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Traditional culture as a vehicle for Christian future-making: ethnic minority elites pioneering self-representations in northern Myanmar

Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange/Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung Multireligiöser und Multiethnischer Gesellschaften This paper explores the pioneering work for future-making by one of Myanmar's non-dominant ethnic groups. Specifically, it examines how the Christian Lisu elite strategically, and somewhat opportunistically, use 'traditional culture' to perform ethnicity against the background of their 'double-minority' status vis-à-vis the dominant populations of the (Kachin) state and (Myanmar) nation. It analyses heterogeneous social actors and conditions that have influenced a Christian elite's renewed interest in their pre-Christian *litpix* traditions, as well as the challenges involved in translating the singularity of its abstraction into various embodied forms. Central to this process is the selection, revision and standardisation of previously marginalised artefacts and practices, placing them in the *litpix* domain independent of religion (Christianity). These embodied forms are readily tagged as ethnically Lisu whenever assertion of difference is needed. I argue that the emerging *litpix* space has become a significant discursive site relating to Lisu self-representations of modern selves and relations. It is also crucial in the Christian elite's efforts to gain competitive political, economic and cultural resources for the future development of the Burmese Lisu (especially the younger generation) while maintaining the church's important influence on public and private life in the Lisu Christian community.

Key words Lisu, Myanmar, Christianity, culture (*litpix*), elite

Introduction

On 14–17 December 2017, Lisu Protestants celebrated their Literature Centenary Jubilee in Pumatati of Myitkyina, the capital city of Myanmar's northern Kachin State. Local community members, Lisu guests outside Myanmar, government officials and leaders of Kachin subgroups gathered together to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the creation of the Lisu Christian script, known as the 'Fraser script'. Central to the festivities were daytime worship services, transnational fellowship meetings, cultural shows and evening music concerts. People could visit the business area, which was packed with trading stalls selling food, Lisu traditional clothes, handicrafts and Lisu-language music albums. Between 2012 and 2014, I conducted fieldwork on the church singing and socio-religious change of the Lisu in Yunnan's northwestern Nujiang Prefecture. That doctoral work set the path of my postdoctoral book project on how transnational sound production, circulation and consumption become integral to the Lisu perception and practice of faith on the China–Myanmar border. The conceptualisation of the

book benefited from an intensive 40-day field trip (December 2017–February 2018) in Myanmar's Kachin State and Yangon. Therefore, I was fortunate to attend the Jubilee that drew the Lisu from around the globe during that fieldwork in addition to my interviews with Lisu media practitioners and observations of their studio production.

I was intrigued by an apparent paradox I had seen in the Jubilee. It was advertised as a cultural event, but was permeated by Christian formality. It seemed to have provided an opportunity for Lisu participants to share their Christian identity while having consciously incorporated traditional artefacts and musical traditions to articulate ethnic identity. This presented a contrast to what I had observed in Nujiang, where most Christian Lisu still followed the unwritten rule of abstaining from animistic worship, traditional performing arts and other traditional practices deemed inappropriate.¹ Moreover, '*litpix*',² a Lisu term that was unfamiliar to me, was frequently used to refer to 'culture' during my conversation with Lisu participants and in the church and political leaders' public speech. It appeared in the name of the Jubilee's organising committee, the *Lisu Tot'et be Litpix Zzujei Yong* (Lisu literature and culture committee). Pummati, the Lisu land purchased in around 2013 for hosting community events, was appraised as '*Lisu Litpix Mut*' (the land of Lisu culture). During my time in Myanmar, most people I talked to – Christian leaders of various domains, media practitioners, Bible school teachers and students, and performers of Lisu cultural dance – used 'tradition' interchangeably with 'culture' to explain to me the meaning of '*litpix*'. But when I asked them to articulate what 'culture' stands for, they would turn to specific artefacts, performing arts and customs for reference.

Why is there a renewed interest among the Burmese Lisu in their pre-Christian traditions? How does the notion of *litpix* come into use, and for what purposes? In this paper, I examine a Christian Lisu elite's attempt to gain access to competitive political, economic and cultural resources to achieve future-making goals through their positive engagement with traditional culture for the performance of self-representation. In particular, I look into *litpix*'s operations and efficacies as markers of distinction and the ways that this relationship is articulated in practice against the background of the Lisu people's 'double-minority' status both within Kachin State and in the Burmese nation. As I will show, the Lisu elite's future-making attempt is not only for the development of the future generation but also for their greater involvement.

The Lisu are a Tibeto-Burman speaking highland group of over one million who reside across the mountainous areas of southwestern China and Southeast Asia.³ Over 100 years of migration from western Yunnan southwards to Myanmar, Thailand and elsewhere, the transformative social experiences of the Lisu have been shaped by different factors. The classic anthropological work highlighted the role of new economic conditions in transforming the social structures (Gilligly 2006) and gender relations (Hutheesing 1990) of the small Lisu community in northern Thailand. In

¹ Some Chinese Lisu explained to me the reason why they were not 'qualified' to convert to Christianity was that they were not willing to stop singing traditional folk songs or quit smoking and drinking alcohol.

² Romanisation of Lisu terms is according to the phonetic system adopted in Xu Lin *et al.* (1985). All Lisu terms (except personal names) are italicised so that they can be distinguished from the Romanisation of other non-Lisu and non-English words.

³ China refers to the People's Republic of China throughout this article.

Lisu-populated areas of the China–Myanmar border, one important factor for social change has been conversion from animistic practices (Durrenberger 1975) to Protestantism since the early 20th century. Despite constraints facing the Lisu as marginalised members of society, they constantly attempt to establish a resilient path to becoming self-positioned subjects as an autonomous but compliant people.

In Myanmar, where Buddhism is deeply intertwined with the country's culture and the Bamar-ethnic majority, about 90% of the 500,000 Lisu population self-identified as Christians by December 2017.⁴ Kachin State hosts the largest Burmese Lisu population (more than 200,000). It is also home to several other small ethnic groups defining themselves in contrast to the dominating Bamar and Jinghpaw populations yet being part of the Kachin collective affiliation as their primary marker of socio-political identities. In 1955, the national parliament recognised six sub-groups of the Kachin – the Jinghpaw, Lawngwaw (Maru), Nung-Rawang, Lisu, Zaiwa (Atsi) and Lachik – and grouped them under one umbrella.⁵ The word 'Kachin' started to serve as an ethno-political category. It is against this historical background that I explore the recent formation of the *litpax* space by the Christian Lisu elite and how it becomes a significant discursive site relating to Lisu self-representations of modern selves and relations.

I should pause to clarify how I use the concept of 'elite' among the Lisu. I use 'elite' to refer to both long-established church leaders, and emerging leaders of ethnic organisations, politicians and other sociocultural activists. Akin to the place of the village chief (*vutddut reitsu*) and animist priest (*nitpat*) in Lisu traditional socio-political organisation, they are regarded by the Christian community members as 'leaders' who can guide community development based on their authorities in religious and social knowledge. My Lisu interlocutors identified three groups of Christian elite: church leader, cultural leader and political leader. The so-called church leader – comprised of priests, senior preachers and pastoral team members at various levels – has long been in a monopoly 'elite' position among the Burmese Lisu in the sense that institutionalised churches of five denominations have been wielding influence over Lisu public and private life since the latter half of the 20th century. The church leader also constitutes the intellectual authority and remains in control of printed material and public speech, as well as paradigmatic shifts in socio-religious practice. The emergence of leadership in cultural and political domains over the last three decades is a result of a Christian elite's engagement with changing national economic, social and political circumstances and interaction with the forces of neighbouring Kachin and Burmese populations.

General assumptions persist that those who are the 'elites' must control material resources (Scott 2008), maintain tight closed networks (Mills 2000 [1956]) and face confrontations with other social groups (see also the introduction of this issue). The Christian Lisu elite in the non-Western, non-industrial context challenge these assumptions. First, their elite position arises not out of any form of superiority but through serving as the community advocate for their 'non-elite' people (see also Rumsby, this issue). Second, the foundation of Lisu elite status relies on their interactions, rather than confrontation, with superior groups such as the Jinghpaw and Burmese leaders.

⁴ Information was obtained in conversations with some church leaders in Myanmar.

⁵ For more on the historical formation of 'Kachin' and its ambiguous meaning, see Mandy Sadan's relevant chapter in *Ethnic diversity in Burma* (2007: 34–76).

The concept of elite, from this perspective, is dependent more on relationships (political, religious, etc.) between (elite) groups than it is on specific qualifications. This echoes the view of Salverda and Skovgaard-Smith's recent article (2018) that the status of elites are both contested and attributed by people they interact with and relate to. Third, Lisu practice exemplifies how 'the elites ... are adapted and altered under the influence of social changes' (Salverda and Abbink 2013: 10), as new leadership emerged out of religious authority.

In the analyses that follow, I examine through what kind of politics the state, religion, ethnicity and other actors possibly influence the Christian Lisu elite's renewed interest in their pre-Christian *litpix* traditions, as well as the challenges involved in translating the singularity of its abstraction into various embodied forms through viable projects. Central to this process is the selection, revision and standardisation of previously marginalised traditional artefacts and practices in the Christian community which are readily tagged as ethnically Lisu when assertion of difference is needed. I argue that the construction of a specifically *litpix* space independent of religion was crucial in a Christian Lisu elite's attempt to gain access to political, economic and cultural resources and to legitimise claims to rights for survival and future development of the Lisu while maintaining the church's predominant influence in the faith community.

Ethnicity and boundaries in Kachin State

Complicated ethnic relations in Myanmar have been one of the major issues to which scholars ascribe the country's long-term political struggle (Gravers 2007; Steinberg 2011). Myanmar is a Buddhist country dominated by the Bamar (approximately 65%), with diverse peoples remaining. Christians in Myanmar makes up less than 10% of the population. Many of the country's ethnic minorities are Christian, including the Christian-dominated Kachin. Accordingly, inter-ethnic tension and conflict between the Bamar and many of these minority groups often unfold along with religious encounters back to the colonial period (Edwards 2021). The concern about Christian minorities' loyalty has been a key factor of Burmese Buddhists' hostility towards Christianity; as a Burmese scholar recently wrote, 'Buddhist nationalists typically characterise Christianity as a Western religion and accuse Burmese Christians of being disloyal to their own people and country' (Mang 2016: 157).

As one of the eight major 'national races' classified by the British colonisers, the 'Kachin' is originally a collective term for administration over the region that historically stretched from Northern Shan State to most northern Myitkyina. Officially identified as consisting of six subgroups since independence in 1948, the term 'Kachin' acquired new meaning as an ethno-political category during Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party government (1962–1988). The Kachin Independence Organisation and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) were founded in the 1960s to support the Jinghpaw-dominated Kachin ethno-nationalist movement against the socialist government, even if there were subgroups who had 'less demands for independence from the state' (Sadan 2007: 57). The 1989 name change of the country from Burma to Myanmar signified a new national framework of ethnic relations in service of creating a sense of unified nation. This is considered as the newly founded military government, State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC 1988–1997)'s attempt to be inclusive of diverse groups and to distance themselves from the colonial history associated with

the name 'Burma'. The ensuing announcement of a total of 135 ethnic groups served as the foundation for a particular idea of Burmese nationalism. The following State Peace and Development Council (SPDC 1997–2011) proceeded to enforce their version of 'Myanmarness' through sponsoring the preservation of the pre-colonial court culture to create one uncontested national history for their legitimacy (Douglas 2007).

The Kachin's long-lasting confrontation with the central government was paralleled and reinforced by projects aimed at creating one official Kachin history and culture, at the expense of the distinct histories and cultures of its internal subgroups. The Kachin Literature and Culture Association was founded in the 1960s by Yangon-based Jinghpaw students (Sadan 2013: 250, 326). Representations of Kachin ethnicity were then controlled by the Christian Jinghpaw leaders' reinvention of an oral mythology that not only confirmed a nationalist discourse of Kachin kinship but also highlighted the superiority of the Jinghpaw (Robinne 2009). Jinghpaw traditional culture then became a primary political symbol for the Kachin collective identity. The evolution of the manau festival is an echo of such history. Mandy Sadan (2013) has traced the transformative shift in its production, circulation and consumption from a one-day community dance performed around a set of wooden posts and hosted by British officials by the end of the 1920s, to the government-sponsored event since then and the nationalist manau folklore since 1961 where the six manau posts become a modern symbol for the unity of the six sub-groups. The Kachin Lisu have tended to perform allegiance to their designated affiliation for political legitimacy as part of the Kachin and Christian solidarity.⁶ There is perhaps no better example than the Lisu participation in the manau festival, although they had no such tradition alone.

While an increase of cultural maintenance projects in the socialist period established the Jinghpaw as the advocate of Kachin identity, a parallel endeavour to create a Burmese-oriented national cultural identity as new foundations of the legitimacy of SLORC-SPDC regime was facilitated by state projects in the early 1990s. These included state-sponsored conferences focusing on the value of traditional culture, revived festivals, cultural performances, new museums in each of the states and encouragements to various artistic forms (from a multitude of scholarship, summarised in Douglas 2007: 29). Following the ceasefire of 1994 between the KIA and the Burmese army, the government allowed Kachin subgroups to establish their own community organisations, commonly known as 'literature and culture committees', to study their respective histories and cultures. The government also resumed the sponsorship of the manau festivals, seeking to downplay the nature of their military-political intervention in the region by self-presenting as an advocate of Kachin 'traditional' culture (Sadan 2013). It is possible that they encouraged the cultural preservation and promotion of Kachin subgroups for similar reasons, as those groups do not only belong to the Kachin but also part of the Union of Myanmar.

For whatever causes, this opened up sociocultural spaces for minor ethnic leaders to challenge the Jinghpaw-dominated narrative of Kachin-ness and make assertion of difference. While in everyday interactions there is no practical need to publicly assert a unique identity, at certain moments ethnic distinction becomes essential for those minor groups to earn competitive rights, resources and opportunities locally. It is in

⁶ When some Christian Lisu left Yunnan province and settled down in northern Myanmar in the 1950s, they joined the Kachin Baptist Church until they founded their own Baptist churches in Myitkyina in 1976.

these national and regional trends of cultural patronage for ethno-political gain that members of the Lisu literature and culture committee, in coordination with other Christian elite groups, began to recover revised forms of traditional practices and bring them back into community public life. The surge of those Lisu cultural projects led to an emerging indigenous *litpix* space to which I will now turn.

The emergence of the *litpix* space

Within the Lisu community outside of people's everyday religious and ritual life, three significant projects have begun over more than a decade. The founding of the Central Lisu Literature and Culture Committee in Myitkyina, standardisation of selected symbols and traditional practices, and a transnational mega community festival are the intertwined projects that have contributed to the emergence of a specifically Lisu *litpix* space, which has become a significant discursive site relating to Lisu identity on the start of the transition around 2011.

Although regional informal organisations for organising educational and sociocultural activities for local communities had emerged as early as the 1950s, the Central Lisu Literature and Culture Committee (CLLCC) in Myitkyina was not officially registered with the government until 2005. By December 2017, according to one committee member, Sifu Dwe, there were 21 all-Christian committee members including a female district parliament member who worked as a coordinator between the CLLCC and the government.⁷ From the onset, the work of CLLCC was based on one principle: no discussion of ethnic relations, politics or denominational division. As Sifu Dwe explained, 'Negative report about other ethnic groups was excluded as well in our monthly newspaper. Now we have cultural, religious and political leaders. We have different roles and responsibilities, and our work should not mix.'

Christian rhetoric of a common written language, backed by the authority of churches, dominated the official discourse surrounding CLLCC's one major task: educating the younger generation to preserve and promote Lisu literature and language. The importance of writing encapsulates two crucial aspects of a distinctly Southeast Asian highland society in microcosm: Christianisation trends with Protestant missionary work among marginalised members of society (although the majority of Lisu conversion occurred earlier in China before the 1950s) and the corresponding creation of a writing system that has offered the power of literacy to them. As Charles F. Keyes writes, 'it [writing] became possible for previously preliterate peoples to point to books in their own languages as a sign that they are not inferior to dominant peoples' (1996: 290). Missionaries working among the Lisu created an orthography early in 1917. It has now become the most widely used Lisu script, known as 'book language' (*tot'et ngot*) or 'Fraser script' in honour of its creator, James O. Fraser. Since the 1980s, the reintroduction of this Christian script has facilitated the Lisu to reunify themselves as a transnational group (Bradley and Bradley 1999: 81).⁸

⁷ Information was gained during my interview with the committee member Sifu Dwe on 23 December 2017, translated by David Ahpu.

⁸ My research also supports such a view. The Lisu priests, pastoral staff members and Bible school-teachers whom I talked with all stated that most Christian Lisu, regardless of their nationality and dialect area, could use this standard Bible language to communicate.

A strong aspiration to ensure the script's sustainability was made clear in the Jubilee's theme, 'living letter' (*sailca ma tot'etzoq*). In practice, the CLLCC has set their long-term strategies, which are written on the wall of their office in Pammuti, as: (1) To protect Lisu literature and language; (2) To be willing to study Lisu literature and language; (3) To standardise Lisu language and literature; (4) To make more and all kinds of literatures in Lisu; (5) To use grammar correctly; and (6) To write all Lisu religions in Lisu language.⁹ In practice, Lisu language education currently relies on a dual teaching system: the long-term mother-tongue education provided by the church and the additional language class in the afterschool programme in Lisu-populated public schools since 2012.¹⁰ David Morse, the third generation of the American Morse missionary family and a native Lisu speaker,¹¹ devised the Advanced Lisu Script compatible with all standard typewriters and computer keyboards in the 1990s, and played a key role in helping acquire Lisu Unicode status in 2008 (Bradley 2012: 51). Two American Lisu leaders, Pastor Lawu and Ahdee Gwa, expressed most strongly at the Jubilee: 'It is so important to use high tech [Lisu Unicode] for online publication and communication. It is a key to sustain our Lisu identity in the future.'

While senior church leaders work with the CLLCC to promote faith-based literacy, they are rarely involved in the CLLCC's cultural projects. This has a lot to do with the church's lasting devaluation of pre-Christian traditions, which led to the marginalisation of traditional practices and customs in the converted Lisu community. This constructed boundary historically has been linked to a missionary discourse of opposing 'religion (Christianity)' against 'tradition'. Both of these categories in the present Christian Lisu elite's future-making endeavour undertake their appropriate roles through a high degree of non-interference in practice. This has already been seen in the interpretation of the revised form of the ritual with animist origin as a purely secular cultural performance, thus permissible in the '*litpix*' domain.

The word *lit-pix* is officially translated by the CLLCC as 'culture'. In the *English-Lisu Dictionary* (2009), edited by India-based Christian Lisu scholar Ahby Yay (Avia) and his wife Ziby, the first part of the compound, '*lit*', has multiple meanings, including law, ceremony and regulation. David Morse explained the term to me as 'ways of doing things', such as kids being forbidden to step over the older lying on the bed and ritual protocols in funerals and weddings.¹² Within the music community, a small group of Lisu media activists (musicians, singers and songwriters) have gradually acquired a special influence for their ability to mobilise community members through music. The word '*litpix*' is used often in the so-called '*cotshit mutgguat*' (songs of people) with

⁹ Translated by the author from the Lisu original texts.

¹⁰ The Ministry of Education reintroduced in June 2012 the teaching of ethnic languages – part of the new regime's educational and political reforms – in the afterschool programmes.

¹¹ The Morse family hailed from the American Church of Christ and first started to evangelise among the Lisu in Tibet and China in 1921. They left China in 1950 and continued their mission in northern Myanmar until they were ousted by the military government. Their North Burma Christian Mission has been based in northern Thailand since 1972 (Morse family nd).

¹² His explanation resembles the meaning of Akha term *zab* as 'an extensive system of rules for proper ritual and non-ritual action' (Kammerer 1996: 326); the Karen equivalent '*ta a lua la*' (custom) as a common Karen knowledge of the tradition (Gravers 2007: 231); or the Hmong term '*kevcai*', which can be translated as 'customs' or 'tradition' (Ngo 2009: 155).

lyrics aimed at educating people to be proud of being Lisu. One such representative use is in 'Lisu', an early song of Ah Si, one of the most renowned Lisu songwriters who started to write Lisu songs in 1996. The first line of this song, '*Rot litpix, rot tot'et ngot, rot reitngot dai, nu zhiqai niqma guabbei*' is a call for action that 'we [Lisu] should accept and praise our culture and language with our heart'.

Whether in the CLLCC's name or in the above song 'Lisu', '*litpix*' is used as an abstract concept. The formation of *litpix* space in practice, however, comprises a multiplicity of its embodiments. The orally transmitted *litpix* knowledge and practice used to be passed down from parents to children and from village elders to community members, and therefore multiple versions circulated. By contrast, today members of the Lisu literature and culture committees at various levels teach community members, especially the younger generation, definitive explanations of traditional artefacts and fixed forms of music and dance performance. The process of standardisation relates to the question of what counts for Lisu tradition, a question rarely publicly discussed or debated. Instead, the cultural leader automatically becomes the major agent for the education of Lisu traditions; as Michelle Zack says in her recent book on Lisu, 'Not that many young people really know about *il-li* [synonymous with *litpix*] Lisu today. They learn about culture [concrete forms of *litpix*] from the Cultural Committee, not their parents' (2017: 250).

The decision of what constitutes the *litpix* space is often appropriate to the national and global renderings of ethnicities. For example, ethnic groups are always encouraged to wear traditional costumes to assert their ethnicity in a formal manner. One important manifestation of the purpose of *litpix* patronage for performing ethnicity is seen in the new creation of a youth cultural dance. It was created in 2011 and first performed at the first Lisu transnational New Year festival in Myitkyina. The creator, Lazarus Fish, was born into a prestigious Lisu preacher family in Putao, one of the major Lisu settlements in northernmost Myanmar, and received his PhD in Theology in the United States. Fluent in Lisu, Burmese and English, Lazarus has become a leader who works across religious and cultural lines. He established Myanmar Agape Christian Mission in 2002 with multifaceted ministries including Yangon Christian College and Seminary (YCCS), a border training centre, and a media-and-media ministry.

This cultural dance incorporates two traditional dance forms, *guakiq* (literally, 'dance') and *qailngot* (translated as 'the tune played for kicking feet'). It is accompanied by a miscellany of pre-recorded music of synthesised traditional instruments in a musical style that is not traditionally associated with the Lisu. In the stage performance, young dancers of both sexes always wear fashioned ethnic costumes in the regional style of Putao. The standardised choreography lasts about 12 minutes. It features constant change of dance formation and interactions between male and female dancers, which provide the viewers with a compact sociocultural landscape of Lisu material culture, hunting and agricultural activities, and other traditional customs. These include the demonstration of the once unwelcome courtship and wine-drinking practices. The creation of this dance, as described by Lazarus, was motivated by two goals: 'to teach young people Lisu tradition' and 'to show others the uniqueness of Lisu culture'.¹³

While Lazarus did not specify if he thought the project like the creation of this youth dance was problematically changing the tradition, it caused controversy on the

¹³ Interview with Lazarus Fish in Yangon on 2 January 2018.

authorship and authenticity of Lisu dance performance, as quietly expressed during my interview with Ahki Yotha, a senior cultural leader in Putao.¹⁴ Whichever was the case, this cultural dance received special attention from the Burmese government officials who saw the live performance given by the YCCS students in the Yangon Lisu New Year celebration in 2014. Consequently, the youth dance group led by Lazarus was selected to represent Myanmar to participate in the Eighth Hué International Art Festival in April 2014 for the first time. The group was officially called 'Myanmar Culture Troupe'. Throughout the festival, Lisu dancers both asserted their 'Lisu ethnic identity' and performed their sense of national pride by holding the flag of Myanmar when performing on stage or in the parade. Lazarus and many other Christian Lisu elites perceived this trip as an official validation of their ethnic status and an acknowledgement of their commitment and loyalty to the nation. The irony of the folklorisation of traditional dance was compounded by the fact that except trained young dancers, few Lisu knew how to dance with this specific tune at the time.

While the Lisu cultural dance has proved its worth of national and global recognition, within the matrix of ethnic relations in Kachin State, the crossbow has become a decidedly modern symbol of Lisu ethnicity in distinction with the six manau posts as the emblem of solidarity of the six Kachin subgroups. The crossbow used to be an essential male tool for hunting on which the family livelihood was based. During the early 20th century, the crossbow was a Lisu archer's lethal weapon, which made the Lisu favourable combatants recruited for various wars on the China–Myanmar border. Gao Zhiying argues for the crossbow's key role in the Lisu people's 'double survival strategies': they chose to 'escape' from the central control and live by crossbow-aided economy, but they also desired to gain 'recognition' through participation in the state military operation (Gao 2018). One can witness the ubiquitous presence of the crossbow when travelling through Lisu-populated regions in contemporary China and northern Myanmar. After the crossbow culture is contextualised in Myanmar society, it emphasises more of its relationality to the political present rather than to a mysterious past. The icon and statue of the crossbow are both used to serve political agendas, such as advocating Lisu strength, asserting uniqueness among Kachin subgroups and promoting solidarity. Traditionally, gender-based taboos prevented women from using or even touching a crossbow during pregnancy or menstruation. Today, a woman can perform Lisu identity by holding it as a stage prop.

A third major project that contributes to an emerging *litpax* space is a mega cultural festival, often on a transnational level, that began in the early 2010s. Sometimes, the shared cultural form is used to assert difference for groups living in close proximity. In this case, the Lisu cultural leaders created a Lisu festive form alongside the Jinghpaw-dominated Kachin manau festival to claim an exclusively Lisu public space in the multi-ethnic region of Kachin. Derived from an evangelical trip as part of the indigenous media evangelism that combines open-air preaching with live gospel music concerts, this format is adaptable to different occasions and themes. A wooden crossbow construct serves as a prideful display of Lisu presence in parallel with the manau posts in downtown Myitkyina (Figure 1). I now turn to the Lisu Literature Centenary Jubilee and the Lisu New Year festival in Putao to analyse how they embody the nature of *litpax* space 'as part of a much larger legitimising enterprise' (Guss 2000: 14).

¹⁴ Interview with Ahki Yotha on 20 January 2018, translated by David Ahpu, my fieldwork assistant.



Figure 1 Left, the Lisu crossbow construct at the Jubilee, Pummati, Myitkyina, Kachin State, Myanmar, December 2017; right, the manau posts in downtown Myitkyina, December 2017 Source: Photos by author [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Performing ethnic identity and Christian solidarity in the festival

Held at the ‘Lisu cultural land’ Pummati in the suburb of Myitkyina, the Jubilee was organised by the CLLCC and the Lisu Bible league. It had a salient religious theme yet was promoted as a cultural event. One month later, on 16–18 January 2018, the first Lisu New Year festival in the far north of Myanmar was organised by the Putao Lisu Literary and Cultural Committee, an event also aimed at celebrating the Committee’s 60th anniversary. Despite its pure cultural and historical significance, the festival’s political agenda was obvious as Ar Ti Yaw Han, then Minister for Kachin Lisu Ethnic Affairs, was the chairman of the organising committee. These two transnational events bear resemblance in a twofold purpose: one for the performance of ethnicity through use of standardised forms as ‘tradition’, and the other concerned with the continuation of Christian privilege even within highly politicised cultural space. Between divided indoor pulpits and outdoor stages, in both events there coexisted the devoted churchgoers attending worship services and the excited crowd taking part in cultural activities. Despite the noted presence of cultural performances scheduled throughout the day, however, there was a strict line drawn between the *litpix* and religious space in a non-interference manner.

The first dichotomy of religion and culture is seen in the spatial arrangement through which religious and cultural activities were regulated separately without causing unnecessary conflicts. Take the Jubilee’s spatial layout as an example. The festival compound was divided into three main zones: an *ad hoc* assembly hall for worship services, a cultural plaza for ethnic display and participatory dancing, and two stages for evening performances. At both festivals, in the foreground was the assembly hall – reminiscent of a wooden-structured version of the vast tent commonly used during American frontier



Figure 2 Left, an *ad hoc* dancing arrangement at a village wedding, Putao, Kachin State, Myanmar, 19 January 2018; right, semi-organised participatory dance in the Lisu Putao New Year, 16 January 2018 Source: Photos by author [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

camp meetings in the early 19th century, when people travelled to a particular site to pray, sing hymns and listen to itinerant preachers. Short steps from the Christian corner was a separate cultural plaza with a wooden crossbow post as its centrepiece. To legitimise this newly purchased land as a specifically Lisu public space, the CLLCC cultural leaders planned to build a concrete crossbow post for future cultural festivals.

Parallel to the spatial division was the sonic alternation between religious and *litpix* spaces. Christian sounds were dominant during the daytime worship service twice a day. A mixture of congregational hymn singing, praise and worship music performed by the local church worship team, and speeches of preaching and motivation from invited church leaders of different denominations – all sung and spoken in Lisu – was broadcast via loudspeakers. Cultural sounds, by contrast, stood out only between services. An additional dance activity scheduled after lunchtime was a semi-staged participatory dance called *guakiq*, a traditional community dance in which people move in a circle with instrumental accompaniment. Participants followed the steps led by costumed young dancers stepping first in line. Traditionally, players of the three-stringed or four-stringed plucked lute would provide musical accompaniment. At both festivals, although the dance lead held a four-stringed *qibbe*, they only pretended to be playing the instrument. Instead, the music was pre-recorded and played via the loudspeaker. The difference between this kind of festive dance and community dance at a wedding primarily lies in the consumption of meaning, not the dance pattern itself: while dancing around the crossbow post is seen as a public expression of modern Lisu solidarity, participatory dance at a wedding is a normative, everyday reality in community life (Figure 2).

In the Putao New Year festival, the construction of *litpix* space was complicated by the scheduling of the *altat ddait* (sword-ladder climbing) folkloric performance, which derives from a traditional animist ritual involving animal sacrifice and spiritual worship. As a similar performance had been performed before, in the first two Lisu New Year festivals (2011 and 2016) in Myitkyina, some CLLCC members proposed to include an *altat ddait* show in the Jubilee. It did not succeed due to the fierce opposition of religious leaders. Although the show was finally scheduled in the Putao Lisu New Year festival, it caused controversy in the community, both publicly and privately.

Obviously, to interpret the performance as a secular cultural show was not enough to ease many Christians' concerns about *altat ddait*'s animist origin. Uziah, vice president of the Lisu Church of Christ in Myitkyina, expressed his strong opinion as such:

They [animists] sacrifice to *si'nit* (ghost, animist spirits). They kill hens and cows and they drink wine. If we use these traditions in religion [referring to Christianity], not good. We [religious leaders] are very against this one ... the Lisu are making music and dancing for new house dedication and wedding, and in happy days such as in *kor-shit* (New Year). These practices can be used in every religion. But we reject worshiping to other gods.¹⁵

Then the desired objective of adding an *altat ddait* show in the *litpix* space was not aimed at educating the Christian community members about their former animistic beliefs, but rather for showing off Lisu a unique tradition and strength worthy of praise to government officials and leaders of other Kachin subgroups. The political role of the emerging *litpix* space was further demonstrated by the key reason for the organisation of the Lisu New Year in Putao in the first place. When I asked my field-work guide David Ahpu and several close Lisu friends in the music community why the Jubilee and Putao events were separated by only three weeks, I was told that it was partly because their political leader [Ar Ti Yaw Han] wanted to use the Putao festival to demonstrate his political achievement and that of the Lisu.

In the evening programme, a dichotomy of religion and culture was articulated, sonically and choreographically, in the divided spaces where the privilege of Christianity was revealed beyond doubt. Similar to a separation between religious and cultural spaces during the daytime, two evening stages were independent of each other. One was the traditional stage devoted to group-dance-dominated youth performances, with performers all dressed in traditional outfits of different regional styles; the other was entitled 'Multifarious Performances of Praise' for gospel music concerts, fashion shows and song competitions. The two stages appeared to be similar: both were decorated with a background curtain with the festival theme written on it and both were set up for presentational shows with a clear audience-performer divide. However, the entertainment stage was equipped with the best outdoor multimedia system and lighting among the Lisu, provided by Ja Ni, a YCCS graduate and one of the major Lisu media activists. The equipping of the gospel concert stage with the latest media technologies is a microcosm of Lisu music and media practice for religious and youth mobilisation over the last two decades (Figure 3).

The programmatic choice on the traditional stage illustrates that the youth cultural performance on stage had more relevance to ethnic display than to the safeguarding of Lisu traditional performing arts. Although vocal genres and stringed lute-playing featured more prominently in the traditional repertoire, the demonstrations of Lisu musical instruments or singing styles were the shortest items in the programme as few young people know how to play instruments or sing traditional songs today. Although several instrumental training workshops had been organised, the 'cultural heritage' that Lisu youths had learned from the cultural leader focused on choreographed dancing and ethnic costumes. Older folk musicians had few opportunities to perform, except playing at the stage corner for young dancers. This speaks to an emphasis on the

¹⁵ Interview with Uziah on 26 December 2017. Conducted in English.



Figure 3 Left, Lisu youths performing on the cultural stage; right, renowned Lisu gospel singers performing at the other modern multifunctional stage. The Lisu Literature Centenary Jubilee, Myitkyina, 15 December 2017 Source: Photos by author [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

symbolism of the traditional culture, here staged in the *litpax* space, with least regard for the transmission and renewal of traditional music.

Christianity claimed its territory in this Lisu cultural land on the entertainment stage, where most renowned Lisu gospel singers put on a music show of dominantly Christian repertoire in a format that presented a strong resemblance to a standard rock concert. This new Lisu tradition derived from the outdoor worship concert as part of indigenous music and media ministries over the last two decades. Cultural performances on the traditional stage were always scheduled one hour earlier, so that two stages did not have to compete for attention. By the time the pop music band came onto the stage to warm up the concert, the youth dance show on the traditional stage was close to conclusion and cultural sounds soon yielded to modern Christian pop. In contrast with young performers' anonymity on the traditional stage, singers and musicians at the gospel concert spanned several generations, and many of them were household names across the Lisu transnational communities. Singers wore tradition-inspired garments but also modern fashionable clothes. The singing repertoire mainly comprised Lisu Christian songs that contain divergent musical styles – from folk-inspired music, to lyrical ballads and contemporary worship songs – yet share similar features such as a monophonic texture and verse-chorus form. They had been widely circulating through music recordings and now live performance. The concert concluded with all singers performing a Christian-themed song together to thank God's blessing to the Lisu. In this rural area at the periphery of the country, while anywhere else was falling into silence, the electronic amplification of Christian solidarity created an overwhelmingly spiritual space for the staging of the Lisu modern, forward-looking aspiration fused with a sense of ethnic pride.

Conclusion

In the last two decades, there has been an increase in the amount of research on the cultural practices of major non-Burman 'national races' (Gravers 2007; Dudley 2010; Sadan 2013). This article shifts the focus towards one of Myanmar's non-dominant

ethnic groups, studying how the Christian Lisu elite strategically, and somewhat opportunistically, uses traditional culture to perform ethnicity for establishing political and ethnic legitimacy of the Lisu *vis-à-vis* the dominant populations of the (Kachin) state and (Myanmar) nation. I have examined the creation of the *litpix* space, which appears to be motivated by two future-oriented goals: one cultivating the ethnic pride of the next generation and the other concerned with performing ethnicity in the service of gaining competitive social and cultural capitals for a sustainable future.

For a long time, pre-Christian traditions were marginalised in the life of the Lisu faith community. The emerging cultural leaders' pioneering work in codification of traditional practice has contributed to the formation of a *litpix* space alongside, and independent of, religious faith and church. In the process, however, they had to grapple with two main challenges. For one thing, they had to arbitrarily decide what counts for the Lisu people's authentic traditional culture regardless of its internal division while authenticating once decried traditional practices based on the principle of non-interference; for another they must prudently respond to the Burmese government's concern about political loyalty of Christian citizens for Buddhist governmentality. This is an important issue addressed in the recent discussion about the different goals of the state and Christianity (Bautista and Lim 2009).

The Lisu adaptive cultural strategies elucidate the plural and relational aspects of ethnicity and boundaries from three perspectives. First, within the elite leadership, different groups developed partnerships while maintaining their appropriate roles to avoid potential conflicts. It seems that cultural leaders are responsible for selecting and standardising popular forms for self-representation. Their work has always been influenced by religious and political forces. On the one hand, they have to negotiate with church leaders regarding the use of certain traditional forms (as in the case of the folkloric *altat ddait* show); on the other, they need to coordinate with political leaders, as such ethnic display is always politically charged. Second, the concept of ethnicity is dependent on interactions between groups of people, a fundamental anthropological perspective of ethnicity established since Leach's work with the Kachin (1977 [1954]) and Barth's (1969) inquiry of ethnicity construction by emphasising boundary construction. The Christian Lisu elite attempts to make use of 'traditional' culture for performing simultaneously difference (from the Jinghpaw), alliance (with the Kachin) and sameness (obedient to Burmese governmentality). The concept of ethnicity in the Lisu case is evidently related to the Lisu elite's agenda to legitimise claims to rights, the kind of political behaviour that Thomas Eriksen (2010) has considered an essential element in ethnic understanding.

Finally, the emerging '*litpix*' space has allowed for alternative forms of sociability, communication and entertainment for community members outside the church, which represents the church's transition from a closed mode of religiosities to a dynamic mode that embraces change as an essential element of religion's continuity and viability. In this way, Christianity will have a continuous dominance in the enactment of Lisu modern selves and relations. Moreover, a salient increase in the range of sonic and material expression of Lisu-ness relates to the Christian elite's efforts to make Lisu traditions relevant to the younger generation, whose imaginaries and modern life are increasingly intertwined with the larger global world. It remains to be seen how the *litpix* space will evolve to make continuous influence on Lisu traditional knowledge and practice. A general emphasis on the representativeness of traditional performing arts with a secondary concern for their transmission,

discussion and innovation at the grassroots level has already furthered its marginalisation in the life of community members.

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Fabriquer un avenir chrétien à travers la culture traditionnelle: autoreprésentations d'une élite de minorités ethniques au nord du Myanmar

Cet article explore le travail pionnier de l'un des groupes ethniques non dominants du Myanmar en matière de création d'avenir. Plus précisément, il examine comment l'élite chrétienne Lisu utilise stratégiquement (et avec un certain opportunisme) la « culture traditionnelle » pour interpréter l'ethnicité dans le contexte de leur statut de 'minorité double' par rapport aux populations dominantes de l'État Kachin et de la nation du Myanmar. Il analyse aussi les acteurs et les conditions sociales hétérogènes qui ont influencé le regain d'intérêt d'une élite chrétienne pour sa tradition litpix pré-chrétienne. Finalement, l'article examine les défis liés à la traduction de la singularité de son abstraction en diverses formes incarnées. La sélection, révision et standardisation d'objets et de pratiques précédemment marginalisés sont au cœur de ce processus – les plaçant dans le domaine du litpix indépendant du christianisme. Ces formes incarnées sont facilement étiquetées comme ethniquement Lisu lorsque l'affirmation de la différence est nécessaire. Je soutiens que l'espace litpix émergent est devenu un site discursif significatif lié aux

autoreprésentations Lisu de soi et de ses relations modernes. Ce site est également crucial dans les efforts de l'élite chrétienne pour obtenir des ressources politiques, économiques et culturelles compétitives pour le développement futur des Lisus birmans (en particulier la jeune génération), tout en gardant l'influence importante de l'église sur la vie publique et privée de la communauté chrétienne Lisu.

Mots-clés Christianisme, élite, culture (litpix), Lisu, Myanmar