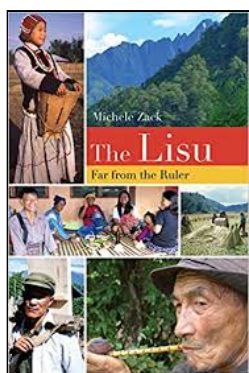


The Lisu: Far from the Ruler

By Michele Zack. 2017. Louisville: University Press of Colorado. 304 pages. ISBN: 978-1-60732-603-8 (soft cover).

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[Review length: 1039 words • Review posted on September 20, 2018]



From the steep slopes of Yunnan, China, down through the mountain ranges of northern Myanmar and Thailand, the Lisu people have maintained an identity distinct from other hill tribes and the dominant cultures of the nations they inhabit. What defines the Lisu and how they retain their identity in the face of modernization and the growing presence of the nation state are the questions that drive Michele Zack's book *The Lisu: Far from the Ruler*. The dispersion of these 1.5 million people into different countries and their subsequent exposure to varying topographies, different religions, and contrasting political contexts, provides a fascinating glimpse into strategies for retaining cultural identity. The range of behaviors, beliefs, and practices across Lisu communities challenges any understandings of a coherent group. Nonetheless, the Lisu reputation for independence, egalitarianism, adaptability, and self-sufficiency is largely retained across these different locales even as modern technologies and globalizing forces sweep the region.

While based in Thailand in the 1990s Michele Zack drafted an initial report on the Lisu for publication in 1999. She returned to the area in 2014 to finish the book, and her account highlights vast, life-altering changes yet still finds a coherent sense of Lisuness. Zack makes no claim to be an anthropologist and does not deal with grand theories or extensive review of the scholarly literature. However, she is well aware that her observations are in dialogue with past anthropologists and contemporary theories. The book offers a highly readable depiction of the lifeways, stories, and personal strategies of Lisu life. Zack's account, across three different nations and stretched over thirty years, offers valuable contributions to understanding the malleable and relational properties of ethnicity and of the plight of cultural identities vis-à-vis the forces of the state and other life-changing forces in the form of roads, electricity, religious conversion, drug trade, education, and telecommunications.

The book is divided into two parts that broadly account for the early and late portions of her research. Part I mirrors a classic anthropological small-scale-society ethnography with descriptions of typical Lisu customs and culture. These chapters generalize Lisu mythology, history, and migration patterns, and outline the habits of life seen through childhood, kinship, bride negotiations, gender roles, cosmology, and economics. Zack here draws from the work of previous scholars and wrestles with the problem that much of that literature originated in Thailand, where the Lisu represent only about 5% of the total population. Balanced by her own early visits to Myanmar and China, Zack's work highlights some important evidence of ethnic boundary making (and crossing) with other minority peoples of the region (Akha, Lahu, Hmong, and many others). The normative Lisu character is captured most effectively in Zack's explications of the concept of *myi-do*. An individual's productive capacity and ability to transmit influence onto others is expressed through *myi-do*, encapsulating the values of working hard, taking care of obligations, speaking well, and following custom. The contextualization of this *myi-do* ethos runs throughout the book and is the biggest clue as to what makes the Lisu Lisu.

Such generalizing, over-arching themes, across three countries, seems initially problematic until Part II of the book where a shift in focus to country sketches brings the distinctive voices and personalities of individuals to the surface. The chapters of Part II provide insight into the unique local challenges to the 700,000 Lisu living in Yunnan, China, the 400,000 in northern and eastern Myanmar, and the 50,000 in Thailand. In all these countries the Lisu conventionally live at relatively high altitudes, frequently move their villages, and incline to live "far from the ruler." They are an example of deliberately stateless people carving out intentional non-state spaces and

non-governed lives in the highlands of the southeast Asian massif or Zomia, as recent scholarship by James Scott and others has theorized. In the face of the increased presence of the state and the forces of globalization, Zack asks basic questions that bridge traditional Lisu customs with looming change. To elicit a wide range of local strategies and challenges for individuals, she asks her informants, "What are the biggest changes affecting you and your country over the last twenty years?" Here the book highlights major differences accrued from different living situations that are largely defined by the political situation of three very different countries. The voices of Christian Lisu in (largely Buddhist) Myanmar, who are coming to terms with the need and recent opportunity for political representation in national parliament, contrast with those in Thailand, where few Lisu are Christians or have any role in politics but where a growing ecotourism market impacts village life for economic gain within the constraints of foreign consumption. The Lisu in Thailand find their citizenship status to be tenuous, and struggles with land rights and education create tensions with the state, while those in China have unproblematic citizenship and today self-define as Chinese nationals. These vivid contrasts found within different national, religious, and agricultural zones are the most significant contributions of the book.

The book has splendid black-and-white and color photos, and Zack's prose is smooth and engaging. The paucity of historical material on Chinese and Myanmar Lisu creates a slight imbalance, and the limited discussion of the Lisu clan system, despite many references to it, seems inadequate. But these are minor shortcomings. Given the import of migration, altitude, and location to the Lisu identity, a few maps highlighting river systems, mountain passes, topography, and national borders would have helped the reader immensely.

In *The Lisu: Far from the Ruler*, Michele Zack paints a vivid picture of the Lisu at a moment when global forces are simultaneously facilitating and eroding ethnic coherence. The speed of change has not benefited many of the Lisu on the lowest rungs of society, as language loss, prostitution, AIDS, addicts, and drug mules have become far more prevalent in all three countries than they were thirty years ago. At the same time, increased literacy, education, Facebook accounts, "Lisu Zone" Youtube channels, and a Lisu script for Unicode have offered avenues for forging new ways of being Lisu in the twenty-first century. Lisu culture is transforming quickly, and Michele Zack's wonderful book offers valuable insight into this little-known group who--for better and worse--are increasingly close to the ruler.