

## **Building a Kavalan House- A Pioneer Action to Preserve Lau-lau Cultural Landscape**

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### **Abstract**

This article is based on experience of “Building a Traditional Kavalan Tribal House in Lau-Lau” to clarify role-playing and working strategies of a local spatial professional NPO, especially as it faced preservation issues related to local culture and environmental fabric.

Lau-lau<sup>2</sup> is a hill with only 4 hectares of surface area on the lower Dongshan River. It is the last living village of the Kavalan tribe in today’s Yi-lan county and is also a very important archeological site in Yi-lan. There are wetlands and fields rich in bio-diversity surrounding the village. Due to many reasons, the Kavalan people collectively migrated to Hualien in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, disconnecting them from their culture and traditional territories. Those who stayed in Yi-lan were so deeply sinicized by the Han culture that they lost their mother language and traditional culture. Though the Kavalans who moved to Hualien were influenced by Amis there, they preserved the Kavalan language and culture.

Since 1987, the Kavalans have worked to assert their cultural and ethnic identity. These efforts in times have shown the importance of preserving Kavalan culture and keeping its subjectivity. Within this social context the I-lan Office of National Taiwan University Building and Planning Research Foundation continually strives for the preservation of Lau-lau in its long-term localization work. In this case, owing to some funding from public sectors and the collaboration of spatial professionals, the descendants of migrated Kavalan were able to return to Yi-lan and build a traditional style Kavalan House at Lau-lau. It is not only a symbol of landscape rebuilding, but also a pioneer action to preserve Yi-lan Kavalan culture.

This article introduces various challenges professionals faced in the 14-day house

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<sup>1</sup> The case of this article is initiated and supported by the Yi-lan Office of the National Taiwan University Building and Planning Research Foundation. The Director is Yu-Chen Chen; Project Manager is Ting-Hua Wu; and associates, Ya-Shian Lin, Yun-Ju Ling, Trung-Hui Wu, and Zhi-Fa Lee. Professor John Liu, and many master students of the Graduate Institute of Building and Planning of NTU also assisted in the process.

<sup>2</sup> Lau-lau is a Kavalan village in Yi-lan.

building period-from October 17, 2006 to November 10, 2006. And more importantly, the uniqueness and the significant of Kavalan people and culture help professionals to re-understand Kavalan Culture and Lau-lau in Yi-lan and develop the attitudes and principles for building Kavalan house.

This pioneer action of culture conserving and landscape rebuilding of Lau-lau is a micro-scale community participation action which contains issues of communication, collective learning, cooperation, and recognition. The Office's attitude of facing issues and developing working strategies is fully explored in this case study. It also shows how the Office looks upon cultural and environmental issues of Yi-lan in the long term. The Office takes communities as the start point, values their subjectivity and reciprocally cooperates with them. In the meantime, the Office also promotes specific value toward cultural and environmental affairs and develops integral management strategies. These two approaches work together to enhance each other. Such intentional strategy is also shared and discussed in this article.

## **1. Kavalan on the Lanyang Plain**

Lanyang Plain is a funnel shaped plain occupying an area of about 300 km<sup>2</sup> with elevations gradually decreasing from west to east. Receiving abundant rain, rivers flow through the land and enter Pacific Ocean throughout the year. According to recent studies, the Kavalan tribe was active in the coastal area by the sand dune<sup>3</sup> of Lanyang Plain dating from 17<sup>th</sup> century. They were good at sailing. Their activities could be found in northern and eastern Taiwan.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Wu Sha led the Han Chinese immigrants to Lanyang Plain and started large-scale land reclaiming which greatly affected Kavalan tribal life. Under the pressure of Han settlers, Kavalan people lost their land. While they struggled for a living, their social structure was corrupted. Beginning from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Kavalan people started large-scale migration to the Hualien Plain and East Coast Area of Taiwan. With the migration, disconnection between the culture and their traditional territory was created. Kavalans who stayed in Yi-lan were so deeply sinicized by the Han culture that they lost their mother language and traditional culture. Those who migrated were influenced by the Hualien Amis culture, yet, preserved their Kavalan language and culture.

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<sup>3</sup> There are piles of wind-formed sand dunes parallel to the coastline near the coastal area in Lanyang Plain which could be up to 20 meters high. They are the first lines of defense for coastal life and birthplaces of villages. They are also a specific landscape of Yi-lan.

Since 1987, the Kavalan Tribe strove for a series of actions to assert their cultural and ethnic identification<sup>4</sup> and returned to Yi-lan to find their remaining relatives. After twelve-year hard work and waiting, they were finally recognized as the 11<sup>th</sup> indigenous tribe by Taiwan government.

## 2. Preservation Process of Kavalan Culture

The Da-li-tze area where Lau-lau is located contains several cultural and ecological issues which are significant to the Lanyang Plain. These issues include: preservation and operation of Li-tze old street; preservation and management of the Lanyang Rivermouth Waterbird Refuge and the Wushiherjia wetland; preservation and future development of the old watercourse after the straightening of the Dongshan River; and the preservation of the cultural landscape of Lau-lau and continuity of Kavalan culture.

Lau-lau is a hill with only 4 hectares at lower Dongshan River in the Da-li-tze Area. It is the last living village of a Kavalan tribe in today's Yi-lan county and is also a very important archeological site<sup>5</sup> in Yi-lan. There are wetlands and fields rich in bio-diversity surrounding the village. From the viewpoint of cultural preservation, the importance of Lau-lau is significant. However, the private ownership of property makes it difficult to designate and preserve the village. The beauty and location of Lau-lau exerts uncontrollable development pressure. The biggest frustration is the failure to properly designate this site. The attempt of designation in the 80s caused significant agitation from Lau-lau residents. Restrained cultural preservation strategies were used after that, which caused a huge loss of Kavalan culture. In the 90s, the Yi-lan County government proposed that culture is the county's foundation. Kavalan people around Taiwan were invited to return to Yi-lan and large-scale Kavalan cultural activities were held in later years. County government also guided the preparation of the Kavalan Cultural Foundation and started Kavalan archeological research which remains to this day. Even so, Kavalan descendants in Yi-lan are still not able to get rid of the acculturation of Han-culture, facing a conflict between

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<sup>4</sup> Kavalan is one of the aboriginal tribes in Taiwan. Owing to incursion and competition of Han people, they gradually lost their ethnic identity. In order to prove the existence of Kavalan tribe, Yi-lan county government, academia, and Kavalan people work together to hold various cultural activities and petitions for over a decade. Over the 12-year hard work, the Kavalan is finally recognized officially by central government as the 11th indigenous tribe of Taiwan. The success of the movement is due to efforts of Yi-lan county government, elites and leaders in both Hulan and Yi-lan.

<sup>5</sup> According to archeological investigation, the sand dune area of Lau-lau is an archeological site. It belongs to Shihshang Culture Chiushe Type and is suggested to be preserved.

cultural indifference and self-identification.

In 2003, the I-lan Office<sup>6</sup> started assisting the Li-tze-jian Cultural Promotion Association in holding Kavalan cultural activities. Later, it voluntarily started environmental investigation and residential interviews. Many workshops were held to clarify preservation issues at different levels and shape the future vision of Lau-lau. Such actions rekindled the importance and motivation for preservation by local government and people in cultural fields. Archeology Studio<sup>7</sup> under the Cultural Affairs Bureau of Yi-lan County prepared a short-term exhibition of Kavalan People based on its solid understanding of Kavalan culture through long-time archeological experience for the 2005 Yi-lan Green Exposition<sup>8</sup>. During the same year, the I-lan Office of the National Taiwan University Building and Planning Research Foundation managed to build a Kavalan Traditional House on a parcel of publicly owned land in Lau-Lau<sup>9</sup> to connect the exhibition experience. The building project on Lau-lau is a pioneering strategy to initiate the long-term preservation of the landscape of Lau-lau and the Kavalan culture.

### 3. Building of Kavalan house

The Kavalan used materials such as wood, bamboo, sword grass, thatch, and yellow rotang palm to build their houses. These materials were gathered from the area closed to where they lived. Wood and bamboo are able to get from market, but it still needs Kavalan people to identify the appropriate material from suppliers to satisfy the specific requirement for the house. There is no other way but to gradually gather sword grass and yellow rotang palm (*Calamus quiquesetinervius* Burret) from the wild. Also the technique to collect yellow rotang palm and pare the bark is only

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<sup>6</sup> The Building and Planning Research Foundation of National Taiwan University established the localized studio in Yi-lan in 1995 and cooperated with the county government to begin the county-wide historical site investigation and research. At the same time, the I-lan Office also entered Da-li-tze area to push series of community participation actions of landscape preservation and maintenance through projects or volunteering consultant. There are issues of "Collaborating Vision Development of Three Villages of Da-li-tze," Preservation of Dongshan Old Rivercourse and Specific Spaces of Historic Interest," etc..

<sup>7</sup>She-king Chu is the executive of the archeological Studio under Yi-lan county. Chun-yin Lee and ShuLan Qu are the major co-workers. The studio executive, She-king Chu has made a significant contribution to the movement to reclaim the name of the Kavalan and is respected by Kavalan people in both Yi-lan and Hualien. It was the archeological Studio that introduced the I-lan Office into the Kavalan Tribe of Hualian Hsin-she village.

<sup>8</sup> Yi-lan county has four major festivals held in different seasons. The Green Exposition is the most important festival in Spring. It takes place in Wulaokeng, Yi-lan and lasts for about 58 days.

<sup>9</sup> Most lands in Lau-lau are privately owned. Only one parcel of land with 500 m<sup>2</sup> acreage is publicly owned.

known by very few old Kavalans. Most Yi-lan Kavalans today have lost such a traditional ability; therefore, we have to asked Kavalans of Hsin-she Tribe in Hualien, who are migrated from Grand Li-tze Sand Dune in the ancient time, for help.

April 2006 is the first time team of I-lan Office visited Hsin-she Tribe in Hualien. The team discussed with the tribe's leader, Pan, Jin Rong<sup>10</sup>, about building a Kavalan House in the village of Lau-lau Tribe. The team expected to invite Kavalans of Hualien Hsin-she Tribe to participate the house building and help to re-establish Kavalan culture in Yi-lan. Later on, we re-visited the village several times, and launched a study journey of Kavalan culture through the process of discussion and information acquisition. It also accidentally led to a participation experience of construction of traditional Kavalan house.

### **(1) Material preparation: a process of entering fields, discovering issues, and defining positions.**

At Hsin-she, we find that Kavalans are fond of community life, and they are at the turning point of passing village leadership to the young generation. Owing to living competitions in the modern society and split of the community, which is due to political operation and elections in the past, there is a trend that the young generation are facing difficulty to recognize their community, refusing to participate in public affairs, and inheriting the traditional culture. Long-term cultural acculturation by Amis leads to splitting and competitions among cliques. Debate of the "Others" arises as many anthropologists, historicists, and cultural researchers visit the community and enjoy villagers' hospitality and friendship. We witnessed the conflict of alteration of community leaders occurred, and experienced the deep apprehension of Mr. Pan and the priestess A-pi<sup>11</sup>. But we also observed how those tribal women changed the results of political elections. Those phenomenon represent how Kavalan culture evolved and developed. Blending with the Kavalan women's specific easement and sense of humor, their softness influences every corner and village life of Hsin-she, and our cognition of Kavalan and Lau-lau, Yi-lan.

After visiting Hsin-she for several times, the team of I-lan Office is able to establish working principles of house-building:

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<sup>10</sup>Mr. Pan, Jin Rong. A missionary knowledgeable in music. He was elected as tribe leader in 2005.

<sup>11</sup>Mrs. Jhu, A-pi is the most experienced priestess and spiritual leader of Kavalan tribe. She is the one who possesses the richest knowledge about traditional religion and folks.

1. The building of Kavalan house is a social process, not merely an operation of building technique and architectural space. Therefore, we decide to convince founding providers to extend the project deadline to accommodate the decision-making habits and the cultural process of the Kavalans.

2. Material preparation is the key of this building project. It reflects Kavalan's social network, spiritual belief, living skills, cognition of environment and community territory. Therefore, we decide to follow the Kavalan's way of discussion and decision-making, and to cause a cross-generation material preparation process happen.

3. The process of house building is a close dialogue between traditional tribal wisdom and the environment. Everyone, no matter old or young, male or female, plays a specific role and contributes his or her own experience to it. The building process contains a system of delicate division of labor. Even in Hsin-she, those experience and technique are rapidly losing. Therefore, we decide to create a building process that is beneficial to inheritance of experience. Traditional building procedure and ritual are held, and we urge young generation to participate in the entire process.

4. The arrangement of Kavalan house is coordinated closely with the environment and traditional living habit. We make the final decision based upon field investigation and discussion. Such a decision-making process deeply reflects the cultural attribute of Kavalan. Therefore, we abandon all the paper work, and plan several fieldtrips for Hualien Kavalan to go to Lau-lau and picture the house on the site. Because of such strategy, Kavalan culture once again connects with its originated territory at Lau-lau. And successfully, we move one step forward to rebuild the Kavalan living landscape through such house arrangement decision-making process.

5. Traditional Kavalan living territory is constituted by clusters of individual houses and hunting fields outside the village. Therefore, the project includes building both house and its surrounding environment. Barn, pigsty, watchtower, and vegetable farm are basic elements of a Kavalan house. They are arranged based upon sites and homeowner's need. That is how traditional living landscape of Kavalan is formed. So, arrangement of those elements was gradually decided during the process.

6. We also recorded the complete building process by scripts, photos, and videos. Later on, traditional building technique, rituals of building, community life, and tribal culture hidden in the working process, interaction of different culture in the participation process could be reconstructed through images, words, and visuals. We would also provide those documents to Hsin-she tribe for future experience sharing

and culture succeeding.

Five-month ceaseless communication and planning started at April, 2006. Small meetings, meal discussions, tribe meetings, and welcome receptions for returning youth Kavalan were held in order to confirm material preparation. Afterward, we cut down the longest and most beautiful sword grass (*Miscanthus floridulus* (Labill.) Warb. ex Schum. & Lauterb) at sunny coast along Hualien. Headed by village headman, we went to Mountain Qezunamai to gather yellow rotang plam (*Calamus quiquesetinervius* Burret). All processes follow the tradition, including the ritual during the gathering process, welcome and celebrating ceremony after we come back home.

## **(2) Planning of the house: Every Kavalan is a designer.**

With the help of Kavalan tribal leaders and seniors, we finished a field survey in Lau-lau and determined the location and orientation of the house. Our topics of discussion included: winds and rains from the sea, the exposure of orographic rain in the hills, the currents and fishing site in old rivercourse of Dongshan River, the closeness and openness of the bushes, the protection of bamboos and trees, the extension of the front side of houses, the paths to the house and the vision from the front side, the prohibition of planting a single tree in the front of the door, and the symbolism of the first house rebuilding to Kavalan tribe, etc.

Carrying on the Kavalan's traditional habit of doing environmental observations and making judgments and decisions on the top of trees, tribal leaders and seniors extended their arms and legs to make measurement. They finally decided that the size of a house is one that could accommodate a big family and with two arbors attached on both sides. Its roof with beautifully constructed slopes would be supported by tall and upright pillars. The inner house would be big enough to accommodate two bamboo beds, a cooking range, and a fireplace. In addition, activities like weaving, carpenter, games of children could be held in the arbors. The discussion of the house's functions by the leaders and seniors evoked our unlimited expectation. We, spatial professionals, as well as the Kavalan people of Lau-lau, learned a lot from this survey.

This discussion of the design of the tribal housing completely revealed Kavalan's closeness to and understanding of nature. When Kavalan people were studying the site's geology, hydrology, winds orientation, soils and flora and fauna, they spoke to each other closely in their native language, and made measurement and decision...

while we professionals provided information of artificial factors of nearby areas, raised questions, and helped to make conclusions.

One particular difficulty in housing planning was to coordinate the building project with an archaeological evacuation project undertaken by the local government's archaeological team. Issues include: location of the archaeological evacuation, the site of the housing, and its pillar positions. It involved much discussion and dialogues between the two parties, the I-lan Office and the archaeological team, and it continued during the building process.

### **(3) Fourteen Days' Housing Rebuilding and Succession.**

On October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005, Chief Pan Jin-Rong brought 13 tribe members from Hualien to Yi-lan and began the construction of the traditional Kavalan houses. The leader instructed the daily work in Kavalan language. Under Pan's direction, the Kavalan seniors and youths worked together with divisional roles. His position as a tribal leader becomes a bridge to the succession of generations. However, the collaboration between the seniors and youths broke down once and during the days the leader left the team and returned to Hsin-she for some administrative work. The two generations had a conflict on the issue of whether to employ modern building techniques or the traditional one. When the quarrel turned into cold war, they gathered by different campfires on the construction site. Each generation sat around their own fireplace. Sometimes the young people sang the songs at work; while the seniors would congregate paring the palm bark silently, or murmured their disappointments heartbreakingly.

During the days when the leader was absent, we would convene meetings in the morning, noon and night like what the leader did. We tried to break the cold war and invoke communication between the two generations by asking questions. We tried to mediate among them to build a consensus on each working stage until the leader came back to Yi-lan.

With the work pace of Kavalan, the building process took two weeks, twice more than we originally estimated. While working, the leader would lead for a chorus, the youths would improvise some songs for entertainment, and Grandmother A-Bu would make jokes. During the break, some would do fishing and gather medicine herbs on the hill. Some would make sculptures or weave handily. The house is finished building on Nov. 9th.



The night the building was completed, all people participating the construction gathered together in the new house singing and having a great ceremony. Some stayed in the house waking over night. The next morning, Grandmother A-Pi, a female priest of the highest rank in the tribe, led all people to complete a ritual of ancestor worship. With the celebratory dancing, the completion of a Kavalan house was marked and blessed by the Kavalan ancestors.



The inauguration of Kavalan House: Kavalan priestess and chief of Hsin-she tribe led everybody to bless and dance in front of the house.

Photographer: Hsu, Rui-Yuan

#### **(4) Respecting the Kavalan subjectivity**

Postponement was common in the Building of Traditional Kavalan Tribal Housing. Team of I-lan Office negotiated hard to get consensus with the local government in order to reorganize the building schedule coordinated with Kavalans' habitudes. Several important factors determined the schedule but also reflected the team's values of the work:

1. Several young Kavalans insisted on using modern techniques in traditional building, which led to communication gap between generations and affected passing of traditional skills. It took significant time to modulate the conflict which is the main

factor of postponement.

2. Not only for consensus but also inheritance of ideas and crafts, the chief and elders used Kavalans to illustrate every central part of construction meticulously and the young Kavalans were assembled to learn. The team of I-lan Office divided into groups to record the whole course by video and camera.

3. Beyond building technique, what is important of the house building is the cultural and social process. It's the reason why traditional ritual, such as "spaw" before beginning a building, the ceremony of setting up the beam and "spaw" of offering sacrifice to ancestors and process of negotiation, is as important as building crafts. To carry out those cultural forms in proper time and in proper sequence required ample amount of time.

4. House-building is part of Kavalan daily life. The extemporaneous singing, fishing, gathering medicinal herbs, cultivating, carving, wooden-manufacturing on Lau-lau, a small hill close to water, during the building process reconstructed the daily life-scape of Kavalan.

5. With the agreement of the chief and seniors, the team introduced students major in architecture to participate in construction. After the major structure completed, we spread the information out to promote schools, institutions, cultural groups and nearby communities to visit the site. There were some Yi-lan Kavalans voluntarily joint in our daily work because of such elaborated participation strategies; however it also complicated the construction process.

### **(5) Re-examine the roles of the professions**

Building a Kavalan house is a spatial action with rich cultural and social meanings. I-lan Office deeply realized their professional limitation and the power of tribal culture from the first time experience of working with Hsin-she Kavalan. This cognition encouraged us to think about how to learn from and cooperate with different cultures. The team shifted its original role of participation planning and designing process. We used to lead the value system in community anticipating process; however, here we try to induce collective decision-making process, keep conversation lasting, and implement the consensus.

Besides, based upon Kavalan tradition, everyone in the tribe, including males, females,

elders, and youths, had their own specific positions in house building and contributed themselves completely to the tribe. That spirit inspired us a lot. We seemed to know too little about Kavalan culture compared to the Hsin-she Kavalan; however, we were good at connecting local and professional network, and interpreting and representing the process of house building.

Therefore, we made an extensive but also flexible system of division of labor to take care of Hsin-she Kavalan's daily life and manage the needed space, equipments, and materials during construction. We also introduced volunteers and goods from every domain in Yi-lan, banished disturbance from bureaucracy and promoted recognition of neighbor communities. Simultaneously, we documented the whole process of the building.

The team of I-lan Office, as members of house-builders, also practically anticipated in every part of house building. We learnt how to peel bark of yellow rotang palm and won appreciation from the seniors. Moreover, we made a piece of roof, which is first time made by female, and a bathroom. Perhaps, it was because of our attitude of working together that we were able to play the role to cause conversation and enhance consensus in the cross generation conflict about traditional and modern ways of construction and get through the crisis.

Our efforts of administration, communication, and promotion meant a lot from Hsin-she Kavalan's point of view. In the late period of building, some Lau-lau residents agreed to provide their own properties to be used as path and garden of the Kavalan house. Reportings by mass media quickly spread out the cooperation spirit of Kavalan and wisdom of traditional housing. It also stirred up discussion on Kavalan culture, breed and identity.

In addition to residents in Yi-lan, there were over ten institutions and almost 200 persons from other areas visited the site in the last five days of house building. Mr. Pan, the chief of Hsin-she, introduced visitors to the house and construction process in mandarin and Kavalan language. Everyone was welcomed to participate at anytime. Some were attracted so much that they came over and over again. For the team of I-lan Office, the biggest challenge was to make note of what happened in the daytime after a day's hard work. In the next day, we would confirm and complete the lost part. Those record and document of collective actions of the Kavalan house-building project would be the best feedback from us to Kavalan and Hsin-she tribe.

## 4. Conclusion

After the construction of Kavalan house in 2006, we were told what happened in Lau-Lau was widely discussed in Hsin-she. It seemed that the building in Yi-lan, Kavalan's hometown, reestablish the emotional connection between Kavalans in Hualian with their motherland, Yi-lan. We also concern about what would happen within Hsin-she, or between Hsin-she and Lau-Lau in the future.

In May 2007, team of I-lan Office returns to Hsin-she again. What the team tries to focus is the interior arrangement of the house, surrounding garden, and spatial arrangement of Kavalan's daily life. Therefore, our discussion touches upon some issues related to the formation and representation of culture, such as wisdom of life, craft and technology, etc. To extend the earlier cross generation inheritance experience of Hsin-she Kavalance, we think the task should be done by Kavalanz from Hsin-she and in Lau-lau together with a collaborative manner. Such task is challenging and educational, and is expected by people who concern about the existence of Kavalan culture, such as headman, Mr. Pan, priestess Grandma A-pi, and the elders Kavalan, for a long time.

In the meantime, we are also working on another project of Lau-Lau's comprehensive planning, which covers not only four hectares of Lau-lau but also the lowland around the hill - the ancient time hunting field. Through the project, the Lau-Lau shall be transformed into a reunion and education base for Kavalan who are currently living and working elsewhere. On the one hand, its main task is to rearrange the spatial structure of the Kavalan homeland; on the other, its ultimate aim is to unite all the Kavalan people—including the deeply assimilated, the moving-out, and the widely scattered groups of Kavalan, bringing them into a process of speaking for collective cultural identity, a process of acting for cultural reconstruction, and, eventually, a process of seeking for the final solution. Taken from the perspective, our planned action of building a Kavalan house is essentially an experimental attempt in this direction.

With the coming of Chinaberry's flowering season, the Kavalan house with "ten cats"<sup>12</sup> guarding around is still standing atop the Lau-Lau hill. Along the winding path, through the tree shadows, we walk deep into the bamboo forest so as to have a glimpse of her beauty. Together with the white petals fluttering down, there we see

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<sup>12</sup> In order to prevent leaking, the Kavalan use rows of straw to cover the joints of thatched roof. In Kavalan language, these rows of straw are named as "sagu (cat)," because they not only look like sleeping cats in appearance but also have an interesting association with cat's habit of "never leaving home."

her basking in the filtered sunlight. Indeed, that is how she demonstrates to us how the Kavalan education base mentioned above shall be built up in the foreseeable future. Particularly as the symbol of the Kavalan's cooperative nature, the inspiring story about how beautiful she is and, more importantly, how she becomes so beautiful would definitely help arouse the public concern for reconstructing the Kavalan culture.