

INTRODUCTION

Tso Lo Hamlet

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.

“It’s time for church,” Naomi said.

I was spending the New Year’s holiday in Tso Lo hamlet, high above the roaring Nujiang River in the remote far west of China’s Yunnan Province. The home of Naomi, a Lisu Bible teacher, and her family was built in the traditional Lisu style. The house had two rooms, each with a fire pit in the middle, and two beds along the walls. Embroidered Bible bags hung from hooks all over the house, adding splashes of color to the warm brown of the woven bamboo floors and walls. Corn hung from the ceiling. Large bags of rice and burlap sacks filled with corn or cauliflower or radishes leaned against the walls. Beneath the bamboo floor lived the family’s animals: chickens, roosters, four pigs, and a donkey.

I grabbed my Bible bag and followed Naomi up the steep hill. In a small, dimly lit room, five women and five men sat on backless benches, men on one side and women on the other. All had brought their embroidered bags

carrying their Bibles and hymnbooks. After singing two hymns and a doxology, and praying, Naomi began to preach.

- 2 Directly after church Naomi announced that we were going to a meeting at a neighbor's house for the purpose of intercessory prayer—prayer conducted on behalf of others. Several people were gathered around the fire in the middle of the room. As the fire grew hotter, we pushed our stools back. As it cooled, we inched forward.

The hosts laid out bowls of rice, meat, and boiled eggs, and we all moved from the fire over to a low table to eat. After eating, we moved back to the fire and sang three hymns. There were about ten of us singing in the small dark room around the fire. Still, I could hear the four-part harmony. One of the hymns we sang was hymn #242, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” This song was very familiar to me, not only from my own church upbringing but because the Lisu sang it often. As we sang the song together in Lisu, the English words drifted through my mind:

What a friend we have in Jesus,
 All our sins and griefs to bear!
 What a privilege to carry
 Everything to God in prayer!
 Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
 Oh, what needless pain we bear,
 All because we do not carry
 Everything to God in prayer!

This hymn encapsulated two strong interrelated strains in Lisu Christian culture: prayer and troubles. The deeply felt nature of troubles is expressed in the Lisu language in a four-word couplet:

NI . . . X . . . MY . . . X
 heart . . . worry . . . soul . . . worry

This four-word couplet occurs three times in “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” once in each verse. The missionaries had also used “NI X MY X” frequently in Bible translation. In Isaiah 53:3 this four-word couplet is used to translate *suffering*. In Romans 8:35 it is used to translate the word *hardship*. And when Jesus, before his crucifixion, prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, his deeply troubled state was translated into Lisu as “NI X MY X.”



fig. 1 The Nujiang Valley. Photo: author.

Those who had requested prayer then knelt in the middle; the rest of us stood around them, praying aloud, all at once, in a loud cacophony. After several minutes, the voices gradually died out, until just one voice remained. That voice grew deeper and louder, knowing the responsibility it carried to end the prayer strong and well.

Tso Lo hamlet was a place where the sacred seeped into every space. Unlike the sacred/secular dichotomy that has become a dominant factor in Western consciousness,¹ the Lisu in Tso Lo hamlet experienced desecularization creep, whereby the sacred permeated all aspects of life. Entertainment was line dancing to Christian pop music, learning a new hymn, or sitting around the fire in Christian fellowship with neighbors. Eating was an occasion to thank God for his blessings. Sickness and difficulty were times not to appeal to hospitals, medicine, or any other current remedies, but to petition the Almighty. There seemed no corner of life in this marginalized, impoverished hamlet that was not consecrated and sanctified through a form of Christianity that defined faith through practices.

The Lisu were evangelized over one hundred years ago by missionaries from the China Inland Mission (CIM), and they adopted Christianity in a “people movement” that permeated nearly their entire society. The

evangelization of the Lisu is missionary lore, the subject of numerous narratives and even a film.² But despite vast knowledge of the Lisu church's beginnings, much less is known about the Lisu church today. In this book I will take the Lisu Christian story from its missionary origins to the present day. I will narrate the story of how the Lisu nearly lost their Christian faith amid China's tumultuous twentieth century—involving war, revolution, famine, and successive government campaigns culminating in the Cultural Revolution, in which all churches were closed for more than two decades. I will also recount how the Lisu, improbably, and entirely on their own initiative, have revived their faith in the years since 1980.

But my primary aim is to explore how Lisu Christians, like Naomi and her fellow Christians in Tso Lo hamlet, have oriented their faith less around cognitive ideas of belief and more around a series of Christian practices that express that belief. Lisu Christian practices, such as attending church, singing hymns, and participating in intercessory prayer, are bodily actions filled with Christian meaning. They are unspoken liturgies. Christianity is, for the Lisu, fundamentally a way of life, not merely a belief system.

Lisuland

I first heard about the Lisu when I picked up a worn copy of Isobel Kuhn's spiritual autobiography, *By Searching*, off a shelf of used books in Oakland, California. I was immediately captured by her narrative voice. Born in 1901 in British Columbia, Isobel retained the vestiges of a Victorian upbringing in her prose. Yet I found her book to be filled with common points of reference, as I, too, had grown up in the Pacific Northwest. After hearing the pioneering missionary to the Lisu, J. O. Fraser, speak at The Firs retreat center in Bellingham, Washington, Isobel was determined to work with the Lisu people. She set sail for China with the CIM.

Isobel wrote captivating descriptions of life in Lisuland—the Nujiang Valley in China's Yunnan Province. She characterized the valley this way: "It is a land of giants—giant peaks, giant winds, giant disease, giant spiritual forces."³ One could never get away from the feeling of being enclosed by the steep canyon walls. She called it "life on the perpendicular," and said, "there is only up and down here, no level spot."⁴ In describing the Nujiang Valley's notorious rainy season, Isobel reported: "The rainy season had begun. Day after day the tent and miserable hut were swept by torrents: clouds and drizzle veiled the grand scenery. All was just cold and mud and

wet. 'From Sunday morning until Saturday night, I never had my galoshes off, except to go to bed,' [another missionary] told me."⁵

The Nujiang Valley is named for the Nujiang itself, which in Chinese literally means angry (*nu*) river (*jiang*). The river is aptly named. Unlike China's Yellow River, which picks up yellow-brown sediment on its slow journey to the sea, or Myanmar's fat Irrawaddy, which lazily makes its way through flat landscapes, the Nujiang (called the Salween in missionary narratives) cuts through mountains of rock in its upper reaches, making its aquamarine color just a shade or two from translucence. The river is usually a mass of roiling, foamy anger, rarely placid.

One hundred years ago this river meant life, but it also meant danger. Water was a necessity, but drowning was common, as the river could only be crossed by bamboo raft ferry at certain points and, during the rainy season, hardly at all. The river divided then, and it still does today. Traveling to villages within easy sight of one another on opposite banks required a bamboo raft ferry crossing then, and today, it means trekking out of the way to the nearest bridge.

A few years after first picking up Kuhn's books, I was living in China myself. While conducting some internet research about China's minority groups I came across the Lisu once again. According to the website, the majority of Lisu were now Christians, and the Chinese government was considering declaring them an official "Christian" minority group. I had the sudden realization that there was a direct link with the missionary work of my literary hero, Isobel Kuhn (along with a handful of other missionaries that I had met as characters in her books), and the current religious status of the Lisu ethnic minority in China.

The Lisu are one of China's fifty-five minority groups. Of the over 600,000 Lisu in China,⁶ approximately half are Christian.⁷ The Lisu live in villages and hamlets across highland Southeast Asia and southwest China, scattered across rugged terrain that now falls under the sovereignty of India, China, Thailand, and Myanmar.⁸ In whichever state they have found themselves, the Lisu have been on the margins, geographically, politically, and socially. They occupy mountainous terrain, withstand treacherous monsoon rains, and subsist precariously on the political and physical fringe.

The Lisu have long had a well-defined sense of ethnic identity.⁹ Despite Chinese condescension toward the Lisu,¹⁰ J. O. Fraser wrote in the introduction to his handbook on the Lisu language, "No Lisu is ashamed to own his race."¹¹ The Lisu made every list of the ever-shifting categorical registers of ethnic minorities since the Chinese state began cataloging; by the

6 time of the People's Republic's Ethnicity Classification Project of the 1950s, they were one of only fourteen ethnic groups in Yunnan whose status as a "minority nationality" was presupposed.¹²

The Christian history of the Lisu begins with James Outram Fraser, an engineer, musician, and linguist who began his pioneering missionary work among the Lisu in 1913. For three years he itinerated through the mountains among the Lisu, though he found them unresponsive to his message. In 1916, just as he was about to give up on the Lisu and offer to be reassigned, a great people movement began and whole families, even entire villages, tore down and burned their spirit shelves, declaring their allegiance to Christianity. As the Lisu had no written script, Fraser, together with Ba Thaw from the Karen people, created the script that today bears his name.

Fraser insisted that the embryonic Lisu church follow "three-self" indigenous principles from the very start. It was led locally, supported itself even though the people were poor, and sent out evangelists immediately to spread the good news among neighboring villages and hamlets. Most missions in China used foreign money to build mission stations, churches, hospitals, and schools;¹³ in Lisuland the work was entirely self-supporting.

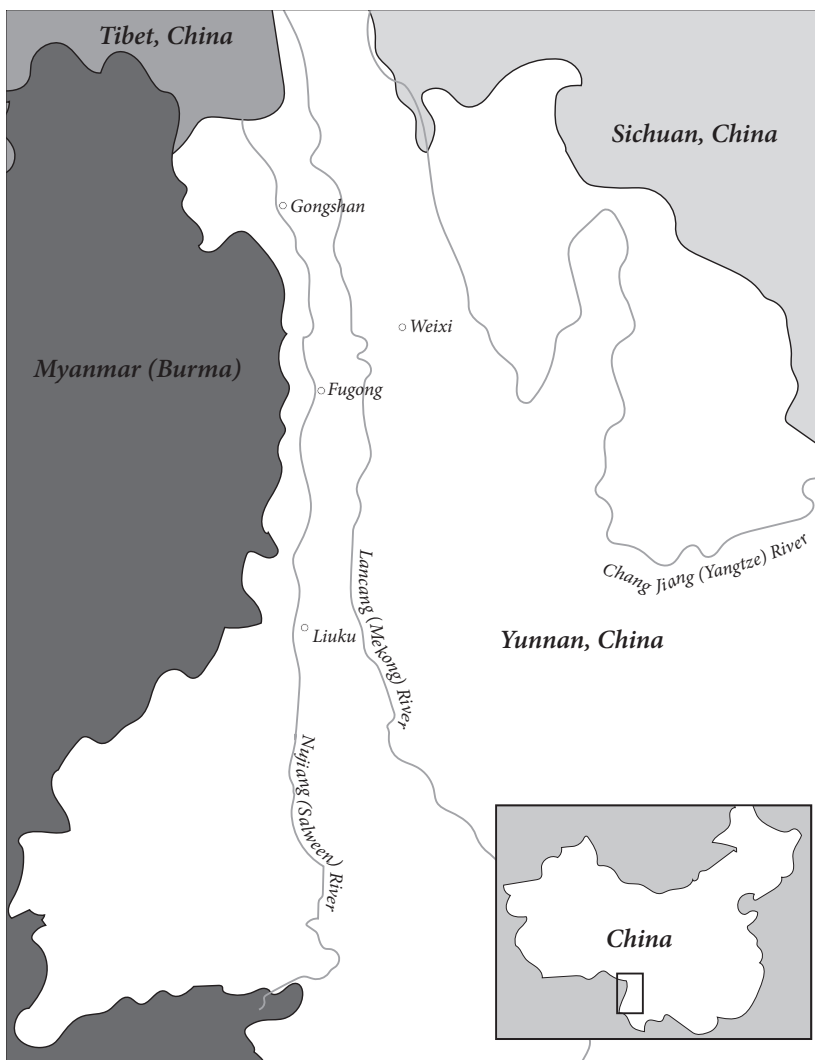
In the 1920s, Fraser was joined in the work by Allyn and Leila Cooke, who lived among the Lisu, working on the translation of the Bible and the hymnbook until Leila died in 1943 and Allyn was forced to leave the country in 1951. Like Isobel Kuhn, Leila Cooke was a gifted and prolific writer. She composed several articles on their work among the Lisu Christians for the CIM periodical *China's Millions*, and she also penned two books, *Honey Two of Lisu-Land* (1933) and *Fish Four and the Lisu New Testament* (published posthumously in 1947). J. O. Fraser himself wrote voluminous correspondence to his mother and the prayer group she established in England, excerpts of many of which are found in his two biographies: a hagiographic portrayal, *Behind the Ranges* (1944), by Geraldine (Mrs. Howard) Taylor, and *Mountain Rain* (1994), by his daughter Eileen Fraser Crossman. Gertrude Morse, matriarch of the Morse family of independent missionaries among the Lisu and other minorities, also penned a memoir entitled *The Dogs May Bark but the Caravan Moves On* (1998). Thus the missionary history of the Lisu is well documented. The recounting of this history presented in this book draws on these published sources, as well as archival materials held by the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center, Yale Divinity School, and the University of London SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies). The BGC Archives at Wheaton College contain numerous circular letters written by the Cooke and Kuhn families, as well

as uncatalogued papers of the Gowmans (fellow missionaries among the Lisu), including translations of the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John into Lisu, diaries, and an old catechism. In the CIM archives at SOAS, University of London, I found the majority of the interview transcripts and other primary sources used by Mrs. Howard Taylor in her biography of J. O. Fraser. What I was unable to find, however, were the letters Fraser wrote back to his prayer circle in England, letters that Mrs. Taylor quoted from extensively. In searching for these letters I contacted Fraser's daughter, Eileen Fraser Crossman. Sadly, she also did not know the location. Still, the search for the letters led me to a number of exchanges with Mrs. Crossman, including a visit.

Because of the Communist Revolution in 1949, all of the missionaries departed, and the narrative of the Lisu church becomes shadowy and opaque. In 1958 the Chinese Communists began an assault on religion that led to a mass exodus of Lisu Christians—some of the consequences of which were reported by Gertrude Morse from her standpoint on the Burma side. The Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1958 was followed by the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) and other campaigns, most notably the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. What happened to the Lisu Christians during these difficult years?

With Deng Xiaoping's policy of Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang*), beginning in 1980, Christians in China (including in Lisu) were allowed to practice their faith once more. But although the Lisu church has been reopened for more than thirty years, few studies exist of Lisu Christianity today.¹⁴

My first visit to the Nujiang Valley was during the rainy season in 2012. I made the trip from Yunnan's provincial capital, Kunming—a trip that took about thirty days in the missionary period—on the seventeen-hour overnight bus. Several impressions stood out on that first trip. Although I was visiting Fugong, the county with the highest concentration of Lisu in China, Lisu writing using the Fraser Script was largely absent. Large Chinese characters looked down from every storefront. Only Chinese-language books sat on the shelves at the local Xinhua bookstore. Buses announced their destinations with illuminated Chinese characters. Even the local ATM machines required their customers to use Chinese to withdraw their money. I wondered what had happened to the Lisu's precious Fraser Script and why Chinese characters seemed to have eliminated Lisu writing from every public space. It was only in church that I saw the visible presence of Lisu writing, though even in the religious sphere its reign was not unchallenged:



map 1 Western Yunnan Province. Map drawn by Mariah Christ.

many Lisu youth, now educated in Chinese schools, were largely illiterate in Lisu. The Sinicization of the Nujiang Valley—primarily owing to the encroachments of a strong state and its education policies—was bringing the Lisu language back to its original state: an oral language.

While I had seen few vestiges of a particular Lisu identity around Fugong—it seemed rather similar to countless other Chinese towns—it changed when I went to church. In church old women wore traditional

clothes and children wore beaded headdresses. Nearly everyone carried an embroidered bag with bright tassels—bags I had read about in the missionary narratives—that contained their Bibles and hymnbooks. Church and ethnicity exhibited a strong relationship.

I made a second visit in February 2013, this time to Gongshan at the northern edge of the Nujiang Valley, a four-hour drive upriver from Fugong. I flew into Kunming and met an American contact who had helped facilitate my previous trip into the valley. I told him my sketchy plan of heading to Gongshan and trying to meet Jesse, a name I had learned from a Reuters article on the Lisu Christians of Gongshan.¹⁵ My American contact told me that Jesse was the leader of the entire Nujiang Valley Lisu church, and as he was a busy and important official who traveled frequently, I had no chance of meeting him. I got on the overnight bus feeling completely blind, going in with no contacts or relationships.

After arriving in Gongshan on a Tuesday afternoon, I found my way to the Zion Church on the hill above town. There were several folks milling around, and they directed me to a church administrator who could speak Chinese. He informed me that there would be a Wednesday evening service. The next day I arrived early for the service and sat in the courtyard of the quiet church. A young woman shortly entered the courtyard, grabbed some laundry from the line, and asked if I had eaten. She invited me to an apartment behind the church and, together with her mother and a few young girls, started making some chicken soup. I spent the evening with them in the kitchen until the church service began.

After the service, the young woman sought me out and invited me upstairs again. This time she walked me past the kitchen, ushering me into a living area where two middle-aged men were sitting. I sat down, accepted the walnut tea she brought, introduced myself, and explained my research. When I had finished, I asked the two men their names.

“My name is Jesse,” said the first man.

For the last twenty minutes I had been talking with the head of the Lisu church in the Nujiang Valley.

“And this is my daughter,” Jesse added, pointing to the young woman who had first invited me up for chicken soup. My relationship with Jesse enabled my entry along the entire length of the Nujiang Valley. In every place I went, the Lisu Christians knew Jesse; he was my gateway.

I spent most of August 2013 in residence at the Gongshan Zion Church’s Bible training center, taking my meals with Jesse and his family. This was where I met Naomi, a Bible teacher at the training center. I came back in

December 2013, attending Christmas festivals in two neighboring villages in Gongshan County.

10 I returned to Lisuland in March 2014 for my culminating stay, spending most of that time in a village high above Gongshan town with Timothy, a Lisu farmer/pastor, and his family. Ma-pa Timothy taught me Lisu for two hours each morning. The remainder of the time was spent engaged in family, village, and church life. I sat on hard pews in countless church services and sat on low stools around evening fires, eating *baba* (fried bread). I hiked up and down mountains and worked in the fields. I sang hymns, joined in intercessory prayer, and listened to stories.

Altogether, between 2012 and 2014, I conducted five months of fieldwork with the Lisu Christians. I never maintained my own residence at the field site but lived with the Lisu, whether in a bamboo hut, a village farmhouse, or a room at a Bible training center. I participated in the daily rhythm of village life: planting corn, feeding animals, eating food cooked over a fire, washing dishes, playing with children, and after all the work of the day was complete, sitting by the fire and drinking tea. My observation of the Bible training schools was even more intense, as Bible school students were busy with chapel, classes, morning exercises, meals in the canteen, nightly study halls, and music classes.

I attended twelve churches in the Nujiang Valley (five in Gongshan County, four in Fugong County, and three in Lushui County), many for extended periods. I stayed at both Bible training centers—Gongshan and Liuku—that were in operation during my stay. I attended the Christmas and Easter church festivals as well as the New Year's festival, which is more of a family event. I had a research rhythm, in which my time in the field with the Lisu focused intensely on data collection, and my time at my home base in Beijing was spent transcribing, coding, analyzing, and refining my research questions.

In the beginning of my fieldwork, I positioned myself—quite honestly, I thought—as a researcher. However, I soon learned that “researcher” was not a category that existed in Lisu culture, and thus this caused confusion. I then explained that I was there to learn the Lisu language. This made perfect sense to the Lisu, as their advanced linguistic status, with a written script, Bible, and hymnbook, had made learning Lisu a requirement for any local minority who converts to Christianity. In fact, I did spend hours each day studying the Lisu language, either informally through asking questions, or formally through the help of a Lisu pastor. Through daily immersion in the Lisu language and both formal and informal instruction, I became adept at

reading Lisu and learned religious terms and phrases, such as those used in preaching and hymn singing. However, Mandarin Chinese remained the primary language I used in my interviews.

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In addition to my time spent in Lisuland, I also made three research trips to Chiang Mai, Thailand. During those trips, I attended the Lisu (Borneo) church of Chiang Mai, studied Lisu with one of the church members, had helpful conversations and interviews with David and Eugene Morse, and met members of Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) who currently work with the Lisu in Thailand and Myanmar.

I could see early on that central government and local church research permissions would conflict. The presence of Christian minorities in China's borderlands is a sensitive topic, and gaining official Chinese research permission would have been difficult. Further, formal government research permission and affiliation (if granted) would have entailed the mandatory assignment of a research assistant to monitor my work.¹⁶ Such a situation would not only have brought unwanted scrutiny to the Lisu church but would also have forced a less intimate research encounter. Therefore, I chose not to seek official government permission but to seek the permission of the Nujiang Christian Church *lianghui* organizations within the government-sanctioned Protestant church.¹⁷ At all times during the conduct of my research, I was under the auspices and protection of the local Lisu churches.

Christian Practices

In this book I explore how the Lisu of southwest China have defined faith as a rhythm of shared Christian practices. Christian practices are embodied patterns of activities imbued with a narrative of meaning directed toward faith in Jesus Christ that a community participates in together. They are physical metaphors of the Christian life. Cadenced to the agricultural seasons of the hills, Lisu practices are recurring and regular. Attending to this flow and rhythm means that Lisu Christians affirm what it represents and the togetherness it compels.

As Etienne Wenger puts it, "The concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. In this sense, *practice is always social practice*" (emphasis mine).¹⁸ Unlike beliefs, which can be codified into creeds and doctrines and statements, and thus, like artifacts,

examined apart from their settings, Christian practices cannot be understood apart from the quotidian contexts from which they have sprung.

12 Lisu practices are bodily in nature, involving not just culturally situated bodies but physical bodies that eat and drink, breathe and imbibe, work in fields and sing hymns. Lisu practices involve mouths, feet, and hands. Nearly every Christian practice involves the body or occurs close to the body. This is exemplified in the Lisu focus on not allowing smoke or alcohol to enter the Christian body, as well as in the hymn-singing voice emanating from the very core of the body, and the line-dancing body moving in rhythm along with other bodies. Through the actions of their bodies the Lisu configure their worlds.

Practices have long been part of church history. From those of the Desert Fathers, the Rule of St. Benedict, and the ascetic practices of Irish monks to more recent adaptations, all shared the ideal that through habitual practices, virtues would be acquired.¹⁹ Practices do not float freely, separate from belief systems. As Alasdair MacIntyre states, “There is no such thing as ‘behavior,’ to be identified prior to and independently of intentions, beliefs and settings.”²⁰ Implicit in the Lisu Christian practices are layers of meaning about the nature of sin and God and humanity. But these are not philosophical meanderings, unmoored from the practicalities of daily life. Rather, as Wenger states, “*Practice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life*”²¹ (original emphasis).

This meaning is grounded in narratives: communal and individual narratives of experiencing God. Lisu Christians pray because they believe in a God who by nature is loving and caring and answers their prayers. Lisu Christians shake hands and greet each other with “Hwa Hwa” because of the spirit of fellowship and togetherness this Christian greeting implies. Lisu Christians share the Gospel message with others because it is not something for them alone, but for the entire community and beyond: “A social practice involves a narrative, a reason why, a mental horizon within which action is experienced as meaningful.”²² Embedded in every practice is meaning, significance, and worldview; they are not empty. Practices, as Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon state, are theologically significant.²³

But for this theological significance to be understood, the “semantic domain” of theology—that is, the arena of meaning and the words used to talk about it—must be expanded.²⁴ Theology does not always begin, as is assumed in Western academic circles, with an articulated philosophical foundation. It does not have to be communicated solely through treatise, doctrinal statement, or commentary. These forms of theology, according

to Robert Schreiter, are based on the specific cultural configurations of the West, with its ideal of literacy, its assumption of “sure knowledge,” and its rational approach.²⁵

Theology for the Lisu follows a different pattern, for an oral, holistic, mountain people would never adopt a Christian faith that is reduced to mere personal, intellectual assent to a set of doctrinal propositions. Theirs will not be doctrine from the commanding heights of systematic theology but rather a theology of the earth, situated in place, culture, and bodies.

It will not be an academic theology but a community theology, centered on the local church. As a community theology, it will necessarily be focused on the exteriority of human experience, assuming that the majority of experiences are done in conjunction with others, in front of others, seen by others, and undertaken with others, for in such cultures, inner experiences are few and relatively unimportant. It will be a theology lived out. And at least with the Lisu, it will be a theology communicated through an enacted script of practices.

And this is where the Lisu Christian story of a faith enacted in practices meets up with one of the oldest theological questions in Christian history: how can sinners be reconciled to a holy God? At the heart of the matter is the question of whether bodily expressions of faith, such as practices, behaviors, deeds, works, or any other human endeavors, have a place in a grace-oriented faith focused on salvation granted by God alone.

Within Western Protestantism, the majority of church traditions have emphasized that salvation comes from faith alone, as a gift of God's grace. They are buttressed by the words of Paul, most notably in his letter to the Romans: “For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (3:28). Such a view emphasizes that humankind cannot earn its own salvation by any form of merit, or, in the words of Alister McGrath, “Faith is not something human we do, but something divine that is wrought within us.”²⁶ Justification by faith alone was a theme for Paul, one he returned to many times in his letters.²⁷

Complicating the matter, however, are other biblical passages, such as James 2:14–26, indicating that true faith must show itself through works. In the concluding verse of this diatribe, James declares, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” James expresses a concern that when faith is reduced to sentiment, verbal profession, or even intellectual conviction, it is in fact no faith at all.²⁸ James emphasizes that faith is more than a matter of right belief; faith has a practical element, requiring deeds.

This issue took center stage during the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther rallied against the works-based righteousness he perceived in the medieval Roman Catholic church, advancing the term *sola fide*—faith alone. Luther went so far as to add the term *allein* (“alone,” in English) to his German translation of Romans 3:28, stating that idiomatic German required the addition. If salvation is wholly a matter of God’s grace, then salvation is unattainable through human effort or any amount of human striving. Works, however, are inherently human acts. Therein lies the tension. Though the issue remains contentious, Protestants have reconciled faith and works in a variety of ways: as works proving faith, as works subsequent to faith, as works arising from faith. But faith and works are usually placed in a hierarchical relationship, with works playing the role of junior partner.

This is not the Lisu way. In the midst of the flock of Protestant spirituality, in which Luther’s “faith alone” still echoes stridently, the Lisu of southwest China have marked out their faith by means of Christian practices. They have made claim to a visceral faith that involves interceding for others in prayer, singing together, line dancing, attending church and festivals, shaking hands in Christian fellowship, keeping the Sabbath, evangelizing, working in each other’s fields, and abstaining from practices that have historically been deemed harmful to the community. Lisu Christian practices are more communal than personal, more outward than inward, and more embodied than emotional. The Lisu do not make a fine split between justification and sanctification, as most Reformation theologians do, for their practices include a strong component of moral regeneration. Through their practices, the Lisu have been able to compose their creeds, express their belief, instill their values, and enact their obedience to God. In other words, Lisu practices are theological acts.

World Christianity

In describing the religious practices of an ethnic minority group in China, this book is firmly situated within the field of World Christianity. The center of gravity of Christianity has shifted southward and eastward, toward Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Dale T. Irvin describes the study of World Christianity as seeking to “investigate and understand Christian communities, faith, and practice as they are found on six continents, expressed in diverse ecclesial traditions, and informed by the multitude of historical and cultural experiences in a world transformed by globalization.”²⁹ In a sense, World

Christianity has a subversive³⁰ or at least revisionist³¹ element, as it seeks not just to push out to the geographic edges but also to upend traditional academic categories, decenter Western thinking, and privilege the perspectives of those on the margins.

Though the Lisu were initially evangelized by missionaries of the CIM, the revitalization of the Christian faith after churches in China were reopened in 1980 was a purely local endeavor. While the missionary mark upon Lisu Christianity is certainly discernable, at the same time, their practice-oriented faith conforms nearly completely to Lisu culture. One of the primary contentions of this book—that Lisu Christianity is at its most authentic when its practitioners sing translated Western hymns—demonstrates this complementarity.

Lisu Christianity is a faith that has settled in and taken up residence around the fires in the bamboo shanties on the steep hillsides of the Nujiang gorge. In singing Christian hymns as their sincerest form of devotion, these subsistence farmers declare not just their reverence for their own missionary heritage but also their membership in a communion of faith across borders—into the Lisu regions of Thailand, Myanmar, and India—and even more broadly, their membership in the worldwide communion of faith.

The Ethnographic Imagination

The phenomenon of World Christianity has been studied through both historical and theological lenses. Others have pointed to the polycentric nature of World Christianity³² or have argued for a more interdisciplinary approach.³³ These are useful frameworks, but my approach will vary slightly by bringing the analysis down to the level of the earth, to the level of lived experience and embodied practice. Inasmuch as World Christianity is concerned with creeds and theologies, reformation and revival, liturgies and sacraments, missions and intercontinental interactions, it is also concerned with hymns sung, liturgies recited, faith uttered, and devotion expressed. In other words, World Christianity is not just themes and topics. It is people and their stories. Given this, my approach to World Christianity is through the ethnographic imagination.

C. Wright Mills, in his 1959 book entitled *The Sociological Imagination*, states that “the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its

task and its promise.”³⁴ The sociological imagination holds that these two, history and biography, are interdependent, that neither can be understood without reference to the other.

Borrowing from Mills’s sociological imagination, Susan E. Mannon, in *City of Flowers: An Ethnography of Social and Economic Change in Costa Rica’s Central Valley*, states that “the ethnographic imagination combines descriptive writing, rich storytelling, and social analysis to make the connection between larger historical forces and individual biographies in particular places and times.”³⁵ Drawing upon both Mills and Mannon, I would like to reframe the ethnographic imagination for the study of World Christianity.

To start, let me define my terms. Ethnography refers to a research methodology that places emphasis on fieldwork conducted *in situ* with research participants, usually involving participant-observation, interviews, and archival research.³⁶ Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen define ethnography as “a process of attentive study of, and learning from, people—their words, practices, traditions, experiences, memories, insights—in particular times and places in order to understand how they make meaning.”³⁷

Imagination refers not to flights of fancy, nor to conjecture or loose attachment to objective reality, but rather to an ability to find truth that is not readily obvious, to find knowledge in interstitial places, and to synthesize data from numerous locations. It is perhaps in the imagination that we can truly grasp the nature of the communities that we study.

As the sociological imagination links history and biography, broader social movements and milieus with the individuals involved, the ethnographic imagination in the study of world Christianity links church movements with the individuals that participate in them. It links texts and artifacts with oral traditions. It links creeds with practices. And it links key figures and leaders with lay practitioners. It requires the imagination to find knowledge in the connections.

We do not need the imagination to analyze larger social movements and their histories; we have historiographical methods for that. Nor do we need to imagine the lives of individuals and their stories; those lives can in fact be known through ethnography and anthropology. It requires the ethnographic imagination, however, to yoke together the historiographical with the anthropological and seek knowledge in the frayed edges where they meet. What kind of knowledge do we seek in these in-between places? What kind of knowledge does it require the imagination to uncover? The ethnographic imagination aims to reveal embedded theology. It should

describe faithful discipleship. It favors the particular over the universal, the local over the global, the lay over the leaders. It requires decentering.

Most importantly, the ethnographic imagination connects the big stories of World Christianity with the small stories. Individual lives are embedded in broader histories, so the ethnographic imagination must delineate the broad historical forces that provide constraints and parameters. At the same time, it must attend to the voices of individual Christians shaped and constrained by these forces while acknowledging the agency these individuals possess. Big stories without small stories lead to research that is removed and distant, focused on abstract social and historical forces, removed from everyday life. Such research usually ends up telling only a story of the elites. Small stories without big stories lack context; they are just anecdotes. The ethnographic imagination must bring these two—the big stories and the small stories—together and find truth in this tension.

17

Big stories and small stories are often not easily reconciled, if they can be at all. Yet they need each other, for each story, the big one and the small one, by itself, is incomplete. The truth, messy and difficult and incomprehensible as it may be, is in the stories together, caught up in the epistemological tension. The ethnographic imagination requires us to go into these interstices, to sit a spell in this tension, to seek to understand paradoxical and complex truth.

It requires just such an imagination to understand Lisu Christian practices. Lisu Christian practices are carriers of meaning, and these meanings are understood and communicated through stories. The Lisu experience Christian life as narratives. It is through the narrative lens that they interpret reality, even theology. Ideas about what it means to be Lisu are communicated through community narratives, narratives of social ills, poverty, and resilience, narratives of marginalization, independence, and evangelism. These narratives do not merely recount their history; they also communicate what the good, the moral, the virtuous is. It is in the stories that the theological significance of the Christian practices can begin to be grasped, for practices and narratives are inextricably linked. Each Lisu Christian practice, from the prohibition on drinking and smoking to Christian festivals to singing hymns, has a story. Because the Lisu practices are socially consequential, because they are rooted in the community narrative, they are theologically significant.

The Lisu Christians I interacted with all had a story to tell, stories of migration and hardship, stories of family and history, but ultimately, stories

of faith. These individual stories blend into the collective Lisu Christian story, a narrative they know and honor.

18 Through the ethnographic imagination my intention is to give a detailed and careful, yet personal and intimate, portrayal of the Lisu church. While abstract theorizing is a worthwhile end state, and one for which I strove in this study, I also found that doing so chopped up the lives and experiences of the Lisu into so many codes and themes and categories. I hope that by including ample amounts of narrative, the nature of Lisu lived experience can flow in a more continuous, and ultimately more accurate, fashion. Viewed in narrative terms, my research is just the current chapter of the larger and grander Lisu story. I hope in the telling I have done justice to the high regard in which I hold them.

The Structure of the Book

The chapters of this book will alternate between narrations of important stages in the history of Lisu Christianity and close examinations of specific Christian practices that particularly resonate with the Lisu. Big stories and small stories are interspersed throughout this book, their narratives intersecting in each chapter. The big stories recount evangelization by CIM missionaries, the acculturation of Christianity into Lisu culture, the rupture caused by twenty-two years of systematic government persecution, and the improbable revitalization of the Christian faith—all through local agency and initiative—once churches were allowed to reopen after 1980.

Woven alongside are the small stories of individual Lisu Christians, such as Naomi, Jesse, Timothy, and others. While the big stories give us the context for Lisu Christianity, the small stories are equally essential, for they show the meaning the Christian practices hold for those who observe them. Small stories also show how ordinary Christians responded to China's twentieth century: at times showing resilience, but at other times, fragility.

The first-person "Voices" sections sprinkled throughout the book present the small stories of individual Lisu believers in their own voices. These sections are not verbatim transcripts; I found the transcript, as a translation from oral to written speech, to be quite flattening. Rather, I sought to use their own words spoken in the idiom of their own voices, without elements that are common in oral speech but do not read well in written form, like fillers, partial thoughts, and incomplete sentences. Some amount of literary license was involved, but the result is a more true and authentic

representation of their personal story. I want the reader to hear their voices and even to picture their faces. In so doing, I hope not only to have embodied them but also to have empowered them. I want them changed from informant to person.

Naturally, as real lives are messy and complex, more details are included in their stories than just those narrowly related to my study. I hope in this way that their own voices come through as a single embodiment, as a whole story, not parceled out into a plethora of pieces in service to theoretical explication or other aspects of the research agenda. As Gabriel Fackre states, “Narrative speaks in the idiom of the earth. Reality meets us in the concretions of time, place, and people, not in analytical discourse or mystical rumination.”³⁸

The Church Below

“Hurry,” Naomi said to me. “We’re going to be late for church down below.”

For the Sunday noon service, Naomi’s family, as well as most of the rest of the village, hiked down the mountain to what I called Patchwork Village. This larger village had its own large church building sitting atop a rounded mountain covered with a yellow and green patchwork quilt of corn and wheat. For morning and evening services, they remained in their own hamlet, holding small services in the storage room. Naomi referred to these two churches as “the one above” (*shangmian de*) and “the one below” (*xiamian de*).

After Naomi and her mother changed into their Lisu finery—pleated skirts, velvet vests, beaded headdresses—we began to walk down the mountain toward the church. Several neighbors joined us. We walked together, single file, through the wooded path that followed the inside of the ridge, descending into Patchwork Village. Church had already started and we had difficulty finding seats—we were late on account of the intercessory prayer service—but we arrived in time for the last hymn before the sermon.

Naomi’s mother sat in the front row with the elderly women. Naomi and I sat in the middle of the women’s section, one row behind her second-oldest sister. Naomi’s older brothers sat in the men’s section. Lisu church seating conventions put people of like gender and age together, scattering family members across the sanctuary. The women’s section was a sea of hot pink and turquoise, as most of the women wore the plaid head scarves so ubiquitous in Fugong County.



fig. 2 Two Lisu women walking to church. Photo: author.

For the Sunday evening service, we returned to the hamlet storage room. Naomi's father was back from sojourning for a few days to join with others in intercessory prayer, something he did often. We had met him in Fugong town on our way up; he had come down to join others in prayer meetings. He led the preaching for the evening service, teaching the villagers a new song as part of his sermon. Walking back after church, I could see the lights from villages on the opposite bank of the Nujiang.

That evening I could hear loud music and children laughing, and I walked up the hill to investigate. About seven kids, ranging in age from older teenagers to six-year-olds, were lined up, tallest to shortest, practicing a Christian line dance under some lights outside the house on one of the few pieces of flat terrain in the hamlet. Huge speakers had been set up outside next to the pasture. This hamlet was loud because it contained so many children. All generations were present. (So many Chinese villages, with the adults gone out in search of work and the children boarding at school, had a hollow ring.)

All ten of the families of Tso Lo hamlet were in the same predicament: they were returnees from Myanmar and, as a result, had ambiguous legal status within the People's Republic of China. They lacked *hukou* (residence permits), so they could not work, go to school, or own land. Having lived the majority of their lives in Myanmar, they could not speak Mandarin Chinese. They carved out a precarious perch high on this mountain rock.

Without education they could not speak Mandarin—essential for leaving to find wage-earning work. And so they stayed. Without *hukou* the children could not attend school, so they remained in the hamlet with their parents and grandparents, tending the pigs, chickens, and donkey, cooking over the fire, praying, singing, going to church, being raised with the faith of their families and not the values of the state. The very marginalization of Tso Lo hamlet, clinging to this mountain crag, had contributed to its healthy vitality.

But the primary contributor to the vitality of this hamlet was its heartbeat of Christian practices, a rhythm that overlay the agricultural rhythm of tending to animals and planting and harvesting crops. In its traditional lifestyle high above, Tso Lo hamlet was a place not unlike the Lisu villages where the missionary J. O. Fraser first sat around fires and preached his gospel message.