

## LISU SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

by

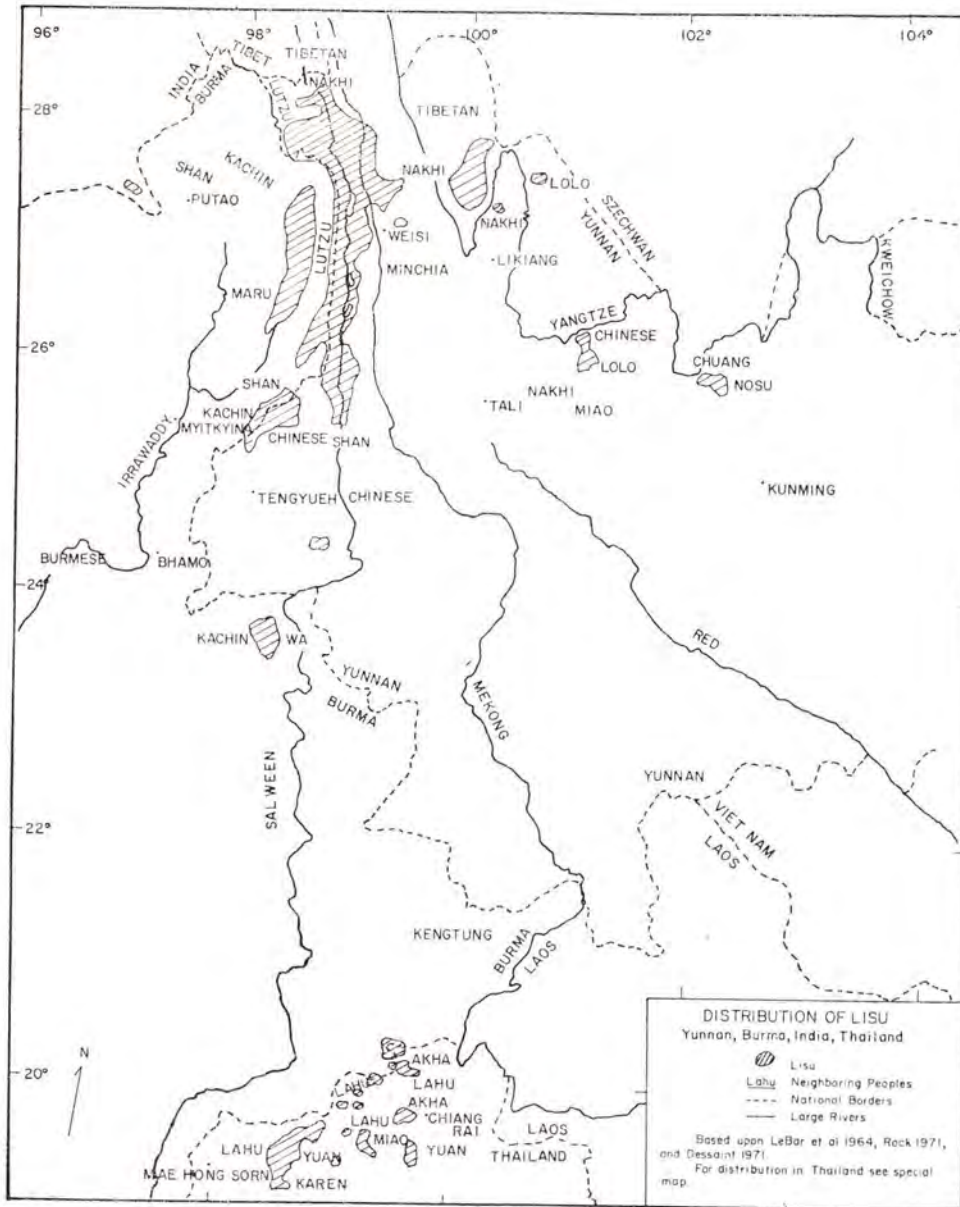
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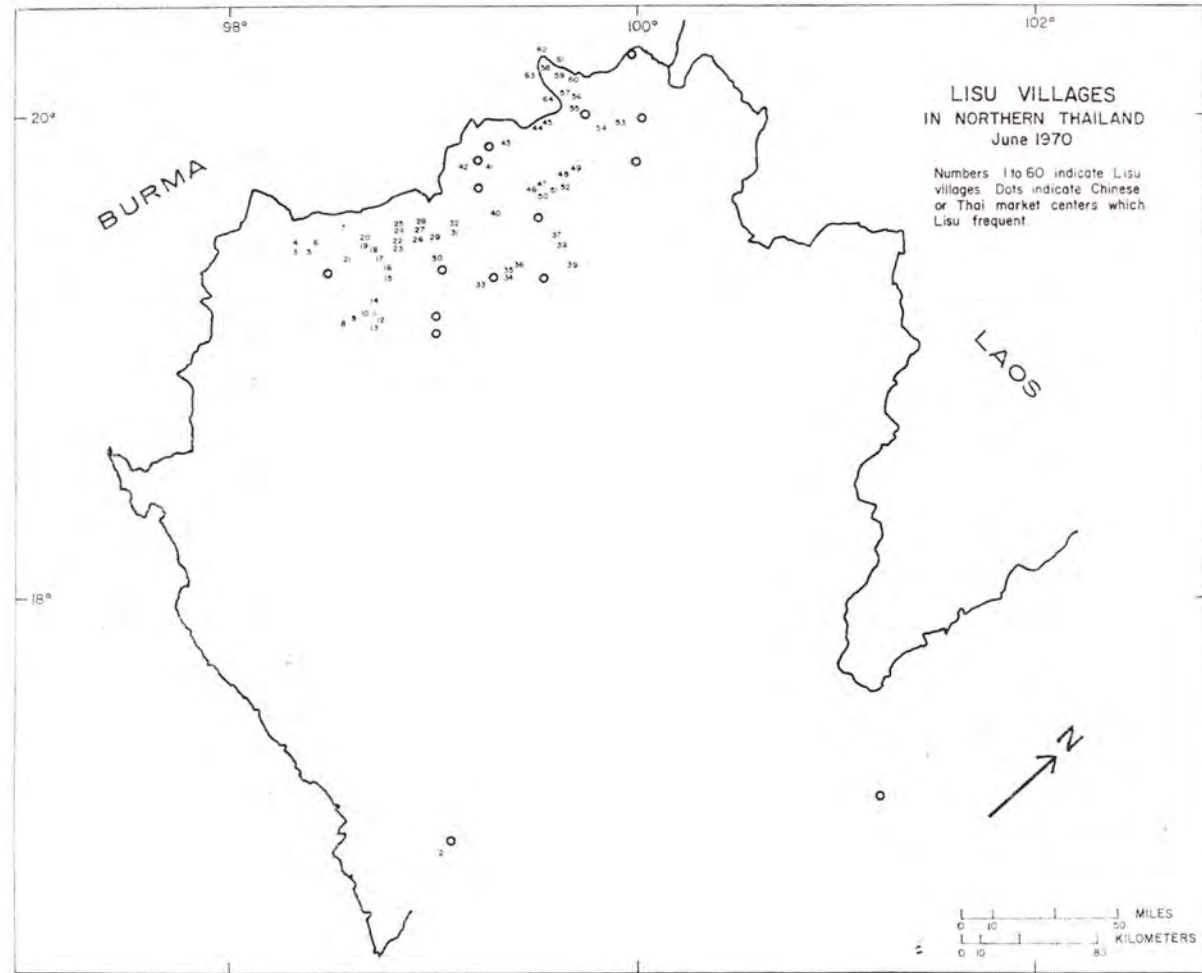
The Lisu are a Tibeto-Burman mountain folk scattered from northwestern Yunnan to the provinces of Tak and Phitsunulok in Thailand (28° to 17°N) and from eastern Tirap Frontier Division to northwest of Kunming (96° to 103°E) (Map 1).<sup>2</sup> Although there is a large concentration of Lisu along the Salween and Mekong rivers from 27°30' to 25°30'N, their villages are usually interspersed among those of numerous other ethnic groups. For this reason and because of frequent shiftings of village sites, most maps of Lisu distribution (e.g. Bruk and Apenchenko 1964, LeBar et al. 1964) are either inaccurate or outdated. This paper examines some aspects of Lisu village distribution in northern Thailand.

The Lisu first moved into Thailand from the Kengtung area of Burma between about 1900 and 1930. The reasons given by Lisu for this move were poor harvests, high taxes, and the many bandits in Burma. They first occupied the Mae Chan and Loi Tsa areas of Chiangrai province (Map 2, area of Nos. 46-60) and Doi Angkhaan area of Fang district in Chiang Mai province (north of No. 42). There has been some movement back and forth between Burma and Thailand since then. For example, most of village No. 60 has moved into Burma in the last three years, and in fact some villages near the border cultivate their fields on both sides. During the 1930's, Lisu groups moved south into Chiang Dao, Mae Taeng and Phrao districts of Chiang Mai. From the mid-1950's to the mid-1960's, nearly a dozen Lisu villages were established in northern Tak province, where only one now remains (No. 2). About the same time, Lisu moved west into Pai district of Mae Hongson, a movement which has accelerated

1) Research on the Lisu, including field research from August 1968 to August 1970, was supported by the National Institute of Mental Health and the East-West Center, to whom I wish to express my gratitude. I especially wish to thank the many individuals in Thailand who aided this research, and in connection with this article, the Public Health Department at Chiang Mai for allowing me to consult the records of their Malaria Control Teams. This article was written in December 1970.

2) Bruk and Apenchenko (1964: 58) show a large concentration of Lisu at 95°30'-96°E and 24°-24°30'N, but this should probably be Kachin and Kachinized Lisu.







in the past few years. In 1966, Lisu began moving into the Phitsunulok and Petchabun border area, but most of them moved back north in 1968-69 due to fighting between Miao and Thai (the exception is village No. 1). As Table E indicates, most Lisu villages in Thailand have been in their present locations for less than ten years. It should be noted, however, that villages rarely migrate as units, but the common practice is for groups of households to move together at any one time. Furthermore, some villages may have moved to their present locations from short distances, and they have therefore remained in the same general area for a longer period than is apparent from Table E.

During the early part of 1970, I counted sixty predominantly Lisu villages in Thailand (Map 2). Their total population was about 11,000 in 1,600 households. This compares fairly well with the 1965-66 Thailand census estimates of 9,440 Lisu living above 600 meters. My estimates indicate that Young's (1961) population estimates are much too high. His estimate of 17,300 Lisu was based on estimates of 39 villages, 37 houses per village and 12 persons per house. The latter two estimates are too high and probably reflect the fact that he visited the better-known (hence larger) villages and the wealthy (hence larger) households. The records of the Malaria Control Teams of the Public Health Department of Thailand indicate 53 Lisu villages in the northern region (not including Tak and Phitsunulok provinces), with 1,479 houses and 8,820 Lisu.

It can be seen from Table A that population estimates of Lisu in China and Burma also vary greatly. The frequently cited estimate of 30,000 for Burma is certainly too low, and that of 317,000 for China is probably too high. In 1968, three small Lisu villages were reported in eastern Tirap Frontier Division, near Hkamti Long, the first time Lisu have been reported in India. Davies (1909) mentioned a possible Lisu village in Laos, Srisawat (1962) claims there are a few Lisu in Laos, and Ta'o (1948) mentions a Lisu village in north Vietnam. It is quite probable that small groups of Lisu have lived in Indochina in the past—the Lisu of Chiangrai sometimes travel into Laos even today—but there are probably no Lisu there now.

Aside from the obvious problems of enumeration such as inaccessibility, frequent changes in residence and lack of rapport, population estimates of Lisu and other highland groups in southeast Asia are difficult

because of problems of ethnic identity. Although the Lisu may be a more cohesive ethnic group than, for instance, the Miao or the Yao, there are many cultural differences between regions and even between villages. In China, Lisu are frequently considered Yi (Lolo), while in Burma they are often considered Kachin. In Thailand, about half the Lisu villages have some Chinese residents and several villages have Lahu residents. Inter-marriage between these three groups is fairly common. Ethnically mixed villages are not a recent or isolated phenomena since they were noted by the earliest European travellers to the Lisu area (e.g., Forrest 1908, Johnston 1908, Scott and Hardiman 1900).

Lisu village size in Thailand ranges from six to about 150 households (Table E). Size fluctuates greatly during the history of a village, typically growing very quickly at first. For instance, village No. 8 had 14 houses in 1969 (the year it was founded), 34 the second year, and it is still growing. Village No. 15 grew to almost 150 houses within its first six years. This often results in great land pressure or in disputes between factions of the village. Rival headmen may function for a while, but the usual outcome is the emigration of at least part of the people living in the village.

There is no Lisu village plan, but kin and friends tend to build houses close together, subject to land availability and to the approval of their new neighbors and (sometimes) of the headman. Houses must be built below the ritual centre in elevation. The main door should face the nearest stream and therefore all houses in a village will usually have the same orientation.

In choosing village sites, the Lisu have three major criteria:

- (1) Villages should be near drinking water and within a short distance of good opium and rice fields. Generally, Lisu villages are sited on a hill slope just below the ridge line. However, there are a few exceptions: five villages have been built directly along streams, one is on both sides of a motor road and four are in the lowlands near wet rice fields.
- (2) Villages should be away from ethnic groups that may harass them. Table B indicates the ethnic identity of villages within a two hours' walk of Lisu villages. The majority are near another Lisu village, for Lisu villages tend to cluster. When the Lisu migrate the information available



to them is always better for areas where Lisu are already living. They therefore tend to migrate either to established Lisu villages or to the vicinity of established Lisu villages. Some households may also move a short distance from the site that was originally settled either to move away from others after a dispute or to be closer to their fields. For example, disputes and land pressure in a large village at Muan Ko led to its breaking up into seven separate villages (Nos. 22 to 28). Lisu villages are sometimes located near villages of other opium-growing groups such as the Lahu, the Akha and the Miao, since they all seek the same type of land and of village sites, and there are no restrictions against living close together. Some Lisu, in fact, prefer to settle areas where soil fertility has already been proven by pioneering Lahu or others. The pioneers often have a broader economic base, including hunting and a variety of crops, while the Lisu coming as a second wave tend to specialize in opium and dry rice. Lisu also favor village sites close to a source of cheap labor, usually Karen. Three Lisu villages in Thailand are near Chinese settlements, to which they sell vegetables.

(3) Villages should be reasonably close to a market. In practice, most of the Lisu villages in Thailand are within half-a-day's march from a market of some sort. This reflects the Lisu dependence on the lowlands for a wide variety of necessities and luxuries, including cloth, rice, betel, tobacco, firearms, silver, kerosene and salt. Even when they buy from peddlers or caravaners, prices of the goods they require are correlated with the distance from their village to the nearest market, and the Lisu are very sensitive to this economic factor (Table D).

TABLE A  
Lisu Population Estimates

Country	Year	Population	Source
Burma	1901	1,605	Census
	1911	9,066	Census
	1921	13,152	Census
	1945	30,000	Embree and Thomas 1950: 35
	1960	20,000	Srisawat 1962: 379
	1961	40,000	Bruk and Apenchenko 1964: 161
China	1931	31-43,000	Li <i>in</i> Siguret 1937
	1953	317,465	Census
	1961	375,000	Bruk and Apenchenko 1964: 163
Yunnan	1959	235,000	Tsui et al. 1959
India	1968	200	Dessaint
Thailand	1911	2-300	Graham 1924
	1960	17,300	Young 1961: 34
	1960	20,000	Srisawat 1962: 382
	1961	1,000	Bruk and Apenchenko 1964: 165
	1970	11,000	Dessaint
North of Mae Kok	1964	1,037	Hanks et al. 1964
Above 600 meters	1965-66	9,440	United Nations 1967: 8
Except Tak and Phitsunalok	1969-70	8,820	Public Health Department

TABLE B  
Lisu Population of Thailand, 1970<sup>1</sup>

Province	District	Number of villages	Number of houses
Chiangrai	Mae Chan	8	218
	Mae Suaj	7	220
	Wiang Pa Pao	3	51
Lampang	Wang Nya	1	13
Chiang Mai	Fang	6	87
	Phrao	3	88
	Chiang Dao	18	567
Mae Hong Sorn	Mae Taeng	5	75
	Muang	2	47
	Pai	5	117
Tak	Muang	1	35
Phitsunulok	Nakhorn Thai	1	30
TOTALS	12	60	1548

<sup>1</sup> Data collected by Dessaint and Lisu informants, 1968-70

TABLE C  
Ethnic Identity of Villagers in Table B and Ethnic Identity of  
Neighboring Villages

Self-identification	Lisu villages in which present	Village less than two hours' walk from Lisu village
Lisu	60	38
Non-Lisu <sup>1</sup>	35	27
Chinese, Haw	30	3
Lahu	8	4
Akha	0	5
Meo (Miao)	0	4
Karen	0	9
Northern Thai	5	8
Thai police	9	—
Lisu only	15	23
Unknown	10	10
TOTAL LISU VILLAGES <sup>2</sup>	60	60

<sup>1</sup> Does not include those who have become Lisu and identify themselves as Lisu.

<sup>2</sup> Sub-totals will not tally since one Lisu village may include more than one resident or neighboring ethnic group.



TABLE D

**Time (Distance) From Lisu Village To Market<sup>1</sup>**

Less than three hours	4
Three to six hours	28
Six to nine hours	12
More than nine hours	6
Unknown	10
<b>TOTAL LISU VILLAGES</b>	<b>60</b>

<sup>1</sup> I.e., presence of several stores or regular vendors with whom Lisu trade. Time is downhill under good conditions, using vehicles when Lisu regularly use them.

TABLE E

**Size and Length of Occupation of Villages in Table B**

	0+ to 5 years	5+ to 10	10+ to 20	20+ years	Unknown	TOTALS
6 to 10 houses	1	3	2	1		7
11 to 20	5	11	2	1	2	21
21 to 30	4	2	3	0		9
31 to 40	2	1	1	3		7
41 to 150	0	1	2	3		6
Unknown					10	10
<b>TOTAL LISU VILLAGES</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>60</b>

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