

## Authenticity of the Sign: Travels of a Lahu Song

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Volume 32, numéro 1-2-3, 2012

Recherches anthropologiques  
Anthropological Inquiries

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1027773ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1027773ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de sémiotique / Canadian Semiotic Association

ISSN

0229-8651 (imprimé)

1923-9920 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Pine, J. (2012). Authenticity of the Sign: Travels of a Lahu Song. *Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry*, 32(1-2-3), 83–102.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1027773ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article a pour objet une chanson pour laquelle la détermination d'une identité Lahu nécessite des opérations sémiotiques complexes. Selon le contexte, "The Wedding Oath Song" (la chanson du serment de mariage) peut être interprétée de différentes manières : on y verra tantôt l'expression d'une certaine modernité susceptible de plaire à une société pré-moderne, tantôt une façon de lier un groupe ethnique à un état moderne qui reconnaît ses obligations envers ce groupe, ou encore l'expression des bienfaits du cosmopolitanisme propre aux états-nations modernes. Ces interprétations reposent sur autant d'index qui en assurent l'authenticité et, surtout, permettent d'étendre le concept d'"autostoppeur sémiotique" (*semiotic hitchhiker*) aux traits non matériels d'une performance discursive.

# Authenticity of the Sign : Travels of a Lahu Song<sup>1</sup>

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The song at the heart of this paper came into existence as a mimetic exercise. Composed for the 1957 feature film *Lusheng Liang Ge* (also known as *Love Songs on the Reed Pipes* or *Lusheng Love Songs*, Yu Yanfu dir.), *Hun Shi* (which I will translate here as the Wedding Oath song) is a duet between a Lahu maiden and a Lahu youth, epitomizing a particular sort of romantic love which, as I will discuss below, is associated explicitly with a desired modernity in post-revolutionary China. In the ensuing decades, the song has undergone dramatic semiotic transformations, finding its way into a variety of contexts into which it is able to fit by virtue of an absence of sustained central meaning. The Wedding Oath song is a shifter, a semiotic hitchhiker which adapts to the circumstances in which it finds itself, shaped by its vehicle and retaining, instead of a core, a peripheral indexical connection to an awkward association between modernity and authenticity which shifts and slides as the assemblage moves from context to context.

In this paper, I will trace some of the changes through which this intriguing bundle of signs passes. Using Mendoza-Denton's (2011) concept of the semiotic hitchhiker, and stretching that concept in a fine anthropological tradition to accommodate some difference, I will argue that the survival of this song, its ubiquity in some circumstances, relies upon the fact that it is bereft of any clearly delineated origin, despite the significance of a sense of authentic origin in its iterations. Like gender as described by Butler (1990), this song begins as a reproduction. It relies – for its authenticity, for its modernity, for its very existence – on the ambiguity that arises from a connection to a non-existent original, as well as a polyvocality that facilitates complex, fluid indexical con-

nections. An exploration of some of these indexical connections, both direct and indirect, provides a glimpse of ideological structures of identity construction in southwest China which are not restricted to the Lahu case.

I first became aware of the Wedding Oath song while sitting in my office working on other things, a CD of Lahu music<sup>2</sup> purchased in China running in the background on my computer. The third or fourth instrumental version of the same melody emerged from the speakers and I stopped the CD, took it in to my undergraduate research assistant<sup>3</sup>, and asked him to see if he could figure out what this pesky, persistent melody was. It didn't sound like either the traditional Lahu music with which I was familiar or the pop music that is the focus of my current research, but it was on a CD that was clearly intended to be Lahu. My research assistant at that time had some rudimentary knowledge of Chinese, while I have no Chinese at all. I also suspected he would be better at tracing a piece of music through the complex web of information-bearing systems in the online universe. I was right. He very rapidly came back to me with the melody identified as the Wedding Oath song, and noted that it appeared to be a popular song for weddings in China, showing up in amateur videos posted online.

The Wedding Oath song, from what I have been able to ascertain<sup>4</sup>, was composed for the 1957 Chinese film *Love Songs on the Reed Pipes* by Lei Zhenbang, an ethnic Manchu composer known for his ability to incorporate ethnic music into his compositions. The film is a love story set in the 1930s, featuring Lahu resistance against the Nationalist Chinese Army and collaboration with the People's Army. The script is based on a story written by ethnic Han author Peng Jing Feng Tan, which is in turn based on a conversation he had with a Lahu man in 1952. While the song is not a Lahu song, Lei is, as noted above, known to have drawn on traditional melodies in his compositions and it is likely that he sought out traditional Lahu music while composing. One element of the song that rings true as Lahu is the fact that it is a duet between a man and a woman, reflecting, perhaps intentionally, the traditional marriage practice of Lahu as distinct from the practice of Han and other patrilineal, patriarchal groups in the region (Ma 2011; Du 2000), a topic I explore below. This intentional, meaningful connection of a song composed and sung in Mandarin, the language associated with the dominant Han, to Lahu cultural practice appears to prepare the song for life as a hitchhiker.

The three vehicles I will explore in this paper include the original film for which the song was composed, within which the song indexes a particular sort of marriage, and through it a particular sort of modernity. The second vehicle, a television variety show, requires that the song disconnect from one set of referents in order to latch onto another. Here, carried by Lahu men into a Han-dominated context, the song is

a tool in the struggle to be part of the whole and yet to be distinct, and to point to the inherent belongingness of the Lahu originally claimed by the film, now expressed from the Lahu position. Finally, in the third conveyance, an “ethnic” performance in a theme park setting, the song does not belong to the Lahu anymore but instead is wholly given to the Han as a decoration, a cosmopolitan connection to the authentically “ethnic”, an intentionally awkward ludic interlude that reinforces the modernity of the dominant through an effacing of the subordinate whose song it has never really been. By following the song from its original vehicle, a feature film created as part of a propaganda program, to the Chinese national airwaves as part of a variety show performance, and finally to a ride within the performance of commodified ethnicity, I will demonstrate the flexibility with which this song adapts itself to its vehicle while maintaining a connection to modernity, which is itself reshaped over the course of the song’s travels.

### Indexicality and a Hitchhiking Text

The flexibility with which the Wedding Oath song remains meaningful in these three contexts relies primarily upon the quality of indexicality that it exhibits. The song is used by a variety of actors to perform conditions that they intend to call into existence or call attention to, indexing desirable qualities while calling on its audiences to recognize and respond to these qualities, behaving as a complex “shifter” (Silverstein, 1976). Keane, discussing the indexicality of a text as a material object, notes that such a text may presuppose the conditions of which it is an effect, bringing with it “entailments” – its own effects and possibilities – which may be misread as expressing something that already exists (2003 : 417).

The misreading, in the case of this Lahu song, is central to the success of the semiotic operations that the song performs in its various contexts. This misreading relies on a recognition of the Lahu-ness of the song, since the indexical meanings that it exhibits in various contexts spring from its Lahu identity. The fact that Lahu language versions of the song are translations of a Chinese original is obscured as the song makes its way from vehicle to vehicle.

The ability of the song to move, however, indicates the existence of an overarching semiotic ideology. The semiotic ideology within which these operations take place is one that is characterized by particular understandings of the concepts of modernity, authenticity and identity. The decision to include this particular song in a variety of performances indicates a metasemiotic awareness that would seem contrary to the idea that it is a hitchhiker, since Mendoza-Denton argues that a semiotic hitchhiker eludes metasemiotic awareness of users. Certainly it is difficult to be unaware of a song, as I discovered when I first became aware of this one. I contend, however, that the absence of an original vehicle allows the Wedding Oath song to function as a hitchhiker, albeit a noisy

and intrusive one.

Hill (2008) describes the articulation of direct and indirect indexical relationships between referent and object, these two semiotic operations being necessary to the success of jokes using the style she names “Mock Spanish”. Mock Spanish is used primarily by white middle-class Americans, incorporating the direct indexing of a positive image of the speaker as hip, cool, while indirectly indexing racially inflected, socially negative characteristics associated with speakers of Spanish. This dual indexicality depends upon a language ideology that draws the connection between Spanish and particular Spanish speakers, and relies on a covert recognition of the indirectly indexed meaning, as overt racism would destroy the directly indexed hip, cool image under construction. For a “Fleas Navidad” Christmas card to function, it must point directly to the hip, cool character of the (white middle-class) sender while simultaneously indicating racist associations with the Spanish that are assumed to be part of a shared language ideology. “Joyeux Knoll” does not carry the same weight, and is not “funny”, because the indirect racial index is missing.

The Wedding Oath song indexes, in different contexts, a desirable modern quality in a pre-modern society, a connection between an ethnic minority group and the modern state that implies obligations toward that ethnic group, and the positive quality of diversity as a characteristic of a modern nation state as illustrated in the stylized performance of an ethnic identity. Modernity, understood as a break from the pre-modern, is clearly visible in the modernization project of the Chinese Communist party, and the defining of ethnic groups was key to this project (Harrell, 1995). This modernity creates a need for authenticity as its alternate, viewed across a divide (Simmel, 1990), a relationship that has been well explored in tourism research and anthropology (see for example Handler, 1986; MacCannell, 1973).

### The Wedding Oath Song - the Original Version

The Wedding Oath song is an antiphonal duet, a genre not uncommon in the Greater Mekong Subregion<sup>5</sup>, an area that encompasses mainland Southeast Asia and much of southwest China. The duet, initiated by the woman, in conjunction with a lyric emphasizing a romantic, monogamous relationship, creates a direct index between this song and dyadic relationships formed by the members of the relationship itself. The four lilting musical phrases with a pause at the end of each phrase appear to be modeled on the traditional format of courtship songs, which alternate between female and male. Traditional Lahu courtship songs may be sung or instrumental, but are always duets. Lahu, like other Tibeto-Burman languages, is monosyllabic and tonal, and tonal languages are especially suited to substitution systems that allow speakers to communicate in a limited way using wind or percussion instruments,

“saying” well established things. Lahu women on Jew’s harps and men on flutes are able to communicate stereotypical phrases, “sweet nothings” if you will, with tone taking on the burden usually carried by other elements of phonology.

The Wedding Oath Song lyrics go like this : <sup>6</sup>

*Woman sings* : The affection between Elder Brother and Younger Sister is long. The sound of flowing water is heard day and night, but water will sometimes dry out. Elder brother is forever by my side.

*Man sings* : The affection between Elder Brother and Younger Sister is as deep as the long root of the banana. Elder brother is like banana leaves. Younger sister is the banana heart.

*Together* : Swallows fly overhead in pairs. Sweetheart and I swing together; the swings swing into the clear sky, as if we were swallows in the air.

*Man* : Crossbows cannot fire without strings; Sister is like the strings on crossbows. The sweetest thing in the world is honey; Sister’s heart is sweeter than honey.

*Together* : Bees come when flowers bloom; flowers and bees are inseparable; bees are born to love flowers, flowers bloom for bees.

The lyrics of the Wedding Oath song emphasize a sensibility associated with Lahu traditional culture<sup>7</sup>, a marked gender equity that Du (2002, 2004) has explored in detail in a Chinese Lahu context, arguing that the primacy of the couple as the central unit of Lahu society reflects gender equity in daily practice. This gender equity, resonating with the modern Chinese vision of individual agency in marital partner selection and a discarding of “feudal” patriarchal norms and practices (Friedman 2005), is naturalized, autochthonized, through the connection of traditional Lahu marital practice and the story of the founding of the People’s Republic. A sense of female empowerment, often read as sexual license, is an important component of lowland images of upland peoples in the region (Du 2002).

The centrality of marriage reform in the historical context of this first iteration of the Wedding Oath Song results in a complex indexical operation, which may well contribute to the hitchhiking capability of the song. The 1950 Marriage Law (*hunyin fa*) was developed with the explicit intention of destroying traditional Chinese marriage practice. Arranged marriages that joined patrilineal clans economically and politically were defined as “feudal”, while the modern marriages which would form the structure of the modern state were to be marriages between individual adults. This “New Democratic marriage system” (Engel 1984) was viewed by the state as crucial to the necessary transformation of China. Marriage reform in China in the 1950s and ’60s was of great importance to the national government.

The importance of eliminating the practice of arranged marriage

between patrilineal families and adopting instead the practice of individual adults selecting their own marital partners was seen as “critical to throwing off feudal shackles” (Friedman 2005 : 320). The link between a desired modernity and individual agency in the selection of a marital partner, and especially the provision of full agency for women in this decision, must logically have preceded the 1950 law, and may well have become hegemonic by the 1957 production of the film. Thus, in *Love Song Through the Reed Pipes Lahu* ethnicity becomes a referent indexing modernity through the argument that gender equity and mutual individual agency in marital partner selection is the hallmark of the modern. At the same time, the film’s plot builds a firm connection between the central Lahu characters and the foundation of the People’s Republic. The Wedding Oath song condenses these complex indexical bundles, directly indexing modern marriage while indirectly indexing the inherently Chinese (in the sense of belonging to the People’s Republic) nature of such a modern marriage.

At the same time, Lahu retains an iconic association with that which is un(pre?)civilized/natural and through this association to the land itself, autochthonizing the modern marriage form which would otherwise necessarily be an imported concept. It is this dual operation that provides the Wedding Oath song its initial impact, an impetus that moves it through further, transformative, iterations<sup>8</sup>.

### Lahu, Gender Equity, Marriage, and The Song

As an ethnic group, the Lahu are often described in the literature according to economic patterns which only some Lahu practice today. They may be referred to as upland swidden cultivators, one of a number of such groups whom Scott (1998) has recently gathered together under the heading of “Zomia”. However, the Lahu – of whom some 500,000 live in Yunnan, PRC, 200,000 in Myanmar/Burma, 80,000 in northern Thailand and 3000 to 4000 elsewhere (the US, Australia, etc.) – are a difficult group to define. Despite differing national locations, they remain distinctively Lahu, an identity that is almost entirely discursive. Lahu people are Lahu because they say they are Lahu, generally in a dialect that is associated with the Lahu language. Anthony Walker, an ethnographer who has conducted extensive research with Lahu peoples, argues that they are “a collectivity of human beings who, despite their lack of common social, political or economic institutions, share a feeling of ‘Lahuness’ which goes beyond their common language (albeit with considerable variation between the major dialects) to embrace the idea of a shared past” (2003 : 52-3).

Lahu people tend to be quite conscious of the diversity that lies under the heading “Lahu”. In the summer of 2009, for example, when I told a Lahu woman that I was interested in Lahu opinions/attitudes regarding Lahu language pop music she laughed and replied that I

would get a different opinion from every Lahu individual. There are, however, some uniform features in the diverse practice of being Lahu. Lahu language pop music, much of it produced in Burma/Myanmar, has gained an audience throughout the Greater Mekong Subregion, and a Lahu language radio soap opera produced in and broadcast from Chiangmai, Thailand, had an audience that extended throughout the region as well (UNESCO 2013). Media is an active site for the ongoing performance of Lahu identity/ies.

The dominant identity that the Wedding Oath song brings into relationship with Lahu might be described as simply Chinese. I have chosen, however, to use the term “Han” as a label that is more appropriate to the argument at hand. Harrell (2001) asserts that Han identity, despite its constructed nature and the considerable diversity within the proposed classification, possesses a “thusness” which he compares to Whiteness in the United States, and it is in this sense that I will use the term, recognizing that it is easily as problematic as Lahuness, but that Han is a category into which people place themselves and others. Han identity is associated with a neo-Confucian-shaped patriarchal kinship structure, which forms a significant element of the structure of pre-revolutionary China. This structure includes the subordination of women, and a focus on the patrilineage in marital decisions. The Lahu kinship structure, in contrast, is not patrilineal. Like many peoples of the Greater Mekong Subregion, Lahu practice bilateral kinship, and until recently did not use surnames. Moreover, Lahu gender relations exhibit a powerful and enduring equity. Du (2002), as mentioned above, argues that the fundamental unit of Lahu social structure is the couple. She notes that traditional childbirth practice, in which the husband is the primary midwife, and childrearing patterns, which include men caring for infants (even while hunting), support this equity despite centuries of pressure from dominant patriarchal groups.

In my own observation, the acceptance of either the husband or the wife at village meetings requiring participation by all households, and the perception of unmarried adults of either sex as ineligible for leadership positions, support the idea that in Thailand, as well, despite decades of patriarchal policies beyond the village, Lahu gender equity at the local level endures<sup>9</sup>. Typically, Lahu villages have both a headman and headwoman, a priest and a priest’s wife or a pastor and a pastor’s wife, and households are for the most part headed by a dyad rather than an individual, although divorce is not uncommon and the makeup of households can shift with relative ease. Ma (2011) argues that the egalitarian situation that results from bilateral kin structure requires some external source, such as religious authority, to create any coherent political structure. The clear link between an egalitarian ethos and a non-patriarchal marital practice is arguably a central element of mainstream Chinese understandings of Lahu culture and society. The selection of a



marriage partner is, as a rule, left to the couple themselves<sup>10</sup>.

The film *Love Songs on the Reed Pipes*, with the Wedding Oath song as its theme, promotes this form of marriage, drawing on the actual practice of Lahu people, creating a “model minority” representation of a group that has not otherwise enjoyed such status. As swidden agriculturalists, the Lahu have not generally engaged in the kind of rice and paddy agriculture that produces what Sturgeon (2005 : 33) has called a “civilized landscape”, one reflecting both the productivity and hard work of farmers and the benevolent rule of the state. In the Greater Mekong Subregion, which includes mainland Southeast Asia and much of Yunnan Province, PRC, the dichotomy between lowland paddy farmers and upland swidden agriculturalists has a long history. As Keyes notes, despite technological, cultural and linguistic differences, sharp boundaries did not develop between uplanders and lowlanders. “Rather, throughout most of Southeast Asia, hill peoples were incorporated into social systems dominated by lowland peoples”, often taking the role of “holders of the wild” (Keyes, 1994 : 19). The “civilizing project” (Harrell, 1995) of the post-revolutionary Chinese state has, as a rule, worked to transform the Lahu and other uplanders into “civilized” Han citizens. Nevertheless, the Lahu marriage practice indexed by the original version of the Wedding Oath song places Lahu people, within this one fleeting frame, in a position of superiority to ethnic groups whose association with modern nation states marks them as modern.

### The Problem of Authenticity

The melody I am tracking here, in its original iteration as a duet between two ethnic Lahu lovers, directly indexes the modernity of the revolutionary state in its association with marriage between self-selected adults, relying on an indirect indexing of the link between Lahu as authentic citizens and the state as a location in which Lahu can be citizens. This momentarily eludes the double-bind often associated with authenticity with regard to indigeneity in other contexts : to be authentically Other, indigenous – in this case, not-Han – is to be not-modern, yet the place of Lahu and other ethnic minorities in the modern Chinese state is defined by their status as members of their particular ethnic minority groups. The concept of Lahu authenticity – which is necessarily indexed by melody composed for a diverse, Han-dominated audience by a Manchu composer – would be ironic if we did not recognize the role of the melody as a semiotic shifter, providing a bridge between a romantic indigenous authenticity associated with the Lahu and a nation state whose modernity is explicitly associated with its equally authentic cosmopolitanism.

Indigeneity, like ethnicity, is a characteristic that cannot simply be ascribed; rather, it must conform to an ongoing discourse on the nature of relationship to land, or to the state, or perhaps to both. The desire to

claim indigenous identity is not sufficient in and of itself, as noted by Onsmann (2004) in his discussion of efforts on the part of ethnic Frisians. Like the Frisians, Lahu cannot lay claim to a history of occupation of what are now Lahu spaces. In China, formal recognition by the government places Lahu among the 56 recognized nationalities<sup>11</sup>; however the Lahu autonomous county of Lancang is officially recognized as home to a variety of ethnic groups, reflecting the absence of clearly demarcated “homelands” throughout the region. Mainland SE Asia has been referred to as a geoethnic mosaic (Walker 1992), within which there are no clearly demarcated, bounded areas specific to particular ethnic groups, and this seems to hold true in Yunnan as well. Moreover, as Leach noted in his classic work (1990 [1964]), the fixity of ethnic identity preferred by the state in its search for legibility (Scott, 1998) does not necessarily hold for this region.

### The CCTV (Chinese State Television) Version – Claiming a Lahu Space In a Chinese State<sup>12</sup>

The Wedding Oath song appears several times on the Beijing-produced CCTV/Chinese state television variety program *Mingge Zhongguo* (*Songs in China*), namely in an episode featuring the Lahu that aired in October 2008 on CCTV 15.<sup>13</sup> It includes songs that exhibit, sometimes with modifications tuned to the sensibilities of the audience, a variety of traditional Lahu music including call-and-response courting songs. Also on the program are several versions of the Wedding Oath song, some in Lahu with a variety of lyrics and some in Mandarin with the original lyrics. The song is performed by Lahu people wearing modified traditional Lahu costumes, singing in Lahu, and also by non-Lahu singers, sometimes in “ethnic” costume and sometimes in Western evening dress. The County Executive whose performances first brought the song to my attention was instrumental in promoting the particular Lahu musical group appearing on the program, a group from that hails from what’s been described to me as “the village where everyone plays guitar” : the Lahu village in Lancang County where I was given the VCDs and where I met the performers. I have chosen a particular performance of the song for this analysis, as a powerful example of the hitchhiker nature of the song. This version is an a cappella rendition sung in Lahu by an all-male quintet in a “barbershop” style.

The role of the Wedding Oath song in reminding the state of the role of authentic Lahuness in the state’s origins is part of a discursive construction of a recognized, and therefore authentic, Lahuness in China. The indirect indexing of an obligation, on the part of the Chinese state, to support Lahu culture can only be successful if the Lahu claim to the song can be supported. That is, in order to be authentic here, and thus to be successful, the song must lose its connection to its origins in the mind of Mr. Lei while retaining its connection to the story of the Lahu support of the People’s Army. The song accomplishes this indexi-

cality in part through translation into Lahu. Other Mandarin versions are performed in the course of the variety program, but this all-male version is in a language incomprehensible to the non-Lahu audience, a situation reminiscent of the Native American language singing described by Ahlers (Ahlers, 2006). As with these Native American songs, the Lahu language version of the Wedding Oath song carries, for its audience, a clearly legible link to a particular, and in this case Chinese-but-not-Han identity.

As it indexes its Chinese origins, and indirectly indexes the role of Lahu culture in support of the state, the Lahu-language barbershop version of the Wedding Oath song sheds the key element of the song, which had connected it to both Lahu cultural norms and the goals of the revolutionary state. The duet of man and woman disappears, the lyrics associated with romantic love are obscured, leaving behind only the melody, which may or may not carry with it a memory of modern marriage<sup>14</sup>.

### The Theme Park – Musical Appropriation Of An Authentic Other

In August 2011, I visited the Minority Nationalities Village, an ethnic theme park just outside of Kunming, Yunnan, PRC. During that visit, I observed the final iteration of the song that I will discuss in this paper. This iteration, clearly marked as Lahu but sung in Chinese, once again turns the kaleidoscope of significance, placing modernity in conjunction with Chineseness, and moving Lahu into a supporting position. The argument for the master sign here is that a modern nation state is characterized by a cosmopolitan inclusion and appreciation of diversity which it preserves and enjoys, albeit in artificial settings where the not-modern Other is placed on display. The slogan of the theme park is “Let the world understand China, let us understand ourselves” (Litzinger 1998 : 231). Litzinger quotes a member of the park staff describing the metapragmatic frame within which the park operates : “The park does not only have an entertainment value; it also demonstrates to the world that China has handled its nationality problem more successfully than the former Soviet Union. The park also allows the Chinese to better understand their own country” (Litzinger 1998 : 230-231, italics mine).

The park houses exhibits that represent all of China’s recognized minority nationalities (*shao shu minzu*) who make homes in Yunnan province. Exhibit spaces consist of traditional houses, tools and clothing, and many of the exhibits include a scheduled performance. Individual group performances have the feel of a theme park or zoo performance, with very little space between performers and audience. The area in which performers present their particular identity is open to the public except when the performance is taking place. After the performances, the ethnic performers often offer some sort of traditional food or drink in the traditional house. The Lahu house, while considerably larger

than any actual Lahu dwelling I have visited, did exhibit many of the characteristics I associate with a Lahu house : it was made of wood and bamboo, raised well above the ground, with a fireplace set into the centre of the floor. Likewise, the food offered was familiar Lahu fare on both occasions I have visited this performance space<sup>15</sup>.

Arriving early, I found a seat in the audience area and watched as a variety of songs, dances and games were presented by actors, some of whom were ethnic Lahu.<sup>16</sup> During the course of the show selected audience members were invited to participate in a variety of physical activities, which included the mock chase and capture of a woman by a man. In every case the audience member struggled to perform tasks made to look easy by the professional performers.

The Wedding Oath song, along with dramatic ethnic costume and feats of physical derring-do, carried with it the weight of a performed authenticity into which the modern Han audience was invited. Near the close of the performance, a young man was recruited from the audience to perform a duet with one of the female performers, a woman dressed in what I identified as traditional Hmong<sup>17</sup> clothing. The young man was handed a sheet of paper from which he read as he attempted to sing the man's part of the song. The woman, a professional giving a professional performance, began to sing the Wedding Oath song in Mandarin, and directed the young man to come in on the man's part. He stumbled his way through his solo with good humour, and there was no sense that a professional performance was expected of him. This song marked a shift from performance to participation. At the end of the show, more members of the audience were invited to engage in a ball-tossing game, which I and other SE Asianist scholars I have consulted think of as a Hmong game<sup>18</sup> My initial and persistent identification of this game and the swing as "inauthentic" elements of the show offers powerful support for the hegemonic nature of the concept of authenticity in the "representational economy" (Keane 2003) within which the theme park operates, particularly in light of the fact that Lahu groups often adopt practices and technologies they find attractive. Indeed, I know of at least one Lahu Na Shehleh<sup>19</sup> village whose young women have recently adopted the distinctive (and quite lovely) headdress of Lisu maidens as part of their traditional Lahu attire (Saenghong personal communication), and a Lahu language feature film produced in 2013 includes a scene of ball tossing between Lahu Na Meu Neu (*Akawve*, T. Montreewa, dir.).

How does the song, in this iteration, accomplish entertainment rather than humiliation? The lack of skill of the Han audience-participant, in comparison to the skill of the Lahu (or "Lahu") performer, is a theme throughout the performance as audience-participants struggle with physical tasks first demonstrated by performers. In the Wedding Oath song, the complexity of this relationship between ethnicity and skill becomes especially apparent. The show is intended for a non-Lahu

audience, and must entertain and amuse that audience, and yet the audience-participant might well be humiliated by the position into which he is placed. The particular performance I witnessed may be atypical, but the audience response was one of amusement and not outrage. The semiotic operation of the song appears in this case to require the dual indexicality described by Hill, and to operate along the same lines as the Mock Spanish humour she examines.

The directly indexed significance of the theme park performance of the Wedding Oath song, like Mock Spanish humour, asserts the cosmopolitan, and I would argue modern, nature of the audience-participant and, by extension, the audience as a whole. Observing and participating in this “ethnic” performance offers an opportunity to demonstrate a repertoire that includes the diversity whose value is central to the park as a whole. The lack of skill with which the song is performed by the audience member indirectly indexes the subordinate nature of Lahu-ness by emphasizing the absence of negative consequences for poor performance. Both of these operations are made more readily available by the erasure of the Chinese origins of the song.

There is an unavoidable metapragmatic awareness of the performative nature of Lahu identity in the theatrical space of the theme park show. The capacity of the song to carry any meaning at all relies on an idea of authentic Lahu origins which the song does not, in fact, enjoy, along with an erasure of this metapragmatic awareness which indexes Lahu as an identity-to-be-performed, in opposition to the relatively unmarked identities of the audience. The play of authenticity in tourist spaces is not new of course, and the inclusion of an audience member in the performance of identity contributes to the perception of an entry into “back spaces”, which MacCannell (1973) describes as a component of the construction of modernity by imagining authenticity as its opposite. This manufactured authenticity ascribes a Lahu identity to practices associated with a variety of peoples living in the mountains of southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia : the Greater Mekong Subregion.

The “representational economy” (Keane, 2003) of the theme park performance is associated with a very different modernity from that found in the film in which the song originates. This is a modernity characterized by the consumption and production of “culture” as a commodity that is undeniably and unexceptionally a performance, while the film offers the song as authentically embedded in its cultural, geographic and historical context. Modernity itself provides a sort of semiotic bridge in this case, riding along with the song on its journey from its original vehicle, while the autochthonous authenticity of the song’s origins is joined by an authentically modern cosmopolitanism experienced by the audience and audience-participant.

## Conclusion

In the case of the Wedding Oath song, types of authenticity are indexed in articulation with one another in order to further index a multifaceted and ambiguous modernity. In this, the song behaves in a manner comparable to a material object, much as the ambiguous, polyvalent meaningful pottery described by Field (2009). Field makes the argument that there are, for created objects such as pottery, four types of authenticity, two of which are relevant to my discussion here. The first, “ethnographic authenticity”, requires that objects “accurately represent a bounded, named culture, cultural group, or cultural identity” (510). The second, “engineered authenticity”, Field uses to describe pottery created in factories. This engineered authenticity relies on adherence to explicit, precise design standards (511), an authenticity that Field attributes to Benjamin. The reproduction of the song, for its part, cannot fail to also call to mind the mechanical authenticity that Benjamin brings to our attention; and yet, in order for this to function, the song must maintain its connection to what may be termed “ethnographic authenticity”, which has been described as a trap into which indigenous identity may be forced (Onsman, 2004). It is as a result of its hitchhiker abilities that the song has avoided the trap of authenticity, a trap that is sprung by the process of iconization : the understanding of indexical features as iconic representations of a particular group (Irvine and Gal, 2000), which creates links between speakers and language that endure as a foundation for their own misrecognition. The argument that connects the song to the objects it indexes invokes a sort of authenticity, however : the Wedding Oath song is not just a song, it is a Lahu song.

Keane argues that an index requires a semiotic ideology to provide the “instructions” (2003) through which it may be read, while Mendoza-Denton asserts that a semiotic hitchhiker is characterized by an absence of metapragmatic awareness; those who deploy it and recognize it cannot name it or discuss it. Although the Wedding Oath song cannot, as a named and known text, entirely evade metapragmatic awareness – a characteristic Mendoza-Denton offers as a marker of the hitchhiker she proposes – I argue that this song is, nevertheless, a semiotic hitchhiker. Carrying with it minimal baggage, the song takes on new shapes and identities as it enters new contextual vehicles. As the theme song for the film *Love Songs on the Reed Pipes*, the Wedding Oath song indexes modern marriage as a potentially indigenous Chinese tradition. In the CCTV variety show, the song, created by a non-Lahu and originally not sung in Lahu, is appropriated by Lahu singers while leaving behind the gender equity with which it was originally connected. At the Minority Nationalities Village theme park, the song is used to build a connection between the performed authenticity of “Lahu” identity and the mainstream Han identity of park visitors. The capacity that the song exhibits to reshape itself to its vehicle draws upon the fact that it begins its life as a hitchhiker, not belonging truly to its original vehicle but instead gaining its

position in the film by virtue of a sense of its previous existence.

The Wedding Oath song, in its many forms, is itself a vehicle for a variety of passengers, but the Lahu authenticity on which so much of its indexical force seems to rest is a passenger that might be said to have no semiotic vehicle of its own. As Walker notes, there is no shared material culture, no shared costume, and not even always mutual intelligibility between dialects, and yet there remains among Lahu a profound sense of shared identity. The idea that authenticity might, in the case of this song, be a semiotic hitchhiker, may stretch Mendoza-Denton's useful concept too far out of shape. Semiotic hitchhiking requires that a feature not have a vehicle of its own, but instead that it co-occur with other features, traveling with them wherever they may go. Authenticity, or perhaps an authentic Lahu identity in particular, does not belong to the vehicles in which the Wedding Oath song finds itself. And yet, the place of the song in the film calls into question the idea that the film is a vehicle belonging to the song. The song, created for the film, must immediately be misrecognized as originating in the pre-film past in order to perform the task of performing modern marital practice as Chinese, although not Han.

Discussing the topic, I learned from Du Shanshan, a scholar with a long history of working with Lahu in China, that Lahu intellectuals are proud of the Wedding Oath song and its association with Lahu identity. This pride, along with the County Executive's strategic use of the song in his CDs, seems to indicate that some portions of the Lahu population do enjoy a metapragmatic awareness of the possible hitchhiker. I have not yet encountered the Wedding Oath song in the Lahu language pop music produced in Burma/Myanmar and Thailand, although I have encountered Southeast Asian Lahu language pop music in Yunnan. Very little Lahu language pop music is produced in China, and the relatively sophisticated Chinese language used on the album cover for the CD on which I first encountered this persistent melody would seem to indicate that it is intended for non-Lahu audiences. The entextualization required to outfit the song for its journey as a hitchhiker would seem firmly grounded in a Chinese discourse of identity that, it has been pointed out, is significantly different from the discourse found in mainland Southeast Asia (Sturgeon, 2005). A reviewer commenting on an earlier draft of this paper remarked that Chinese discourse mobilizes the hitchhiker, while Southeast Asian discourse immobilizes it. The conditions that dissuade, or perhaps even prohibit, hitchhiking – or at least this particular hitchhiker – may well emerge from the difference in state-ethnic group relations, such that the formal state recognition accorded by the PRC permits a movement not available to Lahu in states, which do not offer such formal recognition.

The key circumstance that marks the song as a hitchhiker is that the song itself has no natural vehicle, despite its well-documented origins,

due to the semiotic necessity of an always already existing nature to its fundamental meaning in Yu Yanfu's film. This always already existing quality might be called authenticity, perhaps, or authochthony. It has a flavour of indigeneity to it and certainly, if my analysis is accurate, the capacity of the song to link monogamous romantic marriage choice to China's fundamental indigenous past is key. The relationship is also impacted by the Maoist acceptance of a Marxist understanding of cultural or social evolution that, as a continuum, places Lahu farther back along a line that stretches to reach the civilized Han.

As the song moves to new vehicles, having no true original vehicle may facilitate the changes it undergoes as it adapts to the context in which it finds itself. Thus, entering into the variety show it loses its link to monogamous marriage and reaches not to some imagined indigenous past but rather to the song's actual origins in *Love Songs on the Reed Pipes* and the role of Lahu as foundational to the new Chinese state. Finally, in the cultural show, the song becomes a marker of cosmopolitan modern Chinese identity, loosening its connection to Lahu specifically and reversing the pull of time, linking not to a past either imagined or historical but rather to a present/future of diversity integrated into a successful 21st century Chinese state. It is, in this sense, not a Lahu song but a Chinese song, or a Chinese Lahu song.

And yet, as an index the song carries the potential to belong already, again or still, to (some) Lahu, just as the hymns sung among Baptist Lahu in Thailand, or the Thailand Lahu bubblegum pop, belong to Lahu. The larger ideological framework that produced the song does not own it once it enters Lahu hands, just as the theistic animism likely owes much to the influence of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism (Walker 2003) and the Baptist dancing around a traditional New Year tree topped by the head of a hog, the sharing of rice cakes and raw pork, and the washing of the hands of the elders are authentically Lahu practices. These people, who adapt and survive, share qualities with the song that came to them as an adopted child. Like the Lahu Shi Hapoe, who were found reinventing themselves as Lahu in the early 1960s (Hanks 1965) and, like the distinctively Lahu Baptist practice I have observed over the course of a dozen years' association with Lahu Baptists, the Wedding Oath song is Lahu, always ready to hop into another vehicle and make some connections.

The Wedding Oath song, as a pragmatic device, performs a series of identities that, like gender as described by Butler (1990), are reproductions of something that does not have a prior existence. This performance requires the flexibility of the hitchhiker as it adapts itself to the journey and direction in which it is carried. The modernity it indexes shifts as well, from the indigenized modernity inherent in the link to a modern form of marriage, which was always already Chinese, to the assertion of a claim to membership in the modern state as a recognized and valued



minority, and finally to the cosmopolitan modernity experienced by Han visitors to the Minority Nationalities Village as they encounter the newly authentic Other through this song. The success of these efforts to lay claim to modernity is difficult to judge. The ubiquity of the Wedding Oath song testifies to its potential.

## Notes

1. The research on which this article is based was conducted with the support of a National Science Foundation grant. All research conducted in Thailand was authorized by the National Research Council of Thailand.
2. The CD on which I first heard various versions of the Wedding Oath song was not, in fact, the first recording of that song that I acquired. While in a village in Yunnan, PRC, I was given a VCD with a full recording of a CCTV variety program featuring musicians from the village; and on that VCD, I later discovered, were versions of the Wedding Oath song sung in Chinese by Chinese pop stars and by Lahu musicians in Lahu. I had no means of watching VCDs at that time, and although I watched part of the program in the home of the family who were featured in the show I have no memory of seeing the Wedding Oath song at that time. The significance of the Lahu language version of this song was not apparent to me until after I had begun tracing the travels of the song.
3. Mr. Cody Tornow, without whose able assistance this paper might never have come into existence.
4. The English language source from which I drew initial information is a blog kept by a post-doctoral researcher; the entry can be found at <http://chinablog.cc/2010/06/wedding-oath-a-lusheng-love-song/>. I have not located a scholarly source for this information, but I have no reason to doubt its accuracy, and the information is in accord with material from sources such as the Complete Internet Database to World Film (<http://www.citwf.com/person25428.htm>).
5. For an excellent discussion of the form and its 21st century versions see Kitiarsa, 2006.
6. Lyrics translated with deeply appreciated assistance from Prof. Lily Yang, Dept. of Chinese Language and Literature, Western Washington University.
7. The use of sibling terminology to refer to spouses or romantic partners is relatively widespread in the Greater Mekong Subregion.
8. The pairing of natural and technological objects would seem to reflect a knowledge of Lahu wedding prayers, which often include a series of such sets. The pairing of strings on crossbows recalls mainstream Chinese perceptions as well as Lahu traditional practice, as Lahu are often pictured or described with crossbows in texts from the 17th through the 19th centuries (Walker, 2003, especially pp. 73-80).
9. My fieldwork in Lahu villages in northern Thailand began in January 1997. Since that time, I have conducted fieldwork in Chiangmai, Chiangrai and Mae Hong Son provinces in Thailand, and have made brief visits to Lahu villages in Yunnan, PRC.
10. There is a traditional procedure for getting parental permission, and a wedding involves considerable expense. As a rule a go-between is sought by the boy after his parents have agreed to the match. This adult, unrelated to either the boy or the girl, conducts the negotiations necessary to gain the consent of the girl's parents and select an appropriate date for the wedding. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the tradition of bride-service is less common than it had been previously: as a rule a Lahu husband worked for his father-in-law for 2 or 3 years before setting up his own household (Jones, 1967; Walker, 1986).

In wedding negotiations I have witnessed, cash, in the form of bride price, has entered into marriage negotiations, in addition to the traditional concern over the number of pigs to be slaughtered for the marriage feast.

11. These are nationalities in the Stalinist sense, seen as having distinct “cultures” that include all features except the political and, until recently, the religious. The state feels an obligation to support each distinct nationality in its pursuit of modernity.
12. Although it is not directly relevant to my argument here, it is useful to note that the village from which the Lahu performers hail is a Protestant village. One elder in the village, a committed member of the Baptist church, told me with some pride that he was a long-time member of the Communist Party, indicating that the ideological tension between Protestantism and Communism does not hold in China as it does in Protestant Lahu communities in Thailand. The County Executive has worked to convince the state of the authenticity of the villagers of this particular village, petitioning for funds to preserve their traditional culture. The response of the central government has been that guitars are Western and not traditional, and the state has no interest in preserving Western culture. In addition to their performance of pop-inflected, often original singer/songwriter composed music with multiple guitars, the villagers of Lo da baw hk’a perform traditional music and dance, using traditional instruments and costume. When I visited the village, three men changed into traditional clothing, got out their gourd pipes, and gave a traditional performance that strongly resembled those I have attended and participated in at New Years’ celebrations. Later in the evening, we sat around the home of our host family and sang, accompanied by guitars. From a Lahu perspective, this was all equally Lahu, but the modern state, and not only the Chinese state, prefers its subjects legible and clearly demarcated. The traditional songs do not accommodate well to a modern audience, although there are some on the CCTV program. The “modern” guitar music is not, in the ears of the state, recognizably Lahu.
13. I am told that DVDs of this program were in circulation in Thailand in 2010 or 2011.
14. While the CCTV Lahu language versions of the song disconnect it from the original Mandarin lyrics, connecting it in a new way to Lahu-ness, the instrumental version performed on the CD moves away from lyrics of any kind. Lahu courtship practice traditionally included instrumental music, specifically gourd pipe music by men and Jew’s harp music by women in call and response patterns, and these are demonstrated in the quite lengthy CCTV program. The versions of the song on the CD, which seems from its labeling to be produced for a non-Lahu educated Chinese audience, erase the gendered duet that was the force of the song in its original iteration.
15. There is a daily performance of all of the ethnic groups in an arena-style theatre on the grounds, where performers and performance space are sharply marked off from audience space, which is divided into general admission and VIP. Interestingly, while there was no objection to my recording the performances in different exhibit spaces, recording the grand show in any way was strictly prohibited.
16. Both before and after the Lahu performance, some of the actors involved in the show played guitar and sang pop music. I learned that one of the actors was part of a Lahu pop group I had seen on YouTube, and was given a copy of a professionally produced CD of music by this group. The Lahu pop music that has been my research interest for the past several years did not, however, find a place in the performance of Lahu for tourists at the Nationalities Village. Some traditional drum beats added to the level of excitement at appropriate intervals, but no actual gourd pipe music was included either.
17. There is a close relationship between Lahu and Hmong villages in some parts of

the Greater Mekong Subregion (Smutkupt personal communication); however the presence of some Hmong in the Lahu show may also be related to diversity within the category Hmong, and to the fact that the “Hmong Village” features a Protestant church, located near the “Dai village” with its Theravada Buddhist temple.

18. The Hmong ball-tossing game, a traditional courtship activity, does not have a long history in other upland groups as far as I am aware. I have recently been informed that some Lahu do practice ball-tossing, but I have not witnessed it outside of staged performances and can find no mention of it in the ethnographic literature. Likewise, the traditional Akha/Hani swing that features in the lyrics and in some videos associated with the Wedding Oath song is generally associated with Akha/Hani. This flow of elements of practice and material culture of other upland groups into a performance of Lahu identity may indicate the significance of the upland people or mountain minority category (Hmong, Lahu and Akha/Hani all fit in this category) within the texts in which identity is performed. The upland category is not a Chinese category; rather, it is a long standing Mainland Southeast Asia distinction (Hinton & al, 1969; Kunstadter, 1967, 1979; McKinnon & Vienne, 1989), and, moreover, one which has drawn anthropological attention to ethnic identity as practice (Leach, 1990 [1964]).
19. There are a number of sub-ethnic groups among the Lahu. Two of these groups refer to themselves as Lahu Na (Black Lahu). One Lahu Na group sometimes refers to itself as Lahu Meu Neu (Northern Lahu), and this group refers to the other as Lahu Shehle, a name that this second group does not accept or use. I have chosen to refer to the groups as Lahu Na Shehle and Lahu Na Meu Neu, knowing that members of both groups may find this compromise annoying. I am unwilling to call one or the other Lahu Na, and as the groups are linguistically and culturally quite distinct I feel it is necessary to use some ethnonym.

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## Abstract

This is a paper about a song which requires rather complex semiotic operations to be Lahu. The Wedding Oath song indexes, in different contexts, a desirable modern quality in a pre-modern society, a connection between an ethnic minority group and the modern state which implies obligations toward that ethnic group, and the positive quality of cosmopolitanism as a characteristic of a modern nation state. The nature of authenticity as a feature of these indexical relationships creates the possibility that one might extend Mendoza-Denton's (2011) concept of "semiotic hitchhiker" to incorporate a non-material feature of a discursive performance.

## Résumé

Cet article a pour objet une chanson pour laquelle la détermination d'une identité Lahu nécessite des opérations sémiotiques complexes. Selon le contexte, "The Wedding Oath Song" (la chanson du serment de mariage) peut être interprétée de différentes manières : on y verra tantôt l'expression d'une certaine modernité susceptible de plaire à une société pré-moderne, tantôt une façon de lier un groupe ethnique à un état moderne qui reconnaît ses obligations envers ce groupe, ou encore l'expression des bienfaits du cosmopolitisme propre aux états-nations modernes. Ces interprétations reposent sur autant d'index qui en assurent l'authenticité et, surtout, permettent d'étendre le concept d'"autostoppeur sémiotique" (*semiotic hitchhiker*) aux traits non matériels d'une performance discursive.

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