

## Abstract: How the Lisu from Yunnan Became Southeast Asian

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In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, populations of upland peoples moved across the landscape of what is now China and Southeast Asia, becoming “minorities” in today’s Southeast Asian nations. Analysis of why and where people moved at this time is a vehicle for examining transformations in social forms – organization, relationships, adaptive strategies – in the face of different political economies. This paper discusses the Lisu, an upland ethnic minority people of Southeast Asia, as a counterpoint and comparison to the Hmong. I situate the population movement of Lisu southward to Thailand from the Tibetan borderlands of southwest China in historical regional and global processes in which opium cultivation and migration became a significant feature of Lisu social organization. The specific features of Lisu social structure at this time (such as household autonomy and egalitarian relations) facilitated adaptive shifts in response to the political and economic environment. This is an early case of globalization – incorporation into a global economy through a highly valued cash crop – that allows us to examine the local dynamics of world systems. I argue that the upland peoples of this region (now referred to as “Zomia”) cannot be fairly or justly analyzed in terms of an essential “tradition.” We must carry out our analyses of upland peoples as active agents in a shifting landscape of political, economic, and social settings.