however, the ritual prestige of senior elders reaches its peak.

Having completely fulfilled their responsibilities in life, senior elders are entitled to be cared for by their children, or to "eat the strength" of their children, as the reward for their lifelong hard work. They usually live together with one of their children and his or her spouse who have jointly inherited their house and have succeeded them as household co-heads. They also receive various forms of support and care from their other children and children-in-law.

4) The spirits of deceased parents (chaw mawd ned, the spirits of the deceased "elders" and "senior elders," i.e., those who die after they have become grandparents).

"Elders" and "senior elders" receive great respect and honor in mortuary rituals, which celebrate and revere their fulfillment of the responsibility of raising their children to adulthood. Elaborate rituals are performed to appropriately and honorably send their souls to the world of the dead and to let them symbolically pass down blessings to their children and children-in-law before their burials. Most important, funeral symbolism guarantees that the deceased elders and senior elders will reunite with their spouses in the afterlife, ensuring the

full force of their joint responsibility and authority in the spiritual realm. Believed to possess critical power in the well-being of their children's households, the spirits of deceased parents receive offerings from their children on most festive and ritual occasions.

In brief, the Lahu wedding serves as a rite of passage, initiating two incomplete individuals into adulthood. Through the wedding ceremonies that forge a paired social entity, a boy and a girl are simultaneously transformed into social adults and acquire the status of "elders." From then on, the couple is expected to be bound together to jointly go through the different sub-stages of "elders" when alive, and to reunite as "parental spirits" in the afterlife. By defining the stages of the life cycle according to marital and parental status, the responsibility, authority, and prestige of men and women are intrinsically intertwined with each other in husband-wife dyads. From this dyadic perspective of personhood, gender equality is simply a matter of course throughout the life cycle and beyond.

Gender Sharing of Labor [9]

"Sexual division of labor" is perhaps one of the most widely used concepts in the past century and a half. Despite the enormous development in cross-cultural studies of the subject matter, this concept is often erroneously associated with biological determinism, which assumes a natural and exclusive link between women and childrearing. The Lahu ideal and practice of gender sharing of labor occupies an extreme end among the diverse patterns of gender allocation of labor which have resulted from biosocial interactions in different ecological contexts. As suggested by the Lahu metaphor: "Chopsticks only work in pairs," the equal contribution of each stick in a pair of chopsticks in their joint performance of each task echoes the naturalization of joint gender roles,

including pregnancy, childbirth (the husband serves as midwife), childcare, domestic chores, and subsistence work.

Corresponding to the perception that the offspring of a couple are the "bone and marrow-blood and flesh" of both parties to a union, Lahu principles expect the husband and wife to share all child-related tasks, which is described by a gender-neutral term (yad hu) that means both 'childbearing' and 'childrearing'. Whereas biology assigns pregnancy and childbirth exclusively to women, Lahu origin myths trivialize such a division by depicting how women took over these tasks, which were originally performed by men, either by accident or through compassion. Corresponding to such mythological explanations, traditional norms emphasize the joint effort of a married couple in pregnancy and childbirth. During pregnancy, a husband is expected to carry out a larger proportion of the work that the couple had previously shared and to track his wife's bodily changes. At childbirth, he is required by the convention to serve as the midwife. At the early stage of the contractions, the expectant father massages his wife's abdomen to examine the position of the fetus and to perform external manipulation if the fetus is in a transverse or breech position. Other tasks assigned to the husband include supporting his wife's back during childbirth, cutting the umbilical cord, picking up and washing the newborn, burying the placenta, and washing the bloodstained pajamas, cloths, and bed sheets.

The joint role of a Lahu couple in childcare starts from the moment the child is born. During the period of postpartum rest, the husband typically stays to take care of both his wife and the newborn. While the mother breastfeeds the baby and serves as the primary caretaker, the father also plays a significant role in taking care of the newborn, including bathing the baby, cleaning the newborn after urination and defecation, and taking turns with his wife to hold the baby. When a

couple returns to their normal work routine, they continue to play a unified role in childcare. Except for nursing, a Lahu couple is expected to take joint responsibility in all major tasks of childcare and childrearing, including carrying, bathing, feeding solid foods, playing with, and comforting their child.

A typical Lahu strategy to cope with the commonly perceived incompatibility between childcare and many subsistence tasks was for the parents to alternate carrying their child on the way to work and sometimes even as they work. Carrying a child to and from the fields and while working is a major task in traditional Lahu childcare. During the first two to three months, the infant is frequently carried in a basket made of very tightly woven, fine bamboo pieces covered and padded with soft cloth. The couple often takes turns carrying the infant on their back or side in the basket. Typically, they place the basket on the ground in the fields where they are working, choosing a shady spot in the summer and a sunny one in winter. Both parents tend to the infant when it cries with the mother nursing it when it is hungry.

From the age of about four months, when the baby's neck muscles are strong enough to support its head, it is carried in a cloth carrier, which is more flexible than the basket. Children up to five years old are occasionally carried in this cloth carrier, especially when they are sick or when they are traveling to more distant fields. While the parents are working, young children usually entertain themselves nearby or play with older siblings. When a child is sleepy or clingy, whichever parent the child approaches first will carry him or her until he or she falls asleep. Once asleep, the child is often placed in bed while the parents continue to perform domestic tasks or perhaps on a wooden board in a nearby field shelter while they are working outside. If the weather is cold and there is no

shelter near the work site, the child is then often carried in the cloth carrier by both parents alternately for the duration of their nap.

In addition to the physical care of children, the husband and wife also share responsibilities in discipline, education, affection, and time spent. While the role of husband-wife team in childrearing is highly emphasized in Lahu society, many couples will also receive supplementary childcare on a regular basis from parents and older children, other relatives, and even neighbors. Interestingly, these non-parental caretakers are of both sexes rather than being predominantly female.

In accordance with the gender sharing of tasks in childrearing, which creates a dual parent-child bond, the Lahu ideal of "husband and wife do it together" also includes the concept "work hard to eat." This phrase connotes all the tasks involved in feeding a household, from planting to weeding, harvesting, storing, pounding (rice), cooking, fetching water and firewood, raising pigs and chickens, and gardening. These tasks apparently blur the boundaries between food production, which is commonly viewed as subsistence work and is often linked to males, and food preparation, which is typically classified as reproductive work and is usually associated with females.

The dyadic socio-cultural ideal that unites a husband and a wife as a single labor team to jointly perform both productive and reproductive tasks is widely realized in practice. According to the household surveys I conducted in the Abo village (sixty-three households in 1996) of the Qhawqhat village cluster, fifty-one out of the sixty-three head couples of these households (81 percent) had an equal share of labor both inside and outside of the house. The remaining twelve pairs of household head couples were considered as exceptions because of one spouse's

idiosyncratic conditions, which included eight excusable causes such as chronic diseases and non-traditional occupations as well as four "inexcusable" cases of laziness and alcohol addiction.

Despite the seamless gender unity suggested by the ideal that "husband and wife do it together," not all tasks performed by Lahu men and women are identical in practice. In fact, a clear division of labor by sex is observable in a few tasks. For instance, hunting, blacksmithing, and tasks in the fields that require intense strength (such as plowing and cutting trees), are typically men's work. In addition, weaving cloth is typically a woman's task. Similar patterns in the division of labor have also been reported among Lahu living elsewhere.

Lahu villagers do recognize the impact of sex difference in labor organization. For instance, the general advantage of men in physical strength was the common answer to my persistent inquiries concerning the reasons for the clear gender-based division of a few tasks. However, the villagers also acknowledged individual diversity in strength among members of the same sex**.** Many people gave me examples of some women in the village who were physically stronger than their husbands and performed heavy tasks such as plowing and woodcutting. Na Lad, a woman in her forties, proudly told me (in her husband's presence) that she was stronger than her husband and therefore performed all the heavy work in the household that was usually done by men. Other ethnographic studies have also recorded that some Lahu wives plow and hunt together with their husbands, although males typically perform those tasks that require more strength. In this sense, while most Lahu villagers recognized the general sex difference in strength as responsible for the allocation of some tasks, neither individual strength nor related productive tasks were strictly coded by sex. Interestingly, even the existence of gender division of roles in the aforementioned tasks is ignored by Lahu mythological and ritual songs, which portray men and women playing joint roles in

hunting large game, cutting bamboo and trees, reaching in the honeycomb, blacksmithing, and hunting.

In summary, Lahu tradition defines a married couple as a single labor team, ideally functioning together as smoothly as a pair of chopsticks in both childrearing and subsistence work. The socio-cultural emphasis on gender sharing of labor minimizes the impact of sex difference, thus promoting gender equality in socio-cultural allocation of labor.

Paired Leadership

As suggested by "Chopsticks only work in pairs," a single chopstick is useless, thus, powerless. This common saying also serves as a metaphor for the paired leadership in traditional Lahu society. According to Lahu principle (awl lid), in the same way that the universe operates, households and villages are also manageable only when "a pair of male-female masters rules together."

The indigenous Lahu ideology and institutions required married couples to serve as household co-heads and to hold political and spiritual posts in the village and the village cluster. According to my observations in 2007, the co-headship of husband and wife in the household is still widely practiced in Lancang Lahu Autonomous County. However, except for a handful of village clusters, the Lahu indigenous tradition of paired leadership beyond household has been eradicated by the radical social changes introduced by the Chinese state since 1949.

Fulqhat is one of the few Lahu village clusters in Lancang where indigenous village organization immediately revived as soon as the state policies relaxed in the early 1980s.

Since then, the indigenous leadership of Fulqhat has operated both at the levels of the village and the village cluster. The structures and norms of the indigenous community leadership described in the remainder of this section were derived from my fieldwork between 1995 and 1996.[10] When I revisited Fulqhat in 2005, except for the replacement of two major leading couples due to the death of one member of each pair**,** the general patterns of the paired leadership still remained intact in the community.

At the village level, three pairs of leaders manage the social and spiritual life—qhat shie ('village head'), cawl paf ('leading spiritual specialist'), and cal lieq ('leading blacksmith', who is called ca liq in Lahu Na). Each term can refer to either the head couple as a unit or to one of the couple's constituent individuals, depending on the linguistic contexts.

The three pairs of village leaders are in charge of different domains of village life. The village head couple is mainly responsible for maintaining social order both within and beyond the village and especially for the enactment of customary laws. The head couple of spiritual specialists mainly represent the villagers in serving village guardian spirits, especially by performing rituals at "the temple of village guardian spirit(s)." "Leading blacksmiths" perform rituals to assure spiritual security for a village's agricultural production, which is also symbolized by tool-making for the village. In other words, whereas the village head focuses on social affairs and customary laws, spiritual specialists and the leading blacksmiths are in charge of the spiritual aspects of village life according to indigenous Lahu religion.

While each couple has certain specialized duties**,** the three leading couples also cooperatively organize major village rituals and activities. On such occasions, these three

pairs of leaders are expected to operate as a trinity in village life, and they are all equally respected, especially in ritual symbolism.

At the level of the village cluster, indigenous posts are also held by husband-wife dyads. The locus of the power structure of Fulqhat is in the founders' village, called "the Old Village," from which other villages have sprung over several generations. Besides the triple posts set up for an ordinary village, the Old Village possesses two additional posts—the head of the village cluster and a Buddhist "monk-couple"—representing not only the village but also the entire village cluster.

The duty of the head couple of the village cluster focuses on legal and social relations between the villages and neighboring village clusters. Those who are dissatisfied with the settlement of a dispute at the village level, especially a dispute involving members from more than one village, can appeal to the heads of the village cluster.

The most interesting post in Fulqhat is that of the Buddhist monk couple.[11] The Buddhism introduced to Lancang by a Han monk is the dominant sect of Mahayana Buddhism in China, which requires rituals to be held by single celibate male monks. Nevertheless, while indigenizing Buddha into Xeul Sha, a pair of male and female gods, the ancestors of Fulqhat villagers also transformed the monk position to a dyadic unit reserved only for a married couple. The Buddhist monk-couple is called <u>ful yiel</u>. <u>Ful yiel</u> is a Mandarin loanword meaning "Buddhist monk who is a celibate senior male." Ironically, this Han term is used by Fulqhat villagers to refer to both the married couple who holds the post and to either individual member of the couple, just like the gender-neutral terms used for other village-cluster posts. Modified by gendered suffixes, this term can also be transformed

into two gender-specific terms—ful shief paf ('male Buddhist monk') and ful yiel ma ('female Buddhist monk')—in order to distinguish the individuals in the post when necessary. The most significant duty of a Buddhist monk-couple is to represent the entire village cluster when worshiping and making offerings to Xeul Sha (Lahu Buddha) at the pair of Buddhist temples, which are adjacent to each other but of different sizes. The large temple is called hawq yiel and the small one is called ful yiel. They are identified by villagers as female and male respectively.

The leaders of the entire village cluster of Fulqhat also work cooperatively in major village-cluster activities, especially during rituals. For instance, at the beginning of the Lahu New Year, all of the leading couples jointly represent the village cluster, followed by many villagers, at a ritual site at the top of the mountain where they dance and make offerings to welcome Xeul Sha to Fulqhat. Afterwards, the group stops at the village dancing center to make offerings and to let Xeul Sha have a little rest. Then, with music and dance, they send each member of the dyad god, Xeul Sha, to stay at his or her respective Buddhist temple, assuming that they will remain there during the entire festival (fifteen days). At the end of the Lahu New Year, a reverse ritual is held to send Xeul Sha back to the top of the mountain.

At the levels of both village and village cluster, the indigenous leaders of Fulqhat are elected by communal consensus based mainly on a combination of personality and competence. Insisting that a husband-wife team hold each post, the criteria for leadership candidates focus on the physical strength, gentleness, fairness, and leadership capability of both the husband and the wife. The elders that I spoke with stated that they measured their leadership candidates by the overall strengths of each couple considered as a unit.

Like those in other “tribal” political systems, the indigenous leading officers in Fulqhat are characterized more by their community service than by their authority. None of the indigenous leading couples are exempt from labor, although villagers do provide some voluntary labor services to compensate for the time and materials the leading couples dedicate to the community. In addition, the prestige and authority of the leading couples are informal and impermanent, derived from and maintained by generosity, competence, persuasiveness, job performance, and good fortune. Elders may call a reelection to replace a leading couple if they perform their job unsatisfactorily or if the village or village cluster suffers any misfortune within the year or two following their undertaking the position. Such a situation occurs most frequently for the position of spiritual leader and leading blacksmith when there are natural disasters and bad harvests. Because of the general expectation that they are to set moral examples and provide selfless service to the community and because of the high risk of being blamed for the village’s misfortunes, some qualified couples are reluctant to accept such offices. Nevertheless, if they have been elected, refusing to take the office would be considered as an offense to norms or principles. Therefore, some head couples take on the responsibility with reluctance, a tendency that has been intensified by the increasing influence of the market economy. For instance, Zhang Bao temporarily left the village cluster to live with his relatives in the early 1990s soon after he and his wife had been elected the leading blacksmith of Fulqhat. His departure sent the subtle message that the couple was unwilling to accept this office. However, upon his return to Fulqhat, the village elders insisted and eventually succeeded in imposing the will of the community on the couple.

Adhering to the dyadic principle, leadership shifting also occurs when one co-leader is

unable to perform the task because of natural causes. The death of one member of a leading couple requires the surviving spouse to resign from the position even if he or she remarries soon after. For example, when the male monk of Fulqhat died in 1990, a new leading couple was quickly elected and took over the position. Similarly, if the current head couple requests permission to resign due to old age or the failing health of one member of a leading dyad, a new couple will replace them both. In addition, the moral misconduct or negligence of duty of one co-head normally results in the impeachment of both leaders. For example, in a village cluster that is a neighbor to Fulqhat, the head couple of a village was removed from the post in the mid 1980s when the male co-head was found to be involved in an extramarital relationship.

Compared with the joint roles played by household co-heads, division of gender roles is observable among the leading couples in the revived indigenous institutions. The disparities between the sexes in village leadership have been greatly intensified as indigenous leaders interact with state appointed officials.

Overall, congruent with the cultural ideal of male-female dyads, Lahu indigenous institutions in Lancang were characterized by paired leadership of married couples prior to the 1950s. Despite the destructive impact of radical social changes during the past half century, household co-headship is still widely practiced and paired village leadership is revived, to a certain extent, in a few communities.

Dyads in a Bilateral Kinship System

Cal Lad: Yad Mid [the Lahu nickname given to me by my adoptive relatives in

Qhawqhat], you keep chatting with your Aunty. I have to leave now.

Yad Mid: Where are you going, Uncle? It's getting dark.

Cal Lad: Zhang Lan's wake. She was my haw mawd lawd mawd. If I don't attend, people would judge that I am abandoning [traditional Lahu] principles.

Yad Mid: Oh, I didn't know that she was your haw mawd lawd mawd before.

Cal Lad: Yes. She was the mother of Na Vol [the wife of one of his grandsons].

Yad Mid: I don't get it. There are always so many people [typically over one hundred] in a wake. How can people notice the absence of one remote relative?

Cal Lad: Oh, people surely know it. My sister Na Nud must attend it as well because she is also Zhang Lan's haw mawd lawd mawd.

Yad Mid: Do you mean that people could even notice Na Nud's absence? And, she would be judged negatively for not attending the wake of her brother's grandson's wife's mother?

Cal Lad: Of course. Everyone must attend the wake of their haw mawd lawd mawd.

This mind-boggling conversation, which opened my eyes anew to the mystery of the Lahu kinship system, took place a few months after the dialogue discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Since my first field trip to Lancang, I had sensed the extraordinary significance of kinship in Lahu daily life and started studying their kinship terminology. Several years later, however, as the kinship relations under each kinship category kept expanding like a snowball in my little notebook, I had found no definitive rules to draw clear boundaries for any category. Eventually, I reluctantly gave up my vain effort to delineate the rules of Lahu kinship and accepted the widespread understanding that bilateral kinship

system was simply “notoriously elusive.”[12]

However, the aforesaid conversation did reveal to me quite clearly that boundaries delineating <u>haw mawd lawd mawd</u> do exist: Not only could the villagers unmistakably identify the kinspersons involved in this category, but they also associated these relatives with certain designated ritual responsibilities and obligations. In the next few weeks, I eagerly developed and tested various hypothetical rules for Lahu kinship categories, but they were all quickly dismissed by the Lahu villagers. However, they were unable to clarify the correct rules, which seemed to them as natural, and yet as unexplainable, as the air they breathed.

After I had exhausted all the academically-grounded options, a “wild” idea occurred to me: “Could the Lahu principle of ‘pair’ apply even to their kinship system? Is it possible that a married couple is categorized as one single entity, rather than as two individuals, in their kinship terminology?” Testing this hypothesis was the most rewarding experience of my fieldwork, particularly as the villagers shared with me their great excitement and joy: “You understand it at last!” Uncle Cal Lad beamed, “See, our Lahu principle is not confusing!” Amazingly, by simply thinking from their perspective of the “pair,” the previously elusive Lahu kinship system suddenly became both discernible and clear.

A simple exercise may help the readers comprehend the role that “pair” plays in the Lahu kinship system. Imagine that you were a married Lahu woman. “A” is your father’s brother’s daughter. “B” is your husband’s father’s brother’s son’s wife. In your genealogical tree, is “A” or “B” more closely related to you? From an individual-oriented perspective (“ego”), “A” is certainly closer to you than “B” because “A” is three genealogical spaces

removed from you and "B" is five. However, according to Lahu dyadic kinship reckoning, "A" and "B" are equally close to you. This is because by their reckoning, you and your husband are counted as "one" ("dyadic ego") and your husband's father's brother's son and his wife are also counted simply as "one." Therefore, in your Lahu genealogical tree, "A" and "B" are both equally three genealogical spaces removed from you.

From the perspective of a "dyadic ego," there are four major generalized categories in Lahu kinship terminology:[13] Chaw mawd refers to the older generations of a couple's relatives. Awl viq awl ni refers to relatives of a couple's own generation. Awl yad refers to the relatives one generation below the couple. Haw mawd lawd mawd refers to in-laws derived from the marriages of younger generations.

The relationships between a married couple, who constitute one single social entity, and other members in their immediate community and beyond are mapped by three circles. Each of these circles has certain designated responsibilities and obligations, most importantly, which concern labor cooperation, assistance in food shortage, and ritual participations.[14]

Members within a couple's first circle of relationships are called "one family" (ted yiel chaw), which refers to the core relatives of each of the four primary kin categories. They are the couple's parents, their siblings and their siblings' spouses, their children and children-in-law, and the parents of their children-in-law. According to Lahu traditions, households co-headed by members of "one family" ought to interact with each other by the principle of generalized reciprocity, namely, sharing labor and goods without expecting anything in return. These households also have mutual obligations to participate in most rituals. The degree of closeness expected among the members of Lahu "one family" matches, to some extent, that

expected among members of a traditional nuclear family in the United States.

Members within a couple's second circle of relationships are called "relatives" (ted ceol ted qhad), which refers to the peripheral relatives of each of the four kin categories. For example, the peripheral relatives of a couple's awl viq awl ni include their first and second generational cousins and the spouses of these cousins. According to Lahu traditions, households co-headed by "relatives" (ted ceol ted qhad) ought to interact with each other by the principle of balanced reciprocity, namely, informal exchange of labor and goods with the expectation of a fair return in the near future. These households are only obliged to participate in each other's major rituals, particularly weddings and funerals. In the aforementioned scenario, Uncle Cal Lad and his sister were expected to attend the wake of Zhang Lan because both of them were her peripheral in-laws.

The third relational circle of a couple includes those who are neither the members of the couple's "one family" nor their "relatives." According to Lahu traditions, households co-headed by non-relatives interact with each other either by the principle of monetary exchange, or by the form of barter that expects an immediate and fair return.

Since the 1980s, Lahu principles of household interactions, especially generalized reciprocity, have been increasingly undermined by the rapid expansion of cash crops such as tea and sugarcane. The constant labor shortage of some entrepreneur households may cause an endless drain of laborers from the households of their core relatives, if the latter continue to abide the traditions and offer help without any expectation for return. Nevertheless, as of 2007, in most rural Lahu communities in Lancang, the fundamental structures of the Lahu kinship system have remained strong and reciprocal principles are still practiced. This is

particularly true in the domain of the performance of traditional rituals.

In brief, the Lahu kinship system is governed by both the bilateral principle and the dyadic rule. A married couple is categorized as one single entity in kinship terminology, as well as in the corresponding bilateral networks among households. This dyadic kinship system provides the structural foundation which identifies and empowers the husband-wife dyad to function as conjoined co-heads of their household.

Romance and Love-suicide

While serving as the framework of their worldview and the code of both social organization and gender roles, the Lahu principle of conjoined male-female dyads also shapes their ideal of romance, as expressed in their abundant cultural heritage of very touching courtship songs. Prior to the mid 1980s, interactive singing of love songs between a young man and woman in a semi-public setting constituted both the appropriate and predominant form of courtship in most Lahu villages in Lancang.

Blending spontaneity with convention in style and content, traditional Lahu love songs convey a romantic ideal in which the infatuated attractions and passions seamlessly fuse with harmonious and functional companionship. Rather than creating a romantic fantasy that ends with the wedding, Lahu courtship songs position the passionate expressions of mutual adorations as the prelude to an enduring intimacy throughout a lifetime of marriage. The main body of the courtship songs pronounces in great detail the couple's expectations and commitment to their envisioned marital life. These songs romanticize the social expectations for a monogamous couple to function harmoniously as a pair of chopsticks in all arenas of

everyday life: child rearing, domestic and subsistence work, and interactions with family members and relatives, etc. At the climax of Lahu courtship songs, the two hearts mingle with each other in their faithful and joyful dedication to the responsibilities and obligations entailed their prospective marriage. If a married couple lives happily in accord as expressed in those courtship songs, they are admired for being "with one word and one strength."[15]

Notwithstanding the fact that the Lahu principle of male-female dyads nurtures and promotes egalitarian-based harmony in marriages and gender relations, not all individuals can live up to these social expectations for husband-wife dyads. The gap between the ideal and practice of the Lahu pair is probably most dramatically demonstrated by the conflicts between emotional attachment and social restrictions experienced by some unfortunate individuals. In the traditions of Lahu oral literature, there are stories and antiphonal songs about the love-suicide of a pair of star-crossed lovers, whose romance was doomed by parental disapproval of their proposed marriage. The artistic expressions of the agony and the ultimate dedication of the lovers are exemplified by the following verses of interactive singing of between two performers:[16]

A: The two of us were born to be a pair

Like the bananas growing together on the side of the field

My heart attached to your heart

Even my liver connected to yours.

You and I can't go on without each other

Just as monkeys can't be separated from the trees.

Yet we can't lean on each other in this life.

We can't even hold each other in this life.

What can be done [so that we can marry]?

B: It is said that rice is produced not just in the world of the living

It is said that the world of the dead can also produce rice

You and I, two of us

Discuss with one mouth

You and I, two of us

Talk with one breath

Shall we look for the seed of death under the sky?

Shall we look for the seed of the deceased under the sky?

A: I agree with what you just said

[Let's] look for the seeds of death and the deceased

[Let's] go to the world of the dead

What two of us cannot attain in the world of the living

We will attain in the world of the dead.

Love-suicide is captured in the literature and art of many cultures. Consider Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet and the tragedy of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai in Chinese literature and drama. Nevertheless, outside the realms of literature and art, it does not appear as a widespread social practice. Prior to 1949, the situation in Lahu resembled that in other societies which have artistic expressions of love-suicides. For example, in the Qhawqhat village cluster (population 2320 in 2006), where I have conducted long-term fieldwork, witnesses attest to the fact that love-suicide was unheard of in the community

before 1949. Since 1949, however, love-suicide has shifted from artistic expression into a devastating social reality among the Lahu communities in Lancang. In the Qhawqhat village cluster alone, love-suicides have claimed 105 lives between 1949 and 2007.

This tragic outbreak of love-suicides has resulted from the collision between Lahu tradition and radical social changes imposed by the Chinese state since 1949. State policies have inadvertently torn apart a social fabric which was based on the institutional integrity and moral cohesion of husband-wife bonding. For example, the imposition of collectivism exerted tremendous pressure on the traditionally inseparable ties which existed between spouses in all their daily economic and social activities over the course of their entire life. The result of their separation under collectivist system was a drastic increase in marital conflict and in extramarital liaisons. At the same time, however, there was a drastic increase in both the traditionally strict restrictions on divorce, and the severe punishments meted out to those who were involved in illicit relationships. So, previously surmountable gaps between Lahu ideal and practice suddenly became impassible chasms as a byproduct of socio-cultural changes. As a result, many individuals were trapped in a tragic dilemma between emotional longing, social obligations, and shame. Some of them appropriated the abundant heritage of traditional love songs. In this socio-historical context, however, rather than serving to alleviate their stresses and sufferings through artistic expressions, this cultural treasure-trove became a fatal catalyst in the catastrophic cultural clash.[17]

Rather than being a utopian society, there has always existed a gap between ideal and practice in Lahu society, particularly manifested in conflicts between social norms and

obligations and the emotional desires of certain individuals. Since the 1950s, however, the intensified clash between Lahu dyadic traditions and radical social change has exacerbated the once sporadic conflicts in traditional Lahu society and resulted in the tragic outbreak and retention of a historically high incidence of love-suicides.

To conclude, not only does the ideal of the male-female dyad prevail in Lahu religion and in their cultural delineations of personhood and life cycle, but it is also institutionalized in their gender roles, kinship structure, traditional leadership, and romantic expression. Such cultural logic and institutions generate cross-sex bonding and gender equality by highlighting the inalienable interdependence between males and females, who are believed to make each other complete, even merging into a separate and higher identity. Therefore, in traditional Lahu society, gender equality is not achieved by a careful distribution of equal power and prestige between males and females, but rather, it is fostered by the dyadic unity of the two sexes: "Chopsticks only work in pairs."

Notes

[1] For the purpose of privacy-protection, I use pseudonyms for all the individuals as well as the villages and village clusters mentioned in this chapter. I would like to thank Betty LeJeune for her editorial comments on this chapter.

[2] Anthony Walker, "The Division of the Lahu People," *Journal of the Siam Society* 62, No. 1 (1974): 1-26.

[3] National Bureau of Statistics of China, *Zhongguo 2000 Nian Renkoupucha Ziliao* [Tabulation on the 2000 Population Census of the People's Republic of China]. (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2002) p. 251.

[4] Jacquetta Hill, "The Household as the Center of Life Among the Lahu Shehleh of Northern Thailand." In K. Aoi, K. Morioka, and J. Suginohara, eds., *Family and Community Changes in East Asia* (Tokyo: Japan Sociological Society, 1985), pp. 504-525.

[5] Deborah A. Elliston, "Erotic Anthropology: 'Ritualized Homosexuality' in Melanesia and beyond," in *American Ethnologist* 22 No.4 (1995), pp. 848-867. Also see Thomas O. Beidelman, *Cool Knife: Imagery of Gender, Sexuality, and Moral Education in Kaguru Initiation Ritual*. (Washington : Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

[6] Nancy Lutkehaus, "Introduction." In *Gender Rituals: Female Initiation in Melanesia*. Nancy Lutkehaus and Paul Roscoe, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 3-32.

[7] Roy Wagner, "Ritual as Communication: Order, Meaning, and Secrecy in Melanesian Initiation Rites." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 13 (1984), pp. 143-155.

[8] The remainder of this section is derived from Shanshan Du, *"Chopsticks Only Work in Pairs": Gender Unity and Gender Equality among the Lahu of Southwest China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp.53-67.

[9] This section is adopted from Shanshan Du "Gender Sharing of Labor: An Anthropological Perspective." In *Exploring Women's Studies*, Carol Berkin, Carole Appel, and Judith Pinch, eds. Prentice Hall, 2005), pp. 186-191. For theoretical discussions of the subject, see Shanshan Du "'Husband and Wife Do It Together': Sex/Gender Allocation of Labor among the Qhawqhat Lahu of Lancang, Southwest China." *American Anthropologist* 102 No. 3 (2000), pp. 520-523.

[10] Du (2002), pp. 126-135.

[11] Shanshan Du, "Is Buddha A Couple?: The Lahu Gender-Unitary Perspectives of Buddhism." *Ethnology* 42, No. 3(2003), pp. 253-271.

[12] Carsten, Janet and Stephen Hugh-Jones, "Introduction." In *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and*

Beyond. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[13] For details of these kinship categories, see Du (2002), pp. 140-149.

[14] Ibid., pp. 149-161.

[15] For details of Lahu conceptualization of romance and intimacy, see Shanshan Du, "'With One Word and One Strength': Intimacy among the Lahu of Southwest China." *Cross-Cultural Studies of Intimacies*. William Jankowiak, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 95-121.

[16] These verses were collected and translated from Chinese into English by the author.

[17] Shanshan Du "Choosing between Love and Life: Negotiating Dyadic Gender Ideals among the Lahu of Southwest China." In *Critical Asian Studies* 36, No. 2(2004), pp. 239-263.

Suggested Readings

Du, Shanshan *"Chopsticks Only Work in Pairs": Gender Unity and Gender Equality among the Lahu of Southwest China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. An ethnography on the gender system among the Lahu in contemporary China.

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