

Cult of “Fu” or Living Buddha among the Lahu in Yunnan, China: Surviving Belief in Supernatural Powers

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the sovereignty and marginalization of an ethnic minority people. Although Lahu people, a highland dwelling ethnic minority of the area called “Zomia,” are now relatively powerless and live in the geographical and social peripheries of diverse states including China, Myanmar and Thailand, they were once strong and enjoyed a high degree of autonomy in the 18th and 19th centuries in Yunnan, China. Their independent territories were enabled by their religio-political government system, based on hierarchically organized villages that were governed by the charisma-wielding Master Monks and their temples located in several central villages. Mobilized by the Buddhist monks, the Lahu repeatedly fought against the local and central governments, but the rebellions were eventually all pacified. The temples were destroyed and the independent Lahu territories were lost by the beginning of the 20th century. Since then, the Lahu Buddhist movements disappeared from historical records. Based on the field study of the villages that were involved in the Lahu Buddhist movements, this paper presents oral histories of Lahu Buddhist movements as well as religious beliefs and practices of the Lahu today. The study finds the surviving millenarians currently living among Lahu villagers. For students of religions and ethnic minorities, the paper provides detailed descriptions on the messianic aspirations of the marginalized ethnic minority, their view on charismatic and supernatural leaders, and the importance of abstinence associated with these religious leaders.

Keywords: ethnic minority, religion, Buddhism, millenarianism, supernatural power, Yunnan, China, Lahu

1. Introduction¹

Lahu people, a highland dwelling ethnic minority in southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia, have historically practiced pioneer swidden agriculture and for many generations lived and moved in areas

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under the political, military, and economic pressures of diverse valley-dwelling peoples including the Tai (Dai) and the Han. But, due to the increasing scarcity of cultivatable land and the extension of stricter administrative controls of lowland governments to the frontier areas, the autonomy these people formerly enjoyed has been significantly restricted. As national borders became a political reality, the Lahu have been marginalized. At present, the Lahu live as a weak ethnic minority in the geographical and social peripheries of different states including China, Myanmar and Thailand.

However weak and peripheral now, the Lahu people in 18th and 19th century Yunnan were very strong and enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. From the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the Lahu repeatedly fought against the local and national governments and were notorious as rebellious barbarians. These Lahu rebellions were of messianic nature, for they were mobilized by their religious beliefs and organization.

In the beginning of the 18th century, Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to the Lahu areas in southwest Yunnan. The Buddhism introduced from Jizu Mountain 鷄足山, Dali 大理 blended with the Lahu indigenous religion and gave a basis for the people to establish autonomous regio-political territories in southwest Yunnan. In this regio-political government system, smaller villages had a village temple and monks administered the villages. These villages were integrated into a hierarchical system in which the Master Monks (sometimes called “Dafoye” 大佛爺) of center villages stood at the top and administered the smaller villages. Many Master Monks were believed to possess supernatural powers and were supreme leaders both in the religious, political, and military spheres. The religion mobilized rebellions in which these charismatic monks directed villagers in the fights against the local Tai (Dai) and national Qing government armies (Kataoka 2007, 2013a, 2013b; Ma 2011, 2013b).

However, all these rebellions were eventually defeated and pacified by the more powerful forces of the Qing government. The independent Lahu territories that had been governed by the so-called “Five Buddhas” (*wufo* 五佛 in Chinese) were all destroyed. The once independent Lahu religio-political territories came to an end. A part of the Lahu population came under governmental control, while the others fled to more frontier areas, even to the Burmese territories, where it was difficult for the governmental control to reach.

Since then, reports about the Lahu religious movements almost disappeared from the historical

records.² After the establishment of the New Chinese State, ethnic religion came to be regarded as a politically sensitive issue, especially in the border regions in which the Lahu lived, and “all activities linked with the worship of *E Sha* (*G’ui sha*, the creator and supreme god in Lahu) among all the Lahu, such as gatherings at village temples, or rituals of calling or sending souls, have been banned since 1958” (Ma 2013a, 46).

Thanks to the historical studies by Kataoka (2013a, 2013b) and Ma (2011, 2013a), we know what the *fu* (monks) and *fu yeh* (temples) were like in the past. However, we do not know the present religious situations of the Lahu and Wa centered on *fu* and *fu yeh*, especially the current situations of those villages that were called the “Places of Five Buddhas”五佛之地 and were once religiously, politically, and militarily very active and influential.

Although this paper is a descriptive report on the contemporary Lahu people in China, it also has implications concerning the study of millennialistic religion among marginalized ethnic minorities. Many studies on minority highlanders in Zomia, including the recent influential book *The Art of Not Being Governed* (Scott 2009), describe the subordinate status of these peoples vis-à-vis powerful lowlanders as well as the messianic movements that the former mounted against the latter in the critical moments in their history. With regards to the religion-based studies, my paper provides detailed descriptions on the messianic aspirations of the marginalized highlanders, their view on charismatic and supernatural leaders, and the importance of abstinence attached to these religious leaders.³

From March to August, 2012, I stayed in Meng Lang, the Lancang county seat, and made visits to the villages that I could identify as ones being listed as “Places of Five Buddhas” as well as ones that, I knew from the Lahu villagers in Lancang, once had had *fu* and *fu yeh* in the past.⁴ I made visits to the sites where *fu yeh* had once stood and, using the Lahu language, conducted many informal interviews with villagers.⁵ Some villagers that I had interviews with were small children when *fu* and *fu yeh* still existed there in the villages and told me what they saw with their own eyes. Other villagers related to me their

² Ma (2013, 27) writes, “it [is] difficult to find a series of historical documents about the change and spread of the secret society, and its detailed progress among the Lahu people.” One of the cases recorded is the one on “Zadie *E Sha*” (Ma 2013, 43-44; Zhang *et al.* 2008, 55).

³ My paper is more inclined to provide detailed information acquired in my fieldwork than to analyze this data. This is why I literally cite long statements given by the Lahu villagers in order for students of religion and ethnic minorities to make use of and develop analysis from them.

⁴ Lists of the former Lahu and Wa Buddhist centers (五佛 *wufo*) differ according to historical and ethnographical studies. See Kataoka (2013, 74n11).

⁵ But in the villages where non-Lahu residents are living now, I tried interviews in Mandarin.

memories that were told to them by their elders. My observations of the remains of old *fu yeh* and interviews with the villagers reveal the Lahu and Wa beliefs and practices concerning *fu* and *fu yeh* both in the past as well as in their present situations, because through speaking about their religion in the past, these villagers' stories also reveal their current religious viewpoints.

Of the 17 villages in which I conducted research, I will take Nanzha Fu 南柵佛 and Dongzhu 東主佛 as case studies and report the research results in detail.⁶ Based mainly on these two cases, I will then discuss the continuity and change in beliefs of Lahu and Wa villagers regarding supernatural powers.

2. Villages That Once Had *Fu* and *Fu yeh*

2.1 *Nanzha Fu* 南柵佛

2.1.1 *Fu* and *Fu yeh* in the Past

Many of the Chinese studies on Lahu Buddhist history refer to Nanzha Fu as the center of the “Five Buddhas” of the Lahu in the 18th and 19th centuries.⁷ A Lahu cadre in Lancang County government also said, “In the past, there were ‘fu’ (monks) and there was a ‘fu yeh’ (temple) in such places as Ankang (now in Fubang Township⁸) and Nanzha. The biggest among them was the one in Nanzha.”⁹ An elder of the Nanzha Fofang village also related that there were no *fu yeh* in other villages. The elder also said the first and true *fu* is “the one here” (Nanzha Fofang village).¹⁰ Although the Nanzha monastery was already destroyed and there are no *fu* or *fu yeh* anymore, there are a lot of remains of the monastery and the widow of its last monk is still alive. Villagers have memories about the old-time *fu yeh* and the monks residing

⁶ The former Buddhist places that I made research about mainly by visits and interviews are: 1. Baka Fu 壩卡佛, Shuangjiang County, 2. Nanzha Fu 南柵佛, Ankang Township, 3. Manda Fu 蠻大佛, Wendong Township, 4. Laba Fu 拉巴佛, Donghe Township, 5. Laba Fu 拉巴佛, Muga Township, 6. Mengnuo Fu 勐糯佛, Muga Township, 7. Nanliu village 南六村, Muga Township, 8. Bangli Fu 邦利佛, Muga Township, 9. Kalang Fu 佻朗佛, Fubang Township, 10. Ankang Fu 安康佛, Fubang Township, 11. Saihan Fu 賽罕佛, Fubang Township, 12. Dongzhu Fu 東主佛, Zhutang Township, 13. Fofang village 佛房寨, Menglang Township, 14. Mengka Fu 勐卡佛, Ximeng County, 15. Nanduan Fu 南段佛, Nuofu Township, 16. Basuoduo village 八索多寨, Nuofu Township, 17. Ponong Fu 破弄佛, Menglang Township. Except for 1 and 14, these are all in present-day Lancang Lahu Autonomous County.

⁷ The Chinese term “fo” (Buddha) is pronounced as “fu” in Yunnan accent. I use “fu,” not “fo” as spelled in the Standard Chinese, because the Lahu villagers used the term in Yunnan dialect.

⁸ “A Hka Fu,” as called so by local Lahu villagers, is located in Ping'an Village 平安村, Fubang Township 富邦鄉 and is presumed to be Ankang Fo 安康佛 in the Chinese literature.

⁹ Interview with a cadre of the Lancang Lahu Autonomous County. August, 2012.

¹⁰ The former part of the villager's statement is not true. Actually, there are *fu yeh* in other villages, too.

there.¹¹

The destroyed Nanzha monastery was built at a corner of the forest that is connected to the village. The old-time monastery was comprised of *hpa yeh* (literally, “monks’ house” in Lahu), *haw yeh* (temple hall), a dancing ground, and a *g’ui po* (pond).¹² In the forest above the monastery, there is a place called *hk’a sheu* (“village god”) or *sha tu kui* (“place for burning incense sticks”), which is the place of the village guardian spirit. At the main ritual festivals of the village today, offerings are made both to the *hk’a sheu* and the destroyed monastery. In this sense, villagers still worship the remnants of the old-time monastery, a situation that is quite different from other villages with a destroyed monastery, such as Mangda Fu and Dongzhu Fu.¹³

Villagers often talk about the magnificence of the destroyed monastery. A villager told me that the *haw yeh* had been very big, consisting of 30, 40 or 50 stories. The Nanzha monastery is said to have been built by the carpenters who came all the way from Dali, a place where the Buddhist sect that spread among the Lahu had originally come from.¹⁴ “According to *chaw maw* (elders and ancestors), people from Dali built the temple buildings. They built houses for burning incense sticks. They say, *G’ui sha* wrote and sent letters to invite the Dali people. *Chaw maw* know this.”¹⁵ “There are no buildings (of *fu yeh*), because they were destroyed. *G’ui sha*’s retainers, specialists of building temples, came from Dali.”¹⁶

There are plenty of remains of the destroyed temple in Nanzha Fofang village. When I visited the village, a young villager, pointing to many remains on the side of the road, said, “These were used for the temple roofs. Very old. They are used for roofs of *hpa yeh* and *haw yeh*. Inside these there were written characters. Han characters. Long ago, probably *G’ui sha* made these things. There was a very big stone (a thing made of stone). It was very long. Characters were written on it, they say.”¹⁷

Present-day Nanzha Fofang villagers related to me stories about the monks who had resided at the

¹¹ I visited Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012 to see the present situation of the Nanzha Fu that once stood in the village. I also interviewed villagers of Nanzha Dazhai village and Nanzha Qizu village as well as Nanzha Fofang village, which are the data sources for this paper.

¹² There seem to have been tombs of the monks in the monastery compound, as one Nanzha Fofang villager (female, in her 60s or 70s) related, “I saw a man called Ca Va Ca Nu sweeping the monks’ tombs every year, in March. That was the time for Qingming (Chinese Tomb Sweeping Ceremony)”.

¹³ I was told not to take a picture of a part of *fu yeh*, where villagers still burn incense sticks. This shows that the point is a sacred object of worship and that some taboos exist around it.

¹⁴ Interview with an allegedly 18 year-old boy and a man in his 50s, on different occasions, in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012. Both informants live in Nanzha Fofang village.

¹⁵ Interview with an allegedly 18 year-old boy in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

¹⁶ Interview with a male Nanzha Qizu villager in his 50s in April, 2012.

¹⁷ Interview with an allegedly 18 year-old boy in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

monastery, of whom a monk called Ca K'o was the last and lived until 1984.¹⁸ Lahu villagers in Lancang County refer to the monks and the monasteries as “33 generations of monks” (*hpa 33 htai*) and “99 monasteries” (*99 fu*). Villagers supported the monks and the monastery and there were caretakers working for them.

Villagers recalled the names of monks: Pa Lu Hpa, Ca Nu Hpa, Ca G'a Hpa, Hpa Maw Pa, Ca Cu (aka. Li Ca Cu), and Ca K'o Hpa. An accurate genealogy of these monks is not known, but the second to last monk of Nanzha Fu was Ca Cu and the last was Ca K'o, both of whom shared some time living together at the monastery. Pa Lu Hpa was said not to have worn yellow garb like Tai (Dai) monks but a long garment.¹⁹

“Ca Cu Hpa was *Dafoye* (Great Monk) and a teacher (*shu ma pa*). His name was Li Ca Cu (probably, 李扎主). He was a monk (*hpa*) and taught people. Besides him, there was (a monk called) Ca K'o Hpa, whose name was Li Ca K'o (probably, 李扎戈).”²⁰

Another villager said, “Li Ca K'o spoke while looking at books (probably, Buddhist scriptures). In the past, there were many, many books. There were many of *G'ui sha*'s books. The books were the kind you have to open and read. When they were opened, they became very long (probably, describing folded scriptures). Someone may have hidden these books in the forest (and there are no books now).

“At *fu yeh*, there were books (scriptures) written in the Han language, and the monks were reading them.”²¹ These descriptions show that the monks of Nanzha Fu were literate in Chinese and Chinese scriptures were used at the temple.

Another description by two villagers indicates that “Ca K'o was dressed in the traditional Lahu garment. He did not eat meat or drink alcohol. His wife and children were living in the village below the temple. Probably, he only went to the temple above when he served.” From this description, we know that the Nanzha monks avoided meat and alcohol but, at least, some were married and had children.²²

¹⁸ Ca K'o is also called “Li Ca K'o” and “Ca K'o Hpa.” As “hpa” in Lahu means “monk,” “Ca K'o Hpa” means “Monk Ca K'o.” A male villager in his 60s said that Ca K'o died in 1984, while Xu Yong'an 徐永安, who visited Nanzha Fofang village, writes that Ca K'o 扎戈 was 76 years old and still alive in 1992 (Simao xingshu minzu shiwu weiyuanhui ed. 1993, 269).

¹⁹ Interview with a male elder and female elder in their 60s or 70s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

²⁰ Interview with a male village cadre in his 40s and an allegedly 18 year-old boy in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

²¹ Interview with a male elder in his 60s or 70s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

²² Interview with two male villagers, one in his 60s or 70s and another in his 20s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

2.1.2 The Fall of the *Nanzha Fu yeh*

The *Nanzha fu yeh* (temple) still had the *hpa yeh* (monks' residence) before the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), although the *haw yeh* (temple hall) had been destroyed before that. But during the Cultural Revolution, the *haw yeh* was also destroyed and the monks were disrobed. One villager related that during the Cultural Revolution, a man called "Teacher Yang" (*Yang Laoshi*), who knew both the Lahu and Han languages, came to the village and told them "not to worship the images of cows and snakes."²³

When the last two monks had been in office, there had still been the *hpa yeh*, which, however, was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. "As there were no longer places for burning incense sticks (*sha tu kui*, here designating *fu yeh*), Ca K'o was working in the fields. He died while working in the fields."²⁴ After that there has been no one living in the temple.

Such artifacts as gongs (*bo lo k'o*) and cymbals as well as Buddhist scriptures were lost during the Cultural Revolution. The gongs are said to have been a pair comprised of both a male and a female gong.²⁵ "If you banged the gongs without reciting sutras, you would get a stomach ache."²⁶ Villagers do not know in what language, Chinese or Lahu, the scriptures were written and infer that the scriptures were taken to Lancang county seat.

2.1.3 Current Religious Practices

Nanzha Fofang village has *hk'a sheu* (an altar on the hill slope above the village), *haw yeh* (temple) and *hpa yeh* (monks' residence) as guardians for the village(s) and *sha tu kui* (place of burning incense sticks) as a guardian for each household. The *haw yeh* and the *hpa yeh* are in the same compound, the latter of which is usually referred to as *fu yeh* in Lahu. According to a male villager in his 60s or 70s, *hk'a u shan sheu* (another name for *hk'a sheu*) only takes care of *Nanzha Fofang* village, while *hpa yeh* and *haw yeh* are in charge of five villages including *Nanzha Fofang* village.

Nanzha Fofang villagers hold the main annual festivals in the first, second, fourth, eighth, ninth

²³ Interview with a male village cadre in his 40s and an allegedly 18 year-old boy in *Nanzha Fofang* village in April, 2012. "Do not worship the pictures of cows and snakes" (*nu ngu aw ha o k'o ta pui*) in the Lahu language probably comes from the Chinese slogan during the Cultural Revolution "*hengsao yiqie niuguisheshen* 横扫一切牛鬼蛇神," meaning "sweep away all the superstitions."

²⁴ Interview with a male *Nanzha Fofang* villager in his 60s in April, 2012.

²⁵ Xu Yongan also writes that the gongs were a pair, comprising of a female one called "Luotiema" and a male one called "Luotieba." The two gongs were different in shape and so were the sounds (Simao xingshu minzu shiwu weiyuanhui ed. 1993, 272).

²⁶ Interview with a male *Nanzha Fofang* villager in his 40s in April, 2012.

and tenth months of the lunar calendar.²⁷ On New Year festival days, incense sticks and candles are burnt. Villagers related that on one day in the New Year festival they go to make offerings of cooked rice (white glutinous rice), beans (probably, bean soup), rice cakes, water, tea leaves and tobacco to *hk'a sheu* and *fu yeh* (the act of “climbing above” as expressed by villagers).²⁸ Villagers celebrate the New Year days by consuming a lot of meat, especially pork. But, they do not slaughter animals “above” (at *hk'a sheu* and *fu yeh*) or takes dishes with meat “above.” They offer cooked rice and bean soup and burn incense sticks and candles, but no meat.

One villager related to me that those who eat dog meat cannot go to the place of worship, which probably means *hk'a sheu* (village guardian spirit) and *fu yeh*, and that only young men before marriage can go.²⁹ But, if they wash themselves cleanly, even married men can go to the place of worship. The same villager continued, “In the past, women (who have menses monthly) were not allowed to go there,” implying that this prohibition is not very strict any more.

The 8th of the second lunar month is the next annual festival occasion for the Nanzha Fofang villagers, which is known as “Repairing Woods” (*suh gu ve* in Lahu).³⁰ Two village representatives climb “above” to make offerings of beans (*naw*, maybe bean soup), water, and cooked rice (both glutinous and non-glutinous kinds). The representatives first go to *hpa yeh*, then to *haw yeh*, and finally to *g'ui po* (sacred pond).

The annual festival in the lunar eighth month is called “the 15th of the eighth month” (Lahu villagers use the Chinese term “Ba Yue Shiwu”八月十五). Nanzha Fofang villagers celebrate a harvest on this day (*ca suh ca ve* in Lahu or “eating new rice”). Villagers cook newly harvested rice and make offerings. “We do not slaughter chicken or pigs, but just eat beans and rice.”³¹ Thus, this harvest festival is vegetarian.

Next, villagers hold a ritual on the full-moon day of the lunar month when *veh nyi* flowers (*yetaohua* in Chinese) blossom.³² Two representatives of the villagers, who are other than the village head, climb “above”; make offerings of rice cakes (*aw hpufuh*), beans (*naw*), cooked rice (*aw*), water (*i ka*), tea leaves (*la*) as well as tobacco (*shu*); and burn candles and incense sticks. The offerings are made to *hpa yeh*,

²⁷ The villagers referred to the ninth lunar month as “the month when wild peach flowers blossom” (*veh nyi ha pa*).

²⁸ Interview with male and female villagers in their 60s or 70s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

²⁹ Interview with a male villager in his 60s or 70s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

³⁰ This is probably a Tomb Sweeping Ceremony (*tu pfuh gu ve*). As I learnt from interviews with Lahu villagers in Yunnan, Lahu in Yunnan usually hold a Tomb Sweeping Ceremony in the second lunar month, while the Han do a similar ceremony in the third lunar month.

³¹ Interview with a male villager in his 60s or 70s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

³² This Lahu lunar month of *veh nyi* flower blossom is thought to be the ninth lunar month.

haw yeh, the pond (*g'ui po*) and *sha sheu* (aka *hk'a sheu* or village guardian spirit). Each household brings meat (*sha*) and uncooked rice (*ca hk'a*) to the village head's house and puts them together (probably for the wife of the village head to cook in order for villagers to eat together).

Every household has a *sha tu kui* (place for burning incense sticks).³³ One of the household *sha tu kui* that I observed was a simple two-stage altar made of wood. On the lower stage of the altar, there was put a small bamboo pipe, in which incense sticks were put for burning, while on the upper stage, there were two bamboo vessels for offering cooked rice and water.

Lahu usually observe two holidays (*shin nyi* in Lahu, literally “merit day” or “precept day”) in a lunar month, when they burn incense sticks and/or candles as well as hold some precepts (Walker 2003). As to the Nanzha Fofang village's religious practices, one villager related that on tiger days of the Lahu zodiac, they should burn candles and incense sticks (*peh tu sha tu*), should not go out of the village, and should have rest from work in the field.³⁴ But, actually, they do not seem to observe these *shin nyi* practices. Another villager said that they burn incense sticks at the household altar irregularly every three or four days, apparently paying no attention to *shin nyi*.³⁵ In general, in Nanzha Fofang village, each household head (usually male), who is in charge of the household altar, burns incense sticks when someone in the household is sick rather than according to *shin nyi*.

Xu Yongan, who visited Nanzha Fofang village in May, 1992, writes that some artifacts of the old Nanzha temple are still kept by a Luo-surnamed female villager. On the 15th day of every lunar month, the Luo-surnamed villager takes out the gems, puts them on the altar, makes offerings and prays (Simao xingshu minzu shiwu weiyuanhui 1993, 273).³⁶

Nanzha Fofang village has a few specialists for conducting rituals addressed to spirits (*maw pa*). However, they do not seem to be very skillful, as a villager said, “We have only a few *maw pa*. We don't have an elderly one (*chaw maw*), but only younger ones (*ya neh*). The younger *maw pa* only know a few

³³ Interview with a male village cadre in his 40s and an allegedly 18 year-old boy in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

³⁴ Interview with a male village cadre in his 40s and an allegedly 18 year-old boy in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012. The Lahu expression “burning candles and incense sticks” (*peh tu sha tu*) is a couplet. Villagers in Nanzha Fofang village probably only burn incense sticks on the tiger days.

³⁵ Interview with a female villager in her 30s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

³⁶ It is interesting that both in my interviews with Lahu villagers and in Xu Yongan's report, villagers do not mention about Buddha images which may have been in the old *fu yeh*. It is not known that the old Lahu *fu yeh* had a Buddha image as the main object for worship. On the other hand, there is no main Buddha image or Buddhist scripture in present Lahu *fu yeh* in Yunnan.

words (to chant before the spirits)”³⁷

2.1.4 *Fu yeh* in the Time of Cultural Revival

In Nanzha Fofang village, there are a lot of remains. Villagers regard these small pieces of remains as being from the destroyed *fu yeh*. Some artifacts for worship used in the Nanzha *fu yeh* are said to be kept in nearby Nanzha Dazhai village 南柵大寨. Villagers said, “Han bosses (government cadres) came to our village a few years ago to do research about the remains. They said, they want to write books (probably, reports).”³⁸ “Things once used by *G’ui sha* are kept at (Nanzha) Dazhai village. A group of cadres including the mayor came and told us that we should build a house to store the remains. The mayor said that he would give us “five *yuan*” (a euphemism that maybe means 5,000, 50,000 or 500,000 *yuan*), but no building has been built yet (probably because no money was paid in spite of the mayor’s promise).”³⁹ “Li Guanghua (the late Lahu cadre who was mayor for more than thirty years) also came. He had come before the mayor (Shi Chunyun, then the mayor of Lancang) came. He (Li Guanghua) said, he would help with the rebuilding of the *fu yeh*, but the *fu yeh* has not been rebuilt yet.”⁴⁰

2.2 *Dongzhu Fu* 東主佛

Along with Nanzha Fu, Dongzhu Fu was one of the strongest and most central among the Lahu Buddhist Centers in the past. Many Chinese documents refer to Dongzhu Fu as one of the “Five Buddhas.”

However, in present-day Dongzhu, there are no Lahu residents and mostly Laomian 老緬族. The Laomian are included in the Lahu nationality in the official classification of the Chinese government. But, the language of Laomian is quite different from the Lahu and both languages are not mutually understandable. In the heyday of the Lahu Buddhist movements, it is reported that many Laomian fought with the Lahu against the local and the central government troops of the Qing Dynasty (*ibid.*, 224-227).

The original Dongzhu temple was destroyed long ago and now there stands a reconstructed Dongzhu Lahu Buddhist temple 東主拉祜佛堂. In 1991, the new Dongzhu temple was registered as a

³⁷ Interview with a male village cadre in his 40s and an allegedly 18 year-old boy in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

³⁸ Interview with an allegedly 18 year-old boy in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

³⁹ Interview with a male village cadre in his 40s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

⁴⁰ Interview with a male villager in his 60s or 70s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012. I wrote “Li Guanshi” in my field notes, probably because of a mistake in listening. It probably was “Li Guanghua.”

Conserved Cultural Relic by the Lancang Lahu Autonomous County government.⁴¹

The new Dongzhu temple stands in a corner of a school compound and is not an object of worship. There are no Buddhist images or ritual items inside the temple. When I visited Dongzhu in April, 2012, the temple's front door was locked, but from the gap I could see that there was nothing inside. When one of my colleagues visited Dongzhu in February, 2012, the temple was full of harvested corn. Apparently, the temple was used as a place for agricultural work.⁴²

Although the present-day Dongzhu temple does not have a resident monk nor is it a place of Buddhist worship, sometimes we can still hear stories of Dongzhu temple in the old days and its supernatural powers. "I am from Dongzhu Laomian village. In the old days, there was a Buddhist temple in the village. There was a place for worship and villagers were burning incense sticks. There were two big stone pots for burning incense sticks and four small cylindrical things used in worship. If a person touched either of them, he or she would become sick. If one of these things fell, a person who was in the direction of the head of the thing that had fallen became sick. The thing that had fell rose by itself and returned back to as it had been. These were stories of my childhood. I don't know if these things are still there, because I have not gone home for a long time. We could not do such things as weeding around the place of worship. We left the place as it was (in order not to disturb the spirit or *G'ui sha* there). I don't know if there was a person taking care of the place, because I was little then."⁴³

A Lahu elder in Zhutang Township told a story of Dongzhu Fu. "In Dongzhu there was a big Buddhist temple and there lived the *Sanfozu* (三佛祖 or 三佛主), the Master Monk. The *Sanfozu* was actively burning incense sticks. But, someone, apparently incited by a *Heh Pa* (a Han), put a cow bone in the *sha lu hkeh* (container for burning incense sticks) and burnt a cow bone. The *Sanfozu* found that and said, 'I was working hard for you people but you did this to me!' and moved to Meu Hka."⁴⁴

2.3 *Fu* and *Fu yeh* Today

My research of 17 places that once had *fu* and *fu yeh* reveals that, even after all major Lahu

⁴¹ This is according to the cement plaque standing near the rebuilt Dongzhu temple.

⁴² Mio Horie, a Japanese anthropologist, personal communication.

⁴³ Interview with a Laomian man in his 50s, April, 2012. This Laomian man left his home village in 1984 and has been working in Meng Lang, the County seat, since then.

⁴⁴ This story was told by a Lahu man in his early 70s to Mio Horie. Meu Ka, or Mengka 勐卡 in Chinese, is in the present-day Ximeng County.

rebellions had been pacified and the main Buddhist temples had been destroyed by the beginning of the 20th century, many villages had temples (probably in smaller sizes than the old ones) and monks until about 1950. But in the Collectivization period, especially during the Cultural Revolution, the temples were completely destroyed and the monks were abused.

But, since the 1980s, the government policies toward religion have changed to more tolerant ones, and, as a result, many ethnic religions and customs have been revived. In the name of promoting traditional cultures, the local governments are also subsidizing some elements of ethnic religions while putting wary eyes on the other ones.

Of the Lahu culture, the government now values such things as creation myths (*mvuh hpa mi hpa*), dancing accompanied by gourd pipes, and skills and techniques to make musical instruments. Many of them have been designated as intangible cultural heritage in lists of the state, the prefecture and the county (Yunnan sheng wenhua ting 2009). On the other hand, traditional practices related to supernatural beliefs and healings, which were once banned as “old superstitions” (*lao mixin*) are given a sensitive status; they may be regarded as part of the Lahu “traditional culture,” but they also may be considered as practices of a “heretic religion” (*xiejiao*), which the Chinese government is very wary of.

In some villages, such as Mengnuo and Saihan, *fu yeh* that had been destroyed before are now being rebuilt with subsidies from the county government, whereas *fu yeh* of other villages are just left as remains.⁴⁵ Nanzha Fu and Manda Fu are cases of the latter. But, while Nanzha Fofang villagers make offerings and pray to the remains of Nanzha temple, Wa villagers of Manda village pay little attention to the temple remains. Present conditions of how the old temples are regarded by the villagers where they are located differ from place to place.

Dongzhu temple was rebuilt many years ago, but the reconstructed temple is not a sacred place for worship today. Laomian villagers in Dongzhu do not seem to engage in any religious activity at the new temple. The Dongzhu temple is designated as a Conserved Cultural Relic of the Country, and the temple building without any religious activity is now an object of cultural promotion.

In the following, I will focus on the monks’ abstinences and villagers’ beliefs about supernatural powers in order to show the surviving millenarian current among Lahu villagers.

⁴⁵ Villagers of those villages that were rebuilding their *fu yeh* said that they had received some funding from the County government, while the head of Nationality and Religion Department of Lancang County said that the government had not given any money for rebuilding *fu yeh* (interviews in 2012).

3. Monks' Lives and Supernatural Powers

3.1 Abstinence and Change

According to the villagers' descriptions of the monks of Nanzha Fu, they were different from those of Tai (Dai) Theravada Buddhism in that they did not wear yellow garbs and could get married. On the other hand, Nanzha Fu monks were similar to Tai (Dai) Theravada Buddhist monks in that both of them do not work in the fields and their lives are supported by laypeople.

“Ca K'o used to speak (preach) on New Year's eve. After that, he would not speak for one year. He gathered villagers and spoke before them. The villagers had to remain silent until Ca K'o finished his talk. Ca K'o Hpa used to talk in the evening. After he had talked, he told villagers to come again the next morning. Then he asked the villagers what dream they had had the night before.”⁴⁶ Monks seem to have been distant from the villagers.

Monks of the *fu yeh* held precepts concerning sex, alcohol and meat, which should have served to be the criteria that differentiated the clergy from the laity. But actually, although originally the monks strictly avoided alcohol, at least some of them in later periods did not totally refuse sex or alcohol.

Some monks had a wife and some did not. A monk called “Hpa Maw Pa,” who had been in office before the last two monks, Ca Cu and Ca K'o, is said not to have had a wife.⁴⁷ Referring to Ca Cu, the second to last monk of the Nanzha Fu to be *Dafoye* (Master Monk), one villager related that Ca Cu had not been married but later took a wife, a Han woman, and had one daughter.⁴⁸ It is not clear whether Ca Cu took a wife when he was still a monk, nor is it known whether Ca Cu was a monk his whole life or if he turned to secular life before death.

Ca Cu Hpa and Ca K'o Hpa, the last two monks that lived at the monastery, both had wives. It seems that the monks had wives even during monkhood, as shown from the fact that Ca K'o had a wife and children when these monks lived at the monastery. As one villager explained, “Li Ca K'o was the A Shu (uncle, Fyb) of this person (referring to the person who was sitting next to him). Ca K'o had a wife and children. He had three children. He had a wife and children when he was monk, but they didn't live together.

⁴⁶ Interview with a male villager in his 60s or 70s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

⁴⁷ Interview with a female villager in her 60s or 70s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

⁴⁸ Interview with a male village cadre in his 40s and an allegedly 18 year-old boy in Nancha Fofang village in April, 2012.

Ca K'o died in 1984."⁴⁹

According to the same villager, monks who had a wife and children usually lived “above” or in the monastery whereas their wife and children lived “below” or in the village. An elder in a nearby village said to me, “Ca K'o Hpa died already. His wife is still alive. They have three children. The children are living with Ca K'o's wife (in the same village). They are still alive. Ca K'o's children are one big brother and two younger brothers (i.e., three brothers).”⁵⁰

However, Ca K'o's case may be an exceptional one.⁵¹ Xu Yongan writes that there was a genealogy of Nanzha monks: E Sha Fozu (*G'ui sha* Fozu), Zha Nier (probably, Ca Nyi Eh in Lahu), Zha Ni Pa (Ca Nyi Hpa), Zha Zhu Pa (Ca Cu Hpa), and Da Zha Shi Pa (Ta Ca Suh Hpa). “From E Sha Fozu to Da Zha Shi Pa, all Master Monks 佛祖 did not take a wife” (Simao xingshu minzu shiwu weiyuanhui 1993, 269).⁵² Ca K'o returned to secular life and got married after the temple was destroyed in 1956 (*ibid.*, 270). This suggests that the precept for the Master Monks not to get married has loosened due to the oppression against religions during the Mao era in China.

While some monks could get married, adultery was strictly prohibited and it would bring disastrous consequences to the monks who violated the prohibition. One monk is said to have died because of the adultery he committed (*ya mi g'ui ve*).⁵³

This monk discussed in the narrative above is probably the last Master Monk of Nanzha Fu, Ca Suh Hpa 扎師帕 in Xu Yongan's report. Ca Suh Hpa is said to have committed adultery, and when the followers found out, Ca Suh Hpa, feeling ashamed, killed himself by taking a poisonous flower called “gou nao hua” (literally, “dog barking flower”) (*ibid.*, 269).

As shown by the villagers' statements such as “*G'ui sha* doesn't eat meat. Only humans eat meat when festivals are held, but no meat is dedicated to *G'ui sha*” and “*G'ui sha* doesn't like cow and buffalo meat,” villagers avoid offering meat to *G'ui sha* or taking meat to the religious area comprised of *hk'a sheu*

⁴⁹ Interview with a male villager in his 60s or 70s in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

⁵⁰ Interview with a villager in his 60s in Nanzha Dazhai in April, 2012.

⁵¹ Kataoka (2013b, 199) writes, “In the time of ‘Five Buddhas,’ unmarried monks often returned to secular life and got married after they were established as having charisma, and their disciples took over the religious roles of the former monk. In this case, children of the former ‘*fu*’ inherited their father's charisma.” This means that the monks could not get married while they were monks and some of them got married only after having returned to secular life.

⁵² Xu Yongan (Simao xingshu minzu shiwu weiyuanhui, ed. 1993, 269) writes that, from E Sha Fozu, Zha Nier, Zha Ni Pa and Zha Zhu Pa, all Master Monks died in the temple, which implies that these Master Monks were in office all their lives without taking a wife.

⁵³ Interview with a female elder of Nanzha Fofang village in her 60s or 70s in April, 2012.

and *fu yeh*.

It is negatively understood that ordinary villagers eat meat of dogs, cows, and buffaloes, while pork and chicken are their most favorite foods.⁵⁴ As stated above, those who eat dog meat cannot go to the place of worship, which means *hk'a sheu* (village guardian spirit) and *fu yeh* (temple). In short, any kind of meat should not be taken into the area of worship, but the abstinence is stricter for certain kinds of meat such as that of dogs, cows and buffaloes. It seems that these kinds of meat would pollute the sacred area.⁵⁵

But it was not that the monks completely avoided meat. Although the monks such as Ca K'o were said to "have had no alcohol or meat," it should be understood in these statements of villagers that the monks' abstinence of meat was only held when they were in the *fu yeh* compound; at least it became so in a later period. Like the monks who avoided sex with their wives when they were in the *fu yeh*, their abstinence of meat was only held when they are "above" (*fu yeh*). A villager of another village says, "*Hpa* (monks) didn't eat meat. When *hpa* was in the *hpa yeh* (monks' residence) above, they didn't eat meat. But, when we had meat in the village below (when having festivals or rituals), sometimes the monks came and ate meat. They ate chicken and pork, but didn't eat other kinds of meat. *Hpa* held rituals when someone died. On such occasions, they ate a little meat. They ate meat 'below' (i.e. in the village below the *fu yeh*). *Hpa* couldn't eat meat when they were 'above,' but sometimes they came 'below' and ate meat. It was (and still is) prohibited to take meat 'above.' It was (and still is) prohibited to cook and eat meat 'above.' *Hpa* didn't drink alcohol. They didn't eat meat of cows and buffaloes. They couldn't eat dog meat, either, even when they were 'below.' They only ate good pork. That is, the monks didn't eat meat that had been used in the rituals for propitiating ancestors (*chaw suh*) or recalling souls (*ha hku ve*)."⁵⁶ In other words, not the monks themselves but the realm of the "above" (*hk'a sheu* and *fu yeh*) was (and still is) strictly vegetarian.⁵⁷

On the other hand, Xu Yongan writes that Master Monks 佛祖 of Nanzha Fu in the past had held the precept of vegetarianism and that, because of the Mao era's oppression against religions, there were no longer Master Monks who observed abstinence from meat and marriage (*ibid.*). "After Monk Dazhashi 大扎師帕 committed adultery and died by suicide, the temple faded and there were no Master Monks anymore. There was no choice but to ask Ca K'o 扎戈, who only had studied a few days at the temple, to manage the

⁵⁴ Despite the negative value attached, consumption of such meat as that of dogs, cows and buffaloes is, actually, not rare.

⁵⁵ For a similar case of the polluting character of cow bone, see the story about Dongzhu Fu cited above.

⁵⁶ Interview with a female villager who is "67 or 68" in Kalang Badui village in July, 2012.

⁵⁷ For the vegetarianism of the Lahu secret society, see Ma (2011, 26-27).

temple office. At that time, the whole country had already been liberated 解放, and Ca K'o had already returned to secular life and took a wife. So, in the temple, there were no longer monks who lived on a vegetarian diet and prayed to Buddha. Ca K'o is 76 years old now (1992). Monks 佛爺 who had faith in Buddhism did not take life, do improper things or get married. Ca K'o only returned to secular life and got married after the temple was destroyed in 1956. Because there were no suitable persons to take care of the Buddhist office, villagers asked Ca K'o to do Buddhist activities, even though he had already violated the monks' rules" (*ibid.*, 269-270).

This description suggests that monks in the past observed the religious rules of not taking life or getting married. Ca K'o seems to have been seen by villagers more as a caretaker of the temple than a monk 佛爺. Ca K'o continued monk's tasks even after he had returned to secular life, but this was because there were no other persons who could be a proper monk.

During the interviews with Lahu villagers, I heard two different Lahu terms: "fu" (or "hpa") and "kwan pa." "Fu" (or "hpa") designates a monk of Buddhism who renounces the world, whereas "kwan pa" means "person to take care (of the temple)."⁵⁸ Although the distinction between monks and laypeople is often not very clear in the daily usage of these terms, we may infer that it was much clearer in the past. However, in the social changes in which Lahu traditional religion was dismissed and their temples destroyed, laypersons came to fulfill the tasks that monks actually should do. These laypersons are called "kwan pa."

3.2 Surviving Belief in Supernatural Powers

Though destroyed, the remnants of the temple are thought still to have power. "A few years ago, we wanted to make a road in the village, but couldn't. When we were to start digging to make the road, the sky suddenly turned dark and it started thundering. So, we couldn't make it (because of fear)."⁵⁹

In the old Nanzha *fu yeh* compound, a few big trees still stand there that villagers call "G'ui sha's trees" (*G'ui sha suh ceh*). It is said that *G'ui sha* had said long ago that when these trees had grown into big trees, He would come back.⁶⁰ Xu Yongan also writes about these "Fozu's trees" that people say *G'ui sha* planted when he was still alive. When he planted these trees he said, "The world is changing. When

⁵⁸ *Kwan* comes from the Chinese word "guan" 管 which means "to take care of, to administrate."

⁵⁹ Interview with an allegedly 18 year-old boy in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012

⁶⁰ Interview with an allegedly 18 year-old boy in Nanzha Fofang village in April, 2012.

these trees have grown to be three big trees whose circumferences are as long as the length of three people's outstretched arms, Buddhism will thrive again; the Master Monk will be born again." The trees have grown now to the extent that their circumferences are the length of the outstretched arms of two people. In order to ask for the Master Monk's protection, people sometimes go to these trees, make offerings and pray (*ibid.*, 273).

In Nanzha Fofang village, there are kept several artifacts that are said to have been used at Nanzha *fu yeh* in the past. When Xu Yongan went to Nanzha Fofang village and saw these treasures in 1992, the Luo-surnamed villager first cleaned her hands, burnt incense sticks, kneeled down and prayed by *kawtaw* and recited Buddhist sutras for three minutes before she took out the treasures from inside the house. After Xu saw them, she, with much care, returned the treasures to storage (*ibid.*).

3.3 *G'ui sha's* Reincarnation

With the decline and fall of the Buddhist centers of which Nanzha Fu is regarded to have been the strongest, *G'ui sha* is said to have fled and left the Lahu people. Often, Lahu villagers think that *G'ui sha* fled to a faraway "northern country" (*aw na mvuh mi*) or to the Han place to reincarnate as Mao Zedong 毛澤東. *G'ui sha*, who once lived at Nanzha *fu yeh*, is sometimes said to have had a mole (*hpeh na shi*) under the mouth, which, in turn, is given as a proof of the reincarnation.⁶¹ A villager said to me, "They say *G'ui sha* fled to 'a northern country,' to the Han place (*aw na mvuh mi ta-e ve ce, Heh geh ta-e ve ce*). We don't know where He is now. He fled to a faraway northern country. He said, 'I can no longer stand to live here' (*daw ma tau ce*). He fled to live in *Peu Kin* (Beijing 北京 in Lahu accent). It was in about (19)47 or 48; he liberated 'the southern country' (*aw haw mvuh mi*), fled faraway and has never come back. In about 47 or 48 when there were wars. The war between the Communists, the Nationalists (KMT) and the Japanese. *G'ui sha* fled to 'the northern country' and never came back."⁶²

The villagers' tales of *G'ui sha's* reincarnation as Mao Zedong show their worshipful attitudes towards Mao Zedong as well as their worship of *G'ui sha*. When the stress is more on the former, villagers

⁶¹ Interview with a male elder of Nanzha Fofang village in his 60s or 70s in April, 2012. I also heard other Lahu villagers of other villages refer to the mole as proof of the incarnation of *G'ui sha* as Mao Zedong in 2012. Luo Manying (2010, 50) describes the "God" (*tianshen*) that came down from the sky to a Lahu village in the figure of "an old man who has a dark brown mole under the mouth."

⁶² Interview with a male villager in his 50s in Nanzha Qizu village, a nearby village to Nanzha Fofang village, in April, 2012.

refer to Mao Zedong as superhuman. “Chairman Mao was *G’ui sha*, they say. Chairman Mao is the ruler, is *G’ui sha*. He is the ruler that rules every country. There is no man like him.”⁶³

By identifying *G’ui sha* with Mao Zedong, the charismatic founder of the New Chinese State, Lahu villagers redefine themselves, an ethnic minority, as being in the center of the universe. One villager said, “*Peu Kin Na Kin* 北京南京 is/are not far away. It/they is/are designated as being here, *Na Ca Na Taw mvuh mi*.”⁶⁴ *Na Ca Na Taw mvuh mi* is a name for the area including Nanzha Fofang village. Because *taw* in the Lahu language means for a land to be “low and flat,” the Lahu name *Na Ca Na Taw mvuh mi* implies that the Nazha area is lowland. This is an inversion of the usual notion that the Lahu people are dwelling on highland through which they, who are usually regarded as being in the periphery, invert themselves to a people occupying the central place of the universe.

4. Conclusion

Some of the 17 villages that had *fu* and *fu yeh* (temples) in the past have remains of the *fu yeh*, and elderly villagers retain memories of the buildings and *fu* (monks). Although these villages had *fu* and *fu yeh* and were conducting religious practices until about 1950, the temple buildings were destroyed and the monks were abused in the Collectivization period, especially during the Cultural Revolution. In the Reform and Opening-Up policy since the 1980s, the county government now helps in the rebuilding of some of the old temples in their effort to promote ethnic/traditional cultures. Yet, even with the more tolerant government policies toward religions, Lahu *fu yeh* and *fu* are still a sensitive issue because of their roles in the rebellions in the 18th and 19th centuries as well as the millenarian nature that the Lahu Buddhism centered on *fu yeh* and *fu* involved.

Today, although the *fu yeh* were destroyed, the monks were dismissed completely and *G’ui sha* is said to have fled from the Lahu people, villagers retain memories about the supernatural powers of the *fu* and *fu yeh* in the past. Some of the remains of the old temples are objects of worship and some of them are even said to possess supernatural powers. Villagers sometimes locate themselves in the center of the universe and are expecting the return of *G’ui sha*. In this sense, millenarian beliefs are surviving as an

⁶³ Interview with a male villager in his 50s in Nanzha Qizu village, a nearby village to Nanzha Fofang village, in April, 2012.

⁶⁴ Interview with a male elder of Nanzha Fofang village in his 60s or 70s in April, 2012.

undercurrent and have a chance to become more explicit, as reflected in the stories of *G'ui sha's* reincarnation and return.

With the fall of the *fu yeh*, the monks had to return to secular life and the abstinences from meat and sex were broken. If a charismatic leader emerges among the Lahu again, he/she will probably first observe strict abstinences in order to make him/herself sacred in the eyes of villagers.⁶⁵

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⁶⁵ Among the Red Lahu in Myanmar and Thailand, the religious leaders with charisma, who became influential and acquired a large number of followers in their history, stressed abstinence from eating meat on *shin nyi* on holy days (see Solot 1989). They avoid drinking alcohol all the time, although they can be married and have children. Marriage is not prohibited for Red Lahu religious leaders, but adultery is regarded as a serious violation of Lahu customs. Many stories are heard among the Red Lahu that religious leaders with charisma, who once had had supernatural powers and had been very influential, lost their powers and reputation because of adultery.

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