

The Taming of Irrationality: An Attempt at Secularizing an Orthography with Religious Connotation among the Lisu in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper aims at articulating the domestic politics over the secularization of an orthography with religious connotation, or the Fraser Script, in the context of the cultural revitalization movement among the Lisu in Thailand. The data and discourses shown here primarily derive from the author's community-based participatory research over two decades, and from previous works of anthropologists, linguists, and Christian missionaries on the Lisu and their orthographies as well.

Regardless of preceding cleavage between the Lisu who observe rituals based on spiritual beliefs and the Lisu who converted to Christianity, the two groups are now beginning to reconcile by sharing common problem consciousness, and by secularizing the Fraser Script as common orthography beyond religious beliefs. However, as the Christians, with their better access to Fraser Script and transnational Christian network, expanding political influence through pan-Lisu networking in China, Myanmar and Thailand, the on-going shift of the Fraser Script to a neutral position seems to be subject to oscillation between secularization and desecularization.

Key Words: Lisu, orthography, Christianity, Fraser Script, secularization, Thailand

I. Introduction

For Martiya Van der Leun, an anthropologist who had just started her fieldwork among the Dyalo, the Walker family was a precious source of knowledge. The Walkers were a Christian missionary family who had long been living among the Dyalo, one of the minority ethnic groups in northern Thailand. They knew not only the history of the people but also their language and orthography, so there was a lot to be learned from them. However, there developed a split between the family and Martiya regarding their attitudes towards the spiritual beliefs of the Dyalo, who valued various kinds of spirits. It was an inevitable course of events since Martiya was deeply empathetic towards their beliefs, while the Walkers condemned them

as “Satanic.” Martiya asked the Walkers, “What do you think the spirits are?” Samuel replied on their behalf.

Maybe they’re fallen angels, that’s certainly a possibility, or maybe some other being[sic] created in the spiritual realm. The biblical evidence certainly associates the spirits with Satan. But you know how I’ve always thought of the Dyalo spirits? They are like a bureaucracy. Like a giant powerful bureaucracy, which imposes a million and one rules on the Dyalo. Fines them a pig or a chicken or something worse when they do something wrong. Punishes them, kicks them around, treats them like dirt [Berlinski 2007: 218].

At this point, Martiya took the interpretation lightly and as part of their friendly conversation. But later, when Hupasha, her most trustworthy interlocutor and someone with whom she was starting to feel a strong spiritual bond, declared that he intended to be an “Adam-person,” something broke within her. She began to have dark and intertwined feelings against the member of the Walker family who had been responsible for Hupasha converting to Christianity, and these feelings began to grow until at last becoming murderous impulses when finally meeting him head on.

This is an excerpt from *Fieldwork: A Novel* by Mischa Berlinski published in 2007. This is a fictional account, and so is the ethnic group’s name Dyalo. But as the author noted in his postscript, “This novel began not as fiction but as history of the conversion of the Lisu people of northern Thailand to Christianity¹”, it was intended to be a non-fiction documentary which, in the process of writing, metamorphosed into fiction. Thus, if you disregard the fictitious name of the ethnic group as well as some folk terms, you can read it as a record of a hermeneutic controversy over conversion to Christianity that really took place among the Lisu in northern Thailand. The murder in this story is a fiction, but all the rest that is depicted there is analogous to reality.

However, it has been more than half a century since Christianization of the Lisu in Thailand had a full start since the 1970s. By far the most significant change that took place was that the religious majorities of the Lisu with spiritual beliefs and ancestor worship who outnumbered Christians (hereafter “the majorities”), and who had never had any orthography of their own gradually began to adopt the orthography used almost exclusively by the Christians, to meet the necessity of recording for the posterity their songs and ritual chants that had been handed down only as oral tradition. Since the Fraser Script was named after the missionary who invented it, the majorities called it “Christian alphabet” and virtually pretended it did not exist for quite some time. In recent years, however, the majorities have witnessed the sudden

decline of their oral traditions and ritual knowledge, and they are changing their direction towards learning the Script from Christian missionaries, doing away with their long-standing indifference against it. In other words, the majorities are now being driven into a situation in which they need to tame an unfamiliar orthography into a regular one.

Yet, at the same time, as the Frazer Script is known with its rather complicated structure – some even depict it as irrational – , introducing and secularizing it among the majorities entail a great deal of difficulties. Aside from the challenge of spreading an extremely difficult orthographic system, there also loomed a classical plot that whoever has the power over the orthography can have a better access to the power structure. That is to say, struggles over hegemony between various actors regarding the Frazer Script are becoming more and more explicit. At the same time, their political tug of war is impinging greatly upon the orientation of the cultural revitalization movement of the Lisu in Thailand.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to articulate the domestic politics over the secularization of the Fraser Script in the context of the cultural revitalization movement among the Lisu in Thailand. Accessibility to the Frazer Script, therefore, is the deciding factor for political space making on the part of the related actors. At the same time, it will be necessary to see what kind of orientation can be detected in the various movements and discourses over the issue of orthography that seems to have taken on the nature of transnational agenda involving the Lisu in China and Myanmar who have been relatively successful in enrooting the Fraser Script to their social context, at least, way ahead of the Lisu in Thailand.

II. The Lisu in Thailand and Conversion Issues

The total population of the Lisu people is thought to be a little over one million; approximately 700,000 of them living in China², 300,000 living in Myanmar³, 50,000 in Thailand⁴, and some 3,000 in India⁵. They are a people with a language of their own. The Lisu in China mostly live in Yunnan Province, while the Lisu in Myanmar live on both sides of the Thanlwin (Salween) River running from north to south in Kachin State and Shan State, and the southern tip of their collective domicile is just barely extended beyond the Thai side of the national border where the Lisu in Thailand reside. In regard to dialect classification, the Lisu often refer to themselves as: Lovu (or Northern Lisu: Northwest Yunnan and Kachin State), Sha Sha (or Central Lisu: Western Yunnan and Shan State) and Lushi (or Southern Lisu: Southwest Yunnan, South Shan State and Northern Thailand). The majority of the Lisu in Thailand are regarded as Lushi Lisu on the southern bank of the Thanlwin River who migrated to Thailand by crossing the national border during the last century. The greater part of the area where the Lisu in Thailand reside is mountainous, where they had been engaged in swidden

agriculture, and so they have been counted as one of the Hill Tribes. At present, however, many of the Lisu in Thailand have received higher education and have come to seek employment in lowland towns and big cities, so that it is no longer a realistic description to call them a Hill Tribe. In recent years, some local leaders have come to be engaged in the movements linked with national and international activities of the indigenous peoples' network, having become conscious of their own status as part of it.

The Lisu have been long since seized by the waves of modernization and globalization, but at the same time they are well known for their strong attachment towards their conventional ways of life (*yi-li*). Their kinship system, inseparably connected to their ancestor worship, is deeply rooted in their society. It consists of approximately thirty major clans (*yi-tsu*), each segmented into several sub-clans, which constitute the core of their organizational principles. If one stays in the village for a couple of days, he or she can be present at some soul-calling rituals (*tsoha-kfu*) in which different spirits are summoned to either heal the sick or to do divination. In the New Year Festival that takes place at the same time as the Chinese Lunar New Year, men and women clad in formal ethnic costumes dance in many rings surrounding musicians playing a three-stringed banjo and a flute made with a gourd, which is a marvelous sight. Alongside the dancers, elderly men and women exchange songs of the olden times in an archaic language.

Since the Lisu were very eager to maintain and reproduce such prototypical scenery, Christianity did not succeed in securing their presence among the Lisu when the first missionaries came to the Lisu villages for propagation. Identification with each clan is deeply connected to ancestor worship, and it would present a Lisu with a contradiction if he/she tried to substitute just the religious portion of their beliefs, while maintaining the formal affiliation to the clan intact. Therefore, to convert to Christianity for a Lisu usually implied irreversibly leaving the past behind. In the days when a secluded mountainous village was their whole world, only very few Lisu would dare to convert. In other words, once Lisu people made the decision to cross over to Christianity, it often meant a drastic inversion of values as well as disenchantment with the past they depended so much on.

Although the missionaries of the China Inland Mission (CIM)⁶ began securing their foothold among the Lisu in northern Thailand in the 1950s, it was not until the 1970s that the Christian missions really began to fully make progress. After the CIM, the North Burma Christian Mission (NBCM)⁷, led by the Morse family, also moved their base from Myanmar to Chiang Mai in 1972. In the process of establishing Christian missions, there was a considerably severe friction between those who tried to maintain spiritual beliefs and the missionaries with the converts. At first, the cleavage between the majorities and Christians became so intense because of the early mission style on the part of some opinionated

missionaries who called the ancestor altar, to which Lisu people paid so much respect, “demon shelf,” and ordered it burned⁸. At the same time, some Lisu who converted to Christianity showed strong skepticism against spiritual beliefs. The gap between the two sectors seemed irredeemable, so to speak. In some villages, religious majorities and Christians tried to avoid living together, which resulted in splitting one administrative village into two zones.

I was living with the Lisu for about three years between 1994 and 1997, the longest duration of my fieldwork. I often encountered events that showed such a split was real. At that time, I was living with the villagers who held spiritual beliefs, and I had a chance to visit, together with them, a rather new village consisting only of Christians. An elderly man was squatting on the ground, and he beckoned me to come closer. As I approached him, he drew a line on the ground with a branch of a tree. He then said, as he was pointing to the foreground, “This side is a wonderful world where God has blessed. The side you’re in is the world of sins to be burned in hell.”

On another occasion, I was involved in the turmoil caused by a Lisu family’s conversion to Christianity. The head of the family was a shaman (*nyi-pha*), and when he stopped at our village, he was on his way to another village where his nephew lived. He had the hopes of returning his nephew to his previous spiritual beliefs as he had been converted to Christianity. The shaman was accompanied by his own son, who was also thinking of converting to Christianity. The shaman was nearly seventy and was very tired, so he decided to spend the night with us, wondering if he really had to go to his nephew’s village. That night, his son had an acute pain around his ribs, and he was writhing in agony. The family head thought that he had vexed his ancestors by deciding against visiting his nephew. He performed a ritual of possession to listen to the ancestors’ divinity. The ancestor spirit said, “You were on a good mission heading towards your nephew’s village, but you hesitated. So, I punished you by giving your son some pain. He had better not even think of converting, and then his pain will leave him.” The son’s pain subsided for a while, but it came back, so much so that he eventually passed out, with some bubbles around his mouth. I could not watch it anymore, so I took him to the hospital in the foothills. The diagnosis was that he had an acute pneumonia, and his swollen lungs were pressing against his ribs, causing the deadly pain. Despite missionaries’ good intentions to bring wellness to the Lisu villages, conversion issues used to tear many families apart until very recently.

Incidentally, there is one more factor that is not often talked about concerning the strife between the majorities and the Christians; witchcraft. Lisu in Thailand believe in a witchcraft spirit called *phi-phu*. This spirit is believed to eat fresh human flesh, and under certain conditions, it is thought to be metamorphosed into a “were-animal spirit” called *phu-su*. The *phi-phu* is an evil spirit that is said to possess a certain individual and those who had a deep

relationship (sexual in particular) with the possessed, and it is said to be contagious between mother and child. There is no way of exorcising this spirit, and if someone kills the possessed person, the killer will become the new host for the *phi-phi* [Durrenberger 1993: 50]. Therefore, the villagers try not to stimulate those who are thought to be possessed. The villagers do not overtly segregate them, but they do try whatever it takes not to create any marital relationships with them. Meanwhile, for the people who are stigmatized in this way, there had been only two options; either move away from the original village and establish a new, endogamous group somewhere else, or convert to Christianity to emancipate themselves from the cultural context that was binding them. With this factor as a background, there was a certain portion of those who were “possessed” and were segregated among early converts to Christianity. For the majorities, this was a major factor that negatively affected their image of Christianity. From the point of view of the converts, the majorities “dwelling on their old beliefs” looked like people who would not hear the gospel.

III. From Cleavage to Reconciliation

However, somewhere between the late 1990s and early 2000s, there came a time when the two groups slowly began to reconcile their differences. We could see it coming from late 1990s, but the decisive factor that compelled them to do so was the so-called “War on Drugs” in 2003, and the International Lisu Cultural Seminar¹⁰ that has been held off and on since 2012 being inspired by native Christian missionaries. The “War on Drugs,” a governmental crack down on drug dealers that killed drug dealers, who are also fathers of their children, produced hundreds of orphans. The Lisu were truly devastated by it and they began to view their religious strife as trifling in comparison. People who had become sick and tired of protesting against poverty, drugs and prostitution without any visible results began to share a common problem consciousness that existed beyond religious beliefs. It was in this context that the International Lisu Cultural Seminar was held. More than 10,000 people participated, and it had a huge significance in that the Lisu from three countries (China, Myanmar, and Thailand) got together on such a large scale, and also in that both the majorities and the Christians took part.

Cooperation between the two groups began as a search for commonalities beyond the dimension of religion. The first visible return to “the Lisuness” took the form of song exchange, festal round dance, playing authentic musical instruments, wearing ethnic costume, as well as increased involvement in kinship, oral tradition, language and such factors that did not seem to be overtly related to religion. They began to enjoy performing and practicing these traditional activities, competing to show their proficiency in seasonal festive occasions and other events. Such a movement is affiliated with the movement of preserving ritual knowledge

on the part of the majorities, but it has also become acutely visible as contributions on the whole to the cultural revitalization of the Lisu in Thailand.

At this point, the Lisu majorities are faced with a problem. It is the question of how to archive with precision their traditional knowledge, such as the lyrics of the song exchange, oral tradition and ritual chants. It is a problem particularly for the majorities since they do not have an established orthography which can be read and understood by many of the villagers. To be more precise, the Lisu do have an orthography; it is called the Fraser Script and was developed by a Scottish missionary in order to translate the Bible and the hymns into Lisu. Therefore, literacy is limited to the Christian Lisu, and hardly any of the majorities in Thailand understand it. It does have an impression of being a biblical language, and the majorities are appalled to describe their ritual chants using this orthography. Nonetheless, there is no other option, and the majorities began to cope flexibly with the acceptance of the Fraser Script.

The series of cultural seminars greatly changed the majorities' attitude towards the Fraser Script. They used to view the Script as tinted with a strong Christian image and therefore something unfit as an orthography to archive ritual chants and lyrics of traditional songs, but they saw virtually for the first time, non-Christian Chinese Lisu use Fraser Script as their official script in the seminars, and this gradually softened their attitude towards it. There have been some sporadic attempts by the majorities to archive their cultural tradition in Fraser Script, but they never lasted, and so these attempts have not been enough to grow to be a new current. The biggest impediment was that the majorities alone were not sufficiently accomplished at using the Fraser Script and needed the help of the Christians who have mastered it. But after the seminars, something new began to sprout. The majorities finally began to study the Fraser Script and to incorporate it into educational activities.

This is a process, so to speak, of reshaping the present highly Christian-oriented orthography by consciously secularizing and neutralizing it as meta-religious script. Meanwhile, in China and in Myanmar, the Fraser Script has already been accepted to a degree way beyond the Thai situation. In order for the Lisu in Thailand to maintain their presence within the transnational Lisu network, it has become urgently necessary to accept the Fraser Script as their common and secular orthography. At present, the only people who can take the initiative are the Christians, and more specifically, the Lisu native missionaries who have a deep knowledge of the Fraser Script. It is not too much to say that their attitude in this respect will seriously affect the prospect of the transnational pan-Lisu movement.

IV. In Search of Common Orthography

The reason the majorities in Thailand were reluctant to accept the Fraser Script (hereafter the FS) is not only because it had a strong Christian image, but also because it had a relatively complex structure that hindered the motivation of learners in the beginning. There are 10 vowel letters and 30 consonant letters, which does not seem too many. However, of the 40 letters based on the Roman upper-case characters, 15 of them are inverted, or written upside down. Even if letters are not inverted, some of the usual Roman characters are pronounced in completely different ways. There are 6 basic tone marks, plus 8 combination tone marks, which amounts to 14 kinds of tone marks [Morse and Tehan 2001: 22].

The relative difficulty of the Lisu orthography becomes apparent when it is compared to the Akha (Hani/Akha) case. The Akha habitat partly overlaps with the Lisu habitat, and the two groups have deep relationships through intermarriage and trade. In case of the Hani/Akha, whose habitat extends to five countries: China, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, representatives of these countries met many times in order to come up with a common, pan-Akha orthography, on top of the individual orthography used in each country, and in this script each letter is read almost in the same way it is read in the English alphabet [cf. Morton 2013]. Thus, anyone with some knowledge of English can read the common Akha script to some extent. In contrast to this, the FS is hardly legible for someone seeing the script for the first time. Furthermore, most of the existing texts written in FS are based on the Lovu Lisu language¹¹, a northern version of the Lisu language distributed around the northwestern part of Yunnan Province in China. Since the Lisu people in Thailand have a different set of vocabulary, it is not at all possible for them to read and understand a text written in the FS even if they knew the way sounds are represented in it. Since the FS is a phonogram, it is possible to preserve Lisu language spoken in Thailand only as sounds. As will be discussed later, they had to wait until 2016 to witness the emergence of full-fledged textbooks of FS edited exclusively for the Lisu in Thailand that conform to the local vocabulary system.

As described above, the reason why the majorities were reluctant to use the FS as their common orthography is evident, but the question remains why they did not try to come up with their own script in place of the FS. In fact, there were considerable numbers of cases of attempts and efforts, virtually none of which survived, and their only remaining option was the FS. The following is a short account of how they tried to create orthographies. Since David Bradley, an Australian linguist, has elucidated the whole account in detail as part of his years of research [Bradley 1994, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Bradley and Kane 1981; Bradley and Bradley 1999], I will only comment briefly on this matter.

There are three kinds of Lisu orthographies which came to be used and acknowledged as such by the general public: the FS, Wa Renbo's script, and the so-called new script based on Chinese pinyin. Of them, the FS is the oldest. The FS was created by J. O. Fraser who went to China from Scotland as a missionary of the China Inland Mission. He met Ba Thaw, a Karen evangelist from Myanmar and J. G. Geis, an American Baptist Missionary in Myanmar, and with their help, he developed the FS between 1914 and 1915. Since then, it has been revised many times, and by 1918, the present form was finalized. It is said that the Lisu had a legend that there would be a white man (*xwapfu-pha*) who would return the script, and Fraser and his script came to be sacralized in a Christian context. Later, Wa Renbo, a Lisu man of the Weixi Lisu Autonomous Country in present-day Dechen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, created in 1923 a system of more than 800 syllabaries based on Chinese characters and tried to spread it as an alternative script. Even at present, the bronze statue of Wa Renbo can be found in Weixi, and his script can be seen in many parts of the town. Bradley has given a short account of this as:

Chinese sources often refer to it because from their perspective it is politically correct: it came from the masses and had nothing to do with foreign missionaries or Christianity; also it shows the cultural influence of Chinese writing on some Lisu [Bradley and Bradley 1999: 80].

Attempts at creating Lisu orthography unrelated to Christianity continued after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. In the 1950s, an attempt at using pinyin to transcribe the Lisu language began in accordance with Chinese national policy to write the languages of the minority nationalities acknowledged by the government [Bradley and Bradley 1999: 80-81]. This script was roughly completed by 1958, and it was called the "new script" as opposed to the FS which is sometimes called the "old script." At that time, government agencies and publishing companies opted to use this script, and for a while it was treated almost as the standard orthography of the Lisu in China.

However, in the mid-1990s, Nujiang Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province became an open zone for foreign tourists, and communication among the Christian Lisu in China, Myanmar and Thailand became active. One of the driving forces was the common orthography, the FS. For the Lisu in Myanmar and Thailand, the FS was their "true" Lisu orthography, and they welcomed it when Chinese Lisu returned from the new script to the FS. Chiang Mai in Thailand, particularly since the 1950s, served as the focal point for information gathered by the Christian Lisu in China and Myanmar seeking free religious activities. People cultivated mutual relationships there, and this was a microcosm of the transnational relations

that developed later.

The situation is such that the Lisu in Thailand also may have to comply with the use of the FS, but there did exist an effort to use Thai letters to create a Lisu orthography. In 1970, Edward R. Hope, a linguist and a missionary of the Overseas Mission Fellowship tried this, and there have been some other sporadic attempts, but none of them have survived up to the present day. No matter how difficult and irrational it seems, in the course of one hundred years, the Lisu people from three countries were thus left with the FS as the final common orthography.

V. Oscillation between Secularization and Desecularization

Thus, the movement towards gradual incorporation of the FS began in Thailand among the majorities as well. There are three distinct and important factors that prompted this movement. First of all, it was necessary for the majorities to record for posterity their ritual chants and the lyrics of the traditional song exchange in an authentic orthography. Secondly, on the part of the Christians who have been in the minority, in relative terms, extending the use of the FS outside of their realm was a good chance to enhance their social presence as successors of the FS. Thirdly, there has been an earnest call to share a common orthography among the Lisu living in the three countries so as to encourage stronger bonds. Referring to the third point, Lisu in Thailand comprise only approximately 5% of the total Lisu population living in the three (four when India is included) countries, and if the Lisu in Thailand alone insisted on having their own orthography, this would imply isolation within the context of a larger association.

Accepting the FS has not yet become a full-scale tidal wave, but some concrete movements have gradually started to manifest since 2012. Some of the native Christian missionaries, with nondenominational views or a conciliatory attitude towards the majorities, began to launch the development of elementary textbooks of the FS without any religious aspects within their vicinity. However, they were initially rather cautious about extending the distribution to a wide region, so the textbooks were not yet fully accessible to the general public. Meanwhile, in 2014, the majorities created large size posters showing the list of the FS alphabet with the help of native missionaries. This initiative was taken by some Lisu individuals working for an indigenous NGO. Three hundred copies were printed, which may not seem many, but what was epoch-making was that the sample words used to illustrate the use of the alphabet were taken from the vocabulary of the Lushi Lisu, which is used most extensively in Thailand. The alphabet poster prepared before that used, as sample words, the northern Lovu Lisu vocabulary on which the FS is most heavily based. So, most of the Lisu in

Thailand could not ever feel any affinity towards the sample vocabulary. The poster, on the contrary, created a sense of familiarity. Together with such a drive, there have been attempts at teaching the FS to Lisu children in Thailand. A Lisu artist launched the Lisu Youth Camp in 2006 in order to teach children how to play traditional musical instruments and sing traditional songs, as well as to teach them some knowledge of herbal medicine. From 2011 on, the staff began to invite native missionaries to give them a chance to get used to the FS little by little. They have gone only as far as reciting the alphabet together, but in this camp, what is most remarkable is that the FS was taught not as a Christian orthography, but as a Lisu orthography. From 2013 on, in the Village M, known as the core Lisu village of Mae Hong Son Province, a native missionary couple living there started a weekend Lisu language class for children, which is still continuing to this day. The husband of the couple leading this classroom on a volunteer basis told me, “Villagers often say that the FS is Christian, but we never refer to God or the Bible during class hours.”

Finally, in 2016, three volumes of beginner’s level Lisu language textbooks to learn the FS designed for the Lisu in Thailand started to be published one by one. Three institutions, namely International Lisu confederation, The Thailand Lisu Network, and Indigenous Knowledge Management Institute (IKMI) took the lead in its publication and began distributing them widely in various Lisu villages in northern Thailand. It was definitely a figurative event in the history of dissemination of the FS in Thailand. At the same time, however, it requires careful assessment on whether they really meet practical use of the people. As of 2022, partly due to the prevalence of COVID 19 and the lack of proper learning platforms, tangible results have not been observed.

One of the ultimate goals to be reached in the process of these movements is to record with precision in FS, the songs and ritual chants traditionally handed down among the majorities so they can be passed on to the next generation. Regarding the songs, this attempt began quite some time ago¹². Some of the missionaries look at the traditional songs as owned by the majorities (*nvi-latsu*) and prohibit their flock from singing them, or at least try to keep them away from them. But some of the nondenominational and liberal missionaries, particularly some of the native missionaries, view them as ancestral wisdom and try to preserve them¹³. Nonetheless, when it comes to transcribing ancestral rituals and soul-calling rituals performed by shamans and priests, virtually no Christian with a command of the FS would work on them. So there has been no progress in transcribing them. It is certain, however, that the need to preserve them is intensely felt.

Regardless of religion, many Lisu do welcome such a change in principle, but this progress is intricately balanced. From the point of view of the majorities, this is a process of overcoming the distrust against Christianity still lingering among them by way of political

compromise. Christians, on the other hand, would view this as giving in towards the majorities and the establishment of a united Lisu identity, or else it is simply a process of religious compromise. Therefore, any attempt at secularizing or neutralizing the FS brings imminent dangers of discord, and with each small change of situation a new factor rises to the surface.

One day when I was talking to local leaders about the importance of the spread of the FS in a Lisu village in Chiang Mai Province, a well-known old man from another village arrived. He is widely respected for being an excellent cantor of ritual chants and traditional songs. I gave him a jolt by asking if he would agree to the use of the FS, he spat out, “Nope. It has to be written in Thai script.” He then abruptly curtailed his conversation. Such an attitude is not rare among the Lisu people who are over sixty years of age, showing a sharp contrast of values to the youth who have a much more tolerant attitude towards the FS. But once people decide to transcribe ritual chants and songs into FS, they cannot help but ask for help from these wise old men as their source of information, and some of these men have started showing cooperative attitude.

On the other hand, though some Christians including native missionaries are willing to overlook neutralization of the present learning system of the FS, they are not at all happy about switching learning content from Lovu Lisu to Lushi Lisu using FS for phonological representation alone. Since their personality development was significantly based on the Bible written with the FS based primarily on Lovu Lisu, FS associated with Lovu Lisu has become part of their flesh and bones, their ontology so to speak. Therefore, even if switching to Lushi Lisu is technically possible, they are not necessarily willing to actively encourage it.

Such a gap would probably be filled as time goes by. At present, there is a gigantic tectonic deformation that supersedes such a situation among the Lisu in Thailand. Speaking of the Lisu networks in Thailand, there are three major associations, the Thailand Lisu Network (1997-), the Lisu Cultural and Environmental Study Association (2014-), and the Thailand Lisu Confederation (2015-). These associations are most instrumental in creating networks of the Lisu inside and outside Thailand. Of them, the Thailand Lisu Network has the oldest history, and as far as matters concerning domestic affairs, important decisions are made exclusively in their meetings. This association does not have any religious leaning, but as of 2016, the chairperson and most of the executive members are the Lisu with spiritual beliefs. However, regarding matters concerning Lisu international networks, the other two, newly risen associations are the driving forces, and they are chaired respectively by a Christian, and a Christian missionary.

In October 2015, an international conference on Lisu studies was held in Weixi Lisu Autonomous County in Yunnan Province, China. Then in February 2016, the International Lisu Cultural Festival was held in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, Myanmar. In both of

those meetings, the participation quota for the Lisu in Thailand was given not to the Thailand Lisu Network, but to the other two associations. This is due to the fact that the chairpersons of the two groups and central figures are well versed in the Christian Lisu Bible written in the FS and communication with the Lisu from other countries was easier for them. Also, they had already established cordial personal relations with the Lisu from other countries through the office of the Christian human network. This can be interpreted as an inversion in which the Christians as a minority group among the Lisu in Thailand have begun to acquire influential power within the context of transnational networking, way beyond the power held by the majorities.

Secularization of the FS in Thailand has been, at least partially, the product of religious compromise by the Christians. However, if the enhancement of their political position influences them in such a way that they opt to reevaluate their compromise, then the on-going shift of the FS to a neutral position might also be subject to a swing back to their earlier, less compromised position.

VI. Ritual Chants on the Verge of Extinction

In February 2016, five youngsters gathering from neighboring villages got into a fight at the Lisu New Year festival in P-County in Chiang Mai Province, and they were each fined 5,000 Baht¹⁴ and were required to participate in a military training, as stipulated in the local rule ahead of time. The first thing that came to my mind on hearing this was why these youngsters so readily gave in to this sanction by paying such a large sum of money. Because as Scott (James C. Scott) depicted them as a classic case of an anarchic ethnic group in his epoch-making book, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), the Lisu people in Thailand have been well known for evading authoritative coercion. I asked the village chief who hosted the New Year Festival, and he gave me a straightforward reply.

They have no choice but to obey. If their village plans to hold some rituals, they have to invite skilled experts from our village. If they don't comply, it means they will never be able to perform rituals in their village.

There looms a new religious trend among ethnic minorities in northern Thailand; the co-prosperity of spiritual beliefs and Theravada Buddhism is being gradually terminated, and some people are shifting to Theravada Buddhism alone. For one thing, the financial cost of animals for sacrifice is too heavy on the ritual client, but there is another stark reason for this. The number of people who can recite chants in spiritual and ancestral rituals is dwindling. This

is also happening to some villages of the Akha who are often neighbors of the Lisu. As mentioned before, the Akha in Thailand have both their own set of orthography and a versatile transnational orthography, but the trouble seems to be that the preservation of ritual chants and the training of novice priests have not caught up with the actual situation. This is a good example, illustrating that the existence of an orthography and its actual use in daily practices are two different things. For the Lisu in Thailand who are teetering on the verge of incorporating the FS, this is an even more serious problem. They are facing a dire situation in which the ritual texts themselves are on the verge of extinction while they are involved in a lengthy discussion as to how to archive their ancestral legacy.

VII. Conclusion

For the majorities, the acceptance of the FS as a neutral orthography is vitally important if they intend to succeed and hand down to posterity their religious rituals, or their punctuation marks of life, as their “taken-for-granted” [Eriksen 2010: 14]. At the same time, this issue has arisen, as mentioned before, taking the form of domestic identity politics. The following are the tentative interpretations on what is taking place among the Lisu in Thailand concerning adoption and secularization of the FS:

1) In the Lisu society in Thailand, connections with the lowland Thai political arena, or economic abundance and superiority, were once the two prerequisites for obtaining power. But there came a change when the International Lisu Cultural Seminar was held in Thailand in 2012, and two other factors came to the fore as the new conditions for obtaining leadership: access to the FS and the connection with the international Lisu network. For this reason, key persons of internal politics began to opt for obtaining a position within the more global International Lisu Network rather than being incorporated in the periphery of the power structure whose center is the national government, with which the Lisu society has scarce cultural affinity.

2) The FS, as depicted in some literatures, is more or less irrationally structured, and is extremely difficult to learn for a novice, and due also to the lack of proper instructional system in Thailand, the number of people who are highly proficient in this script is severely limited. Access to this script in Thailand has so far been limited to a portion of the Christian Lisu as their privilege. This was instrumental in the maintenance of a political equilibrium between the majorities and the Christians. In a way, irrationality inherent in the FS is now being tamed as rationality in higher political dimensions. However, when the prospective standardization of the Thai version of the FS progresses and the Lisu general public in Thailand become more

proficient in the FS, present-day equilibrium may undergo seismic change.

3) While the secularization of the FS seems to have progressed rapidly, the Christian Lisu leaders played flashy roles in the transnational context, showing their marked presence in recent years, so that this could bring about a reactionary trend of desecularizing the FS as the privileged letters for Christian Lisu in Thailand. However, since there have often been calls for the sharing of cross-national as well as cross-religious Lisuness among the Lisu living in the three different countries, the agenda of secularizing the FS cannot remain a matter just for the Lisu in Thailand. There will certainly be oscillation in the process, but the transnational position of the FS on the whole is clearly leaning towards secularization, and the Lisu in Thailand would have to comply.

It is not uncommon that control of orthography is closely connected to political space making, as shown in many instances of our history, but it is not necessarily common if a people still do not have the means of transcribing their cultural heritage well into the third decade since the beginning of the 21st century. The case of the Lisu in Thailand, therefore, is an intriguing example showing that the collective will that manifests itself in the process of overcoming or taming this “uncommon occurrence” does not always choose simple rationality.

Notes

- 1 Quoted from “A Note on the Sources” added at the end of the book.
- 2 Based on the sixth national population census of People’s Republic of China.
- 3 Based on Bradley’s [2006: XV] estimation.
- 4 Estimated number considering the growth from 38,299 in the last official census on Highlanders by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, Thai government in 2002.
- 5 Based on Bradley’s estimation [Bradley 2007].
- 6 Protestant missionary society founded by James Hudson Taylor in 1865. It changed its name to Overseas Mission Fellowship in 1964, and is now called OMF International.
- 7 Church of Christ’s mission led by the Morse family. Their missionary activities first started in China and Burma, and later moved to North Thailand since 1972.
- 8 In the book on the history of her propagation in northern Thailand, Isobel Kuhn describes in detail the way a converted villager was encouraged to tear down and burn the ancestor altar which she called “a dirty old pallet of his, or demon shelf” [Kuhn 1968: 130].
- 9 The Thai government, intensely peeved by the on-going drug problem, declared war against the drug dealers within the country in 2003, and it was later called the “War on Drugs”. They not only jailed 90,000 drug dealers, but gunned down 2,000-3,000.
- 10 Its official name is “The First Cultural Conference & Exhibition of Lisu from Thailand, Myanmar and China”.
- 11 As for the Bible, many *Sha Sha* Lisu words were added later in the course of repeated revisions.
- 12 First trial to record traditional Lisu songs in the FS in Thailand was started at the initiative of Lisu Local Wisdom Reservation Project in 2002 [Khroongkaan Phatthana Suu Phumpanya Chon Phao Lisu 2002], but not much has been done since then. David Bradley also published two booklets on Lisu bride price song [Bradley 2000] and Lisu new

year song [Bradley 2008] written in the FS with the assistance of local Lisu villagers and native Lisu missionaries.

13 Based on personal communication with Mr. David Ngwaza, a native Lisu missionary.

14 Approximately one hundred forty-three U.S. dollars as of March 2016.

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