

## Christian Life among the Lisu in Yunnan Province

*Y. Franklin Ishida*

### The Lisu in Lijiang, Yunnan Province

Flying into Lijiang is a test in one's nerves and trust in the pilots. The plane winds its way into the valleys, its wings looking like they may barely miss mountain ridges. It is a bit unnerving, but this is the normal arrival to the northern Yunnan Province city of Lijiang.

Lijiang is an ancient city that lies at the intersection of numerous ethnic groups: the Naxi, Lisu, Yi, Bai, Pumi, among others. Lijiang itself, located in a broad valley, was the capital of the Naxi kingdom. The other ethnic peoples were scattered in the surrounding mountain lands, coexisting despite differences in language and cultures.

The Lisu people, about whom I write here, are spread in the northern and western parts of Yunnan Province, inhabiting the very rugged mountainous parts of the province. They are one of the 56 recognized ethnic groups in China. They can also be found in neighboring Myanmar and Thailand, as well as some in India. North of Lijiang, though, is one of the centers of the Lisu lands.

To get there, you head west and north from Lijiang, and especially past the so-called First Bend of the Yangtze River. Some of this area has been designated as Shangri-La [County], coming from the fictional place described in the 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* by British author James Hilton. While the name here has been given more to promote tourism than being the actual place name, it is as picturesque as you may imagine from the book. This is the heartland of the Lisu and the Yulong Christian Council.

While the larger towns have a mixed ethnic population, many of the Lisu – and their churches – are spread throughout these mountains. Their ancient culture and traditional religion notwithstanding, many Lisu converted to Christianity beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Missionaries from the China Inland Mission were active among the Lisu of Yunnan. They accepted those missionaries and their teaching the Gospel so that many converted to Christianity quickly to be followers of Christ.

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## The Christian Church of Wujihou

After traveling north along the Yangtze River, we now head west into the mountain valleys. Past the picturesque village of Liming and deeper up the valley is the hamlet of Wujihou. A church stands at the end of the road. Though remote, this church actually represents one of many gathering points for the Christian faithful. On any given Sunday, parishioners would hike for hours over mountain paths to arrive at church. The church is usually packed with some 40 people, young and old, and children, too. To only gather for a worship service would be a waste of time for those who have spent hours getting there. So church activities run all day.



Wujihou Christian Church.

This is a lively Christian community. The people may see each other only once a week at the most. But their faith remains deep as they pray together, sing hymns – most of which came from missionaries over a century ago – and study scripture. They are led by an evangelist who preaches, teaches and leads the singing. And it seems as if the kitchen is a constant spot for activity to make sure meals and food are ready during the course of the day.

Wujihou is one of 82 congregations and worship points in Yulong Christian Council's service area that covers four counties and one district. Yulong County itself has 56 of these congregations with almost 6,000 members.

Today, some 70 percent of the approximately 750,000 Lisu in Yunnan Province are Christian. While the Communist atheist ideology has affected religiosity in China and this is a factor within the Lisu communities as well, the Christian faith has remained strong among them. During the sociopolitical purge of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 until 1976, many Lisu Christians continued to practice their faith in secret. One elderly man



recounts how, at night, his parents would whisper-sing hymns. They would also read from the Bible by candlelight. Fortunately for them and many other Christians in this region, their remote living spared them from the harsher effects of anti-religious sentiments. Their steadfastness to the faith has made Christianity a normative part of their culture. And today, the Chinese government has proposed considering Christianity as the official religion of the Lisu.

## Lisu Language and the Fraser Alphabet

The missionary influence upon the Lisu lies deep. Like in many parts of the world, the missionaries promoted education, agriculture, and health care. The missionaries also created the Lisu written language.

The Fraser alphabet or Old Lisu Alphabet was invented in about 1915 and improved by the missionary James O. Fraser, a missionary who lived and worked with the Lisu people in China from 1910 to 1949. During his time in China, Fraser learned to speak Chinese and Lisu and produced a Lisu translation of the New Testament using his alphabet. The alphabet is now recognized by the government and is used in the Lisu translation of the entire Bible. These Bibles, more than 750,000 that have been printed, are among those of many of the ethnic languages of China printed by the Amity Printing Press in Shanghai.

Meanwhile, as an originally orally-based culture, literacy in the Lisu language remains low while children grow up learning Mandarin in schools. But the quality of education, or at least opportunities and resources, remain low in remote places of China. Many Lisu thus suffer limited opportunities for advancement in society and great numbers of younger

people travel to cities or other parts of China for work. This further erodes community and culture.

For some young Lisu people, the church offers opportunities. Education, literacy, including in Lisu, music training (as they already love music), and Bible literacy.

## The Bible School of the Yulong Christian Council

Just outside Lijiang is located the Bible school of the Yulong Christian Council with five instructors at the time being. Started in some out-buildings of one of the churches and simply as a lay training center, the school has grown to have some 25 students, studying and living in a large four-story building. Students range in age from 15 to 25. For them, this is probably the only opportunity for a secondary education or higher.

The Yulong Christian Council has fewer than 20 full-time staff. There are two areas of work covered: grassroots ministry and the Bible school. Grassroots ministry leadership is about assisting with congregation leadership and evangelism. Historically, there had been no systematic church training for local ministers, so council staff would go out into congregations and provided practical training on the ground.

It is to this that the Bible school brings a strong education program for young grassroots leaders. It has six teachers: three in Bible, three in instrumental music. The students come from beyond Yulong County, and even from other than the Lisu people. Most come from remote congregations. Interestingly, some come with no faith (encouraged by their families to get an education); some are delinquents; some do not know what prayer is about, have never read the Bible. According to the director of the Bible school, it feels like



A class at the Bible school.

things start from zero. “But we accept them equally.” The program starts with reading the Bible and prayer, how to lead a good life. “After three years, we see change. When they first come, they don’t want to pray. We ask them to attend morning and evening prayer, and they come to see what this is all about.”

The curriculum is balanced between Bible and music. Students, both women and men, are equipped equally. “Our graduates are very liked in the churches because they can preach, sing, and play instruments.” They also learn to live independently and cook (even cook for 50 people). Support for the students comes from the different counties reflected in the study body, where churches in each county are responsible for one month each for the food. Much of this comes from their own crops.

After graduation, these lay evangelists return to their villages and live lives within their communities, while at the same time attending to worship leadership, Christian education, and music leading. Many actually desire to go on to seminary, typically at Yunnan Theological Seminary in Kunming or Sichuan Seminary in Chengdu.

In addition to training lay evangelists, the Bible school offers a three-month training program in leadership, and a women’s training program. There also is Lisu language instruction three times a year (one week each).

Even as the missionaries instilled a strong sense of evangelism and church planting among the Lisu, this is certainly carried on by the cadre of evangelists trained by the church. With only three ordained pastors to cover the broad swath of territory of the Yulong Christian Council, it is the people themselves who develop their own churches.

## Meile Anqi Christian Church

As you travel the road to Liming, there is a branch road that leaves the valley and winds into the mountains through gorges and ridges. At the end of this road is the village of Meile. This village is a central marketplace for the district, but it has had no church there for the surrounding area.

The people petitioned the government to establish a church. The local government agreed and granted the land on which to build a church. The understanding was that this was to be not just a place of worship, but a social and cultural center for the people, something that is already important for the Lisu people. The challenge was for the church to find funds to build a building. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America contributed funds for the construction with two conditions: only 50% of funds would be provided with the rest resourced from the local church itself; and that the church building design should incorporate Lisu cultural elements (rather than Western styles often used around China).

On Easter 2015, Anqi Christian Church was dedicated. A crowd of more than 100 people processed around the church while singing a hymn, led by a cross-bearing member and Pastor Li Zhi, the lead pastor of the Yulong Christian Council. Then with a loud shout and a knocking on the door, the church opened up for worship.

This Easter service was a pure celebration of faith and life, and even culture. I was told that this worship was the first time – at least in this region – that traditional Lisu instruments, songs and dance were incorporated into a worship service. Indeed the Lisu are a



Meile Anqi Christian Church.

musical people. But while most hymns are old missionary hymns, the use of their own culture in worship – together with a church building design set in their own context – is something that has been coming for a little while now. (Already the Wujihou church had



Easter worship at Anqi Church.

been rebuilt in a more traditional Lisu style; also constructed with some funding from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.)

The name Anqi actually has a double meaning: In Mandarin, it means “peaceful prayer” while in Lisu, the word means “Rock of Ages,” something you can imagine from the cliffs that tower around the church.

In terms of being an expression of a strong faith, what was amazing was the number of people attending this Easter church dedication service, considering the members of the wider church had been gathered in a far different place for their annual Holy Week vigil. Over the course of three days leading to Easter, the faithful gather from the far corners of the region. Hundreds come together for prayer, Bible study, preaching, singing, and community faith-sharing.



Pastor Li Zhi, lead pastor of the Yulong Christian Council.

Children have their own program. They all sleep in communal areas and eat food that has been prepared en masse. They come in small buses, by motorbikes, and even on foot. One person had traveled a week to get there from Tibet.

The Holy Week vigil is rotated among the congregations, who spend a couple years sometimes preparing for the event. It is one of the highlights in the life of the church, but in that year, 2015, having this vigil plus the dedication of a new church, and in two different locations, gave the people a double celebration.

## Xincheng He-yi Church

The other example of evangelical zeal within the church is the effort to prepare a spiritual home for new residents of the city.

Xincheng [New City] He-yi [Unity] Church was established in a newly developing part of Lijiang city. This new residential area is being developed to house common citizens (as opposed to those living for tourism in areas of the old city.) Many new people are coming in from the countryside, including church members. The need to have a church community is important for these people. At the same time, the church reaches out among non-Lisu and non-believers as well. The pastor, Tao Meihua, is herself of the Miao ethnic minority (married to a Lisu pastor) and the worship community includes those from the other ethnicities of Lijiang, including from the main Chinese Han people. Because of this, church activities are conducted in Mandarin.

As the congregation – initially set up as an unregistered church gathering (though not underground) – grew, the government asked it to be registered. Typically, such a religious community has to have about 100 members before becoming registered. This government “order” came while the church had only about 30 members. The congregation then made a leap of faith and rented space across the street from its original place. Much larger, this store front church features a first floor used for various communal activities, such as music and afterschool programs for children and youth as well as for fellowship; a second floor worship space; and a third floor for meetings as well as a future small staff apartment.



Pastor Tao Meihua.

“We approach people by making friends, telling the good news. At our first Christmas here, ten people were baptized,” says Pastor Tao Meihua. “One thing we do special here is to reach out, to be in contact with the newly baptized once a week. I feel this kind of relationship-building is key to ongoing outreach beyond this and community-building.”

“Our Saturday program for youth is important,” states Pastor Tao. “From 1-4 pm we teach instrumental music. Then there is Bible study. There are some 20 youth, who sometime bring friends and then things grow to 30.”

“With all this, basically in the past couple years, this congregation went from 0 to 30 members. Of course, there are quite some challenges ahead. But we continue to see growth,” she concludes.

Now, the congregation is in conversation with the government about purchasing property in order to build a church building. This may take time (and money).

All during this time, He-Yi Church has continued to see growth. There are always new people at worship and at least 40 people worshipping regularly. While this is an urban ministry, the congregation offers training for those village evangelists, particularly in areas of technology and liturgy, to experience different styles of worship. There are various group activities for all ages, with some ongoing focus on high school and university-aged youth. A good number of these younger people are involved in worship and leadership.

According to Pastor Tao, things like Bible study are more interactive than “teaching.” She says that this approach has come from the experience of the context, where people are seeking answers in all aspects of life. This interactive engagement can also be seen at other times such as the after-church fellowship, where people were asking questions. This interactivity extends beyond the church as members organize visitation groups to check in on those who have not been in worship, and prayer groups that drive around in a car and pray at key spots around the city.





Worship at He-Yi Church.

## Engagement in Lisu Agriculture

Church is not just about a spiritual endeavor, meanwhile. The early missionaries encouraged the development of Lisu agriculture, away from subsistence living to a livelihood.



Back in the mountain areas, one notices how difficult it is to engage in typical agriculture due to the terrain. Traditional practices include raising goats and small-scale vegetable farming. This is their life, so actually the key is to enhance what they already have rather than change anything. And this is where the teamwork of local government, agricultural universities, cultural associations, and the communities of which Church is a part have come together to facilitate learning new techniques, diversification, and market-building.

Goat is an important staple in the region's diet. Bringing in different breeds of goats that reproduce faster and provide a better quality of meat was one of the strategies for greater income. In one of the experimental

Chao Wanshen and one of his goats.

areas high above Meile and Liming, Chao Wanshen speaks of how the improved goat breeds have improved his life. “I already have a family home in which to live and having greater incomes from goat-raising has given me the incentive to stay on the land rather than migrating to the cities in search of a job.” In turn, this is a way for the Lisu to maintain their cultural ties with the land and community, to stay on the land rather than migrating to cities where life can actually be harder.

Taking advantage of market needs is one key to greater agricultural production. Walnuts are easy: plant the trees, allow several years to grow, and you have automatic crops. Add to walnuts a favorite seasoning: honey. While harvesting wild honey has been a traditional Lisu practice, creating higher yields with actual bee-keeping is being developed.

What started as a hobby has now become an income-generating project for Li Wanrong and his spouse He Xiu'e. “The price of honey does fluctuate,” he says. “But in general I make what amounts to about half of the retail price for my honey.” Compared to the subsistence farming of livestock and field crops they both grew up with, this makes a big difference in their lives. And the church has helped them move in this direction.



Li Wanrong and He Xiu'e.

For Li, in particular, the church has had other influences. He was not a Christian at first. “I became a Christian in 1988. I had grown tired of the superstitious religion I held to. Everything was a god, and we had to do lots of sacrifices.”

“I then heard of this one God, a universal God. I just wanted one God with whom I could communicate. I now believe I have found him. And that’s how I came to know God and Jesus.”

Li and his immediate family were the first in his village to become Christian. Now, out of a population of 560, there are five or six Christian families. Twenty or so worship each Sunday in the small village church, which Li leads as the local evangelist.

“I really had a reputation of being spiritual, but I was not satisfied with myself until I found this God,” says Li, who was later invited to attend Bible school and subsequently appointed as an evangelist. “After I became a Christian, I became more tolerant and people liked me better. I became a transformed person: God changed me! For we cannot change ourselves.”

Other crops that have been developed for the area include Chinese herbs, corn, and potatoes. Graduates of the Bible school, as noted earlier, often return to their home communities to engage in agriculture themselves. As part of their training and leadership development, they do regular work outings to help local farmers with their farm work, even as together they learn and develop new techniques. It is this kind of community engagement that builds trust within the Church and further develops community.



Bible school students helping with crop preparation.

## Other Central Features of Lisu Community

One of the central features of Lisu community is song and dance. The Lisu are a singing and dancing people. Every social occasion will include singing. There are elaborate drinking songs (actually more about toasting to honor someone), songs of love, nature, and those to dance to. Dances are typically what are called line-dances: the group holding hands while dancing in step. Some of the dances are actually quite interesting with off-beat rhythms (whereas most dancing is in threes or fours, these are in sevens).



There are regular Lisu cultural festivals. Lisu from all over their inhabited area, including Thailand and Myanmar, gather for days of story-telling, song, and dance. Local festivals at different times during the year also become a time for coming together as community.

If song and dance are part of community, community is also with the wider, cross-border world of the Lisu, sharing their culture and faith. While their culture and expressions of it bind them together, we see an example of how faith transcends boundaries and life's challenges.

The Lisu have had a challenging life. But, especially with church as a center, they have found ways to meet those challenges and develop themselves, for themselves and by themselves.

The examples I give here are only from parts of northern Yunnan. But you can repeat same kinds of experiences in other parts of the Lisu world, especially with the centrality of the Christian faith and Church in people's lives.