



Payahadu the Disabled

Dai People – China, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand

Yanhadu was a small, deformed, and without doubt not very good looking young man, who lived in the Menghun Basin a long, long time ago. However, he was exceptionally clever and had worked hard since childhood to develop new skills in order to overcome the obstacles of his physical conditions. Thus, among other things, he became an accomplished martial artist.

The Menghun Basin, where Yanhadu lived, enjoyed fertile land and abundant water which made life easier for its inhabitants, who rarely lost their crops and were rarely in need of food. This had always provoked the envy of people from neighbouring regions who, from time to time, attempted to take over the Menghun Basin and drive out the traditional Dais.

However, one spring, a huge invading army swept into the Menghun Basin. It met with no resistance. The Dai chieftain in the region did not know what to do, for they had neither enough young men nor enough weapons to deal with such a formidable invading force. So, he witnessed the spectre of plunder, oppression and even death looming over them if anyone dared to oppose this invader.

Finally, not knowing what to do, he called an assembly of Menghun people in the largest town in the valley, with the intention of seeing if anyone could come up with any idea in the face of the advancing conquerors. For hours they discussed the situation but the people, in

their anguish and despair, were unable to agree on any measure. After all, what could be done against an invading army when there was no force to oppose it?

It was then that Yanhadu, climbing onto a bullock cart so that everyone could see him, shouted at the top of his voice:

‘Maybe I can stop them! Let me try!’

After the crowd’s initial hush, there followed a rumbling of despondency, when they realised that it was ‘poor’ Yanhadu who had spoken.

‘But how are you going to stand up to a whole army?’, shouted a neighbour in the crowd. ‘You’re small and crippled. Have you lost your senses? You’re not fit to even go to speak with them.’

His neighbour’s remarks had certainly been cruel, but Yanhadu had spent his whole life dealing with similar comments, so he did not give in to despondency. ‘After all, what choice do they have,’ he said to himself.

‘Let me go,’ Yanhadu shouted with a resolution that surprised many. ‘If I’m so disabled, you’ll not miss my presence. Who needs a “good-for-nothing”?’

Many people, especially the women, felt a pang of guilt as they realised that Yanhadu had never been thought of as more than an insignificant passer-by.

‘I don’t fear death,’ the youth continued, trying to convince his neighbours, ‘and perhaps I’ll come up with a good idea which will stop the enemy’s advance.’

Some in the crowd, including the chief, had to admit that Yanhadu had shown signs of being a smart guy, as they had witnessed him overcome the setbacks that his disabilities had caused him over the years.

‘I, for one, agree,’ the chief finally said. ‘It’s clear that we have no other option and, in any case, we need to buy time.’

Many nodded in agreement at the chief’s words. Then, in the silence that followed, a voice was heard to say:

‘Perhaps we need a hero ... or a martyr.’

Nobody else said anything.

So Yanhadu left the assembly and went home, dressed himself in the most imposing clothes he could find in his chests, and set out in the direction of the occupying army. Soon after, he stood before the formidable enemy army, with his small stature, his misshapen body and ungainly appearance, even without a knife on his belt to defend himself. He said that he wanted to see the chief, that he wanted to challenge him to a one-on-one combat!

On hearing his words, the invaders, fierce and battle-hardened soldiers, burst into roars of laughter.

‘Are the Dais of Menghun so stupid that they send us a lame man to waste our time?’ said one of them, who looked like an officer.

But Yanhadu did not shrink back before the arrogant officer.

‘We of Menghun are strong people, we’ve the best horses, and we thought that, in order to avoid bloodshed, it would be enough for me to come and fight with your chief.’

And he added with a cocky tone:

‘Moreover, it’s you who are wasting our time, for until you leave, we’ll not be able to sow the fields in peace for the next harvest.’

The lack of fear in his countenance, and such conviction in an unlikely hero threw the officer, and all the soldiers who overheard Yanhadu, into confusion. And so they hurried off to tell their chief, who was in the rear, what had happened and what the short, malformed young man had said.

Soon after, the chief of the invading army arrived, dressed in his finest imposing battledress. Without a word, in order to frighten Yanhadu before he began, he drew a huge sword and, with a single swipe, split a boulder in half. This boulder, standing by the roadside, was about the same height of a man. Then, sheathing the sword, he stared at Yanhadu impassively without opening his mouth as if to say: ‘Get over it’.

Yanhadu then hobbled over to the boulder that the barbarian had split open and, clutching the two halves, he smashed them together and turned them into pebbles and dust with his fingers.

When Yanhadu turned to look at the invading army, he was confronted with an unspeakable sight: the barbarian chief, and the hordes of soldiers behind him, had their eyes wide open like a fish! Some had their mouths open as if their jaws had been unhinged.

‘Well,’ said Yanhadu with as much conviction as he could muster into his voice, ‘I’m the dumbest and clumsiest of Menghun. Do you really think you can withstand our onslaught?’

After allowing a short silence for everyone to digest his words, he added:

‘Return to your own lands and let us share the good things of life in peace and as good brethren. And if, at any time, you have trouble with your crops, or some misfortune befalls you, you’ll have our word that we’ll treat you kindly, we’ll help you, and be generous to you.’

The leader of the invading army, bewildered by what he had seen, then ordered his troops to return home.

And the people of Menghun, when they heard what had happened, made Yanhadu their chief and named him Payahadu, to honour his wisdom and bravery. And, after his death, they made Payahadu a god. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Xueping Luo (2022).

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Comments

The Dai or Tai Lue People mainly refer to various Thai-speaking ethnic groups living in the Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Xishuangbanna in southern China, although there are numerous Dai populations in Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand.

The natural environment of this prefecture, recognised by UNESCO as a Man and Biosphere Reserve, constitutes only 0.2% of China's total land area. However, it is home to 20% of the country's species in tropical and subtropical ecosystems that, in recent years, are having to be protected in the face of the region's economic and population growth (Sacred Natural Sites, 2017).

A significant part of the reason why the lands of the Dai People are such ecological gems lies in the fact that their ancestral beliefs lead them to believe that those elevations, whose forests are considered to be the residences of the gods, to be Sacred Hills (*Long*, 竜). From these beliefs – which are a syncretic form of Theravada Buddhism combined with ancestral Dai animistic polytheism (Zeng, 2019) – the plants and animals of these forests are believed to be the companions of the gods.

On the other hand, the Dai believe that their ancestors also live in these places. According to their worldview, they believe that the forests are not only supernatural spheres, but that they are the cradles of mankind. They believe that the forests are the source of the water that feeds their fields and provides them with food. So forests are, for them, the source of all their well-being. It is not for nothing that a Dai folk song says:

If you cut down all the trees, you have only bark to eat; if you destroy the forest, you destroy your road to future. (Sacred Natural Sites, 2017)

However, those who do not hold these animist beliefs have been endangering the Dai Sacred Hills since August 1951, when the Chinese government planned the creation of 133,000 ha of rubber plantations in Xishuangbanna (Zeng, 2019). Over the past 50 years, 90% of the 750 Dai Sacred Hills have been destroyed or severely damaged because their forests have been cleared for rubber plantations. This situation has been exacerbated, since 2000, by the shift from community-based forest management to individual management (Sacred Natural Sites, 2017). This is why efforts have been made to restore the community management of the forests and their revival according to traditional culture of the Sacred Hills. In fact, community management was included in the 2019 amendment to the Regulation on the Nature Reserve of the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province.

Ultimately, it would be desirable for Chinese law to recognise the status of the Sacred Hills as soon as possible and thus return the management of their protection to the rural communities themselves in order to protect these unique havens of diversity in the world.

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Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 9c: Recognise the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 16: Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

Principle 16a: Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

