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On the Lanten Methods to Fetch the *Hon* or Living Force of the Original Rice

Abstract: Rice rituals are core to the rice-cultivating societies in Southeast and East Asia. The planting, growth, and harvest of rice depend upon how well the farmers secure their spiritual integrity and the effectiveness of the homage paid to the spiritual owners of the rice. This chapter presents one of the ritual actions associated with the Lanten rice rituals in northern Laos: fetching the *hon* or living force of the original rice. Informed by a decade of fieldwork and various academic projects directed by the author in Laos, this chapter translates and discusses the secret words in ritual use employed by the Lanten master leading the ceremony, revealing the logic and ethnographic context of the ritual itself in connection with research on rice rituals and their historical development in the region, with a focus on Yao Studies.

1 Introduction

The Lanten, a branch of the Yao, are one of the smallest and most marginal ethnic minorities in Laos, numbering some ten thousand and living in forty villages in the provinces of Luang Namtha, Bokeo, Oudomxay, and Phongsali, in the far northwest of the country close to the borders with Thailand, Vietnam, China and Myanmar. Their autonym Mun means 'person' in the Mun language (a language of the Hmong-Mienic family; both the people and the language are also referred to as Kim Mun), yet they present themselves to outsiders by the ethnonym Lanten (French: Lantène), from the Chinese 藍靛瑤 Lándiàn Yáo, literally 'Indigo [dye] Yao'. This is a name that is accepted by both Lanten and non-Lanten communities in Laos.[1] It

1 The Lanten in Luang Namtha designate their autonym *Jiu Mun*, meaning lit. 'Yao person' as *Iu Mien* does in Mien language; in Mun language, *Dou* 民 'people' identifies any other non-Lanten person. There are two Mun-speaking societies in Laos, those who call themselves *Kwa Bu Mun* or Blue Trousers [wearing] People, who have a population of around 4,700 members and reside in the provinces of Luang Namtha, Bokeo, and Oudomxay; and the *Kwa Kia Mun* or Black Trousers [wearing] People, with a population of around 5,500 members, who reside exclusively in Phongsali province, along the Sino-Lao border (Lao Statistics Department, 2010). There is no contact, exchange, or intermarriage between these two societies – the same applies to communities of the

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constituted the favoured choice for early European travellers who visited northern Laos in the 1890s and who interacted with various Lanten communities at that time and documented these encounters, which testifies to the old use of the term and its wide acceptance in the region.[2]

The Lanten ritual system presents a remarkable complexity that can be ascribed to the so-called Yao Daoism, which has long fascinated scholars owing to its structural similarities with the earliest organized Daoist communities of the Later Han dynasty.[3] All Lanten young men undergo ordination as Daoist ritual masters, receiving accreditation as *dao kong* 道公 'priests' and *tai kong* 師公 'masters'.[4] Although all the Lanten men are – ideally – ordained in their teens, interviews with ritual experts in the Lanten settlements in Laos revealed that only around ten per cent engage in an increasingly specialised path as ritual experts. Their dedication to the community grows as they are freed of the most demanding household tasks, as their children cater for them (i.e., after they are forty to fifty years old), enabling full-time dedication, one that is seasonal as the most demanding ceremonies are arranged during the dry season.[5] The ordained status allows the men to participate

other Yao society in Laos, namely the Iu Mien. This research focuses on the Blue Trousers People of Luang Namtha.

2 For instance, in the Luang Namtha region: Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902, 288; McCarthy 1900, 150–151; Lefèvre 1898; and Davis 1909, 371–372. Both British and French explorers and travellers to North Myanmar and North Vietnam, respectively, documented the use of the ethnonym Lanten. 'These are called variously Yawyin, Yaoyen, Yaojên, Laoyen, and Lanten [...] there are four main divisions of this people [...] the eldest branch call themselves Yu-mien or Yao-mien [...] the other branches are the Lantien Yao, the Santeng Yao, and the Chiaokuo Yao' (Scott 1900, 601). The use of English and French in the transliterations may result in exotic outcomes, such as that used by Prince Henri d'Orléans (1898, 47) as he met members of this society during his travels in Yunnan, China: 'They said they were Lintindjous [i.e., Lanten Yao], but the Chinese called them Yaos'.

3 For instance, Alberts 2007 and 2017; Lemoine 1982 and 1983; Lemoine and Chiao Chien 1991; Shiratori 1975 and 1978; and Strickmann 1982. Based on conversations with Lemoine at his home in Bangkok, Michel Strickmann wrote an unpublished conference paper 'Chinese Sources of Yao Ritual and Myth' presented at the First International Colloquium on Yao Studies, held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 26–30 May 1986, which should enlighten this matter. Both Strickmann and Lemoine drew attention some decades ago to the Han connection with the Yao rituals, a topic which deserves more research. The detailed programme of this colloquium was published in the *Chinese University Bulletin*, 3: 3–4, accessible at: https://www.iso.cuhk.edu.hk/images/publication/archive/bulletin/198603/html5/english/files/assets/common/downloads/bulletin202001_en.pdf (accessed on 11 December 2023).

4 This article only provides a basic phonetic notation of the Lanten ritual language in Luang Namtha as per reference for the few terms transliterated here.

5 The ritual experts must be married (i.e., embody female and male aspects of the cosmos) and old age allows for the creation of the intimate relationship with the deities who grant the gifts of life

actively in the thriving Lanten ritual life, with the senior ritual experts leading all the major ceremonies.

2 Rice and its ritual significance

The Lanten are a widely dispersed society that resides in river valleys in the highlands rather than on the tops of mountains like other Mien groups, so wet-rice cultivation is of primary importance, along with other varieties grown in dry fields on the hillsides. Being their staple food, rice is something the Lanten excel at cultivating in its many variants and in a variety of terrains. These include numerous types of rice, including long-grain and short-grain rice, with some variants of the latter being sweeter and more glutinous. Boiling and steaming are the main ways to cook rice among the Lanten. The Lanten cultivate rice in paddy fields ('wet', next to streams) and hill lands ('dry', unirrigated) in a cycle marked by the duality of the rainy and dry seasons characterizing their tropical habitat. Ploughing the fields and planting takes place right before the start of the rainy season or monsoon (around the middle of March), and the harvest takes place at its end (middle of October). The importance of rice and its cultivation and the uncertainty and risks associated with the farming cycle are embedded in the major rice-related myths, oral stories, songs, and ritual practices maintained as a living tradition by the Lanten. To understand the complexity of rice farming among the Lanten, one needs to be introduced to their general cosmovision – as a shared integrated system of beliefs, practices, and understanding that the Lanten, as a society, uphold about the world and their own meaning and purpose in the universe.

Most societies cultivating rice across South, Southeast, and East Asia share a view of the rice as composed of a dual body comprising physical and spiritual component parts, and perform rice-related rituals that are informed by the acknowledgement and reinforcement of this duality. This is also the case with the Lanten and explains the central role of rice in Lanten rituals. The duality in the body of the rice grains results in the nurturing of the person's physical and spiritual bodies as

extension and a 'second life'. Hence, full-time ritual expertise relates to the Lanten concept of the person, notions of being *complete*. In addition, the acquisition of the necessary ritual competence is built up over decades of study, and leading a ceremony entails following certain ritual rules that reflect seniority; for instance, sexual intercourse is avoided during the rituals (including preparation and follow-up) to prevent deities from being born into the world, thus, younger ritual experts with a more active sexual life do not engage so enthusiastically in the rituals, especially if they are still trying to conceive children.

well. The spiritual body of the rice grains strengthens that of the Lanten; according to the Lanten, no other grains fulfil this essential task. This explains the significance of rice and its conceptualisation as a gift of Heaven. In addition, rice in its many forms, as plant or grains, as grains with and without husk, cooked or uncooked, boiled or steamed, prepared as sweet or savoury cakes or distilled into rice liquor, and even in the form of ashes from its straw or chaff, plays a central role in the Lanten rituals. Rice conveys an intrinsic nurturing value but also serves as a vessel for other spiritual components that the Lanten ritual experts can embed into it, allowing for their incorporation as the rice in its many shapes is consumed or employed in ritual actions. This ideology does not pertain exclusively to the Lanten, but also constitutes a fundamental aspect of other rice cultivating societies.

The passages from the few pages translated below contain a fundamental ritual text used in the ritual actions aimed at fetching the *hon* or living force of the original rice so this can be planted every year.[6] These pages are employed in three different ritual actions. Two of these ritual actions pertain to the only two communal rituals that are celebrated among the Lanten in Laos; the third one is performed at the household level. The chronology of the three rituals relates to the lunar (full moon) and agricultural cycles; thus, the exact dates vary across January to February (the Lanten New Year), February to March (the Festival for Planting the Rice), and March to April (the ritual to install the *hon* of the rice into the growing rice plants). The last of these can be performed on any day within the same lunar month; the communal festivals must occur on the exact date each year, since both the world of the living and the wider cosmos (deities and ancestors) are subject to the calendar.

The Lanten New Year Festival coincides with the Chinese New Year and aims (among its many functions) to honour the harvest and the transition of the annual lunar cycle. This festival is exclusively attended by male representatives of the Lanten households (ideally, all ordained men), who come together in a designated venue to honour the Deities of the Village (*pun kaeng dan* 本境神), a pantheon comprised of deities and communal ancestors that supported the original foundation of the community and safeguards its growth and prosperity. Nevertheless, Namlue Village also has a small shrine placed outside the village boundary, next to the north gate, that serves as an abode for these deities. Cleaning and honouring this shrine and inviting the deities to occupy their seats in it constitutes an essential task of the Festival for Planting the Rice (*Thu Song*, lit. to carry out the planting), which is

6 See Holm 2004, 145–174 for the 'redemption of the rice spirit' among the Zhuang in Southern China, which presents a comparable narrative.

celebrated precisely one full lunar month after New Year.[7] This festival ends with a banquet to which all the adult villagers are invited (men and women sitting separately). The Lanten lack temples, and each household becomes an ephemeral sacred space during the celebration of a major ritual. For the communal festivals, one household is selected to represent the village as a whole and to host the events; this honour requires the household and its members to commit themselves for at least a year (a complete ritual cycle); the position requires supporting some of the costs but also involves charisma as the venue's owner plays a central role in the ceremony as the third leading ritual expert and the embodiment of the village – representing the locality, the community, and the Lower Realm in the Lanten tripartite cosmos. The other two ritual experts are the master and the priest, who represent, respectively, the Middle and Upper Realms; the entire cosmos attends the ritual. The participants in the communal festival include the representatives of the households (i.e., all residents), with little to no outsider participation. Since each household sends at least one male representative and all the Deities of the Village are summoned, the festivals engage a 'community of spirits' comprised of the living (embodying reincarnated ancestors) and their pantheon of deities and communal ancestors.[8] These communal festivals engage the entire community in celebrating annual cycles (the lunar calendar and farming calendar). The third rice ritual pertains to the household level, and the owner organises it; this ritual takes place between one and two lunar months after the actual planting of the rice (that is, from April until May) and has the aim of fetching the *hon* of the original rice to reinforce the rice crop. The rice field's owner can perform the ceremony himself (if he has the ritual competence), or hire experts to do it on his behalf; the ritual action takes place outdoors, in the rice fields.

The same text serves to fetch the same *hon* or living force of the original rice in the three rituals, but each ritual embeds the rice *hon* into three different bodies and focuses its major aim on different purposes. In the New Year Festival, the rice *hon* is embodied in husked uncooked rice grains that the ritual experts place in small glasses or cups that are filled with rice liquor; each attendee consumes a series of these glasses as the representative of their households; the rice *hon* that they ingest

7 See Cawthorne 2015 for another view of this ceremony in Namdee Village, Luang Namtha; on Lanten textual culture, see Cawthorne 2021.

8 On the 'community of spirits', see Wessing 2006. In Namlue, there are Lanten (the majority) and non-Lanten residents; several Khmu families moved from the neighbouring Nale District to reside in the village. They live on the periphery. Nonetheless, they are invited to join the Lanten celebrations, as Namlue is designated officially by the Lao government as a Lanten cultural village. The Khmu community also organises and celebrates their own events (e.g., Khmu New Year, celebrated in December) and invite their Lanten neighbours to join them.

in this manner reverts to the Lanten households which they represent as parts-and-wholes.[9] In the Festival for Planting, the rice *hon* is embodied in rice seeds, rice cakes, and an object shaped like a rice plant with two panicles that every household receives as a gift, representing the original gifts of rice and its cultivation. Finally, in the third and final ritual action, the rice *hon* is summoned and embodied into the growing rice plants in the fields and gardens. The three rice rituals contain the necessary ritual actions to reproduce the social and cosmological orders of the village, ensuring its existence and the well-being of the community, along with the fundamental tasks of starting the farming season. The third ritual guarantees not only the efficacy embedded in the triple repetition common to all the Lanten rituals, but guarantees the spiritual integrity of the rice plants as wholes – preventing disease and abnormal circumstances from affecting them (from drought to flood, including all types of accidents whose root causes are often interpreted as having cosmological origin).[10] The *hon* or living force is ascribed with a natural predisposition to return to the spiritual domains in which they originate; this tendency of cosmological elements to return to their '*foyer d'origine*'[11] accounts for the idea that only rituals of socialisation may grant human beings a long and healthy lifetime, and the same logic applies to crops (i.e., rice) and livestock.

The spiritual and ritual dimensions and meaning of rice are not exclusive to the Lanten of Luang Namtha or the so-called Yao, but are widespread in Southeast Asia and East Asia.[12] Furthermore, the cultural essence and functions of the Lanten communal festivals are also comparable with Chinese festivals.[13] Indeed, the study of rice cultivation culture and rituals played a central role in the early development of Yao Studies. In his seminal lecture 'A new working hypothesis on the structure of early Chinese cultures' during the Second Conference of the Society for Ethnology in Leipzig, 1936, Wolfram Eberhard proposed a new framework for the study of Chinese civilisation as a whole made up of different parts, with different ethnicities

9 Mauss 1966, 76–81.

10 Platenkamp 1998 and 2004 and Estévez 2016 present health as a social condition in which the incompleteness or deterioration of the spiritual body results, eventually, in that of the physical body. The manifestation includes disease, and natural disasters affecting the crops in the case of rice cultivation. Hence, the third rice ritual is key to securing the proper maturation of the plant and a fruitful harvest.

11 Hertz 1988, 56.

12 For a general overview of the religious and mythical dimensions of rice and its dual soul-body in Southeast Asia, see, for instance, Hamilton 2003, Schiller et al. 2006, Sunarti et al. 2021, and Walker 1994; for Japan, for comparable cosmogony and cosmology and presentation of rice deities, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 44–63.

13 Bodde 1975; Eberhard 1952; and Katz 1995.

making up the parts. This holistic approach moved the focus from the Han as the chief identifier of Chinese civilisation into the dynamics of cultural interactions with all the societies sharing the territory, and defined China as a cultural conglomerate under this novel vision.[14] Eberhard's research set an historical benchmark at an early time, around the seventh century, as a period in which all these cultural 'wholes' coexisted independently, establishing a baseline for an ethnography of each society. He then proceeded to analyse the processes of social and cultural integration, hybridity, and migration. Yao societies are fundamental in this vision, as they constitute one of the principal civilisations or cultural wholes in interplay in his framework. More critically, Eberhard placed the Yao and other 'barbarians' such as the Miao, Tai, Liao, and Yüeh as cultural clusters sharing an intimate commonality and cultural origins, one that predated the migrations to Southeast Asia from communities originating in this region and ethnicities. This approach may serve as a framework for comparing their myths and rituals to reveal common cultural patterns, values, and ideologies, not only in modern Southeast Asia,[15] where these minorities are now neighbours and cultural exchanges occur in real time, but also based on evidence in earlier times when many of their rituals and myths crystalised.[16]

Shiratori Yoshirō, who had translated Eberhard's works on Chinese history and the so-called Southern barbarians into Japanese,[17] organised a research team on the Yao of Thailand at Sophia University. Shiratori's research was influenced by that of Matsumoto Nobuhiro, who, like Eberhard, saw a commonality dating back to the early history of South China and also present in the rice-cultivating mountain and river basin cultures of Southeast Asia.[18] Japanese anthropology had been strongly

14 Under this holistic approach various German ethnographers and historians have detailed chapters dedicated to Yao society in early China. Apart from Eberhard (1942, 196–221, 1943, 148–162, and 1968, 33–139), Egon von Eickstedt also presents a discussion about Yao society within his 'bloc of Southern Barbarians' in his *Rassendynamik von Ostasien* (1944, 148–161), and Otto Franke did likewise in his *Geschichte des Chinesischen Reiches* (1965, vol.1, 32–61).

15 See e.g. Barraud and Platenkamp 1990.

16 Eberhard dedicates his *China's Minorities: Yesterday and Today* (1982) to elaborate on this part and presents the 'Strategies of Chia I' (Eberhard 1982, 107–110) as an example of this systematised civilising process. Coalescing societies with differentiated identities, i.e., 'wholes', became minorities or 'parts' within the Chinese Empire and were subjected to dynamics empowered by Chinese imperial diplomacy, conquest, and colonization. Civilising the barbarians involved persuasion, marriage, ambassadorial missions, tribute and trade exchange, military conquest, civilising religious endeavours (Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism) and intervention in religion as a means of control.

17 Shiratori 1964 and Shiratori 1966, 147–163.

18 This was the First Synthetic Research on the Rice-Cultivating Cultures and Ethnicities in Southeast Asia, organized by the Japanese Society of Ethnology, 1957–1958.

influenced by the German *Kulturkreis* School (roughly, 'culture circle' or 'cultural whole') proposed by Fritz Graebner, the founder of the Vienna School of Ethnology. This central idea in early 20th-century German anthropology promoted focusing on the particular histories of individual societies to understand them as cultural complexes ('wholes'; societies such as the Yao) that influenced each other (e.g., via diffusionism), producing a cultural conglomerate whose parts enable an analytical holistic understanding of the totality. Robert von Heine-Geldern and his studies on Southeast Asia and cultural diffusion[19] also influenced the Japanese teams, whose members tried to interpret Japanese origins and culture within these various academic frameworks and scholarly endeavours, which envision rice myths and rituals and rice cultivation cultures in South China and Southeast and East Asia as functioning as a cross-cultural language sharing a rice-based commonality. This commonality was forged long before the arrival of the Lanten in Southeast Asia, and is one that has been and is being shaped by continuous cultural exchanges, historical developments, and contingencies.

Shiratori's team developed its endeavour by means of conducting field research in Northern Thailand between 1969 and 1974.[20] Their work focused on Yao social structure, livelihood, ecology, economic activities, and the religious system (e.g., ritual, symbolism, and mythology), including Yao Mien manuscript culture – they collected many artefacts, together with many manuscripts.[21] Their work and findings attracted the attention of Strickmann and Lemoine, the latter being one of the founders of the Yao Studies Association, which came into being in Hong Kong in 1986.[22]

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http://jominken.kanagawa-u.ac.jp/research/fieldsience/koplrv0000000ijq.html [in Japanese, last accessed on 1 July 2022]. Matsumoto led the first Japanese multi-disciplinary research on rice-cultivating cultures and ethnicities in Southeast Asia. See Miyamoto and Shiratori (eds) 1959 and Matsumoto 1965. This endeavour was related to the Rice Farming History Research Meetings (1955–1963), also co-initiated by Matsumoto.

19 Heine-Geldern 1942.

20 The baton of Yao culture studies in Japan is carried by Hirota Ritsuko, of Kanagawa University, and her team at the YAOKEN (https://www.yaoken.org). The Yao Dao Project, focusing on the Lanten (Yao Mun), does so in Hong Kong (https:/www.yaodao.hku.hk) – these research endeavours co-organise frequent workshops and discussions.

21 Amongst the Japanese scholars in this team are Takemura Takuji, whose research interests cover Mien rice rituals and social morphology. His latest publication (Takemura 2003) revisits his research from the early 1960s to the 1990s. Leif Jonsson 2000 discusses the commercialisation of the Yao material heritage as collectibles and also points out the underlying rationale of Japanese research on Southeast Asia – one about digging into their own cultural origins.

22 Lemoine 1990.

This chapter on the Lanten rice rituals in modern-day Laos contributes to the above-mentioned academic work and discussions. Research on rice-cultivating cultures led to awareness among Western academics of the so-called Yao manuscripts and Yao Daoism; this chapter brings us back to the rice-cultivation culture and ritual. The following sections present the ritual context, the need for the 'secret words' (a concept explained below) that enable the Lanten ritual experts to fetch the *hon* or living force of the original rice, and the logic of the methods to do it – serving as a holistic approach to the annotated translation of the secret words accompanied by comments on their ritual use presented in the second part of this article.

3 A short explanation for Lanten magic

The essential Lanten *ideologeme*[23] *yam kaang - yang kaang* refers to a dual permeable and interpenetrating reality composed of two interwoven complementary worlds.[24] These terms refer to the invisible or spiritual world and the visible and biological or living world. They are related to the Chinese *yin-yang* dyad; other societies in South China and Southeast Asia related linguistically and culturally to the Lanten present a comparable ideology. Such is the case of the Mien, who pronounce these concepts as *yiem genv - yaangh genv*[25] and the Hmong, who pronounced them as *yeeb ceeb - yaj ceeb*.[26] In all cases, this *ideologeme* refers to a dual reality that encompasses a world that is invisible and immaterial (*yam*) and inhabited by immortal and powerful spiritual beings who include deities, ancestors, and the dead, and another world that is visible and material (*yang*), inhabited here by the living. In some ritual contexts, the invisible and visible worlds amount roughly to Heaven and Earth,[27] respectively, indicating the duality of invisible-visible and the socio-cosmos resulting from it. For the sake of clarity, we shall refer to them from now on as either the invisible or spiritual and visible or material worlds, or by employing the Lanten terms *yam yang*.

The origins of such a duality are described in the Lanten cosmogonic myth that recounts the origins and development of the universe. According to this myth, the present socio-cosmos was put in order and hierarchised from an original chaos. This

23 A fundamental unit of ideology, after Dumont 1977.

24 Standard Chinese *yinjian yangjian* 陰間陽間 lit. 'dark/shady realm/domain' and 'bright/sunny realm/domain'.

25 MacDonald 1997, 37.

26 Tapp 1989, 59.

27 *Tin Di* 天地, lit. 'heaven and earth'.

order enabled life and, ultimately, human society. Bountoud, a principal informant in my projects, and Lao Lee my master-father and adoptive father,[28] narrated this cosmogony as part of my training. Similar versions, more or less complete, have been provided by other key informants. This is my translation from the vernacular version (Mun language) assisted by my Lanten collaborators:

> In the beginning, there were only clouds. Two deities came out of the clouds, and suddenly all these clouds disappeared: *Njui Woung* 玉皇 – the first deity – created the invisible world and, soon after, *Boun Woung* 盤皇 came to be the second deity, and from his body resulted the visible world. *Boun Woung* experienced a further transformation: his eyes became the Sun and the Moon, and each of his head-hairs, beard-hairs, and teeth turned into stars; his bones and flesh originated the mountains and soil; his body hair became forests including animals and plants, and his blood became rivers, ponds, lakes, seas, and the aquatic life in them. Finally, his last breath grew into a wind that started moving all things. From that moment on, the invisible and the visible worlds came to exist, one world for the deities, and everything else came into being.
>
> To guarantee the separation between Heaven and Earth, *Njui Woung* and *Boun Woung* created the Middle Realm, a buffer zone aligned on its top with Heaven and its bottom with Earth, dividing them.[29] *Njui Woung* commanded the Middle Realm to two new deities, *Sang Tin Tai* 張天師 and his younger brother *Lui Woung* 雷皇. The former was born first; therefore, he became the ruler of this realm; the latter exerted military and executive duties. In the Middle Realm, each brother oversaw a season: The elder brother controlled the dry season, and the younger brother did the same with the wet or rainy season. For thousands of years, peace, order and prosperity prevailed, and the Three Realms grew prosperous together. Thanks to the two well-balanced seasons, the Lower Realm became a lustful green paradise filled with life.

This variant of a well-known Chinese Daoist cosmogonic myth,[30] whose metaphorical relations appear deeply embedded in the Lanten stories and rituals, establishes the basis of the power structure in the Lanten socio-cosmos. The three emperors (*Tam Woung* 三皇) in this story are the Jade Emperor, the Thunder Emperor, and Pangu the Cosmic Giant (also known as *Boun Kouk* 盤古 among the Lanten); the physical body of the latter becomes the visible universe. The elder brother in the story is Celestial Master Sang who, with the Thunder Emperor, rules the two seasons, thus the year and the passage of time. The roles of these deities are crucial for rice rituals as the ultimate rulers of the Lanten cosmos and governors of the seasons marking the passage of time (i.e., the lunar and agricultural calendars). The creation of the two worlds mentioned above is a transformative process that substituted a particular order with another one: from a type of order characterised as

28 Estévez 2019.

29 *Tjan kaai* 上界; *tjong kaai* 中界; *ya kaai* 下界.

30 Schipper 1978, 355–386.

'clouds', two distinctive and opposing principles were generated, namely a dualistic order. This is a common theme very familiar in the cultural Sinosphere and Daoism. The differentiation of the original clouds into two worlds, one visible and another invisible, also initiated a course of interactions and circulation, exchange, and flow of forces within. It is, indeed, this circulation that articulates and upholds the differentiation. The interactions serve to show that these two worlds cannot stand on their own and be complete in themselves: once separated, one is only possible in juxtaposition to the other, and only together do they constitute a whole.

The sequential order in forming the two halves established a hierarchy in which the invisible world is acknowledged as the elder (that is, the first born), and the visible world is acknowledged as the younger (that is, the second born). This hierarchy serves to articulate various essential relations. The first of these relations provides the rationale for enthroning the Jade Emperor, the first-created deity and, thus, the first born, as ruler of the socio-cosmos. His rule, in turn, empowers the authority of the invisible world – *yam* or heaven – over the socio-cosmos, subjecting to its mandate the realm of Pangu and the visible world – *yang* or earth. Hence, the creation myth provides a particular model of dualistic reality and makes clear – based on the lineal order of creation – which world governs which and, ultimately, which leads the socio-cosmos: everything starts in the invisible world. The second relation is based on this same reasoning and conceives of the inhabitants of the invisible world as the spiritual 'owners' of all the domains and landscapes existing in the socio-cosmos, for they were born first and, thus, became the original inhabitants.[31] By contrast, in modern times, it is the Lao State, defined as the Lao national community, who represents the owner and manager of the land, granting long-term and secure rights to land use.[32]

A third relation establishes that all living beings constitute micro-reflections of the dualistic socio-cosmos by embodying both the visible material and invisible spiritual dimensions within the same dual entity. This feature is found in persons, animals, plants, ritual spaces, and objects.

The Lanten concept *hon* 魂 is employed directly in this discussion rather than using a translation. The concept *hon* has a high lexical ambiguity as it signifies various notions: (1) the living force animating all living beings, and also present in some

31 The concept of spiritual ownership is widespread. For Southeast Asia, see for instance Condominas 1954 and 1980. The concepts 'cosmo-morphic' or 'socio-cosmic' refer to a society's belief that its social morphology is structurally commensurate in scope with the cosmological order as a whole (Barraud et al. 1994).

32 General provisions of the Land Law (amended 2019) in the Lao PDR. In English: https://data.laos.opendevelopmentmekong.net/en/laws_record/presidential-decree-on-the-promulgation-of-land-law-revised-2019/resource/843816b2-b0d0-43c9-b616-1d0e07a062f9 (accessed on 11 December 2023).

inorganic matter such as silver and gold; (2) the spiritual body as opposed to the physical body in the *yam* and *yang* duality; and (3) the various spiritual component-parts comprising the spiritual body of a person. The spiritual body of the Lanten men consists of seven *hon* and women's bodies contain twenty-four. Various informants provided different numbers such as twenty-three or twenty-six; this range of numbers in oral traditions seems to be associated with variations in the transmission of ritual knowledge. Twenty-four is, however, the number employed in the ritual actions. All these *hon* contain the life-principle. A person's last breath leads to the loss of all *hon*, which means the death of the physical body; losing one or more affects the integrity of the spiritual body, which manifests itself as disease in the physical counterpart. However, there is a clear distinction between the spiritual part that contains the persona, that is, the ancestral part and self, and those that stand for the life-principle that animates the body with its various ritual and gender-specific dimensions. All these dimensions of the concept *hon* warrant further discussion. Some plants and livestock have a *hon* compatible with that of the people, and, therefore, consuming them replenishes ones *hon*. Rice in its many forms constitutes the staple food of the Lanten for this reason; the rice *hon*, including distillations, reinforces a person's spiritual body – for the Lanten, bread or millet lack the capacity to substitute for rice because of their absence of compatible *hon*.

In this view, the farming of rice and livestock whose production cater for this type of compatible *hon* lies at the basis of the Lanten ritual economy. This model of farming and husbandry requires the support and protection of deities who grant, manage, and protect the *hon* in the invisible world. The ritual gifts presented in the ceremonies comprise offerings crystalising their gift of *hon*. Furthermore, the duality of the Lanten socio-cosmos and the relations mentioned above demand that the farming of the rice must take place first in the invisible-and-spiritual world to empower the farming season in the visible-and-material counterpart, following the logic of creation in the cosmogonic myth. Farming, like many other everyday activities among the Lanten (e.g., hunting), constitutes a ritual action, and specific myths and stories provide an accompanying narrative. The compatibility of *hon* means that animals may substitute for persons; for instance, a bride can be substituted for by a large pig with the same symbolic value of a person, and the celebration feast objectifies the contract and the value of the dowry, with kilos of meat counted as kilos of silver. Holm provides the Zhuang logic for the sacrificial value of a buffalo:[33] it can serve as a substitute for a person (the Lanten have preserved a similar idea). The compatibility of *hon* enables modalities of exchange, and the competence of the Lanten ritual experts to transfer *hon* into persons or ritual objects, facilitates its

33 Holm 2003, 206.

manipulation. The festivals create and constitute a liminal sacred time and space where these ritual experts mediate between the social (Earth - *yang*) and cosmological (Heaven - *yam*) orders.

The Lanten deities share some characteristics, hagiographies, physical descriptions, functions, and attributes ascribed to deities honoured in Daoism, Chinese Buddhism, and Chinese popular religion.[34] According to this understanding, the deities are arranged hierarchically in a manner that echoes the organisation of the late Chinese imperial government: the Jade Emperor rules the known socio-cosmos from his palace in the Upper Realm, just as the Chinese emperor ruled the Chinese empire from his capital. Nevertheless, each of the Three Realms has a ruler; the Thunder Emperor and Pangu rule the other two realms, the middle and the lower respectively. Together, these three emperors, also referred to in the rituals as the Three Old Sages,[35] preside over and oversee the Celestial Administration.[36] This power structure supports an elaborate assembly of deities and ancestors, which amounts to the governance of the known socio-cosmos. Note that this celestial governance designates the Thunder Emperor as the ruler of the Middle Realm, while the cosmogonic myth presented above does so with his elder brother Celestial Master Sang; we shall return to this essential question later. To this Celestial Administration pertain all the major deities and the ancestors of Lanten households. The ritual experts serve this government as high-ranking officers certified by Daoist ordination. As part of these ordinations, Lanten men become the living incarnations – embodiments – of various deities. The authority of the priests and masters within this power structure emanates from their intimate relationship with the invisible world or *yam* and the rulers they represent.

Each of the principal deities' domains is conceptualised as an office or imperial court-like department, meaning that its scope is explicit, often located in a particular space, and based on exclusive ritual functions that are not duplicated or held simultaneously by other deities. These celestial offices hold plenipotentiary powers over the domain they control and include its internal hierarchy. Internally, they consist of various celestial officers, with one high officer presiding over the office

34 See Feuchtwang 2001 for the 'imperial metaphor' of a celestial power structure that is anchored in time and imagery – hence immutable despite the uncertainty and contingency affecting the world of the living; see also Wolf 1974, Ahern 1981, Seidel 1983, and Meulenbeld 2015.

35 *Yao Thaeng* 舊聖, lit. the old sages; also, *Tam Thaeng* 三聖 lit. the three sages – being the Three Emperors.

36 *Yam Thee* 陰司, lit. the officers [in charge] of the invisible/spiritual world or *yin*. Note than in the Chinese context these same characters refer to the 'officers of the Netherworld', which is represented by the Chinese character 陰 *yin*. The concept *Yang Thee* 陽司 refers to the rulers of the polities in the visible *yang* world.

and supervising his or her subordinates, described as lower-ranked bureaucrats who hold specific ritual titles with detailed positions and functions within that office. These offices oversee the fundamental ritual functions such as the reincarnation of ancestors (i.e., the birth of new babies); the wellbeing of children and women; exorcistic healing; the extension of life for older people, caregiving in the afterlife; land ownership and other land-related matters; farming; animal husbandry; divine justice, and so on. The deities incarnated in the ritual experts enable the mediation between the invisible *yam* and the visible *yang* worlds; these deities empower their authority, and their embodiment into novices assures the transmission of this ritual expertise to younger generations.[37]

The Lanten concept *pap* 法 lit. 'method', which I have translated as 'magic',[38] refers to the ritual manipulation of unseen forces by means of complex ritual procedures that include visualisations, mental commands, and ritual actions carried out by Lanten ritual experts. The Lanten *pap* or magic is comprised of various dimensions, each designating different principles or aspects of the whole. The physical dimension of magic refers to persons, landscapes, objects and manifestations of magic in the visible world and the methods, laws, ways, and solutions to embody, store, transmit, and apply magic. Different types of spiritual component-parts or energy fields, such as the *hon* or living force that animates persons, livestock, and plants, originate in cosmological domains; the Lanten envision magic as unseen cosmic forces, emanating from and connected to their cradle. Each independent cosmological domain in the invisible world constitutes a spiritual dimension of magic. The social dimension identifies the continuum or chain of transmission that originates in the spiritual 'owners' of the magic and flows uninterruptedly (through the master lineages) into the ritual experts who employ the magic in the current spacetime.

The Lanten ritual experts describe different aspects of the Lanten magic as 'owned' by different deities. Ultimately, the spiritual 'ownership' of the magic is ascribed to the deity *Lao Kwan* 老君 (also 老子), who rules the cosmological domain where magic originates. However, the different methods or techniques to channel, control, craft, and apply magic with efficacy are attributed to the deities *Tam Teang* 三清, the Three Pure Ones, and *Tam Nyun* 三元, the Three Primordials. These six

37 My primary findings on this matter, namely a detailed systematisation of the most important celestial beings in the Lanten cosmos, are presented in detail in my doctoral thesis (Estévez 2023).

38 As widely employed in writing on the Daoist concept of Thunder Magic (Chinese 雷法 *leifa*); see, amongst many others, Reiter 2016. While the sectarian development of the Daoist Thunder Magic tradition became dominant in the Song dynasty, a time when Tantric Buddhism also exerted an impact on Daoist practices, the use of magic among the Lanten Yao should first be approached independently from the Han historical trajectory, owing to its own particular characteristics. Further research will be required to allow comparison between the Han Daoist practices and the Lanten.

deities are the original three priests and three masters who became the Celestial Masters teaching the ritual system to the Lanten. The Three Pure Ones initiated the priestly or civil division, and the Three Primordials did so with the master or martial division. From each division is derived different forms of magic and ritual legitimacy, and each one employs different methods, sets of ritual tools, manuscripts, and secret knowledge. This secret knowledge is half transmitted orally and half recorded in a textual corpus. Part of this corpus is comprised of liturgical texts and companion texts, and another critical part encompasses living manuscripts that embody deities acting as officers who empower the ritual knowledge associated with this particular type of ritual text.[39] These living manuscripts are ascribed with a will of their own, as opposed to other manuscripts which are considered inanimate objects.[40] The Lanten call these living manuscripts *pai nyui* 秘語, lit. 'secret words', in reference to the complex procedures, narratives, and ritual knowledge they contain. Being identified as the embodiment of celestial officers (hence, living beings), these manuscripts must be covered in 'uniforms', that is, wrapped in cloth, resulting in a primary distinction within the Lanten textual corpus between dressed or living manuscripts and the rest (liturgical texts and companion texts).

Accordingly, Lanten magic is intimately interconnected with several Lanten deities whom the Lanten designate as its ultimate guardians, spiritual 'owners', and other deities presiding over celestial offices administering it (and associated with types of *hon*) within the Celestial Administration. Thus, Lanten imperial magic is subjected to a three-fold condition: one needs access to the magic's source, the necessary ritual knowledge, to channel it, and the authorisation to employ it, sanctioned by the proper ritual payments that sanction its 'ownership'. The efficacy of magic in ritual use manifests itself in the visible world when the anticipated outcomes of the ceremony come to be realised. For instance, the efficacy of the magic for fetching the *hon* of the original rice and the ritual farming of it in the invisible world is confirmed when the rice barns are full to bursting at the end of the season.

Lanten magic constitutes a 'total prestation',[41] which metonymically (as part for whole) stands for every aspect of the Lanten socio-cosmos it is part of. Using magic involves the visible and invisible worlds and the circulation of exchanges between them, including, for instance, *hon*, gifts, and ritual knowledge in use, connections

39 These companion texts include texts such as almanacs, visual dictionaries, teaching material, and songs, which are used to assist the memorisation and performance tasks of the ritual experts and the transmission of their ritual knowledge; these do not qualify as liturgical or living manuscripts.

40 Among the Lanten, various items are ascribed with *hon* or living force, for instance knives and swords, and brooms and spinning wheels. For a general discussion on Lanten manuscripts as ritual objects, see Estévez forthcoming.

41 Mauss 1966 [1925].

between the deities and the living and with the ritual experts as mediators, transforming the fabric of society in the process. Studying the magic is, therefore, essential to understanding the Lanten ritual system. The operationalisation of the invisible world occurs primarily in the mind of the ritual expert, and it is imperceptible to outsiders, for the methods – magic in use – consist mainly of mental commands and visualisations. These constitute a very powerful tool in the ritual experts' repertoire, one that demands those trying to understand the meaning of the Lanten secret words to work in close cooperation with them.

The primary role of the visualisations is to enable the ritual experts to re-enact and call upon specific stories, myths, and events associated with the particular aims of the ritual—the stories about rice and how the Lanten cultivate it to inform their rice rituals. The ritual experts read the texts and recite in their minds the oral stories; they employ their own experiences and knowledge to imagine these narratives with the visualisations being compared to (in my master-father Lao Lee's words) 'watching a movie in your head'. In short, it enables recreating the cosmos in their minds and working on it by imagining the stories and subjecting it to mental commands. These stories refer to the mythical time in which the deities performed their mighty deeds, employed specific tools or objects that performed a function in the ceremony, and they describe the origin of cosmological domains, include hagiographies whose narration summons and activates the deities mentioned in them, or recount stories whose themes and motifs record positive developments that once benefited Lanten society and whose recollection invites a similar beneficial effect. By visualising these narratives, the ritual experts connect their space-time with the mythical time that frames the stories, making the stories 'alive' in the sacred space. Mircea Eliade designates this ritual storytelling the 'eternal return' (*l'éternel retour*),[42] which consists of summoning the mythical age, transforming the profane space and time into sacred space and mythical time.

It is the creation of this liminality, objectified in the sacred space and time articulated by the rituals, that enables the priests and masters to run the invisible world, which ultimately transmutes the visible counterpart from within. Stories are a key element in such rituals, for their enactment (performative and imagined) shapes and articulates the operations on the cosmos by the ritual experts. As part of many ritual functions, chanting fragments of these narratives, uttering the titles of stories or names of deities, the theatrical performance in the central stage of short plays about them, and the creation of ritual objects, all reinforce the ritual action as a whole, completing and reinforcing the efficacy of the *pap* magic, meaning the methods and the unseen force working in the invisible world.

42 Eliade 1949.

The ritual training of the Lanten men includes increasing their familiarity with different stories (such as stories about rice), which are present in some summaries and references in liturgical texts and living manuscripts (e.g., in the pages translated below), and especially in the oral stories shared within the Lanten community and the ritual knowledge orally transmitted from masters to apprentices. Ritual experts who perform the rice rituals (active or retired) usually have more knowledge about details and variants of the stories, since they are interested in the topic. Only when a ritual expert commands a holistic understanding nurtured by the intertwining of oral and textual knowledge and secures the necessary qualifications can he lead the communal rice-related rituals – the same applies to other major rituals which are associated with different collections of stories. The men performing the rituals are appointed to these positions by the council of elders, a body comprised of well-respected senior ritual experts in each village. There is no single 'complete' source for the oral stories, and the texts gain meaning only when informed by the oral knowledge, including multiple variants. Often, the manuscripts include markers informing the reader about the need for missing oral ritual knowledge that has been systematically omitted from the texts. The intent behind such omissions is to reinforce the master-apprentice relationship. This has the effect of making the texts alone useless in the ritual. This distributive model of ritual knowledge is inherent in the Lanten ritual system and its transmission.[43]

The narratives of all the rituals share a universe, main characters, themes, and motifs, which eventually assist the ritual experts in memorizing by association new elements and stories. As a form of material support for the ritual experts' memory, the living manuscripts containing secret words that store half of the knowledge – usually the most challenging elements to memorise, such as the myriad of ritual names for the deities and all their emanations, their locations, designations of ritual actions, and the names of ritual objects. The compression of the content in these ritual texts and their multiple references to orally transmitted knowledge make their meaningful translation a challenge. A crucial ritual function of the living manuscripts and their secret words is that of being a memory palace or journey method to facilitate the visualisations and activation of the mythical time. For these reasons, the contents sometimes include fragments of ritual names, functioning as keywords that enable cross-referencing of content and the decompression of the narrative as a rich visualisation. The most fundamental moment in a ceremony is when the leading ritual experts hold a living manuscript in their hands, their eyes closed or in a blank stare, silenced by ritual rules, while they construct their visions in their heads.

43 Estévez forthcoming.

When attending a Lanten audience ritual, what we see and hear, and read in the ritual texts available in situ, gain their full significance only when we understand the happenings taking place in the invisible world, which is reconstructed in every instance by the leading ritual experts based on their comprehensive, quasi-encyclopaedic ritual knowledge.

4 The storytelling associated with the fetching of the *hon* of the original rice

A long and complex form of storytelling informs the logic, magic, and ritual actions associated with the Lanten rice rituals. The Lanten flood myth tells how only the two siblings *Bok Njee* 伏羲 and *Thea Mui* 姐妹 survive the flood, which only ends when their organic ship made of giant gourd hits the grounds of the Jade Palace in Heaven (in the Upper Realm) and the Jade Emperor sends the Marshals to capture the Thunder God who caused the flood by blocking the Five Holes in the Seas with his hands, feet, and torso, while creating massive storms and raining for seven days and nights.

This action is part of the Thunder God's quarrels with his elder brother over the rulership of the Middle Realm; a position ultimately granted to the Thunder God, who becomes the emperor despite being the younger brother. The two siblings are the children of Celestial Master Sang, the elder brother; they were born in the Middle Realm but are now stranded in the Lower one. As the entire world has been annihilated, the siblings Bok Njee and Thea Mui, must consummate an abnormal (incestuous) conjugal union that produces, after three years of gestation, a bitter melon (instead of a baby) from which, eventually, all the ethnic groups emerge, creating the primary social differentiation between the people living in plains (the domains in the plains) and the people living in the mountains (the hamlets established in the highlands). Thus, they become the ancestors of the Lanten and every living person, and also provide a mythological basis for the ethnic diversity in the region.[44]

The flood myth conveys a narrative of cosmic renewal and an account of the origin of humankind. The Lanten variant pertains to a widespread tradition of comparable narratives on flood myths and surviving siblings documented in Southeast

44 See Proschan 2001 for the gourd myth and its relevance in the construction of ethnic identity in Southeast Asia; also on this matter, see Lemoine 1987.

Asia and China.[45] Abadie documented variants preserved by the Man Lan Ten (indigo people) and Man Quan Trang (white trousers people) in Vietnam that are closer to the Lanten case in Luang Namtha.[46] The unity in themes and the diversity of details in the variants, along with their significance in the associated rice rituals, invite comparative approaches, such as those proposed by Eberhard and his views of early China and its conglomerate of societies connected by cultural diffusion, and the Japanese research on rice cultivation cultures in modern times. While the cultural tropes embodied in these stories suggest a unifying commonality relating to all these societies, the diversity (that is, differences in details) relates more to social identity and ethnic differentiation – even among branches of the same ethnic group.[47] The same applies to the concept of the physical and spiritual body of the person, in which the number and location of the parts express gender, ethnic, and religious identity.[48]

But the Lanten flood myth does not end there. Following the repopulating of the new world, the following story summarises fetching of the *hon* of the original rice – which is missing in the post-flood world that has destroyed everything and, thus, must be retrieved. The deities and ancestors witnessed in awe how the new humankind, born out of the bitter melon, must face the primaeval forests surrounding them without the proper means and tools, feeling hungry and feeding by trial and error on the plants and animals surrounding them. Many die quickly, and are poisoned, while others face famine. For these reasons, the Jade Emperor arranges

45 For a comparison of the variants and their major themes, see Birrel 1997, Yang and An 2005, 22, and Dang 1993. Lewis 2006 and Saechao 2019 present in detail the Chinese case (the siblings Fuxi and Nüwa) and Iu Mien (siblings Fu-hei and Tze-mui), respectively.

46 Abadie 1924, 22 and 141. Holm 2003, 192–205 discusses the act of divine incest along with its ritual significance among the Zhuang in the context of an analysis of connections between Zhuang and other Tai versions and earlier Chinese textual evidence.

47 Lemoine 1987 discusses this differentiation in view of the variants of the flood myth among the Miao-Yao. The current chapter identifies many relations between the Lanten variant of the flood myth and those of other societies, but its aim is to present how the version of the Lanten variant in Luang Namtha shapes the logic of their rice rituals. The comparison and study of the diffusion and dynamic of incorporation of the themes and elements, or a chronology and directions of this diffusion of the stories across time, space, and societies, is a matter for future academic investigation.

48 The Lanten concept of the *hon* invites close comparison with its homonyms Chinese *hún* and Vietnamese *hồn*. In Laos, Tai-speaking societies both Buddhist and non-Buddhist have a comparable concept in the *khwan*, an analogous spiritual body comprised of various component parts whose number and location also varies with ethnic and religious identity (Platenkamp 2010; see also Anuman 1962 and Estévez 2023).

a special mission: he sends his guard, the mighty Five Marshals,[49] to rescue some seeds of the original rice. The original rice grew like a tree that produced abundant fruits in numbers sufficient to provide for the old humankind.[50] But both the original rice and old humankind perished during the flood. As part of her devoted scholarly venture, an eccentric old female deity, Grandma Thaek Ge (*Thaek Ge Bu* 釋迦婆), had preserved in her private herbarium seeds and samples from all the medicinal plants existing in the pre-flood world. The Marshals are commanded to cross nine mountain ranges and three great rivers (three mountains and a river at a time), sneak into the deity's palace, steal some seeds of the original rice, and return with them. To achieve this goal, the Jade Emperor transforms the Marshals into white mice and grants them gold incisors. The mission is perilous and barely successful. Upon return, only the embryo of the original rice[51] has survived, stuck between the incisors of the mice. The deity *Dan Long* 神農 collects the embryos, operates his magic on them to strengthen the seeds, and develops the necessary farming techniques to plant and harvest them successfully, providing the new humankind with the necessary instruction and seeds to farm their own rice from that moment on. The new rice prevents starvation and becomes the staple food of the new humankind; his vital assistance qualifies Dan Long as the deity of farming. The new rice is small and difficult to farm, so frequent rituals are needed to secure a fruitful harvest every year. This story – the fetching of the original rice – is central to the pages translated below and indeed, core to the Lanten rice ritual.

Bonifacy translated into French a 'Song of *Dàn-nông*' that a community of Máns Lam-diên (Landian Yao) in Lào-tri, Vietnam, had preserved as a text and employed in their rice rituals.[52] The song shares the principal themes and motifs with the case presented below, and it includes the part about fetching the rice *hon* as a means to

49 *Ti Sui Man* 四帥神, lit. 'celestial armies of the four directions' – the central army is implied. These deities were five teenagers, all brothers, who became deities after confronting the Jade Emperor. The elder brother is the strongest one amongst them; the four younger brothers originated from pieces of the cover of the coffin in which his father tried to bury him alive. To escape this destiny, the boy blew the cover up, with the four largest pieces turning into four younger boys who identified him as their elder brother.

50 Terwiel 1994 presents a general overview of this theme in the rice myths of Southeast Asia; Estévez and Yangnouvong 2020 have edited a selection of Lanten oral stories including stories about rice.

51 The body of *Blau Nya Man* (in vernacular or Mun language), lit. the deity of the tooth/embryo of the rice who 'activates' the rice seeds, making them germinate.

52 Bonifacy 1904, 188–194. Full text available online at: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k44108884/f190.item

feed the many children of the married siblings. One part of the song deserves special attention; my translation in English from Bonifacy's French goes as follows:[53]

> [...] Dàn-nông felt compassion [shed tears] and sought a way to feed the people. He researched the one-hundred different plants [i.e., all] until he found a precious one that was very tasty – this was the rice plant. However, a rat from the mountaintop of a dark purple mountain took the seed of the rice plant in its mouth and ran with it into the forest. The Three Emperors sent the deity Buddha Sèc-kè after the rat; this deity was able to fetch and rescue the rice seeds. Dàn-nông came to the Earth and planted and sowed the rice [teaching the people to do so], and since then the people can cultivate rice and feed themselves up to the present time [...]

The Song of Dàn-nông instructs that its chanting must be accompanied by drumming, meaning that this song constitutes an invitation and invocation of the deity *Dàn-nông*. In this regard, the song also has the Lanten three-act ritual structure that starts with the ritual invitation and summoning of the celestial guests that transforms the profane space and time into sacred space and time by initiating an imperial Chinese audience-like ceremony (the middle or peak act in which the central ritual actions occur), with the last act being the return of the space and time to its profane status as the celestial guests are sent back to their residences in their cosmological domains. Bonifacy's translation into French constitutes the only other source reflecting on Lanten rice ritual and their associated stories; his work reinforces the significance and widespread use of the rice myth and rituals among the Lanten not only in Luang Namtha, but elsewhere.

The variant preserved by the Máns Lam-diên in Vietnam recounts their flood and rice-cultivation stories and presents the deity Dàn-nông in a central role in their rice rituals. Dàn-nông is known as Dan Long 神農 among the Lanten of Laos, both echoing the Chinese deity Shennong (known in Vietnam as Thần Nông), who in the Chinese myths teaches the humans the basics of agriculture (that is, ploughing and rice planting) and the use of medicinal plants. More interestingly, the song introduces Buddha Sèc-kè, the Sage of the Śākya, Śākyamuni Buddha, as the main character rescuing the rice from the thief – a rat who steals the rice seeds and runs away with them – saving the day.

The presence of Śākyamuni Buddha in the rice rituals in Thailand, Laos, and China is not strange.[54] My research in this region has documented not only Lanten rituals but also local variants of the Lao Rice Harvest Festival and Thai chants to

53 Bonifacy 1904, 193.

54 See van Esterik 1984, 47; Yang and Lesmana 2022; Simmalavong 2011; Jotisakulratana 2012; and Jaruworn 2005.

summon or call back the *khwan* or living force of the rice.[55] The spiritual ownership of the rice, namely the rice *khwan* soul or living force is ascribed to the female deity Phra Mae Phosop (Thai: พระแม่โพสพ) who is often identified as the 'mother of the rice *khwan*' (Thai: แม่ขวัญข้าว Mae Khwan Khao). In some recorded stories, a farmer or the farmer's wife mistreated the deity who, feeling upset, retires to the deepest part of the forest. Her absence resulted in the death of the crops and the farmers' inability to grow new rice, leading to famine and suffering in the community. It is Śākyamuni Buddha who convinces the deity to return, or she returns to assist Śākyamuni Buddha's mission of salvation. Upon her return, all farmers treat her with respect, and as a result, the rice planting is straightforward and its harvest abundant; since then, homage to her is celebrated annually when the rice in the fields is about to mature. The rice festivals in Laos and Thailand are celebrated in January or February and include both homage to the female deity in the rice fields and gifts of rice (a share of the harvest) to the nearest Buddhist temple to feed the monks during the rainy season. The main themes in these stories deal with (1) the spiritual ownership of the rice, (2) the methods to fetch the spiritual body of the rice, and (3) the mediation of one or more deities in the process – this mediation refers to the fetching itself but also to the necessary farming knowledge. Often, variants in these themes ascribe to ethnic differentiation and the creation of cultural identity.

The variant shared by the Lanten of Luang Namtha includes these themes. The spiritual ownership of the rice is ascribed to two different entities: the fearsome guardian of the seeds, and the deities of the rice who find abode in its embryo. The Lanten deity Grandma Thaek Ge (釋迦婆 Thaek Ge Bu) shares a name with Śākyamuni Buddha, a name that the Lanten of Laos have recorded accurately but bestowed on a female deity of their own whom various stories describe as a bad-tempered old lady. Grandma Thaek Ge is a well-known Lanten female deity of medicine who devoted herself before the flood to collecting samples of all the medicinal plants and remedies in the world; she became a zealous custodian of her herbarium after some of her medicines were stolen by thieves and ended in the possession of the Lanten ritual experts. Indeed, her personality, as described in the Lanten stories, is opposite to the kindness and compassion attributed to Śākyamuni Buddha – a stranger for most Lanten since their contact with Buddhism is minimal (beyond driving by the local temple when they visit the town), and Buddhist references in their texts haven been filtered through their own cultural understanding, which is divorced from canonical Buddhism.

55 Lao: ບຸນຄູນເຂົ້າ *boun khoun khao*; Thai: คำสู่ขวัญข้าว *kham su: khwan khao*; see Rajadhon 1955 on rituals and traditions related to the rice *khwan* and the rice mother in Thailand.

The role of the rat in Bonifacy's translation (or that of the 'mother of the rice *khwan*') is to withhold or take away the rice, so this must be fetched or rescued, a common task to carry out as part of the rice rituals. In the Lanten stories, the Jade Emperor transforms the Marshals (one, four or five, depending on the variant) into a rat or rats, which is the hero who fetches the original rice *hon* – stealing it from Grandma Thaek Ge, in an inversion of the story presented in the song of Dàn-nông. The Jade Emperor and Dang Long mediate on behalf of the new humankind, with the latter becoming the patron of farmers, mainly for rice cultivation.

Readers should be reminded that this article does not use Han Chinese and Chinese culture and religion as the primary reference for the translation of the four pages of secret words presented below; instead, the Lanten emic understanding of their own texts forms the core of my research approach to the Lanten ritual system and, hence, the primary outcome of this research. Some of the findings may surprise readers unfamiliar with the Lanten society and rituals – Grandma Thaek Ge is a notable example. The Lanten are a non-Han population whose use of Chinese has been integrated according to their own cultural understanding; differences and discrepancies between emic and etic readings are expected in the script and its meaning and interpretation. The Lanten secret words can often be obscure or idiosyncratic for non-Lanten readers, yet full of meaning for the Lanten ritual experts employing them.

5 A living manuscript in ritual use

Three leading ritual experts perform the communal rituals. They represent the Three Realms and the Three Emperors, namely the Jade Emperor and the Upper Realm (priest); the Thunder Emperor and the Middle Realm (master), and Pangu and the Lower Realm (the venue's owner). They hold specific ritual titles during this event. The priest is referred to as *toung lao* 村老 the Village Elder, the master as *nin lai yang koung* 年例鄉官 the Village Official in Charge of the New Year Ritual, and the venue's owner becomes *kam dau soud tjui* 藍頭說主 the Spokesman for the Indigo-headed People – all such titles being more descriptive than part of a hierarchical official system. The meaning, roles, and duties associated with these titles deserve some attention. The role of the owner of the house in these festivals recalls a third type of ritual expertise (*thang kong* 僧公 'monks') whose transmission was interrupted in Laos at the start of the Laotian Civil War (1954–1975) due, amongst various factors, its associated high costs (ten large pigs) and risks (the novice had to jump from a platform into a handmade net, prompting accidents); his ritual tasks

were incorporated into those carried out by the priests in everyday life and the venue owner in the course of the communal festivals.

The priest is the director of the ceremony and the spiritual 'owner' of the village; he is the designated elder (*primus inter pares*) who represents the council of elders as a single voice. His ritual functions are to (re)establish (moral) order, law, and harmony as the advocate and local representative of the Celestial Administration. As the embodiment of the Jade Emperor (civil sphere), the priest is identified as the Morning Star (金星), representing the Upper Realm. The master is the master of ceremonies who invites all the celestial guests and guarantees their well-being and satisfaction during the ceremony; he also mediates and transfers the ritual payments. This ritual function builds on his role as the matchmaker in the conjugal union between Heaven and Earth. As the embodiment of the Thunder Emperor (martial sphere) and the Middle Realm, the master has an intimate relationship with the agricultural cycles and is designated the embodiment of the Sun (日宫). As a master of ceremonies, his ritual role is central. The venue owner and his family and house embody the village and the community (Lanten and non-Lanten residents). His home is transformed into a temporary sacred space that functions like a 'yamen' hosting the visiting celestial guests. During this time, the family's behaviour epitomises 'being Lanten' in the eyes of the deities, the communal ancestors, and the living: the family members must wear new clothes and their best silver jewellery and behave appropriately – meaning according to Lanten notions of being civilised, respectful, humble, even-tempered, in control of ones emotions, kind, and generous (but not spendthrift). The owner is the embodiment of the Moon (月府) that relates to the Lower Realm. His ritual title recognises the Lanten as Indigo People, reinforcing the idea that this term and colour is fundamentally interlaced with the Lanten ethnic identity.

The three ritual experts do not receive payments; their remuneration is measured in terms of merit (service to the community), prestige, and charisma. In most Lanten villages, these three positions are held by senior active members of the council of elders; most have held – or hold – a position as village mayor in the past. For instance, the priest in Namlue Village has been the village chief for many years. Owning the associated magic to perform the ceremony is a sine qua non condition to lead any ritual.[56]

The selection of the appointed candidates holding these highly valued ritual positions results from consensus in the village. The council of elders appoints the priest and the master whose positions last for at least one ritual year (a complete cycle); most appointed ritual experts carry out their duties for over a decade or

56 See Estévez forthcoming on this matter.

until they die, move out of the village, or are incapable of doing it so for personal or health reasons. The council of elders is responsible for the internal governance of the village, which at the administrative level is represented by three mayors or chiefs (Lao: *naiban*) who must be proficient in Lao language and culture – these mayors are, in modern times, often younger men who do not hold a concomitant position in the council of elders. The venue is selected amongst the many that may compete for the honour; any candidate household must commit to serving as the public meeting place for village festivals for, ideally, three years (at least one ritual year); the venue owner holds his ritual position for the same time for his ritual role emanates from being the venue's owner.

The most specialised ritual experts have their own collections of manuscripts.[57] Most of the Lanten manuscripts are made available within the community and can be borrowed or copied in exchange for ritual payments and fees; rare or special texts are seldom shared, but transmitted from father to son or masters to apprentices. Having a copy of the necessary ritual texts does not qualify one to perform the ceremony: to employ living manuscripts containing secret words and providing abode to the deities, one must own their magic. This ownership comprises a twofold tenure and is objectified in the ritual payments associated with the copying process. One aspect of tenure involves technical expertise and demands understanding the text (often encrypted) and the associated oral knowledge (parts hidden on purpose – secret knowledge), together with knowing by heart how to perform the ritual action (hence, the ritual in use). The other aspect of the tenure refers to being connected with the cosmological domains in which the unique magic originates and, therefore, with the original 'owner' of the magic and with the uninterrupted chain of masters leading to it; the relation master-apprentice functions as the pivotal thread articulating the connection – a chain that links the present time and ones masters with the mythical time and the deities and domains in which the magic originates. The payment of transmission fees sanctions the transfer of knowledge and the articulation of this connection and only those ritual experts who 'own' its magic can perform a given ceremony. Those ritual experts leading the communal festivals have a copy of this fundamental text and also of the tablet containing the names of the Deities of the Village mentioned above. The tablet includes the names of the deities honoured by the village. These are the deities summoned and honoured in the course of the communal festival, and, thus, the list is unique to each settlement, for it also includes the communal ancestors. During the festival, the tablet embodies the deities whose names are inscribed in it, and, for instance, throwing a few droplets of rice liquor three times serves as an invitation to toast and consume

57 See Estévez forthcoming on the ritual production of manuscripts.

the spirits. It is the presence of the living manuscripts with the deities embodied in them that sanctions the ritual – in some cases, the texts have been memorised and yet their physical presence is still necessary, for they manifest the connection to the deities and the cosmological origins of magic.

The manuscript containing the pages whose photographs are presented in this chapter was copied in 2003 by Lao Lor from Tavane Village, who devoted his golden years to copying ritual texts on demand (that is, as a hired scribe) for his many apprentices and other ritual experts.[58] The ritual rules prevent changing the content of the manuscripts by reducing or adding elements. Bounsing, one of his students, the current manuscript's owner, and the master leading the festival in Namlue Village, decided recently to produce a fresher copy of the text preserved in this living manuscript (this process counts as a ritual action). He used high-quality white paper purchased in Mengla, Yunnan Province, China, and wrote a copy of the text himself with a nice brush and Japanese black ink. By employing these novel items purchased far away and writing by hand the secret words that fetch the *hon* of the rice in his village, this reputable senior master displayed his social networks and raised his charisma and reputation, while perpetuating his ritual name in a living manuscript to be passed down by the future generations – hence, achieving a status comparable to that of his former master. This happens to place the value of the living manuscripts in their content and the ability of the ritual experts to bring them to life by embodying deities into them. It also adds to the motivations to copy manuscripts, and clarifies why the text is not used today – therefore, ritual change. The secret words discussed below are read in their minds by the ritual experts who remain silent during the process – a performance that combines reading with visualisations and mental commands as they bring the text to life.

The fetching of the original rice *hon* is one of the five crucial ritual actions associated with the Festival for Planting the rice; the others include cleansing the village by means of banishing various demons from the social space, for instance, the *Ngu Sang Kwai* 五傷鬼, lit. the demons of the five injuries ('those who cause accidents that leave scars') and conceptualisations of vermin that parasitise the village's spiritual body (a reflection of those affecting the visible village), capturing and 'slaughtering' those demons haunting the village and transforming them into compost to nurture the fields, and resetting and reinforcing the village spiritual protections (walls, nests, and gates) and the shrine where the Deities of the Village

58 The full digital version of the manuscript is preserved by the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme (project EAP1126) at https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1126-1-5-35 [last accessed on 1 July 2022], title 'Yiben bao miao miyu' 一本保苗秘語 'A Book of Secret Words for Securing the Rice Seedlings'.

find abode. The communal rituals contain many ritual actions pertaining to the ritual roles of the priests (civil) and master (martial); the magic for fetching the original rice *hon* constitutes only one of them – one central to the planting season.

Below, in Fig. 1, from right to left, the venue's owner, the priest, and the master (the one holding a smartphone) read and visualise the secret words to fetch the *hon* of the original rice. Each ritual expert follows his owns pace. The altar and setting pertain to the Festival for Planting the Rice in Namlue Village in 2019. Each ritual expert has his own copy of the text; enlarged in the upper left corner stands the text employed by the master and presented here.

The ritual experts read the secret words in their minds; they remain silent during the process – one that combines reading with visualisations and mental commands as they bring the text to life in the ritual space.

Fig. 1: The three ritual experts leading the Festival for Planting the Rice in Namlue Village, 2019, perform the ritual fetching of the original rice *hon*.

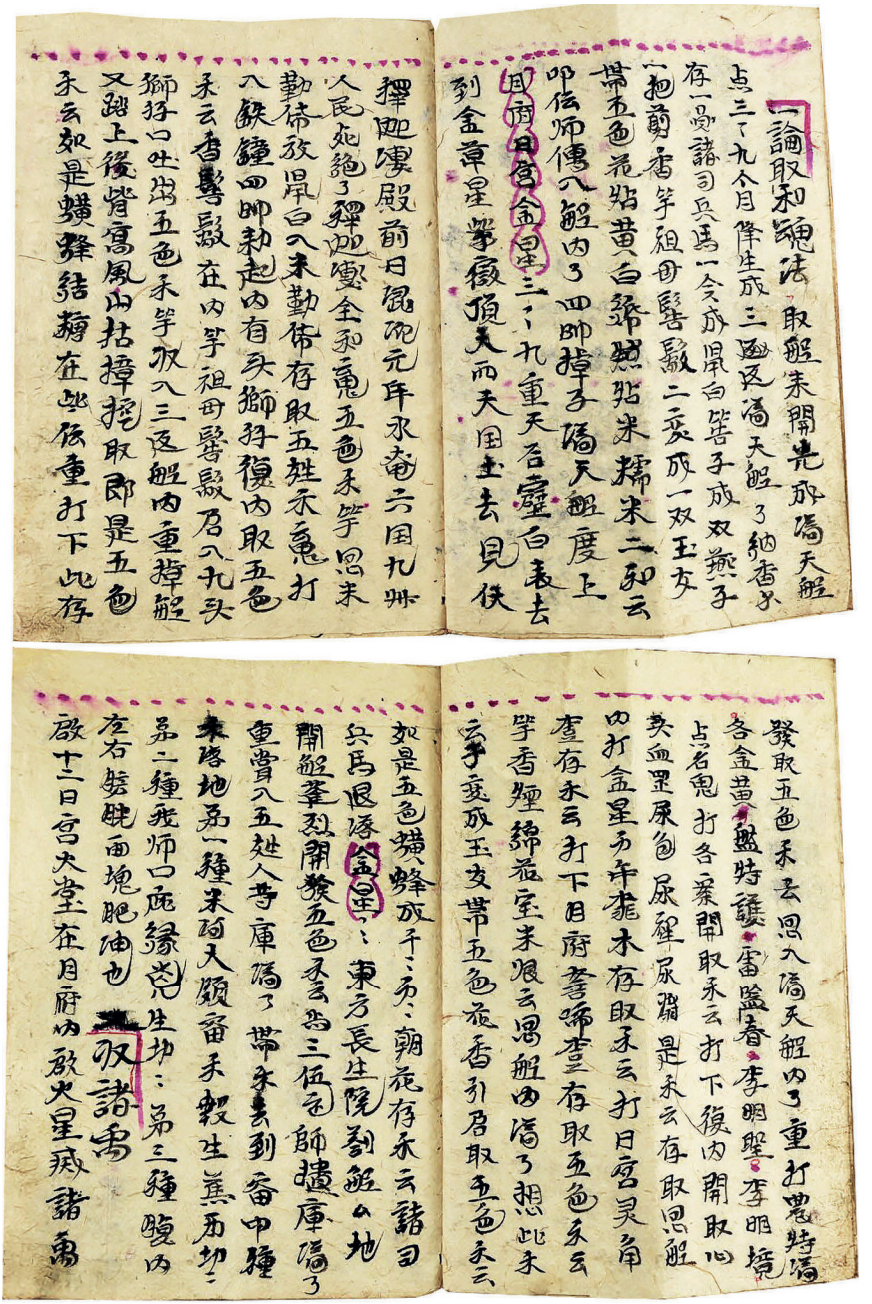

Fig. 2: The secret words translated in this article; manuscript EAP1126-1-5-35; pages 8–9 and 10–11.

6 The method (magic) to fetch the *hon* of the original rice–translated and explained

The living manuscript used in this ritual comprises five sets of secret words that empower five different ritual actions, namely, adding extra nurturing soil and ground to the land, roasting the bugs that may jeopardize the planting, fetching the *hon* of the original rice, sealing the village from the evil coming from the Five Directions and Three Gates, and setting up and improving the shrine of the Deities of the Village.[59] The secret words for fetching the *hon* of the original rice are written on four pages. Each page contains eight lines or columns to be read from the right, with around eighteen characters each, and the entire ritual text comprises thirty-one lines. The start and end of the ritual part are embraced by red hook marks shaped as 'ไ' and inscribed in red ink.

Although the activation of the secret words demands the articulation of visualisations in the minds of the ritual experts, there are also associated ritual actions that include crafting and using ritual objects to operationalise the invisible world or *yam* and to embody and distribute the celestial gifts received from it.[60] Various ritual objects are employed along with the living manuscripts and relate to their content, for instance, rice grains from the last harvest, scissors, and small rice sachets. The photographs below shall serve as a visual reference for the particular items in ritual use.

The translation is arranged sentence by sentence – sometimes, two sentences are presented together to preserve internal coherence. The sentences are numbered to facilitate analysis identifying the rows of the script in the images. As requested by Bounsing, the owner of the manuscript and the master leading the ceremony, the transliteration contains some corrections in parentheses as he noticed minor mistakes in the original manuscript, which prompted him to produce an updated version. The translation includes the text in the manuscript, the literal meaning in English with some minor notes in brackets clarifying the meaning, and explanations on the manipulation of physical objects performed by the ritual experts, their visualisations, and other relevant matters requiring comment.

There is a discrepancy in the translation that is comprised of three aspects. One aspect is ethnographic and is connected with Bounsing, the ritual expert who owns

59 Estévez 2023, 418–419 presents these secret words in ritual use followed by the description and meaning of the associated ritual actions.

60 Estévez 2023 is devoted to the Lanten cosmography, ritual system, and communal festivals, and contains a detailed account about these rice rituals.

the text, who considers that there are mistakes in the manuscript text presented in the photographs – mistakes consistently recognised by other Lanten ritual experts. He agreed to share his expertise on the condition that I take note of his corrections, which I agreed to do. A second aspect is related to the textual transmission. Those copying the Lanten manuscripts, i.e., the Lanten ritual experts, do not intend to simplify or complicate the texts – they copy a manuscript *as it is* according to their competence and level of literacy, with ritual rules that prevent any change in the contents. A Chinese reader will find simplified and traditional characters in the Lanten texts, including terms from many points of origin and historical strata, some as employed long ago. The Lanten do not wish to invent a unique writing system to distance themselves from China or other Chinese Daoist corpora. To translate this chapter in accordance with their understanding of the texts that they use in their rituals, I have written them in standard traditional characters to aid readers in understanding the meanings of the text; some characters in the Lanten text are non-standard and require dedicated software for digital reproduction. This chapter presents a comprehensible approach, for its focus is on meaning, not on the Lanten writing itself; the latter is a topic for another article in the future. Here, traditional characters are used to transliterate the texts for the convenience of writing and reading. A third and last dimension regards the meaning of the characters for their users (all being Lanten ritual experts) and the non-Lanten readers of this chapter. For this reason, two different translations accompany the text, one that refers to the Chinese text and conveys a more or less literal meaning of the sentences, and the accompanying explanations that aim at transmitting Lanten ritual experts' understanding of the text and their ritual use as informed by the oral knowledge and the associated actions.

6.1 Title: 論取禾魂法 On the Method of Fetching the Rice *Hon*

L01 取船來，開光成滿天船。
Get a boat, open its eyes so it becomes a full[-fledged] celestial ship.

This line is an instruction to prepare the ritual setting. A central element in this setting is a winnowing tray, used for sifting rice, which the internal narrative describes as a *boat*. In the ritual context, it serves as a multi-terrain vehicle that allows for travelling to every location within the vertical Axis mundi of the Lanten socio-cosmos, which is interconnected by a myriad of rivers, lakes, and seas. The ritual experts describe this ship sometimes as a sampan (see L02), but also as a bamboo raft or vessel with sails, a flying ship, depending on the context in which it appears.

The ‘opening of the eyes’ of the different ritual objects and tools transforms them according to the narrative’s specifications. The ritual experts execute this action by linking the physical body standing in the visible world with a spiritual body existing in the invisible counterpart. This enables them to operationalise the *yam yang* simultaneously, as the ritual objects exist and function in both worlds.

Fig. 3: This particular setting pertains to the New Year Festival; the scissors (the rat’s golden teeth in the magic) are used to pierce the bags of rice.

> L02 點三三九個月。降生成三返滿天船了，納香錢
> Dot [to activate] it three times, repeat thrice [to give] nine months. [The boat] is born after three turns as a full[-fledged] celestial ship; pay incense and money.

He turns the lamp three times above the items whose ‘eyes’ he aims to open; these items are reborn in the ritual space as a duality (united spiritual and material parts) linking the visible and invisible worlds. Each turn equals a month. The nine months represent human gestation and, thus, the birth of the item into its new self.

The object’s activation (opening of the eyes) is mediated by an oil lamp or burner that has been lit at the start of the ceremony. The lamp’s flame embodies and represents the Morning Star, Sun, and Moon, symbolising and embodying the Three Old Sages (Three Emperors), the Three Pure Ones or original priests, and the Three Primordials or original masters. The flames articulate the separation between the *yam yang* and connect the person holding the lamp to the original priests and masters as a member of the Celestial Administration he represents.

By directing the lamp’s light, the ritual expert commands the universe and its ritual time cycles, often corresponding to natural cycles (e.g., orbits of the celestial bodies, the seasons, and human life).

L03 存一員諸司兵馬，一令成鼠白，筊子成雙燕子。
Visualize a marshal with his officers and troops. Order one to become a white rat. The divination blocks to become a pair of swallows.

This line invites the Marshals to lead and navigate the celestial ship as its crew, marking the start of the journey. The line assists the ritual expert in recalling and visualising the story in his mind. Fig. 3 above presents various items that the ritual experts visualise and transform into living ritual objects.

The Marshals are five brothers; the elder brother, Tong Ku, is the Marshal of the Central Direction, so he remains at the central altar protecting the ritual space. His four brothers carry the special tactical operation as the crew of the sampan, protecting troops and the rat. The Jade Emperor transforms the second brother, Marshal Dan of the South Direction, into a white rat with golden teeth. In some versions of the oral stories, four or five brothers are turned into rats to carry the seeds of the five types of rice (each rat carries a seed).

The moon blocks are transformed into a pair of swallows (a married couple) accompanying the team to provide surveillance and reconnaissance.

The swallows' principal task in the mission is, nevertheless, different, and relates to the tendency of the *hon* to fragment and return to its cosmological origin. It is understood that rice grains have been lost during the last year for many reasons. The rice *hon* is deemed scattered across the Five Directions of the Three Realms. It has ended in cracks in the ground, riverbanks, trees in the deep jungle, and so on. Swallows are well known for stealing the seeds that the farmers plant in mountain fields and paddies. The pair employed in the ritual action are expected to replicate that natural behaviour, thus, looking for the rice *hon*. The swallows also watch out for the *hon* and ensure that none is left behind, adding a layer of efficacy to the ceremony by guaranteeing the spiritual integrity of the collected rice *hon*.

The wooden stamp (*laeng*) represents a one-headed lion; however, in this ritual action, the lion has one head standing on each of the Nine Administrations of the Three Realms, hence the nine heads. This lion is a guardian of the rice, and the number of heads reflects its might and competence in watching over the rice: nothing can escape its many mouths. Therefore, the original rice is well-protected.

The twelve small glasses in Fig. 3 are filled with rice liquor and a few rice grains; each glass represents a month, representing together an entire year. In the New Year Festival, the rice grains from the previous harvest embody the *hon* of the original rice, so the representatives of the households can consume it to start the year in prime condition.

L04: 一把剪香竿祖母髻髮二。變成一雙玉女。
One pair of scissors, two incense sticks, and two Grandma's hair bun wigs. They [the incense sticks] are transformed into a pair of jade maidens.

The pair of scissors are the white rat's golden incisors, deemed so powerful that they can nibble through anything. The golden teeth are a gift from the Jade Emperor to the second Marshal so that he can face this challenging mission with a better chance of success; they serve as tools and weapons, since the rat cannot carry anything else. In the New Year ceremony, a small bag filled with rice grains accompanies this pair of scissors – this small bag represents the 'hair bun wig' and bags with the original rice seed treasured by the deity Grandma Thaek Ge in the Upper Realm.

The two incense sticks (see Fig. 3) become two beautiful celestial consorts. In the Lanten ritual system, incense sticks are 'fruit trees' in the invisible world, whose juicy fruits are made available to the deities and ancestors, always described as being in a state of hunger. This gift of fruit trees prevents them from feeding on the *hon* of the living; therefore, the ritual rules mandate that incense must be burned during the entire ceremony. Here, the ritual experts are directed to open their eyes and visualise the incense sticks as jade maidens. Another set of incense sticks burned nearby completes their intended function as fruit trees; the logic of opening the eyes of the ritual objects entails identifying the invisible element to understand what and how the master operationalises the universe by manipulating the visible counterpart.

The kinship term 'grandma' (祖母) is identified as Grandma Thaek Ge. The oral stories narrate how she was tricked once: many of her medicines were stolen. She found the thieves and executed all but one – the survivor was the knowledgeable ritual expert Tam Kai 三界 who, with the support of his ancestors, escaped with a share of the medicines and eventually became a deity himself. Tam Kai passed down his medicinal repertoire and ethnobotanical knowledge to the Lanten ritual experts. In this context, Grandma Thaek Ge fulfils an important role in the challenge of fetching the rice *hon*: a mighty 'dragon' defending a fabulous treasure located far away, in the furthermost region in the Upper Realm – a guardian of the threshold to be broken through to attain the *hon* of the original rice and return home with it.

> L05: 帶五色花，粘黃白紙，貼粘米、糯米二禾魂。
> [The two celestial consorts] carry the Flowers of the Five Colours, glue on yellow and white paper, stick on the *hon* of the two kinds of rice – non-glutinous and glutinous [to collect them].

The performative part requires cutting paper shaped as two basic flowers that represent the two celestial consorts. The two flowers are made of gold and silver in the invisible world; cuttings of red and yellow paper – or any other available colours – serve as the ritual objects. The ritual experts glue rice grains to these paper-flowers (non-glutinous rice on the right side, and glutinous rice on the left) to represent the gathered rice *hon*, which is described as trapped bees.

The rice *hon* is conceptualised as 'bees' attracted to the beautiful and fragrant gold (yellow) and silver (white) flowers. Most elements in the invisible world are made of precious gold and silver. Two jade maidens carry all five types of flowers whose delicious nectar and fragrance lure and help capture the *hon* of all types of rice – characterised as a myriad of dispersed bees. The flowers become a trap that helps collect the bees or rice *hon* effortlessly by embodying it into rice grains, thus enabling its manipulation in the visible world.

The metaphor of *hon* being insects that wander around and like to travel far away is common in the Lanten ritual narratives, which are shaped by a horticultural, often floral, language. Honey bees and honey are known as 'good' *hon* (found in ancestors, persons, rice, buffaloes, swine, and chickens) compared to the 'bad' *hon* of parasitic pests such as maggots, wasps, or locusts that represent non-social deities. Bees leaving the hive (a symbol of spiritual integrity) and flying in every direction portend fragmentation. Collecting the bees represents achieving wholeness: the parts come together once again. Most Lanten rituals aim at a two-fold function: to exorcise unwanted spiritual elements and to call or bring back those that have run away.

The efficacy of the ritual action builds up in the iteration of the ritual actions and the duplication of methods; the triple repetition addresses the tripartite socio-cosmos. Therefore, there are many methods to fetch the rice *hon*.

> L06: 叩伝師傅入船內了，四帥棹子滿天船度上。
> Summon the masters to enter inside the boat. The Four Marshals paddle the full celestial ship upstream.

The celestial ship and its celestial crew are ready to begin their mission. The upstream direction and the downstream direction remind the reader about the vertical Axis mundi defining the Lanten socio-cosmos, shaped by a river network.

The ritual experts identify the 'masters' in this line as the Three Pure Ones, the Three Primordials, and the Marshals. The ritual experts embody all these deities; hence, the ritual expert visualises himself carrying the action, transforming this adventure into a spiritual journey.

> L07: 月府、日宮、金星、三三九重天石壁白表去。
> [Travel through] the Moon Mansion, the Sun Palace, and the Morning Star. [Pass through] the Three Realms and Nine Administrations to reach the surface of the White Rock Cliff.

The Moon, Sun, and the Morning Star (the 'brightest star' or Venus) represent the Three Realms and their three rulers (the Three Emperors). The three celestial bodies create liminality (as sacred space and time do) as they appear together briefly in the sky during sunrise and sunset. The celestial bodies also are identified as the rulers' residences or palaces, and their linear order provides the necessary

direction: from night and Earth (the ritual venue) to sunrise and Heaven, marking the stopovers in a journey. The venue where the ritual occurs counts as the 'harbour' and starting point for the ship. Due to their ritual significance, these characters appear highlighted (in brackets) in red in the ritual text. The White Rock Cliff is the ultimate destination, the residence of Grandma Thaek Ge.

The Lanten socio-cosmos is divided into Three Realms, and each of these realms has three administrative subdivisions that replicate its power structure. Each realm has a capital or headquarters (a central polity) and two delegations or embassies, one from each of the other two realms. Hence there are nine administrations. The Lanten in Laos compare these celestial bodies to the modern-day three administrative tiers: the village, the city, and the province.[61]

> L08: 到金單星、紫微頂、大西天國土，去見佛(婆)。
> Arrive at the Lone Morning Star, the Summit of the Purple Tenuity [Mountain], the Realm of the Great Heaven of the West, to see the Buddha (Grandma).

The character (婆) is an addition by Bounsing, the owner of the text. *Bu* 婆 is a familiar term for 'grandmother' and an old lady that I translate here as a respectful yet intimate 'grandma'.

The line describes the arrival at the destination, namely the residence of the deity Grandma Thaek Ge, whom the ritual expert informants explicitly identified by the characters 佛 (婆). The text places this residence at the White Rock Cliff, which, according to the oral stories, stands in the Upper Realm's Westernmost region, a region that one can only reach after passing the residence of the Jade Emperor at the Purple Tenuity Mountain, described as the highest mountain. This inaccessibility makes this journey especially adventurous.

The oral story provides further details as it translates the Three Realms as three large rivers and the Nine Administrations as nine big mountain ranges. This cosmological landscape correlates with the heavy labour and uncertainty of planting and harvesting rice, and the significance and difficulties of the mission to be carried by the white rat, which are common to both shamanistic journeys and Daoist ritual petitions addressed to the highest deities.[62]

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61 Lao: ບ້ານ *baan* or village; ເມືອງ *mueang* or district; and ແຂວງ *khoueng* or province.

62 This theme invites further discussion as it reveals old practices carried by migrating communities in the highlands, such as the Lanten themselves, who, having been deprived of their rice grains (e.g., after being assaulted or fleeing a war in a rush), had to steal rice from the inhabitants of the plains to eat and plant it. The Marshals' journey, the secrecy of their mission, the invasion of Grandma Thaek Ge's palace (epitomizing the granaries of the city lords of the polities along the

L09: 釋迦婆殿。前日混沌元年，水淹六國九州。
In the Palace of the Grandma Thaek Ge. The day before was the first year of chaos, when water inundated the Six Kingdoms and Nine Continents.

The first year was the starting point of the havoc (i.e., flood) that destroyed the world. That year, the Six Kingdoms, meaning Earth, and the Nine Administrations, meaning Heaven, were devastated. The Thunder Emperor created storms and blocked the drainage system at the bottom of the seas, causing flooding.

This sentence requires the ritual expert to recall the oral story and invites him to visualise it all.

The year of chaos refers to a cosmic renewal and the start of a new order. During the Festival for Planting the Rice, the priest performs a ritual action that replicates the flood, destroying the universe, so he can recreate it and bring it to its prime to produce the best setting for the new planting season. The 'chaos' shapes a liminality characterised by the presence of the raw forces of destruction and creation.

L10: 人民死絕了。釋迦婆全禾魂、五色禾竿恩米。
The people died out completely. Grandma Thaek Ge fully preserved the rice *hon*, the Five Coloured grain stems of the blessed rice.

This line identifies the rice *hon's* saviour: Grandma Thaek Ge. The mythical original rice is still available at her palace; she is its spiritual 'owner' and custodian.

Many stories circulate among the Lanten to describe the characteristics of the original rice. It grew strong and fast like the banana tree, and large and fruitful like the mango tree. The original panicles produced rice grains as large as a thumb (or a green mango) that could feed everybody effortlessly. Nobody needed to plough the land or worry about planting and harvest, and people could collect rice from the trees and satiate their hunger any time. As discussed above, these stories form part of the rice myths common to South, Southeast, and East Asia.

L11: 勒袋放。鼠白入來勒袋，存取五姓禾魂。
Untie the strings of the bag. The white rat enters the bag. Visualise obtaining the rice *hon* of the Five Surnames.

This sentence is critical to the ritual actions in the New Year Festival and conveys the instruction to visualise the opening of the rice sachets with the scissors; see Fig. 3, on the right: the three leading ritual experts use the scissors to do so.

river basins), and the struggles to return with the precious loot serves for both the narratives of a shamanistic journey and the harsh reality in the margins of the Chinese Empire.

In this action, they embody the second Marshal or white rat, who has reached the residence of the deity and bypassed all the defenses. The original rice is in bags hanging from the ceiling beams (similar to the way Lanten households keep food in the kitchen). Only a tiny rat with the unique abilities of the Marshals and enhanced by the Jade Emperor's gift of golden incisors can complete this mission. The theme of the rat as a thief appears in another Lanten story that tells of a fearless rat that invaded the private chamber of the Jade Emperor's third daughter several times to harass her. The Jade Emperor taught his daughter how to capture the rat, which ended up being killed. Its skin was used to make the 'thief bag' (賊包) that the deity Celestial Master Sang bestows the Lanten novices with in the course of their ordinations. This enchanted bag looks like a normal Lanten travel bag but its interior can store an unlimited number of belongings, enabling the ritual experts to carry all their ritual objects in the invisible world (their actual travel bag being the visible counterpart). This story articulates a close relationship between the rat, a skilful thief able to penetrate the most restricted quarters of Jade Emperor's palace, and the Lanten ritual experts who 'wear' its skin, providing further rationale for the transformation of Marshall Dan into a rat to steal the original rice seeds.

The five surnames are identified as the residents (the family names or households) in the village receiving this gift of rice *hon*; the ritual experts visualise the most common surnames in the village (all of them in the same particular hamlet), which serve as an addressee for this gift. This part is crucial because the households sponsor the ceremony, and their surnames must be properly identified so that the celestial gifts can be delivered to them and allow them to start the planting season.

> L12: 打入鐵鐘, 四帥敕起(铁杖)。內有頭獅子。腹內取五色禾魂。
> Forcing their way into the iron bell, the Four Marshals initiate their command to wield [the iron spear]. Inside there is a lion. From its belly extract the *hon* of the five- coloured rice.

The oral stories fill some gaps in the journey. After fetching several seeds of the original rice from the bags, the crew leave the palace through a back gate. Informants describe how Lanten houses have a front or main door and a back or kitchen door, and note that the palace's floorplan incorporates this same structure. The point of using this back door is to signal that the journey continues. The crew follow a different path and, thus, will face new situations and adventures. This explanation is part of the background required by the secret words: the oral stories and cultural knowledge provide the necessary information to visualise a coherent and vivid story.

The first of these new scenarios is a metal cage ('iron bell') containing a mighty nine-headed lion. This line relates to the role of the wooden stamp (*leang*) shaped like a lion in Fig. 2 above. Grandma Thaek Ge keeps this lion as a pet or guard-dog to protect her palace. The awe-inspiring lion symbolises the might of its owner and

the value of the treasure inside. The Marshals force the cage open with their iron spear. The ritual experts explicitly mention this spear and its omission may indicate a mistake in the manuscript at this point.

The nine-headed lion guards the rice *hon* in its belly. This scenario echoes that involving the bees, and counts as another instance of re-iteration, as the rice *hon* is extracted various times.

> L13: 香髻髮在內。竿祖母髻髮召入九頭獅子。
> The incense and hair wig buns are inside [at Grandma Thaek Ge's palace]. Stick the stems of Grandma's hair wig into the nine-headed lion.

The Four Marshals open the cage and subdue the lion with their bare hands. An iron spear helps them to open its jaws and reach deeper locations in the lion's body, from the lion's multiple jaws to the deepest section of the lion's stomach.

This action symbolises subjecting Grandma Thaek Ge's pet lion to the might of the Marshals, therefore, to the ritual experts.

> L14: 口吐出五色禾竿。收入三返船內，重棹船。
> Spit out from your mouth the five coloured rice grain stems. Load them onto the ship, three times over, and row the ship back.

The Marshals force the lion to spit out the rice *hon*. Fetching the rice *hon* in this scenario comprises three actions: retrieving it from the lion's heads, stomach, and saliva. The triple repetition completes the cargo, enabling the crew to return home, turning the ship anti-clockwise three times. Nevertheless, the adventure has not yet ended.

> L15: 又踏上後背高風山。枯樟挖取，即是五色禾魂。
> Then, step onto the back of the High Windy Mountain. From the withered camphor tree is extracted the five-coloured rice *hon*.

This line presents a new scenario. The rice *hon*, as honey bees do, have flown far away, attracted by a dark, cosy, dry hollow provided by a withered tree (*Cinnamomum camphora*; *Ga Sang Nyang*), where the bees have built a new hive and are producing honey.

The new scenario constitutes an indication of the extent and richness of the cosmological landscape and the length of the adventure. Mind journeys across the Three Realms are part of the ritual experts' training; these narratives exemplify how the journeys operate. The secret words include the necessary information to identify and navigate to the residences of the deities and those hidden spots where the *hon* enjoys wandering around and finding solace.

L16: 如是蟥蜂結糖在此。伝重打下此。
As the bees gather their honey here. I [the ritual expert] order to strike it hard down here.

This line instructs the ritual experts to visualise the collection of honey.

The visualisation is informed by a skill – honey gathering – that Lanten youngsters learn when they are allowed to go hunting alone after receiving their ritual names.

L17 and L18: 存發取五色禾魂，恩入滿天船內了，重打農特滿、谷金黃、盤特護、雷監春、李明聖、李明境。
Visualize obtaining the rice *hon* of the five colours. Load the blessed [rice] into the full celestial ship. Hit hard again [the grains to wake up the following deities] Nong Te Man, Kok Kiam Woung, Boun Dak Hu, Lui Kam Tjan, Lee Meang Thaeng, Lee Meang Keang

These two lines are combined to keep the structure of the invitation. After securing the cargo of the rice *hon*, the deities whom the Lanten describe as the protectors of the rice are alerted, so they can get ready to carry out their duties during the farming season. The action entails visualising the awakening of the protectors of the rice grains by threshing rice grains by hand. In the text, the names of these deities are separated by red dots that indicate their ritual importance.

Overseeing this group is the deity Nong Te Man. In the Lower Realm, Kok Kiam Woung and Boun Dak Hu (emanations of Pangu) care for the rice by managing the watering system, nurturing the plants, adding enough rich soil, and preventing threats and pests. In the Middle Realm, Lui Kam Tjean (an emanation of the Thunder Emperor), Lee Meang Theang, and Lee Meang Keang (embodiments of the Lights of the World, namely the Sun and the Moon, and their children the Stars) deliver, respectively, all the needed rain and sufficient sunlight and warm weather ('not too hot, not too cold') to promote healthy growth. The Jade Emperor and the Upper Realm are not invoked in this ritual action.

These deities personify essential ritual functions (i.e., appear as emanations of the principal deities) that echo the needs and uncertainties of a rural community whose supply of staple food depends on rice farming. The rice protectors are assigned the management of the unpredictable regional weather cycles and the local microclimate and landscape.

L19: 點名鬼，打各案，開取禾魂，打下腹內，開取心頭血罡。
Call out the names of the ghosts, knock on each table, open and extract the rice *hon*. Hit to extract the belly. Open it to obtain its arterial blood from the heart.

This instruction tells the ritual experts to submit a sincere invitation to summon the Deities of the Village (the 'ghosts') to join the high tables in the final banquet. This

line reminds the ritual expert that his own heart functions like an echo chamber for his mental commands and visualisations: True believers receive true gifts.

The celestial presence of the Deities of the Village will facilitate the circulation of *hon* originating in their cosmological domains, enhancing the cargo of rice *hon*, and strengthening those in the presence of divinity – those actively sponsoring and attending the ceremony.

A piece of emic information allows for understanding the reference to the blood and the heart. This part refers to the gift of the 'real blood' of the Tao Dan 斗神, the astral deities of the Big Dipper who manage the registers of life and death and hence assign each person's lifespan to them. These deities do not attend the festivals but provide two important gifts. The ritual experts visualise their arterial blood (*sam kong* 心罡), which invigorates the living, and their gift of longevity to be embedded in the rice cakes.[63] The summoning of their gifts is hinted at in these secret words and the various tags glued to the central altar constructed for the Festival for Planting the Rice.[64]

> L20: 尿包(泡)、尿經、尿醬是禾魂，存取恩船內。
> The urine bag (foam), urine strand, and urine sauce are the rice hon. Visualize to take the blessed [rice] inside the ship.

In the emic explanation, the celestial guests invited to the banquet respond as the living would do in such a situation: After enjoying a copious banquet, they feel the call of nature. Like any liquid or organic matter left unattended in the forest, their depositions attract insects quickly. These insects are also described as carriers of rice *hon*. These *hon* are gathered and added to the ship's cargo. This line reminds us that the *hon* has many origins and that even the celestial depositions have value and may nurture the living.

> L21 and L22: 打金星萬年桃木，存取禾魂；打日宮靈角樹，存禾魂；打下月府菩提樹，存取五色禾魂。
> Hit the Ten-Thousand-Year Peach Wood in the Morning Star, visualize extracting the rice *hon*. Hit the Water Caltrop Tree in the Sun Palace, visualize preserving the rice *hon*. Hit the Bodhi Tree in the Moon Mansion, visualize extracting the five coloured rice *hon*.

These lines describe how the crew descends along the vertical Axis Mundi to return to the host venue. The liminality of the space is addressed on descending (downstream) from sunrise to darkness, to the venue hosting the ceremony.

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63 *Tao dan liang liu* 斗神粮料.

64 The officers providing these gifts are named, appearing on the tags (left and right sides): Yao Tao Liang 右斗像, Yao Tao Thi 右斗司, Thao Tao Liang 左斗像 and Thao Tao Thi 左斗司.

A different tree represents each realm, ruler and palace. These trees are the immortal Flat-peach Tree (*Prunus persica* var. *platycarpa*), the Water Caltrop Tree (*Trapa bicornis*), and the Bodhi Tree (*Ficus religiosa*).

The Lanten ritual experts in Laos are not aware of what types of trees are described in these secret words; they have never seen them with their own eyes. The noun tree 樹 appears in the narrative, and the specific type of tree is thought to be irrelevant to the associated ritual action.

Striking the tree refers to the technique of shake-and-catch employed for harvesting fruit trees: Hitting or shaking the trunk causes the ripe fruits to fall, making it easy to gather them from the ground. During the past year, the rice *hon* has found an abode in the flowers of these trees. Upon beating the trees, all the flowers fall (like fruits), and so do all the bees/*hon* trapped inside, enabling the ritual experts to collect the rice *hon* effortlessly.

> L23: 竿香煙、綿花寶、米銀魂、恩船內滿了
> With burning incense sticks, precious soft flower blossoms, silver rice *hon*, and the blessed [rice], load them onto the ship until it is full.

The missing rice *hon* is visualised as insects that the ritual experts must lure and trap. The incense sticks are visualised as a bait of intertwined precious flowers that lure all the insects around with their scents. The insects are quickly collected and added to the cargo. This amounts to another call to collect rice *hon*: more repetition and recurrence.

> L24: 想此禾魂童子變成玉女，帶五色花香，引召取五色禾魂。
> Visualize this rice *hon* child transforming into a Jade Maiden, carrying the fragrance of the five coloured flowers, attracting, summoning, and gathering the five coloured rice *hon*.

According to the informants, this sentence means that the deity Dan Long, the divine farmer, sends one of his own children to help with fetching the rice *hon.* This gift is instrumental in completing the mission and designates the deity, not mentioned explicitly in the text, with an extra task in the ritual. The child is transformed into a beautiful jade maiden wearing flowery garments that lure the rice *hon* embedded in the insects around about. The presence of this celestial consort and her attributed kinship relationship with Dan Long is understood to be a precious gift.

> L25 and L26: 如是五色蟥蜂成千千萬萬朝花，存禾魂。諸司兵馬退落金星[。。。]東方長生院剳船厶地。
> Just as the five-coloured bees in their hundreds and thousands head for the flowers, visualize the rice *hon*. The soldiers and horses retreat and land on the Morning Star [...] the Court of Longevity in the East ties up the ship in a certain place.

After collecting as much rice *hon* as possible, the mission is deemed complete, and the ship returns to the venue designated as a harbour for the ship, where the expedition started. But before returning, the Marshals arrange a stopover at the Morning Star or Upper Realm to visit the palace of the Tao Dan, to collect their gift of longevity (mentioned above).

The text symbol [。。。] indicates that a piece of information known by the ritual experts does not need to be written again. In this case, it refers to the detailed route through the Three Realms and Nine Administrations that brings the ship safely back to the starting point.

In the ritual action, the tray or pan symbolizing the ship is turned clockwise three times to represent the upstream journey and three times anti-clockwise to represent downstream. Each turn is equated with a realm, and the directions up and down refer to the vertical Axis Mundi.

> L27: 開船蓬烈，開發五色禾魂與三位臣師。櫃庫滿了。
> Open the awning of the ship fiercely. Deliver the five coloured rice *hon* to the three leading ministerial masters. The cabinet in the granary is full.

The crew returns home with the celestial ship, paddled fiercely by the Marshals. They have fetched the rice *hon* successfully, along with other gifts. Removing the ship's awning facilitates the distribution of the rice *hon* in full display so that everybody can attest to the fair distribution, and ensure that not even a single grain is left behind.

It is the three ritual experts who receive the rice *hon* first, and then they distribute all the *hon*. The informants insisted that every family in the village receives the same gifts in the same amount. The different outcomes (actual harvest) between households are ascribed to differences in farming techniques (knowing which type of grain to plant in which type of soil, proper watering, and so on), work ethics, and the particular relationships between the household and its pantheon and the community (its networking in the *yam yang*).

> L28: 重賞入五姓人等。庫滿了，帶禾魂去到畲中種禾落地。
> Heavily reward the people of the Five Surnames. The granary is full. Carry the rice *hon* to the open fields and plant the seedlings on the ground.

The villagers have all the necessary rice *hon* now. But the Lanten celestial gifts are gifts of potentiality: making things happen in the invisible world establishes life, latent abilities and capabilities that can be later developed in the visible counterpart, and lead to future success. Fetching the rice *hon* constitutes only half of the job in rice rituals: the rice fields in the invisible world must be planted, and Dan Long 神農 is the deity granting the gift of cultivation.

Fig. 4: Left: two winnowing trays with sweetened glutinous rice cakes embodying rice *hon* and the gift of longevity to be consumed by representatives of the households; there is also a metal bowl with rice grains with their husks (seedlings) and rice plants with two panicles made of bamboo and paper. Right-top: the general setting during the ritual use of the living manuscript. Right-bottom: detailed view of the ritual object representing a rice plant (the paper panicles are filled with rice grains).

> L29: 第一種米何大岭，畬禾報生，蕉芽切切。
> The first planting takes place on a certain formidable mountain ridge. The seedings in the open field report their growth, as rapid as banana seedlings.

The ritual planting constitutes a triple recurrence and relates to three ritual objects produced during the Festival for Planting the Rice and the three phases of the planting and the growth of the rice.

The first phase transforms the rice with husks into rice seedlings to be planted on the mountain ridge. These seedlings are commanded to grow like banana trees, which the Lanten describe as healthy, beautiful, fast-growing trees that produce abundant fruits. In this conception, the rice panicles should become as large and plentiful as banana bunches (with many 'teeth'), which echoes the descriptions associated with the original rice in the oral stories.

L30: 第二種，我師口庇綠，胸生切切。
For the second planting, I the master, swallow [it] to protect the green, within my chest it grows rapidly.

The second phase describes the transplantation of the rice seedlings from the mountain into the bodies of the ritual experts. Their bodies will nurture the seedlings as the rice paddies do. All the attendants contribute to this narrative when they chew, swallow, and digest the rice cakes they receive as gifts in the venue. Those actions (eating the rice) represent ploughing the fields, arranging the seedlings, and transplanting the seedlings into the fields in the invisible counterpart: the rice seedlings are planted in their stomachs symbolically.

The ritual experts do this first, 'teaching' the method by example and re-enacting the story of the flood myth when Dan Long developed the methods to cultivate rice and taught them to the people. The leading ritual experts perform this part on behalf of the entire village; the representatives of the households attending the ceremony do so on behalf of their families.

L31: 第三種, 腹內左右膀胱，兩塊肥油也。
For the third planting, inside the belly are the left and right bladders, which are two pieces of fatty oil.

In the third phase, the ritual experts' bodies become the rice plants. The 'fat' in their bodies nurtures the rice plants to grow quickly and healthily. The left and right sides of the abdomen become the two types of rice panicles as narrated in the oral stories (non-glutinous and glutinous).

The ritual experts become a matrix that can operate the alchemical transformation that realises the potential of the seeds and *hon* of the original rice. The rib cage of a person reminds people of the shape of the panicles. This body part houses the same organs (the heart, the lungs, and the liver) that represent the sacrificial offerings, and hence the core or essence of the *hon* in a person or the livestock.

The ritual object modelled after the rice panicles represents this idea and combines the gifts of rice and farming. At this stage of the ritual, the celestial gifts have been embodied into ritual objects and presented to the community. A representative from each household collects the cakes, seeds, and crafted rice plants with two panicles. The farming season can start now in the visible world.

These three phases describe a complete and successful farming season in the invisible world. After the Festival for Planting the Rice, the season's first rain symbolises the deities' sanction and approval of the ritual. The rice barns filled with rice after the harvest attests to the efficacy of the process.

7 Some final remarks

The primary ritual function of the secret words presented here rests on the foundation that the oral stories establish: the original rice was lost, and it is fragmented and must be recovered to allow seedling and planting in the new farming season. The magic and secret words bring it back (though only its 'tooth') and reverse its fragmentation by restoring its wholeness to the best ability of the ritual experts. The community's survival depends on filling the rice granaries by the end of the season. Hence, the ritual requirement is to fetch as much of the original rice *hon* as possible. All the collected rice *hon* is embedded into food and drinks to nurture the community, seeds to allow for the new planting, and, for the growing plants, the wherewithal to restore their spiritual integrity and thus make them 'stronger', resilient against pests, producing dense panicles, and resulting in an abundant and uncomplicated harvest. Nevertheless, the internal narratives establish the impossibility of fetching all of the rice *hon*, providing plausible arguments for explaining bad harvests.

In this ritual, rice appears as a complex and multifaceted being whose spiritual 'ownership' belongs to many deities: from the deities of the tooth or embryo of the rice (that is, the rice itself), the zealous guardian who keeps the original rice plants, and the deity who developed the necessary cultivation techniques or the protectors of the rice as it grows. Rice *hon* also has many origins in its fragmented form in the invisible world. Some are precious like honey bees; others are filthy, the depositions of the deities, reminding readers that life, which feeds on them, also has light and darkness. Failures in addressing all these components and paying homage properly to the various spiritual 'owners' may result in disaster. Ritual narratives avoid absolutes, and imperfection intensifies the liminality sustaining the logic of partial efficacy or null results.

Every Lanten ritual expert employs the same secret words, and every Lanten household receives the same gifts. The third fetching of the rice *hon*, arranged by households in the fields separately that reinforces the spiritual integrity of the rice plants, corrects omissions or mistakes during the communal celebrations, and resolves any dispersal of rice *hon* during the planting process in which seeds or grains may have been wasted. More importantly, this ritual establishes the agency and logic determining the different outcomes in the rice harvest amongst Lanten households.

The Lanten magic and secret words employ a horticultural or floral language (bees, flowers, and so on) whose understanding in terms of grammar, motifs, and themes requires a variety of approaches methodologically. It is the study of the Lanten stories, songs, and oral ritual knowledge that has facilitated the breakthrough of emic meaning in the few sentences translated here. As a living tradition, emic

explanations by ritual experts were essential for decoding the living manuscripts and understanding the ritual actions, revealing the internal structure of the ceremonies as a whole. Using this approach, the comparison of rice rituals and rice-cultivating societies in modern-day and early Southeast Asia and China should enable us to discover patterns of cultural diffusion and ritual exchange. Multidisciplinary investigations informed by ongoing developments and academic trends in religious, linguistic, and ethnohistorical studies are crucial to positioning these findings comprehensively and holistically.

The variations in the emic (Lanten understanding) and etic readings (literal translation of the texts from Chinese) of these secret words do not constitute a limitation but the opposite. They illuminate the way that the secret words are on one level stable structures that bring forth complementarity by which the emic and the etic inform each other. Ultimately, it is through dialogue between different interpretations that one can achieve a more holistic meaning and enhanced understanding. The Lanten Chinese employed in the Lanten living manuscripts reveals a flexibility that empowers ethnic and local interpretation while providing a very stable body and structure for transmitting ritual knowledge. The depth of this understanding depends upon ones familiarity with the Lanten culture and ritual system. The associated performance can vary to encompass modernity and contingency. The secret words remain unchanging, providing an anchor to the Lanten ritual system to remain consistent – and by doing so, to the Lanten society whose members cohere meanings around them.

Finally, last but not least, the Lanten use of the Chinese script requires a wide-ranging review of the textual corpus to identify encoding systems, unique characters employed by the Lanten, character variation within the corpus, emic translations and meanings, and homophones reflecting on the Lanten vernacular, ritual, and singing languages. This work has yet to be done systematically.

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