

Michele Zack, *The Lisu: Far from the Ruler*

Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2017. 372 pages. 32 color photographs, 85 black and white photographs, 1 map. Paperback, \$27.95; eBook, \$22.95. ISBN 978-1-60732-603-8 (paperback), 978-1-60732-606-9 (eBook).

The title of this volume plays on the thesis put forth by James Scott that upland cultures in the Himalayan watersheds purposely took to the hills to escape state power and evolved anarchist societies across the constructed expanse of “Zomia.” Michele Zack offers a journalistic view of what has become of one of these societies, the Lisu. Numbering about 1.5 million, most Lisu live in communities within southwest China and bordering countries. Over a span of two decades Zack visited Lahu areas of China, Myanmar and Thailand, interviewing local officials and common folk. Drawing on her experiences and the works of missionaries and anthropologists, the book presents a multi-faceted picture of the Lisu while recognizing the diversity within the ethnic tag. The intricately written work not only introduces relevant facts on the Lisu, but provides useful context on the larger situation of the states in which they reside. Zack

created a network of sources that enabled her to visit and revisit many of the places, thus enabling firsthand perspectives on the massive cultural changes that have taken place in a relatively short time in three transnational Lisu areas.

The text is divided into two “books.” Book 1, “Meet the Lisu,” covers aspects of the Lisu world, beginning with theories of origin, migration, identity, and various facets of the life cycle, village life, and the economy. Book 2 compares the national scenes in Thailand, Myanmar, and Thailand, followed by a conclusion speculating on future developments of the Lisu.

Like other Tibeto-Burman speakers in the eastern Himalaya watershed the origins of the Lisu are shrouded in the past. On what evidence is available, the area of the Nujiang River (Upper Salween) seems to be a cultural hearth from which groups of Lisu migrated within China and across the present international borders. Zack suggests that although there is significant variation in clothing styles, religious beliefs (nature and ancestral spirits, Buddhism and Christianity), and adaptations to modernization and globalization between groups in China, Myanmar, Northeast India, Laos, and Thailand, there are some innate cultural features—“language and political worldview” (3)—that allow recognition between local groups. In the Introduction, Zack notes her shock at the huge degree of cultural change between her initial investigations in the 1990s and a return trip in 2014. The text reflects these changes, with many of the lifeway descriptions in the first part being based on the earlier phase of cultural observation. In the second part, Zack brings to light the challenges of the more recent era, which include the opening of once remote areas by road and highway infrastructure and the building of hydroelectric plants on once wild rivers.

As an example of the ethnographic content in the first part, the chapter on “Cosmic Views” engages varied traditional beliefs and the more recent Christian ones in the various Lisu locales. Beliefs in Wu-sa, a major creator god, are found in the three areas Zack investigated. Regarding Thailand, there is discussion of the ritual specialists called *mur-mu-pa*, who care for the village shrines to Apa-mo, which Zack describes as the village guardian spirit. These specialists also calculate the annual round of worship days on the lunar calendar and collect the requisite offerings from local families. There are also *ne-pa* ritualists who function more as shamans or spirit mediums, linking the human and spirit world, especially in cases of illness or misfortune.

Zack describes a differing set of beliefs in China, where Apa-mo and the *mur-mu-pa* are not recognized among local Lisu. In the Guyong area of Yunnan, which Zack visited in 1997, there were traditional ritualists called *dashi-pa*, who differentiated themselves from the *ne-pa*, whom they considered as practicing the “dark arts” (130). Zack reports, however, that Lisu in Myanmar know of Apa-mo of “Grandfather,” considered to be the oldest Lisu ancestor. Thus, as in other facets of Lisu life, local beliefs vary, as is to be expected in a situation where migration has played such an important factor. Christianity was introduced to the Lisu by the end of the nineteenth century and continues to grow in popularity in each area Zack visited.

The second part of the book features interviews with local leaders, ritual specialists, and other folk. Zack interviewed local government leaders in Nujiang, Yunnan province who explained how the Lisu were adjusting to government policies that were designed to better the lot of rural communities in Southwest China. There is an immediacy to the interviews which reveals a practical acceptance of an age of change and a willingness to adapt. There are some interesting observations on attempts at cultural

preservation, such as the teaching of both Lisu and Chinese in schools, which has had mixed results. The portraits of the individuals and communities include rich detail on community life and the incorporation of new technology (farm machinery, solar panels, cell phones, motorcycles, cars, etc.), and changes in cultural awareness that can translate into new ways to adapt to challenges and take advantage of opportunities. For instance, Zack relates the story of a Lisu farmer in Putao, Myanmar who not only raises livestock for sale, but mines amber and gold under frenzied, gold rush conditions.

Throughout the work, Zack gives insights into folk ideas that help understand Lisu motivations and values. One of the most valuable discussions concerns the individual value of “*myi-do*,” or “repute,” exemplified by “working hard,” fulfilling obligations, “speaking well,” and following traditional customs (16-17). There are also insights into gender norms and the idea of different but mutually “respected” roles and obligations between men and women (104). Noting similarities with Lahu customs of cooperative work between the genders, Zack relates that in the folk imagination elephants represent women, while dogs represent men.

Zack has produced a relevant introduction to the life of Lisu people in three different states. The discussions of cultural dynamics are useful in larger discussions of the fate of ethnic minority groups in this part of Asia that face similar challenges as the Lisu. Well-written and engaging, the work is a timely snapshot of a diverse culture in an era of intense cultural change.

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