

Loss and chance

Michael Vatikiotis

MICHELE ZACK

The Lisu: Far from the Ruler

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Some forty years ago, as a student in Thailand, I visited the town of Mae Hong Son, nestled up in the Shan Hills along the country's western border with Myanmar. In the fading golden light of a December afternoon, I crossed the border in the back of a Toyota pick-up truck, accompanied by chisel-faced members of a lost regiment of Kuomintang forces who found shelter in Thailand after their defeat at the hands of the Chinese People's Liberation Army in 1949. Three decades later, the grown-up sons of these soldiers had found work policing Thailand's border with Myanmar. I was struck by the harnessing of these isolated outlaws to keep the peace.

Today, many of these marginal areas are managed in much the same way. Across vast swathes of mainland Southeast Asia, from the rippling Chin hills that cut across the border of India with Myanmar to the snowy Himalayan peaks of Kachin State in the far north of Myanmar, to the lush green valleys of Shan State bordering Thailand, there is nothing certain about who governs whom, except that central state authority is weak and tenuous.

Considered Southeast Asia's ungoverned frontier, these mainly remote, upland areas are home to a dazzling array of different peoples, many of whom have traditionally preferred to live transient lives, farming upland areas far from the predations of organised central authority. Their survival speaks volumes about the triumph of identity and collective human endeavour.

Until recently, most outsiders managed glimpses of these so-called hill tribes in the commercial night bazaars of northern Thailand, where they peddle colourful embroidered artefacts and old silver, or on organised treks up into the hills around Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai further north. Most settlements of Hmong, Akha, Lahu and Lisu peoples are relatively recent, for these people have lived much longer in the nether regions between China and Myanmar, mostly originating from China's Yunnan province.

Knowledge about their history and customs is not hard to find — most undergraduates studying anthropology of the region will have encountered the works of Edmund Leach, John McKinnon and Paul Durrenberger. Contemporary social science has been inflected with insight into autonomous communities by the studies Yale sociologist James C. Scott has made of these upland areas.

Michele Zack's wonderful new book on the Lisu casts a fresh eye on one of the more interesting of Southeast Asia's hill people. As a journalist with experience in Southeast Asia who has specialised in writing the history of local communities in the United States, she manages to make the customs and culture accessible, but also, over the three decades she has been following the Lisu, she offers a valuable comparative look at the fortunes of the Lisu over time and across a much transformed region.

"Throughout their history," Zack writes, "the Lisu have migrated frequently and far — to seek new land, as an individual or group response to internal conflict, and to avoid war and domination." Or, as one Lisu proverb cited in the book has it: "It's good to live close to the water, but it is better to live far from the ruler."

There are more than a million and a half Lisu scattered across Yunnan in southwestern China, Kachin State in Myanmar and northern Thailand, with smaller communities in India and Laos. Traditionally they prefer to live in remote upland areas, farming rice and forest produce; they believe in a world filled with spirits, are egalitarian, independent-minded and intolerant of authoritarian behaviour. About half of their number, mostly in Myanmar, are Christians.

The book is divided into two parts: the first offers a detailed ethnographic picture of the Lisu, based on research done in the 1990s. It captures, in elegant layman's prose, a world of casual spirit worship, individual pluck and, rather bizarrely, sexual prudishness. When asked why the Lisu adopted the elephant as a symbol for females, Zack was told: "Don't you know? Elephants are shy ... when they fornicate, they do not want anyone watching."

The central role played by women and their equal status with men, underlines for Zack the extent to which a society free of hierarchical stratification tends to engender equality of the sexes — even among Christian Lisu in Myanmar.

The second, more interesting section of the book, at least for those interested in modern Southeast Asia, is a comparative survey Zack conducted in the past five years of Lisu communities in China, Myanmar and Thailand. Here there are some surprising findings. While some Lisu in Thailand have done well by attending Thai schools and establishing connections to the country's freewheeling market economy, there remain problems of integration as citizens.

Meanwhile in Myanmar, where one would expect the upsurge of ethnic conflict in the past few years to have affected the Lisu, they appear to have done quite well. "Lisu now have open eyes," a Lisu man tells Zack in the remote Putao Valley of northern Kachin State. "Now we listen to the radio, look at the news. Our children go to school and become educated, and we have become curious about how people make revenue in other places."

Lisu in Myanmar have become involved in politics and have even established their own ethnic Lisu party — in a land with a myriad of ethnic political parties. Zack meets a Lisu who was elected to the upper house of the Myanmar parliament, and it is in this and other interactions that a fascinating tale of adaptation and survival unfolds.

In China, where around half the Lisu population still lives, Zack comes face to face with the grinding gears of modernisation that has brought the formerly remote areas of Lisu settlement within range of multilane expressways and a garish domestic tourist industry. She finds Lisu custom and culture in full retreat, and wonders how they can survive as a distinct group of people.

This experience frames the overall conclusion of the book, which is that while the Lisu may no longer be living far from the ruler, and have started to lose their strong traditions of self-reliance and independence, she argues that their individualistic drive and pluck will stand them in good stead for the future, as they continue to strive for dignity and esteem. As she writes, "Loss and opportunity go together." And as another Lisu proverb has it: "What you eat now is yours; if you save it, it could become someone else's."

Michael Vatikiotis is the author of *Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia*

How might wealthy countries like Australia react to the ensuing displacements? The existing policies of offshore detention and boat turnbacks suggest the kind of brutality likely in response to population flows involving millions — perhaps billions — of people.

In that context, a hippyish tinge makes some of the pieces in the XR book sound rather naive. The XR artists, for instance, explain that they avoid "aggressive colours" such as "leftwing red or Conservative blues" on the basis that they want "no alienation or division". A tear-out form on the final page mocks up a "social contract" between "you, the Citizen" and "the State", presumably to legitimate the book's "declaration of rebellion". We're told that XR is "beyond politics", but we're also presented with pieces from the Green MP Caroline Lucas and the Labour MP Clive Lewis, each of whom presents climate revolt as more or less compatible with their own party program. Many of the contributors denounce what Farhana Yamin calls "current forms of capitalism", but there's no obvious consensus as to what the post-rebellion society might be like.

But maybe that's OK.

For, despite the book's title, it might be argued that climate activism today should, in fact, be seen as a drill, a rehearsal for what's about to come.

The millions striking against climate change reveal a huge potential constituency for environmental action. Yet we're still at the very early stages of the political confrontations that global warning will surely bring, and the mobilisations we've seen so far look very different from the social movement that we surely need.

Extinction Rebellion constitutes a valuable experiment. But, as some the writers in *This Is Not a Drill* acknowledge, it's a beginning and not an end. □

Jeff Sparrow is the author of *Fascists Among Us*

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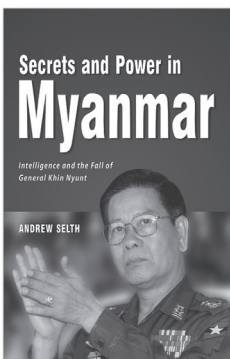
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