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Cover Page Footnote

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Mediating Gospel Singing

Audiovisual Recording and the Transformation of Voice among the Christian Lisu in Post-2000 Nujiang, China

Ying Diao

In 1928, missionaries of the China Inland Mission (CIM), an interdenominational missionary society founded in Britain in 1865, established their first station in Yunnan's northwestern Nujiang, a border region renowned for its ethnic diversity and spectacular river gorge.¹ Since then not only Christian doctrine but also congregational hymn singing have been introduced to the Lisu, an ethnic group of over one million people who reside mainly in China's southwestern Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, in Myanmar's Kachin and Shan states, in northern Thailand, and in India's northeastern Arunachal Pradesh.²

Ddoqmuq mutgguat (literally, "songs of praise"), a majority of which were translated from gospel songs from the northern United States by Philip P. Bliss, Ira D. Sankey, and other Evangelical composers, constitute the majority of Lisu hymns.³ Characterized by

major-key melodies in four-part settings, this repertoire has remained almost unaltered. Since the 1970s, it has been preserved in the most widely used Lisu hymnal, *Sipat dail Ddoqmuq du Mutgguat* (Hymns of Praise), with tunes transcribed into cypher notation and texts translated into the Lisu script devised by the CIM missionary James O. Fraser and the Karen evangelist Sara Ba Thaw in 1914.⁴

Missionaries occasionally wrote about the Lisu people's interest in four-part singing. Allyn Cooke of the CIM, who translated many hymns, invited readers to "come again after supper and sit around the campfire with us and hear these nearly five hundred Lisu sing hymns."⁵ Another CIM missionary, John Kuhn, ardently described the sound of Lisu singing: "The sweet strains of harmonious Lisu voices blending together in those hymns that had become precious throughout the years was almost too much for [the] heart to bear."⁶ In many ways, the habitat of present-day Nujiang resembles the scattered villages

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¹ The word "Nujiang" literally means "the Nu River." In this article, Nujiang is used as a synonym for Nujiang Prefecture. The Lisu who reside in Nujiang are referred to as the Nujiang Lisu.

² China refers to the People's Republic of China throughout this paper.

³ Romanization of Han Chinese names and terms in this chapter follows Hanyu Pinyin, the generic phonetic system used in China since the 1950s. Han

Chinese names are given according to the conventional order: surname comes before given name. Romanization of Lisu terms (Lisu Pinyin) is according to the phonetic system adopted in Xu Lin et al., *Li-Han Cidian* (Lisu-Chinese Dictionary) (Kunming: Yunnan Minzu Chubanshe, 1985). To distinguish Lisu Pinyin from Hanyu Pinyin, all Lisu terms written in Lisu Pinyin except personal names are italicized.

⁴ The most widely used Lisu writing system since the 1910s, this script is commonly known as Old Lisu (Lao Lisuwen) in China, in contrast to Lisu Pinyin.

⁵ Allyn Cooke, "A Gathering of the Tribes People," *China's Million*, April 1924: 138.

⁶ John Kuhn, "Fruitful Branches over the Wall," *The Millions*, April 1959: 51–52.

where missionaries once resided. Although most of the thatched huts of worship have been replaced by houses made of concrete and brick, the Christian Lisu still sing the same body of *ddoqmuq mutgguat* when they congregate for worship service five times a week, and in other church events.

Nevertheless, it was not only those “harmonious voices” that characterized the Lisu Christian soundscape during my dissertation fieldwork in 2012–14. In and around Nujiang, a type of popular devotional song called *mutgguat ssat* (literally, “small songs”) permeated the air—on DVDs, mobile phones, and other playback devices; in churches, village plazas, and farmers’ markets; and in Christian festivals, training classes, and social gatherings.⁷ Despite their diverse styles—from music incorporating traditional Lisu tunes, to lyrical ballads sung to an acoustic guitar, to contemporary praise and worship songs—*mutgguat ssat* were mainly monophonic and in verse-chorus form, with lyrics expressing love of and gratitude to God. *Mutgguat ssat* singing featured instrumental accompaniment—often a typical rock ensemble of electric guitars, drum kit, and keyboard—and was often combined with *daibbit* (literally, “to imitate by movement”), a form of Christian sign-language dance incorporating decorative movements.

My research revealed three interrelated features in the Christian singing of the Nujiang Lisu. First, the new *mutgguat ssat* singing was clearly distinguished from the older congregational singing of *ddoqmuq*

mutgguat in terminology, vocal style, context of use, and cultural associations. Second, the Christian Lisu in Nujiang juxtaposed the new singing modality with the older practice in the same ritualistic context, instead of choosing between them. Third, *mutgguat ssat* singing largely depended on people’s interactions with the latest media technologies. Cassette tapes began to appear in Nujiang in the 1980s. VCDs, and later DVDs, became prevalent in the mid-2000s, followed by a flood of pirated recordings in the early 2010s. During my fieldwork, I found *mutgguat ssat* DVD albums being used in various contexts even in remote village churches. Most were produced and reproduced in local home studios and disseminated widely via the local farmers’ market.

In light of the features listed above, it is worth examining the effects of media use on the development of the Lisu singing voice. I maintain that *mutgguat ssat* singing disseminated through modern media technologies is conducive to the role of voice as mediation between individual Christians, as well as between the believing community and God. The ascendancy of *mutgguat ssat* singing does not merely represent Lisu Christians’ response to the increasing cross-border religious interactions in the post-2000 era. Rather, it indicates a material shift in religious practice, which has empowered the Lisu people to weave Christian beliefs into the fabric of their everyday lives in secular Chinese society.

Voice, Material Religion, and Mediation

In the emerging ethnomusicological scholarship on world Christianities,⁸ there have been

⁷ Most circulated live and recorded monophonic short songs at the time of my fieldwork were given the generic name *mutgguat ssat* by the Nujiang Lisu. I use the term in the most general sense, regardless of other terminologies that my informants used to distinguish the repertoire’s internal differences, especially those adopted by the Burmese Lisu people.

⁸ Ethnomusicologist Jeffers Engelhardt addressed this field of scholarship as “an ethnomusicology of Christianity” in his article “Right Singing in Estonian Orthodox Christianity: A Study of Music, Theology,

encouraging trends that seek new understandings of the role of music in Christian practice, and of the relationship between locally produced Christian sounds and the transnational flow of technologies and musical ideas. However, music has more often been approached as a means of religious expression than as mediation. In particular, ethnomusicologists have shown great interest in indigenous peoples' use of traditional sounding to express a genuine Christian faith, often in relation to identity construction. Timothy Rommen's ethnography of Trinidadian gospel music explores diverse local styles and how "ethnics of style" is used as a marker for identity negotiation in "sonically imagined communities."⁹ In her recent monograph, Zoe Sherinian describes how Reverend James Theophilus harnessed folk music to facilitate his advocacy for the empowerment of the lower-caste Dalits of Tamil Nadu, where folk songs served not only as a means of theological expression but also as a vehicle for generating "critical consciousness."¹⁰ Four chapters in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities* focus on this issue.¹¹

Some theoretical changes to this scholarly model are suggested by the contributors to a recent edited volume on the making of congregational music and media, which explores the various ways music serves as "a site where music mediates our understandings of ourselves, the details of our belief, our experien-

ces of salvation, our fellowship with others and our divine encounters."¹²

My study of Lisu Christian singing follows this new perspective in approaching Christian music as media in the broadest sense, while drawing on the latest scholarship on material religion that views religion as "a practice of mediation."¹³ In the past two decades, a growing body of scholarship pertaining to the religion-media nexus has examined the embodied practices of religious participation. "Mediation" is one of the most significant conceptual frameworks for this emerging field, in which material culture, sensational forms, embodiment, and religion's expansion into the public sphere are of crucial interest.¹⁴ Under the rubric of "material religion," media encompass not only mass media and digital technologies but also any material religious objects and acts "through which religious practitioners are made to experience the presence and power of the transcendental."¹⁵

and Religious Ideology," *Ethnomusicology* 39/3 (2009): 33–34.

⁹ Timothy Rommen, *"Mek Some Noise": Gospel Music and the Ethics of Style in Trinidad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Zoe C. Sherinian, *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

¹¹ Suzel A. Reily and Jonathan M. Dueck, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² Anna E. Nekola and Tom Wagner, eds., *Congregational Music-Making and Community in a Mediated Age* (London: Routledge, 2015), 16.

¹³ Birgit Meyer, "Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics, and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion" (lecture, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, October 6, 2006), 13, <https://research.vu.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/2168376>; (accessed July 30, 2017).

¹⁴ See, for example, Hent De Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Religion and Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, eds., *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); David Morgen, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Manuel Vásquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion" (lecture, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, October 19, 2012), 1–49, <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/257546>. (accessed July 30, 2017); and S. Brent Plate, ed., *Key Terms in Material Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹⁵ Meyer, "Religious Sensations," 9.

Most studies of material religion have focused on visual culture, and modes of visual use and perception that affect believers' experiences of faith.¹⁶ In Nujiang, however, vocal practices have been a far greater presence in the religious life of the Christian Lisu. During my fieldwork in Nujiang, I found many of the Christian Lisu there seldom read the Lisu Bible outside ritualistic contexts. Instead, hymn singing fills its role of spiritual guide as "a theological mediator, bridging the gap between the text-intensive religion that is Christianity and the oral world of Lisu culture."¹⁷ In line with Steven Feld's observation that voices are "material embodiments of social ideology and experience," we may adopt "voice" as a useful analytical component in the study of material religion because it can be seen both as a sonic phenomenon and as a material practice of mediation in relation to changing social, cultural, and political conditions.¹⁸

Although relatively little attention has been paid to "sound" in the study of material religion, the impact of media technology on

Islamic sounds and listening practice has received scrutiny. Tong Soon Lee has examined the role of the loudspeaker in generating a sacred acoustic space that facilitated the construction of a cohesive Islamic community in Singapore.¹⁹ Charles Hirschkind has studied the significance of cassette tapes in repeated listening practices through which new forms of collective identity were formed based on shared aesthetic and ethnical sensibilities.²⁰ Brian Larkin has explored the use of loudspeakers on churches and mosques in Jos, Nigeria, and how it shaped the urban soundscape and produced a particular experience of urban living for ordinary Nigerians.²¹

The significance of material practice and technology on vocal practices in Christianity and Judaism has also been highlighted in two recent monographs. Jeffrey Summit has conducted an in-depth study of how digital technology has transformed the experience and meaning of chanting Torah among contemporary American Jews in recent years.²² Drawing on his extensive site visits and archival research, Anderson Blanton investigates how material culture and technologies of sound reproduction have become

¹⁶ See, for example, Birgit Meyer, "'Praise the Lord': Popular Cinema and Pentecostal Style in Ghana's New Public Sphere," *American Ethnologist* 31/1 (2004): 1–19, and "'There Is a Spirit in That Image': Mass Produced Jesus Pictures and Protestant Pentecostal Animation in Ghana," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52/1 (2010): 100–130; David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and *Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, eds., *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Aminta Arrington, "Christian Hymns as Theological Mediator: The Lisu of South-West China and Their Music," *Studies in World Christianity* 21/ 2 (2015): 140.

¹⁸ Steven Feld et al., "Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song," in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. A. Duranti (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 332.

¹⁹ Tong Soon Lee, "Technology and the Production of Islamic Space: The Call to Prayer in Singapore," *Ethnomusicology* 43/1 (1999): 86–100.

²⁰ Charles Hirschkind, "Cassette Ethics: Public Piety and Popular Media in Egypt," in *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 29–51. An earlier version appeared in *Cultural Anthropology* 16/1 (2001): 3–34.

²¹ Brian Larkin, "Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87/4 (2014): 989–1016.

²² Jeffrey Summit, *Singing God's Words: The Performance of Biblical Chant in Contemporary Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). A related article version appeared in *Resounding Transcendence: Transitions in Music, Religion, and Ritual*, ed. Jeffers Engelhardt and Philip V. Bohlman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 147–62.

indispensable to the Pentecostal community's experience of faith in southern Appalachia.²³

This article complements the studies cited above by analyzing how the religious use of the latest media technologies, particularly DVDs, has enriched the sonic and material aspects of Lisu Christian singing—through which the mediation of voice extends from its voicing body to produce an immersive experience in various sensory modalities—and how people have generated ways of engaging with technologies in order to create a more genuine Lisu expression in their everyday Christian lives, in addition to the communal hymns of praise inherited from their missionary past.²⁴

The Lisu Christian Mediascape in Post-2000 Nujiang

The Lisu people in China were officially designated as an ethnic minority in the 1950s. Nujiang Lisu Nationality Autonomous Prefecture (Nujiang Lisuzu Zizhi Zhou) is located in northwest Yunnan. As home to the largest Lisu concentration in China, it is a significant section of the Three Parallel Rivers (Sanjiang Bingliu)—the Jinsha, Mekong, and Salween (known within China as the Nu River)—of Yunnan Protected Area, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2003 (see Fig. 1). According to the 2010 census, the prefecture has an ethnically diverse population of 534,337, of whom 48.21 percent are Lisu.²⁵

²³ Anderson Blanton, *Hittin' the Prayer Bones: Materiality of Spirit in the Pentecostal South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

²⁴ Most of the church leaders and ordinary Christian Lisu I talked to during my fieldwork in Nujiang showed their knowledge of the origin of *ddoqmuq mutgguat* hymns and the repertoire's authority and unchangeability.

²⁵ Nujiangzhou Tongjiju (Nujiang Bureau of Statistics) and Nujiangzhou Diliuci Quanguo Renkou

Nujiang is a very special region, due partly to its strategic position in the country's frontier areas; partly to its higher percentage of ethnic minorities in the overall population (87.65 percent) compared to other minority autonomous prefectures; and partly to its isolated environment and insufficient farmland, making it one of China's most impoverished areas. By 2012, the local peasants' average per capita income was 2,773 yuan a year, one-third of the national average.²⁶ Nearly 240,000 poor people constituted more than half of the overall agricultural population.²⁷

Pucha Bangongshi (Sixth National Census Office of Nujiang), "2010 nian Nujiangzhou diliuci quanguo renkou pucha zhuyao shuju gongbao (Bulletin on the main data of Nujiang Prefecture's 2010 sixth national census)," last modified July 20, 2011, http://xxgk.yn.gov.cn/Z_M_001/Info_Detail.aspx?DocumentKeyID=CD68B7D886F540BC8005ED7F3CEA6BF1 (accessed July 30, 2017).

²⁶ As of March 2018, one U.S. dollar is approximately equal to 6.31 Chinese yuan.

²⁷ Yang Yueping and Xinhuashe (Xinhua News Agency), "Yu yiban nongye renkou pinkun, Yunnan qidong Nujiang zhengzhou fupin gongjian (One-half of the agricultural population is living at the poverty line; Yunnan has started the priority poverty alleviation program throughout Nujiang)," December 2, 2013, http://yn.yunnan.cn/html/2013-12/02/content_2980842.htm (accessed July 31, 2017).



Figure 1: The Nujiang Great Valley, December 2012. (All photos used in this article were taken by the author.)

The spread of Christianity among the Lisu people in western Yunnan can be traced back to 1909, when James O. Fraser first entered Yunnan via Myanmar's northern city of Bhamo and started to evangelize the Lisu in Tengchong.²⁸ CIM missionaries founded their first station in Nujiang in 1928.²⁹

In spite of persecution by the local Nationalist government, the Lisu church grew in strength. By 1949, more than 20,000 Christians (19.3 percent of the regional Lisu

and Nu population) were affiliated with 213 churches.³⁰ But the defeat of the Nationalist Party in the Chinese Civil War and the subsequent founding of the Communist government in 1949 disrupted all missionary work in China, leading to severe religious suppression between the 1950s and 1970s. Since the 1980s, Christianity has gradually revived in Nujiang. In 1999, there were a total of 88,000 local Christians.³¹ By 2012, that number had increased to about 100,000, of whom approximately 80,000 were Lisu—that is, over one-third of the Nujiang Lisu population.³²

²⁸ Lisuzu Jianshi Bianxiezhu (Editorial group for *A Brief History of the Lisu*), *Lisuzu Jianshi* (A brief history of the Lisu) (Kunming: Yunnan Minzu Chubanshe, 2008), 62.

²⁹ The CIM missionaries were not the only ones working among the Nujiang Lisu in the 1930s. The Assemblies of God built strong Christian communities to the north of Liwudi Church in what is now around Shangpa Town in Fugong County. In 1940, the Morse missionary family from the Church of Christ moved their mission base from the Lancang River into Nujiang's Gongshan and remained there throughout World War II.

³⁰ Lisuzu Jianshi Bianxiezhu, *Lisuzu Jianshi*, 63.

³¹ Ibid., 208.

³² Feng Rongxin, "Nujiangzhou Jidujiao qingkuang huibao tigang" (Draft report on the situation of Christianity in Nujiang) (unpublished manuscript, 2012).

Despite the church's steady growth since the 1980s, Lisu Christianity has been virtually invisible in the official government media. According to one reporter from *Nujiang Newspaper*, the prefecture's Communist Party newspaper, even pictures of church architecture were avoided.³³ In the late 1990s, Lisu hymn singing was stripped of its Christian association and refashioned as a farmer chorus tradition, with "ethnic authenticity" and "artistic value" as selling points.

The performance of Lisu farmer choruses was first used to promote local ethnic culture in the post-2000 tourism boom. Thereafter they became a propaganda tool in the government's effort to imbue Christians with greater love of the Party/nation than of their God—part of a nationwide campaign known as "red songs entering church" (*hongge jin jiaotang*) celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 2011. While the state successfully appropriated one singing voice of the Christian Lisu, a few young Lisu songwriters not only presented a self-conscious religious and cultural identification with their Burmese peers by imitating the Burmese Lisu way of making *mutgguat ssat*, but engaged in their own Christian music writing and recording outside the government apparatus.³⁴

³³ Personal communication with Yu Ruishan.

³⁴ A similar dynamics of minority Christian music production outside the mainstream realm is presented in Heather MacLachlan's study of the Burmese popular music industry. She discovers that there has existed a parallel to *tain-yin-tha* (ethnic minority groups or national races) recording industry in Burma aiming to support minority languages, cultures, and religions, in contrast to the mainstream industry's focus on making money. According to MacLachlan, minority-language recordings circulate primarily in minority communities and travel easily over the border into refugee camps. For further information, see MacLachlan, *Burma's Pop Music Industry: Creators, Distributors, Censors* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 166–67.

The first Lisu *mutgguat ssat* recording, a cassette tape album titled *Silije Niqchit Mutgguat* (Songs of Deep Yearning), was made in the 1970s. It comprised 34 lyrical ballads featuring two-part singing over a solo acoustic guitar, most of which were written and performed by Joni Morse (singer) and Bobby Morse (guitarist), members of the missionary family.³⁵ The repertoire included both Christian songs and secular ballads on topics such as homesickness and friendship. For example, the widely known *Mileix matdda a'ma Mulashiddei* (Unforgettable Mulashidi) expresses two singers' longing for their former home village in Myanmar's northernmost town of Putao.

Silije Niqchit Mutgguat caused a sensation in Lisu Christian communities in Myanmar, Thailand, and India when the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) first aired songs from the album in 1973.³⁶ Inspired by *Silije* and other non-Lisu recordings available at the time, Burmese Lisu started to compose and record their own Lisu songs in the late 1970s.³⁷ WaNyi Ahwu, Bbiat SaMoeYi, and Cao Rubby are some of the renowned first-generation Burmese Lisu musicians devoted to making Lisu-language albums. Over the

³⁵ The remaining family members are still working among the Lisu and other ethnic groups in northern Thailand. Eugene Morse was the eldest surviving Western missionary formerly missionizing among the Lisu by the time he passed away in May 2015. His oldest son, David Morse, not only designed a computer font for the Lisu Christian script but also made great efforts in translating and compiling Lisu hymns.

³⁶ Interview with Ahdi Mark, director of Gospel Broadcasting Mission in Chiang Mai, on February 19, 2014; Jin Jie, "Jidujiao Chuanbo dui Lisuzu Yuyan Wenzhi jiqi Shiyong de Yingxiang Yanjiu" (Research on the impact of the spread of Christianity on the Lisu language and its use) (Ph.D. diss., Yunnan University, Kunming, 2013), 177.

³⁷ In addition to the sources cited in note 37 above, interview with WaNyi Ahwu, one of the most renowned Burmese Lisu musicians since the 1970s, on December 17, 2017.

years Myanmar has become the center of Lisu studio music production, and Burmese-produced *mutgguat ssat* recordings served as a primary source for the Nujiang Lisu to learn songwriting. Second-generation Burmese Lisu musicians, especially those who grew up with the radio and music ministries of Myanmar Agape Christian Mission, founded by Dr. Lazarus Fish in 2002, became role models for many Lisu Christian musicians in present-day Nujiang.³⁸

From the 1980s to the 1990s, tape recordings were the primary tool for the Nujiang Christian Lisu to appreciate and learn Burmese-produced *mutgguat ssat*, although not many families could afford a tape recorder at the time. When Ci Luheng, a musical young man in his early thirties, organized his fellow villagers to make Nujiang's first Lisu *mutgguat ssat* album in 2000, only simple recording technologies were available. In one video, the original soundtrack of the Burmese-produced album *Jjisu nailgua Colail* (Youths in Christ) is played on a tape recorder while the group dances and sings along. Nowadays, most *mutgguat ssat* recordings are produced in private studios equipped with a personal computer, a sound-mixing console and a microphone for audio recording, a DLR camera and a digital video camcorder for filming, and inexpensive (or pirated) audio/video editing software.

By the end of my fieldwork in July 2014, I had visited four private studios engaged in the production of *mutgguat ssat* DVDs. Unlike home studios in Myanmar run by Christian Lisu musicians, Nujiang's private studio producers/owners were neither musicians nor

professionally trained sound engineers. They had to teach themselves the skills necessary to produce a DVD, such as recording engineering, post-editing, graphic design, and video-taping. The local government did not strictly prohibit the production and circulation of those recordings. The only practical action was an occasional spot-check of farmers' markets in Fugong. I witnessed one such raid on July 25, 2014, when officials from the Fugong Comprehensive Law Enforcement Brigade for the Cultural Market confiscated 192 pirated DVDs from a street stall in Shangpa.

The post-2000 impact of mass media on Lisu Christian singing in Nujiang was significantly broader. Like the rest of the country, Nujiang experienced a rapid growth in mobile phone and Internet use. In 2008, there were only 4,671 cellphone and 7,475 Internet subscribers in Nujiang, representing, respectively, 0.9 percent and 1.47 percent of the prefecture's permanent residents.³⁹ By the end of 2014, those figures had increased to 305,000 cellphone and 55,000 Internet subscribers.⁴⁰ It is worth mentioning that many of Nujiang's rural dwellers only use the Internet service on their smartphones. While Facebook and Twitter are still not readily accessible to

³⁹ Nujiangzhou Tongjiju (Nujiang Bureau of Statistics), "2008 nian Nujiangzhou guomin jingji he shehui fazhan tongji gongbao (Statistical bulletin of Nujiang Prefecture's 2008 national economic and social development)," last modified on January 19, 2010, <http://www.tjcn.org/tjgb/25yn/3042.html> (accessed July 31, 2017).

⁴⁰ Nujiangzhou Tongjiju (Nujiang Bureau of Statistics) and Guojia Tongjiju Nujiang Diaochaui (Nujiang investigation team of the National Bureau of Statistics), "2014 nian Nujiangzhou guomin jingji he shehui fazhan tongji gongbao (Statistical bulletin of Nujiang Prefecture's 2014 national economic and social development)," last modified on March 20, 2015, http://www.stats.yn.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/201702/t201702_03_675191.html (accessed July 31, 2017).

³⁸ The information about the second-generation Burmese Lisu musicians draws from my recent fieldwork in Myanmar between December 15, 2017 and January 31, 2018.

people living in China, Weixin, known as WeChat in the English-speaking world, has been the country's leading social media platform since 2011.⁴¹ WeChat was not widely popular among the Christian Lisu I encountered in 2014, but in 2016 I observed a rise in the formation of online groups and the circulation of *mutgguat ssat* recordings there. WeChat-based Christian activities have so far proceeded with little interference from the authorities, in contrast to the situation among the Islamic Uyghurs.⁴²

Transforming the Materiality of Lisu Christian Singing

In this section I attend to the materiality of Lisu Christian singing in the relationship of *mutgguat ssat* Christian pop, *ddoqmuq mutgguat* hymns, and their respective media (DVDs and hymnal), which enable the Lisu people to engage in a more self-conscious vocal practice.

A comparison of the materiality of the two singing voices starts with the sound itself. Voice quality is probably the foremost marker of the distinction. The act of singing from the Lisu hymnal, *Sipat dail Ddoqmuq du Mutgguat*, gives priority to text over vocal articulation.

Thus *ddoqmuq mutgguat* singing tends to be emotionally neutral, loud, and solemn, with little change of dynamics, whereas the voice of *mutgguat ssat* is often lyrical and sentimental.

With the introduction of imported *mutgguat ssat* recordings, the Christian Lisu in Nujiang have become more concerned with sound quality. On the one hand, they accord priority to the singer (*gguaaxsu*) over the songwriter (*bbosu*); on the other hand, they have their own ideas about what constitutes a pleasant sound. Most of the songwriters, vendors, and ordinary Christian Lisu I talked to preferred the Burmese-produced *mutgguat ssat* sound because the majority of Nujiang-produced recordings rely heavily on keyboard synthesizer, generating heavy bass beats that often drown out the singers' voices. Moreover, they insisted that the Burmese Lisu had better voices and played the guitar more beautifully. The commonly used Lisu term for a "good sound" is *nasa ssair*. When *nasa* is used to compare different sound qualities, it can be translated as "polished" or "refined." The frequent combination of *nasa* and *gaqchit* (literally, "cheerful") in *mutgguat ssat* lyrics or in descriptions of their sounds indicates that a good *mutgguat ssat* tune is one that makes people euphoric, in contrast to the solemn emotion cultivated through congregational hymn singing.

The materiality of the voice is also reflected in language. While the early missionaries highlighted the Lisu people's talent for four-part hymn singing in their sparse accounts, they did not mention the mediation of the printed hymnal in cultivating Lisu literacy or its influence on the making of Lisu subjectivity. David Bradley, a linguist specializing in the Tibeto-Burman language of Southeast Asia, argues that the reintroduction of Christian script in the 1980s facilitated the

⁴¹ In January 2011, Tencent (Tengxun in Chinese), the Chinese IT giant, launched the smartphone app WeChat. By 2016 it had become the media of choice for some 768 million users worldwide, 50 percent of whom spent 90 minutes a day on WeChat. For further information, see the website of the Official WeChat Blog; "The 2016 WeChat Data Report," last modified on December 29, 2016, <http://blog.wechat.com/2016/12/29/the-2016-wechat-data-report/> (accessed July 28, 2017).

⁴² Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa observed that from mid-2013 to mid-2014, a million Uyghurs inside Xinjiang and in the diaspora were using WeChat; however, the security forces implemented a crackdown among the Uyghur users in summer 2014; see http://www.soundislamchina.org/?page_id=1277 (accessed June 27, 2017).

rise of transnationalism and Lisu identity.⁴³ Throughout my investigation in Nujiang, I found that most Christians, regardless of their educational backgrounds, had a certain degree of Lisu literacy. By contrast, non-Christian Lisu often claimed that they could not read or write Old Lisu.⁴⁴ The media for the cultivation of literacy through singing are no longer limited to printed hymnals, but also include *mutgguat ssat* DVDs. In these videos, lyrics written in Christian script appear at the bottom of the screen, often in changing colors to guide the singer, a practice known as “karaoke style.” Despite their distinct vocal qualities, both *ddoqmuq mutgguat* and *mutgguat ssat* are sung in Lisu exclusively—in contrast to most of the official media products presenting essentialized Lisu culture for non-Lisu consumption—thus becoming the recognized voice symbolizing the singers’ Christian status.

The process of producing voices through bodily actions with particular technologies offers another important way of understanding the materiality of the voice. In Nujiang’s *mutgguat ssat* singing, voice, dancing body, and instrumental playing, either live or recorded on DVDs, often coexist in a single performance. The creation of *daibbit* dance has expanded the aural dimension of voice to include body language. Dancers usually do not

sing while dancing to *mutgguat ssat* recordings. Early videos show that in the early 2000s, dance movements simply combined a basic walking pace with hand gestures interpreting a few key words of the lyrics. Only in the last few years have more decorative motions, such as twirling, gymnastics routines, and formation, been added.

Instruments are the other mediating technology that has enriched the voice of Lisu Christian singing. The use of modern guitars not only adds an intricate layer of “voice” to the vocal, but also endows it with culturally specific ideologies. By imitating the sound of *qibbe*, the traditional Lisu four-stringed plucked lute, both acoustic and electric guitars have become symbolic media to project Christianity with Lisu identity in the voice of *mutgguat ssat*. The compositional strategy of implanting a precomposed, stereotypical *qibbe* melody has been more commonly adopted by the Burmese Lisu. For instance, in his signature song “Lisu,” Ahci, one of the most renowned Burmese Lisu songwriters, added a 30-second introduction, a 16-second interlude, and a 15-second coda, all played on an electric guitar, with melodic and rhythmic patterns similar to those heard in a traditional *qailngot* tune.⁴⁵ A similar use of the “*qibbe* sound” can be heard at the beginning of the 30-minute Lisu Christian program broadcast

⁴³ David Bradley and Maya Bradley, “Standardisation of Transnational Minority Languages in Asia: Lisu and Lahu,” *Bulletin suisse de linguistique appliquée* 69/1 (1999): 75–93.

⁴⁴ Similarly, the creation of the Christian “Pollard script” brought literacy to the Hua Miao along with religion, and the script is part of what the third- or fourth-generation Christians regard as “tradition,” as intrinsically “Miao” as those state-approved cultural markers of Hua Miao ethnicity. See Norma Diamond, “Christianity and the Hua Miao: Writing and Power,” in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 157.

⁴⁵ *Qailngot* (literally, “tunes for kicking feet”) is a type of Lisu traditional dance featuring a man and woman moving forward and backward and chasing each other. For further information, see Zhang Xingrong, “Lisuzu yuanshengtai yinyue (The original ecological music of the Lisu),” in *Yunnan Yuanshengtai Minzu Yinyue* (The original ecological music of Yunnan’s nationalities) (Beijing: Central Conservatory Press, 2006), 105–06; and Yang Yuanji, “Lisuzu yinyue wenhua (Musical culture of the Lisu),” in *Sanjiang Bingliu Qiyu Yinyue Wenhua Dagan* (Musical cultures of the Three Parallel Rivers region of Yunnan), ed. Zhang Xingrong (Shenzhen: Zhongguo Changpian Shenzhen Gongsi, 2012), 327–28.

daily by the FEBC. The reason for this, as two program editors explained to me, is that “the sound of *qibbe* has been widely considered as a signifier of Lisu culture—we [Christians] do not play the traditional *qibbe* anymore, but we recognize its sound. So anyone would know that it is a Lisu program upon hearing it.”⁴⁶

Finally, this inseparable Christian voice trio is packaged for viewing on DVD screens. While many Burmese-produced videos feature a well-acted story line or live *mutgguat ssat* singing, staged in a manner similar to a typical rock concert, a large number of videos produced in Nujiang are documentations of church events that alternate between landscape views and close-up shots of the actual events, especially the performance of female *daibbit* dances and other social scenes outside the rituals. The visual representation of Lisu Christianity is now fraught with quotidian details of people’s religious lives.

Mediated Voice: The Religious Use of DVD Recordings

The mediation of DVD recordings in the singing practice of the Christian Lisu is inseparable from the Lisu people’s interactions with them. The liturgical form of the Sunday noon worship service is a perfect example of how DVDs are used in most ritualistic gatherings and mediate the juxtaposition of two contrasting singing voices. A short hymn singing announces the start of the service as noon approaches. After the opening prayer, the assigned song leader (*mutgguat hot’su*) leads the entire congregation in singing two or three *ddoqmuq mutgguat* hymns, which are often, but not always, textually related to the sermon of the day. After the first hymn singing, the

congregation stands and sings a short “Doxology” (*Sayo Titggoxddeit Xelggetddu*), which is followed by the second prayer and the first musical profession of faith, a section of semi-organized voluntary singing dedicated to God, mostly featuring *mutgguat ssat* singing. The names of performers and songs are then announced by the service moderator (*xiirddu hot’su*), and one by one each singing group or individual singer steps onto the front platform. This is when the amplified voice of *mutgguat ssat* DVDs permeates the church space. Their mediation, however, does not distract the congregation from focusing on the sounds as personal live worship and praise. The electronic amplification ends when the singers/dancers conclude the performance by saying, “*Wusa reitqet dail xalmo*” (Thanks to the grace of God). Then comes the sermon in Lisu, which lasts at least half an hour, depending on the preacher’s oratorical style. Another congregational singing, a closing prayer, and a short final singing conclude the worship service.

The coexistence of two singing traditions in the same ritual context connects the missionary past with the present experience, reflecting a diachronic scene of gospel singing. The following analysis shows how DVDs and other technologies associated with *mutgguat ssat* singing and production comprised part of the everyday lives of the Christian Lisu and how that engagement produced a particular experience of Christian living for them.

It was the rest time after supper at the Gongshan Christian Training Center in Cikai Township of Gongshan County on July 15, 2014. Some students were busy doing laundry in the yard, some were reviewing passages of scripture in the makeshift classroom, and a few were playing basketball. I was attracted to the guitar playing from the student dormitory on my way to the priest’s home. I walked into the

⁴⁶ Interview with Ahdi Mark and SaMoeYi on February 19, 2014.

room and saw a male teenager sitting by the window, with three other students standing around. I stood aside, trying not to disturb the guitarist's practice. Then unexpectedly he started to play the melody of *Qibbe Nitba* (Two Guitars), a *mutgguat ssat* oldie featuring *Silije* song's narrative lyrical singing over an acoustic guitar. He told me that he had first heard the song on a recording in his father's VCD collection. He liked it so much that he learned to play the guitar part from the recording.

Soon it was time for the daily *daibbit* rehearsal before the evening study. Summoned by the music group leader, a short, thin woman named Ahna (an alias), most students quickly walked into the classroom, standing apart. Ahna played a moderate-paced *mutgguat ssat* song in duple time. The students danced to the tune, following Ahna's lead. The vigorous amplified sound constituted the vital ambient environment in which the entire class danced to the same song played ten times over without interruption, as the DVD player was set on repeat mode (see Fig. 2). After the rehearsal, Ahna explained to me that they were practicing this choreography for the upcoming graduation ceremony. According to her, the *daibbit* practice was not part of the school curriculum, but most students wanted to devote their break time to more musical activities. "Dancing to the *mutgguat ssat* recording together is probably the most feasible way to do it while keeping everyone engaged," she said. "This has become part of our daily routine through which we can have a direct communication with the Lord without teachers' help. Moreover, we could teach the choreography to the people of our villages when we go back."⁴⁷

While *ddoqmuq mutgguat* hymn singing is usually live and unrehearsed, such religious use

of DVD recordings for the *daibbit* dance practice outside the ritual context can promote a kind of heightened collectivity and enhance social interactions among a certain group of people at a particular moment. This agrees with Thomas Turino's observation about one effect of participatory dance performance: "When the performance is going well, differences among participants melt away as attention is focused on the seamlessness of sound and motion. At such moments, moving together and sounding together in a group creates a direct sense of being together and of deeply felt similarity, and hence identity, among participants."⁴⁸ Similarly, *daibbit* was a catalyst for women's increasingly active participation in church activities (see Fig. 3). From the perspective of gender norms, the mediality of DVDs reinforced women's visibility as dancers in *mutgguat ssat* singing. Men primarily worked as songwriters, arrangers, and producers, and most instrumentalists were also men.⁴⁹

The Nujiang Christian Lisu have been recording *mutgguat ssat* for a variety of purposes. One of the most common is to record singles in the studio for the purpose of teaching or accompanying *daibbit* dance in church activities. Pu Yicai, a prolific Nujiang Lisu songwriter, explained:

I would like to record my single songs for the convenience of teaching *daibbit*, because with pre-recorded music I would not need to sing and focus on teaching dancers the choreographed routine. Second, our church [Zibo Church] would be often invited to give a performance in other churches' activities. I wanted to sing live while playing. But you know, very often it was inconvenient to carry a keyboard along. So preferably I could have the

⁴⁷ Informal conversation with Ahna on July 15, 2014.

⁴⁸ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 43.

⁴⁹ Such a remarkable gender divide is almost exactly the same as that in the practice of Lisu traditional music.

music pre-recorded and only take the recording with me for the performance.⁵⁰

The two recording sessions I observed at Li Xiaohua's Guangming studio were private recordings of single songs.⁵¹ When I first visited his studio on June 16, 2013, I came across two brothers recording a new song composed by the younger brother to be used in the graduation ceremony to express his heartfelt thanks to the Bible school teachers and God. I encountered a similar case when I visited Li's studio for the second time on June 19, 2014.

The female pastoral staff member from the nearby Latudi Church and her husband were recording singles specially written for the forthcoming all-female training in church ministries. She had been invited to teach music and dance in the workshop. "The music to be recorded today, together with my favorite Burmese *mutgguat ssat* singles, will be burned into one DVD for use in class," she said.

Some groups in Nujiang have self-produced their own music DVDs. The youth group Small Twigs, based in Fugong, comprised eight people aged 18 to 32 who were enthusiastic about producing *mutgguat ssat* DVDs just for fun. Yu Youpu, in his early twenties, is the singer-songwriter who wrote most of the songs for group's first two DVDs. The first was made in 2013 and the second was being produced in June 2014, when I first got in touch with the group. I spent most of my time with them on the day they went out shooting videos for the forthcoming album. Li Xiaohua himself organized a group of Fugong-based Christian Lisu to

make *mutgguat ssat* albums under the name "Titnit Titna" (One Mind, Same Root). They raised funds for the project and had produced a total of four albums by the end of 2017.

Today, another common line of business for recording studios is producing memorial DVDs of important church events. Relatively affluent churches that have money to spare will ask a producer they are acquainted with to videotape the entire activity and produce a DVD. In addition to the invited producer, several other people are sometimes involved in videotaping the event. In Latudi Church's 2014 New Year celebration, four people made recordings during the performance: one was an ordinary villager with a small digital video camcorder; one was a young person from the Fugong Television Station with professional equipment; one was the invited producer; and I was making a fieldwork recording for personal use. When I attended the 2013 Easter celebration at Yiludi Church in Lishadi Township, I noticed that the memorial DVDs were ready for sale on the day of the last service.

⁵⁰ Interview with Pu Yicai on June 18, 2014, translated by Ge Sanhua.

⁵¹ Li Xiaohua is the first producer I talked to in Nujiang in May 2013. He is a Nu Christian from Fugong's Zilijia Township and has been running the Guangming studio since 2010.



Figure 2: Students rehearsing *daibbit* dance in the make-shift classroom in the Gongshan Christian Training Center on July 15, 2014.



Figure 3: Attendees of Lumadeng Township Women's Church Ministry Training Class (July 1–10, 2014), rehearsing for the graduation performance on July 8, 2014.

Besides church gatherings, local farmers' markets are the main places where pirated *mutgguat ssat* DVDs are sold. At Shangpa's Saturday market on June 21, 2014, four sidewalk vendors and one registered corner store—Han Chinese, Christian Lisu, and non-Christian Lisu—were selling pirated DVDs, including a large number of *mutgguat ssat* recordings. According to the store owner, most DVDs duplicated from the Burmese-produced albums were numbered for the convenience of trading, as the album titles were often hard to remember for those non-Lisu businessmen. If someone saw a DVD elsewhere and wanted to buy a copy, one only had to remember its number. Similarly, vendors just needed to order the best-selling “numbers” from the pirates.

These four sidewalk vendors had several things in common. First, most of the pirated DVDs they sold were packaged in simple plastic bags. While some covers had inkjet pictures of featured singers identical to those of the originals, others were blank except for the album titles written in a highlighter pen. Second, each of the vendors owned a DVD player and loudspeaker system for test-playing and attracting people. Third, all the vendors had similar DVDs for sale on that particular day, representing the average Lisu Christian's musical choices. Two types of *mutgguat ssat* DVDs had reportedly been selling particularly well. One was a compilation of songs from various early albums, the other a memorial DVD of church activities.

The Lisu Christians' religious use of studio-produced *mutgguat ssat* DVDs speaks to how the spread of mass media technologies has put cultural production into the hands of the Lisu people themselves, outside the realm of state-controlled, front-stage ethnic cultural representation. Until the completion of my

fieldwork, the proliferation of Burmese-produced Lisu Christian albums was considered a kind of religious infiltration, and the local government accelerated the speed of “sending culture to the countryside” (song wenhua xiaxiang). According to Zou Jun, the former head of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Propaganda Department of Fugong Party Committee, Fugong Stone Moon Art Troupe (Fugong Shiyueliang Yishutuan), one of the government units affiliated with the cultural bureau, has been giving performances in villages to acoustically compete with the Christian *mutgguat ssat* sound there.⁵²

For almost a century, translated, four-part *ddoqmuq mutgguat* hymns, considered unalterable and authoritative, have been the dominant singing voice in the Nujiang Lisu church. In the last two decades, however, the local Christian Lisu have recognized the transformative power of newly available media technologies and made a significant material shift to engage in more *mutgguat ssat* singing in their everyday lives, outside the ritualistic context. The concept of religion as a practice of mediation is especially suitable for understanding the contemporary significance of singing as both a marked medium and an unmarked practice of mediation in creating social integration and distinctions, and for celebrating contemporary Lisu ethnic and religious identities. Through the mediation of the concrete forms of material practice in singing, Lisu Christian heritage is no longer presented solely as something attached to the missionary past or repackaged onstage by the government into an ethnic, regional tradition, but instead is embodied in the Lisu people's everyday lives. While many Christian Lisu

⁵² Interview with Zou Jun on June 17, 2013.

have not yet become a congregation fully capable of reading the Bible, a wide range of mass-media technologies have made inroads into their lives. Four-part hymn singing has long since replaced traditional folk singing accompanied by instrumental playing and dancing in Lisu converted communities. Nonetheless, over the last two decades, the Lisu people have taken advantage of the flexibility of DVD recordings to incorporate into *mutgguat ssat* singing elements of traditional cultural forms that used to be considered inappropriate, thus producing a more genuine Lisu expression of Christianity on a daily basis.