

PRAISE FOR  
The Lisu

“A real triumph. The Lisu should be proud to have Michele Zack, a keen observer with an unfailing eye for the revelatory image or event, to chronicle their amazing history and culture. The Lisu reputation for independence, equality, adaptability, ‘repute,’ and cultural cohesion despite steep odds comes across in her vibrant prose.”

—JAMES C. SCOTT, YALE UNIVERSITY

“You don’t need to be fascinated already by the Lisu to be fascinated by Michele Zack’s spectacular new book about the Lisu. You just need to start on page one, travel with Zack into the Lisu world, and succumb to her remarkable evocation of this little-known but endlessly interesting people. If you cannot live years of your life with the Lisu, this is the book to read, at once a rigorous ethnography, a lively travelogue, and a beautifully written memoir. The best books are the products of love: this book is the product of a passion enduring decades.”

—MISCHA BERLINSKI, AUTHOR OF *Fieldwork  
and Peacekeeping: A Novel*

“This is a loving, inviting, and accessible portrait of the Lisu people. . . . The book is richly illustrated, well organized, and packed full of fascinating observations and insights. It is bound to reach and inspire many readers, both students of culturally diverse Asia and the general reader fascinated with the richness of our shared world.”

—MAGNUS FISKESJÖ, CORNELL UNIVERSITY

“Journalist-historian Michele Zack provides rich images of Lisu across the entire region. Her keen observations and lucid writing unify what until now have been isolated bits and pieces of a much larger picture and for the first time show us the range and variability of these remarkable highland people.”

—E. PAUL DURRENBERGER, AUTHOR OF *Uncertain Times, Gambling Debt*, AND *The Anthropological Study of Class and Consciousness*

“Michele Zack’s book is packed full of insights and information. . . . Together with intimate portraits of individuals and communities, it asks important questions about opportunities and constraints facing indigenous people in a fast-changing world and concludes with interesting thoughts on possible futures for the Lisu.”

—DR. ASHLEY SOUTH, AUTHOR OF *The Politics of Peace in Myanmar*

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# Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
<i>Note on Use of “Burma” and “Myanmar”</i>	xix

Introduction	3
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## Book I: MEET THE LISU

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### Part I. Lisu World

1. Who Are the Lisu?	13
2. Mythic Origins	23
3. History and Origin Theories	29
4. Modern Times	35
5. Migration	39
6. Identity and Cultural Flux	53

7. View from the Village	61
<i>A Temporary Encampment</i>	61
<i>Social Organization and Symbolic Significance</i>	72
<i>Dispute Solving</i>	78
 Part 2. Being a Lisu	
8. Childhood: Learning by Doing	87
<i>Girls: To Work Earlier and Play Closer to Home</i>	91
<i>Boys: Running Free and Learning to Survive</i>	94
9. Men, Women, Courtship, and Marriage	99
<i>New Year Celebrations: Setting the Stage for Romance</i>	99
<i>Gender Roles, Courtship, and Sexuality</i>	103
<i>Negotiating Bride Wealth</i>	112
10. The Household: The Place for Family and Work	117
<i>Dualism in Division of Labor</i>	119
<i>Food, Feasts, and Liquor</i>	119
<i>Clothes</i>	121
<i>The Home/Jungle/Field Connection</i>	124
11. Cosmic Views	127
<i>Spiritual and Physical Worlds Converge</i>	127
<i>Lisu Curing and Dealing with Spirits on a Daily Basis</i>	138
<i>Impact of Christianity . . . Just One More Influence?</i>	148
12. Economy	157
<i>Economic Activities in the Forest</i>	163
<i>Sweat: The Lisu Capital</i>	166
<i>Lisu Women: Equal Partners</i>	167
<i>The Lure of Land</i>	169

## Book II: THE LISU BY COUNTRY: CONTEMPORARY SKETCHES

---

1. Comparing Lisu National Scenes: Full of Opportunities to Be Wrong	179
2. Thailand	187

	<i>Contents</i>	vii
3. Burma/Myanmar		213
4. China		265
Conclusions, and Notes on Where Lisu Might Go from Here		303
<i>Notes</i>		315
<i>Bibliography</i>		331
<i>Index</i>		341

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# Introduction

It's good to live close to the water,  
but it is better to live far from the ruler.

—*Lisu proverb*

In known time, Lisu have roamed east and south from villages clinging to sheer slopes in or around the Nujiang, or Upper Salween River Valley, of Yunnan, China, and across mountain ranges in Southeast Asia. Theories diverge on where they came from, but they've since wandered from China into Burma, fingertips of India and Laos, and to Thailand's northern provinces. If vertiginous passes meandered on indefinitely instead of smoothing down into plains and deltas, Lisu would probably have kept on moving in search of the perfect, east-facing mountain with good soil and water and as far away from police, soldiers, or other authorities as possible. Today, while most Lisu still live in remote areas, many have settled at lower elevations and closer to rulers than their ancestors would have deemed wise.

Widely dispersed, numbering around a million and a half people, the lives and customs of Lisu vary from country to country and even from mountaintop to mountaintop. Yet they are bound by a language and political worldview that ignores distance and defies pigeonholing. Whether they wear long flowing skirts and black velvet tunics, as in the upper Nujiang gorge

in Yunnan, or blue, orange, and red mini-skirts with rattan knee bracelets and embroidered gaiters, as in Tengchong 200 miles south, they are Lisu. Their cultural glue transcends the modern clothes many wear today as well as religion: whether they commune with nature spirits, their own ancestors, Buddha, Christ, a combination, or none of the above, they identify as Lisu. The variables of dialects in China, Myanmar, and Thailand are sufficiently minor as to allow Lisu everywhere to communicate with each other.

In 2014 I returned to Southeast Asia to update the research and fieldwork conducted in the 1990s that this work is based upon. Changes brought by modernization were so dramatic that my first impression was that differences between then and now were too great to span in one book. But I soon realized that while easy-to-spot markers such as traditional dress are far less prevalent than a generation ago, other continuities, more subtle and more basic, link yesterday and today. Outer values have become internalized, but cultural self-awareness, accompanied by unity movements in China and Myanmar, indicate that Lisu culture is not about to disappear. It is changing, though, and loss of language and integration into majority populations pose existential threats. Even in *laissez-faire* Thailand, where Lisu enjoy individual freedoms but have weaker citizenship and land-owning rights, I witnessed intent to preserve and bring a version of their ethos into the future. In 2015, Chiang Mai University in Thailand hosted one of the first meetings of Lisu from all over Southeast Asia, including Laos and India.

I witnessed a muscular will to cultural survival among Lisu in every national setting. In China, perhaps the most religiously and philosophically diverse of the countries, Lisu atheists, animists, and Christians equally value some construct of “traditional culture” as their world modernizes at convulsive speed.

One Lisu, out of more than a hundred I interviewed in 2014, responded negatively when asked about the importance of cultural identity—and he was most likely joking. A sixty-year-old atheist with a crew cut from Liuku, capital of Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture in China, he lives in one of the few places where Lisu make up the majority. In fact, one third of the world’s Lisu population lives here. His denial was delivered with deadpan irony: “who has time to think about culture? Today all we care about is making money and doing business.” He is married a second time to a second Lisu wife, speaks Lisu most of the time (even to conduct business), and went out

of his way to show me old Lisu cable bridges still in operation across the Nu Gorge. Being an atheist did not inhibit him from having strong opinions on Lisu culture and religion. He was visibly disappointed when I was unable to visit his father who, until converting to Christianity ten years ago, had been a practicing shaman.

The Lisu are among the most egalitarian of all Southeast Asia's hill tribes, and their political style rejects hierarchical organization that could link them across villages or countries. Since until the past hundred years no standard Lisu writing system existed, the cohesiveness of their culture has always been mysterious—and never more so than today. They continue to adapt and change while identifying as Lisu.

Missionaries introduced Fraser's Romanized script of the Lisu language a century ago to translate the Bible, but this, as well as less-used and now defunct alphabets developed by the Chinese (in the late 1950s) and the Burmese (1970s), have yet to gain broad usage. Lisu children began attending school and learning to read and write Chinese, Burmese, and Thai scripts a few generations ago; but through most of the twentieth century it was oral tradition—songs, myths, proverbs, and grandiloquent speechifying—that informed Lisu existence. Lisu men in particular are renowned linguists able to converse in several languages.

Unlike other preliterate, less anarchic people including the Hmong and Karen in Southeast Asia, the Lisu did not take to expressing themselves in writing until recently. Because Fraser's script, the most universal Lisu writing system, was first developed to communicate Christian content, there was push-back from animists and atheists against its broad adoption. If the Lisu language itself remains viable, however, this could change. The Lisu version of Christianity is growing and today is practiced by close to, if not an outright majority. Led by China, Fraser's has become the Lisu writing system accepted by nations, and the Lisu Fraser keyboard is now available via Unicode, the computing industry standard built into today's operating systems including Microsoft and Java. Within more modernized Lisu enclaves in all three countries, a modified version called Advanced Lisu Script (ALS, a script without backward and upside-down Roman letters) has gained ground, as it is convenient for texting.

I traveled extensively, mostly in tribal areas of Thailand, Burma, and China, in researching this book. It was a marvel to see Lisu living so variously and



*Yunnan's Dansha Valley near Tengchong, where Lisu have settled at lower elevations.  
Author photo.*

yet cut from the same cloth. Whether worrying about their *myi-do* (repute), preparing a smoky meal around the fire, or arguing about new political realities, the Lisu in all three countries—in the 1990s and today—face life with a blend of practicality, fatalism, and distinct humor riddled with what they call “talk play.” Most still live in relatively remote areas and practice agriculture even as roads, electricity, and the Internet connect them to majority cultures and the world beyond. A growing proportion has moved to cities and towns. Lisu everywhere are empowered by mobile and smart phones to communicate and to maximize whatever economic advantages life hands them. While for most these remain modest, new emphases on prosperity and education have taken off, growing exponentially with the rise of a new class of “untraditional” Lisu leaders in culture, politics, religion, and business.

Lisu with undergraduate and advanced degrees number perhaps 1,000. I met the Lisu foreign minister of Nujiang’s Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan (a Communist Party cadre), the animist/Buddhist daughter of an illiterate Lisu woman who runs a US-based tech company from Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the first Lisu senator in Myanmar, a defrocked Roman Catholic priest—among others.

Such variety makes defining the essential quality of “Lisuness” or teasing out its distinctness from other highland peoples in Southeast Asia, such as the Lahu, Akha, Shan, Hmong, Karen, and other minorities, tricky. Yet the Lisu *are* distinct, even in perpetual flux. Descriptions ranging from the Chinese label of the “Merry Nationality,” to “anarchists of the highlands,” or Paul and Elaine Lewis’s “desire for primacy” and “the Lisu want to be first”—all capture long-observed aspects of Lisu pith. Lisu was translated as “the loud custom people” by Eugene Morse, a Christian missionary who spent his life among them. The “wraparound people” is another frequent translation. Rice, repete, getting one’s daughters well married, and avoiding authorities are all ingredients—yet the recipe remains offhand. Newer research provides a useful non-state perspective on their stateless culture by locating Lisu within “Zomia,” a Europe-sized but heretofore unidentified “idea-realm” in highland Southeast Asia. (But that doesn’t help much in distinguishing finer grains.) My approach, as much as possible, is to let the Lisu define themselves in their own words, songs, stories, and proverbs.

Whether it is an old Christian woman in Burma running out to her muddy fields to dig up roots to feed unexpected guests, a Lisu man in Southwest China inviting strangers to stay the night, or a family in Thailand gamely entertaining tourists—images of hospitality, directness, and a nutty zest for life against great odds come to mind when I think of the Lisu.



This work is neither definitive nor academic but one that introduces a people and their environments—in China, Myanmar, and Thailand. I refer to those living in India and Laos, whom I did not meet. Country-specific material is integrated throughout, but most contemporary material is in Book II.

Book I includes mythic, historical, and ethnographic sections on village, childhood, economy, and religion—and is a fairly un-restored 1990s ethnographic period piece describing traditional Lisu lifestyles before national setting had as much impact as today. Some newer material is woven in to offer a taste of the dramatic change occurring in the single generation since. While the past refuses to be contained in a separate box, I wish to preserve a version of the original work I did because it was undertaken in the last moments when it was possible to glimpse Lisu living more or less as they had for centuries.

In the past thirty years, many isolating effects of physical remoteness have decreased or vanished—and national governments have tightened their grips on frontier areas via improved infrastructure, technological reach, and political integration.

Book II includes country-specific views of the Lisu, based on some research from the 1990s but far more on fieldwork and on sources I've encountered since 2014. Sketches, stories, and interviews provide contemporary snapshots of life in Thailand, Myanmar, and China. Descriptions of Lisu in all three countries inform this section and bring the book up to date, so readers may follow the Lisu journey across space and time and capture a sense of the varied political landscapes they inhabit today.

I aim to make Lisu reality present by exposing the universality of their journey and by interrogating some of the choices they've made as they evolve from stateless outsiders into something more compatible with citizenship in modern nations. My father-in-law, the cultural anthropologist Walter R. Goldschmidt, was of invaluable assistance in Book I, first in framing what would be useful in a nonacademic short work on such a broad subject. Well into his eighties, he accompanied me to Otome Klein Hutheesing's study village of Doi Laan in northern Thailand in 1997 for his last fieldwork. He died before I revived this project and so has not been here to advise me on the update. He had strong ideas and opinions, however; I've relied on my understanding of them to help frame Book II and my conclusions.

There has been excellent scholarship on the Lisu, mostly in Thailand, and I am indebted to the works of both academics and missionary-ethnographers. But only 5 percent of the Lisu live in Thailand, and they remain relatively unstudied elsewhere. They were even less so in the 1990s when I began this project.

Since the British Colonial Period, little new material has been written about the Lisu in Burma-Myanmar. In 2014 I interviewed the chair of the National Lisu Culture and Literature Preservation Committee, who shared parts of a draft of a new volume on Lisu history and custom about to be submitted to the National Archives. It is part of a larger national project on Myanmar's minorities and *after government approval* will be published simultaneously in Lisu, Burmese, and English.

Chinese scholarship also exists but is politically influenced and controlled. Outside a small body of unreliable translated material, most of what has

been written about the Lisu is inaccessible to non-Chinese speakers. Because Chinese government websites are so wildly off on basics (in one, Lisu population was wrong by a factor of 10), I chose not to rely on this source. Although several Chinese scholars have focused on Lisu gender roles, such as Yang Guangmin's *Women Not to Be Blocked by Canyon*, such material is not considered reliable in its particulars. Chapters titled "Farewell to Slash and Burn Agriculture" and "Throwing off the Shackles of Primitive Culture" do highlight Lisu women's equality and leadership.

Taking the broad view and compared to larger groups such as the Hmong (or Miao), Karen, or Mien, however, far less is known about the Lisu outside of their own world.

Perhaps because of this dearth of material—especially in Myanmar and China, where 95 percent of Lisu in the world live today—and the specialized nature of scholarly work, no professional anthropologist has written a general overview of this group whose independence and all-over-the-map quality leave so many loose ends to ponder. The impossibility of substantive analysis—and reticence over sinking into generalizations on one hand or interminable relativizing on the other—make such a study frankly unanswerable to standard academic scholarship. While understandable, it is a shame because as the world changes rapidly and the Lisu with it, it was too late to *begin* this task in 2014.

There is diversity among the ways of Lisu in China, Burma, and Thailand; and country setting influences culture and fate. Policies toward minorities on issues of citizenship, land tenure, and religious freedom vary widely. But this is one book, not three, which emphasizes cultural patterns and place over time, remarking on national variations.

The Lisu tapestry is complex and doesn't fit neat progress narratives woven by nation-states. Still, comparing and contrasting the lives of Lisu in flux in three very different countries offers a unique lens through which to examine culture and adaptation and is the broad perspective this book offers. Its appearance makes good a long-deferred, much worried-over promise I made to share the Lisu story with a broader audience.

May the myi-do (repute) of all Lisu who helped me tell their story increase with this publication!