

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Bisu, a minority language first documented in Chiangrai, Thailand by Japanese linguist Tatsuo Nishida (1973), has attracted many scholars' interest within recent decades. It is regarded as one of the endangered languages in the world because of its limited distribution and population. As a minority language surrounded by predominantly non-Bisu communities, what is its language vitality? Will it be maintained in the foreseeable future? This study is an attempt to provide an answer to such questions by looking at language use and attitudes among Bisu speakers in both China and Thailand.

In this chapter, issues such as the research questions and hypotheses of this study will be discussed, followed by a brief overview of the Bisu language.

1.1 Research questions

In recent years, Kirk R. Person has worked with the Bisu people in Thailand and helped them develop their own written form based on the Thai orthography (Person 1999). There are now about 200 small books, including folktales, a Bisu-Thai-English picture dictionary, and basic literacy books (Person 2005, p.c.). By contrast, in China no such language development work has been done. The Chinese government sub grouped Bisu speakers into the Lahu minority in 1990 (Xu 2001: 7). Indeed, Bisu was not formally recognized as a new member among the languages of China until the late 1980s (Xu 2001: 4). As a result, little has been done to document some basic issues related to their language and culture. Given that Bisu language development is at differing levels in China and Thailand, the following are the research questions in this study:

1. How is the Bisu language used among Bisu speakers in China and Thailand? Are there any differences regarding its use among the speakers in China and Thailand? If so, what are the possible factors influencing the differences?
2. Is the use of Bisu influenced by social factors (such as place of residence, age and gender)?
3. How do Bisu speakers think about their vernacular language and their identity as Bisu? Do they value the Bisu language?
4. Are there significant links between language use and language attitudes? If so, what might they be?

All these research questions will shed light on the maintenance and vitality of the Bisu language in the foreseeable future.

1.2 Hypotheses

The following hypotheses regarding the Bisu language will be examined in the course of this research:

1. Bisu speakers in China use the Bisu language less than Bisu speakers in Thailand due to Bisu language development being at differing levels in these two countries.
2. Bisu speakers in China have less positive attitudes towards the Bisu language compared with Bisu speakers in Thailand, because there is no Bisu language development program in China.
3. There is a relationship between language use and language attitudes: the more Bisu speakers use their language, the more positive attitudes they hold toward the Bisu language.
4. Language use and language attitudes toward the Bisu language may vary by age and gender. The elderly people use Bisu more than the younger people and thus

have more positive attitudes than the younger people; women may use Bisu more than men and value Bisu more than men.

1.3 Scope of the study

This study will examine the current use of the Bisu language as well as language attitudes held by its speakers in four selected Bisu villages in China and two villages in Thailand. The patterns of Bisu usage and general attitudes towards Bisu will be discussed according to place of residence, age and gender. In addition, the relationship between language use and language attitudes will also be investigated in the attitudinal discussion.

1.4 Overview of the study

This study consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the whole study as well as an overview of the Bisu in China and Thailand; Chapter 2 reviews related literature regarding language maintenance, language vitality, language use and language attitudes; Chapter 3 introduces the methodology used to collect data on language use and language attitudes, focusing on presenting the questionnaires being used in this study. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the data collected in terms of language use and language attitude; Chapter 6 is a concluding chapter, drawing conclusions regarding language use and language attitudes. Issues such as further study questions and an evaluation of the questionnaires are also included in Chapter 6.

1.5 The Bisu language

1.5.1 Genetic affiliation

The Bisu language is one of the numerous Loloish languages within the Tibeto-Burman language family (Bradley 1985). More specifically, Bisu is a member of Bisoid language branch. Together with Pyen, Phunoi and Coong, it constitutes the

Bisoid branch that is found within the southern Loloish family within Tibeto-Burma, as shown in Figure 1:¹

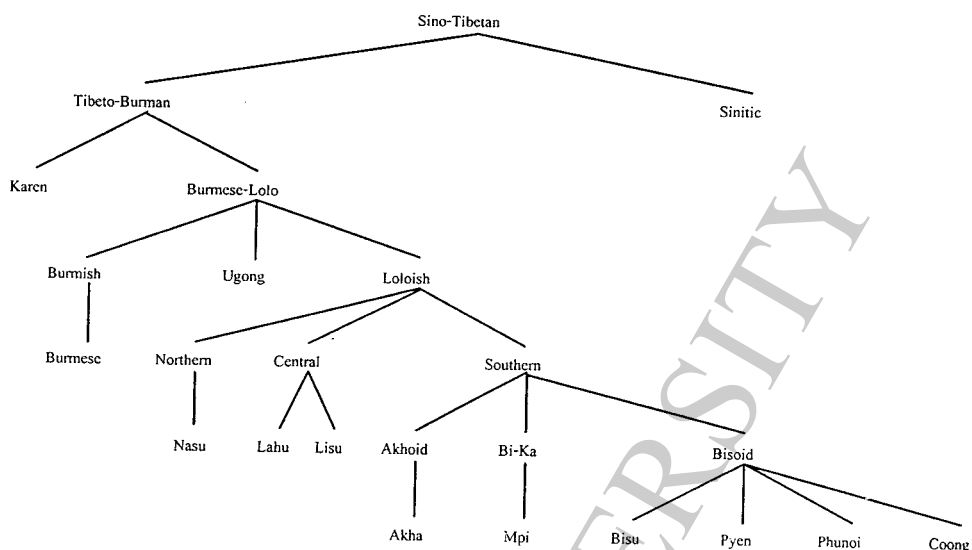


Figure 1. Bisu language within Southern Loloish
(adapted from Bradley 1981: 3 and 1994: 178, cited in
Person 2000: 1)

1.5.2 Language names

The term “Bisu” refers to both the language itself and its speaker. According to James Matisoff, ‘Bi’ and ‘su’ descend from old Sino-Tibetan roots, both meaning ‘people’ (Matisoff 1999, p.c., reported by Person, 2005, p.c.). Bisu is the antonym used by Bisu speakers in Thailand, Myanmar and some villages in China (Nishida 1973: 55). The alternate names of Bisu spoken in Thailand are Mbisu and Mibisu. They are closely related to Mpi, Pyen, and Phunoi (Bradley 1985). The Northern Thai call the Bisu “Lawa” or “Lua”. According to Kirk Person, these two terms

¹ The term “Loloish” comes from Yunnanese and has derogatory connotations; “Yiphoish” is another acceptable alternative which has been introduced by some scholars (Person 2003).

are “both derogatory and confusing” because they actually refer to a linguistically unrelated ethnic group (Person 2000: 2).

The alternate names of Bisu spoken in China include Laopin hua (old pin language), Pin hua (Pin language) and Laomian hua (old Burmese language).² The Bisu people in Menghai are called “Laopin” or “Pin”, while those in Lancang, Menglian, and Ximeng are called “Laomian” by themselves and outsiders. In addition, Bisu in Menghai County also call themselves “Mbisu” (Gordon 2005). Bisu people in China also call themselves “gu ba ren” (gu ba people) and their Bisu language “gu ba hua” (gu ba language). “Gu ba” literally means “our group” in Bisu, thus speaking Bisu, in their word, is gu ba bisu tǎn which means “our group speaks our language” (Person 2005, p.c.). Those in Myanmar are called Pyen (meaning “to change”), explained by a legend that says they exchanged their traditional ethnic clothing for Plang clothing in order to escape from slavery in Laos (Person 2003)

1.5.3 Distribution

Bisu is spoken in the border areas of China, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos (Xu 2001). Gordon (2005) estimates about 6,000 Bisu speakers in China and 1,000 in Thailand. The following two subsections will introduce the distribution of Bisu in China and Thailand.

1.5.3.1 The Bisu in China

The Bisu in China are mainly found in Yunnan Province in Southwest China. Xu Shixuan listed four counties where Bisu-speaking areas are located: Menghai, Ximeng, Menglian and Lancang (Xu 2001). The most representative Bisu villages

² “Old Burmese language” is the literal translation of “lao mian hua”. David Bradley sees this name as coming from the fact that Bisu is closely related to Burmese, while respondents were confused and uncertain when asked about this. Maybe “lao mian hua” is a borrowed word from Bisu neighbors, who recognized some Burmese-like sounds or words and thus gave them this name.

are found in Menghai and Lancang Counties, where the Bisu language and culture are relatively well preserved (Yang 2002).

The Bisu villages in China include: the village of Laopin in Menghai County, the villages of Zhutang, Laba, Donglang, and Fubang in Lancang County, the villages of Fuyan, Jingxin and Nanya in Menglian County, and the village of Laomian in Ximeng County (Gordon 2005: 327). Among the four counties where Bisu are found, only Menghai County is located in Xishuangbanna prefecture; the other are all found in Simao prefecture, as shown in Figure 2:

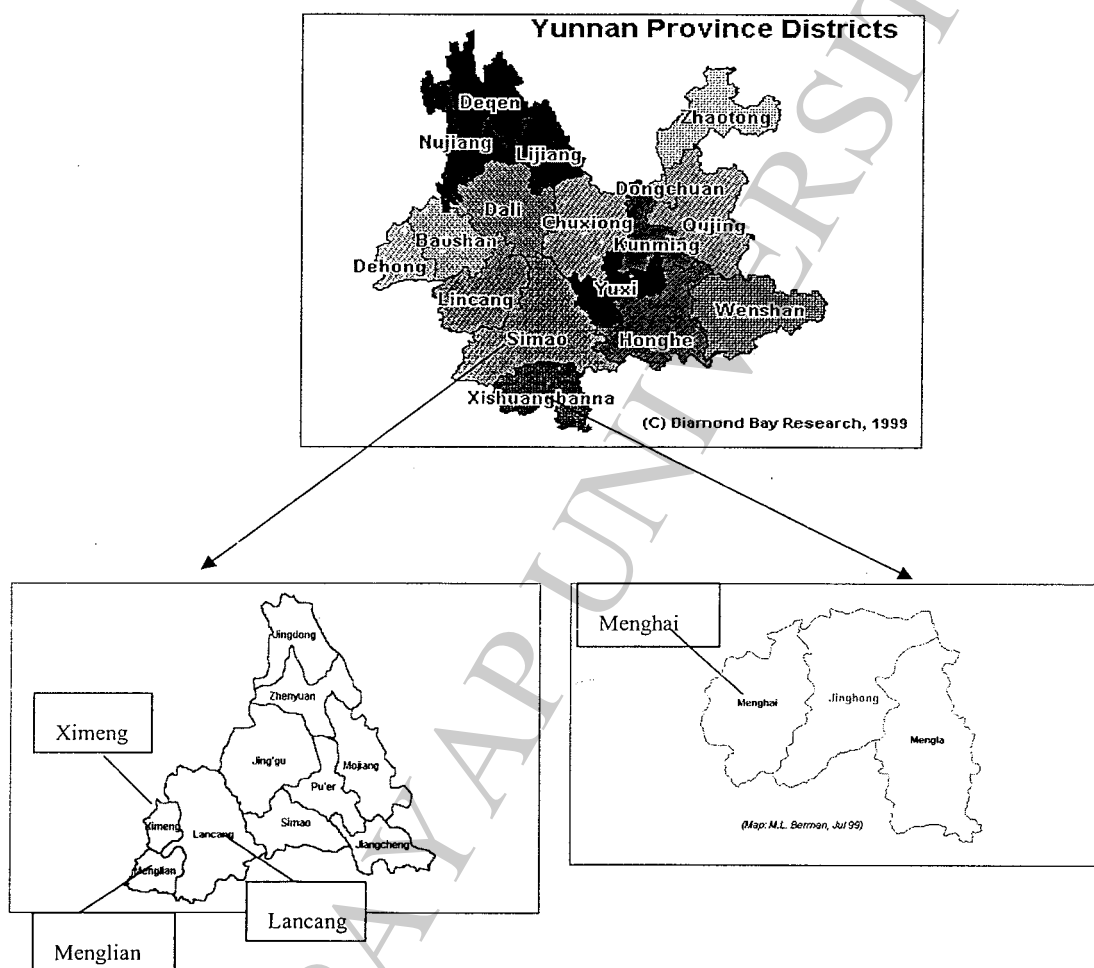


Figure 2. The distribution of Bisu in China

1.5.3.2 The Bisu in Thailand

The Bisu in Thailand are mainly located in Doi Chompuu and Doi Pui, in Chiangrai Province. The Bisu population in these two villages is about 200 and 500, respectively. In addition, a handful of speakers are also in Pha Daeng Village (Amphoe Phan, Tambon Doi Ngam, Chiangrai Province) (Person 2000: 2). The distribution of Bisu villages in Thailand is shown in Figure 3:

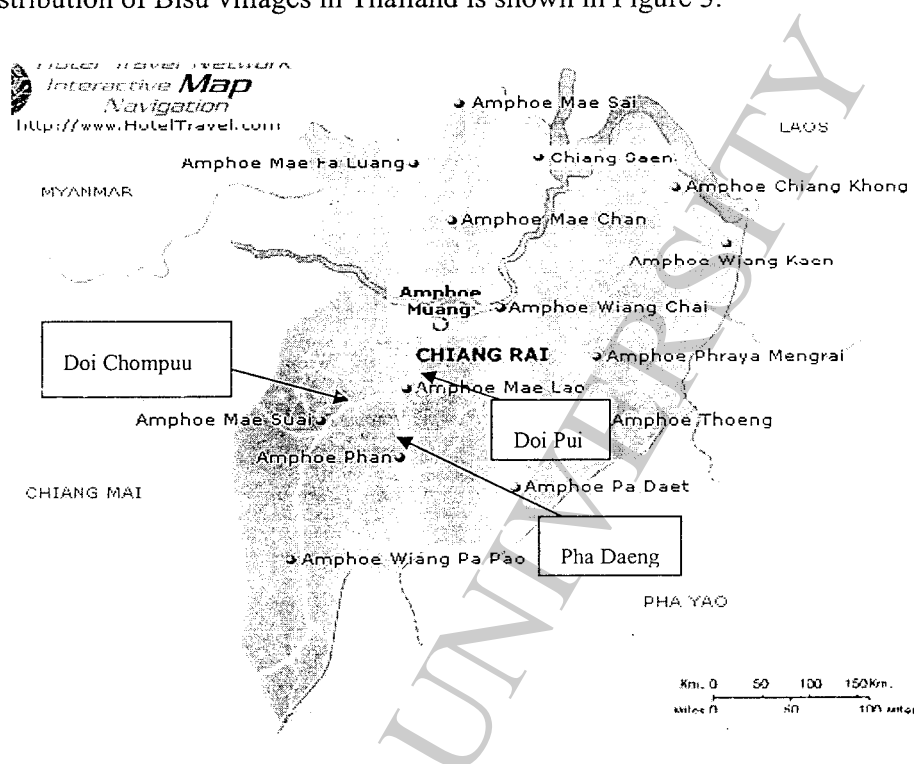


Figure 3. The distribution of Bisu in Thailand

1.5.4 Previous research related to the Bisu language

Since Nishida first described the Bisu language from his investigation from September 1964 to February 1965, more and more research work has been done. In his 1973 article entitled "A preliminary study of the Bisu language: a language of northern Thailand recently discovered by us", Nishida introduced the Bisu language and provided phonetic and grammatical descriptions of the Bisu language.

In his 1979 book *Ptoto-Loloish*, David Bradley applied the comparative method to data from Bisu to construct part of the history of the Loloish Branch of Sino-Tibetan. In addition, he compared and analyzed nasality in Bisu and Bisoid in a later paper.

Most of the recent research regarding the Bisu language in Thailand was completed by Kirk Person. In his dissertation of 2000, Person described sentence final particles in Bisu narrative based on thirteen folktales, six expository texts, and three life histories. The results demonstrate the usage of Bisu particles linked with text types and contributed to understand the sentence final particles in the Bisu language (Person 2000).

The study of Bisu within China was first done by Professor Li Yongsui who formally recognized Bisu as a new member among the languages of China in the late 1980s (Xu 2001: 4). In his study of the Sangkong language (2002), he compared Sangkong with other Southern-Loloish languages (such as Hani, Lahu, Bisu, Mpi, Pyen and so forth) in terms of their vocabulary. The results showed that Sangkong has the most cognates with the Bisu language (the percentage of cognates reached 69%). This close relationship between Sangkong and Bisu affirms the status of the Bisu language in the Loloish language family.³

In her book of 2001, Xu Shixuan described the Bisu language spoken in China in terms of phonology, lexicon, and grammar, and also produced a comparison of Bisu with other members of its language family (Xu 2001). This was the first book in which the Bisu language as spoken in China was introduced comprehensively.

³ While Sangkong and Bisu share many cognates, they are mutually unintelligible, based on the fact that a Bisu speaker from Thailand, Mr. Tong Wonglua, who visited a Sangkong village, was unable to converse meaningfully with the villagers. By contrast, he was able to understand the Lao mian and others.

1.6 Bisu society

1.6.1 Bisu history

Due to a lack of recorded written form, there was no accurate information relating to Bisu history. In Xu Shixuan (2001), two important migrations of Bisu within the last 200 years caused by two rebellions against their local Lahu groups were described via Bisu oral literature:

After the rebellion was crushed in 1801, the Bisu migrated south, taking with them nine horse-loads of cooking pots, cups, and iron tripods. Following the Nanku River downstream, they lived for a while at Miema Miemeng (present location unclear), among a group of “big people” with yellow hair, high nose-bridges, and long legs. However, the unsuitable climate led them to migrate back, passing through Nanchong Nanshu (which means “pond of hot water”, *i.e.* hot springs) and arriving at Mengjiao Mengdong (present-day Cangyuan in Yunnan province) to live among the Va people for another period. As they were such a small group, they could not resist harsh treatment and enslavement by *tusi* (a hereditary headman appointed by the government in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties for national minorities) from the other minority groups. Therefore, a few decades later, their headman, Ya Makan, led them in an overnight escape. Although the *tusi* managed to recapture and enslave those who fled too late, a hundred or more households did arrive safely at Muga Mengnuo (present-day Muga Village in Lancang County), later moving to Dongzhu (in Zhutang village, Lancang County), where they gradually increased to over 300 households (Xu 2001: 7).

Because they were enslaved, the Bisu people launched a second rebellion that incited their second phase of migration:

In 1918, Lilong and Li Hu led the peasants in an armed rebellion in the Lancang area. With “Kill the Officials; Cancel our Debts” as their slogan, they launched a spirited attack on the *tusi* system. The Bisu also participated in this conflict. The peasant forces routed most of the armed *tusi* soldiers and besieged the county offices in Lancang. To protect their common interests, the Lahu *tusi*, Han landlords, and local warlords formed an alliance, and, as a united front, finally defeated the peasants. For fear that their village would be destroyed and their families killed, groups of Bisu decided to

flee, moving to areas such as Menglian, Ximeng and Menghai (Xu 2001: 7).

The Thai Bisu have not preserved much of their history, beyond a few elderly people who heard that they originated in Myanmar and China (Person 2005 p.c.). In Person (2000), it is suggested that the forebears of the Thai Bisu were originally from China; they may have entered into Northern Thailand following the Mekong River approximately 200 years ago. They may also have migrated gradually from Laos or Myanmar (Person 2000: 8 & 2003).

1.6.2 Bisu social organization

Bisu people, like many hill tribes, have transferred from “slash-and-burn” farming to gas-powered farming. The Bisu in China experienced a transition from individual farms to cooperative agricultural enterprises to private ownership (Xu 2001: 8). The Thai Bisu have always had individual farms. However, most Bisu people in China and Thailand are farmers and the gap between the rich and the poor is small; thus the concept of social classes within the group has not been developed. This provides a foundation for their harmonious relationship in their daily life, such as all kinds of cooperation in farming, building houses, conducting marriages, burial and funerals. Figure 4 shows a picture where Thai Bisu people were cooperating to decorate their temple.

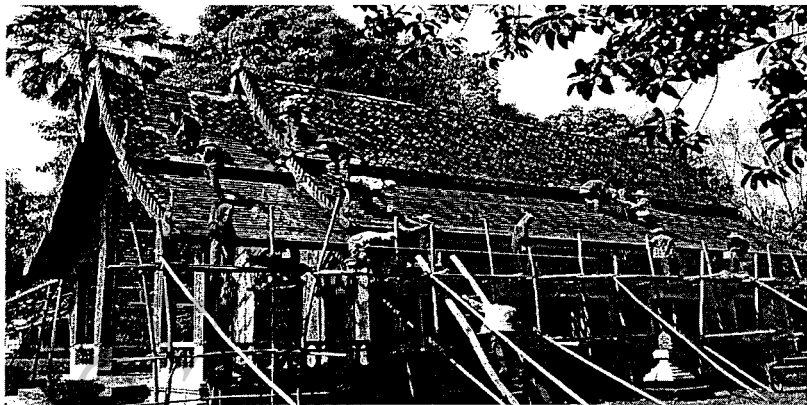


Figure 4. Harmonious cooperation among Bisu people

During their long-term cooperative production activities, Bisu people have developed their own way to organize their life. Xu (2001) described the team that leads each Bisu village in China as follows:

This team consists of four members: a headman, a deputy headman, a hospitality officer and a steward. Each of them is elected democratically; their exemplary moral character and integrity are the priority to be elected. While none of them possess any special economical or political powers.

The four members fulfill distinctive responsibilities. Usually, the headman manages the village affairs such as organizing food production and religious rites, punishing those who have transgressed village laws, maintaining communications outside the village, and being a mediator in disputes involving other villages or tribes. The deputy headman is the headman's assistant, helping him in the management of village affairs. The hospitality officer is responsible for receiving guests to the village and arranging labor for various activities. The steward is responsible for various activities associated with religious observances such as the burning of incense, kneading wax, tying red ribbons round the wrists of the bride and bridegroom at weddings, and untying them during divorce proceedings (Xu 2001: 8).

1.7 Cultural features

As a minority group surrounded by larger groups, the Bisu have been influenced greatly by neighboring cultures, such as the Dai, Lahu and Han. However, some distinct cultural features are still kept among the Bisu people. This section will introduce Bisu culture from four points of view: marriage, religious beliefs, festivals and traditional customs and taboos.

1.7.1 Marriage

The Bisu people in China and Thailand all practice life-long monogamy. Intermarriage with other ethnic groups was strictly prohibited in the past, and those who married outsiders were driven out of the family (Xu 2001: 13). This has changed nowadays. However, in the more conservative Thai Bisu village of Doi

Pui, it is still a tradition that those who marry non-Bisu are not allowed to live within the village borders (Person 2000: 22).⁴

The traditional Bisu marriage includes engagement and wedding ceremonies, but the marriage process varies from place to place. Traditionally speaking, the marriage process among the Chinese Bisu is easier and shorter than that among the Thai Bisu. In Xu (2001), a detailed engagement is described:

.... When they have made their choice, they should first tell their parents. Then the man's parents will request a matchmaker to take two bowls of wine to the woman's home to ask for her hand and drink "Engagement Wine". If the woman's family agrees to the match, their elderly folk and relatives will drink the wine together, after which the engagement is deemed complete. The couples are then free to purchase the necessary items for the wedding. If the offer is rejected, the wine is left untouched and returned to the man's home, after which the matter is never mentioned again (Xu 2001: 13).

Soon after the engagement, an auspicious day is chosen for the wedding, as described by Xu:

The wedding ceremony takes place over two days. The first day, the pig is slaughtered, and the two families exchange pigs' heads. The bridegroom, accompanied by five male friends, arrives at the bride's home and spends the night there. Early after the breakfast on the second day, the newly-weds kowtow to the bride's parents, who then recite congratulatory verse, wishing that they will live in harmony, remain faithful to each other and have a happy and fulfilled life together. Blessing over, the bridegroom then takes the bride back to his home. On arrival, two chickens are first killed as an offering to the gods, and the pork is given to the guests. The elderly folk, while enjoying their wine, will speak auspicious words to the couple. When the marks on the chicken bones have been observed, red ribbons are tied around the wrists of the couple. Blessings for happiness are bestowed on them, and the wedding is then deemed complete (Xu 2001: 14).

⁴ Those who marry non-Bisu should move to a place that is a few meters away from the Bisu village proper. Since it is not far, the Thai government still regards this area as part of the Bisu village.

By contrast, the traditional marriage among the Thai Bisu has a long shift from the engagement to the wedding. After the engagement ceremony but before the marriage ceremony takes place, the groom should work for his fiancée's family for 1-3 years without compensation. Since sexual relations are permitted, it is common for a couple to have children before the wedding (Person 2000: 20).⁵ By contrast, for the Chinese Bisu, sexual relations during the engagement are strictly forbidden. If a baby is born to a couple who have been married for less than a year, they have to provide wine for the whole village as a fine (Xu 2001: 10). In addition, intimate behaviors such as embracing should be avoided before marriage no matter how long they have been in love and how much they love each other (Zhao 2002).

1.7.2 Religious beliefs

The Thai Bisu people's religious beliefs are "Buddhist in theory and animist in practice" (Person 2000: 16). On one hand, they are greatly influenced by Buddhism from neighboring groups. On the other hand, animism has impact on their everyday lives. This can be shown by their various kinds of sacrificing activities. For the Thai Bisu, in addition to a village-wide sacrifice held three times per year, additional sacrifice activities are also held when one is sick. Person (2000) described how Thai Bisu people determine appropriate sacrifice by consulting the "spirit stick" as below:

.... The Bisu delineate between illnesses which respond to the modern medicines available at the nearby clinic (their first course of action) and those which do not and thus attributed to spiritual forces. In the latter case, the sick person or a member of his or her family will consult the meter-long "spirit stick." Direct yes/no questions are addressed to the spirit stick: "Was it a spirit in the forest? Was it a spirit in the field?" To answer in the affirmative, the stick is said to become several inches longer. Next, questions about appropriate sacrifices are asked: "Should I sacrifice one

⁵ Nowadays, fewer and fewer Thai Bisu are marrying in the traditional way, as it is perceived as too much hassle.

chicken? Two chickens? A pig?" Again, the stick becomes longer when the correct offering is mentioned. The sacrifice will be performed by the sick person or a member of his or her family in the location revealed by the spirit stick (Person 2000: 18).

As for the Chinese Bisu, soul-calling activities are one of the frequent activities occurring among them. They believe that all kinds of gods are taking care of everything for them such as their home, village, water, grain, mountain and so forth. Thus, they make every effort not to offend them by worshipping them and offering sacrifice to them (Xu 2001: 10). In the investigation, it is noticed that most Bisu villages have a sacrificial altar for people to worship the gods on important occasions (such as the Spiritual festivals) or whenever they have trouble in their daily life.

In addition to sacrificing, the Bisu in China also worship their ancestors, believing that their safety as well as happiness is blessed by their deceased ancestors (Zhao 2002). The Thai Bisu celebrate Buddhist holidays just like Northern Thai people (Person 2000: 18).

1.7.3 Festivals

Influenced by Chinese culture, the Bisu in China link many festivals with the lunar calendar, and all their festivals are closely related to food production (Xu 2001: 11). Their festivals include New Year, The 8th of the 2nd month (playing the Lusheng, a traditional Chinese musical instrument), the Fence Festival, Calling on the God of Grain, the Torch Festival, the Vegetarian Festival, Tree-Felling Festival, Worship of the Water God, Worship of the Fire God, Worship of the Sun and Moon. As for the Thai Bisu, they participate in all the local Northern Thai festivals.

1.7.4 Traditional customs and taboos

In their long-term struggling with their harsh life, the Bisu have developed many customs and taboos related to their production and life. For example, among the

Chinese Bisu, it is forbidden to eat sheep, because they think sheep brought them seed-grain. Some Bisu people do not eat otters or cats. Every year, after the seed-grain is scattered, people cannot play the Hu Lu Sheng (a traditional musical instrument) or the flute, and they cannot whistle due to the fear that such actions can lead to poor crops. In addition, certain activities should be avoided on certain specific days. For example, they avoid building houses on Wu, Chen, Si and their parents' death day; avoid going out on one's birthday and one's parents' death day, avoid planting trees on Mao, Chen, Wu and Si Days.⁶ It is also a taboo to peel the skin of barking deer in dry rice fields, because both of them are yellow, doing so is thought to harm the crops.

⁶ Mao, Chen, Wu, Si Day are calculated according to the Chinese lunar calendar, and there are no English equivalents for them. These days mentioned here refer to certain special days occurring once a month.