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MINORITY GROUPS IN NORTHERN LAOS

- Especially the Yao -

by  
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There are many groups in northern Laos, such as the Lao, the Meo, the Yao and the Kha Mou (Phou Theng), interspersed among one another. It is an area where the ethnic structures are complicated and the cultures are mixed. I am limiting my consideration to the district of Pha Tang and its vicinity, and will try to make clear the relationship of the Yao to the other groups. First, I will present some data on the Yao tribe in the village of Kaisou, their settlement patterns, social organization and religion; then I will show their contact and interrelationships with the surrounding groups. In the vicinity of the village of Pha Tang, the Yao and Meo are found in the mountainous districts, the Phou Theng settle on the slopes and at the foot of the mountains, and the Lao live in the valleys and on the plains.

From September, 1957, to April, 1958, the author traveled in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos as a member of the party for Research on Rice Culture in Southeast Asia. From January to April, 1958, the writer lived in the village of Pha Tang in northern Laos and did research on the Thai villages in the area.<sup>1</sup> Pha Tang is a Lao village located between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. In the vicinity of Pha Tang there are many mountains which rise 1,000 to 1,700 meters above sea level, and between them the two rivers -- the Nam Pha Mone and the Nam San flow toward the south. They meet at the southern border of the village, becoming the Nam San and the Nam Ngun before joining the Mekong River east of Vientiane. Ban Pha Tang is located in a valley. On the same river there are sev-

eral other Lao villages at intervals of a few kilometers. Among these are some Thai Deng villages, originally from other areas. The language of the villagers differs slightly.<sup>2</sup> Most of them are immigrants from Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang. The Meo and the Kha Mou, (the latter also known as the Phou Theng or Thai Theng)<sup>3</sup> are located in the mountains and at the foot of the mountains in this district. There are also a couple of Yao villages. While they preserve their own cultural traditions, they also maintain close inter-relationships with the other groups. Although they are not all content, in general, they live together peacefully. The complexity of the ethnic structure is one of the remarkable characteristics of this district.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of research in this village (Ban Pha Tang) was an intensive study of the society and the culture of a Lao village; and to collect data for comparative purposes, we visited as many as possible of the surrounding Lao villages. Accordingly, at first there was no intention of researching the minority groups, but the sight of their extraordinary costumes, and the smoke rising from the top of the mountains whetted a desire to seek their culture and society. I visited the Yao village of Kaisou first on January 24th and again on February 14th to the 16th. At the time of the first visit, I took Po Boua and Tondi of Ban Pha Tang, and a porter. On the second visit I took Po Boua and a porter. Of course, they were not primarily interested in our research. Po Boua was the landlord of the house where I stayed, and Tondi the landlord of the house next door. Our research was done in a short period of time

and we had many difficulties, one of them being the language (even though the Yao spoke Lao quite well), so we could not get sufficient data. I should restrain myself from publishing data in this form, but we do not have much data on the Yao so I hope this report will offer new knowledge on the Yao.<sup>5</sup>

Yao tribes are found in great numbers in the northern part of the Tonkin Plain and in the western mountains, but in Laos they are found mainly in the southwestern part of Sam Neua and around Nam Tha, and in the northwestern part of Phong Saly. There are also a few Yao villages around Luang Prabang and some in the northern part of Thailand.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the Lao, the geographic expansion of the Yao has been erratic. Yao youths around Luang Prabang frequently take the three-day walk to visit the Yao villages near Pha Tang, and when I showed them pictures of Yao in the highlands of Tonkin, they looked eagerly and made a note of their location.

Now let us extend our scope to the whole of south China and look at the distribution of the Yao tribe. For this purpose, we have only the maps of Bernatzik,<sup>11</sup> Eickstedt<sup>12</sup> and Wiens. From these we know that the Yao tribe is now widely distributed in Kwantung, Kwangsi, Hunan and Yunnan provinces. If we compare these maps with those of the distribution of the same tribe in ancient times by Wiens, we can surmise that formerly the Yao were widely scattered all over the districts south of the Yangtze River, and later were gradually forced into the mountain districts. But is this true?

Wiens<sup>13</sup> summarizes tribal relationships in south China as follows: 1) The Chuang or T'ai, are the wet-rice cultivators located

in the valleys and plains. The central location of the Chuang culture is in Kwangsi Province, but they also extend into a large part of Kwangtung and Fukien, Chekiang, Kwangsi, Hunan, Kweichow, Szechwan, Yunnan and Kiangsi Provinces. In Yunnan the Chuang culture is comparatively isolated as a minority group, but in the eastern part it made a great contribution to the ancient Yueh culture, and in Kweichow and Szechwan it has undergone some changes and has become integrated with the local culture.

The Yao established their influence all over south China. Eickstedt mentions that Hsia-min in Fukien is one of the Yao tribes in a broad sense. It is said to be the Yao and not the Thai who are the oldest inhabitants (Urbewohner) of the coast of south China, and it is the Thai, not the Yao, who were the next group appearing there. According to Eickstedt, the Yao language belonged to "monkmerische Sprache" from the beginning.

Liang Shun Sheng's<sup>15</sup> view is as follows: The ancient Man is the same as the present Yao and Hsia-min groups. The Man tribe, in a broad sense, is identical with the Meo tribe. But in a narrow sense, the Man tribe refers only to descendants of "P'an-hu." Hsia-min are scattered in Fukien, Chekiang and the northern part of Tonkin. Man is the Yao's name for themselves. The areas inhabited by the Man before the three ancient dynasties (Hsia, Shang and Chou) were the southwestern parts of Hunan in the Chou period, and were located in the Yangtze valley. In the Sung period they were called Man-Yao, and migrated south to Kwangtung and Kwangsi. Later, they divided and the eastern group entered Fukien and Chekiang and be-

came Hsia-min; the western group moved into Yunnan via Kwangsi and have been called Man. The people who stayed in Hunan and Kwangsi are called Yao.

Hsu Sung Yu's<sup>16</sup> History of the People in the Yueh Chiang Valley was also useful for my research, even though there were some questionable points in it. Above all, his free linguistic interpretation was instructive. According to him, the places of origin of the Yao are Kwangsi, Chekiang and Fukien. In sum, Yu considers the Yao tribe moved first to the southwest, then west, and finally to Indochina.

We can summarize these statements as follows: They all agree that the place of origin of the Yao is the eastern part of south China, but there are many disagreements as to the course of migration, the relation between the adjacent tribes and the classification of their language. Recently Benedict classified the Meo and Yao languages together with the languages of Thai, Kadai, Indonesia, Monkhmer and Vietnamese as proto-Austrian languages.<sup>17</sup> But to clarify the origin and course of Yao migration, we have to depend on the further development of anthropological and archaeological research. Here, I only want to make the following points:

1) due to the pressure from the Han (Chinese) to the north, the Yao have spread to the mountainous area of south China, and their culture has gained many elements through long contact with the Han and adjacent groups, especially the Thai and Meo, and 2) the western extremity of their distribution is in northern Laos, and the southern boundary is approximated by Pha Tang village. This village is the south-western frontier of the Yao and as such reflects accretions of

patterns from northern Indo-China, south China as well as the influences of surrounding local cultures.

#### Culture and Society of the Yao Tribe

What is the culture and society of the Yao tribe like today.

Eberhard summarized it as follows:<sup>18</sup>

**Economy:** Mountainous habitat with shifting cultivation; frequent change in settlements, and hunting and gathering of edible plants. The cultivation of potatoes is significant.

**Social Structure:** Neither a ruling class nor a tribal organization are well developed. They have a strong patriarchal clan, and practice exogamy, with frequent cross-cousin marriages. Other traits include the custom of spontaneous exchange of poetry, and trial marriage. The formal marriage rite is performed only after the child is born. Initiation ceremonies into the adult life exist.

**Religion:** Worship of the dog god and P'an-hu. They have both dog and tiger taboos, and tiger worship. At the end of the year they perform the No play masquerade rite. They have memorial tablets and worship their ancestors. The deceased is placed in a coffin and buried. Shamanism forms an important element in their religious practices.

**Domestic Life:** One-story houses with earth floors, no veranda. A fire is in the center of the floor; along the walls there



are pallets; the cooking is done in a corner of the rectangular house, over a crude stove. Most of their houses are for small families. They wear short coats and do not wear shoes. Their hair is carefully braided. Burdens, supported by a headband, are carried on their backs.

These are some of the generalized features of the Yao. Now let us describe the Yao in northern Laos.<sup>19</sup> The following data on the Yao pertains to Ban Kaisou unless otherwise specified:

(1) Houses and Settlements.

In the mountainous areas near Ban Pha Tang, there are three Yao villages, Kaisou, Pha Louang and Pha Nam Pin. All of them located in Muong Vang Vieng, are between 1,000 to 1,700 meters above sea level. In Muong Kassy (north of Muong Vang Vieng) there is a Yao village called Pha Tiou, but only the three villages in Muong Vang Vieng are in direct contact with the Lao in Ban Pha Tang. There are 27 houses in Ban Kaisou, making it a comparatively large Yao village. The other two villages are much smaller; Pha Louang has only 5-6 houses and Pha Nam Pin has 7-8 houses. There are also several Yao villages near Luang Prabang sub-divided into hamlets, e.g. Pha Koum is composed of the hamlets of Nja Kha (25 houses), Om Se (4-5 houses), and Tam Yat (10 houses). But in the villages near Pha Tang there is only one community and one Nai Ban (village headman) who supervises the three villages.

To reach Kaisou from Pha Tang it is necessary to walk for four hours to Den Din (occasionally trucks are used) then turn

right into the forest; cross a single bamboo-pole bridge (which was subsequently rebuilt) over a small stream 3 meters wide, and then climb a steep slope. At places there are log huts where people rest when carrying heavy burdens, and there are also caves providing shelter from the rain. In about an hour a ridge of the mountain is reached and then the path crosses the ridge. After a while we come to a rotted-bamboo gate which seems to be the entrance to Kaisou village. After another hour, a wide field suddenly opens up and the Yao village appears in the basin surrounded by many limestone peaks.

The village is located on the south side of the basin, 980 meters above sea level, surrounded by the sharp peaks of Pha Tong Ching. In the surrounding areas there are forested limestone slopes interspersed with a few patches of grass. In the center of the basin is a small stream, but during the dry season there is no water. The houses stand in one or two lines in the shape of a right angle. They are situated very close to each other. Scattered nearby are rice granaries, pig pens, horse stables and chicken coops. There are no boundary fences. In the center of the village is a fenced-in area where plants from which dyes are made, are cultivated. Tea plants, peach trees and other plants are nearby.<sup>21</sup> In the northern part of the village there is another field of tea plants, and beyond it there are poppy and vegetable fields. When the author visited the village at the end of January, there were white and purple poppies in full bloom. Corn, red peppers and cabbage are interspersed in the poppy field. The western part of the village is covered by shrubbery but some areas have been cleared to cultivate coffee.

According to the Yao the coffee plants had been brought from the Boloven plateau to the Lao but did not grow well in this area. The south of the village is dense forest which spreads over the ridges and the mountain tops. The Yao village is like an oasis in the desert, a "hidden village" in the tropical forest.

The size of the houses in this village varies. In Figure 2, the houses numbered 11, 22, 23, 26 and 27 are very small. Some of them are so small that they look like storage houses or tool sheds, while some are well-built. This seems to indicate social strata in the community. Generally speaking, the houses are made of wood with earthen floors and gabled roofs. Some of the houses have thatched roofs while others have wood shingles. Two or three of the houses use the wave-shaped galvanized iron sheets (Japanese made) on one side of the roof. The slope of the roofs is very steep, and the rain water is conducted through bamboo pipes into a well, which is not used during the dry season. Pallets are built in a row on one side of the room; on the opposite side are pallets for guests. The fireplace and cooking stove are built on the floor<sup>22</sup> and an altar is placed on one side of the wall. There are, occasionally, several papers pasted near the altar with the saying, "Directly overhead, pure wind blows; He grows wings and flies away," written in Chinese. At times, on a board over the entrance there are very expertly written Chinese characters indicating the year and date of the construction of the house. Since the houses are built on the slope, one side of the house is on stilts, and on this side are generally placed the beds for the guests, and the pig-pen. The horse stables, chicken

coops and the rice granary are attached to the houses. The floor of the rice granary is built high on pillars with board planks to prevent mice from getting into the rice. Occasionally, the pig-pens are built separate from the house.

Kaisou was founded 14 years ago, Pha Nam Pin 20 years ago and Pha Louang village is more than 50 years old.

#### Agriculture and Livestock.

Horses, cattle, pigs, chickens and dogs are kept. Water buffalo cats and geese do not occur in Kaisou but they are found in Pha Koum village. At a distance from the village, fields have been cleared (by burning the grasses and trees) for cultivating poppies, dry rice, sugar cane, corn, sweet potatoes and bananas. On the ridges and slopes, a distance of 2-3 hours walk from the village, there are rice fields, and also three groups of houses; one group of two, another of three and a third one of five can be seen. Wood and bamboo are used for construction and for making paper. They also mine silver and lead.<sup>23</sup> Recently, the population has increased and the fields have expanded from Kaisou village to the Den Din ridge (675 meters above sea level).

Their main agricultural products are opium, rice and corn. Poppies are harvested three times a year -- first the poppy seeds are sown in July and harvested in September. Second, the sowing is done in August and the harvesting in December, and the same procedure again in September, with the harvest in January or February. They gather the milky liquid from the poppy seeds and make raw opium. This is their main source of cash income.

They have several kinds of dry rice, of which the author obtained samples of three types. Rice is sown in March or April and reaped in September. Their staple food is non-glutinous rice. Corn is used for livestock.

They have several horses, used for transportation. They also have cows. According to the Yao, the Lao buy cows from them and the Meo. Beside wild birds and animals, pork and chicken are very important food items.

#### Food Habits

They take their breakfast at 11:00 a.m. and have two or three other meals, but usually have two formal meals per day, and when they are hungry between meals, they eat baked sweet potatoes, baked bananas or chew on sugar cane. They sit down around a round table or take their seats around the fire. Men and women never eat together. If the family is large, the head of the family and the elder males eat first; next the rest of the males, and last are the females, who eat by the stove. During meals the head of the family is seated first and prays before all begin to eat. At the time of a formal party for a festival this procedure is more complicated. First, the village headman or the eldest man gives a long prayer in a low voice; next, the host stands and passes the wine glasses to the guests, one by one. The glasses are received by the guests then returned to the host. Next, the guests individually pass the glasses to the host. Then a toast is made, the wine is drunk and the eating begins. Long tables covered with banana leaves are prepared for parties. If there are many guests, they are divided into two or three groups, the first

group being the eldest males, the second the remaining male guests, and last, the male members of the host's family. In the case of a wedding party the fathers of the bride and bridegroom eat last, and finally the women, by the stove. The women do the cooking, and the young unmarried girls serve the food under strict supervision.

The staple food is non-glutinous rice, which is served in a cooking bowl, and chopsticks are used. At a formal meal glutinous rice is also eaten, steamed and occasionally served on banana leaves. Some of the rice seems to be steamed, then fermented, while another rice dish seems to have sweet rice alcohol poured over it. They are especially fond of this type of food. A soup is made of pork fat and bamboo shoots; as the meal is eaten, boiled vegetables are placed in the soup. Braised ground pork, boiled chicken legs and wings are also favorites. Raw cabbage and roasted pork are also served. The foods are usually saturated with pork fat. There are two kinds of rice alcohol, red and white. Some of the older people keep saccharin which they put in the alcohol when they drink. They refer to the saccharin as "sugar." As the dinner progresses, pig blood which has coagulated into the consistency of pudding is placed in a wash basin, and passed around. Sometimes chopped green onions are placed in this dish, which is considered an energy-producing food. Tea and opium are also taken -- the tea leaves being toasted and then placed in the hot water. Opium is eaten only by the adult males, never by the younger boys. The same is true of tobacco. There seems to be a strict rule concerning age limits with respect

to eating opium and smoking tobacco. The older men eat opium in the afternoon, especially after their meals, and because of this habit many of them appear pale. The headman of the village spent most of the time lying down, wrapped in blankets, and appeared to be addicted to opium. The Yao import Nescafe and condensed milk from the Lao villages, and the rich people favor coffee.

The Yao people like their costumes and do not change them for their daily labor or to take part in rituals. Their clothing is made of roughly woven black cotton, most of which is made in Japan. Their caps are decorated in the center with red yarn pompoms, while the sides of the caps have red woven cotton material. The same red cotton is woven into the collars and sleeves. Silver braiding is also used along the collars and sleeves. Usually, no underwear or shoes are worn. The women place a piece of red material on top of their heads and wrap a turban on top of that. The material used for the turban is also used for their sash, but the flower embroidery on the turban is a little smaller. Silver earrings and several bracelets are also worn. The skirt worn by the women is divided into three panels. Red yarn is used on the collar of the blouse, which is held together with two rectangular silver-plated hooks. Their trousers are embroidered with flower patterns and a sash is worn over the skirt and trousers, with one end of the sash tucked in at the waist. Undergarments are not worn. The women do not bathe at all and their body odor is overpowering.<sup>24</sup>

#### Literacy in Chinese

In addition to the board above the entrance to a house with the

year and the date of construction, there were also Chinese characters beside the altars. On the wall of the house where I stayed, I found a paragraph of Chinese writings...

"My country is large and has a large population, and there were formerly 28 provinces. After victory in the war, we took the northeastern part (Manchuria), and made it into 9 provinces. Since the recapture of Formosa from Japan, there are now 35 provinces."

The family had a dictionary published in Shanghai and they also had a textbook of social studies, which was used in their daily life. A record of the opium sales was kept in a kind of account book by brush-writing on the bamboo paper they made. They write not only records, but also something approaching poetry, and I was very much surprised by a 15-16 year old boy who wrote a Chinese poem. The following are examples of their poems (in rough translation):

"Those who share a common destiny will meet though far apart,  
But if they do not have a common destiny, they will never meet.

"Those who share a common destiny will be related to each other  
as brothers by a miracle sent from heaven.

"In the beginning our ancestors all lived together, but now we  
are scattered all over mountainous places.

Chinese is also used in letter writing; the following is a letter a villager wrote to me asking for incense burners from Japan:

"I am very sorry to trouble you, but if you will, please get ten incense burners and ten bowls regardless of the price."

According to their geographical concept, Japan is located next to Vientiane.

A teacher from the Hô tribe teaches Chinese. (The Lao refer to the Hô as the Khon Hô, whom they believe to be descendents of refugees from the Taiping rebellion in China.) Some of the Hô understand Yao while others do not. The Hô teachers are under contract to the Yao for a certain period of time to teach Chinese to the young people. In the village of Pha Koum near Luang Prabang, many



Ho teach Chinese and receive 1,100 kip.<sup>25</sup> In Kaisou, a Hô teacher from Yunnan taught Chinese, but he died five years ago. Hô teachers are not found in all Yao villages. For instance, there are none in Pha Luong or Pha Nam Pin. Therefore, the young people in these two villages do not understand much Chinese. Generally speaking, the women are not literate in Chinese.

#### Contacts with other Groups and Trade

Both the Yao and Meo are very curious by nature in comparison with other groups. When the Yao come to a Lao village, they walk to every corner of the village, looking inside temples, watching carpenters at work and picking up every article in the stores for inspection. They also observe the fish in the small rivers, the method of breeding pigs and chickens; cultivation, and the possessions of strangers including the author (neither the Lao nor the Phou Theng would think of doing this). There are two or three houses with battery radios, and one house with a bicycle which is not used and is covered with dust. There are a few homes with kerosene lamps. Galvanized iron roofing is used, following the pattern of the Lao. Saccharin is taken with coffee. Formerly they tried to plant coconut palms and betel nut trees but failed. The Yao would like to open up the valley to shifting cultivation, and purchase an automobile to connect their village with Vientiane. They would like to do this in order to bypass the Lao intermediaries with whom they trade opium for their necessities. According to the Yao, they had saved sufficient money to purchase an automobile but had decided not to do so.

### Household Units and the Village

Among the Yao in northern Laos there appear to be twelve sub-groups, and those of Kaisou as well as Pha Luong and Pha Nam Pin are classified as Yao Khaw. There are 27 households in this village and the names of the heads of the families and the number of people in each household is as follows:

- |                            |                                 |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Chao Wen Lung -- 18     | 15. Cheng Fu Sheng -- 9         |
| 2. Chao Lung Sheng -- 8    | 16. Cheng Wen Szu -- 5          |
| 3. Chao Chin Sheng *       | 17. Chao Wen Kyn -- 14          |
| Chao Lung Ching *-- 10     | 18. Chao Wen Hsiang -- 6        |
| 4. Chao Lung Huan *        | 19. Chao Wen Sheng -- 10        |
| Chao Lung Tang *-- 13      | 20. Cheng Kuei Chu -- 7         |
| 5. Chao Chin Mao -- 8      | 21. Chao Wen Shou -- 6          |
| 6. Cheng Kuei An -- 11     | 22. Chao Wen Tsung -- 5         |
| 7. Cheng Kuei Fu -- 5      | 23. Cheng Kuei Tsung -- 6       |
| 8. Cheng Chin Chang -- 6   | 24. Chao Wen Tang -- 13         |
| 9. Cheng Kuei Tang -- 6    | 25. Chao Chin Shou -- 4         |
| 10. Cheng Chin Sheng -- 10 | 26. Cheng Tsai Ching -- 3       |
| 11. Cheng Chin Fu -- 3     | 27. Chao Lung Fu -- 4           |
| 12. Chao Lung Hsiang -- 5  |                                 |
| 13. Li Lung Tsung -- 7     | * In regard to no. 3 and no. 4, |
| 14. Chao Lung Szu -- 7     | two couples share one home.     |

There are 27 homes with a population of 209 in the village of Kaisou. The average number of members in one household is 7.74. There are some families with only 3-4 members, others with about 10, and the maximum is 18 members in a household. The full names of No. 2, 3 and 5 are: Chao Lung Sheng Kun, Chao Chin Chin Sheng and Chao Chin Mao

Ming. Kun and Ming are their fathers' names.

The 'actual' age of a person is known only to himself and to his family members. In general, it is not necessary for them to count their ages numerically. The four families considered no.1, 3, 8 and 17 are unilineal and consist of at least three generations, and there are 2-3 couples in each generation. The marriages in all 27 households are monogamous, but in Pha Koum there are several polygamous marriages, and the village headman has three wives. Next, let us look at the birthplace of the husbands and their wives. There are only a few couples among whom both the husbands and wives were born in different villages (two couples out of five, in the households surveyed). These facts are reminders of their traditional migratory life, i.e., the village is like a temporary, mixed household, with the people coming together from different villages; but consanguinity still has a strong influence in village structure. Marriage ties extend widely to other villages beyond the limitations of their own mountain area. Cases of village endogamy are relatively few. Marriages are all initially matri-local: after the wedding ceremony the husband and wife<sup>26</sup> go to the bride's home where they work for two years (one year if the wife's home is far away), then they return to the husband's home. For example, in Chao Chin Sheng's house a man called Pan Kuo Sheng is living with them. He is the husband of a granddaughter of Chao Chin Sheng, and after working two years there he will return to Pha Koum with his wife. It is noteworthy that the premarital sexual relations of Yao girls are free, and it does not

matter to which group their partners belong. There are many cases of marriage in which the wives are of the same age or older than their husbands. In one case I observed a marriage between a 17-year old bridegroom and a 25-year-old bride.

As we can see from the list of names of family heads, among the Yao many names are similar: in the village of Kaisou there are only three name groups: Chao, Cheng and Li. Families with the same names are referred to as ton sinh or ton fi:nh. This, however, does not indicate a common ancestor. They distinguish this latter fact by the name chuan tsaou. In Kaisou there are four chuan tsaou:(households nos.1, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22 and 34) and nos. 2,3,4,5,12, 14, 25 and 27 as well as nos. 6,7,8,9,10,11,15,16,20, 23 and 26, and last, one family, no. 13. Chuan tsaou is a lineage, and marriage within the same lineage is not permitted, that is, they may marry people of the ton sinh but not of the chuan tsaou. Some people think families 1, 17, 19 and 21 are of the same chuan tsaou but families 18, 22 and 24 belong to other chuan tsaou's. According to the Yao the Lao word for chuan tsaou is sua diaw kan.<sup>27</sup>

The Yao kinship structure belongs to the bifurcate-collateral type which distinguishes the paternal line from the maternal line, and the direct line from the collateral, and it also belongs to the Eskimo type in referring to names of cousins, which does not distinguish cross-cousins from parallel-cousins.

#### Religion

I am not able to describe the general religious patterns of the Yao, but during the second visit I was able to observe a festival.

( It was on February 14th, December 28th by the Yao calendar) when Pu-tou:n (festival of their ancestors) occurred. At this time the divination of the coming year was held. The Lao people refer to this festival as Boun Phi Mai, meaning the New Year Festival, but according to the Yao people the Sian Hyan Sio Penh (Yao for New Year Festival), is held on January 1st. This festival (called Tsa) was not celebrated by the whole village but by only the second chuan tsaou group in the village. The following is a description of this festival:

On February 14th, around 3:00 p.m., I arrived at Kaisou and went to the home of Chao Lung Sheng. Suddenly, I heard the sound of drums coming from the center of the village. Accompanied by youngsters, I went to one home where the drums were sounding. There were many Yao gathered there on the earth floor. As I entered into a small room of the house, a person by the name of Chao Lung Szu beckoned to me. He was the head of this household and about 60 years old. He was lying down, wrapped in blankets and smoking opium. I sat beside him. The sound of zon (drum) and the two kinds of bells, (man and chao tsoui) became gradually louder and louder. The drum and the bells were being sounded in one corner of the house, and a large number of people had gathered around. A space 2 yards square was cleared and on the mien tia lon (altar) incense and candles were burning.

The altar is the shrine of the ancestor. It is made of wood and decorated with paper cut-outs in the form of the sun, moon and a star. On a table, placed to the left of the altar, was a skinned

pig. There was a wine glass placed in front of the pig, and behind the pig were 15-16 triangle-shaped white paper flags placed upright. To the right of the altar was a stool. For a while, nothing happened -- then one Yao man pushed open the side entrance door and rushed in, pushing the people aside. He was hatless, with closely cropped hair except for the back of his head where the hair extended down to his shoulders. He was in a trance and moving around wildly. He was then seized by the others and taken before the altar, where he began mumbling in a low voice while scattering salt around him.

Next, he pulled out a chao (bamboo sticks); holding it in his right hand and bending his body forward a little, he dropped the sticks on the floor. He watched the position of the sticks as he dropped them two or three times, then turning toward the people he dropped his head forward. His face was pale and he was breathing heavily. Lung Szu, who had been lying down, suddenly got up, and pushing the people aside, sat on the stool by the altar. He then began shaking his right foot, then his left foot, repeatedly, and continued this for twenty or thirty seconds. With his long hair disheveled, he stood up before the altar and started to pray. He tossed around several handfuls of rice, then began to dance in circles around the floor. While holding out his right arm and his left leg before him, he held his left hand to his head, hopped a round in a circle about three times, then stood before the altar. He picked up the chao sticks and dropped them to the floor several times in an experienced manner. At times the sticks would pile up, one on top of the other, while at other times the sticks would

separate. Following this, he stood beside the first man, then he dropped his head forward and started to touch his hair with his left hand. There was a moment of silence.

Another man in the crowd suddenly threw off his hat, then sat on the stool and began to shake his foot. Going into a trance, he rushed forward, fell to the ground and started to writhe. Several men picked him up, and brought him struggling before the altar. In this manner, seven men were brought before the altar, facing the assembled people. (One of these seven men had cut short the hair on the top of his head, leaving the sides and back long; another had his hair cut off short on one side of his head; another had very long hair, each of the others in like manner had their hair in an unusual arrangement.)

The seven men began to hop in a circle in one direction, shouted "ha-ha" and reversed their direction. This was repeated two or three times. The men went to the altar where each man picked up two flags and started to dance holding them -- one waving the flags over his head, another holding the flags on his shoulder, another put a flag between the toes of his left foot. They proceeded to dance around in a circle several times, then planted the flags in the center of the circle and got together to drop the chao.

In the meantime the drum and the bells were sounding loudly. A man brought out a plate of white rice, placed it in the center of the floor and replaced the flags around the plate. The wine glasses were placed around the flags, and wine was poured into the glasses. Each man was given a chicken, with Lung Szu receiving

three chickens. The men held the chickens high above their heads and proceeded to dance around several more times, without saying a word. During this procedure the chickens squawked and fluttered their wings wildly. The circle was made smaller and the men crouched down and strangled the chickens. Four or five young men appeared with swords and cut the neck arteries of the chickens. The seven men raised the chickens, with the blood still dripping, over their heads, and danced again for a short while. Again they gathered in the center, and crouching on the ground, threw the chickens behind them. Additional chickens were brought in and the same routine was repeated.

A handsome rooster was given to Lung Szu. He gazed at the beak and at the claws of the rooster for a few seconds, held the rooster over his head and started to dance. The rooster fluttered wildly, Lung Szu's hair was disheveled, and he presented an unearthly appearance. The rooster's blood colored the rice and the flags again, and the glasses of wine were dyed red. When this was finished, the seven men stood before the altar while the chao slipped through Lung Szu's hands several times with the men watching the results of the fall of the chao on the ground. I could not tell whether good fortune or bad was indicated. Lung Szu's expression had not changed.

The seven men before the altar faced the crowd and again dropped their heads forward. The sound of the drum and bells ceased, the crowd dispersed, the festival came to a close. The seven men came out of their trance, back to life.



A party was in progress in the homes of Chao Lung Szu, Chao Lung Huan and Chao' Chin Mao. The headman of the village and thirty or forty guests attended, proceeding from one house to the other during the party. After the men finished, the womenfolk came to eat.

The Yao religion is generally considered ancestor worship, but judging from the previous description, it is also connected with shamanism. The village shaman was the man who rushed into the house where the festival was being held. The Yao people refer to the shaman as Hung Chia Jen ( in this case his name was Cheng Tsai Ching). The Lao people refer to him as MÔ MÔ (meaning conjurer in the Lao language). What is worshipped at the altar is the spirit of the ancestors, but besides this, in the home of the village headman some local Taoist Deity is also worshipped. All the Yao people are trained to go easily into a trance from youth, and they dance with a live chicken held over their heads, mimicking the chicken in flight. Drums also play a prominent part. These facts point up the role of shamanism; but in this festival many other factors are also involved and it has a complex character. The people in the village of Kaisou do not want to show this festival to outsiders, and they particularly do not want to talk about the shaman to outsiders. My friend, Cheng Chin Chung wrote the name Hung Chia Jen in my notebook, but he immediately erased it.<sup>28</sup>

In this Yao village, there is no village shrine. Lao villages have a village shrine which is called Ho:phi (meaning the house of the spirit).<sup>29</sup>

### Other Inter-Cultural Relationships

There are many minority groups located in northern Laos, but they are firmly tied together by bonds of common commercial interest, in which the Lao play the central role. Actually, the villages of the minority groups are geographically separated and the people of these villages live in isolation, but at the same time they have a close inter-relationship with each other. For example, in the Nam Tha market in northern Laos, the following people gather: Thai Dam, Meo, Yao, Lu, Kha Mou, Kha Kho, Lanten, as well as Pakistani, Vietnamese and Chinese merchants. On the other hand, the Kha Mou people, Yao and Meo meet in the neighborhood of the Thai village of Pha Tang. Pha Tang is the central trading place for many minority villages.<sup>30</sup>

With regard to specific trading patterns, in the Thai-Lao villages there are straw hats made by the Phou Theng as well as baskets and kon to, a type of raincoat; carrying baskets and children's hats are made by the Yao people. On the other hand, the architecture of the houses in the Phou Theng villages shows Yao influence. Grinding stones are another instance of this influence. Necklaces made by the Meo tribe, bracelets made by the Yao, woven cloths, skirts and head turbans made by the Lao are also widely used. In Yao villages the ta:n (chair) made by the Lao, is frequently observed, and bac nam (bamboo pipe) for scooping water also seems to be from the Lao. A variety of merchandise from Europe, Japan and Hong Kong is imported through the Lao.

With regard to methods of communication among the groups, the Lao language plays the chief role among the Yao, Meo and Phou Theng

tribes. The three groups speak the Lao language (for trade purposes). On the other hand, the Lao do not have a knowledge of any other language. Very few Lao know Phou Theng words and even fewer understand Yao or Meo. The inter-relationship between the Lao groups and the other surrounding peoples is not new but has considerable time depth. In the vocabulary of the other groups are many words borrowed from Lao; e.g., in the Phou Theng language the numerals are completely replaced by Lao words, and such words as ke, tau, kad, om and og, are from the Lao language. Bo (negation) is also occasionally used. On this point, there is a difference between the northern and southern Phou Theng tribes.<sup>31</sup> In the Yao language there are the words tae, hiw, mae, which may possibly have a common origin, although I cannot confirm this.

With the exception of one case (the husband is Phou Theng) marriages of the Yao people take place mostly within the tribe. Contrary to a widespread idea that the Lao do not intermarry with the Phou Theng and Meo, in reality there are a surprising number of such marriages. I cannot decide whether trade among the different groups has brought about intermarriages or whether the converse is true. However, the existence of intermarriage itself, is an undeniable fact.

The interchange of materials, people and linguistic patterns among the tribes is not always on an equal basis. Each group occupies a different position.

In Pha Tang and its vicinity, Lao culture is the dominant influence. The clearest distinction is found between the Lao and the Phou Theng. The latter work for the Lao at very low wages, and they /outwardly/ accept their position as servants of the Lao people. The Phou Theng, as seen by the Lao, are not clever but good workers. I sympathized with the Phou Theng people who exercised self-control and responded timidly to the Lao. The culture of the Yao and the Lao is on the same level, but some of the Yao look down on the Lao. For their part, the Lao consider the Yao as temporary inhabitants, and think it only natural that the Lao profit from them by acting as intermediaries in the opium trade and associated commerce. The Lao wish only to collect rent, metaphorically speaking, from the Yao, but they are not willing to maintain political and social relations with them. As seen by the Lao, the Yao are good workers and wealthy people, and are second in wisdom to the Lao. Some Yao are attempting to participate in Lao society. When they visit Lao villages in the valley, some of them change their clothes, put on wool sweaters, and mingle with the Lao. They acknowledge the King of Laos and their subordination to the Lao government. On the other hand, they have not forgotten the existence of the mythical Yao King.<sup>32</sup> The relationship between the Lao and the Meo, at least in the vicinity of the village of Pha Tang, is not as close as it is to the Yao. The few Meo villages are located at a great distance. They are poorer than the Yao people: here the Meo are located at the edge of the Lao world. Briefly, the cultural position of each group is taken

with respect to the Lao, who are the central focus.

Naturally, today's order of the local culture is not perfect. One day, Cheng Chin Chang (a Yao youth) wrote the following sentences in my field notes, in Chinese:

"Today in this world, unfortunately, many people are not able to live together; there are a few people in many places who live isolated in the mountains. If we are able to have a brother return to preserve our way of life, that is very good."

This report has been written in the spirit of Cheng Chin Chang's comments.

FOOTNOTES

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1. Keiji Iwata: "In the Valleys of Northern Laos," Geography, Vol. 3, No. 12 and Vol. 4, No. 1. Although this article is a part of the report of the village life in Pha Tang, it does present the routine of everyday life in the village. See Laos Project Paper No. 15 for further details on Pha Tang.
2. Keiji Iwata: "Tribal Distribution and Migration in the Valleys of Nam Song and Nam Lik," Journal of Japanese Society of Ethnology, Vol. 23, Nos. 1, 2 - 1959
3. Kha Mou (Khamu, Khamuh, Kambuu) is the name which they call themselves. "Kha" is supposed to mean "slave" in the Thai language, but I am not sure. Kha Mou also means "man." They do not like to use this name; therefore, in Laos, they generally refer to themselves as Phou Theng (Phou=man, Theng=highland).
4. Halpern, J. M.: Aspects of Village Life and Culture Change in Laos, 1958. In this article, the tribal structure in Luang Prabang Province is described particularly with reference to Luang Prabang district.
5. Takuji Takemura: "Contribution of Chinese Ethnology to the Study of non-Han Tribes in South and West China" Bibliography II, Social Anthropology, No. 2, 1958.
6. Credner, W.: "Völkerschichtung und Völkerbewegungen im Mittleren Hinterindien", Geografiska Annaler.
7. Thai Souei, Thai Neua, Thai Pouan, Thai Poua, Thai Deng, Thai Dai, Thai Nouan, Thai Porong, Thai Et, Thai Soun, Thai O, Thai Sot Ban. They are also classified into two, i.e., Phou Thai (Thai Deng) and Thai Lao (including other 11 groups).
8. Quelques Minorities Ethniques du Nord-Indochine, France-Asie, 92-93, 1954.
9. This distinction depends on differences in their costumes. such as the length of the men's coat and the women's skirt, e.g., the women of the Meo Lai tribe wear a pleated skirt.
10. Thailand, (H.R.A.F. Country Survey Series, 1957) or Thailand, Past and Present, 1957. We also find more details in E. G. Sebastian, "The Yao" The Journal of the Siam Society, Vol. XIX, Part 2, 1925.
11. Bernatzik, H. A.: Die Neue Grosse Völkerkunde, Bd. II, 1954.

12. Eickstedt, E. von: *ibid.* S. 148-161.
13. Wiens, H. J.: China's March Toward the Tropics, 1954. Reviewed with detailed analytical comments by Junichi Tsunemi Social Anthropology, No.2, 1958.
14. Eickstedt, E. von: *ibid.* S. 148, 161.
15. Liang Shun Sheng, Jin I Fu: Report on the Investigation of the Meo Tribe to the West of Hsiang River.
16. Hsu Sung Yu: "History of People in the Yueh Chiang Valley," 1939. Japanese Translation by Iwata Ide.
17. Benedict, R.K.: "Thai, Kadai and Indonesian: A New Alignment in Southeast Asia," American Anthropologist, Vol.44, No.4, pt. 1, 1942. Osamu Matsuyama gives a different view from that of Benedict with regard to the origin of the Thai language. Area and Culture Studies, 3, 1953.
18. Eberhard, W.: Kultur und Siedlung der Randvolker Chinas, 1942 (Quoted from Wiens *ibid.* pp. 51-52)
19. I do not know much in general about the Yao within Laos.
20. The administrative system in Laos consists of Ban (village), Tasseng (5-10 villages), Muong (county), Khoueng (prefecture), and Muan (country).
21. Coconut palms and betel nut trees do not grow in Yao villages any more. Banana plants and sugar cane are cultivated in the fields outside of the villages.
22. The fireplace is very simple and made on the floor. Because the village is located in the mountains, it is very cold at night and the people get warm by burning wood in the fireplace. Of course, they sometimes boil water and cook food in the fireplace, but they usually prepare meals on the kitchen stove.
23. They melt lead and pour it into one half of a bamboo which has been split lengthwise between the joints. This is the unit of their monetary value.
24. They do not make their cloth but buy many kinds of fabric from Lao merchants (the wool yarn and black cloth are mostly from Japan). When I visited the village, they were in need of beads for tassels. Earrings and necklaces are all silver and these are made by the people themselves. The price of the ornaments depends on the weight and not the quality of the workmanship. Some of the men wore a ring on their finger.

Every house has a bellows and simple farming tools and other utensils are made. Their bellows are styled after those of the Chinese. The ingots they mainly use are made in Bangkok.

25. The official exchange rate was one dollar to thirty-five kip in 1957 (but the market rate was considerably higher).
26. The procedure for a wedding is as follows: 1) The bride arrives at the bridegroom's house and bows to the ancestors of the groom's family. The bride's father and the girls of the village accompany her to render assistance. 2) The marriage ceremony takes place and the groom's father presents silver to the bride's father. At this wedding a lump of silver (called Ngun Yao, meaning silver, or money of the Yao), of 2.5 cm. in width, 1.5 cm. in height and 11 cm. in length, and 1/8 cup of silver coins of the colonial period, is presented. Then the fathers of both sides and the village headman, together with several influential villagers join them for dinner. 3) Next, the wedding reception takes place. 4) They chant a wedding song, the beginning part of which is as follows:

"We use the green grass to make paper to write the wedding announcements. We spread the paper over the earth to let all the people know. In the beginning, Pan Wang came to the earth and established the Heavens, the earth and 10,000 people. He raised the people so that the women can marry and the men can grow in strength to be able to lift the heavy incense burner...."

27. Takuji Takemura: "On Several Characteristics of Social Organization of the Yao Tribe." Social Anthropology, Vol.2, No. 2, 1959. Fong or zong in his article seems to correspond to chuan tsaio in this paper. The Lao word sua diaw kan seemingly corresponds to patriclan, but in some phases it corresponds better to patrisib.
28. I did not study their religion and their myths in general. The youths of the Yao tribe did not know about P'an-hu. However, it appears in the wedding previously mentioned.
29. Sebastian, E.G.: "The Yao," The Journal of the Siam Society, 1925. According to this article the Yao have three kinds of altars, i.e., 1) the altar for ancestors, 2) for heaven, and 3) for the spirits of the forest or town.
30. Keiji Iwata: The Social Order of Village Life in Northern Laos (in preparation).
31. Cf. Tsa-Khmu's vocabulary in France-Asie; Quelques Minorities Ethniques du Nord-Indochine, 92-93, 1954.
32. The Yao people believe there is a Yao nation and the emperor of that nation lives in the Kiukiang district.



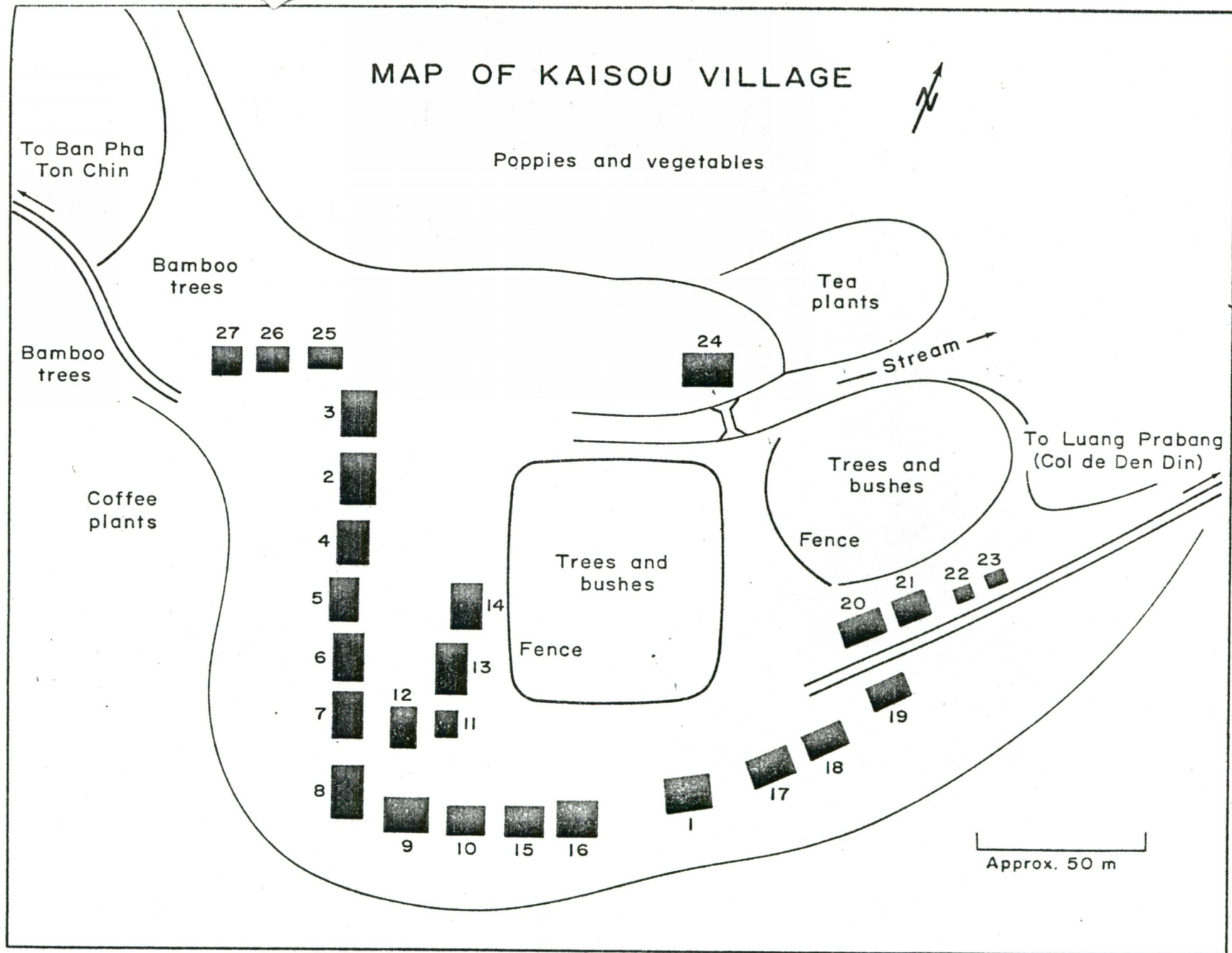
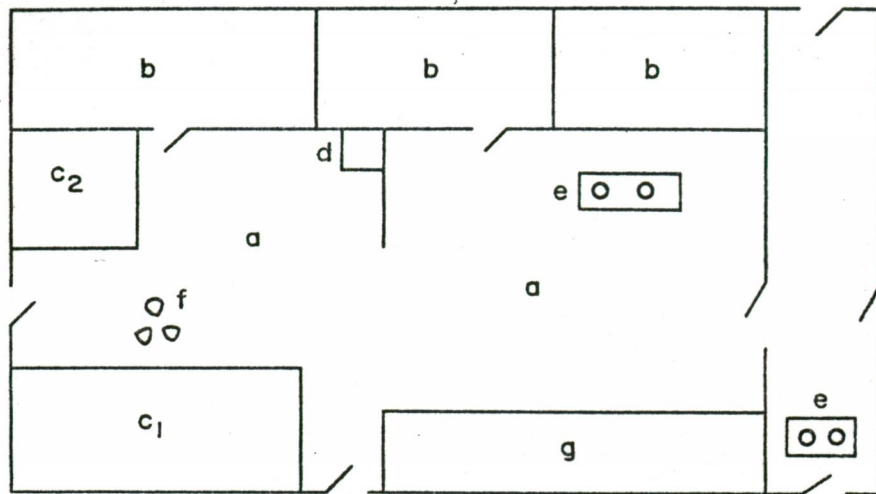


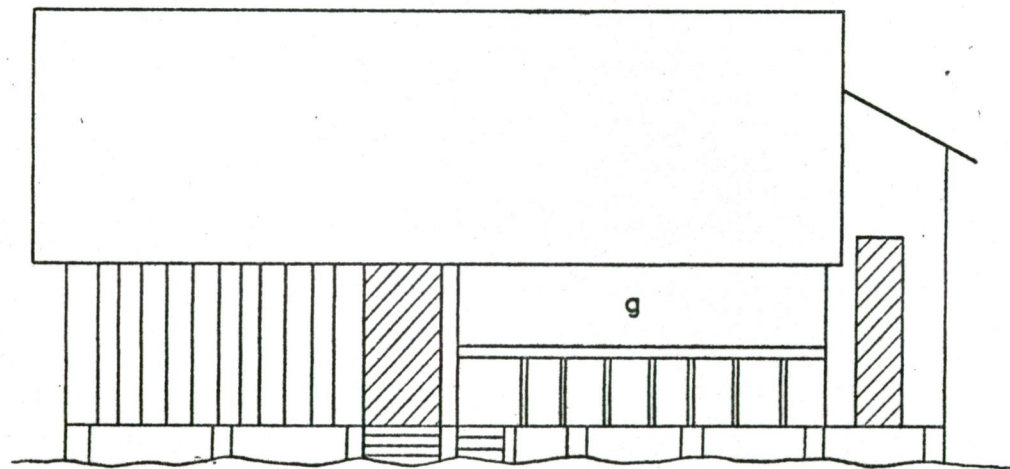
FIGURE I

# YAO HOUSE (HOUSE OF CHAO LUNG CHING)

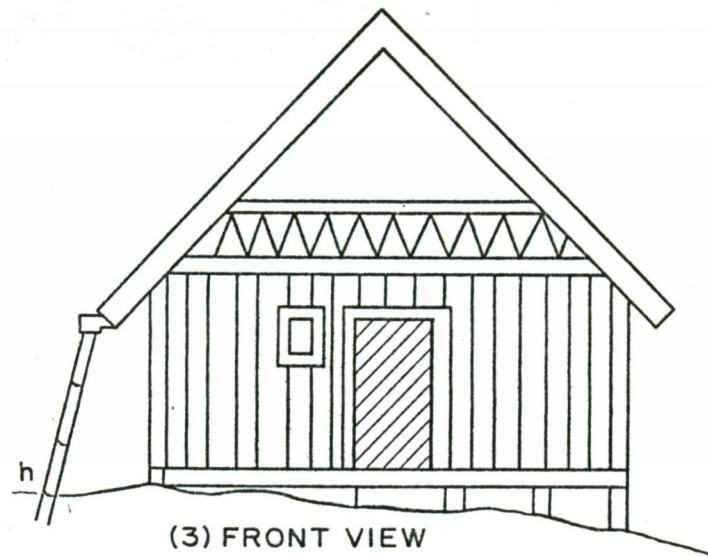


(1) FLOOR PLAN

Approx. 4 m



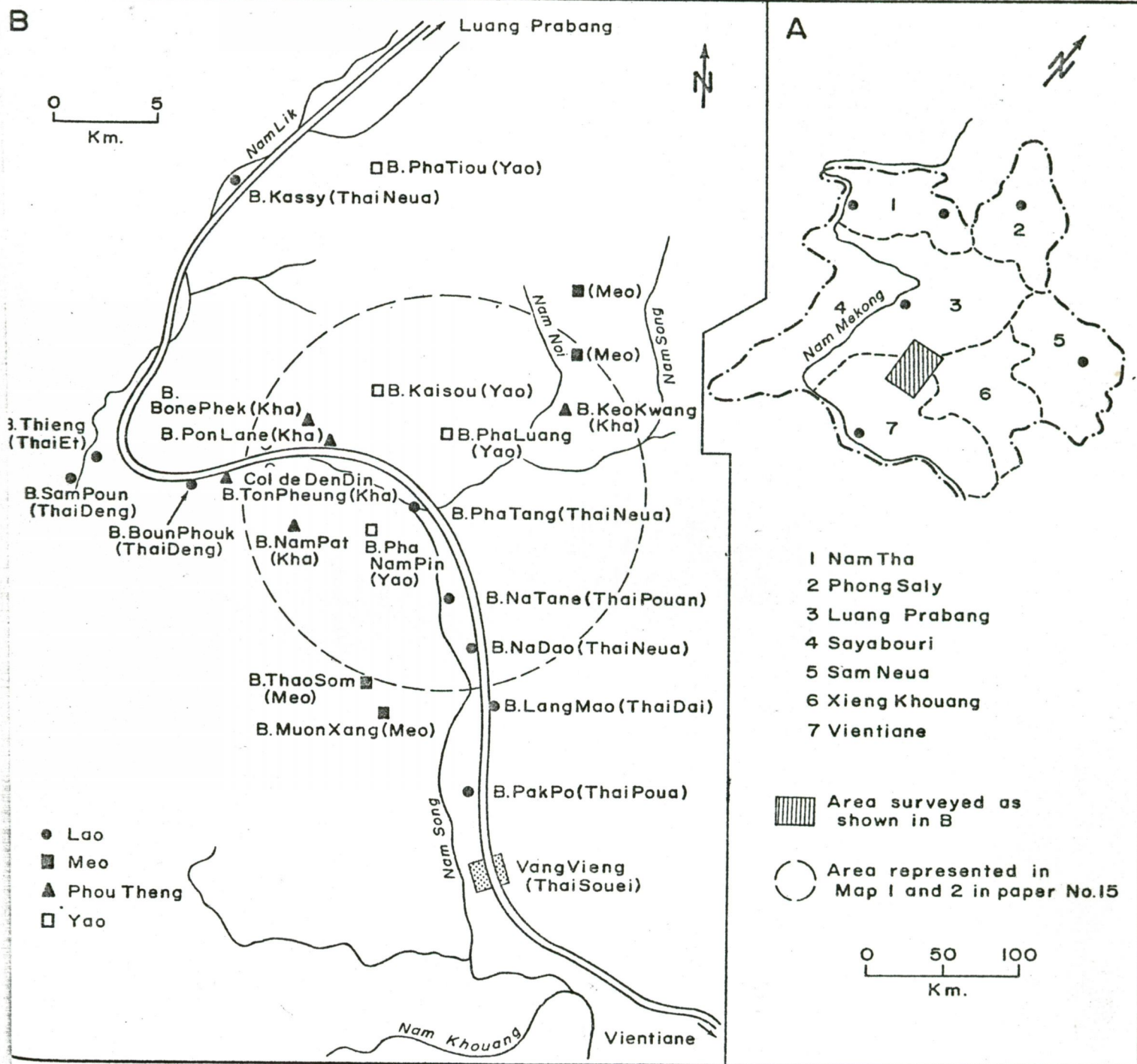
(2) SIDE VIEW



(3) FRONT VIEW

(1) Notes:

- a = earth floor
- b = sleeping quarters
- c<sub>1</sub> = guest sleeping quarters
- c<sub>2</sub> = guest sleeping quarters  
(absent in many houses)
- d = altar
- e = cooking range
- f = fireplace
- g = pig pen
- h = bamboo pipes



NORTHERN LAOS AND AREA SURVEYED  
MAP I