

Christian Ethnic Minority in the Non-Christian States

The Protestant Lahu in Thailand and China

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Abstract

It is not a happy thing for a group of people if their religion is different from the one that is dominant in the country they live in. Protestant Lahu in China and Thailand are the case. Based on the anthropological fieldwork, this paper reports the lives of Protestant Lahu in Yunnan, China in comparison with those in north Thailand. The Lahu is a highland-dwelling ethnic minority living in a mountainous area that includes southwest China, the eastern Shan State of Myanmar, and north Thailand. Their original home is Yunnan, China but they have been moving and spreading southwards due to incessant wars and the need to find new land for swidden cultivation. In China, Protestant Lahu finds themselves as marginal because the atheistic government shows hostile attitudes to Christianity as they regard it as a servant to Western imperialism that disturbs China's national unity. In Thailand where Buddhism is the de-fact national religion, Protestant Lahu find themselves as an ethnic and religious minority. Both in China and Thailand, religion is thus not only a matter of belief but also related to ethnicity and nation-building. By reporting the present lives of Protestant Lahu in China and Thailand, this paper considers the implications that the two cases have on the problems of religion, ethnicity, and national integration.

Keywords: Ethnic minority, Christianity, Lahu, China, Thailand

Introduction

It is not a happy thing for a group of people if their religion is different from the one that is dominant in the country they live in. Protestant Lahu in China and Thailand are the case. Based on the anthropological fieldwork and study of literature, this paper reports the lives of Protestant Lahu in Yunnan Province, China, and in north Thailand. Through the comparative study, this paper examines what it is to be a Christian ethnic minority in non-Christian states or the experience of Protestant Lahu in China and Thailand.

In the following, I will first describe relations between the state and Christian Lahu in China and Thailand, and report on the organizations and activities of Christian Lahu churches in China and

Thailand. By doing this, the paper locates Christian Lahu in Thailand and China in their varied national context to examine the experience of Christian ethnic minorities living in non-Christian states. The paper describes the two nation-states' religious and ethnic policies and political environments more in detail, as I believe that understanding these are essential for a proper understanding of the Christian Lahu experiences in the two non-Christian states.

The paper takes two Christian Lahu villages as the cases for study; Pateun village, Mae Ai District, Chiang Mai Province of Thailand, and Panli village, Donghui Township, Lancang County, Yunnan Province of China. I did fieldwork in Pateun village for 10 months from December 1996 to September 1997. Later, Pateun villagers split into a few groups, and some went to live in other villages while others started a new village. Because there is no Pateun village now, I use past tense to describe it. Although I visited Panli village several times in 2012 and sometimes stayed for a few days, but because of the restrictions given by the China government to foreign researchers, I could not conduct extensive fieldwork there. To make up for the limitation of fieldwork data, I consult studies on Panli village written by people in China (Zhang ed., 2008; Sa mo-e, 2011).¹

The State and Christian Ethnic Minorities

Thailand

As of 2010, Christians occupy only 1.2 percent of Thailand's total population (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2010). Officially, Christianity is categorized as one of the 'other religions' (*sasana uen uen*), which means religions other than Buddhism, the de-fact national religion, and are controlled by the Department of Religious Affairs (DRA), Ministry of Culture.

When Thailand (Siam) was an absolute monarchy, the king and local kings controlled the activities of foreign missionaries by granting lands and securing their status in the territories. The king and local kings behaved as patrons for the foreign missionaries.

Until the beginning of the 1960s, there were more than 200 religious groups and they had been freely operated under the tolerant control of the government. Different government institutions were in charge of different religions. But, since 1964 the DRA starts to administrate religious activities of all religions. Since 1969, diverse rules and regulations for the 'other religions' were issued to give a legal basis to administrate and control activities of the non-Buddhist religions.

According to 'The rules of the DRA concerning diverse religions' (1969), religious groups are to be registered as 'religious organizations' (*ongkan thang sasana*). At present, one Catholic and four Protestant organizations are recognized as 'religious organizations' and are operating legally in Thailand. In 1980, the Thai government started to control the activities of foreign missionaries by controlling their

residence permit. The foreign missionaries have now to apply for their residence permit through the governmentally sanctioned 'religious organizations' to which they belong and to each of which the government grants 'quarters' or the number of missionary visas. The 'religious organizations' can enjoy advantages including the purchase of land, financial help from the government, preferential treatment of tax, and acquiring visas for those foreign missionaries who work for the organizations. In sum, the Thai government has been implementing its religious policies through the DRA, which both controls and gives its patronage to the registered 'religious organizations.'

However, many churches and missionaries are working in Thailand without belonging to either of the officially sanctioned 'religious organizations.' Their activities hardly receive official restrictions. DRA knows these unregistered churches and missionaries working in the kingdom, but the former will not intervene as long as the latter does not cause a big problem.² Thus, Thailand's religious policies toward non-Buddhist religions have always been tolerant ones (Nishimoto 2009).

China

In China, problems of religion, ethnicity, culture, and national integration have been tightly intertwined. Of the most importance are religions that almost all members of given 'nationalities' (ethnic groups) adhere to, such as Tibetan Buddhism for the Tibetans and Islam for the Uighur. On the other hand, there are no 'nationalities' in China, all of whose members are adherents of Protestant Christianity. However, because the Protestant churches came and spread with the advancement of Western colonialism to China, religion has always been of political importance. In the period around 1949 when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established, some of the local Protestant Christians, influenced by foreign missionaries, fought with the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). At that time, ethnic minorities living in the southwestern borderlands had little consciousness that they were members of the Chinese nation (Wang 2005: 57).

CCP is an atheist party, and its "members and members of the armed forces are required to be atheists and are forbidden from engaging in religious practices" (U.S. Department of State, 2021: 1). For CCP, religion is 'feudalist superstition' and 'opium for the people' and Christianity (Catholic and Protestant) was once utilized by the Western imperial powers in their invasion of China. Therefore, CCP's religious policies towards Christianity after the Liberation have been made on their belief that religious bodies and adherents should not be under influence of foreign powers and that the religions should not threaten national integration.

In 1950, the Christian Manifesto was published and eventually signed by 400,000 Christians. It attacked missionaries' association with imperialism. In 1951, almost all missionaries were expelled from

China. “The Three-Self Reform Movement (TSPM) followed in 1951, which set itself the task of helping churches to rid themselves of imperialism, feudalism, and bourgeois thinking” (Barrett ed., 2001: 194).³ “Because the number of pastors and church attendants was reduced by the Socialist Education Movement launched in 1957, the TSPM called for a Church Union Movement, which resulted in a remarkable reduction in the number of churches” (Leung, 2001: 145).⁴

In China’s southwest border areas in around 1949, there occurred such anti-government movements as the ‘League of the Four Big Nationalities’ (Lahu, Wa, Hani, and Shan peoples) led by Rev. Harold M. Young, an American Baptist Missionary, which called for “Oppose the Han, Achieve the Independence.” In 1951, the Association of Kunming Christian Groups issued a declaration to oppose the use of churches for invasion, to cut off the relations with foreign churches, and to complete the Three-Self Reform Movement. By 1952, all foreign missionaries were expelled from Yunnan. In the course of the movement, the Committee of Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Yunnan Province was established in 1963 (Xiao and Xiong, 2004: 101).

“When the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, churches were shut down. Religions were regarded as superstitions and incompatible with the new revolutionary society. From 1966 to 1979, institutional Christianity was completely eradicated. Bibles were burnt, and many pastors and converts were sent to prison” (Leung, 2001: 145). Churches were closed, destroyed, sacked, or converted to secular use. People were unable to conduct any religious activities in public.

In Lahu Christian villages in Lancang County, oppression against Christianity was severe. Bibles and religious literature were burnt. If people were found possessing Christian literature, they would be hit and criticized. Churches were converted to secular use. Some people abandoned the faith during the difficult period, while others kept the faith and prayed in secret, such as praying while feeding domestic animals. Many literate and intellectual Lahu pastors fled to Burma and Thailand (Sa mo-e, 2011: 6-8). One religious teacher I met in Panli village (male, 79 years old in 2012) related that he had been abused and sent to a labor camp for 3 months. He then showed his dislike of Mao Zedong.

Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government revised its religious policies to more tolerant ones and religions in China have been reviving in the Reform and Opening-Up era. The Bureau of Religious Affairs resumed operation in 1979 and the “[p]atriotic Christian organizations were revived. Normalization of religious policy was implemented, seminars were established, and Bibles and other Christian literature were printed” (Leung, 2001: 145).

The China Christian Council (CCC) was established in 1980. “Together with the national Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee (TSPMC), the CCC is the national organizational expression of Protestant Christians in China. The TSPMC and the CCC are said to function as ‘two hands of one body,’

with a relationship based on ‘cooperation and differentiation of function.’ The former is involved in patriotic education and relationships with the government, while the latter is concerned with ecclesiastical affairs” (Wickeri, 2001: 146). One of their most important slogans is ‘Aiguo Aijiao’ or ‘Love the Country, Love the Religion.’

The Christian Council has a hierarchical organization, and under the CCC there are Provincial Christian Councils, County Christian Councils, and so on. The Yunnan Province Christian Council was established in 1981, and, together with the Yunnan Province Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee, the two organizations are called ‘Liang Hui’ or double committees. The Bureaus of Religious Affairs on different levels supervise the double Christian associations on the respective levels.

In the 1990s, the China government issued various laws and regulations to administrate religious affairs. Of the most important is the Regulations on Religious Affairs (2004).⁵ The Yunnan Province government also issued the Yunnan Province Regulations on Administrating the Religious Affairs in 1997, which set rules on ‘the religious groups,’ ‘the religious teachers,’ ‘the place for religious activities,’ ‘the religious education,’ and ‘the religious activities.’ Places for religious activities, such as Christian churches, in Yunnan Province have to display the Regulations (2004) as well as the Certificate of Place for Religious Activities.

“The government recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Only religious groups belonging to one of the five state-sanctioned ‘patriotic religious associations’ representing these religions are permitted to register with the government and officially permitted to hold worship services” (U.S. Department of the State, 2021: 1). Under the current laws and regulations, only the registered religious groups can conduct religious activities in the registered religious places led by the religious teachers. In sum, the China government controls religions by requiring religious groups, teachers, and places to register with the government. Unregistered religious groups are illegal and could be labeled and accused as ‘evil cults’ (*xiejiao*) if the government finds them threatening social order.

“The government’s objective has been to exercise direct Party control over all activities of religious bodies, cutting them off from their corresponding foreign communities that may utilize them for political purposes” (Barrett ed., 2001: 195). In the words of Rev. Duan Sanmei, the chairperson of the Lancang County Christian Council, the purpose of the double associations is “to prevent foreigners from causing troubles to the country” (*aw ba hpaw ve chaw mvuh mi ma g’a sho sha tu ve aw li te ve*). Her words show the way a Lahu religious leader understands the China government’s religious policy.

Only registered religious groups can be involved in religious education. The Yunnan Christian Theological Institute was approved to open in 1989 and now operates under the instruction of the Yunnan

Province ‘double associations,’ which, in turn, are supervised by the Yunnan Bureau of Religious Affairs (Xiao and Xiong, 2004: 115). Likewise, in Yunnan Province, only the registered religious groups can publish religious literature and they have to have the approval and permission of different departments of the Yunnan government. Individuals and unregistered religious groups are not permitted to print or copy the literature.⁶

Christian Churches in Non-Christian States

Thailand

In Thailand, there are many churches to which Christian highlanders belong and these churches are mainly constituted ethnically. Among the Lahu Protestants, also, there are many Lahu churches, but the Thailand Lahu Baptist Convention (TLBC) constitutes the largest Lahu Protestant Church in Thailand.⁷ “[M]ost of Thailand’s present Lahu Christians are recent arrivals in the kingdom from Burma and, as such, represent the grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren of Lahu converted by American Baptist missionaries in Burma at the beginning of this [the twentieth] century” (Walker 1992: 62). As per 2012, TLBC has 16,193 church members, in which baptized members are 8,552 and unbaptized ones are 7,641.⁸

Since 1993, TLBC constitutes the 18th District of the Church of Christ Thailand (CCT), a nationwide Protestant church organization in Thailand and one of the ‘religious organizations’ that are registered with the Thai government (registered in 1969). As a part of CCT through TLBC, many Lahu Protestant villages in Thailand, such as Pateun village that I will write about below, can be regarded as legitimate. As cited above, many Thailand Lahu Christians are immigrants from Myanmar and do speak Standard Thai fluently, and some still lack Thai nationality. The CCT has been helping the church member acquire Thai nationality. A Lahu evangelists who do not possess Thai national identity cards told me that if he was inspected by police officers or soldiers, he showed the evangelist’s certification issued by CCT to avoid problems. Different from Lancang County Christian Council, TLBC and CCT have been working in developments, such as medical, welfare, agricultural, and educational areas, and Lahu church members can receive various material benefits.

Under the supreme committee of TLBC, there are the TLBC office, 7 Districts (*hke*), the Woman’s Society, and the Youth Group. Christian Lahu villages usually have a church and are populated almost exclusively by Christians. Christian Lahu villages belong to the District of the area that the villages are in.

China

Panli village church belongs to the Lancang County Christian Council, which belongs to Yunnan Province Christian Council, which in turn belongs to the National Christian Council. Although Lancang County Christian Council is not constituted ethnically, their church members, comprise only Lahu and Wa, that is, only non-Han people.⁹ Whereas the village church is under the control of Chinese local and national governments, Panli village church members are mostly Lahu.

By the year 1950, there were 76 churches and 10,000 church members in Lancang County, Yunnan Province. Over 90 percent of the devotees were found in Nuofu and Donghai Townships (Zhang ed., 2008: 132-133). Between 1958 through 1980, religion in China declined in anti-religious political movements. Especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), all religious activities were banned. Since 1980, religions in China have been reviving under the Reform and Opening-Up policies. In Panli village, old Christians began to assemble at a bamboo hut for worship. A group of elders revived the village church in 1982 (Sa mo-e, 2011: 11). Because most Christian publications were burnt during the Cultural Revolution, Panli villagers gathered and remembered the parts of the Hymn and the Bible to write them down by hand (Sa mo-e, 2011: 12). As of 1990, there were 62 churches and about 17,000 devotees in Lancang County, which have increased to 85 churches and about 20,000 devotees, in the last of which Lahu devotees were nearly 10,000 (Han *et al.*, 2008: 133). As per ca. 2006, Lancang and Menglian Counties had 22,415 and 2,385 Christians, respectively (Puer City Bureau of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs, 2009, 315-322, 332-342).

Evangelism - Thailand

Before 1971, TLBC provided evangelists with 250 Baht monthly salary to travel to non-Christian Lahu villages, but this effort was not very successful. Since 1971, evangelists started to take their families to the target villages and live with non-Christian villagers. When they have built rapport, they seek opportunities to talk about religion. When villagers were sick, evangelists gave medicine and prayed for their recovery. In 1990, an influential non-Christian Red Lahu priest, Ca Nu, together with his 192 followers was baptized and converted to Christianity. In 1995, six evangelists were working in non-Christian villages, supported by ABMS (Australia Baptist Missionary Society), the Women's Society, and village churches of the TLBC (Pathiphat, 1991: 28, 39; A dul, 1995: 7-8). Pateun village, for example, supported an evangelist by giving him 4,000 Baht for his work in 1997.

Evangelism - China

The Lancang County Christian Council does not seem to support evangelists for their work, but Panli village church supports evangelists.¹⁰ In 1981, the Panli village church started evangelism to Lahu

villages in Lancang and Menglian Counties. In the target villages, the evangelists made friends with villagers and taught Lahu writing, the Hymn, choir, Jesus's life as well as the old Lahu stories (Sa mo-e, 2011, 13). Between 1983 and 1990, the Panli evangelists went to work in villages in Nuofu Township of Lancang County and Menglinan County. Without good roads nor cars, motorbikes, or horses to ride, they went to these villages on foot and sometimes stayed at the target villages for 3 to 5 months (Sa mo-e, 2011: 13-14). In the later period, the Chinese government paved roads and that made evangelism easier. As a result, 4 villages in Muga Township became Christian.

We can point to two characteristics in Duan Sanmei's description of Lahu evangelism. First, the village, not the individual, is the target of Lahu evangelism. It is what early missionaries in Burma and northern Thailand quickly recognized that while it was very difficult to convert individual Lahu if missionaries were able to win the support of the village headman and elders, Lahu would convert in the body (Telford, 1937: 95; McGilvary 1912: 324, 344). At present, there seem to be fewer Lahu villages in China that are comprised only of Christian households than in Thailand where mostly Christian Lahu live separately from non-Christian Lahu. However, among the Lahu both in China and Thailand, conversion is usually made as a group, not an individual.

Second, the evangelical practices described above may not always accord with the regulations of the China government. According to Duan Sanmei, the chairperson of the Lancang County Christian Council, foreigners cannot do evangelical works in China and even native Christians cannot go out to evangelize non-Christian people, but only can teach about religion when non-Christian people come to ask to teach them (personal communication in June 2012).¹¹ However, I heard some villagers say that they had become Christians because people of such and such Christian village had come to teach about the religion. Moreover, except for a few leaders of the Lancang County Christian Council, most Lahu Christian teachers and workers do not seem to know the government regulations on evangelism.

Bible Institute and Bible training – Thailand

TLBC has been providing Bible training courses, usually one week each year, for pastors, evangelists, and villagers. They also produce many textbooks for Sunday Schools in villages.

In 1990 TLBC opened the Lahu Bible Institute (LBI) in Chiang Mai City with financial aid from Sweden and the US. Students study at the LBI for three years and work in a one-year internship to complete their studies. Most Christian Lahu, except children, living in Thailand today are immigrants from Myanmar and many village pastors did not study at the Lahu Bible Institute in Myanmar. But, it is now increasingly necessary for individuals to complete the four years program of the LBI in Chiang Mai to work as a pastor or an evangelist.¹²

Bible Institute and Bible training – China

In 1922, William M. Young, an American Baptist missionary, built a church center in Nuofu. The Nuofu church center had a school and trained church ‘teachers’ (*sa la*) in the Lahu, Wa, and Shan languages. Students learned Romanized Lahu script, the Bible, and music. After 3 to 6 years of training, students went out to villages to teach writing and religion. Top students were sent to Kengtung, Burma for further study. After more than 20 years of schooling, the church school produced over 1,000 Lahu and over 500 Wa language teachers, of which nearly half worked as village pastors and evangelists (Qian *et al.* eds., 1998: 133; Han, 2000: 173).¹³

After the emergence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, foreign missionaries were expelled from the country. It is not until 2006 that the Lancang County Christian Council built a Bible Institute in Panli village and Yunnan Lahu Christians have a Bible Institute where classes are taught in Lahu. 7 teachers are teaching at the Institute and occasionally, the Institute has Chinese and foreign teachers as guest teachers. Students have to study for two years to complete the study; One year has two semesters or 8 months to study, so they have to study for 16 months. The Lahu Bible Institute provides students with accommodation (dormitory) for free, but students have to pay board for 100 Yuan per month and other miscellaneous expenses. During semester breaks, students go out to villages for evangelism (Sa mo-e, 2011: 22-27).¹⁴

The Lahu Bible Institute in Panli village has a few problems. First, there still are many Lahu youths who cannot leave their work and pay tuition to study at the Institute. Many Christian and non-Christian Lahu villages need qualified teachers. Second, the construction expenses of the Lahu Bible Institute were much and they are still in debt of 230,000 Yuan. Compared to the people enrolled in the classes, only a little over half of them completed the two years program (Sa mo-e, 2011: 27-28). One main reason is that some students took a wife or husband during their studies. One religious teacher living in Panli (male, 79 years old in 2012) said, “Some Bible Institute students took a wife or husband with the age of 15. They then don’t study the Bible anymore. Legally, they cannot get married, so they cannot have a marriage certificate.”¹⁵

After graduating from the Lahu Bible Institute in Panli village, some students go to Kunming for further study at the Yunnan Bible Institute (*Yunnan Shenxueyuan*). As of 2011, five students who have graduated from the Lahu Bible Institute are studying at the Yunnan Bible Institute (Sa mo-e, 2011: 28-29). The Yunnan Bible Institute’s program is for 3 years and is taught in Chinese. According to a Lahu Reverent pastor (male, age of 50s), “People have to know both Lahu and Chinese to work as (Lahu) pastors.” In fact, out of 4 Reverent pastors of Lancang County Christian Council, 3 are graduates of the Bible Institutes that use Chinese for teaching.¹⁶ Although there are still many unqualified village

pastors and evangelists, it is now, at least theoretically required to complete a Chinese Bible Institute for an individual to become a Reverent pastor.

Table 1: Numbers of Students Enrolled and Completed the Panli Bible Institute’s Program (person)

Period	Enrolled	Completed	Proportion
2006/9-2008/7	31	16	51.6 %
2007/9-2008/7	16	8	50.0 %
2008/9-2010/7	42	19	45.2 %
2009/9-2011/7	14	10	71.4 %
Total	103	53	51.5 %

(source: Sa mo-e, 2011:28, modified)

Village Church

Village church organization - Thailand

In Thailand Christian Lahu village church organization, we usually find *ceu cao sa la* or simply *sa la* (village pastor, literally ‘teacher’), *sa la ma* (literally, ‘village pastor’s wife’ or ‘female teacher’) as the most important religious positions. *Ceu cao sa la* plays the central role in all ritual practices except the Women’s Society service which is led by *sa la ma*. Besides *ceu cao sa la* and *sa la ma* there may be other people who are also called ‘teachers’ (*sa la*), the reason for the title is usually that they have worked as village pastors or that they have qualifications for being village pastor, such as, that they have completed study at the Lahu Bible Institute in Chiang Mai City. Some of these ‘teachers’ may be working as an evangelist and called *bon ma pa* (teachers of religion) or *ha leh ve bon hkaw ma pa* (teachers of the good news), others may be ordinary farmers and only occasionally help *ceu cao sa la*. Among these ‘teachers,’ young ones may teach basic Lahu literacy to children at Sunday School.

The village church committee is led by a committee head called *ka ma kan lon*, who is the manager of secular matters of the village church. Under the committee head, there are diverse positions, such as *hpu ha sha pa* (treasurer) and *pu cawn* (officer of the village church). The treasurer takes care of church money, including the tithes, donations, and diverse church membership fees. *Pu cawn*’s main task is an arrangement of Sunday church services. In Pateun village in 1997, the *pu cawn* cleaned the church, set up a steel table with tablecloth and flowers to be used as a pulpit, and banged a gong to let the villagers know that it was time to go to church.

The Pateun village church had the Women’s Society and the Youth Group, the former of which was

led by the village pastor's wife. The village church also had a choir led by *ceu cao sa la* and *sa la ma*. There were about 10 members.¹⁷ The Pateun village church had no Sunday School to teach Lahu literacy to village children in 1997, because the village was small and "nobody comes," according to the village pastor.

Village church organization - China

In Panli village with 1,242 Christians, which occupies over 50 percent of the village's Lahu population (Zhang ed., 2008: 137), there are two pastors with the title of Reverent, one village pastor (*ceu cao sa la*), and more than 10 religious teachers (*bon ma pa*). The two Reverent pastors are the former and present chairpersons of the Lancang County Christian Council. There is one *ceu cao sa la*, the village pastor, whose task is to lead the services, but, in fact, the 'religious teachers' often substitute the *ceu cao sa la* and preside over the services.¹⁸

The Panli village church has its church committee and the committee members are called *bon kwan*.¹⁹ There are one committee head (*bon kwan lon*) and about 30 committee members. The church committee's task is to administrate the secular matters of the village church, but they sometimes act like religious teachers. Other positions of the church committee are treasurer (*ca la yu pa*) and keeper of property (*maw ce ha sha pa*). The church committee is sometimes called *aw mo lon* or the main group, compared with the smaller numbered Women's Society (*ya mi aw mo*) and Youth Group (*ya neh aw mo*).

The Women's Society has a Women's Society service on Sunday, which is led by its leader (*sheh k'ai pa*). The Women's Society has its treasurer and property keeper.

The Youth Group also has its service on Sunday, which is led by its leader (*sheh k'ai pa*). The Youth Group has its treasurer and property keeper, too.

The Panli village church has five choirs and each has its leader.

The Panli village church has a Sunday School, at which three teachers (*ya eh ma pa*) are teaching children the Bible in Lahu. However, while many Thailand Lahu Christian villages have Sunday Schools to teach children Lahu literacy, Panli village is the only village that has a Sunday School among the Yunnan Lahu Christians (Rev. Jokue Y. Jakah, a Lahu Reverent paster in Thailand, personal communication in 2013).

Budget and salary - Thailand

In Thailand, the Christian Lahu village pastor (*ceu cao sa la*) receives a monthly salary from the village church. In Pateun village, 22 households had promised to pay 50 Baht cash, 5-liter rice as well as salt and chilies equivalent to 5 Baht to support the village pastor in 1997.²⁰ The village pastor was to receive

1,000 Baht monthly salary, which was not enough to sustain their living. It is commonly observed that a village pastor or evangelist works as a farmer on weekdays and serves the village church on weekends with a salary. However, as it often happens, the intra-village factionalism in Pateun village became fierce and 6 households refused to pay their portions. As shown in the Pateun village case, the financial basis of the village pastor is vulnerable, because village church members can oppose and resist their village pastor by withdrawing their support.

Villagers are expected to pay the tithes, 10 percent of their income, and donations to the church services. In addition, there were various other fees for the church members to pay for TLBC, the Women's Society, and the Youth Group, but these fees were poorly paid.²¹ The tithes belong to God, according to the then Pateun village pastor, and should be used for various church activities, including evangelism. In 1997, the Pateun village church paid 4,000 Baht to support a 'teacher,' for his evangelical work.²²

Budget and salary - China

In Yunnan, Christian Lahu village pastors do not receive a monthly salary and "work as farmers just as other villagers do."²³ Sunday School teachers and evangelists also work without salary, although they receive some money, such as travel expenses from the village church. When somebody holds a prayer assembly at his/her house (*yeh k'a bon law ve*), 'teachers' and church committee members usually receive a small amount of money for the prayer and blessings they gave to the host.

Yunnan Christian Lahu village churches have incomes from the tithes, donations as well as communal farm fields, the last of which is not found among Thailand Christian Lahu. Panli village church has 2 *mu* tea growing fields and 80 *mu* dry fields.²⁴ The total income of the Panli church in 2004 was 11,807 Yuan, of which donations from female church members occupied about 70 percent. The total expenditures in 2004 amounted to 5,939 Yuan which made a surplus of 5,869 Yuan. The main expenditures were guest reception expenses, training and exchange fees, and travel and other allowances for the church workers. The Panli church paid 200 Yuan per year each for the Reverent and the village pastor, 150 Yuan per year for activities by volunteer workers, 50 Yuan per year for each church committee member, and 100 Yuan per year to each choir.²⁵ Besides the above, the village church lent out a small amount of money to the villagers who are sick and in need (Han *et al.*, 2008: 140-141).

Church service - Thailand

As good Christians, Pateun villagers did not work on Sundays and went to church. Some girls put makeup on for the day, and some wore traditional Lahu costumes.

In Thailand Christian Lahu villages, Church services are given 4 times on Sunday. In Pateun village in 1997, Sunday church services were held as shown below:

Table 2: Sunday Church Services in Pateun Village in 1997

About 07:00-07:30 Morning Prayer

About 09:00-09:50 Women's Society Prayer

About 11:30-12:45 Daytime Prayer

About 16:00-17:00 Youth Group Prayer

(source: my observation)

In Pateun village in 1997, the village pastor picked up the problem of the villagers, cited the related parts from the Bible as a parable, and preached. During my stay in Pateun village, the village pastor preached about the importance of "doing God's works" (evangelism, supporting the village pastor, and paying the tithes), and the prohibition of drinking and using narcotic drugs. If pastors of other villages or Chiang Mai City visited the village, they were invited to the daytime service as preachers.

Church service - China

While Thailand Lahu Christians hold prayer services only on Sunday, Yunnan Lahu Christians hold services on Wednesday and Thursday nights as well as on Sunday. On Sunday, many Yunnan Lahu Christian villages have 4 services, but some small villages do not hold Women's Society Prayer.

Table 3: Sunday Church Services in Panli Village according to Panli church teacher

About 07:00-09:00 Morning Prayer

About 11:00-12:00 Women's Society Prayer

About 12:00-14:00 Daytime Prayer

About 17:00- Youth Group Prayer

(source: an interview with Panli village pastor in 2012)

Table 4: Sunday Church Services in Panli Village according to Chinese scholars

08:00-09:30 Morning Prayer

11:00-12:00 Noon Women's Society Prayer

13:30-14:00 Main Prayer

17:00-18:00 Youth Prayer

(source: Zhang ed., 2008: 141)

Table 5: Sunday Church Services in Ahkade Village

Morning	Morning Prayer
About 13:30-	Daytime Prayer
About 15:00-	Afternoon Prayer

(source: an interview with Ahkade village pastor)

Both in Thailand and China, Lahu Christians regard Sunday as a holy day and refrain from killing domestic animals and working in the fields. If *ca suh ca ve*, a harvest festival that includes a feast is held on Sunday, villagers will kill pigs on Saturday to avoid taking life on Sunday. Villagers do not cut trees or dig the ground (Han *et al.*, 2008: 142), because they avoid working in the field on Sunday. Both among Yunnan and Thailand Lahu Christians, the main Sunday church service is the Daytime Prayer, which has the largest number of attendants. In the Daytime Prayer, one of the ‘teachers’ preaches.

Annual church assembly - Thailand

In Thailand, TLBC and other Lahu churches annually hold a big church assembly in the last week of March, to which villagers from member village churches go, sleep outdoors, and attend four or five services a day. This *Bon Paweh Lon* may be the most important activity for TLBC, and the general meeting of the church officers is also held during the *Bon Paweh Lon*.

Annual church assembly - China

Unlike the Thailand Lahu Christians, *Bon Paweh Lon* or annual church assemblies are not held by Yunnan Lahu Christians. After the Liberation (1949), Lancang Lahu Christians held a *Bon Paweh Lon* in Ta La Ba village, Muga District in 1998, but China Christian Lahu have not ever held *Bon Paweh Lon* since then.

What is it to be Christian in a non-Christian State?

Christian experience in the non-Christian state – Thailand and China

The most significant common ground between Thailand and China Christian Lahu are their poverty and powerlessness. They are both a marginalized ethnic minority and live in the social periphery of the states where other majority peoples have overwhelming power. The religion of Thailand and China Christian Lahu is marginal, as it is different from the respective states’ dominant values and religion.

One of the phrases often heard from Thailand Christian Lahu is that they “live in the others’ country and are servants of the others (*shu mvuh mi cheh leh shu ce te ve*).” Both in their myth and daily conversations, Thailand Christian Lahu express their historical and present plight as a series of deprivations; loss of power, loss of their country, loss of their king, loss of knowledge, and loss of the writing. In this world or in Thailand, Thai people are the ruler and the Lahu are the subjects. Christian Lahu sometimes liken themselves to the people of Israel and have elaborated a set of myths that are parallel with those of the Jews; The prosperity at the beginning of time, the fall from the glory, the split of the people, the loss of the country, wondering in search of blessings of the true God, the longing for the future prosperity and restoration of the country (Nishimoto, 2000).

Christian Lahu are living as a marginalized ethnic and religious minority in Thailand, where Buddhism is de facto the religion of the state. However, Christian Lahu pay attention to such parts of Christian teachings as those would give possible explanations for their plight. In this sense, Christianity gives meaning to the sufferings of the ethnic cum religious minority as well as hope that they may be saved and be the ruler in the future or in the otherworld. Paradoxically, because of the present plight and sufferings, Christian Lahu feel themselves to be somewhat prestigious; They sometimes feel like God-chosen people.

The official ideology of the Chinese government is atheism, and the dominant values are Chinese diffused religion (cf. Yang 1970). The Chinese government has been exercising much more strict religious policies toward Christianity than the Thai government. In the postwar time before the Reform and Opening-Up era, Christianity, along with other religions, was banned, criticized, and persecuted. Because of their understanding that Christianity had once been utilized by the Western colonial powers, the Chinese government has built a patriotic system and regulations to prevent Christians in China from falling under foreign influences and from becoming a threat to national unity. In the post-Mao era today, despite an increase in the number of Lahu church members, Christianity is still a sensitive issue and the Chinese government is casting wary eyes on the churches.

The Church Development Projects and Adaptation to the Modern States

The TLBC, an ethnic Lahu church, has been working for Christian Lahu in Thailand to better adapt to Thai modern society. Besides evangelism, the Lahu church has been working in such diverse development projects as agricultural, educational and literacy, cultural, health and welfare developments. The general direction of the church’s development projects has been in accordance with that of the Thai national development policies. The Lahu church has a rational and centralized structure, which makes clear contrast to non-Christian Lahu, who lack networks beyond villages and cover larger non-Christian

Lahu society. TLBC belongs to CCT, one of the governmentally approved ‘religious groups,’ and provides its members with a more secure status within the Buddhist Thai state.

Different from its Thailand counterpart, the Christian Lahu church in China after WWII has not been conducting various development projects. Christianity in the Chinese context today is not a ‘civilizing project’ (Harrell 1995), that brings development to people, but the Chinese government has been playing this role. Under the pressure of anti-religious policies of the Chinese government, Christianity among China Christian Lahu has not helped Christian Lahu to adapt to modern Chinese society. With much fewer networks with foreign churches, Christianity among China Christian Lahu seems to work to build Christian Lahu into a religio-ethnic enclave in the non-Christian state.

Religious Minority and National Integration

In Thailand, Christian and non-Christian Lahu generally have a similar type of identity based on ‘We the Lahu’ versus ‘Them the Thai (or Northern Thai).’ Lahu are ‘living in the others’ country’ (*shu mvuh mi cheh ve*) and they do not feel themselves belonging to the Thai nation.

But, traditionalist Lahu in Thailand sometimes claim a closer identity to Thai Buddhists, because they say that their religion can be called Buddhism. This identification of their traditional religion as Buddhism is enabled by focusing not on the teachings of the religion but on the religious practices, including burning candles that are found among both groups. Lahu traditional religion and Thai Buddhism have an affinity because the two shares many similar symbols and practices (Nishimoto 2009).

On the other hand, non-Christian Lahu people in Yunnan do not have a clear-cut identity of ‘we the Lahu’ versus ‘them the Han.’ Although Lahu in China are ‘Lahu’ in the national identity cards, some expressed feeling that they are not so genuine in the Lahu-ness (cf. Ma 2013). Some told that the Japanese once invaded China, killed many ‘China people’ (*Jongo chaw*), and raped many ‘China women’ (*Jongo ma*). Apparently, in such a statement, the Lahu are included in the ‘China people.’ Some also said that they were originally the Han, having moved to Yunnan “23 generations ago,” and their surnames, such as “Tang” and “Luo” were those of their Han ancestors. In the Chinese context, the identity of the Lahu people is multifold, usually comprised of ‘China people’ at the national level and of ‘Lahu’ at a local ethnic level. This twofold identification is also found among many other ethnic minorities in China (Prof. Hasegawa Kiyoshi, personal communication in 2012) and we may regard this fact as a result of China’s official ethnic policy which argues that there are many different ‘nationalities’ (ethnic groups) in China, but these different ‘nationalities’ constitute a unity of the ‘Chinese people’ (*Zhonghua Minzu*) (cf. Fei et al. 1989).

But, Christian Lahu in China have a different type of identity from non-Christian Lahu in China who claim themselves as 'Lahu' and, at the same time, 'China people.' Among China Christian Lahu, the identity is made on 'we the Lahu' versus 'them the Han' contrast. One religious teacher (male, 79 years old in 2012), related that "during those ten years (Cultural Revolution period)," they could not pray and had to work on Sundays, and all religious books were burnt. During that period, many Lahu religious teachers and people fled to Burma and some of them moved then to Thailand. He was sent to a labor camp and could not go home for three months. He also criticized Mao Zedong, who is, on the other hand, often worshiped by non-Christian Lahu people in China as though he were G'ui sha (God) and superhuman.

Another difference between Christian and non-Christian Lahu in China, by which we can see different identities among the two groups, is the fact that, while the latter hardly retain memories about the once very prosperous 'Lahu Country' (*La Hu Mvuh Mi*) and the Lahu's fighting against 'the Chinese' (*Heh Pa*), many of the former retain them. Although the memories of 'the Lahu Country' and the fighting against 'the Chinese' by Christian Lahu in China are not so prevailed and elaborated as by Christian Lahu in Thailand, Christian Lahu in China also tell the stories of A Teh Fu Cu, a Buddhist warrior monk among the Lahu in the 19th century and he fought against the Chinese government. After the defeat by the Chinese, he is said to have prophesied the coming of Christianity to the Lahu people.²⁶ Memories about the sovereignty and the relation with the Chinese in the past by Christian and non-Christian Lahu in China make a clear contrast, and it reflects different types of identity by the two groups.

Based on their experience of strict controls on religions by the Chinese government, memory of hardships in the Mao era, and the very different conceptualization of their past, Christian Lahu in China have not developed an identity that they are members of the Chinese state. In other words, their religion has been working to have Christian Lahu in China feel themselves to be distinct and distant from 'the Han' (*Heh Pa*), the term that is often used by Lahu in China as a synonym for the Chinese government.

Conclusion

Being poor and having little power, Christian Lahu are a marginalized ethnic minority both in Thailand and China. In both countries, the dominant religious values are not Christianity, and, because the problem of religion is inseparably connected with those of ethnicity and national integration in both countries, the difference between the state's dominant religious values and the religion that Christian Lahu follows provides uneasy social environments for them. For the states, religious and ethnic minorities mean a potential threat to national unity.

Under these circumstances, Christian churches seem to have been helping the Christian minority

people by giving meaning to their sufferings. The Bible gives possible explanations for the plight and sufferings that Christian Lahu have gone through as religious and ethnic minorities. Christianity offers Christian Lahu hope for salvation and glory in the future or in the otherworld and makes them feel that, although they have been subjugated by more powerful lowland peoples, they are essentially equal or even higher than those majority peoples. Both Thailand and China Christian Lahu retain stories of A Teh Fu Cu, by which both groups have developed a mythology similar to that of the Jews.

While the Lahu Christian church in Thailand has carried out diverse development projects, such activities are hardly found among the Christian church in China. While the Christian church in Thailand has been helping Christian Lahu better adapt to modern Thai society, the Christian church in China has not played such a role. In China, it has always been the Chinese government that has helped minority people, including Christian Lahu, in adaptation to modern society.

Unlike in Thailand, many ethnic minority peoples in China have a twofold identity, by which they define themselves as the ‘China people’ and, at the same time, as ethnic ‘nationalities.’ This may be a result of the Chinese government’s long endeavors of nation-building and patriotic education. Yet, unlike non-Christian Lahu in China, Christian Lahu in China have a more distinct identity based on the ‘we the Lahu’ versus ‘them the Han’ module. Despite the government’s policy of patriotic education for religious teachers, the experience of the strict policies against Christianity and the hardships in the Mao era has failed to make Christian Lahu in China feel themselves to be a part of the ‘China people.’

Notes

¹ Sa mo-e is a Lahu woman and the chairperson of the Lancang Christian Council. Her Chinese name is Duan Sanmei and she will appear in this paper in her Lahu and Chinese names.

² An interview with an officer of the DRA in 2003.

³ The Three-Self means self-government, self-support, and self-propagation.

⁴ It is through this Church Union Movement that denominational differences disappeared in many places of China.

⁵ By the enactment of the Regulations (2004), the Regulations on Adminstrating the Places for Religious Activities (1994) were abolished.

⁶ This regulation for publishing is one of the reasons for the fact that Christian literature among Lancang Christian Lahu are much less than among Thailand Christian Lahu. Also, one Thailand Lahu pastor whom I met in Yunnan said that it was not permitted for foreigners to bring religious literature to China (Rev. Jokue Y. Jakah, personal communication in 2012).

⁷ After Wa Christians came to be members of TLBC in 1993, TLBC has a Wa section. But, still, most TLBC members are Lahu.

⁸ Information was given by a TLBC staff in 2013. There were 13,674 members (baptized 6,974 and unbaptized 6,700) in October 1997 (personal communication with the then Chairman of TLBC).

⁹ Besides Lancang County, Lahu Christian village churches are found in Menglian, Cangyuen, and Shuangjiang

Counties. Yet, the largest number of Lahu Christians live in Lancang County.

¹⁰ It is not known if other village churches in Yunnan support evangelists.

¹¹ This Duan's statement should have referred to the China government's regulation that propagation is only possible in 'the places for religious activities' that are registered with the government.

¹² At the time of my stay in Pateun village in 1997, the village pastor (age 45) and his wife (45) had just completed the LBI program.

¹³ Note that good students were not sent to towns in China but to Kengtung, where the American Baptist Mission had a church center and school. These good students were presumably further educated in the Shan or Lahu language, but not in Chinese.

¹⁴ According to Rev. Duan Sanmei, as a result of the evangelical works of the students, many old Christians who had not been able to pray in the Mao era resumed faith and many non-Christian Lahu became interested in Christianity (Sa mo-e, 2011: 26).

¹⁵ According to the Marriage Law of China, only males and females who are more than 22 and 20 years old, respectively, can get married, but it is often otherwise defined for minority people. The Lancang County government defines that "in the case of the farming cooperatives members, males who are not older than 20 years old and the females who are not older than 18 years old cannot get married ("Lancang Lahuzu zizhi xian gaikuang" bianxizu 2007: 96).

¹⁶ Of the China Christian Lahu leaders, Shi Yongfo (male, over 80) is a graduate of the Nanking Bible Institute, while Li Zhaluo (male, over 50) and Duan Sanmei (female, over 40) are graduates of the Yunnan Bible Institute.

¹⁷ Pateun village had 25 households and a population of 162 persons in 1997. Almost all villagers were Christians.

¹⁸ The roles of religious teachers may be different in smaller villages. For example, in a small village cluster with about 30 Christian households, Church services are led by a 'teacher' who comes every Sunday from Panli village. There is one 'in-village teacher' (*hk'a hk'aw ve sa la*, age of late forties) who acts as assistant of the 'teacher' from Panli, because the 'in-village teacher' does not know enough, according to both the in-village teacher and the 'teacher' from Panli village.

¹⁹ *Kwan* comes from the Chinese term 'guan' which means to control, manage, care, etc.

²⁰ According to the TLBC regulation, the village pastor's salary is to be paid from the tithes collected. Pateun village, however, allocated 22 households contributions to the pastor's salary, because many households did not or only partially paid the tithes. The Betani village church is paying the pastor's monthly salary of 1,000 Baht from the tithes in 2014.

²¹ In 1997, Pateun village church members were told to pay TLBC annual membership fees of 50 Baht per person for those who had been baptized, TLBC area four annual contribution of 50 Baht per household, the Women's Society annual membership fee of 65 Baht per person and the Youth Group's annual membership fee 24 Baht per person.

²² The villagers called this man a 'teacher' because he graduated from the Lahu Bible Institute. He was working as an evangelist in a non-Christian Lahu village in Maehongson Prefecture, a faraway and underdeveloped place as Lahu villagers so perceived.

²³ Duan Sanmei, the chairperson of the Lancang County Christian Council, personal communication in 2013.

According to Rev. Duan Sanmei, Yunnan Lahu Christians, in the past, had supported the village pastor by giving him salaries. But, after the Cultural Revolution, during which they could not do any religious activities, they have not

been supporting village pastors, “because they cannot force villagers.”

²⁴ One *mu* is 6.667 acres.

²⁵ This description does not accord with the statements of the Panli village pastor and Duan Sanmei in 2012 that the village pastor does not receive any salary.

²⁶ A Teh Fu Cu, also called A Sha Fu Cu, was a Buddhist monk who with many Lahu followers fought against troops of local Dai lords and the Qing Dynasty. In the stories retained among Christian Lahu both in Thailand and China, A Teh Fu Cu had supernatural power and prophesied that one day a White man on a White horse brought ‘The White Book’ to the Lahu who were in plight and suffering after the defeat in the fights against the Chinese. ‘The White Book’ (*li hpu tan hpu in Lahu*) means ‘The Sacred Book,’ which Christian Lahu in Thailand and China today regard to be the Christian Bible.

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非キリスト教国家におけるキリスト教徒少数民族 ー タイ国と中国におけるプロテスタント・ラフ族 ー

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要旨

ラフ族は、中国南西部、ミャンマー東部シャン州、タイ国北部にかけて広がる丘陵地帯に暮らす少数民族であり、現在、タイ国と中国に暮らすラフ族中には一定数のキリスト教徒が存在する。タイ国では上座仏教が支配的な宗教である一方で、無神論を標榜する中国政府は、キリスト教を国家統一を乱す西洋帝国主義の下僕とみなしてきた。換言すれば、タイ国と中国においてプロテスタント・ラフ族は、民族的・宗教的なマイノリティであり、宗教は信仰だけでなく、エスニシティや国民統合に関わる問題である。文献調査とフィールドワークにもとづき本稿は、タイ国と中国におけるマイノリティ宗教を取り巻く制度と環境について記述し、両国のプロテスタント・ラフ族の宗教生活について報告する。異なる国家コンテキストの下で暮らすプロテスタント・ラフ族の現状を報告することで、宗教がエスニシティや国民統合の問題に対して持つ意味について予備的な考察をおこなう。

キーワード： 少数民族、キリスト教、ラフ族、中国、タイ国