

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSION: RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This study has focused on the lives of Lahu women who practice mobility and develop social networks in order to earn cash income. Their practice of mobility and their social networks are situated as part of their everyday lives and social space construction as female Lahu vendors. Exploring the reasons for their choice of such practices has been emphasized in order to gain a better understanding of the lives of members of this highland ethnic group under a changing environment. In this chapter, a discussion on the methodological approach used and the research findings, including theoretical debates, will be highlighted as part of the conclusion of this study.

#### **6.1 Discussion on the Methodological Approach of the Study**

Studies on the Lahu over the past few decades have mainly been village-based. Basic information on the Lahu's ritual practices, lifestyles and the influences of other ethnic groups has been richly explored by the Tribal Research Institute, as well as other scholars (Sharp 1965, Tribal Research Centre 1970, Sanit 1977, 1980, 1989, Walker 1981, 1986, 1992, 2003) and the construction of Lahu identity in relation to nationalism and religion has also been examined (Nishimoto 1998, Kataoka 2006). Some research focused on the lives of the Lahu in urban areas, has shed the light on the life of marginalized Lahu (Kwanchewan, Panadda and

Prasit

2002, Panadda and Meeyum 2006). However, the mobility of the Lahu in Thailand has been less focused upon, although it is increasingly practised and scholars recognize the practice (Panadda and Meeyum 2006, Kataoka 2008, Nishimoto 2009). This study, about female Lahu vendors, describes one part of the Lahu's social practices, focusing on mobility. Their mobility is not one-way, from village to urban or traditional to modern; they shuttle between one place and another, and the two values co-exist. Carrying out mobility for cash income earning activity is a recent phenomenon, one practiced by many Lahu, as well as other groups. This issue should be studied more, in order to understand the diverse methods of social space-making, as well as identity construction that take place among the Lahu.

Tracing back through the historical context of Lahu migration indicates that mobility has often been implemented as a social practice. The history of Lahu migration is the history of Lahu identity construction. Within the structure of unequal power relations between the highlands and lowlands, many Lahu have participated in resistance against the lowland dominant groups, and religious development has been implemented in the hope of finding salvation. The relationship between the highlands, lowlands and central authorities changed after the nation state was created and as globalization took over in the areas where the Lahu settled. In the case of the Lahu in Thailand, their life has been greatly influenced by the highland development policies of the Thai Government, as well as by tourism and capitalism. While stereotypes of the negative images of 'hill tribes', derived from highland development policies, have been internalized by the Lahu and became a part of their notion of inferiority (Nishimoto

1998), receiving items and value from outside has become a common practice for them. As a result, a new mobility, one which differs from the historical migrations that took place in the form of fleeing, has been practiced by the Lahu.

This study has tried to implement an ethnographic research framework from the viewpoint of the Lahu people, a framework emphasized especially by Kataoka (2006) and Nishimoto (2009). This is not a comparative study between the lowlands and highlands, or between one village and another. Rather, this study has tried to reveal how the life experiences of ordinary people, such as female Lahu vendors, is constituted in relation to others. Hence, participant observation of the Lahu traders' everyday lives and multi-sited ethnography were implemented as part of the research, in order to trace the connections among them. At the same time, I used the Lahu language in order to form a closer relationship with the Lahu vendors. Understanding the Lahu language also became a tool I could use to gain a deeper understanding of the vendors' thoughts; however, there were some limitations in terms of the implementation of the study, as it was impossible to follow every trader's route, and my understanding of the Lahu language was not enough to understand all of the conversations the vendors had while I was with them. To cover these limitations, I collected their life histories and stories of everyday existence and Thai was used as a supporting language.

## **6.2 Research Findings**

### **6.2.1 Mobility as a Social Practice: Their Choices, Their Life**

Investment in wet-rice cultivation as well as housing is an indication of the tendency toward permanent settlement by highlanders. However, ironically, it creates the situation of putting the cart before the horse: investment is needed for permanent settlement and the highlanders have to go to work outside the village for this purpose (Kataoka (trans. and ed.) in KyaLeh 2008:175, my own translation).

The life of female Lahu vendors is just what Kataoka describes regarding the current life of the Lahu in Thailand. In contradiction to their life experiences as a result of the highland development policies, the Lahu women search for a way to fulfill the twin needs of permanent settlement and earning cash income. I intended to understand their spatial practices and explore the meaning of these practices, which seem to “put the cart before the horse”. Looking at their everyday practices, those that have expanded across multiple locations and situations, was the key to finding the answer. It seems that, for the Lahu vendors, permanent settlement and an improvement in their living status as permanent settlers, is rather a matter of value than of place. Their concern at being valued in Lahu society and of finding a permanent settlement is one such value. Such values are reconstructed, mixed with traditional values, and with government policies to blame for their mobility, they encourage permanent settlement. In this situation, permanent settlement is not the antonym of mobility, but the object of the practice of mobility.

Mobility is also practiced by Lahu women in order to construct linkages among family members who are not settled in a single place. Though the Lahu household becomes a more permanent settlement, family members tend to disperse. Children go outside of the village to get an education, because some villages have kindergartens and elementary schools but no higher education facilities, and some do not have any of these, plus either one or both of the parents, as well as other family members who do not study, also go to work outside of the village. On the one hand, the mobility of Lahu women is a part of the dispersion of the family in general, but on the other hand, mobility provides the Lahu women with cash income, which connects them to other family members, since the income is used to ‘take care of the household’.

### **6.2.2 Social Networks as a Tactic of Negotiation**

During their stay at Tonlamyai Market, the living status, including accommodation, of the female Lahu vendors, as well as the food they consume, is less emphasized when compared to their life in the village. Instead, their development of a social network is highly important. This study showed that social networks are a reliable tactic for them to use, as they are not fixed in space. These networks enable them to manipulate multiple locations, as it is difficult for them to situate themselves in a single space, since their household and cash income earning locations are not the same, yet they have to take care of both.

What Lahu female vendors do utilize are kinship ties and friendship ties, and each is chosen by them within a different level of power relations, such as between a Lahu female vendor and her husband, her Lahu relatives and the Thai state, in order to construct their space as well as maximize profit. Especially when the vendors are at the marketplaces within Thai society, they manipulate various connections. Social networks are not fixed in ethnicity but are constructed beyond their ethnicity, and the Lahu vendors make use of such networks, not only with their Lahu kin and friends, but also with the northern Thai traders. Within the development of a social network between the Lahu vendors and the northern Thai traders at the markets, power relations based on differences between the highlanders and lowlanders are less emphasized, although there are some notions of differentiation developed by the Lahu vendors. Instead, a common sense of companionship, as women who are experiencing a similar struggle to take care

of their household, exceeds the notion of power relations among the Lahu female vendors and northern Thai female traders.

For the female Lahu vendors, it seems that each network is based on the notion of *aw vi aw nyi*, an idea of mutual help which does not have a clear and fixed demarcation. Among the female Lahu vendors and their kin, kinship is highlighted without distinguishing whether that kin shares the same ethnic background or not. Among the Lahu vendors and their Lahu friends, ethnic consciousness as a Lahu is highlighted without distinguishing whether a person shares the same lineage or not. Among the female Lahu vendors and the non-Lahu traders, mutual respect and companionship as mothers is emphasized over any differences in lineage or ethnic consciousness. The notion of *aw vi aw nyi* allows the holder to expand the demarcation of her individual measurement used for place making; therefore, it becomes a tactic of negotiation for the female Lahu vendors.

In theory, the notion of *aw vi aw nyi* is related to the idea of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2005). Herzfeld (ibid:5-8) argues that the idea of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1997) is not enough to explain the influence of national practices of unification as operated by the elites towards ordinary people, who are situated as “only followers”. Indeed, it is not enough to explain another element, other than technologies of power for nationalization, which also helps ordinary people to create a unified image of a larger entity. This idea is formulated in order to complement the view of ordinary people in the construction of unity. It focuses on cultural forms which reveal the relationship between the ‘top’ and the ‘bottom’ that constitute “complex processes of creative cooperation in economic, political, and administrative practices” (Herzfeld



2005:3). The notion of *aw vi aw nyi* can be seen as one form of cultural intimacy that reveals the complex relationship between a Lahu female vendor and the people, as well as the organizations, surrounding her.

### 6.2.3 Gender Relations of Female Lahu Vendors

The mobility of Lahu women, especially the wives, needs to be connected to the role of women in Lahu society. Cholada (2001) reveals that the phenomenon of selling one's own daughter to brokers for prostitution is based on the idea that women have to take care of the household. This idea is also seen among the Lahu vendors and is internalized in their minds, as such an idea is taught among the Lahu through proverbs, as seen below<sup>89</sup>:

- *Chaw maw hk'aw: haw hk'a pa yehkuidawhpeve Ya mi taw kohpeve.*  
(The man is the pole of the house, the woman is the roof of the house.)
- *Haw hk'a pa yehk'ahk'aw yamive o k'ohpehve.*  
(At home, the man is the head of the woman)

Both proverbs indicate the expected role of man as the leader of the household, and that of woman as the helper of the leader. Before, staying at home fulfilled a woman's role as the maintainer of the household, through raising livestock, through cooking and washing etc. Nowadays, earning cash income, which is difficult to earn when staying at home, is regarded as important for maintenance of the household. Since Lahu women find work outside the village periodically, as they seek chances to earn cash income, mobility becomes the way to fulfill their role as Lahu woman by giving them the opportunity to earn cash income. It should be noted that its structure is based on Lahu

<sup>89</sup> The first proverb is known among both traditional and Christian Lahu. The second proverb was told to me by Na Tii. She explained this proverb, linking to teachings in the Bible, which emphasize the subordination of women in the household.

customs, and that there is almost no restriction on women who wish to practice mobility.

During the process of the production of a 'locality' by the Lahuvendors, it should be regarded that this process does not exclude the men, although the locality is produced mainly based on the networks among women. Rather, men play a part in the process in a supporting, but not subordinate role. Men's role in taking care of the house, as well as the production activities at home such as farming and livestock rearing while the women are absent is an important factor which allows the women to work as vendors away from home. It is also based on Lahu customs; there exist roles for both women and men in the household in Lahu society. However, it is not fixed in gender, so that if the expected person is not available to take up a role in the household, another takes it.

#### **6.2.4 Identity and Cosmology of Female Lahu Vendors**

During the everyday practices of the female Lahu vendors, their Lahu cultural identity is not utilized for commercial activities. Lahu ethnic consciousness is only seen as an identification of the self and other Lahu vendors. What the female Lahu vendors utilize instead as their marketable identity as '*khondoi*'. This study has found that their identification with '*khondoi*', as a marketable identity, is constituted through the process of recognition of the Lahu female vendors by others, as well as the representation of self by the Lahuvendors themselves. At the marketplace in Thai society, the female Lahu vendors often choose to differentiate themselves from others as highlanders, in contrast to lowlanders. This self-identification as highlanders, in other words a representation of difference, is not a point of vulnerability for the Lahu

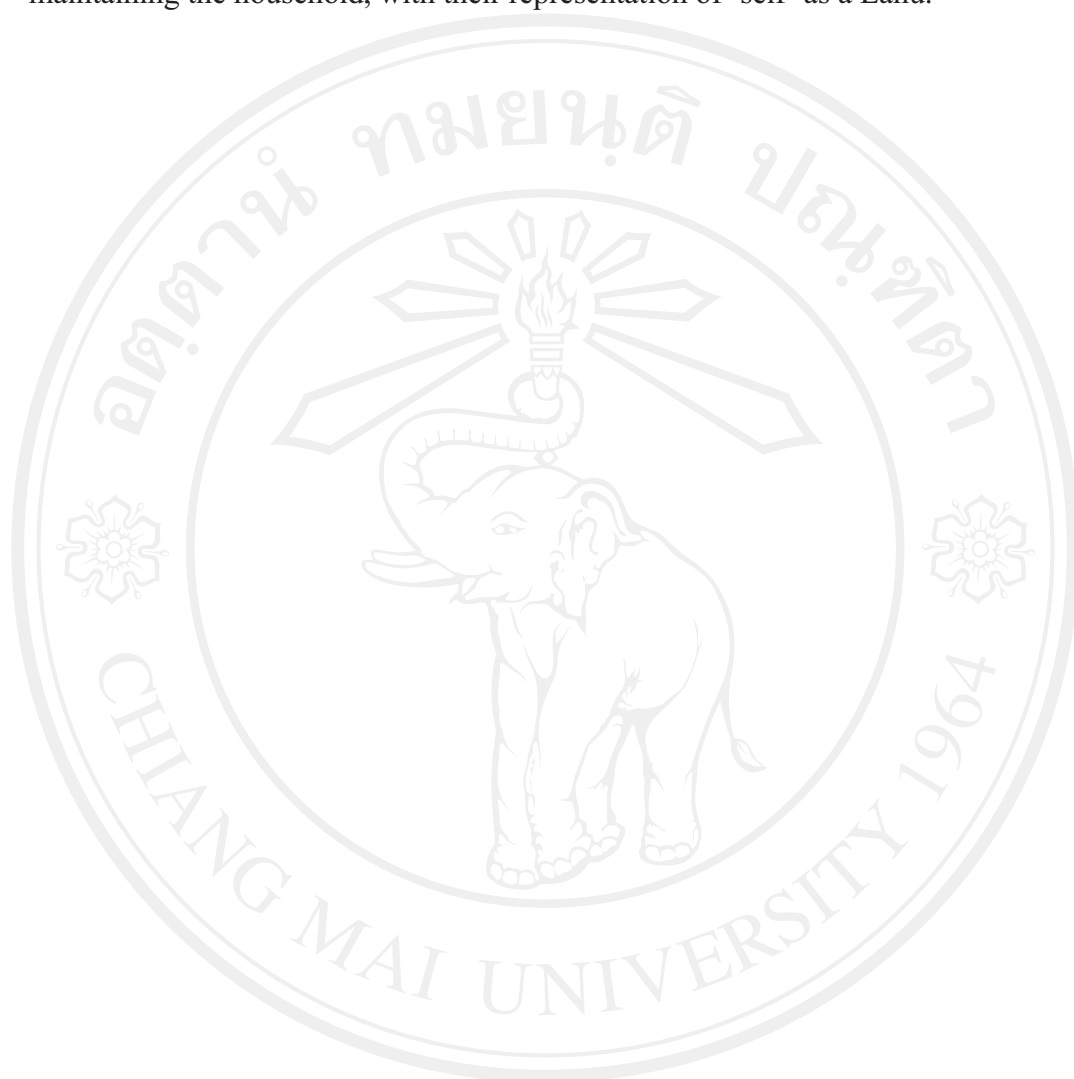


vendors, but rather they utilize it as a tool to form a connection through their commercial activities, with others.

As female Lahu vendors, they play different roles within their different levels of relationship with others. At the wholesale markets, they are buyers who have to negotiate a price with the wholesaler. At Tonlamyai Market and the other local markets, they are vendors, who have to negotiate a price with customers. At home, they are mothers as well as wives, who take care of the household. Representing themselves in different ways across different situations and locations is practiced by the female Lahu vendors as part of their travelling identity, which is tactically manipulated.

During their practice of mobility and cash income earning within the urban Chiang Mai setting, the female Lahu vendors do not aim to consume modernity. Different from the young northeastern women who practice urban migration (Mills 1993), the consumption of modernity, such as wearing western-style clothes, commonly seen among the permanent vendors who live in Chiang Mai, using commodities, as well as consuming lowland food purchased at the market, and learning the Thai language, are practiced by female Lahu vendors only out of necessity. Their personal expenses are economized as much as possible, and the income they earn from vending is used only to pay for household expenses. The urban setting is a part of their everyday lives, especially for those Lahu vendors from highlands. In the urban marketplace, they practice small-scale commercial activity, the income from which supports their life in the highlands, and goods found in the urban setting are consumed by the vendors only as a necessity. Their cosmology nowadays also includes an urban

life, as it gives the female Lahu vendors the opportunity to complement the necessity of maintaining the household, with their representation of ‘self’ as a Lahu.



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