Handbook of the Lisu (Yawyin) language

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HANDBOOK
OF THE
LISU (YAWYIN) LANGUAGE

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NOTE ON THE ORIGIN, DISTRIBUTION, CUSTOMS, ETC., OF THE LISU.

The origin of the Lisu race, as is the case with so many races in this part of Asia, is uncertain. The uniform testimony of the people themselves, from widely separated districts, is that they come from the "head of the river," which they refer, very vaguely, to either the N'mai Hka, Salween, or Mekong Rivers. It is certain that Lisu are found in considerable numbers around the upper reaches of these three Rivers, and as it can be observed that even the present tendency of Lisu migration is in a southerly direction, it seems probable that their tradition is correct.* Hence we may suppose that their original home is in or near Eastern Tibet. This would seem to be borne out by the strong resemblance between the Lisu language and the Burmese and Atsi Kachin languages, the latter races also being supposed to have migrated from the eastern part of Tibet. If these surmises are correct we may, perhaps, hazard the further supposition that the southern migration of the Lisu was a later one than that of the Burmans and Kachins, for whilst the latter seem to be thoroughly acclimatised in their lower altitudes, the Lisu are seldom found at altitudes of less than 5,000 feet above sea-level, and flourish best at altitudes of 6,000 and more feet. They are usually to be found, whether in Yunnan or Burma, in the higher and colder regions of the mountains.

There are, however, many Lisu who have Chinese surnames and claim Chinese origin. Though all Lisu clan surnames have their Chinese equivalents, some have Chinese surnames without Lisu equivalents: these are usually descendants of Chinese adopted into Lisu families. But even Lisu with ordinary Lisu clan surnames will sometimes claim to be of Chinese extraction, averring that their ancestors originally came from Eastern China, usually from the province of Kiangsi—the ancestral home of most of the Chinese living near the Burma frontier. Such Lisu do not, however, boast of their Chinese origin. No Lisu is ashamed to own his race, whereas the aborigines of Eastern Yunnan, where Chinese influence is stronger, are often ashamed to admit that they are not Chinese, and indeed tend to become absorbed in the latter race. In the Tengyueh District there is a saying that the Chinese sometimes "turn into tribespeople" but that the tribespeople never "turn into Chinese."

It is impossible to speak with any accuracy of the Lisu, for they are a widely scattered and comparatively little known race. In China there are probably very few Lisu to be found elsewhere than in the province of Yunnan. In Yunnan they are found along practically the whole length of the Burma frontier from Wei Hsi down to Szemao, those in British territory following, in general, the same line from the North-East extremity of the Putao District down to the Southern

* Their name "Li Su" means "the people who have come down."
Shan States. They are also found along the Valley of the Mekong down to about Lat. 26° N and along the Upper Yangtse nearly as far as the longitude of Yunnanfu. Those in the Yangtse Basin in the vicinity of Yuanmowhien speak a dialect so widely differing from the dialects of the Burma frontier as to be unintelligible to the latter, scarcely 50 per cent, of the words being the same. In fact it is questionable whether they are the same race or not, for only the Chinese call them Lisu, their own name for themselves being Lihpaw. In physical appearance the Lisu are of medium height, with a somewhat darker complexion than the Chinese, and Mongoloid features. Both men and women shave their heads entirely but for a patch three or four inches across at the back of their heads, the long hair of which they plait into a queue—evidently in imitation of the Chinese. The men wear the same kind of loose jacket as the Chinese, whilst the trousers (worn by both sexes) are made, as the latter is, of plain blue cloth and come down to an inch or two above the knee, a blue cloth turban is the usual headgear and white cloth stockings are sometimes worn by both sexes. The footwear, if anything at all, usually consists of cheap sandals made of bamboo bark.

The dress of the women varies very considerably according to the district. In the parts of Yunnan where the Lisu come more directly under Chinese influence the women often dress so like Chinese women as to be only distinguishable from the latter by their unbound feet. Between this plain style of dress and the gay and much bejewelled costume worn by the Lisu women on the Burma China Frontier near Tawgaw and Sadon there are several grades of ornamentation. The turban is usually several feet long, plain in the middle but ornamented with strips of coloured cloth at both ends, from which hang tassels, beads, cowries or other pendants according to the fancy of the wearer or the customs of the district. Ear-rings are usually worn, also necklaces of many different kinds—in the district near Sadon several coils of ordinary brass wire being worn, sometimes even by the men. The dress consists of a tunic reaching only to the waist in front but long behind. The shortness of the tunic in front is made up for by an apron fastened to the body by an embroidered waistband. Both the tunic and the apron are ornamented by square or oblong patches of red, yellow and green cloth, the lower edges being trimmed with cowrie shells.

In disposition the Lisu are mild and easy-going, are affable, hospitable, and almost invariably friendly to Europeans. Whereas the Chinese and Kachins are often suspicious of strangers, the Lisu are seldom so. Their frank geniality is more agreeable to Europeans at least, than the blunt boorish manner of the Kachins on the one hand, or the obsequiousness of the Chinese on the other. They are lovers of peace, law and order, do not engage in raiding or inter-tribal warfare if it can possibly be avoided and are scarcely ever known either to rob or beg. Their love of peace begets a timidity and dependence which forces them under the overlordship of the Chinese, Kachins, or any stronger race near whom they happen to live. They are capable of sincere friendship and make loyal and devoted servants. They have their superstitions and their prejudices of course, but a stranger of another race need not be afraid of incurring
displeasure by unwittingly offending them. This is an important point for the traveller, who knows how easy it is to get into trouble in Kachin villages—the Kachins taking their superstitions so much more seriously than the Lisu.

Lisu women and girls are apt to be shy, but when on familiar terms they are frank and natural. They are not bold as the Kachin women are, nor prudish and self-conscious as the Chinese. In morality whilst not, perhaps, so strict as the Chinese, they are on a distinctly higher level than the Kachins. An unmarried Lisu girl is supposed to behave herself, and in the majority of cases, perhaps, does so, but districts vary considerably in their morals. When breaches of morality occur, the offenders of either sex are at least as often married as unmarried persons. In cases where an unmarried girl is guilty of misconduct the offence is not considered a very serious one and is often passed over. Adultery with a married woman is, however, considered to be a serious offence, and if proved is punished by fining; the lawful husband often divorcing his wife and compelling her paramour to marry her. To the credit of the Lisu it may be said that they have a strong sense of decency and shame. Out and out prostitution is unknown among them.

The Lisu are everywhere addicted to the drinking of rice beer, which they seem unable to drink (as the Chinese usually do) in moderation. Not to speak of the waste of good grain, the moral effect of the habit on the race is wholly bad. It is a fruitful cause of quarrelling and trouble among an otherwise peaceably disposed people. They do not distil the strong spirit called "shao tsiu" by the Chinese, but they buy and drink this also at the Chinese markets they attend. The old people of both sexes are more given to drinking than the young. On such occasions as weddings, etc., an enormous quantity of liquor is consumed. The Chinese have a saying, "The Lisu for liquor; leeches for blood."

Opium-smoking is not very prevalent in most districts, though a village would seldom be found which did not contain at least one smoker. Some Lisu seem to be able to "play with" opium, as they say, i.e. to smoke it when they get the opportunity without acquiring the habit. The Chinese never seem to be able to do this. Poppy cultivation is well-nigh universal among the Lisu—at least in districts where its growth is permitted.

Lisu houses are not built off the ground as Kachin houses are, but have plain mud floors in all the rooms. If, as usually happens, the ground is sloping, a stone plinth is erected in front of the house to support the mud verandah. The posts are made sometimes of hewn, sometimes of unhewn trees, and the partitions, both outside and inside, are made of bamboos, split into laths and woven. As a rule there are only three rooms; the middle one (htang⁵ waw⁶-Ch.) is the "common" room, where around the fireplace either the family or outsiders are free at any time to sit on low benches or logs and warm themselves; here also visitors' sleeping accommodation is provided. At the back of the room, facing the door, is a shelf on which cups and incense bowls are placed for offering to the ancestral spirits; visitors should not place articles on this. The bedroom (hkghe¹ gaw³) is one of the side rooms, usually entered from the centre room, where the family themselves
sleep on raised bedsteads and where the grain, valuables, etc., are kept. A guest is not supposed to enter the bedroom, and will never be invited to do so unless for some special purpose, e.g., to see a sick person. The kitchen (tsao h'i') is on the other side, has a raised brick "kitchen range," into which is let a big iron pan or two. Water is usually both fetched and kept in bamboo cylinders. The building and arrangements of most Lisu houses are so much like the Chinese as to form one of the many proofs of the influence of the latter race on the Lisu.

Though fond of hunting—chiefly the barking deer, of which there is generally a plentiful supply in Lisu country—and though often helping to make a living by selling firewood, timber, vegetables, incense, hemp cord, etc., to the Chinese when living near their markets, the Lisu live almost entirely by agriculture. Comparatively few have irrigated paddy-fields, and the majority live in districts which are too cold to cultivate highland paddy. Their chief crops are maize and buckwheat. Both these crops—in fact most crops of any kind raised by the Lisu—are grown by clearing and burning the jungle. This most wasteful method—"taungya cultivation"—is practised because, so the Lisu say, their soil is too poor to raise crops by any other method. It seems probable, however, that most of the soil cultivated by the Lisu would produce fairly good crops if adequately supplied with nitrogenous manure, which the Lisu are either too poor or too lazy to apply in sufficient quantities. In some villages each family has its own preserve—a large tract of mountain land whereon that family alone has the right to cut down and burn the forest. The same plot of ground is seldom sown even two years in succession, for after the first year the fertility has so far decreased and the weeds grown so rank (sic) that it will not pay to cultivate it. Hence it is fallowed for a long period—usually till the jungle has again grown thick upon it, when it may be again cut down and cultivated. The land is thus used in rotations of from ten to twenty years. Ploughing is not resorted to very much except, of course, where irrigated paddy is cultivated, partly because the land is too steep, but more often because the stumps and roots of recently felled trees would oppose the progress of the plough. The implement used is the ordinary native hoe. Men and women both work in the fields. Beside maize and buckwheat, subsidiary crops of potatoes, hill sesame, hemp, indigo and other things are grown where soil and climate will permit, also, as above stated, opium where its cultivation is not prohibited. There is little in the way of co-operative or commercial farming: each family grows what is sufficient for its own immediate needs and no more. The wealthy farmer, the large landowner, though found everywhere among the Chinese, is practically non-existent among the Lisu.

The method of taungya cultivation described above cannot, of course, keep on for ever, especially with an increasing population. So little is returned to the soil for what is taken out that in process of time old settlements tend to get worked out—the hills bare and sterile. The Lisu will then cast about for new districts to devastate, and will migrate forest-wards. The path of least resistance is always removal to a lower attitude near Kachin or Shan country, and there
is even a small colony of Lisu down by the Irrawaddy on the Myitkyina Plain. It is far easier to make a living at such altitudes, where the soil is rich and the climate warm, but it does not suit the Lisu, and they know it. They readily fall victims to malaria and other diseases prevalent in warm climates and the death rate is high, especially among children. Fear of this prevents many of them moving to warmer districts. In one district known to the author they have a saying: "If you are not afraid of hunger, go up and live in high altitudes; if you are not afraid of death go down and live in low (altitudes)." But even those who can stand living in warm climates seem to degenerate; they get lazy, shiftless, and physically weak—in appearance sallow and pasty-looking. The Lisu 'par excellence' are those who live in cold climates, where even the winds and vapours from hot plains are shut out by mountain ranges; where the men and women are strong, active and intelligent, the children healthy and rosy-cheeked.

In religion the Lisu are animists, though influenced to some extent by Chinese religious notions. Idolatry is very seldom practised but ancestor worship is universal. The latter, as with many of the Chinese, is quite as much in the nature of propitiation of the ancestral manes from a motive of fear as pure worship from principle. Where Chinese influence is strong three large strips of red paper will be seen pasted on the partition at the back of the centre room just over the altar-shelf. The centre one of these will bear the six Chinese characters "t'ien ti chhün ts'in si wei" (the altar of heaven, earth, emperor, parents and teacher) in front of which will be an incense bowl. The strip on the left hand will be for the ancestors and that on the right for the kitchen god, each with its incense bowl in front of it. Incense is burned before these on various occasions and bows made to them by the men of the family. Lisu women seem to have no part whatever in any religious ceremony, whilst among the Chinese religious observances are often left almost entirely to them. It is not many Lisu, however, who worship as elaborately as the Chinese. Their worship, as indeed everything connected with them, is simple and primitive. Indeed the major part of a Lisu's "religion" seems to consist of propitiation of evil spirits whose "bite" causes sickness. Not all sickness is attributed to such evil influences, but if a Lisu priest is consulted in time of sickness and decides by drawing lots (sa^5 sye^4 sye^4) that the disease is caused by the bite of a demon, a sacrifice—usually a chicken, sometimes a pig, but never a cow or buffalo as among the Kachins—must be offered, the priest helping by muttering incantations, and a meal (with rice beer) being eaten by all concerned. The priest does not, as a rule, receive wages, but gets a free meal only.

Beside the spirits of the ancestors (ni^5 bigh^6) and other wandering homeless spirits in general (ni^5) the Lisu recognise other spirits in a vague kind of way e.g. mu^5-kwa^3-ni^5 (a heavenly spirit); mi^5 si^3 ("the god of the hills," who has to be propitiated if horses, cattle, sheep, etc., get lost or killed by wild beasts on the hills) and others. But the creator of heaven and earth, also called upon in priestly ministrations and acknowledged to be the supreme head of all spirits, good and evil, is wu^4-sa^4.
Witchcraft (rgbēt-h'ai syê or t'ai hu) is little heard of in most districts, but in others it is firmly believed in. When a person of either sex is suspected of being able to bewitch others, whether through direct accusation of a fellow villager or by random statements of a sick person in delirium, etc., the Lisu will sometimes throw all sense of justice to the winds and will summarily expel (or even kill) the suspected person without a shadow of a trial. Some of these unfortunate suspects are hanged about from village to village. An accusation of witchcraft is not lightly made, for if proved to be false it renders the accuser liable to a heavy fine. But in any case the safest thing for a person suspected of witchcraft to do is to flee the village immediately. When witchcraft is suspected, as e.g. when there is an unaccountable amount of sickness in a village, recourse is sometimes had to trial by ordeal. This may consist of the handling of hot irons, or more usually to the bringing up of a piece of silver from the bottom of a huge iron pan filled with boiling water or oil. In either case no harm is supposed to result if the person is innocent. The author has seen a man’s arm in a terrible condition after passing through the latter ordeal. But, as said above, witchcraft does not seem to have much hold on the Lisu in most districts.

On the death of a Lisu it is the custom in some places to fire three guns immediately. The corpse is laid out in the centre room and covered by a sheet of hempen cloth. A coffin is provided unless the corpse is that of a child; sometimes the coffin is even prepared several years before death and kept in readiness in the house. If the deceased is a married woman or widow it is necessary to send for some member or members of her own family to be present at the burial. Her husband’s family would not dare to bury her otherwise, for her family might bring an accusation that she died by other than natural means, or else that she was not buried properly and would hence return to “bite” her relatives, etc., which would involve a lawsuit and perhaps the payment of a fine. They must be present to see that every thing is alright. As a rule the burial takes place within two or three days after death—sometimes within a few hours. Auspicious days for burial are either not chosen at all or else chosen in a much simpler way than the Chinese, who will sometimes keep their dead waiting a year or more for interment. In any case incense will be burnt and offerings made to the departed spirit before the coffin is carried out of the house—in some districts a ceremony consisting of walking slowly around the coffin several times and striking it sharply with a stick each time, chanting, being performed by the mourners. At least one meal is served to the guests and helpers. The coffin is carried out without much ceremony and buried two or three feet deep on some spot on the hill side. A subsequent ceremony of “pointing the way”—to the spirit in the unseen world—may not be performed for even several years afterwards; this depends on the

* This method of trial is also employed sometimes in other cases, e.g. theft, when a direct proof is impossible.

† Sometimes even with levity and mirth. The total absence of a reverent spirit at Chinese or Lisu funerals is repugnant to a European observer.