The Art of (not) Looking Back: Reconsidering Lisu Migrations and “Zomia”¹

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Introduction: A People Who Do Not Look Back

The Lisu, according to anthropologist Otome K. Hutheesing, are “a people who do not look back”.² Of her informants in northern Thailand, Hutheesing writes:

Very few Lisu men, even fewer women know about their ‘roots’. When questioned about origins they smile faintly and do not seem interested. Some of the old generation can recall names of towns or areas in Burma [where their ancestors lived]. . . . they cite strife and unrest as a motivating factor for their geographic mobility.³

This chapter addresses the mobility and migrations of the Lisu, an ethnicity in Southeast Asia who may or may not constitute a single social group with a single set of “origins.” It traces back the movements that scattered Lisu households and villages over a broad area from Yunnan in the east to India in the west, from northern Myanmar to Thailand and Laos.

Today, approximately one million people call themselves “Lisu” (or a recognized equivalent) and speak a variant of Lisu as their mother tongue, yet their culture remains little known outside of Southwest China, where two-thirds of them live. This is partly because their lack of an indigenous written

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² Hutheesing 1990: 35.

language means they have never composed their own historical accounts. It is also because Lisu have migrated multiple times over the last five centuries, and have often been concerned with avoiding their more powerful literate neighbors, evading written history in the process. Fragments of Lisu history can be gleaned from the margins of Chinese, Burmese, Thai, British, and other historical records. Lisu people themselves may not understand the formal migration narratives that have survived in archaic language, and Lisu communities’ memories of their journeys do not always correspond neatly to the oft-redrawn boundaries of Southeast Asian states. It would seem that the Lisu have perfected the art of not looking back. Yet, as I argue in this paper, looking back on their migrations fills an important gap in the otherwise state-dominated historiography of Southeast Asia, and has critical implications for anthropological understandings of the region’s cultural politics.

MAP 1  Lisu migrations in South East Asia