“Absurd” Actions and “Reasonable” Faith: The Belief Logic and Social Actions of the “Kingdom-got Sect”

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In China, religion is mostly referred to as a “problem” while the more exact expression should be “religious issues” rather than “religious problems.” When it comes to the research of religion and other cultural phenomena, social science would often turn to models or concepts as the tool of analysis. Although we are in no way nowhere against the employment of models or concepts, it’s notable that if research is simply from concepts to concepts, it would be easily detached from the reality of life. Therefore, the exploration of theory and the generation of concept should always originate from the real-life-world, from the “rough ground” as in Wittgenstein’s puts it words. Theory is expected to help us in understanding the social reality, rather than tailoring the social reality to some evidence of the theory.

So here what we present here is a vivid life story – although the social actions of these Lisu Christians may seem to have a “sense of absurdity” in the modern nation-state context, it is they are not unreasonable and so detached from their logic of life. If we put bias and prejudice aside and are willing to listen to their explanation to of these actions, we will find that they have “rationality,” and are biblical at least in the sense of their faith, though their theological understanding might be quite different from the orthodox doctrine and interpretation. We can always take their selection and alteration of doctrine as strategic actions for protecting benefits of their own, but if we take another perspective, especially the perspective of the self narration of the actors, we have every reason to believe that it is their interpretation of the scriptural or the theological guidance that stimulates or at least legitimizes their various social actions in the sense of holy belief, including the radical “anti-society” resistance in the early times and the later mild noncooperation after the changing of the theological interpretation.
What is the “Kingdom-got Sect”?

The field site where the story happened takes place is an unincorporated village of in Wuding County, Yunnan Province, which; we will call it Xin village, with Huili County of Sichuan Province is nearby, across the Jinsha (Upper Yangtze) River. As similar to the terrain and ethnic group distribution as in most southwest mountainous regions, Xin village where the Lisu people inhabited is located on the top of the mountain; the lower slope belongs to Miao villages, and the river valley of Jinsha are is mainly occupied by Dai people who cultivating rice. Dongpo, the nearest town to where Xin village is located, is a Dai autonomous township that and was established in 1988.

When we talked about the Lisu, usually it is the (Western) (West) Lisu who are referred to, living around the Nujiang Canyon area, like in places such as Fugong, Gongshan and so on. And most of the existing researches or travelogues on the Christianity of the Lisu also take the Lisu church of the Nujiang River as the point of focus topic, and seldom pay attention to the (Eastern) (East) Lisu people along the Jinsha River. Despite the controversy of ethnicity and the fact that East and West Lisu can barely communicate with the same language, in the village we investigate discover at least, that the villagers’ sense of Lisu ethnic identity is salient. This is partly due to their living situation, living among other ethnic groups like Yi, Miao, Dai, Han and Bai, but on the other hand, we also have to realize that in the past half a century, the ethnic identification movement has successfully granted the ethnic identity to the local Lisu people, and the ethnic identity in turn has been initiatively internalized to a large extent.

Xin Village can be said as to be “geographically charming and humanly outstanding.” For instance, the Christian church elder of Xin village, though neither tall – less than 1.6 meters – nor rich, really has presence and authority in the local social life. But meanwhile at the same time, Xin village can has also been said described as “badlands producing unruly people,” such as Pastor Li for instance, who is in charge of the church for the Lisu people, has been considered labelled as one of these “unruly people” by the local government in the past two decades. As he has taken a leading role in so called trouble-making for manynumerous times and has even stormed relevant government departments.

Similar to West the West Lisu of the Nujiang River area, the Dongpo Lisu East Lisu people here also have has a high proportion of Christians, – though not necessarily as high as 80–90% as in the saying of the local church – every village has at least one church and churches of those, more than 30 villages link together and constitute a Lisu Church in this area. The relationship