

# “Stung by a bee, you fear a fly”: areal and universal aspects of Lahu proverbial wisdom\*

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**qhɔ-qhɔ í-kâ? cɛ̀, Lâhɔ tɔ̃-mɔ̃ cɛ̀.**

‘The mountains have [springs of] water; the Lahu have proverbs.’ (#1012)

Proverbs are a particularly interesting type of sentential formulaic expressions. This paper analyzes a rich corpus of proverbs in Lahu, a language of the Central Loloish branch of Tibeto-Burman, both in terms of their syntactic structure and their semantic content. Overwhelmingly bipartite in form, these proverbs reflect cultural and moral preoccupations of the Lahu people, and are sometimes expressed in similes and metaphors that are quite obscure to the outsider. They make implicit or explicit analogies between phenomena in the outside world and aspects of the behavior of human beings. They often use earthy, scatological imagery, which tends to be bowdlerized in Chinese translation. Many of them bear a resemblance to the cryptic Chinese folk similes known as *xièhòuyǔ* 歇后语.

The proverbs cited are compared to similar ones in other languages, revealing the universal aspects of folk wisdom. Most Lahu proverbs seem to be original creations, although some of them look like literal equivalents of Western or Chinese sayings. A full-scale comparative study of Sino-Tibetan proverbs would shed light on possible paths of transmission, whether via missionaries or Chinese or Indian influence.

## I. Introduction

I have always been intrigued by formulaic expressions,<sup>1</sup> since prefabricated, ready-made collocations play such an important role in human languages.

On the lexical level, many East and Southeast Asian languages abound in four-syllable expressions that are stylistically highly valued, but are semantically equivalent to simpler one- or two-syllable words. These quadripartite *elaborate expressions* are especially characteristic of monosyllabic languages; indeed, from one point of view they may be considered to be primarily a stratagem for adding “phonological bulk” to tiny morphemes. In a language like Lahu, they include two identical syllables, either the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup>, or the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup>,<sup>2</sup> the other two syllables constitute an “elaborate couplet”, morphemes which have a semantic connection with each other, either as

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. Matisoff 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Thus forming structures of the form A-B-A-C or A-B-C-B.

synonyms or antonyms, or with a looser metonymic relationship.<sup>3</sup> The adjectival verbs **ĩ** ‘be big’ and **mu** ‘be high’ are coupled in expressions like **chĩ-ĩ-chĩ-mu** ‘praise to the skies’ (“lift-big-lift-high”) and **ĩ-la-mu-la** ‘come up in the world’ (“big-become-high-become”); the verbs **cā** ‘eat’ and **dḥ** ‘drink’ are paired in **thi-cā-thi-dḥ** ‘eat, drink, and be merry’ (“feast-eat-feast-drink”) and **cā-bũ-dḥ-bũ** ‘have plenty of food and drink’ (“eat-full-drink-full”); **fâ?** ‘rodent’ and **ŋâ?** ‘bird’ are paired in expressions like **fâ?-ḥ-ŋâ?-ḥ** ‘food for rats and birds’ (“rat-rice-bird-rice”, i.e. crops left in the fields too long), **fâ?-thḥ-ŋâ?-thḥ** ‘a zoo’ (“rat-jail-bird-jail”). The two halves of an elaborate expression (AB and CD) thus have parallel structure.

On the sentential level, a particularly interesting type of formulaic expression is the *proverb*. As we shall see, most Lahu proverbs are bipartite, and like elaborate expressions they are typically parallel in structure. Although I had collected a few dozen Lahu proverbs in the course of my fieldwork,<sup>4</sup> the impetus for the present study has been the extraordinary collection of 1343 Lahu proverbs presented, along with Chinese translations, in Peng, Wang, and Li (1993).<sup>5</sup> The proverbs in this book are unnumbered, listed in the roman alphabetical order by their first Lahu word. They are written in the *pinyin*-influenced Lahu orthography now in general use in China, with the tones indicated by arbitrary consonants after the vowel.<sup>6/7</sup>

A few preliminary remarks on terminology are in order at this point. The Lahu words I am translating as *proverb* are **tḥ-mḥ** (lit. “old words”) or **chḥ-mḥ-khḥ** (lit. “language of the elders”).<sup>8</sup> On the English side, we have a large number of terms to characterize various types of proverbial wisdom. Although it is irrelevant for our purposes to attempt to make rigorous repartitions among them, I list them here along with my rough interpretations of the differences in their meanings:

·*Saying* is the most general term, but usually means more or less the same as *proverb*. It could also mean a favorite utterance of a certain individual, whether or not it expresses proverbial wisdom: *Grandma had a saying. That’s it then. There you have it.*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For a grammatical discussion, see Matisoff 1973/1982: 81-86, 297-302. For the use of these expressions in Lahu religious poetry, see Matisoff 1991. For a list of 955 elaborate couplets in Lahu, see Appendix III in Matisoff 2006: 403-448.

<sup>4</sup> Most of these are listed as Appendix IV in Matisoff 2006: 449-50.

<sup>5</sup> The first two authors must be Lahu who have taken the Chinese surnames Peng and Wang, but the third is probably Chinese, judging from the fact that his “Lahu” name is only a transliteration of a Chinese one.

<sup>6</sup> A flaw in the first version of this orthography, which did not distinguish between the low falling and the very-low tones, has been remedied in this book, where the former is indicated by **-l**, and the latter by **-f**. For a critique of the first version, see Matisoff 1984.

<sup>7</sup> I am very grateful to my former student Patrick Chew (Zhào Jǐnyáng 赵锦洋), who not only numbered the proverbs and converted them to my own writing system, but also supplied English translations of the Chinese translations, thus greatly facilitating my work. As we shall see (Section VII, below), there are problems with the accuracy of a good number of the Chinese translations from Lahu, obviously none of them Patrick’s fault. The English translations have been revised by me. To agree with gender-ambiguous words like ‘person’ or ‘one’, I conventionally use masculine pronouns, e.g. ‘A blind person’s eyes are HIS cane.’

<sup>8</sup> The word **chḥ-mḥ** has meanings ranging from ‘old person’ to ‘adult’, ‘elder’, or ‘ancestor’.

<sup>9</sup> These last two were favorite utterances of the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II in the film *Amadeus* (1984).

·*Epigrams* are witty, paradoxical or satirical. Here is a cynical French one, from the message of which I would like to dissociate myself: *Les traductions sont comme les femmes: plus elles sont belles, moins elles sont fidèles; plus elles sont fidèles, moins elles sont belles.*

·*Mottos* or *maxims* are the guiding principles of a person or institution. The motto of the U.S. Marines is *semper fidelis*, or *semper fi*. The motto of Harvard University is *Veritas*.

·(Old) *saws* are sayings that are felt to be trite and shopworn, or that people don't believe in any more: *Spare the rod and spoil the child. I wasn't born yesterday. March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb.*

·*Slogans* are mostly political: *Tippecanoe and Tyler too. I like Ike. Change you can believe in.*

·*Adages* are more or less the same as aphorisms. This is a rather rare term nowadays.

·*Aphorisms* are sober, serious statements of general truths. The word is from Greek *aphorizein* < *apo-* + *horizein* 'to delimit, define' (cf. *horizon*): *It is better to give than to receive. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. It takes a village to raise a child.*

*Proverbs* are like aphorisms in that they try to convey general truths, and are usually moralistic and didactic in intent, but they usually involve figurative language (e.g., a simile or a metaphor), so that it is sometimes not immediately obvious what their underlying meanings are: *Never pray for the death of a king. All roads lead to Rome.* In this paper, I will refer to all the Lahu **t̄m̄** or **ch̄-m̄-kh̄** as *proverbs*, while occasionally using the term *aphorism* for the more sober, less figurative type of proverb.

There are many cross-cutting ways of classifying the proverbs, both by their syntax and their meaning. Not all of the nearly 1400 proverbs collected for Lahu can be cited in this paper, but several hundred of the most interesting ones are categorized.

## II. Syntactic structure

### 2.1 Non-binary proverbs

Once in a great while we find a *monopartite* proverb, with a single clause (sometimes these turn out to be just half of a fuller proverb):

(#1064)<sup>10</sup> **š̄a-ku mé-ni ú-gê te mâ phê?**

'You can't use dried meat for a cat's pillow.'

Even rarer are Lahu proverbs with *tripartite* structure, with only one example in the collection:

(#1193) **và? bú? š̄a n̄?, ph̄i bú? yì? qh̄e, ch̄o b̄ò yè q̄.**

'When a pig is full it puts on flesh; when a dog is full it sleeps; when a person is lazy the house is empty.'

The overwhelming majority of Lahu proverbs are binary/bipartite in structure.

<sup>10</sup> The parenthesized numerals before the examples refer to the order of the proverb in Peng et al. (1993), as determined by writing the numbers in manually. See note 7.

## 2.2 Bipartite but non-parallel syntax

It is convenient to have terms for the two halves of a binary proverb. Borrowing from the terminology of conditional sentences, let us call the first part the *protasis* (or simply “A”) and the second part the *apodosis* (or simply “B”).<sup>11</sup>

The more aphoristic type of proverb, lacking figures of speech, is the most likely to have non-parallel syntax in (A) and (B):

(#734) **mû gâ dà? mâ dà?, nā-qhô-bò? ī-i thà? ni.**

‘To gauge the strength of a horse (“horse strength good not good”), look at the size of its nostrils.’

(#797) **nò ve ñâ mâ nù, pí-ma mâ là pí.**

‘If your fish doesn’t stink, flies won’t come.’

(#864) **pâ-té-nê? gî-po chē, mû-nô mì-nâ? qè mâ sī.**

‘The frog stays in the lake, not knowing the breadth of heaven and earth.’<sup>12</sup>

(#894) **pû-tì pè mâ tà qo, ñâ bí gâ tù mâ hê?**

‘If you can’t part with the worm, you can’t hook a fish.’

(#907) **phî khi-gô pâ gà, á-du ca mâ mi.**

‘When the dog has reached your legs, it’s too late to look for a stick.’

(#941) **qâ mâ qhê? pí qo, qhò?-cè pâ tâ hú tã.**

‘If you don’t know how to dance, don’t stand near the New Year’s Tree.’<sup>13</sup>

(#1021) **ši-kô?-nà-kô? qo, yè-mí chi thà? tâ lò?**

‘If you fear death and sickness, do not enter this door.’ [i.e. the door of life]

(#1063) **šā-kî-ñâ-kî, á-phè?-á-lè? khò? dē.**

‘To spoiled meat and rotten fish, it is vain to add chilis and salt.’

(#1230) **gô-cá tê pu ò-gho, mâ dà? ve tê phà? tí.**

‘In the whole head of cabbage, only one leaf is no good.’<sup>14</sup>

(#1294) **yâ-po-pā mâ dō hā, yâ-tâ?-pā dō-hā tù mâ lō.**

‘If the one who bore the child isn’t worried, there’s no need for the one holding the baby to worry.’

## 2.3 Bipartite parallel syntax

Most Lahu proverbs do in fact have parallel syntactic structures in their protases and apodoses. There is unfortunately no space to give interlinear grammatical glosses for more than a few of them:

<sup>11</sup> These terms have actually already been used by analysts of the Chinese “enigmatic folk similes” known as *xièhòuyǔ* 歇后语 (see below §4.1).

<sup>12</sup> This proverb seems to have its origin in a famous story in *Zhuangzi*. There is also a fable by Aesop about two frogs and a well, but the moral is different, something like *Look before you leap* [into a well].

<sup>13</sup> The **qhò?-cè** (lit. “year-tree”) is a bamboo altar erected in the center of the village during the lengthy New Year’s celebrations, traditionally the scene of festivities as well as prayers.

<sup>14</sup> The meaning here seems to be the opposite of the English saying *One rotten apple spoils the barrel*, or Latin *Falsum in uno, falsum in omnibus* (‘Wrong about one thing, wrong about everything’).

(#113) ð-pī            mâ    bà,            ð-šī            mâ    ġa.  
 old thing        not    discard        new thing        not    get  
 Nobj            Adv    V                Nobj            Adv    V

‘(If you) don’t discard the old, (you) don’t get the new.’

(#175) á-cè    ġâ?-khô        kâ    qo    ha-lè,  
 eagle    chicken-voice    hear    when    happy  
 Nsubj    Nobj            V        Prt        Vadj

          ġâ?            cè-khô        kâ    qo    dš-hā.  
 chicken        eagle-voice    hear    when    despair  
 Nsubj        Nobj            V        Prt        V

‘When the eagle hears the chicken’s voice he’s happy; when the chicken hears the eagle’s voice he despairs.’

(#182) ś-qā    khɔ    nò?    cì    mâ    nò?,  
 buffalo horns    grow    teeth    not    grow  
 Nsubj    Nobj    V        Nobj    Adv    V

          í-mû cì        nò?    khɔ    mâ    nò?.  
 horse teeth    grow    horns    not    grow  
 Nsubj    Nobj    V        Nobj    Adv    V

‘Buffalo have horns but no teeth; horses have teeth but no horns.’

(#207) bú?    thā            šā    kà?    mâ    mè,  
 full    time when        meat    even    not    be tasty  
 V        TempNmzr        Nsubj    Prt        Adv    Vadj

          mò?    thā            lâ-qhā        kà?    mâ    qhā.  
 hungry time when        air potato        even    not    be bitter  
 V        TempNmzr        Nsubj        Prt        Adv    Vadj

‘When you’re full even meat isn’t tasty; when you’re hungry even air potatoes aren’t bitter.’

(#735) mû    tō            hô-hô,        nā-pɔ        cò            kâ,  
 sky    thunder        booming    ears        there are        hear  
 Nsubj    V                AdvOnomat    Nsubj        V<sup>1</sup>            V<sup>2</sup>

          mû    pò?            ba-ba,        mē?-šī        cò            mò.  
 sky    lightning        flashingly    eyes        there are        see  
 Nsubj    V                AdvOnomat    Nsubj        V<sup>1</sup>            V<sup>2</sup>

‘(If) you have ears, you’ll hear booming thunder; (if) you have eyes you’ll see flashing lightning.’<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Note that both (A) and (B) have two subparts, with the first being a sort of topicalization (“As for thunder booming...”; “As for lightning flashing...”), and the second being an underlying conditional sentence, with no connective expressed in the *if*-clause and no subject expressed in the *then*-clause (“[if] there are ears, [someone] hears”, “[if] there are eyes, [someone] sees.”)

Similarly parallel structures are found in dozens of other proverbs like the following:

(#35) **a-yé-yé hā gā qo fī dò, la?-há hā gā qo phày dō?**

'If you want to get poor slowly, smoke opium; if you want to get poor fast, play cards.'

(#238) **câ mâ cō qo tê pē tí, qay mâ cō qo tê pī tí.**

'Making a mistake in eating takes but one mouthful; making a mistake in walking takes but one step.'

(#322) **chō-khō chō cò, nâ?-khō nâ? cò.**

'People have human language; birds have bird language.'

(#327) **chō mâ te, nê mâ cò.**

'If people don't worship them, the spirits don't exist.'

(#356) **chō mâ qo ká te ša, chō mâ mâ 5 câ ša.**

'When there are many people, the work is easy; when there are few people, eating is easy.'

(#381) **dò mâ qo gū la, câ mâ qo nà la.**

'If you think too much you'll go crazy; if you eat too much you'll get sick.'

(#413) **fâ?-yê fâ? hà?, nâ?-yê nâ? hà?.**

'Rats love their baby rats; birds love their baby birds.'

(#418) **ha-pa khi thā khe gō, mû-cha lè thā cà-sī hú.**

'In the moonlight spin thread; in the sunshine dry the rice-grains.'

(#436) **hō-ló phī-še chē? mâ jò, gī-po í-kâ? ní mâ yō.**

'An elephant can't feel a flea's bite; the water of a lake can't be scooped out.'

(#476) **i thā gō? qhō, ī la cê qhō.**

'Steal a needle when little, steal cattle when grown up.'

(#553) **kho ve qo mō?, kây ve qo pē.**

'The monkey is mischievous, the bee is hard-working.'

(#565) **lâ qhà-ná mē kà? chē? la, jì qhà-ná mē kà? bú? la.**

'However tame the tiger is, he'll still bite you; however tasty the liquor is, it will make you drunk.'

(#603) **lù ve mâ tō?, dà? ve mâ lò?.**

'If the bad does not come out, the good cannot go in.'

(#612) **mâ ca mâ mō, mâ lò mâ gā.**

'If you don't search you won't find it; if you don't ask, you won't get it.'

(#675) **mì-gì qhō qhâ? ve tō-khō, šī?-cè ló qhâ? ve ò-bà.**

'The most precious in the world is language; the most precious in a great tree is its shade.'

(#692) **mû-kâ? nú-gì šō, mû-lè kī-gì šō.**

'In winter snot drips; in summer sweat drips.'

(#702) **mû nâ? cì mâ qa, lâ kù lâ mâ là.**

'The sky is black [but] no dew falls; a tiger roars [but] no tiger comes.'

(#727) **mû-nō-ma šī mâ ce la pī, mì-nâ?-ma phu mâ tō? la pī.**

'The heavens don't drop down gold; the earth doesn't bring forth silver.'

(#747) **mè ve qo á-lē?, tē? ve qo 5.**

'What tastes good is salt; what supports life is rice.'

(#748) **mè ve pê-yâ-gì, qhâ ve yè-yá-ki.**<sup>16</sup>

‘What is sweet is honey; what is bitter is the gall of a bear.’

(#751) **mê?-cú-pā ve mê?-šī qo jú-fī, cho-qā-pā ve mò?-qo qo là?-no.**

‘The eyes of a blind person are his cane; the mouth of a dumb person is his fingers.’

(#785) **nâ? tâ? šā mā phû, vè?-jī yâ-mī-há mā phû.**

‘Carry a gun and meet no game; get dressed up and meet no dame.’<sup>17</sup>

(#786) **nâ?-chî dà? bò ve thà? mā gu, jì dà? ni-ma yî? ve thà? mā kē.**

‘Good medicine cannot cure laziness; good liquor can’t clear your mind of worries.’

(#798) **ni-ma ī pā cō-cī-lā-cī, ni-ma ī pā mé-ni qhê-qhō cí.**

‘The great of heart ride dragons and tigers; the faint of heart ride a cat’s ass.’

(#829) **nā-pō vī-kì na, mê?-šī nē-kì ni.**

‘The ears hear afar, the eyes see close up.’

(#870) **pō ve mō mā dà?, dà? ve mō mā pō.**

‘Cheap things are not good; good things are not cheap.’

(#993) **qhō-ná-lò-ná fâ?-ŋâ? phô?, he-ná-mù?-ná ġa mò?-šī.**

‘In the deep mountain forests game is plentiful; if the fields are deeply overgrown you will starve to death.’<sup>18</sup>

(#1001) **qhō thà? mā tâ?, ò-tò mā mò.**

‘If you don’t climb the mountain, you don’t see the plain.’

(#1017) **yī-pī cè mê? kō mā ġa, ġì-tì ŋâ mê? bà mā ġa.**

‘Thickets of grass cannot block the eagle’s eye; muddy water cannot fool the eye of the fish.’

(#1018) **yī a-ŋə thà? kō?, a-ŋə mû-ni thà? kō?.**

‘Grass fears the frost; frost fears the sun.’

(#1029) **šī-vê? qhō-lò hó, phī-šū yè-qhō hó.**

‘Flowers are fragrant in the hills; garlic smells good in the house.’

(#1115) **tâ-vâ qhà-qhe dō qo, tâ-khî qhà-qhe mò.**

‘As you think by day, so will you dream at night.’

(#1136) **ti-mi mā qo cà-šī ġa mā, ni-ma mā qo yè-qhō mā hà? dà?.**

‘If the paddy-fields are many, the rice is abundant; if the heart is fickle there is no love in the house.’<sup>19</sup>

(#1155) **tê ġâ cò cí, tê ġâ cò phâ?.**

‘One person builds a bridge, another person tears a bridge down.’

(#1263) **ġì dō ġì-tú mā mò, ɔ cá và?-phī mā mò.**

‘When you drink water you don’t see the source; when you eat rice, you don’t see the chaff.’

(#1309) **yà?-qo nē kà? mā tô mā ġa, ká i kà? mā te mā pè.**

‘No matter how near the road, if you don’t set out you won’t get there; no matter how small the work, if you don’t do it it won’t get done.’

<sup>16</sup> This proverb has been incorporated into a rather obscene children’s jingle. See Matisoff 1988: 1330-31.

<sup>17</sup> Matisoff 1988: 748 has a slightly different version with A and B reversed: **vè?-dà? qo ne â phû, nâ? tâ? qo šā â phû.**

<sup>18</sup> There is a play here on two senses of **ná** ‘be deep (of water); be overgrown (of foliage)’, a quality which is good with respect to forests, but bad with respect to swiddens.

<sup>19</sup> The key to this proverb’s effectiveness is the pun on two senses of the verb **mâ** ‘be many’, which means ‘be fickle’ when coupled with the noun **ni-ma** ‘heart’. This word is not to be confused with the homophonous adverb **mâ** ‘not’, as in **mâ hà? dà?** ‘not love each other’ (cf. the end of the proverb).

As in all the above examples, usually A and B are simply juxtaposed, with nothing overt to suggest that there is a basis for comparison between them. Once in a great while the protasis ends with the connector **qhe** or **qhe-lê** ‘like’: <sup>20</sup>

(#3) **a-bê ú-ni qa qhe-lê, tê ġâ tê qa jî e yò.**

‘Just as the head of the *a-bê* plant branches out, people will move out to different households.’

(#844) **ŋâ phû? ve qhe-lê, thô-phû?-nò-phû?**

‘Just like a writhing fish, squirming back and forth.’

(#896) **pû-tì-pû-qō phê?-dō qhe, a-šū yô-qhâ-yô phê?-dō.**

‘Just like a mass of writhing worms, everybody has to struggle for himself [in life].’

### III. Semantic content

Lahu proverbs may be classified according to the particular social or moral issue to which they refer. The following sections present several of the most common themes to be found in the proverbs, reflecting important cultural preoccupations of the Lahu people.

#### 3.1 Unity

Traditional Lahu society was egalitarian and cooperative, characteristics which were necessary for the survival of a minority group eking out a hardscrabble existence. Many proverbs make the point that *In unity there is strength* or that *It takes two to tango*:

(#533) **khi-še tê pá tí qo pō? mâ là, šî? tê the tí qo tú mâ ša.**

‘On one foot it’s hard to jump; a single piece of wood is hard to burn.’

(#604) **là?-nò tê nò ce tí, nō?-šî tê šî ġō? mâ ġa.**

‘With a single finger you can’t pick up a single bean.’

(#855) **ŋâ? mâ cè mâ kō?, cho mâ lâ mâ kō?**

‘When birds are many they don’t fear an eagle; when people are many they don’t fear a tiger.’

(#1037) **šî? mâ à-mī hê, cho mâ ò-ġâ ī.**

‘When there is lots of wood the fire is strong; when there are many people their strength is great.’

(#1047) **šî? tê cè tí ò-chi mâ phè?, cho tê ġâ tí ká te mâ ġa.**

‘A single tree cannot make a forest; a single person cannot get the work done.’

(#1144) **tê ġe câ qo mē à, tê ġe tâ? qo lò à.**

‘When you eat together [the food] is delicious; when you lift something together [the load] is light.’

(#1324) **yè-khi tê mà tí yè te mâ ġa, là?-nò tê nò tí lâ-phî-tú vō? mâ ġa.**

‘A single pillar cannot make a house; a single finger cannot lift a plow-handle.’

#### 3.2 Poverty/hunger and cold

Many proverbs refer to poverty, hunger, and cold, unfortunately all too pervasive characteristics of Lahu life: <sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The three examples given here are the only ones in the collection.



(#204) **bû? thâ mət ve thət tâ ló, hɔ thâ kâ? ve thət nô tã.**

‘When full don’t forget being hungry; when warm remember being cold.’

(#594) **lò yət nã khâ? tē yē mət ší, qhɔ tã? gō phət tē yē tēt chē.**

‘Go down to the river to fish and the whole family will starve; go up to the hills to pick vegetables and the whole family will live.’

(#691) **mû kâ? mâ phû mì, mû lè thâ mâ ší.**

‘Not having experienced the cold of winter, you can’t understand the warmth of spring.’<sup>22</sup>

(#646) **mã lê?-pã í la mã pí, mət jɔ ve chɔ šɔ cá pí.**

‘If you haven’t slipped and fallen, you can’t become great; a person who has experienced hunger knows how to arrange his livelihood.’

(#649) **mət qo cá-tù mã lət, kâ? qo vət-tù mã lət.**

‘If you’re hungry don’t be picky about food; if you’re cold, don’t be fussy about clothes.’

(#650) **mət kâ? šu ɔ-khê tâ lu, kâ? kâ? šu á-pò? tâ qhɔ.**

‘Even if you’re hungry, don’t grab another’s rice bowl; even if you’re cold, don’t steal another’s shirt.’

(#914) **phí mət gət mã qay, chɔ mət mã yət-tɔ.**

‘A hungry dog cannot be chased away; a hungry person knows no shame.’

(#966) **qhâ?-gò-lò-gò, yâ-gì mət-jê.**

‘If a village is all quiet, the people are starving.’

### 3.3 Ecology/the natural environment

A large number of proverbs reflect the Lahu people’s deep familiarity with the natural environment in which they have traditionally lived:

(#465) **hêt-pí-qhɔ à-mí tò? qo, gò-mé-qu là?-šɛ tha ve.**

‘When a forest catches fire, the leopard-cat claps its paws.’

(#502) **í-ší mɛ ve thət fâ?-nâ? gò-ló ší, ší-vət? pù ve pê-ma gò-ló mət.**

‘The rats and birds know first when fruit is ripe; bees know first when flowers bloom.’

(#721) **mû-lè-yâ khí-phò? thət ní, mû-gò-yâ cá-phò? ní.**

‘In the spring behold the piles of fertilizer; in the fall behold the piles of paddy.’

(#753) **mé-ní le fâ? tē ge mã yì?, chí le khí-yì tē ge mã tó.**

‘A cat and a rat don’t sleep together; a muntjak (barking-deer) and a sambar deer do not walk around together.’

(#769) **mã dú hã-khí ší, gò phət là?-šɛ nɔ.**

‘Digging tubers one’s pant-cuffs get yellow; picking vegetables one’s hands get green.’

(#884) **pê chí? qo tē phò? chí?, í-ší šá qo ò-cè tɛ.**

‘When burning bees, burn the whole nest; when picking fruit, leave the tree.’

<sup>21</sup> The theme of poverty is also common in Yiddish proverbs (see, e.g. Ayalti 1949). Here is a nice one, laced with typical irony: *Orem iz keyn shand; ober s’iz oykh keyn groyser koved nisht* ‘It’s no disgrace to be poor – but it’s no great honor either.’

<sup>22</sup> The seasons are not the same in Southeast Asia as in temperate zones, so *winter* and *spring* are loose translations of **mû-kâ?-yâ** ‘cold skies time’ and **mû-lè-yâ** ‘warm skies time’. Cf. also **mû-gò-yâ** (‘cool skies’), translated ‘autumn’ in Proverb #721. To complete the picture, we could translate ‘summer’ by **mû-hɔ-yâ** ‘hot skies time’. Cross-cutting this apparently calqued temperate system is **mû-yè-yâ** ‘rainy season’.

(#916) **phī phū tê hí, mé-ni phū tê šé.**

‘A dog is worth a thousand; a cat is worth a hundred thousand.’

(#952) **qú-pu mâ kù ò-yô mâ ji, tá-ve mâ kù hó-yè mâ ti.**

‘Before the cuckoo calls, don’t prepare the seeds; before the cicada calls, don’t plant the rice seedlings.’

(#956) **qha-gà-ši à-mī tâ tú, yà?-qo jā ve sí? tâ cho bà.**

‘Don’t set fire in all directions; don’t chop down the trees by the roadside.’

(#1178) **ú-mê ši?-qá mâ mi, pí-cù-né mì-châ mâ gâ?**

‘The quail doesn’t sit on branches; the swift doesn’t scratch on the ground.’

(#1208) **vì dō? ú-qō dō?, lâ dō? cō? thà? dō?**

‘When striking a snake, strike the head; when striking a tiger, strike the waist.’

(#1262) **gì mâ cò ši? mâ cò, ši? mâ cò gī mâ cò.**

‘Without water there are no trees; without trees there is no water.’

### 3.4 *The importance of education*

One of the chief purposes of proverbs is to educate. The Lahu have been acutely aware of the importance of learning, since for the most part they have not had access to formal education until very recently. On the other hand, great emphasis is placed on instructing children by precept and example,<sup>23</sup> both on moral issues and with respect to earning a living by working the land.

(#230) **cè qhà-ná bù kà? mâ dō? mâ bù, cho qhà-ná là? kà? mâ mā mâ ši.**

‘No matter how loud a drum is, if you don’t strike it it won’t make a sound; no matter how clever a person is, if you don’t teach him he won’t know anything.’

(#290) **cū-yì ši mâ pè, mē?-kə gō mâ pè.**

‘There is no end to learning; the stars cannot be counted.’

(#534) **khá-ce mâ cō mâ thê, yâ mâ mā mâ ši.**

‘A crossbow’s bolt if not set upright won’t be straight; a child if not taught will not understand.’

(#580) **là?-ši-qú mâ nú? qo chà? à, yâ mâ mā qo lù la.**

‘Nails not trimmed are dirty; a child not taught turns bad.’

(#599) **li?-dō nâ?-chī phè?, cho-qā-cho-bè thà? gu ġa.**

‘Books are medicine; they can cure stupid people.’

(#600) **li?-ši-pā hā-gō kà? li? mâ hô, pō-ló mē? kà? á-tho mâ hô cá.**

‘A learned person, no matter how poor, will not sell his books; a great officer, even if he starves, will not sell his sword for food.’

(#636) **mâ tē qo mâ cì?, mâ mā qo mâ ši.**

‘If you don’t pound it, it won’t pulverize; if you don’t teach they won’t know.’

(#957) **qhà-ná dā? ve šo mâ ši mâ cī?, qhà-ná là? ve cho mâ hē mâ ši.**

‘However good the knife, if it’s not honed it won’t be sharp; however clever the person, if he doesn’t study he won’t know.’<sup>24</sup>

(#1233) **gō-ma-phu hí?-hī? qo ī la, yâ-yê mā mā qo ši la.**

‘A radish that is often shaken gets big; a child that is often taught gains understanding.’

<sup>23</sup> This theme is closely related to “Age and youth” (next section).

<sup>24</sup> There seems to be punning here between the unrelated but homophonous verbs *ši* ‘hone’ in (A) and *ši* ‘know’ in (B).

(#1282) **gâ?-ma-pē gō-ló gâ?, ò-yê-é qhò?-nó hê.**

‘The mother hen first scratches, the chicks follow her and learn.’

### 3.5 Age and youth

The Lahu have been deeply influenced by the Confucian world-view, according to which one of the basic societal obligations is that of younger people toward their seniors. It is not surprising that Lahu *chɔ-mô-khò* should emphasize the positive aspects of being a *chɔ-mô* ! <sup>25</sup>

(#51) **á-cu-ka yù šā bē? câ, á-cu-ka tɛ ò-e thà? dē.**

‘Pick up the chopsticks to scoop up your meat; put down the chopsticks to scold your mother.’

(#63) **á-mò?-qō-šī ī kà? yô mâ hê, yâ-nè ī kà? šī mâ gà.**

‘Though a gourd be big, its seeds aren’t strong; though a young man be big, he doesn’t know much’ (lit. “know not reach”).

(#229) **cè mô mu mâ pì, lâ mô mo mâ nû.**

‘An old eagle doesn’t lose his feathers; an old tiger doesn’t lose his prowess.’

(#332) **chɔ-mô-chɔ-ké tō-mô šī à, šā-mô-šā-ké ò-pè? šī à.**

‘Old people know ancient teachings; old animals know scents.’

(#337) **chɔ-mô tō phu-ši phû, a-pa-a-e ve tō nâ?-chî phè?.**

‘The words of elders are worth silver and gold; the words of one’s parents are like medicine.’

(#561) **lâ mô cì mâ ši, chɔ mô kû mâ mô.**

‘An old tiger’s teeth are not yellow; an old person’s character is not old.’

(#763) **mê?-phû ò-mu mâ nò?, tō yɔ yà?-tɔ-khò šī.**

‘He who has no hair on his face should know how to speak humbly.’

(#817) **nû-mô yî-nû fā, chɔ-mô yâ-yê fā.**

‘An old cow loves tender grass; an old person loves little children.’

(#960) **qhâ-cí-pè cí-ǵī tâ phè?, chɔ-mô ǵū-šī dà-qhò tâ phê.**

‘Don’t spit near the fireplace; don’t boast in front of your elders.’

(#1035) **šî?-kù-né à-mī-mô, yâ-nè chɔ-mô cè.**

‘Dry sticks are tinder for the fire; young folks are servants for the elders.’ <sup>26</sup>

(#1039) **šî?-mô ò-gə mâ, chɔ-mô cû-yì mâ.**

‘Old trees have many roots; old people have much wisdom.’

(#1291) **yâ-nè te šē hè? dō ve, chɔ-mô dō šē hè? te ve.**

‘Young people act before thinking; elders think before acting.’

(#1292) **yâ-nè šī ve, chɔ-mô lâ ve ma mâ cò.**

‘What young people know does not equal what elders have forgotten.’

(#1343) **cî? ve á-thɔ vâ-mô thà? kô?, cî? ve á-cè šî?-mô thà? kô?.**

‘Sharp knives fear old bamboo; sharp pickaxes fear old trees.’

<sup>25</sup> There are a few proverbs, however, which acknowledge the downside of old age. See below §3.9.

<sup>26</sup> See also #222, above. I have recorded a slightly different variant: **šî?-ká-kwi qo à-mī-mô, yâ-nè qo chɔ-mô cì-lè? cè.** See Matisoff 2006: 450, #25.

### 3.6 *Speech and silence*

The large number of proverbs relating to speech and silence makes it seem as if being a blabbermouth is viewed with particular disdain in Lahu culture:

(#59) **á-lè? khò? mâ qo qhâ, tî yɔ mâ qo na bò a.**

‘Put in too much salt and it’s bitter; talk too much and it’s tedious to listen.’

(#64) **á-mò?-qō qhō chí ġa, chɔ-yâ mǝ?-qɔ chí mâ ġa.**

‘You can stopper a gourd; you can’t stop up a person’s mouth.’

(#180) **ɔ tē khē nī pò mâ câ, tî tē pō nī pō? mâ yɔ.**

‘One bowl of rice cannot be used for two meals; one sentence should not be spoken twice.’

(#222) **câ a tē te qo nù ni, yɔ a tē te qo dô ni.**

‘Smell before you eat; think before you talk.’

(#239) **câ mâ qo mâ mē, yɔ mâ qo ú-nǝ? cí?**

‘Eat too much and it doesn’t taste good; talk too much and the head aches.’

(#520) **kù qhe ve ġâ?-ma-qu ò-u mâ u.**

‘A hen that clucks a lot lays no eggs.’

(#521) **kù qhe ve mé-ni fâ? chē? mâ ġa, tî mâ yɔ ve chɔ ò-chô te hā.**

‘A cat that meows a lot won’t catch mice; a person who talks too much will have trouble making friends.’

(#787) **nâ?-chî dà? qhâ-ma mâ yē, tî dà?-ma qhâ-ma mâ yɔ.**

‘Good medicine should not be overused; good words should not be repeated too much.’

(#822) **nâ?-mē šà? kí bǝ? mâ pō?, tî dô jâ šē qo yɔ mâ tî?**

‘Gunpowder stuffed in too tightly won’t explode; words thought about too much won’t come out.’

(#824) **nù ni šē le câ, dô ni šē le yɔ.**<sup>27</sup>

‘Smell before you eat; think before you talk.’

(#936) **phu qha-pè-è tâ yē, tî qha-pè-è tâ yɔ.**

‘Don’t spend all your money; don’t say everything [on your mind].’

(#1119) **tî-mē tē pō mû-kâ? šē? mà lē, tî-nà tē pō šē-qhò?-šē-bâ ġò.**

‘A sweet word will warm you for three winters; a hurtful word will chill you for three years.’

(#1126) **tî-tē mâ mē, tî-mē mâ tē.**

‘True words are not sweet; sweet words are not true.’

### 3.7 *Parallel admonitions*

A well-defined subtype of parallel proverb conveys *parallel admonitions*; that is, (A) and (B) each express a separate piece of instruction on how to live one’s life, or how not to live it. In the latter type, the adverbs **mâ** ‘not’ or **tâ** ‘negative imperative’ usually appear in each part. Examples:

(#232) **câ ġa qo mī, dò ġa qo qho e.**

‘If you want to eat, plow the fields; if you want to drink, fetch water.’

<sup>27</sup> I have recorded a slightly different variant where (A) stands alone: **câ a qo nù a ni** ‘Smell before you eat.’ See Matisoff 2006: 449, #9.

(#393) **jì-dò-pā šā tâ chí? ci, fī-dò-pā á-qhə tâ šə ci.**

‘Don’t let a drunkard cook meat; don’t let an opium addict mind the house.’

(#1091) **šu mō qhō qo là?-šə the, šu mō qhō câ qo mō?-qə kī.**

‘Steal others’ things and your arm will break; steal others’ food and your mouth will rot.’

(#1103) **šu ve mí-jò?-phi tâ phè?, šu ve á-thè?-tū tâ šò?.**

‘Don’t open somebody else’s flint-bag; don’t stroke somebody else’s knife-handle.’

(#1187) **ú-qō a-šu yō qhā gā?, dà? kī šu thà? chí-mu ci.**

‘Comb your own hair; let others praise your good points.’

(#1190) **vā-tu jū? qo ò-qə-ji ve jū?, mà? bō? qo lé-thò? yū.**

‘When piercing bamboo shoots, pierce the middle; when at war, take the flag.’

(#1221) **vè?-jī? mâ qō thā tó kə, à-mī mâ ī thā jò?-sí.**

‘Sew torn clothes when the hole is not wide; beat out a fire when it’s not big.’

(#1336) **yè tó mú-yè pè thā tó, lì? hē qhò? i thā hā? hē.**

‘If plugging a leak (“sewing the house”), plug it when the rain has stopped; if studying, hurry and study when you’re young.’

The following is a more indirect parallel admonition. It does not overtly say that the activities in A and B are bad, but leaves the deduction to the hearer:

(#1243) **gā?-ma-pō tí le ò-u yū ve, í-šī šá le ò-cè thu ve.**

‘Killing a hen to get an egg, chopping down a tree to pick the fruit.’

### 3.8 Interesting semantics (often revelatory of cultural beliefs)

Many of the proverbs shed light on Lahu cultural beliefs, or the Lahu view of the world. It must be admitted, however, that quite a number of such proverbs in the collection are semantically obscure to the outsider, including me! Here are a few of the more comprehensible ones:

(#42) **a-chi qhō ve pí-gō?, šu là?-šə qhə ve gā?-u.**

‘An ant atop a wok, a hen’s egg in someone else’s hand.’<sup>28</sup>

(#66) **á-nā?-qā kù šā câ, jū-lí-ma kù ve-cho là.**

‘When the crow caws it’s eating meat; when the drongo cuckoo calls guests will come.’

(#94) **ò-mū mū tā ve vī-nā? dō? qo, mú-phe šī?-bí thà? gō-ló ni.**

‘If you want to kill the newly hatched cobra, first look up above in the tree.’

(#126) **ò-vê? qhà-ná hó kà?, ò-šī qhe mâ gà.**

‘A flower, no matter how fragrant, does not equal a fruit.’

(#346) **cho šī lâ tê khe, lâ šī šī-vê? tê dī.**

‘When a person dies, [he becomes] a tiger; when a tiger dies, [he becomes] a clump of flowers.’<sup>29</sup>

(#662) **mó-pā ò-šā câ, né kà? ò-šī lè?.**

‘When the spirit-doctor eats meat, the spirits get to lick the blood.’

(#687) **mū dà? là?-tə-qə, mì-dà? ha-chi-tò.**

‘Heaven’s beauty is the palm of one’s hand; earth’s beauty is the bottom of a pot.’

<sup>28</sup> (A) and (B) are both genitive NP’s. They both seem to refer to things that are thought or feared to be in harm’s way.

<sup>29</sup> For a quite different proverb with the same protasis, see #347 (above §2.3).

(#709) **mû-qhê ò-thà? yì, mù-ší-phô? ò-qhò nâ?**

‘Horse manure is shiny on the outside; the *ší-phô?* mushroom is black on the inside.’

(#726) **mû-nɔ-ma ò-pa, mì-nâ?-ma ò-e.**

‘The Heavens are our father; the Earth is our mother.’

(#759) **mé-ni qhê qò qò? gâ? tū, khá-ce cō šē qò? mō ni.**

‘After a cat shits it scratches and buries it; after you set a crossbow’s bolt properly you still have to take aim.’

(#830) **ni-ma mâ ī hó-qhâ? mâ šō, ú-mu mâ yì yâ-mí mâ šō.**

‘If you aren’t courageous you’re not considered a man; if your hair isn’t long you’re not considered a woman.’

(#917) **phî-šā mâ câ, phî-ğì dò.**

‘Not eating dog meat, but drinking dog-meat soup.’<sup>30</sup>

(#955) **qha nɔ ve qo ġô, qha nâ ve qo šā.**

‘Everything green is a vegetable; everything that moves is meat.’

(#1244) **ğâ? mâ kù, mù mâ thî.**

‘If the cock doesn’t crow the dawn won’t break.’<sup>31</sup>

(#1295) **yâ-pā má-pā qha šū qɔ, yâ-mí khî-ma qha šū hà?**

‘Son and son-in-law equally intimate; daughter and daughter-in-law equally loved.’

### 3.9 Mutually contradictory proverbs

There is always more than one way to look at a life situation. All languages reflect this by having proverbs which seem to contradict each other. Familiar English examples include *Fools rush in where angels fear to tread* vs. *He who hesitates is lost*; or *Too many cooks spoil the broth* vs. *Many hands make light work*. Yet each of these makes perfectly good sense from a certain point of view. Sometimes it is advisable to be cautious, at other times it is necessary to be bold. Sometimes one requires help, at other times it is annoying to have others meddling in one’s business.

One Lahu proverb praises the good conversation that can arise with a little alcoholic lubrication, much like the Latin saw *In vino veritas* :

(#137) **ò-tò-ma qhò ší-vê? ba, jì-khê qhò tō dà? tō?**

‘Flowers bloom in the plains; good talk comes out of a wine-cup.’

On the other hand, drunken speech is decried in several other proverbs:

(#715) **mû-yè-yâ yâ?-qɔ lê?, jì-bú?-pā mò?-qɔ lê?**

‘In the rainy season the paths are slippery; a drunkard’s mouth is glib.’

(#1165) **tō-dà? jì-khê mē chē, lù-kì jì-khê qhê-tō chē.**

‘Good words are at the top of the wine-cup; bad deeds are at the bottom of the wine-cup.’

(#1253) **ğâ?-u šā mâ ta, jì-khō tō mâ te.**

‘Hen’s eggs can’t serve as meat; drunken words don’t count as [real] speech.’

<sup>30</sup> Possible meaning: those who observe a strict code of conduct can violate it by a technicality, like Jews who observe the kosher laws at home, but feel free to flout them when eating at a restaurant.

<sup>31</sup> This seems to ridicule the idea that human effort can affect the laws of nature. Cf. the classic film *Orfeu Negro* (1959), where the Brazilian hero (a reincarnation of the Orpheus of mythology) convinces some children that he makes the dawn come up by playing his guitar.

We have seen several proverbs praising old age (above §3.5). The following three describe the other side of the coin:

(#269) **cê mō khō? lâ, chō mō tō lâ.**

‘An old ox forgets his corral; an old person forgets how to speak.’

(#1040) **šī?-mō ni-ma phī, chō-mō ú nō mī mā nō.**

‘The heart of an old tree is rotten; an old person’s mind is muddled.’<sup>32</sup>

(Matisoff 2006: 450, #16) **nū-mō qo mù?-nwε câ qo qhê hō? lō.**

‘If an old ox eats new grass he gets diarrhea.’

#### IV. Semantics of the A/B relationship in parallel proverbs

##### 4.1 Riddle type

Parallel proverbs that belong to what I would like to call the ‘riddle type’ have much in common with the variety of Chinese *chéngyǔ* 成语 (4- or 5-character set expressions) known as *xièhòuyǔ* 歇后语, perhaps best translated as *enigmatic folk similes*.<sup>33</sup> These sayings have two parts, to which the terms *protasis* and *apodosis* have actually already been applied. In the words of the pioneer Chinese lexicographer H.A. Giles, *xièhòuyǔ* are “set phrases of which only the protasis is uttered, the apodosis [being] understood by the speaker...”.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the protasis gives you a simile or metaphor, while you have to wait for the apodosis to learn the actual phenomenon to which the trope is applied. (Chinese with traditional literary educations do not have to wait, since they have already memorized both halves of the saying in childhood.)

A few Lahu proverbs in the collection are of this type, where I conventionally use a colon to punctuate between A and B:

(#664) **mō? là?-šē qhō ve gā?-u: qhà-thā? khō kà? mā šī.**

‘An egg in a monkey’s hand: you never know when it will break.’

(#733) **mū phē? la mū-ye: mō la ve nà.**

‘Rain that comes at twilight: sickness in old age.’

(#835) **nū có lâ-phī pū: chō-hày mī thà? dē.**

‘A skinny ox carrying a plow: an evil man cursing his wife.’

(#930) **phu-ši vì phē? le, ò-šē-phā thà? qō? thō? la.**

‘Silver and gold become a snake: they can bite their owner.’

Occasionally both the protasis and the apodosis are riddles; that is, two images are given but no direct comparison with the real world is drawn. This is closer to the Chinese variety, since the real-world meaning is left to be deduced by the hearer:

(#1184) **ú-phu qo ú-nâ?, cì qhè? qo cì-yè.**

‘From white hair to black hair; from chipped teeth to strong teeth.’<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> **ú nō mī mā nō**, here translated ‘mind is muddled’, literally means “head aware tail not aware”.

<sup>33</sup> This term seems to have been coined by Rohsenow 1991: ix-xvi.

<sup>34</sup> This definition was also adopted more or less unchanged by C.C. Sun (1981). Both authors’ definitions are cited in Rohsenow 1991: xi.

<sup>35</sup> The meaning here seems to be that the effects of aging are not reversible.

(#1249) **gã?-u há-pi thì, nò?-bâ á-tho thà.**

‘An egg smashing a rock; bean-curd stopping a knife.’

(i.e., situations where resistance against a superior force is futile)

(#1285) **gô-cá-gì qhò ve á-lê?, qa-mì-khò qhò ve ší-vê?.**

‘The salt in a vegetable soup, the flower in a poem.’

(i.e., the indispensable or precious part of something)

In the following sections (§4.2-§4.5), Lahu parallel proverbs are classified according to the “external” vs. “internal” referents of their two halves. Sometimes both the protasis and apodosis refer internally to human beings and their actions (§4.2); sometimes a protasis referring to humans is juxtaposed with an apodosis referring to a similar phenomenon in the outside world (§4.3), or (more commonly) vice versa (§4.4); finally, sometimes both elements in the proverb refer to external phenomena, with the internal analogy left to be deduced by the hearer (§4.5).

#### 4.2 *Internal (A), Internal (B); both are examples of the same general truth*

(#11) **a-šu hā-thò a-šu vè?, a-šu yì?-kì a-šu tō.**

‘Everyone wears his own pants; everyone remembers his own sleeping place.’

(#1076) **še-cí-pā mā jî?, jè cha mā pā ší mā kò?.**

‘A louse-infested person does not itch; one owing many debts does not fear death.’

#### 4.3 *Internal (A) is like External (B)*

(#350) **chò tê gâ nî cwe mâ tèt?, gã?-u tê šī nî pò? mâ hu.**

‘A person does not live two lifetimes; a hen’s egg cannot be fried twice.’

(#363) **chò thà? te lù ve fī, á-thè?-á-thò lù ve vā-mê?.**

‘What ruins people is opium; what ruins knives is bamboo nodes.’

(#366) **chò thà? ga qo ni-ma ga, ší-vê? í-kâ? ò-khí-pō pū.**

‘When helping someone, help the heart; when watering flowers, spray the roots.’

(#1120) **tō-chà?-tō-chê? ni-ma nà, šā-kí-šā-bè ò-pè? nù.**

‘Harsh and mean words hurt the heart; rotten meat stinks.’

#### 4.4 *External (A) is like Internal (B)*

In this very common type of parallel proverb, the protasis refers to something in the outside world (either an inanimate object or an animal), while the apodosis refers to an analogous emotional or social phenomenon in the human world.

(#3) **a-bê ú-ni qa qhe-lê, tê gâ tê qa jī e yò.**

‘Just as the head of the *a-bê* plant branches out, people will separate to different households.’<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> **a-bê** is a plant used to strengthen cotton thread after it is spun. When young the fruits are on twigs growing close together; as the plant matures, the twigs open up, like lovers separating (see



(#7) **a-pè gǐ-chà? dò mâ cǒ, yâ-cù-šǐ khè? ná mâ šǐ.**

‘A duck doesn’t get thin from drinking dirty water; an orphan doesn’t die from his struggles.’

(#81) **á-tho qo ò-ví thà? ni, cho qo ni-ma thà? lô ni.**

‘If it’s a knife look at the blade; if it’s a person examine his heart.’

(#84) **á-tho gǎ šǐ gǎ cǐ?, lì?-mê? gǎ hê gǎ šǐ.**

‘The more one whets a knife the sharper it gets; the more one studies the more one knows.’

(#276) **cè dǒ? jâ qo pè? la, yâ dê mâ qo qā la.**

‘A drum beaten often will crack; a child scolded often will get stupid.’

(#371) **chè?-šǐ qho ī ve gǎ-qha, cho-yâ qho ī ve ò-e.**

‘Among grains, buckwheat is the greatest; among people mothers are the greatest.’

(#548) **khí-nô? ò-pī cí ša, šǐ dà? ve cho yǒ ša.**

‘Old shoes are easy to wear; old acquaintances are easy to talk to.’

(#567) **lâ šǐ ò-gǐ cǒ, cho šǐ ò-mì? cǒ.**

‘When a tiger dies it leaves its skin; when a person dies he leaves his reputation.’

(#677) **mû-qhò á-nâ?-qā qha-šū nâ?, mî-qhò Lâhō tê hō tí.<sup>37</sup>**

‘In the sky crows are equally black; on earth the Lahu are all one people.’

(#700) **mû mâ qo cí ša, cho nû qo yǒ ša.**

‘A tame horse is easy to ride; a gentle person is easy to talk to.’

(#736) **mû gè tê jǒ?-kha, cho gè tǒ tê pǎ.**

‘A horse quickens at the flick of a whip; a person quickens at a word.’

(#758) **mé-ni-qhê tâ qǒ? gâ? tǒ?, tǒ-pī-ku tâ qǒ? qhè?.**

‘Don’t go rummaging through cat-shit; don’t keep bringing up old discussions.’

(#783) **nâ?-wē mē ve tê pǎ, ni-ma dà? ve tê cwe.**

‘Cane-sugar is sweet for one mouthful; a heart is good forever.’

(#811) **nû-kho cǒ mâ thê, cho-qā mā mâ náy.**

‘An ox’s horn cannot be straightened; the stupid cannot be taught.’

(#847) **ŋâ šǐ mē? mâ mē?, cho šǐ dǒ mâ pè.**

‘When a fish dies its eyes don’t close; when a person dies you never stop thinking of him.’

(#1023) **šǐ-vê? hó qo pē-ma mâ, ni-ma dà? qo ò-chô mâ.**

‘When flowers are fragrant, the bees are many; when the heart is good, friends are many.’

(#1024) **šǐ-vê? hó kà? ò-šǐ qhe mâ mē, tǒ-khō dà? kà? te ve qhe mâ gǎ.**

‘Though flowers be fragrant, they’re not as sweet as fruit; though words be good, they can’t compare to actions.’

(#1033) **šǐ?-cè ī la ò-qá qá, yâ-phu ī la yè gǎ pè.**

‘When a tree grows big it branches out; when children grow up they set up their own households.’

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Matisoff 1988: 75). This proverb seems to be punning on two senses of the syllable **qa**, which can either be a verb meaning ‘to branch out’ (in A), or a classifier for households (in B).

<sup>37</sup> **Lâhō** is a Chinese Lahu variant of **Lâhū** (there is much variation between Lahu mid and high vowels). In this sentence the 2<sup>nd</sup> syllable of **Lâhō** is treated as a classifier, as if it meant ‘people; community’ (translated into Chinese as 一个族 *yíge zú*). This seems to be a folk-etymology, which would make **Lâhō** mean “tiger-people”. **-hō** or **-hū** cannot be used as a classifier in the Lahu dialect I studied in Thailand.

(#1081) *šôʔ-šôʔ qo mâ la, m̄ m̄ qo šī la.*

‘By stroking and stroking [an animal] becomes tame; by teaching and teaching [a person] comes to know.’

(#1196) *vàʔ-ló câ búʔ yìʔ ši tā, chɔ-bò câ búʔ dà-qhu phê.*

‘When a great pig is full it sleeps dead away; when a lazy person is full he brags.’

In the following example, there is a double equation of two external situations with two internal ones:

(#1325) *yè-mí-thà jèʔ mâ ð-chô mâ, go pâ mùʔ ná ð-chô mâ ni.*

‘If there’s a lot of mud on the threshold, one has many friends; if the weeds near the entry ramp are deep, there are no friends to be seen.’

#### 4.5 *External (A) is like External (B); the relevance to Internal must be deduced.*

(#4) *a-ŋō-ma mē dàʔ, khi-šɛ tē cɛ fá.*

‘The peacock has a beautiful tail, [but] it hides its pair of feet.’

Deduction: Everybody has his weak points.

(#49) *á-ci-ku ð-ma-pō cē-ce-lê tô qo, ð-yê kàʔ cē-ce-lê tô ve.*

‘If the mother crab walks zigzag, her babies will walk zigzag.’<sup>38</sup>

Deduction: A leopard can’t change its spots.

(#54) *á-chèʔ qha-pè-è pâ-cîʔ nòʔ, pâ-cîʔ qha šwí tí mâ hêʔ.*

‘Goats all grow beards, (but) the beards are not the same.’

Deduction: People are different from each other.

(#761) *mé-ni šā qhō kōʔ jê tā, chi yô qhê tēʔ yô qòʔ tō.*

‘When a cat is stealing meat it stops in fear; when a muntjac farts it scares itself.’

Deduction: Some fears are justified, but others are not.

(#805) *ni ša ve mé-ni fâʔ mâ chēʔ, dàʔ pí ve phî šā mâ gāʔ.*

‘Pretty cats don’t catch rats; good-looking dogs can’t hunt.’

Deduction: Good looks aren’t everything.

(#825) *nū mē-tu qhê-qhɔ be mâ yî, he-phî mē-tu fá mâ gā.*

‘A cow can’t cover its ass with its tail; a fox can’t hide his tail.’

Deduction: You can’t hide your salient characteristics.

(#826) *nū-ló šɛ ša, fâʔ-chàʔ yù hā.*

‘A big cow is easy to lead; a rat is hard to catch.’

Deduction: Size isn’t everything.

(#842) *ŋâ-ló ŋâ-yê câ, ŋâ-yê jèʔ-nêʔ câ.*

‘Big fish eat little fish; little fish eat mud.’

Deduction: The weak are oppressed by the strong.

(#862) *pá-cèʔ mēʔ júʔ šī mâ tōʔ, tāw-quí ð-mu cîʔ mâ gā.*

‘Poke a grasshopper’s eye and it won’t bleed; you can’t pluck hair from a turtle.’

Deduction: You can’t get blood out of a turnip.

(#868) *pā-pè-qu pā-té-nêʔ phèʔ qo, mē-tu thàʔ lô šē ve.*

‘When a tadpole becomes a frog, it forgets its tail.’

Deduction: When a person becomes a big shot, he forgets his old friends.

<sup>38</sup> This proverb has been elaborated to function as the moral of a Lahu fable criticizing hypocrisy, which I collected in 1965-66. See Matisoff 1973b.

(#887) **pò qay ve mò, mú-yè là tè? tâ dǎ-lǎ.**

‘Clouds that fly by, don’t hope for rain from them.’

Deduction: Don’t expect help from casual sources.

(#900) **phà?-sǐ tí pì má hê?, phà?-nǎ kà? pì pí-à.**

‘It’s not only yellow leaves that drop; green leaves may drop as well.’

Deduction: Some people die young.

(#1042) **šǐ?-mú-ku má phǐ šē kà?, á-nâ?-qā mi lǎ tǎ ò.**

‘Even before the tree stump has rotted, the crows are sitting there waiting.’

Deduction: Some heirs can’t wait for their elders to die.

(#1254) **ğâ?-u ġà cá ġà hε, šǐ ġà chí? ġà kè.**

‘Hen’s eggs get harder the more you boil them; gold gets purer the more you burn it.’

Deduction: We are strengthened by adversity.

## V. Proverb variants

Proverbs, being orally transmitted, naturally acquire variant forms from region to region and from generation to generation. These variations may be roughly classified as either *lexical* (i.e. many of the same words are used in each variant) or *semantic* (i.e. the actual words in the proverbs are completely different but the overall meanings of the proverbs are more or less the same).

Three variant proverbs are cited in Matisoff 2006: 450 as rough equivalents to *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*:

(a) **tǎ-kǎ-de chē qo, tǎ-kǎ-ne ġa chí? ve.**

‘When you’re in a grove of *tǎ-kǎ* palms, you must tie things with *tǎ-kǎ* fibers.’

(b) **mè-mô-de chē qo, mè-mô-ne ġa chí? ve.**

‘When you’re in a grove of *mè-mô* bamboo, you must tie things with *mè-mô* fibers.’

(c) **vâ-qǎ-de chē qo, vâ-qǎ-ne ġa chí? ve.**

‘When you’re in a grove of *vâ-qǎ* bamboo, you must tie things with *vâ-qǎ* fibers.’

Two proverbs referring to the theme of unity (see §3.1 above) have the same protasis:

(#577) **là?-šǛ tē pá tí tha má bù, tē ġâ tí yà? dà? má pí.**

‘You can’t clap with one hand; one person can’t fight alone.’

(#578) **là?-šǛ tē pá tí tha má bù, á-cu tē pá tí bê? má ġà.**

‘You can’t clap with one hand; you can’t pick anything up with a single chopstick.’

Two proverbs of type 4.5 (above) have the same protasis:

(#880) **pê-šǐ-phà? mú-yè tē má nê?, šǐ?-mú-ku phǐ lò má nâ.**

‘Rain cannot soak a taro leaf; a dog’s bark cannot shake a tree stump.’

(#881) **pê-šǐ-phà? mú-yè tē má nê?, há-pǐ-šǐ mú-cha qǎ má ġà.**

‘Rain cannot soak a taro leaf; the sun cannot roast a rock.’

Similarly, three proverbs in the collection involving speech (see §3.6 above) begin with the same protasis:

(#1251) **ğâ?-u šǎ má ta, ġâ? pū tǎ má te.**

‘Hen’s eggs can’t serve as meat; a chicken squawking is not [real] speech.’

(#1252) **ğâ?-u šǎ má ta, yâ khô na má tà.**

‘Hen’s eggs can’t serve as meat; children’s talk is not worth listening to.’

(#1253) **gâ?-u šā mâ ta, jì-khō tō mâ te.**

‘Hen’s eggs can’t serve as meat; drunken words don’t count as [real] speech.’

·Proverb (#996) incorporates the entire content of (#991) into its protasis:

(#991) **qhō qhà-ná mu kà?, khi-cí-qu mu mâ cò.**

‘However high the mountain, it’s not as high as your knee.’

(#996) **qhō qhà-ná mu kà? khi-tō-pe hó ce, gî qhà-ná ná kà? hō-lò?-qō hó ce.**

‘However high the mountain it’s only under your feet; however deep the water, it’s still under the boat.’

·Both of the following proverbs have the same protasis. The second is of the External/External type (§4.5), with the Internal reference to be deduced:

(#159) **ō-phù? gà tē gà né, yā-yē gà mā gà šī.**

‘The more you pound glutinous rice cakes the stickier they get; the more you teach children the more they understand.’

(#160) **ō-phù? gà tē gà né, pē-hō gà yè? gà nú.**

‘The more you pound glutinous rice cakes the stickier they get; the more you knead beeswax the softer it gets.’

·Two proverbs about oldsters (see §3.5 above) vary slightly in each of their components:

(#814) **nū-mō he-qhā šī à, chō-mō tō-qhā šī à.**

‘Old cows know the paths in the fields; old people know the paths of speech.’

(#815) **nū-mō khō? šī à, chō-mō tō šī à.**

‘Old cows know their corral; old people know words.’

·The following proverb is known in several slightly different versions:

(#36) **â-tò? mâ hē qo pē-gā-phô? tâ thō, ò-gì mâ thu qo qá-chū-cè tâ tâ?**

‘If your torch isn’t hefty, don’t touch a giant tree-wasp’s nest; if the skin (on your belly) isn’t thick, don’t climb a thorny-coral tree.’

Instead of ò-gǐ ‘skin’, can say qē-gǐ or chē?-gǐ ‘skin on one’s belly’; instead of pē-gā-phô? ‘giant tree-wasp’s nest’ one can say pē-gā?-wí.<sup>39</sup>

(A) and (B) can both be used alone, and in my own fieldwork I heard each half on different occasions.<sup>40</sup>

·The following two equivalent proverbs are reminiscent of the Kikuyu saying *When two elephants fight the grass gets trampled*:

(#187) **ś-qā-pā ló nī khe gū? dà? ve, ò-kā ve yī-mù? câ mâ gà.**

‘When two big male buffalo butt each other, they don’t get to eat the grass between them.’

(#188) **ś-qā ló nī khe ō ve câ ve, yī-mù? nā? šī gū-pè qō.**

‘When two big buffalo fight over food, the grass gets trampled to death and their stomachs are empty.’

<sup>39</sup> See Matisoff 1988: 846.

<sup>40</sup> They are cited separately in Matisoff 2006: 449, #'s 4 and 10, where (A) is compared to Eng. *Don’t start anything you can’t finish*, and (B) is compared to Eng. *If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen*.

The following proverbs (the first from my own fieldwork) are all roughly equivalent to English ‘Still waters run deep’:

(Matisoff 2006: 450, #30) **lò-qá ĩ ve qo ò-khò mâ bù.**

‘A great river does not make a loud noise.’

(#202) **bù ve í-kâ? mâ bə, bə ve í-kâ? mâ bù.**

‘Noisy water doesn’t boil; boiling water is not noisy.’

(#203) **bù ve í-kâ? mâ ná, ná ve í-kâ? mâ bù.**

‘Noisy water is not deep; deep water is not noisy.’

A similar message occurs as the protasis of two fuller proverbs:

(#482) **í-kâ? ná ve ò-khò mâ bù, cù-yì ĩ pā ò-mì? mâ te.**

‘Deep waters make no sound; learned people don’t work for glory.’

(#1269) **gì-ló-ma ò-khò mâ bù, chə ve chə a-šu yò thà? mâ chí-mu.**

‘A great river makes no sound; a worthy person does not praise himself.’

In the following proverb, the protasis is similar to elements of the last five, although the general meaning is more like ‘His bark is worse than his bite’:

(#592) **lò qhe ve phĩ mâ chə?, ò-khò bù ve í-kâ? mâ ná.**

‘A dog who likes to bark doesn’t bite; noisy waters are not deep.’

More than one proverb conveys the message that ‘Misfortune often strikes from an unpredictable source’:

(#75) **á-phè?-cè khĩ-pə chə mâ ši, pũ-chə-cè khĩ-pə chə ši la.**

‘People don’t die at the base of a chili-bush; people die at the base of a sugar-cane.’

(#670) **mì-hā-mì-kù tō mâ pā, tò kì yĩ-de lê?-kò la.**

‘On rough precipices one doesn’t fall down; on grassy level places one trips and falls.’<sup>41</sup>

## VI. Translatability of Lahu proverbs: analogous semantics in other languages

As evidenced by the several cross-linguistic comparisons scattered above, a good number of Lahu proverbs have rough equivalents in other languages, and are easily understood cross-culturally. Interestingly enough, proverbs literally translated from another language always sound particularly profound! On a trip to a Lahu village in 1966, after I had elicited several proverbs, I was asked to give some examples of proverbs from my own culture. I offered:

**kèw-yè<sup>42</sup> chē ve chə šu à? há-pi-ši tâ bà**  
 glass house dwell REL people others ACC stones NegImp throw

After a moment’s thought, everybody broke into appreciative laughter.

Sometimes the wording of semantically equivalent proverbs in different languages is so close that borrowing or calquing is to be suspected:

English: Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

German: *Einem geschenktē Gaul sieht man nicht ins Maul.*

<sup>41</sup> Cf. the famous Japanese story *Ki-nobori no mejjin* (The Tree-climbing Expert). A famous tree-climber is watching a pupil climb a very tall tree. He says nothing while the pupil is in the highest branches, but when the pupil is nearly back on the ground the expert shouts “Be careful!” See also the Yiddish saying *Ven Got vil, shist a bezm*. (“When God wills it, a broom can shoot.”)

<sup>42</sup> The first syllable of this word, which I made up on the fly, is a loan from Tai meaning ‘glass; crystal’ (cf. Siamese *kêw*) used, e.g. in animist religious contexts. It seems to suggest a magnificent building like a king’s crystal palace.

English: Time flies like an arrow.  
 Japanese: *Tsukihi no tatsu no wa ya no gotoku.*

More interesting are cases where the overall meaning is the same, but the images are quite different:

English: He can't walk and chew gum at the same time.  
 Chinese: *Tā yīnggāi tuō kùzi fàng pì.* ("He has to take off his pants to fart.")

French: *Chat échaudé craint l'eau froide.* ("A scalded cat fears cold water.")  
 Russian: *Obžegšisj na moloke, budešj dutj i na vodu.* ("Burnt by milk, you'll even blow on water.")

Chinese: *Yī zhāo bèi shé yǎo, shí nián pà jǐngshēng.* ("One morning bitten by a snake, for ten years fear a well-rope.")

Strangely enough, this well-known Chinese saying is not given as the translation of any of the following four Lahu proverbs with similar meaning:

(#873) **pê chè? jɔ ɔo, pɨ-ma là kà? kɔ?**

('Once stung by a bee, you're afraid when a fly comes.')

(#1214) **vì-nɔ thɔ? jɔ ɔo, yɨ-nɔ mò kà? kɔ?**

('Once bitten by a green pit viper, you're afraid of green grass.')

(#1215) **vì thà? tê pɔ? yù cɔ ɔo, tê cwe ŋâ-vì yù mâ phè?**

'Having chanced to grab a snake once, you can't catch an eel for your whole life.'

(#1216) **vì tê pɔ? thɔ? jɔ ɔo, še qhò? á-khe mò kà? kɔ?**

'Bitten once by a snake, for three years you're scared to see a rope.'

The straightforward meanings of the above group are more or less the same: once a bad thing happens, one is afraid of an analogous harmless thing. If there were a close English equivalent, it would be something like *\*A burnt child fears a used match*. Instead, the nearest sayings we have are *A burnt child dreads the fire* or *Once bitten twice shy*, where the meanings are subtly different, and less interesting: one is afraid of something bad that one has experienced before.<sup>43</sup>

The following Lahu proverbs (cited in Matisoff 2006: 449-50) all have semantically equivalent English analogues:

Lahu: **á-thè?-tú á-thè? tì mâ ġa.** 'A knife can't whittle its own handle.'  
 English: *One hand washes the other./You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.*

Lahu: **câ a ɔo nù a ni.** 'Smell before you eat.'<sup>44</sup>  
 English: *Look before you leap.*

Lahu: **to ši, ví â ši.** 'The body is dead, (but) the stinger lives.'  
 English: *The evil that men do lives after them.*<sup>45</sup>

Two fuller versions appear in the collection:

(#478) **í-chú-cè ši chú mâ ši, pê-mâ?-ū ši ví mâ ši.**

'A bramble bush dies but the thorns don't die; a honeybee dies, but the stinger lives.'

<sup>43</sup> All of the above examples in this section were already cited in Matisoff 2004.

<sup>44</sup> This is the protasis of a fuller proverb; see *Speech and Silence*, §3.6 above.

<sup>45</sup> See Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* Act III, Scene 2, line 79.

(#1212) **vì šĩ mē mã šĩ, pē šĩ vĩ mã šĩ.**

‘The snake dies but the tail does not die; the bee dies but the stinger does not die.’

Lahu: **šú-qhu mà?-hí-kwi qo há-pĩ à? tâ thô?**

‘Don’t knock out [the ashes from] a clay pipe on a rock.’

English: *Don’t build a fire in a wooden stove.*

Lahu: **lâ mã šĩ qo lâ-gì qhè? mã phè?**

‘You can’t skin a tiger until he’s dead.’

English: *Don’t count your chickens before they’ve hatched.*

The following examples are all from Peng et al. (1993):

(#43) **a-chĩ mù?-qho nâ? tâ qô?, mù?-qho a-chĩ kâ? mã phu.**

‘The wok shouldn’t call the pot black; neither one of them is white.’

Cf. Eng. *The pot calling the kettle black.* This one looks like a calque.

(#46) **à-mĩ mã tò?, mũ-qhō mã du.**

‘If a fire isn’t burning, smoke does not rise.’

Cf. Eng. *Where there’s smoke there’s fire.*

(#69) **á-nâ?-gũ-phũ-šĩ ò-thà? dà? le ò-qhō kĩ, nũ-fĩ-qō-šĩ ò-thà? mã dà? ò-qhō mè.**

‘The fruit of the *gynopetalum integrifolium* vine is beautiful on the outside, but the inside is rotten; the outside of the jackfruit is ugly, but its inside is delicious.’

Cf. Eng. *You can’t tell a book by its cover.*

(#104) **ò-hĩ khe pò tô chē ve nâ?, là?-šē qhō ve tê khe qhe mã gà.**

‘A thousand birds flying around are not as good as one in your hand.’

Cf. Eng. *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.*

(#248) **câ tù ò-po tē? ve mã hē?, tē? tù ò-po câ ve.**

‘You don’t live to eat, you eat to live.’

This is frequently said in English too.

(#450) **hò qhe ve yâ-é, cú-gĩ ġa dō mã.**

‘The baby that cries a lot gets to drink a lot of milk.’

Cf. Eng. *The squeaky wheel gets the grease.*

(#508) **jò?-khō ò-šā thà? cē nà, mã dà? ve tō ò-mù?-ku thà? gà.**

‘A whip only hurts the flesh; evil words hurt to the bones.’

Cf. Yiddish *A patsh fargeyt, a vort bashteyt* (‘A blow passes, a word remains’).

(#572) **lâ-qhâ-pĩ šĩ šē hē, he-phĩ qā ġa qhē? ve.**

‘Only when the tiger is dead does the fox get to dance.’

Cf. Eng. *When the cat’s away the mice will play.*

- (#668) **mò?-qə ɲá ve phu, mò?-qə mèt ve ši.**  
 ‘Opening one’s mouth is silver; shutting one’s mouth is golden.’  
 Cf. Eng. *Speech is silver but silence is golden.* This one is so close that it looks like a calque, but from where? See §3.6 above.
- (#852) **ɲâ? mi mə qo šu bô? la, chə chē mə qo šu ni-bò la.**  
 ‘If a bird sits too long somebody will shoot it; if a person [sc. a guest] stays too long people [sc. the host] will be sick of him.’  
 Cf. Eng. *Fish and guests stink after three days.*
- (#859) **pâtây yî?-kè pâ ve yî mâ câ, vâ? ð-phi qhə qhê mâ qò kə.**  
 ‘A rabbit does not eat the grass around his sleeping place; a pig does not shit in his nest.’  
 Cf. Yiddish *Dort vu men est, kakt men nit* (‘Where you eat you don’t shit’).
- (#1083) **ší è ve qha-pè-è ši mâ hê?, gî lâ ve qha-pè-è hà? lâ ve mâ hê?**  
 ‘Not everything that is yellow is gold; not everybody who smiles at you loves you.’  
 Cf. Eng. *All that glitters is not gold.*
- (#1144) **tê gɛ câ qo mē à, tê gɛ tâ? qo lò à.**  
 ‘When you eat together [the food] is delicious; when you lift something together [the load] is light.’  
 Cf. Eng. *Many hands make light work.*
- (#1221) **vò?-jî? mâ qō thā tó kə, à-mī mâ ī thā jò?-ší.**  
 ‘Sew torn clothes when the hole is not wide; beat out a fire when it’s not big.’  
 Cf. Eng. *A stitch in time saves nine.*
- (#1245) **gâ?-ma-u tê-ni-tâ-vâ gò? kà?, ð-u tê ši.**  
 ‘The mother hen clucks the whole day long – one egg.’  
 Cf. Eng. *Much ado about nothing* or Latin *Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus* (‘The mountains are in labor; a silly little mouse will be born’).

## VII. Mistranslations into Chinese

The Chinese translations of the proverbs in Peng et al. were presumably done by the authors themselves, especially the Chinese author Li Jia. They are generally good, but there are also many inaccuracies, some of them quite serious:

- (#28) **a-šu yô va yô te thə, a-šu yə yà?-qə yô nâ? chí.**  
 ‘Everybody sets his own trap; everybody blocks his own way.’  
 [Translated as \*‘One buttons one’s own buttons; one blocks his own way.’]



(#75) **á-phè?-cè khí-pē chō mā šī, pū-chō-cè khí-pē chō šī la**

‘People don’t die at the base of a chili-bush; people die at the base of a sugar-cane.’<sup>46</sup>

[Translated as \*‘Use a chili’s root and you won’t kill anyone; sugar cane root will seal one’s fate.’]

(#114) **ò-pi-ma ve cú, ò-má-pā dō mā há?**

‘The mother-in-law’s milk the son-in-law dares not drink.’

[Translated as \*‘How can the younger generation endure the elders’ suffering?’]

(#326) **chō mā šī ká mā pò, mú mā šī lá mā pā?**

‘As long as a person lives, his work is not done; as long as a horse lives, his saddle is not loosened.’

[Translated as \*‘One cannot plan life away; the horse in the saddle isn’t messy.’]

(#434) **hā-pi-cā? mā chí? pí qo qā tá qhē?, the-du mā chō? pí qo khe-šī tá bà.**

‘If you can’t tie the belt of your pants, don’t dance; if you can’t tuck in your skirt, don’t throw beanbags.’<sup>47</sup>

[Translated as \*‘If you can’t tie your pants-belt, don’t try to antiphonally sing; if you don’t know how to tie your skirt, don’t sneak any bags.’]

(#510) **kō? pí ve pí-pa-ku, mō pí ve á-nā?-qā.**

‘Cockroaches are timid; crows are far-sighted.’

[Translated as \*‘The timid have to count cockroaches, the good-sighted have to count crows.’]

(#614) **mā cá qo mā nē?, mā cō qo mā qō.**

‘If you don’t boil it, it won’t get soft; if you don’t put it over coals it won’t get cooked right.’

[Translated as \*‘Meat that’s not cooked won’t spoil; rice that’s not steamed won’t be done.’]

(#719) **mū-yè mā là gī-qhā šō, à-mī mā tò? í-kā? qho phō?**

‘Before it rains dig drainage ditches; before there’s a fire store up water.’

[Translated as \*‘In the rainy season protect against floods; in the dry season protect against fires.’]

(#1003) **qhō cá qo qhō mō, qhō qō? qo qhō kâ.**

‘If you eat in secret someone will watch you in secret; if you say something in secret, someone will listen in secret.’

[Translated as \*‘As long as no one has stolen anything, why would there be anyone disappearing?’]

<sup>46</sup> This proverb appears in a slightly different version in Matisoff 2006: 449, #3. The meaning is “misfortune tends to strike when one is not expecting it”.

<sup>47</sup> The apodosis refers to the Lahu courtship custom whereby a row of young men and a row of marriageable girls throw beanbags back and forth. The meaning seems to be “don’t engage in courtship behavior unless you’re ready to control yourself”.

Particularly striking in the Chinese translations is an extreme tendency to bowdlerize any proverb with scatological imagery. It seems that the authors were embarrassed to translate some of the saltier specimens literally, perhaps for fear of feeding into the Chinese stereotype of the moral and cultural inferiority of the minority groups. This leaves the Chinese reader with colorless paraphrases:

(#323) **chɔ-lù ɣe ð-chô te qo, šu ve qhê né la cê.**

'If you make friends with a bad person, his shit will stick to you.'

[Translated: \*'If you make friends with a messy person, the evils of the messy will rub off on you.']

(#969) **qhâ?-qhɔ qhê tâ qò, yè-qhɔ jî tâ pí.**

'Don't shit in the village, don't piss in the house.'

[Translated: \*'The village should pay attention to cleanliness; the household should pay attention to hygiene.']

(#1005) **qhê mâ qò, qhê tâ qho.**

'If you haven't shat, don't invite guests.'

[Translated: \*'If you've not yet set the refreshments, don't invite guests.']

(#1006) **qhê mâ phî mâ câ, tō mâ šu mâ na.**

'If there's too much shit a dog won't eat it; if you talk too much, people won't listen.'

[Translated: \*'Cows don't eat dried grass; people won't listen to vexing talk.']

(#1007) **qhê-qò-ye ve tā, qhê mâ qò.**

'Fighting over a latrine, nobody gets to shit.'

[Translated: \*'Occupy houses where no one is living.']

(#1009) **qhê tèt? ɣô-pè qâ, yɔ pè ni-ma ša.**

'Having farted one's stomach feels better; finally saying something makes you feel good.'

[Translated: \*'Having finished matters one feels better; saying things kept in, one is happy.']

(#1070) **šá-qhâ? ɔ câ le, šá-qhâ? qhê qò? qò kə.**

'After eating rice from a steamer, he takes a shit in it.'<sup>48</sup>

[Translated: \*'Face to face say good things, act treacherously behind one's back.']

(#1102) **šu ve qhê-qhɔ, a-šu yô mêt?-phû tâ te.**

'Don't make somebody else's buttocks into your own face.'

[Translated: \*'Don't take another's shortcomings to be your strong points.' This is actually what it means.]

(#1133) **tô chî? qo tô jâ, vî chî? qo vî nù.**

'A whispered word is loud; a suppressed fart is a stinky fart.'

[Translated: \*'When whispering in the ear the sound is loud; fermented beancurd's odor is thick.']

<sup>48</sup> Cf. the Vietnamese proverb **ăn cơm đái bát** 'Eat rice and piss in the bowl.'

(#1158) *tê gã ò-vì tê gã mâ pû, tê gã qhê-quí tê gã mâ sĩ?*

'Don't carry another person's load; don't wipe anybody else's ass.'

[Translated: \*'Don't go carrying with another's pole; don't go uncovering others' shortcomings.']

### VIII. Questions for further research

To what extent are these proverbs original with the Lahu themselves, and which ones have been borrowed from other languages, especially Chinese? This is not an easy question to answer, and I am not qualified to answer it in any case. The awkwardness of some of the Chinese translations is no guarantee that there is no close Chinese equivalent. The translators may not have been familiar with the Chinese originals, if they did indeed exist. As noted above (Section VI), the well-known Chinese proverb *Yī zhāo bèi shé yǎo, shí nián pà jǐngshēng* ("One morning bitten by a snake, for ten years fear a well-rope") was not given as the translation of any of the several Lahu proverbs with that meaning.

On the other hand, those proverbs which mention jungle flora and fauna – e.g. air potatoes (#237), the *gymnopetalum integrifolium* vine (#69), the **a-bê** vine (#3), the **śí-phô?** mushroom (#709), the drongo cuckoo (#66), the leopard cat (#465) – seem clearly to be of native Lahu origin, since the corresponding plants and animals do not loom large in Chinese lore. Similar conclusions may be drawn with respect to those proverbs that refer to elements of traditional Lahu culture and beliefs: e.g., being reborn as a tiger (#346), spirit-doctors (#662), the spirits (#800), the New Year's tree (#941), divinations (#1123).

The proverbs which look like literal equivalents of Western sayings are particularly tantalizing. Were they introduced by missionaries? If not, what could the paths of transmission have been? Was India an important transmission route as well as China? Or are the resemblances purely fortuitous, reflecting universal human experience?

It would be fascinating to undertake a full-scale comparative study of proverbial wisdom in a variety of Tibeto-Burman languages, including both those under heavy Chinese influence (Sinospheric) and those that are more under the cultural influence of India (Indospheric).

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