



Keeping the Spirit Alive: Rice whiskey production in Northern Lao P.D.R.

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Photo Essay

Lao lao is a rice whiskey produced by many rural Lao P.D.R. farmers with their surplus of glutinous rice. **Lao lao** is not the repetition of two words. The transliteration of the expression in the Latin alphabet hides the different meaning of the two words: the first (ເຫຼົ້າ) is pronounced with a low-falling tone, and means “alcohol”, while the second (ລາວ) is pronounced with a high-rising tone, and means “**Lao**” or the land of the Laotians. Thus, **lao lao** (ເຫຼົ້າລາວ) means Laotian alcohol, an indication of its importance in the social fabric of rural Lao P.D.R.: it is a must at all parties, weddings, celebrations, and religious ceremonies (Hatsadong *et al.* 2006), and a social lubricant offered to guests. This photo essay describes the production of **lao lao** in a village in the northern Lao province of Luang Namtha, in February 2006.

All morning, Mrs. Mo has been babysitting a waist-high tin cylinder perched on a charcoal fire. Smiling her playful, toothy grin, she invites us, with a gesture of the bamboo fan that she uses to keep the flames strong, to come and sit around the little outdoor hearth. Having spent a few weeks in the villages around this cool, shady, upland forest, we have always welcomed these fires, lit at breakfast when it is still dark, and burning through a good part of the morning until the chill is replaced by the noon sun. We are in Nale, a subdistrict center in the province of Luang Namtha, a mountainous province renowned for its high concentration of ethnic minority villages, the stunning rawness of its nature reserves, and its numerous border crossings to China, just dozens of kilometers away. But the teeming masses of the border marketplaces seem far away in Nale where the pace of life undulates like the gentle stretches of the Nam Tha River from which the province takes its name. It is the first major tributary of the Mekong as it flows into Laos - the same river is etched in the daily patterns of work, travel, and social life of this village,

and as we came to know, the making of **lao lao**, a potent binding glue of life in the villages.

Mrs. Mo's fire has a particular aroma – a sweet, thick, complex smell of fermented rice. The smell is a treat – **Lao lao** distilling is the last stage of the whole process and often neighbors come over, chatting around the fire, chewing betel nuts and having a little taste of the new whiskey at different strengths as the colorless liquid drips into recycled bottles. **Lao lao** is most often produced in the dry months from January to May, after the planting and the harvesting are done and both men and women are freed up to enjoy a little rest from back-breaking labor.

There are a plenty of reasons to celebrate during the dry season months, and in every celebration, be it a birth, death, homecoming, the visit from a special guest, or the construction of a house, bottles and bottles of **lao lao** are involved. Unlike Beer Lao, the national choice of spirit, **lao lao** is cheaper, has more character as it is home-produced, and tunes up the party much quicker. Sometimes, even for the want of a special occasion, a shot or two is downed with dinner, warming the gut on cool evenings,

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during which temperatures can drop to 12 degrees Celsius. It is agreed among foreign visitors that the alcohol content is around 40%, but in reality, it fluctuates in percentage – but nobody's really checking. **Lao lao** fluctuates also in taste and quality. Markets all over Lao P.D.R. sell home-produced **lao lao**, and sellers are in hard-sell with connoisseurs as hard to please as your serious wine aficionado.

Evidently, even though most households produce just enough for consumption, the sale of **lao lao** for some can make a difference to their yearly incomes. Recently widowed, Mrs. Mo makes **lao lao** two or three times a month, with income from the sales going into her son's secondary school education and living expenses in Luang Namtha, the district capital.

Preparing Lao lao for distillation

The process needed to transform innocent grains of sticky rice to social lubricator takes weeks and a lot of washing, waiting and pulverizing. Mrs. Mo first places about 16 kilos of sticky rice from her store (a kilo of rice for every liter of alcohol), harvested from her own fields, into a large bowl, and covers it with water from the river – the same Nam Tha. After a night of soaking, the wet rice is transferred into a tightly-woven rattan basket and steamed over a basin of water placed over a wood fire. After the rice is cooked, it is brought down to the river and washed thoroughly. A 'rice cookie', or **peng lao**, the fermenting agent, is mashed up and mixed well with the rice and left for 8 to 10 days to ferment. After 8 to 10 days, water is added to the containers and the mixture is again left aside, for another 5 days. The mixture is then ready to be distilled.

Peng lao is an indispensable ingredient in **lao lao** making. We have seen these circular, oatmeal cookie-sized discs strung up in bunches on sale in the local market, brought from as far away as Vientiane and China, for households who want to produce their own whiskey but do not have the time or do not want to go through the effort of making the **peng lao**. The **peng lao** is nothing but a biscuit made out of a dough of rice, but the processing of this unassuming object is almost as arduous as the preparation of the main body of rice-water mixture that will eventually become liquor.

The first part of the process sounds uncannily like preparing the main mixture: first, uncooked sticky rice is covered with water and left overnight, then brought down to the river and thoroughly cleaned with river water. But instead of cooking the rice, the mixture is placed into a basket and left to dry in the sun. When the rice is completely dry, it is smashed with a stick until it becomes powdery. The rice powder is separated from the coarse pieces of rice by swirling the mixture around in a rattan basket, causing the fine powder to fall through the basket weave into a container below. The process, from the beating of the rice

through the swirling, is repeated over and over until all the clumps are gone and fine powder is all that is left. The fine powder is mixed with water into a sticky dough. A big tray with a thin layer of rice husks is prepared, and the sticky dough is shaped into round cookies about 6 cm across, and put onto the husks on the tray. Rice whiskey is then sprinkled onto the cookies, and the disks are left on the tray overnight, covered with the leaves of **bai tong ping** or **bai sat thow kon**. The husks are then removed from the bottoms of the cookies, and the cookies are stored in a shelf above the kitchen fire. The purpose of this is to add a smoky flavor to the fermenting cookies, which darken over time, and to stop the dogs, chickens and cats of the house from eating them, while reducing infestation by bugs. About 10 to 12 **peng lao** are added to the 16-kilo batch of rice Mrs. Mo is preparing for distillation.

Even as Mrs. Mo is distilling a batch of fermented rice, the next round of rice is being fermented – she points us to the main yard, over which numerous large buckets, pots and assorted containers are scattered. To keep the lids tightly closed, plastic sheets are inserted under the covers of the containers, and to discourage the intervention of the resident chickens, dogs, cats, pigs and the occasional pheasant, these lids are covered with stones. We lift one of these sheets up for a peek; Mrs. Mo has added whole dried chillies to the rice, her not-so-secret ingredient. "To add flavor", she says.

Distilling the lao lao

The rice mixture is put into the tall metallic distilling cylinder, called **mo tom lao**. Distilling needs constant, full attention; that's why Mrs. Mo spends a good part of the day keeping watch. The **mo tom lao** is placed over the fire, which must be kept at a constant strength through the distilling process. Into the bottom part, the **mo**, goes the fermented rice. Above the **mo** is placed the **mo han** which is filled with cold water to condense the alcohol vapor. The **mo han** has a concave shape to ensure that the condensed alcohol flows down to the center before dripping onto a sloping pan (**pa fa**) that leads to the dispensing tube (**nomh tua**). The condensed alcohol flows through the **nomh tua** into a container. As the cold water in the **mo han** heats up, it is discarded and replaced with new, cold water from the well. This is done with a **buei**, a water scoop made of the combination of bamboo and half the shell of a **mak nam thow**, a forest gourd commonly used in the region as hardy ladles.

To prevent steam from escaping between the two parts of the distilling cylinder, the **mo** and the **mo han**, a tube made of woven cotton and filled with rice husks (or sometimes cloth or cotton), called **won ho mo**, is placed around the area. This tube is also home-made. A mother of four grown-up children and one of the entrepreneurial spirits in the village, it is evident from Mrs. Mo's dedication to self-

producing everything from the **peng lao** to the won ho mo, that she takes **lao lao** making very seriously.

It takes no less than five distillations to finish converting that initial 16-kilo batch of rice into spirit, starting in the morning – a whole day's work. From every distillation comes one extra-potent first bottle, which is estimated to have no less than 70% alcohol. We wonder about the kinds of parties this bottle will be responsible for. And what happens to the rice after the distilling is done?, we wonder. "I give it to the pigs." she says with a grin.

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Figure 1. Rice fermenting in the sun.



Figure 2. Chicken and ducks looking for fermented rice.



Figure 3. Fermented rice with chilis made ready for distillation.



Figure 4. The peng lao is left over the fire to give the lao lao a burned taste.



Figure 5. Peng lao for sale in the market together with other items essential for life in rural Lao P.D.R..



Figure 6. The process of distilling the rice starts - the fermented rice is poured into the *mo*.



Figure 7. The *pa fa*.



Figure 8. The wan ho mo is placed on the mo.



Figure 9. The mo han is put on the wan ho mo.



Figure 10. Cold water is poured in the mo han.



Figure 11. The distillation starts.



Figure 12. Distilling the whiskey.



Figure 13. The hot water is regularly removed from the mo han...



Figure 14. ...and replaced with cold water.



Figure 15. Verifying the strength of the whiskey.



Figure 16. Plastic containers are filled with **lao lao** for storage.



Figure 17. The rice is removed with a **buei** once the distillation is completed.



Figure 18. The *mo* is emptied and stored. The distilled rice is given to the pigs.



Figure 19. Putting the *lao lao* to good use.