

PORTRAIT OF THE LISU

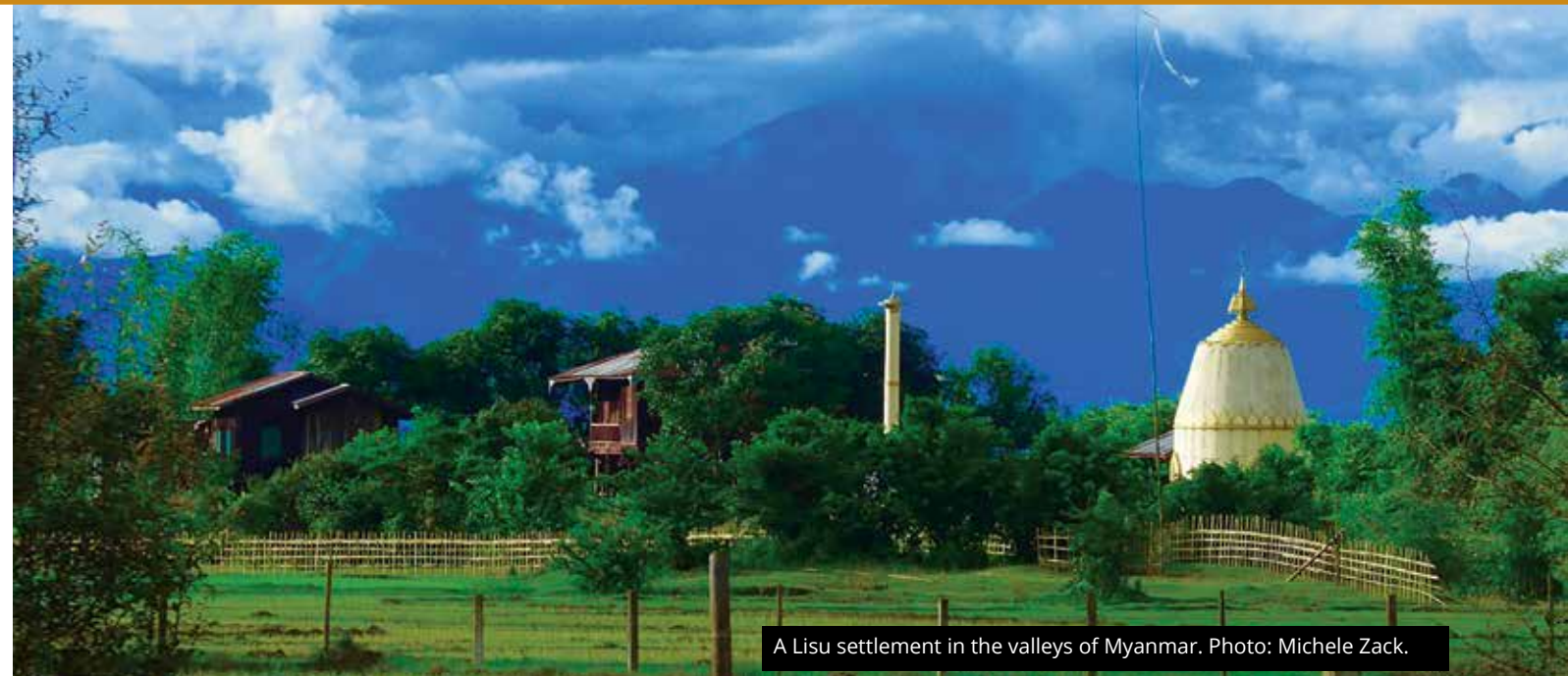
Andrew Landen

American author, journalist and historian Michele Zack has been on the trail of the Lisu in Southeast Asia for about three decades. She first encountered the Lisu in the 1980s and conducted research and fieldwork

among them in the 1990s. In 2014 she again traveled extensively in the tribal areas of Thailand, Myanmar, and China, when she documented the transformative changes of globalization. Some Lisu have adopted successful new urban occupations

in business and politics, while most continue to live as agriculturists, typically a long distance from the countries' centres of power.

"The Lisu: Far from the Ruler" is the first-ever book about the Lisu that



A Lisu settlement in the valleys of Myanmar. Photo: Michele Zack.



The author Michele Zack in a photo from the 1990s.

brings their ironic worldview to life through vivid, often amusing accounts of individuals, communities, regions, and practices. One of the smallest and last groups of stateless people, and the most egalitarian of all Southeast Asian highland minorities, the Lisu have not only survived extremes at the crossroads of civil wars, the drug trade, and state-sponsored oppression but adapted to modern politics and technology without losing their identity.

Ms Zack did her main field work for the book in the 1980s and 90s but it was her trips in 2014 that brought together the strands and discovered the changes modernity and the opening up of areas had had on this highland minority.

The Lisu is a book about a highland group in the midst of change, but one that for various reasons have held true to their culture and religious beliefs. As she says, the cohesive-

ness of Lisu culture has always been mysterious—they reject hierarchical political organization and traditionally had no writing system—yet their culture provides a particular skillset that has helped them navigate the terrain of the different religious and political systems they have recently joined. They've made the transition from living in lawless, self-governing highland peripheries to becoming residents and citizens of nation-states in a single generation.

The book introduces the unique and fascinating culture of this small Southeast Asian minority. Their path to national and global citizenship illustrates the trade-offs all modern people have made, and their egalitarian culture provides insight into current political choices in a world turning toward authoritarianism.

While the book covers the main developments and trends in the communities across Thailand,

"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



The women tend to continue to wear their traditional clothing.

Myanmar and China, it also provides telling personal insights that highlight the changes taking place in society and at the same time show the efforts being made to hang on to the old ways.

This is a story or myriad collection of stories that tell the tales of religious conversion, World War II, the effects of central government changes, and the desire or need for some to leave their villages for work and income.

As Ms Zack writes: My first trip to Myanmar caused me to reconsider religion, and to rethink ideas about organized religion. Adapting or changing religion is personal; yet when conversion occurs en masse it must affect culture. Is it more significant than other adaptations people make: dramatically, to survive, or prosaically, because we live in a world in which jockeying for resources and power is basic to our condition? I began questioning if or how adapting one's religion incrementally by adding local spirits or Buddha, or borrowing ancestor worship from the Chinese, was ultimately that different from converting somewhat more dramatically to Christianity. The Lisu have done all the above since leaving the Upper Salween. They've made other big changes, such as moving from subsistence to market economies, going to school, and moving to urban



An offering in a Lisu village. Photo: Michele Zack

As she writes, the Burma-Myanmar's civil wars, poverty, and isolation from the 1960s through the end of the 20th century appear to have acted as a crucible to hone and intensify the distinct Lisu recipe of fatalism, practicality, and resilience that unify their culture — and seem “bigger,” as the Lisu would say, than the particulars of religious practice.

areas — that seem equally significant. As a practical matter, market capitalism and land ownership, realities Lisu now must adapt to, align more with Christian than animist belief systems — in which spirits, not people or governments, own the land. Religious conversion could be just another step, part of the unstoppable process of joining a globalizing world.

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Ms Zack recounts the 1997 interview she had with Eligah Illia, a Christian Lisu man living in a small village across the Ayerawaddy River from Myitkyina in Kachin State, discussing his military career.

“I came down from the high mountains to Myitkyina during WWII to prospect for gold. I didn't find much, so joined the British army with some Lisu friends. They took us to India for six months training, and then told us we were going home. We didn't know what was going on, but as we got into an airplane, they handed each of us a big package. Well, it turned out to be a parachute, and our first assignment was to re-take Myitkyina, which had fallen to the Japanese! Some of the boys really didn't want to jump, but after we got our parachutes strapped on the officers hooked their backs into this ejecting machine, the rest of

us jumped, and before we knew it we were all falling, and then floating, to earth. Some British officers jumped with us, and told us what to do when we landed. We did it, and re-took Myitkyina after a few days. The operation was a success, so the British said ‘Well done, Lads! Now you're out of a job.’ They gave us some money and said to go home. So I bought some things, and went back up to the border to sell them to the Cho-me Lisu up there. I wanted to attend Bible school, but the elders wouldn't recommend me; they said because I'd been in the army, I must be corrupt. I went anyway, because by then I'd decided I wanted to be a preacher, not a soldier or a trader...”

Ms Zack recounts a major earthquake in Putao in 1951, which encouraged a “deluge of conversions to Christianity” and the work of the well-known Morse missionary family who moved from China to Myanmar to Thailand over the decades.

As she writes, many Lisu in Burma have come down from the highlands. Over the last 60 years, the relative peace of settled valleys in and around Mogok, Mandalay, Myitkyina, and Putao, plus the relative ease of wet rice farming, drew them from vertiginous villages near battlegrounds and along drug trade routes.

The book covers the current swathe of territory from southwest China, through Myanmar, to northern Thailand, offering an insight into the relationship between these highlanders and those in the national seat of power.



Lisu woman in a village in Myanmar.