

《Session 2》

Preserving Sacred Spaces for Cultural Survival: Reconstruction of Thao People of Taiwan Aborigines after 1999 Earthquake

CHEN Yong-Long

Taiwan, Workshop for Bio-Cultural Diversity

I would like to share with you the survival story of the Thao People which is the smallest ethnic group of indigenous people in Taiwan. I think it is a good case study for us to interpret the difficulties of indigenous people after the 1999 earthquake. Through self-awareness and some help of NGOs, they returned to their original land to reconstruct their community and culture, and preserved their sacred spaces for cultural survival.

I. Indigenous Peoples' condition in Taiwan

Taiwan is 36,197.03 km² large constitutes with the principal island of Taiwan (about 35,879.32 km²) and several small islands. The greater part of Taiwan's people are composed of the Chinese migrants (Han-People) and indigenous people. The majority of Han-People came from the southern part of Fukien and Canton Province of mainland China from 400 years ago to the end of World War II. The total official population statistics are 22,615,997 persons including 446,400 persons* of indigenous people. The proportion of aboriginal population is about 1.97% of the whole country. There are more than 12 ethnic groups of indigenous peoples in our country but just 9 races have been officially recognized before 2001. These indigenous peoples have been living on the island for more than three thousand years. It was not until four hundred years ago that they were disturbed by Chinese settlers.

For the past four hundred years, most indigenous peoples have experienced different regimes from Dutch's Army and Company (1624-1662), Mr. ZHENG's Army of Min Dynasty (1662-1683), Chin Dynasty (1683-1895), Japan colonial

* This amount is quoted from the website of <http://www.ris.gov.tw/ch4/static/st0-1-9302.xls>.

government (1895-1945), the KMT regime (1945-2000) until the present DPP Government (2000-).

After 1860's, the late Chin regime changed the policy of mountain area towards development to cut into a mountain for cultivating wasteland and to pacify the indigenous people. These policies led most of indigenous people lived at plain area to be assimilated into the Han-People's society and gradually lost their land. The colonial government of Japan began to move many indigenous tribes away from the mountain area for the purpose of exploitation and economic interest. Most lands of mountain area became the wealth which belongs to the colonial government. These exploitation policies of mountains also deprived many indigenous people the living right and oppressed them to give up their traditional way of life. After the end of World War II, the KMT regime inherited the cultural policy of Japan government and continued to keep exploiting the mountain area.

Today, although the majority Taiwanese enjoyed the fruit of economic success, the indigenous people are not included in the power and money game. Due to the arrogance of rulers, they were stigmatized as barbarians. The indigenous people lived in distant mountains with the nature, open-hearted, joyful and highly trust worthy. Unfortunately, they were not competitive enough in the market economy and did not share the benefits of economic development. There are a few schools and hospitals in remote mountains with scarce resources. For jobs, most young indigenous people have to work in the city and leave the children to grandparents which led to some problem of juvenile.

II. Introduction of the Thao People

Thao group is smaller in number than many protected endangered species in Taiwan. They live in a beautiful mountain area in the central part of Taiwan, the Sun-Moon Lake. Before Han-people move into these mountains at the time of Chin Dynasty, Thao people were the master of this area which composed of thousand of people. They were dependent on the agriculture of dry cultivation and fishing in lake. They also invented many ways for fishing and was the only group to make a canoe just with one trunk of a tree.

During the time of late Chin Dynasty, a great quantity of Han-People migrants took by force or swindle by contract to get the land of Thao people. The infectious disease of the Han migrants led to the reduction of Thao people's population. During the domination of Japan colonial government, Sun-Moon Lake became the water reservoir with a dam for electric power to support the war indus-

tries in Taiwan. This engineering made the water line rise up to the sacred space of ancestry, where living places drowned. Most Thao people were moved to one settlement beside the south of Sun-Moon Lake.

After the KMT regime which fled from mainland China, central and local government cooperated to plan for tourism by redrawing the land. This policy broke up the collective inhabitation of Thao people. Thao people no longer lived close to each other, in a town where the majorities are Han-people settlers. Thao people's ancestral land became government owned or were sold to private business owners. Most Thao people must work in the urban hence or be employed in the tourist business. Only a few of Thao people could live by traditional material life.

Today, Sun-Moon Lake is known far and wide, at home and abroad, it becomes a famous holiday resort. Millions of tourist come from Japan, America, and the interior of Taiwan for leisure and recreation. Tourism has affected their life tremendously. Only capitalists and Major Han-people took up the interest of tourist, the Thao people did not really share with the benefits. It speeded up the outward migration of Thao people and led their mother language to be rarely spoken. And their culture was reduced to performance for the enjoyment of tourists.

The Thao people used many tactics for survival by way of self-defense of Society at least 150 years long. But only after the 1999 earthquake, did the Thao people start their own movement and gave rebirth to their culture. The central part of the island was hit violently. Sun-Moon Lake area, the houses, hotels, recreation areas were hit heavily. At Thao People's area, about eighty percent housings were destroyed. The Thao people are not the only ones that suffered from this disaster. But instead of waiting passively for the support from government, Thao people decided to stand up and worked together with the help from grassroots organizations, managed to find their own way.

III. Social reconstruction of the Thao People

As I said before, there are only 9 ethnic groups of Taiwan Aborigines were officially recognized by government before 2001. For many years, the Thao people was not recognized as a unique group, but was included in another group of Tsou people. There were some members of the Thao people, who once denied their identity as being Thao because of the stigmatization, but came back with their religious symbols which have been long deserted somewhere by themselves.

Before 2001, the names of the different ethnic groups were given by the

anthropologists to categorize, first academically, and then to socially, and now politically. But in their mother languages, Thao, Tayal, Puyuma, Pangcah, and Tsou, are words used to indicate themselves, which actually have the same meaning, and that is “Human Being”. As though others are called Tayal, Puyuma, Pangcah or Tsou, These people call themselves “Ida-Thao” which means “we are human”.

As a unique group but forgotten by government, the official resource could not really get into Thao area for rebuilding after 1999 earthquake. The Thao people were not dependent on government and did not wait for the official rescue. They spread a series of projects for self-reconstruction which combined two faces of living community and Thao society. They tried to rebuild their own collective housing for living, and to reconstruct the identity of Ida-Thao for cultural survival.*

On Oct. 24, 1999, Thao people went back to their ancestral living place, named *Puzi* in Thao language. They claimed that the land belonged to them, and hope they can come back to this site to live in the future. They also started to build their new community on their ancestral land. With some resources and helps of non-governmental workers, Thao people were gathered again in the community, working cooperatively to build up the village. They use bamboos, the traditional building materials, combined with woods and light steels to rebuild their houses with their own hands. For cultural survival, they also struggled with local government for preserving their sacred spaces. With the rebuilding of their community and the strengthening of consciousness as being Thao, they fight for their legal and political status as being Thao and not someone else. After their continuously symbolic struggle, Thao people were finally officially recognized to be a unique people in a class on August 8, 2001 by DPP government.

But the real condition of the Thao people for survival was not changed after official recognition. Because only very few elders of the Thao people still speak their own language, and only very few of the elders still know the technique of traditional art. Since they lived far away from each other, and were all busy in jobs, they didn't have chances to teach the young generation before the earthquake. Now they've gathered again in one community, and they started to have their own education program. They began to recover their lost ritual practice and discover the traditional craftsmanship linked to the lake culture.

Everything seems to work pretty well, except for the fact that their ancestral

* You can see the cultural projects of the Thao People in <http://thao.tacocity.com.tw/>

land, where they rebuild their community, is still a government owned land. Thao people lost this ancestral place in the project of land redrawing which dominated in the hands of local government at 1980s. Local government imposed this land on the excuse of ‘community center’ but changed the item of land use to be commercial pursuits for hotel. Most Thao people did not know why their ancestral places become the properties of government one after another.

Even after the earthquake, Sun-Moon Lake also was appointed the national scenic area by central government, where government would like to promote tourism. Nowadays the Thao people is not yet live in security, although they are living on their ancestral land, they are threatened to move away from time to time. The decision makers, either local government or business owners, want to “take back” the land for recreation purposes. The local government threatened the Thao people that they’ll cut down the supply for water and electricity, if Thao people would not return the land to the local government for development. With the supports of NGOs and media, the Thao people succeeded keeping their ancestral land for the time being. The battle still goes on. The final decision is still unknown.

Though the future of the Thao people still are full of variation, but the Thao people, with scarce material and human resources, still managed to achieve this goal, to rebuild their community on their ancestral land and to breed their culture again. And they’re not just helping themselves, but also set up a good model for other indigenous groups to rebuild their communities as well. Some tribes of another ethnic groups learnt from the Thao people to rebuild their own homes and communities with themselves. So, I hope there are more supports to help the Thao people to live on their ancestral land with full rights and dignity.

IV. Preserving Sacred Spaces for Survival

Now I would like to interpret a story of the Thao people who preserved their sacred spaces and struggled with government for cultural survival. Due to many lands of the Thao people are submerged by the engineering of water power in Sun-Moon Lake, these drowned places included a sacred space where was named *Lalu* in Thao’s language. *Lalu* was an ancestral place of the Thao people, its meaning is the ‘island of lake’. *Lalu* originally was a natural island where had been lived with the ancestries of the Thao people. One could not arrive at without boat even in the past time. After the engineering of Sun-Moon Lake, the square measure of island was greatly reduced and cannot be lived.

In Thao people’s belief, *Lalu* is the most sacred and inviolable space. From

beginning to end, most Thao people still believe that their ancestral spirits live on *Lalu* after death even now. In all their ritual practices, they must invite the ancestral souls from *Lalu*. But *Lalu* was full filled the struggles of ideology. Chin Dynasty named this place 'Pearl Island' (or 'Pearl Mountain') and established an academy of classical learning for assimilation. Japan colonial government named it 'Jade Island' and planted a lot of cherry trees (Sakura; さくら) for nostalgia. KMT regime named it 'Kuan-Hua (means splendor) Island' and built a bower of god who unites persons in marriage for tourism. All of the ideologies by the governing class seriously infringed upon the dignity of the Thao people.

We can see the sacred meaning of *Lalu* in ritual space of the Thao people. Fig. 1 is a sketch map of the Thao people's ritual place in front of their home. Most ritual practices were performed at this place. Masters of Ritual Practice sat in the forecourt and sang the ritual songs to invite their ancestries. They put two bamboo poles to mark off the ritual space. In the past research reports, all the scholars think these bamboos are just for driving chickens or dogs out.

But in my recent research, I found these two bamboo poles not only for driving animals but drawing two lines which have more plentiful meaning in Thao's culture. It separated the *sacred space* from the *lay space* and had the distinct between *physical space* and *spirit world*. The *sacred space* extends from their

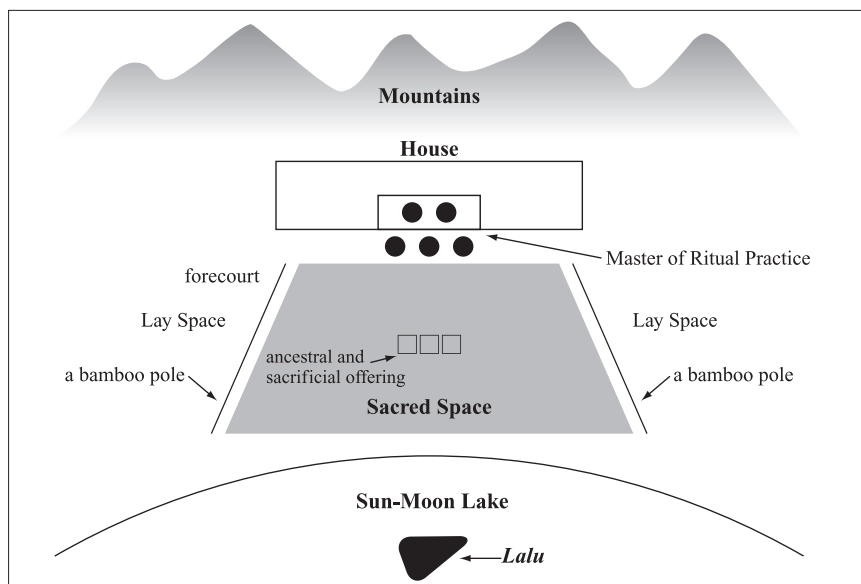


Fig. 1 Imaged Map of Memory in Ritual Space of the Thao people

home to *Lalu* in Sun-Moon Lake which combined the *physical space* of the fore-court and the *spirit world* of *Lalu*. If analysis the lyrics in the songs of their ritual practice, we could find many cultural meanings in it which filled the historical memory of the Thao people. Some ritual songs repeatedly remind their descendants not to believe the Han-people and Japanese. These lyrics also pointed out the Japanese grabbed the lands of the Thao people. *

There are some symbolic meanings in the sacred space for offering sacrifices to ancestors. By a point of view in Thao's Lake culture, they indeed preserved the historical memories in these ritual practices. From ancient times to the present, most Thao people always like to wander unhurriedly on a boat. For this reason, these two oblique lines signified the waves by a boat in the lake. It hinted the image about the historical memory of the Thao people. When water drowned the ancestral places of the Thao people, they were moved out from *Lalu*. Thao people sat on the canoes to look back and call to mind of their homes. They missed the living in lake and cherished the memory of *Lalu*. The memory of lake culture made *Lalu* to become the most *sacred space* where tied with the *spirit world* of the Thao people. **

Fortunately, the bower of matchmaker on *Lalu* was destroyed by the 1999 earthquake. Thao people thought it is the only opportunity for them to take back the dominant power of *Lalu*. They made many efforts for symbolic struggles in order to denominate back the original name *Lalu*. They also participated in the reconstructive process vigorously. Thao people were successfully preserving their sacred space finally for cultural survival. Now the name of *Lalu* is right in Thao's appellation. We can see some expositions about the short history of *Lalu* and the Thao people on *Lalu*. They hoped the information can teach the tourists to esteem the dignity of the Thao people. I think it is a good design which not only for tourism but for conservation.

V. Some Reflection of the case study

For the part of minority groups within nation states, I suggest that we support our indigenous peoples and our minority groups in our own countries. Any political parties are not really concerned with indigenous peoples but just for votes with a formal expression of preference. There are no concrete policies for indigenous

* see (TANG Mei-Chun 1958/1996); (魏心怡: 2001)

** The detailed discourse was discussed in Chapter 6 of my dissertation, see (CHEN, 2003).

peoples to improve their real living condition and to make a living for keeping body and soul together.

In spite of the government's action willing to recognize them as a separate group, the road to future is still difficult and arduous of Thao people. Nowadays, most Thao people live in the community. They try to recover their lost rites continuously and relearn traditional craft for holding with lake culture. Thao People believe only they can make their future by themselves all the time. I think they will create new conventions and certainly will have some invention of tradition.

In the Final part of my presentation, I'd like to share with you some personal feeling and experiences as I have been working with my indigenous friends. Because I have learned more and more things from my friends of Indigenous peoples in Taiwan, I perceive their local knowledge and traditional wisdom still is so precious and valuable. As a non-indigenous member in indigenous society, I really appreciate the education they have given me, which is never provided by the school. Every researchers and professionals should be self-effacing and learn in other cultures. If there is some contribution of my research, I must thank for many friends of NGOs and especially for the Thao people.