

# Standardisation of transnational minority languages in Asia : Lisu and Lahu

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## Standardisation of Transnational Minority Languages in Asia: Lisu and Lahu<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Lisu and Lahu are each spoken by large groups spread over southwestern China, northern Laos and Thailand, and northeastern Burma, with some Lahu in northern Vietnam and some Lisu in northeastern India. The status and corpus planning and educational policy for these minorities differ in each nation where they are spoken, which has led to the selection of more than one “standard” variety and the development of various competing orthographies.

Diversity was created by religious and political divisions: Protestant missionaries prepared the earliest and most widely used orthographies, but Catholic and post-1950 Chinese Communist orthographies are also in use for Lahu; while Lisu has two very different Protestant orthographies and a post-1950 Chinese orthography in use, along with others that are no longer used.

There are also competing centrifugal tendencies among some subgroups speaking divergent dialects, who wish to create their own orthographies and achieve some recognition for their own speech variety. For example, the Lahu Shi (Yellow Lahu) have created their own writing system; this is used among some refugees from Laos living in California and may soon be introduced in Thailand and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, each of the two groups feels an internal unity, which is linguistically reflected in efforts to reunify the orthographies and maintain international contacts among leaders and language scholars. It also manifests itself in efforts to disseminate the respective Protestant orthographies, which are in the process of transcending their religious origins. Despite the fact that they only originated at the beginning of this century, speakers have now become so attached to these orthographies, including their redundancies, that they resist attempts to reform them.

### Introduction

The definition of linguistic and cultural groups is primarily a matter of linguistic and cultural characteristics and group identity, but also partly a matter of political decisions. Transnational minority groups (BRADLEY, 1983) which live in more than one modern nation-state are often categorised and treated differently by each majority group, but may nevertheless maintain their unity. Here, examples will be drawn from two such self-categorised groups, the Lisu and the Lahu.

It will be seen that different names are used to refer to the same group; some of these may be related to internal dialect differences, but others are simply different words for the same group in different languages. Various orthographies

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have been developed; some of them came out of the movement to Christianity, others were developed by the Communist government in China to integrate these groups into the Chinese state, and one is indigenous, but based on the model of Chinese characters. Despite the potential for division caused by the gradually increasing solidity of political, religious and orthographic barriers in the region over the last half century, the Lisu and the Lahu have remained relatively unitary groups. There has been a movement towards considerably wider use of a standard lingua franca and literary dialect by speakers of all dialects within each group: “Bible” Lisu and Black Lahu.

### **The Lisu**

The Lisu are a group who speak a Tibeto-Burman language very closely related to Lahu and also close to Burmese. Most Lisu live in China where the 1990 census gives a figure of 574,856, mainly in Yunnan Province with a few in Sichuan Province; it can be estimated that Lisu population in China is now approaching 700,000. There are also many in Burma (no adequate census available; probably over 250,000), with much smaller numbers in Thailand (31,463 in villages in 1995, with more unenumerated in towns and cities) and India (1,016 in 1981). In addition to those Lisu who are classified as members of the Lisu nationality in China, there are also about 600,000 members of the Yi nationality who speak “Central Yi” varieties which are linguistically much closer to Lisu than to any other variety spoken by members of the “Yi” nationality. Thus the total number of speakers of all varieties of Lisu in the narrow sense is about a million, and in the broadest sense is nearly 1.6 million.

The Lisu are recognised as a national minority in China, as a hill tribe in Thailand, as a scheduled tribe in India, and as two distinct nationalities in Burma. There, the distinction is between the Southern Lisu of the Eastern Shan State who are known as Lishaw or Lisaw from their Shan/Thai name, as opposed to the others in the Northern Shan State and the Kachin State, who are known in Burmese as Lisu or Lihsu. The literature on minority groups in Burma frequently insists that these two groups are distinct, but most Lisu recognise no such distinction, though they are aware of the two Burmese names and the corresponding dialect differences.

In China, the nationality categories and membership of the Lisu and Yi nationalities were determined in the 1950s; the Yi were the 7th nationality and Lisu were the 20th nationality of 56 (including the Han Chinese majority nationality) to be recognised in China. For both groups pejorative Chinese

names had existed: Lolo for the Yi, and Yeren (“wild people”) for the Lisu; the term Lisu was also used earlier in Chinese, but with the dog radical as also used in the traditional characters for Lolo. After 1950 the dog radical was replaced with the human radical in all such characters.

Yawyin is a former Burmese name for the Lisu; this is from the Jinghpaw Kachin name which is itself from the old Chinese term. In Burma this has been replaced by the two separate terms Lisu and Lishaw. The term Yobin, derived from the same source, is also found in some of the literature on the Lisu in India. In Thailand Lisu is now the official term, but the term Lisaw is also used.

The “Central Yi” subgroup uses various names to refer to themselves. In some areas in Yuanmou, Wuding and Luquan counties of north central Yunnan they call themselves Lipo. As “-po” is a suffix meaning “man/person”, this means “Li people”; however the Chinese character used for this Li is not the same as the first syllable of Lisu. In other areas such as Yongren, Yao’an and Dayao counties slightly further to the west, they call themselves Lolopo, using the former pejorative name now replaced by the new term “Yi” plus the same suffix. Some of those who call themselves Lolopo tend to call other more rustic “Central Yi” by the term Lipo, which they regard as somewhat pejorative; but it sometimes turns out that the people referred to by other Lolopo as Lipo actually prefer to call themselves Lolopo too (Eric Mueggler, personal communication). The earliest European-language mentions of the “Central Yi” Lipo from about 1910 refer to them as Eastern Lisu, which is linguistically astute and also reflects the fact that there was considerable contact between the missionaries working with the Lisu (Fraser and others; cf. TAYLOR, 1944) and the Lipo (Metcalf, Nicholls and others). There are some other “Central Yi” subgroups such as the Mique who are scattered across many counties in northern Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Yi Prefecture as well as Luquan and Fumin counties to the north of Kunming, and to the southwest of Chuxiong.

With the ferment in minority identity which arose in China in the 1980s, many people chose to reidentify themselves, ceasing to be members of the Han Chinese majority and becoming members of one of the 55 recognised national minorities. This was usually determined by a decision made on reaching the age of 18, and based on part of the family background. Another outcome of this ferment was that some Lipo people who had been classified as “Yi” chose to reclassify themselves as Lisu; this is the reason for the increase of Lisu population in Luquan, Wuding and Yuanmou counties between the 1982 and 1990 censuses. Seeking minority identity in China in the 1980s was understandable, as it conferred some rights not held by the Han majority.

Changing from one minority to another may also be understandable, as some large nationalities like the Yi in Yunnan are regarded as more advanced and thus accorded fewer advantages than less advanced nationalities. It seems that some Lipo leaders and cadres prefer to be Yi, as membership of a larger nationality confers more political power on them; but many villagers prefer to be Lisu (Gai Xingzhi, personal communication). One practical outcome of this is that a number of Lipo students have been sent by local governments to study Lisu at the Yunnan Institute of Nationalities over the last ten years.

The Lisu are long-distance migrators. For example, the movement up the Salween River into what is now the Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture and Weixi Lisu Autonomous County in northwestern Yunnan is traditionally dated to the mid-eighteenth century. There was a subsequent gradual movement of some Lisu westwards into the Putao area of northernmost Burma starting about a century ago - participated in by the Morse family, American missionaries who have been working with the Lisu in China, Burma and now in Thailand for most of this century. From Putao, a small group moved westward into northeastern India in 1942, followed by another group who moved to the adjacent Naga area of Burma in 1965 (MORSE, 1974). There is regular movement back and forth between such settlements, where political borders still permit.

Another movement to the south led to the development of a distinct variety of Lisu containing a large number of Yunnanese Chinese loanwords, spoken by the descendants of mixed marriages between Lisu women and local Chinese soldiers as well as by other Lisu in the same villages. This Southern Lisu subgroup spread into the Eastern Shan State of Burma last century, and first reached Thailand in about 1918. This movement was considerably augmented after 1950, when some Nationalist Chinese armies, many with Lisu wives and families, left Yunnan and moved into Burma and later to Thailand.

The northeasternmost Lisu in Dechang, Huidong and Huili Counties of southern Sichuan Province are another continuation of the northwards movement; what they speak is quite similar to Northern Lisu as spoken in the Nujiang and Weixi areas. Near them in Sichuan, but mainly south of the Jinsha (Yangzi) River in Panzhihua (Dukou) City, are a few "Central Yi" Lolopo. The scattered distribution of the Lipo and the Miqie also bespeaks long-distance migration; conversely those who identify themselves as Lolopo are somewhat more concentrated, but also have outliers in Lijiang Prefecture to the west of their main concentration in northern Chuxiong Prefecture as well as those to the northeast in Panzhihua (Dukou) City.

Wherever they go, the Lisu pick up material culture and other characteristics from their new neighbors. For example, the Northern Lisu women wear caps similar to those of the indigenous Nu/Nung/Rawang groups. Many of the Northern Lisu in Burma have joined into the Kachin culture complex. The Southern Lisu men wear clothes very similar to those of the nearby Lahu, and the Eastern Lisu women wear clothes very similar to those of the nearby Yi.

One strong unifying factor for the Christian Lisu is the standard Bible dialect, written in what is sometimes called the “Fraser script” after one of the missionaries who worked it out, or “Old Lisu” in China. This is a compromise variety of Lisu with some archaic features derived from traditional song style; for details see BRADLEY (1979b), BRADLEY & KANE (1981) and elsewhere. No one actually speaks it as their “own” local dialect. It was first developed by James Outram Fraser of the China Inland Mission, a Scot, working with the American Baptist J. G. Geis and the Karen Ba Thaw over Christmas 1914 in northern Burma, and put into its current form by Fraser and Ba Thaw in 1918. Ba Thaw’s 1915 catechism, printed in Burma, is in a preliminary version of the script; by 1918 the script was in its current form, then a catechism and finally from 1921 a series of gospels started to appear, followed by a complete New Testament in 1938 (with somewhat revised versions in 1950 and later, with a major revision into “common language” published in 1978), a complete Bible in 1968 with later editions including a mid-1980s reprint in China, with other religious and some secular publications.

The Bible dialect is phonologically conservative, retaining various contrasts lost in Northern Lisu as spoken in Nujiang and adjacent areas (and written in the “New Lisu” Chinese orthography; for details see BRADLEY, 1994a). Christian speakers of all kinds of Lisu other than Eastern (Lipo/Lolopo) use these scriptures, even though they may have some initial difficulty in oral communication. In an ongoing project, we and a number of Lisu colleagues are combining new study of the various kinds of Lisu spoken in China with the work of Metcalf on Lipo and that of Hope and others on Southern Lisu; the goal is to produce a new Lisu dictionary which will include all major dialects as well as the written “Bible” standard.

For Eastern Lisu, a separate Pollard script was devised by Metcalf and disseminated in north central Yunnan up to 1950. The first gospel in this script appeared in 1912, but the full New Testament only followed in 1951, by which time it was virtually impossible to deliver from Hong Kong to the Lipo Christians in Yunnan. This survives in a very limited way among the remaining Lipo Christians. In the 1980s a minor revival took place and a revised version of

this script was prepared by Robert Morse; but its use is very limited. The Pollard script for Eastern Lisu is very seriously redundant for vowels, somewhat inaccurate in its representation of voiced versus voiceless unaspirated stops and affricates, and fails to represent two of the tones. For more details on the Pollard scripts developed for minority languages in Guizhou and Yunnan starting with Pollard's work among the Miao from the beginning of the twentieth century, see ENWALL (1994).

Wang Renpo, a Lisu in Weixi County, created a syllabic script for Lisu using Chinese characters in 1925. This syllabary was incomplete and never widely used; some materials in it have survived but remain unpublished. 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.

Both of the Christian Lisu scripts are quite distinctive. The Fraser script is unique; it uses only upper case letters, some in quite unusual phonetic values, upright and inverted. Though a couple of similar scripts were prepared for other languages of Yunnan using these principles, none other than Lisu has been generally used. As in many Indic scripts, the vowel "a" is inherent in any consonant which does not have a vowel written after it. Tones are represented by punctuation marks after the syllable. For example, "song" is written MU: GW: which represents /mu<sup>21</sup> gwa<sup>21</sup>/. There is a strong tendency to omit tone marks, although normatively every syllable would have a tone mark; this is even true of the most formal religious texts, as seen in the Appendix.

The Metcalf script for Eastern Lisu uses the usual Pollard script conventions: each consonant is a large symbol; adjacent to it is a much smaller vowel symbol. The position of the vowel symbol relative to the consonant symbol indicates the tone - above it for high tone, and so on. Few of the Pollard consonant and vowel symbols have anything to do with alphabetic symbols; some are derived from Pitman shorthand.

In the 1950s, the policy in China was to develop scripts for national minorities which followed the principles of Chinese *pinyin*,<sup>2</sup> and Lisu was no exception. This "New Lisu" orthography went through a number of stages: from 1955 containing Chinese loanwords in exactly the Chinese *pinyin* form, then a late 1957 draft with some Cyrillic letters, and finally the version used from 1958

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<sup>2</sup> *Pinyin* 'combine sound' is the official romanisation of standard Mandarin Chinese, widely used to teach it.

to the present for many publications by the Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House and taught to students of Lisu at the Yunnan Institute of Nationalities. This script is based on Northern Lisu speech of the Nujiang area. From 1960 to 1980, as in the case of many other such scripts including Lahu, political considerations made it impossible to print non-political books in any kind of Lisu in China.

A striking success that the Lisu have had in reunifying themselves as a transnational group is in the gradual reintroduction of the Christian orthography since 1980. Since they are influential in the Nujiang Prefecture government, the Christian Lisu were able to make the “Old Lisu” Fraser script the standard again there in the mid-1980s. Books in this script started to appear officially from 1981, and the proportion of “New Lisu” books is gradually decreasing, though some Communist and non-Christian Lisu authors prefer it. In the early 1980s more books were printed in “New Lisu”, and in larger print runs; but by the late 1980s the proportion was about equal, and in the 1990s the balance has shifted to “Old Lisu”, with much larger print runs for textbooks and somewhat more books. The Lisu-Chinese dictionary produced in China, XU LIN et al. (1985), is mainly in “New Lisu” but also provides the “Old Lisu” form of each head entry. Scriptures are again being published in China, including the Lisu Bible and other books in “Old Lisu”, printed in Kunming by the provincial religious press. Most non-religious books in both scripts from 1955 to the present were published by the Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, which has an active Lisu section. The Lisu are not alone in their reversion to an earlier script associated with their religion; several nationalities in Xinjiang have also rejected 1950s romanisations and returned to traditional Arabic scripts since the liberalisation of the late 1970s.

In China, recognition is provided to so-called “autonomous” regions, prefectures, and counties at the national level; the provincial governments have been creating township (*xiang*) autonomous governments in place of some communes since the mid-1980s. The Lisu have one autonomous prefecture, Nujiang in northwestern Yunnan, and one autonomous county, Weixi, just to its east. When a group which has been recognised as a national minority acquires this new sociopolitical status and its leadership joins the established administrative system, those leaders tend to assimilate. This means that they become very strongly influenced by the Chinese, and their children grow up in towns and may lose their Lisu roots. Thus the most “advanced” and successful Lisu living in capital cities and working for the Chinese government are often the least Lisu. These people have little contact with village Lisu, and almost



none with Lisu from overseas. Nowhere else have the Lisu achieved such political status, though there is one Lisu participating in the ongoing National Convention to draft a new constitution for Burma.

Naturally those Lisu who have progressed within the educational and political systems of each country use the national language, and so many Lisu are fluent in standard Chinese or Burmese or Thai. Many others use local lingua francas as well, such as Yunnanese Chinese, Jinghpaw Kachin, Shan, Northern Thai, Lahu and so on; for details, see Bradley in WURM et al. (1996). Those who were educated in Burma and then moved to Thailand speak both Burmese and Thai, and most Southern Lisu, including those who live in Burma and Thailand, speak Yunnanese Chinese. Thus many Lisu are multilingual; indeed, many have also learned English. Lisu who speak numerous languages are not uncommon, and many Lisu are enthusiastic and successful language learners.

Most of the recent transnational contact among the Lisu is a direct result of Christianity. Because of political changes since the 1950s, much of this activity now takes place in Thailand where Lisu from Burma, India and sometimes from China come to visit or study in the Chiangmai Bible Institute or work in other similar institutions. There are also many Lisu associated with the Overseas Mission Fellowship, formerly the China Inland Mission, which worked with the Lisu in China from the beginning of the century and in Thailand since the early 1950s, among other Christian mission groups.

The development of the indigenous “Three Self”<sup>3</sup> churches in China led to a period of near-total separation of the Lisu Christians there from Lisu Christians and former missionaries elsewhere, most rigid in the 1950s and 1960s but still nominally in force and sometimes enforced. From the early 1980s there was some relaxation of this, and publication of Lisu scriptures resumed in China. Individual contacts with foreign missionaries and Lisu from outside China have increased in the last ten years, but are still perilous at times; Christianity is one of the covert or overt targets of the frequent “rectification” campaigns. Nevertheless, the Lisu are recognised as a Christian nationality, since most Lisu, especially in the Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, are Christian.

In summary, there are about 1.6 million Lisu speaking a variety of dialects; most of them are in China, where the Lisu comprise all of the Lisu national minority as well as the Eastern Lisu or “Central Yi” who are nearly ten per cent of the large Yi nationality. Southern Lisu and other Lisu are sometimes

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<sup>3</sup> That is, churches which have no connection with overseas counterparts: the ‘patriotic Catholic’ church which has no official contact with Rome and so on.

distinguished by different names in Burma. There is a standard dialect, the “Bible dialect”, associated with an orthography used by Lisu Christians in all countries; the use of this orthography is being re-expanded in China, and never stopped in Burma and India. It was also spread to Thailand after 1950 by missionaries and Lisu coming from the north.

## **The Lahu**

The Lahu are a group of about 750,000 people speaking another Tibeto-Burman language in southwestern Yunnan in China (about 400,000 now; 1990 census total 411,476 including some other groups as discussed below), the Shan State of Burma (over 250,000), northern Thailand (82,158 in villages in 1995, with others in towns) and northwestern Laos (15,693 in 1985); there are also about 1,200 refugees from Laos now living in the USA, with a few in Taiwan and Australia.

The Lahu are recognised as a national minority in China, the 24th group to receive this status; as a hill tribe in Thailand; and as a minority in Burma. The former pejorative Chinese name Lohei was eliminated after 1950, but the Shan/Thai name Musur which is usually said to mean “hunters” is still used to refer to this group in Thai and Shan as well as Burmese Muhso which is borrowed from the Shan term. The group is also sometimes referred to by its own name in Burma and Thailand. There is a separate Shan term for the Yellow Lahu subgroup, Kwi (sometimes written as Kuy or Kui), which is also sometimes found in Burmese. In Laos, the Mu Xoe (Musur) and Kuy are classified as distinct ethnic groups, (9,200 Mu Xoe and 6,493 Kuy in 1985). The refugees from Laos in the USA are nearly all Yellow Lahu.

While the Lahu achieved political recognition in two “autonomous” counties in China in the 1950s and jointly with other groups in two more in the 1980s, in 1995 they narrowly failed to achieve similar recognition of one township in Burma. When the National Convention which is drafting a new constitution for Burma decided not to accept a proposal for a Lahu township area at Mōng Ping and Mōng Hsat in the Eastern Shan State, the elected Lahu representative resigned and went overseas to protest; he is now a political refugee in Australia.

Lahu is divided into two main dialects, Black (Lahu Na) and Yellow (Lahu Shi), with many subvarieties; for details see BRADLEY (1979a). The Black Lahu dialect with subvarieties spoken by about two-thirds of the Lahu is the general lingua franca and so most other Lahu can also understand and speak this dialect

to a degree; but few Black Lahu speakers bother with other dialects, and most claim not to understand most of them.

Three orthographies for Black Lahu have been developed. The first was a version<sup>4</sup> devised by the American Baptist missionaries C.B. Antisdell, H.H. Tilbe and others starting in 1906, with the first publication of a primer by Antisdell in 1908, but without tones. This was completely revised by Po Tun, a Karen, who added tone markings and published a much improved primer in 1917, with a reprint correcting some errors, including an embarrassing error of one tone in the title, in 1925. Gospels translated mainly by Po Tun and Ba Te under the supervision of J.H. Telford were published starting from 1924, with a complete New Testament in 1932. After slight revisions by Marcus Vincent Young in 1950, a major revision by a Lahu committee led by Ai Pun and Paul W. Lewis appeared in 1962; more recently a full Bible has also come out. This orthography is quite widely known among Protestant Lahu (a substantial group, especially in Burma and Thailand where they are approaching the majority, and at least ten per cent in China).

In the mid-1950s a *pinyin* version of Lahu modified from the Baptist script was prepared for use in China. The first publications in 1957 do not mark all tones; but since 1958 a definitive version with tonal marking came into use; this was slightly revised in 1989. It is taught to a limited degree in schools in Lancang County, the one solely Lahu autonomous county; for details see BRADLEY (1994b). There are also two slightly different scripts for Black and Yellow Lahu developed by the Catholic missionaries in Burma and used by some Catholic Lahu; these are derived from the Protestant script. Another early attempt by a local Baptist, Duang Dee, using Northern Thai letters to represent Lahu, was unsuccessful; though one gospel did appear in this script in 1925.

More interesting is the use by some Lahu Shi or Yellow Lahu, who represent about a quarter of the Lahu overall, of their own new writing system. This started in 1982 among the Christian Yellow Lahu in the United States, who are refugees from Laos; though their pastor is himself Black Lahu, he now prefers to use it. Their speech represents a tiny minority, even among the Yellow Lahu as a whole; we would estimate about 30,000 speakers of their Balang Yellow Lahu dialect, nearly half of them now in Thailand. There has been a great deal of discord among the Christian Lahu in Thailand over this orthography; the community in Thailand is now split into two factions. Most Black Lahu think the Yellow Lahu should keep using the Black Lahu system, and keep the Lahu

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<sup>4</sup> We are pleased to thank Dr Paul W. Lewis for information on the development of this orthography.

unified; but some accept a new Yellow Lahu system. However many of the pastors in Thailand are Yellow Lahu, even in villages where the population speaks a Black Lahu variety.

Unlike the corresponding Lisu orthographies, the Christian Lahu orthographies are romanisations which use letters in more or less their usual values. There are some digraphs for certain vowels and consonants, and one of various diacritics is written after the syllable to indicate the tone. This tonal convention can probably be traced to the Karen colleagues who worked with the foreign missionaries; Karen uses postscript tonal markings which are an expansion of the system of Burmese, from which the Karen scripts are derived.

Black Lahu is also the dominant lingua franca among the mountain people in this area, so that members of various other smaller or more recently arrived groups learn it to some degree as a second language. There are many speakers of Lahu as a second language with varying levels of ability; their first languages include closely related Akha (half a million speakers, of whom perhaps a fifth have some knowledge of Lahu) and Southern Lisu (about 50,000 speakers, of whom many know some Lahu). A smaller proportion of the Wa (well over 800,000 speakers, with quite a few who can speak some Lahu) and other very small groups (Bana and Sila in Laos and various similar groups in Burma and China) also use Lahu in this way. Some Yunnanese Chinese and other traders also speak some Lahu, which is one of the lingua francas of the opium trade in the Golden Triangle. The proportion of males of other groups speaking Lahu is much higher than females. There is also some intermarriage, especially of Lahu women and Lisu or other men; mixed villages in which Lahu is gradually taking over from Lisu are not uncommon in Thailand, and the one Kachin village in Thailand is becoming Lahu-speaking because most wives are Red Lahu. Marriages in which Akhas or Was marry Lahus and move into Lahu villages are also fairly frequent where these groups are in contact. As a result of this bilingualism in Lahu, there are numerous Lahu loanwords in some of these languages, especially Akha.

Conversely, in the valleys and therefore at markets a different lingua franca is in use, by Lahu speakers as well as others. The valley languages in the Lahu area are Dai languages: Shan and others. The contact between the Lahu and the Shan has been quite extensive, and a large number of Shan loanwords have entered all varieties of Lahu. As well, many Lahu along with other hill groups use some Yunnanese Chinese for dealings with that group. While the Lahu may tend to be somewhat less multilingual than the Lisu, it is quite usual for an educated Lahu to speak his own kind of Lahu, Black Lahu as well, a local Shan

lingua franca and a national language - Chinese, Burmese, or Thai. Some Lahu Christians also speak English; and those who have moved from Burma to Thailand may speak both Burmese and Thai. So, maximally, a Yellow Lahu in Thailand educated in Burma might speak Yellow Lahu, Black Lahu, Shan, Northern Thai, Burmese, Thai and some English, and write in Black Lahu, Burmese, Thai and English; and maybe Yellow Lahu as well, if so inclined.

Lahu (the “standard” Black Lahu dialect) is used as a language of instruction to a limited extent in some Lahu areas of China and in Christian Sunday Schools throughout the Lahu areas of China, Burma and Thailand. It is also taught to Lahu students at the Yunnan Institute of Nationalities in Kunming (where the “New Lahu” *pinyin* version is used) and at the Academy for the Development of National Groups at Ywathagyi in Burma. The Military Academy at Maymyo in Burma teaches some Lahu to a small number of officer cadets, with limited success.

As in the case of the Lisu, the Christian church has been the main focus for ongoing transnational contacts among the Lahu. Unlike the Lisu, the Christian Lahu in China have not succeeded in reintroducing “Old Lahu” (Baptist) script in ordinary schools. However both in Burma and in China the New Testament has been reprinted and various other Christian literature can be published and used. In fact in these countries it is easier for a minority group to practice Christianity than it is for the majority group.

Another unifying factor is the existence of radio broadcasts in Lahu. These originate from Thailand, from Burma, from China and from a Christian network based in the Philippines. Naturally there is a great deal of majority-language influence within the Lahu broadcasts - loanwords from Thai, Burmese and Chinese abound, and may make it difficult for Lahu from other countries to understand. The Christian network tries to follow a linguistically neutral line, which of course means using the many Shan loanwords in Lahu.

Several times over the last hundred years, there have been Lahu revitalisation movements led by messiahs (Paw hku “priest”, G’ui sha “god”). These included a messiah at the end of the nineteenth century who may have been responsible for the creation of the Red Lahu subgroup; another, Ma Heh G’ui sha, who led a rebellion against the British in 1930; a third, Paw hku Yi, who started the building of temples in Red Lahu villages in Burma and Thailand in the 1920s; a fourth, the Maw Na (“black monkey” or “gibbon”) Paw hku, who died, reputedly aged 120, in 1980; and another, the White Lahu messiah in Laos; for more details see WALKER (1974). Each of these indigenous messiahs was most

successful among one Lahu subgroup: the Maw Na had mainly Red Lahu followers, and the White Lahu messiah's group was mainly Lahu Kulao.

A revitalisation movement of external origin was initiated at the turn of the twentieth century by the Young family, along with other American Baptist missionaries and a number of Karen colleagues, who converted a very large number of Lahu from various subgroups in Burma and China to Christianity. This movement has continued and become indigenised, with Lahu Christians continuing to proselytise and convert other Lahu. The association of certain groups with particular messianic movements even led people to change their subgroup affiliation: those Red Lahu who become Christian also tend to reclassify themselves as Black Lahu because of the association of the Red Lahu with the Maw Na messiah. Most of the Lahu Kulao who followed the White Lahu messiah have redesignated themselves as White Lahu, a subgroup which may not have existed earlier.

A typical example of the widespread tendency to lump different groups into one nationality in China involves a distinct group who also call themselves Lahu, and who are sometimes called Cosung in Vietnam and Kucong in China. Their language is very closely related to Lahu but not mutually intelligible; in the 1982 census the 50,000 or so Kucong in China were included in the category of unclassified national minorities. Most of the Kucong are in Honghe Prefecture, far to the east of the main Lahu concentrations; though a few are in eastern areas of Simao and Xishuangbanna Prefectures not too far east of the Lahu; there are also 5,400 (1993 census) in northernmost Vietnam where they are recognised as a distinct nationality - sometimes called Cosung, but more recently also called Lahu. In the early 1980s the Kucong and many other small groups applied for national minority status in China, but in 1989 the Kucong application was rejected and they were instead amalgamated with the Lahu. It was said that when the Lahu and Kucong representatives met, they were surprised at how similar their languages were and accepted the decision; of course they had no alternative. Naturally it was to the advantage of the Lahu cadres to have an extra 50,000 people in their nationality, thus making them the 22nd largest nationality in China. This accounts for the large increase in the reported Lahu population of China, from 304,174 in 1982 to 411,476 in 1990; 50,000 Kucong plus the natural increase of about twenty per cent like similar nationalities; and for part of the decrease in the "unclassified national minorities" category from 881,838 in 1982 to 749,341 in 1990. The rest of this decrease is due to similar amalgamations. However it is most unlikely that the amalgamation will have major practical implications for the Kucong, as Lahu is

only used for official purposes including education in the main areas of Lahu concentration such as Lancang Lahu Autonomous County and Menglian Dai, Lahu and Wa Autonomous County, not elsewhere where the group is less numerous.

In summary, there are about 750,000 Lahu speaking a variety of dialects; most of those for whom Black Lahu is not their own dialect also speak Black Lahu as a lingua franca. There are at least 250,000 non-Lahu who also use it in this way. The 55,000 Kucong in China and Cosung in Vietnam are officially classified as Lahu and speak a very closely related language. The Black and Yellow Lahu, under their Shan names, are recognised as separate ethnic groups in Laos and Burma. Group unity is maintained by the use of Black Lahu as a standard dialect and by an expanding Christian movement.

### **Examples**

The Appendix gives some examples illustrating the degree of difference between the various Lisu and Lahu writing systems. For purposes of comparison the same text, John 1.1, is given for each. Christians in all countries, including China, use the Christian orthography and thus these texts never appear in the new 1950s Chinese orthographies; but we have provided the latter using the conventions of these orthographies.

It can be remarked that for Lahu the differences do not appear insurmountable; indeed the new Chinese script is partly based on the older Christian one. Nevertheless, almost no one in China apart from those who have learned the Christian script in church can read it. This may partly be because it is closely associated with Christianity and so non-Christians do not want to read it or admit that they can read it; and also because there has been extremely little teaching of the new Lahu script in schools since before the Cultural Revolution. Thus readers of that script may have only a very rudimentary knowledge of it. Even more similar are the Black Lahu and Yellow Lahu scripts; one may wonder why, other than self-assertion, the Yellow Lahu want their own writing system.

### **Conclusion**

The decisions about minority matters made in different political domains can have strong effects on those minorities, but if a group is large enough and has some focus for distinctness, it may overcome these divisive tendencies. In the

case of the Lahu and the Lisu, Christianity has provided one such focus; but even those Lahu and Lisu who are not Christian still feel themselves to be members of their groups.

In Laos, the Lahu are divided into two ethnic groups; in China and in Burma, the Lisu are similarly separated between two national minorities. Conversely, the Kucong/Cosung group has been amalgamated with the Lahu in China - a situation which finds many parallels there, such as the Hani, the Tibetans, the Yi, the Yao and various other national minorities which include distinct groups speaking several different languages.

One of the main tools used to create borders within a transnational minority group has been the use of different orthographies. These divisions may be political (China versus the rest), religious (Protestant versus Catholic), regional (Pollard scripts used by Christian missions for eastern Yunnan minorities versus other scripts used by the same missions elsewhere, as in western Yunnan), and even linguistic (based on the selection of a different “standard” dialect as in the case of “Old Lisu” versus “New Lisu” or of more than one dialect for the development of orthographies, as in the case of Catholic Yellow Lahu and Black Lahu scripts). This use of orthographies to reinforce or create boundaries is widespread throughout the world.

The general policy in China was to develop numerous new *pinyin* based scripts for languages of national minorities, and to revise pre-existing scripts in some other cases such as for the Dai (Shan and Lue) nationality. In the case of the Lisu, this has led to an internal differentiation within the group in China, largely on religious lines; but has not divided the Christian Lisu from their counterparts elsewhere. The Chinese policy has been somewhat more successful in separating the Lahu of China from those outside China, but ready intelligibility remains after nearly fifty years, despite differences in the source of loanwords.

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## APPENDIX: EXAMPLES

John 1.1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

### Lisu

Lisu traditional Bible, 1981 edition as printed (based on 1968 and earlier editions)

YI CE YI WU. ɬV LE BV-ɣT JO \_ LO=  
BV-ɣT NY WU-S BE ɬI W.: JO TY \_ LO=  
BV-ɣT NY WU-S ʌ LO=

same, all tones marked

YI. CE.. YI. WU. ɬV: LE.. BV.,-ɣT: JO.. \_ LO..=  
BV.,-ɣT: NY.. WU..-S., BE.. ɬI: W.: JO.. TY, \_ LO..=  
BV.,-ɣT: NY.. WU..-S., ʌ.. LO..=

corresponding Chinese Lisu version (all tones marked)

Eiljei eil'ol tait lei bbaixket jjo a lo.  
Bbaixket nia Wusa bbei tit war jjo jaq a lo.  
Bbaixket nia Wusa nga lo.

phonetic value ('Bible' pronunciation)

[ji<sup>55</sup> tʃe<sup>33</sup> ji<sup>55</sup> wu<sup>55</sup> thæ<sup>21</sup> le<sup>33</sup> bæ<sup>44</sup> kʰu<sup>21</sup> dʒo<sup>33</sup> a<sup>33</sup> lo<sup>33</sup>.  
bæ<sup>44</sup> kʰu<sup>21</sup> ɲa<sup>33</sup> wu<sup>33</sup> sa<sup>44</sup> be<sup>33</sup> thɿ<sup>21</sup> wɑ<sup>51</sup> dʒo<sup>33</sup> tʃa<sup>35</sup> a<sup>33</sup> lo<sup>33</sup>.  
bæ<sup>44</sup> kʰu<sup>21</sup> ɲa<sup>33</sup> wu<sup>33</sup> sa<sup>44</sup> ɲa<sup>33</sup> lo<sup>33</sup>.]

Lisu common language<sup>5</sup> New Testament, 1978 edition as printed

A. XŃ MI M: JO ɬV LE BV-ɣT MYƏ T XU ɬI RO JO \_ LO=  
YI NY WU-S BE TY SI WU-S BE ɬI LE, ʌ LO=

same, all tones marked

A. XŃ: MI.. M: JO.. ɬV: LE.-. BV.,-ɣT: MYƏ.. T. XŃ: ɬI: RO.. JO.. \_ LO..=  
YI. NY.. WU..-S., BE.. TY, SI.,-. WU..-S., BE.. ɬI: LE, ʌ.. LO..=

corresponding Chinese Lisu version (all tones marked)

Alshit mi mat jjo tait lei, bbaixket mi dal shit tit yo jjo a lo.  
Eil nia Wusa bbei jaq six, Wusa bbei tit lei q nga lo.

phonetic value ('Bible' pronunciation)

[ʔa<sup>55</sup> ʃɿ<sup>21</sup> mi<sup>33</sup> ma<sup>21</sup> dʒo<sup>33</sup> thæ<sup>21</sup> le<sup>33</sup>, bæ<sup>44</sup> kʰu<sup>21</sup> mjø<sup>33</sup> ta<sup>55</sup> ʃɿ<sup>21</sup> thɿ<sup>21</sup> zɔ<sup>33</sup> dʒo<sup>33</sup> a<sup>33</sup> lo<sup>33</sup>.  
ji<sup>55</sup> ɲa<sup>33</sup> wu<sup>33</sup> sa<sup>44</sup> be<sup>33</sup> tʃa<sup>35</sup> sɿ<sup>44</sup>, wu<sup>33</sup> sa<sup>44</sup> be<sup>33</sup> thɿ<sup>21</sup> le<sup>35</sup> ɲa<sup>33</sup> lo<sup>33</sup>.]

<sup>5</sup> This is a new translation in simpler everyday language, not a different dialect. For example, the first sentence of the common language version means "When there was no land, there was a kind of person named "Word", while the traditional version follows the original more literally: "At the beginning of time, there was Word".

## Lahu

John 1.1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Lahu (Black Lahu) New Testament, 1962 edition

Aw, hkuī pui\_ hta<sup>v</sup> ka, Taw<sup>v</sup> hkaw<sup>v</sup> caw, ta\_ ve yo<sup>v</sup>.

Taw<sup>v</sup> hkaw<sup>v</sup> o<sup>v</sup> ve G'ui, sha geh cheh<sup>v</sup> leh, Taw<sup>v</sup> hkaw<sup>v</sup> o<sup>v</sup> ve leh, G'ui, sha hpeh<sub>A</sub> ve yo<sup>v</sup>.

Chinese Lahu, pre-1989

Awlkheuq peul thad kar Tawdkhawd cawl tal ve yol.

Tawdkhawd od ve Xeulsha gie chied lie, Tawdkhawd od ve liel Xeulsha phier ve yol.

Chinese Lahu, post-1989 reform

Awlkheuq peuf thad kar Tawdkhawd cawl taf ve yol.

Tawdkhawd od ve xeulsha gie chied lie, Tawdkhawd od ve liel xeulsha phier ve yol.

phonetic value

[ɔ<sup>21</sup> khɿ<sup>35</sup> pi<sup>112</sup> thɑ<sup>53</sup> kɑ<sup>ʔ21</sup> tɔ<sup>53</sup> khɔ<sup>53</sup> tɕɔ<sup>21</sup> ta<sup>112</sup> ve<sup>33</sup> jo<sup>21</sup>.  
tɔ<sup>53</sup> khɔ<sup>53</sup> o<sup>53</sup> ve<sup>33</sup> ɣi<sup>21</sup> ɕɑ<sup>33</sup> ge<sup>33</sup> tɕhe<sup>53</sup> le<sup>33</sup>, tɔ<sup>53</sup> khɔ<sup>53</sup> o<sup>53</sup> ve<sup>33</sup> le<sup>21</sup> ɣi<sup>21</sup> ɕɑ<sup>33</sup> p<sup>hɛ</sup>ɕ<sup>ʔ21</sup> ve<sup>33</sup>  
jo<sup>21</sup>.]

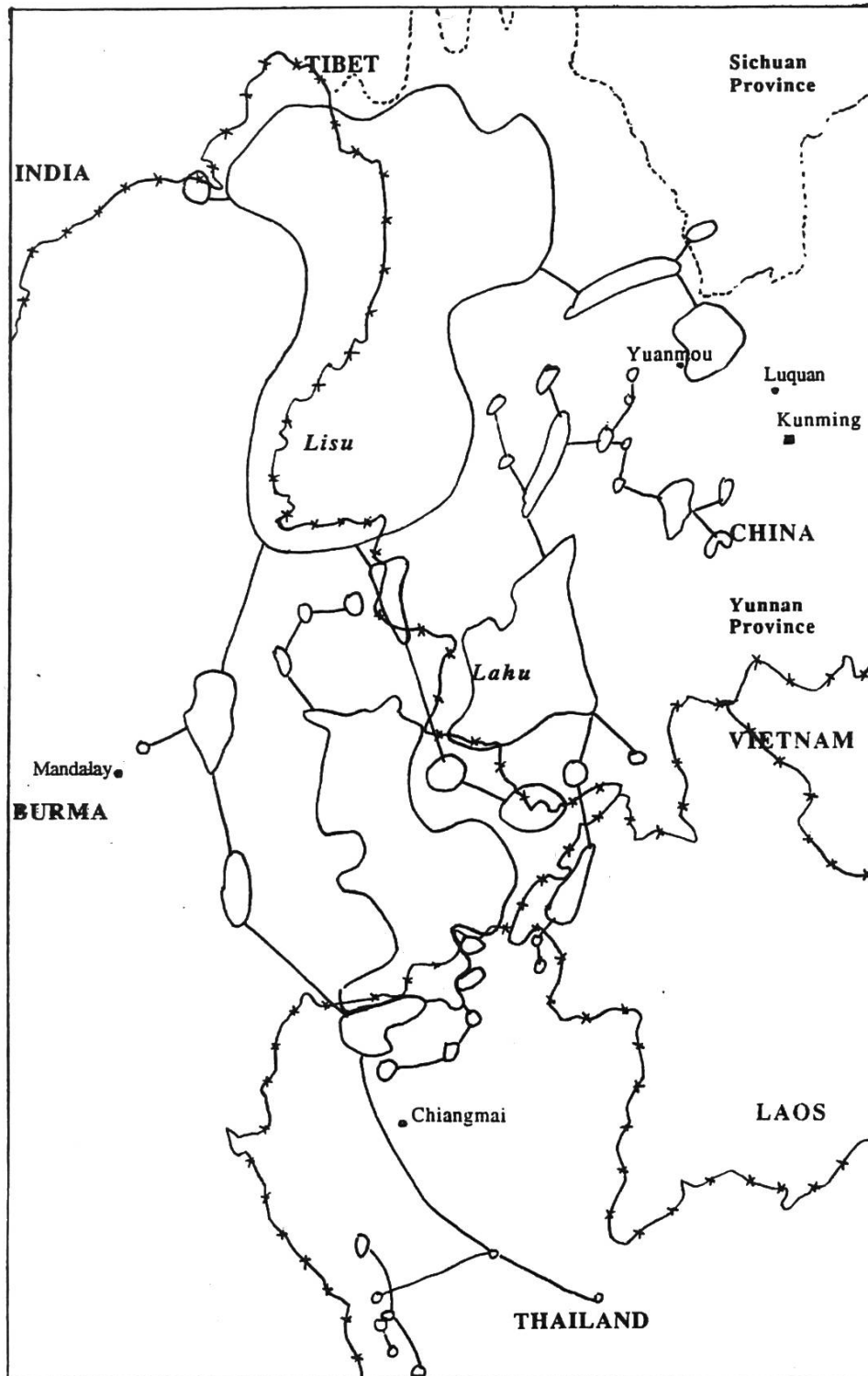
Yellow Lahu (modified from preceding)

Aw, hkī pi\_ hta<sup>v</sup>, Taw<sup>v</sup> hkuh<sup>v</sup> caw, ta\_ che yao<sup>v</sup>.

Taw<sup>v</sup> hkuh<sup>v</sup> o<sup>v</sup> ve G'i, sa geh cheh<sup>v</sup> leh, Taw<sup>v</sup> hkuh<sup>v</sup> o<sup>v</sup> ve leh, G'i, sa hpeh<sub>A</sub> che yao<sup>v</sup>.

phonetic value

[ɔ<sup>53</sup> khɿ<sup>13</sup> pi<sup>11</sup> thɑ<sup>55</sup>, tɔ<sup>55</sup> kh<sub>Λ</sub><sup>55</sup> tɕɔ<sup>53</sup> ta<sup>11</sup> tɕhe<sup>33</sup> jaw<sup>53</sup>.  
tɔ<sup>55</sup> kh<sub>Λ</sub><sup>55</sup> o<sup>55</sup> ve<sup>33</sup> ɣi<sup>53</sup> ɕɑ<sup>33</sup> ge<sup>33</sup> tɕhe<sup>55</sup> le<sup>33</sup>, tɔ<sup>55</sup> kh<sub>Λ</sub><sup>55</sup> o<sup>55</sup> ve<sup>33</sup> le<sup>53</sup> ɣi<sup>53</sup> ɕɑ<sup>33</sup> p<sup>hɛ</sup>ɕ<sup>ʔ21</sup> tɕhe<sup>33</sup>  
jaw<sup>53</sup>.]



Location of the Lisu and Lahu: China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, India

