

# Anthropology Book Forum

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"No longer far from the ruler:" A "then and now" portrayal of the indigenous Lisu of Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China

Review by Micah F. Morton, Ph.D.

*The Lisu: Far From the Ruler*

By Michele Zack

University Press of Colorado, 2017

Like other indigenous peoples the world over, the Lisu of Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China have experienced profound changes in their lives during the past twenty odd years. The Lisu, a Tibeto-Burman speaking group of some 1.5 million people, are adapting to those changes in ways that, while leading to new and emergent ways of being "Lisu," nevertheless maintain a uniquely "Lisu" disposition or habitus grounded in a strong sense of being "independent," "egalitarian," "hard working," and "self-employed." Situated across the borders of three nation states undergoing dramatic political, economic, and sociocultural transformations - namely China, Myanmar, and Thailand - Lisu, regardless of where they reside, are being strongly impacted by and adapting to situations in which they can no longer live "far from the ruler."

In each of those national contexts, Lisu are adapting to a situation in which the state is exerting an increasingly significant presence in the form of expanding transportation and telecommunication infrastructures and direct rather than indirect control. Along with restrictions on land use, land scarcity, and population pressure, Lisu increasingly find themselves in a situation where they can no longer follow their age old tradition of "voting with their feet," the quintessential means by which they have maintained their "independent" and "egalitarian" nature. Lisu are further engaging in new and emergent forms of global connectivity, which have spurred a trans-regional Lisu identity movement.

In short, the Lisu are a people that, while "no longer on the move" spatially, maintain a migratory outlook or ethos that helps them adapt to and make the best of the many changes occurring in their everyday lives and surrounding environments. Through it all, they have asserted and will continue to assert a distinct Lisu identity grounded in a fiercely independent, egalitarian, and hardworking mindset that can be found among Lisu regardless of national context and religious affiliation. These are the main arguments made by Michele Zack in *The Lisu: Far From the Ruler*.

Zack is a journalist that first began studying the Lisu in the early 1990s, initially in North Thailand, and later in North Myanmar and Southwest China. During that period, Zack argues, the Lisu were able to follow their "traditional live-far-from-the-ruler playbook." Following a roughly twenty year hiatus from "Lisu country," she returned in 2014 to find that Lisu had undergone dramatic changes due to their

increasing entanglements in both the "state-dominated worlds they (now) inhabit" and today's increasingly globalized world. In brief, Zack argues that due to those changes, the Lisu are no longer able to "live far from the ruler." Her accessible and engaging text offers a "then and now" look at the Lisu that is variably travelogue, memoir, and ethnography. It will appeal to a wide spectrum of readers interested in Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China, indigenous peoples, cultural change, religion, the state, and globalization.

Zack frames her "then and now" thematic focus in relation to the burgeoning scholarship on "Zomia," arguing that "Lisu custom.....provides an alternate road map to living together cooperatively that clearly privileges egalitarian and individualist values over hierarchical ones" (p. 224). "Zomia" refers to a "non-state" space traversing the mountainous borderlands of Mainland Southeast Asia, Southwest China, and South Asia inhabited by supposedly anarchic ethnic groups, such as the Akha, Hmong, and Lisu, that have, until recently, actively avoided being burdened by and incorporated into lowland states.

In terms of structure, the text is divided into two parts that largely adhere to the theme of "then and now." The first part offers a portrayal of "the Lisu" in classical anthropological style with each sub-chapter covering different aspects of Lisu culture, such as "Mythic Origins," "Migration," and "Childhood: Learning by Doing." In those sub-chapters, however, Zack relies heavily on the earlier scholarship of a number of anthropologists, missionaries, and colonial officials. As a result, part one at times reads like a dry secondary report on "the Lisu." In addition, Lisu from Thailand figure prominently in part one. This is due to the fact that most English-language scholarship on the Lisu to date focuses on Thailand.

Zack claims, however, that she has written the first ever English-language book focusing on the larger Lisu country of North Thailand, North Myanmar, and Southwest China. While she achieves that goal in the larger text, Zack's heavy reliance in part one on scholarship pertaining to Lisu in Thailand is problematic. First, the Lisu in Thailand today are a small minority on a regional scale, comprising roughly 50,000 people compared to 400,000 in Myanmar, and 700,000 in China. Second, most Lisu in Thailand are non-Christian "animists," unlike Lisu in China and Myanmar who are largely Protestant Christians. The impact of Christian conversion on Lisu culture is a major theme in the text.

Last, the Lisu in Thailand today have migrated the furthest and the most when compared to other Lisu in the region. This leaves me to wonder if Zack's emphasis on the Lisu in general as a people on the move forever seeking to live "far from the ruler" applies more to Lisu in Thailand rather than Lisu as a whole. Zack's incredulity upon learning of a 400-500 year old Lisu village in Southwest China suggests that her representations of Lisu history and culture may be skewed more by her observations in Thailand rather than in the greater Lisu country. The latter finding further complicates Zack's portrayal of the Lisu as the quintessential "Zomians."

Part two of the book, entitled "The Lisu by Country: Contemporary Sketches," offers a richer, more intimate portrayal of Lisu culture via a string of vignettes and ethnographies of the particular drawing on Zack's experiences in the multi-sited field of Lisu country. My favorite chapter in part two is the one on Thailand, not because I know that particular context the best, but because in its pages Zack and her interlocutors really come alive. The range of individuals whose life stories are featured in that chapter vividly illustrates the diverse issues facing Lisu and other upland minorities in Thailand today (i.e. citizenship and land rights, drug addiction, poverty, discrimination, and cultural loss) as well as the strategies they are pursuing in grappling with those issues. In addition, the chapters on Myanmar and China shed much needed light on some of the ways in which certain Lisu in those countries perceive of

and are positioning themselves relative to the dramatic economic, sociocultural, and, in the case of Myanmar, political changes taking place locally, regionally, and nationally.

One limitation I found with the text, however, is how Zack deals with the issue of the relationship between culture and religion, given that the vast majority of Lisu today are Protestant Christians. She argues that for Lisu Christians, "culture is bigger than religion," and that religious conversion has only impacted some aspects of traditional Lisu identity as (Protestant) Christians no longer raise pigs for feasting but rather for the market, and no longer consume alcohol and cigarettes. Zack overlooks earlier scholarship on highland Southeast Asia arguing that for many upland minorities "religious" conversion is understood and experienced as an "ethno-religious" conversion process involving the adoption of a new collective identity grounded more in practices than beliefs. A few "animist" Lisu from Thailand featured in the text express the latter view via their assertions that Christian converts "no longer do as we do." I also find Zack's claim that Christian Lisu are doing more to preserve Lisu culture than non-Christian "animists" troubling and am uneasy with her use of the label "animists" for Lisu Traditionalists.

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