

## The People of Mae Hong Son Province & Their Unique Culture In the Context of the Lanna Thai Culture

Presented by the Shan Cultural Association UK ([www.sca-uk.org.uk](http://www.sca-uk.org.uk))

**Mae Hong Son** region has become popular among tourists for its beautiful mountains, lovely weather and unique character of local people and their culture. Keith Mundy, a writer of Sawadee Magazine, describes Mae Hong Son, the provincial capital, as 'a Thai Yai town, and a pleasure in itself – beautiful temples, a serene lake, misty mornings, green hills all around.' (Sawadee Magazine, February 2008).

Tai-yai/Shan in Mae Hong Son have unique culture, much akin to those in the Shan-State. Mae Hong Son Tai-yai culture is also widely seen in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai provinces. Such lovely culture can be observed during their seasonal festivals, such as Poi Sang Long (Ordination festival) and the Pi Mai Tai (Shan New Year festival). Some of their popular performances include the Kinnari-Kinnara Mythical Bird dance and the Ka Pan Gong (dancing to the rhythm of the traditional long-drum band).



### Tai-yai : The Golden People

**Tai-yai (Tai)** people are ethnically and linguistically related to **Dai** in Sipsongbanna (China), **Thai** in central Thailand, **Lanna Thai** in Lanna, **Tai Ahom** in Northeast of India and **Laotians** in Lao.

They are also known as **Shan** in the Union of Myanmar, formerly Burma and to the Western Countries.

It was suggested that the term **Shan** may have come from **Siam**, which means "golden" colour in Sanskrit (Pali), referring to their skin colour.

### The origin of Tai/Shan

The history suggested that Tai people migrated from their original seat in Central Asia towards the South and to settle along the Mekong River (Thai-Myanmar

border), Menam or Irrawaddy River (Myanmar), Brahmaputra River (Assam) and Ruili River (China-Myanmar border) by A.D. 18.

Today, most of the Tai inhabit the Shan-State in North-East of Myanmar. It is the biggest of the 14 states and divisions of the Union of Myanmar covering 60,000 square miles (approximately the size of England and Wales combined) with the population of 9 millions. There are also Tai inhabitants scattered throughout other parts of Myanmar and neighbouring countries such as Northern Thailand, North-eastern India and Southern China.



### Tai/Shan Language

The Tai/Shan language (Lik-Luang), like the Thai, the Lao, the Zhuang and the Kam Sui languages in China, was suggested to have come from Kadai root (one of the language groups of East and South Asia) 2000 years ago. The scripts used in Lik-Luang are similar to old Lanna scripts but somewhat different from central Thai scripts.

### Tai/Shan Culture & Identity



- Yellow: Buddhism ( the Religion most of the Shan believe in).
- Green: Good agriculture of the Shan lands.
- Red: Bravery and courage of Shan people.
- White: Peace and unity of the Shan State.

The Tai/ Shan have maintained their distinct & unique identity in terms of language, culture and tradition for centuries throughout different regions.

Their unique architectural style is seen in Wats (temples) and is the love of the visitors to the province. It shares many similarities to those of temples in Thailand and Sipsongbanna in China.

Tai/ Shan people celebrate their beautiful culture. Most Tai/ Shan festivals & celebrations are featured by a variety of different traditional dances, of which Kinnari-Kinnara bird dance, Sheep or Yak dance, Sword dance, Martial arts dance and the Ka Pan Gong (dancing to the rhythm of the traditional long-drum band) are popular ones.

## SCA\_UK

### The Shan Cultural Association in the United Kingdom



The Shan Cultural Association in the United Kingdom (SCA-UK) is an independent, non-political, cultural association that engages purely in cultural activities. It was found in 2005 in Oxford with a solid support from the Venerable Dr. Khammai Dhammasami, the abbot of the Oxford Buddha Vihara, OBV, ([www.oxfordbuddhavihara.org.uk](http://www.oxfordbuddhavihara.org.uk)).

One of the principle aims of SCA\_UK is to promote Shan Culture and Heritages within and without the communities of the Shan State people. Here in the UK, we actively participate in a variety of cultural activities.

Here are our celebrations and participations we've done so far since SCA\_UK was founded:

- Celebration of 2101 Shan New Year (Pi Mai Tai) at University College London (UCL).
- Celebration of 2102 Shan New Year (Pi Mai Tai) at the School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS) and University College London (UCL) in conjunction with the Centre for Buddhist Studies (SOAS).
- Participation at Kathina (Robe Offering) ceremonies at OBV (Oxford)
- Participation at the celebrations to mark the 60th Ascension to the Throne of His Majesty the King of Thailand, and also His Majesty's 80th Birthday.
- Participation at Songkran (Lunar New Year) festivals at the OBV (Oxford) and Buddhapadipa Temple (Wimbledon).

#### ***The 2102<sup>nd</sup> Shan New Year & The very first international conference on Shan Buddhism & culture proved it!***

In December 2007, Shan New Year celebration was staged at both SOAS and UCL. The 2102<sup>nd</sup> Shan New Year was unique in such a way that it held a conference on Shan Buddhism and Culture. This was the first conference on Shan ever taking place in Europe or America. The conference was jointly organised by the Centre for Buddhist Studies, SOAS and SCA-UK. There were more than 100 scholars from Britain, USA, Sweden, Burma, Thailand and India and approximately 20 research papers were presented.

And it was also made unique by the performance from Sai Htee Seng, one of the best known Shan singers in Burma, Dr. Sai Kham Leik a leading Shan composer, also, in Burma and the Mali Thai Pop Band who sang a well known song Mai Dong Rong Hai by the very famous Thai artist Loong Ad Karabao. This song, which reminds everybody of Bob Marley, has been a hit among the Tai Yai people.

The number of events we participate has increased over the year and the cultural events we organise have becoming bigger and better every year with higher and higher expectations by our spectators. This has been a very big achievement for such a young organisation run by volunteers.

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## Some Popular Performances of Tai



### Ka Pan Gong or Cha Cha Mong

Traditionally, Shan people make festive visit to prominent families within their town & village and also in the neighbouring ones to welcome New Year with the neighbours. On such occasion, they perform traditional dances and wish the host a prosperous New Year and good luck. This is also known as Toak Soo in the Shan Language. It usually starts a few weeks or a month prior to the New Year's Day; and these carol visits form part of fund raising activity, which goes on until the New Year's Day.

Back home, we love going on Toak Soo; it is a very sociable, fun and joyous occasion for both young and old. The host receive the Toak Soo groups very gladly, show gratitude by treating with nice food and donating money. People would even ask when Toak Soo groups would visit them if they haven't been visited by one. But some time the Toak Soo group just makes a surprise visit! Ka Pan Gong is one of the features of the carol visit. It is a very simple communal dance which everybody can join in and dance around the band. There are only three steps, forwards two steps and back one step in rhythm with the drum.

### Kinnari and Kinnara Dance

Kainari and Kainara are female and male mythical birds, believed to have existed in the Himalayan Mountains.

This dance originally was a feature dance for the Buddhist *awk-phansa* or *awk-waa* occasion, which marks the end of the three-month Rains-Retreat.

We all know that Theravada Buddhism believes the Lord Buddha spent his seventh Rains-Retreat in the Tawatimsa or Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods, preaching the Abidhamma (psychological aspect of Buddhist moral teaching) to the heavenly beings, most noticeably his former mother who was now in heaven.

When he completed his teaching, he came back down to the earth and landed at a city in India called Sankassa-nagara (the city of Sankassa). The legend has it that it was at mid-night when Buddha landed on the earth and people came to know it so suddenly that they could only make a temporary hut to welcome the Lord Buddha. So, during the end of *phansa* or *wasa*, the three-month retreat, the Shan build a temporary shelter; it is called *kiang-tarng-boot*; that is to remember the Buddha's descent from heaven.

Welcoming the Buddha on his return to earth were human beings as well as animals and gods. Among those animals were believed to be these mythical birds, Kinnari and Kinnara dancing and rejoicing in the Buddha's home-coming back to the earth from Tavatimsa Heaven.

## SCA\_UK's 2008 Events

Date	Events
22 March	Sai Htee Seng's Memorial Services (Oxford)
20 April	Songkran (Water Festival) at OBV (Oxford)
08 June	Thailand Festival and Local Supplier Market (Dorking)
27 July	Thailand Festival (Battersea Park, London)
09 August	Thai @ Zero Longitude (Greenwich, London)
24 August	Live Thailand (Hampshire)
November	Kathina (Robe Offering) Ceremony at OBV (Oxford)
30 November	The 2103rd Shan New Year Celebration at SOAS (London)