



Happy Pi Mai Tai

Under the misty and foggy winter sky,
In the Shanland known to her inhabitants as Mong Tai
Cherries blossom all over to welcome Pi Mai.
The New Year that culturally unites

And consciously occupies all souls here and elsewhere
Far and near, young and old, one and all Tai to excite.
And with warmest wishes, "Pi Mai" is how we greet one another.

Sao Su Kham

Team of SCA-UK Newsletter vol. 5

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SCA-UK

Shan Cultural Association in the United Kingdom

NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 5

Happy Shan/Tai New Year 2104



SCA-UK's Aims and Objectives

- To maintain and preserve Shan culture and history.
- To promote Shan culture and public knowledge on any aspects of Shan nationalities and nationalities of Shan states.
- To serve as the community hub and to promote general welfare of Shan and people of Shan states currently living in the UK.
- To show case Shan cultural materials (such as traditional dance, music and food) by hosting and participating in cultural events within the UK.
- To share Shan culture with non-Shan who empathy with our organisation's aim to promote Shan culture and preserve Shan history.

Cover photos:

- Front: Dr Sai Kham Leik, a modern Shan and Burmese song composer, who turned 60th birthday in early 2009.
- Back: Sai Hti Seng, a modern Shan and Burmese singer, whose songs mostly composed by Sai Kham Leik. Sai Hti Seng passed away in early 2008 at the age of 58.

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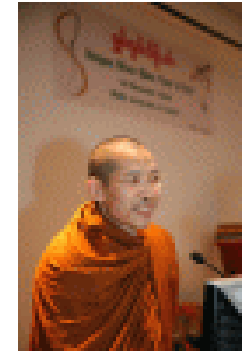
New Year Message

From Ven. Dr Khammai Dhammasami, the Chairman of SCA-UK

The people in the Tenasserim coastal areas and Karen State of the Union of Burma, who live near the Thai border, refer to Thailand as *Shan Pyi* i.e the country of the Shan. What they actually mean is the country of Siam. But they pronounce Siam as Shan. The people in those areas have little connection with the people in Shan State because of the geographical distance. But they trade across the border with Thai people. Despite being known either as Siam (Siamese) and Shan to the outsiders, the Thai always call themselves as Thai and their homeland as *Muang Thai*, " Thai Country/ Thailand".

The Tai people of Shan State of the Union of Burma, also, do not call themselves Shan when speaking in their mother tongue. Instead, they call themselves Tai/ Dai. When presenting themselves as Shan they feel they cannot relate to their cousin elsewhere, namely in Thailand, Lao, India or China. While Thailand used to refer to herself with a classical name Siam, the Shan State has always called herself *Muang Tai*. It was the British who began calling *Muang Tai* as "Shan States", (in plural form because there were many states ruled by different *chao-fas*), a direct translation from Burmese *Shan Pyi*.

The word *pi mai* (ปีใหม่) New Year" is Tai in origin and is understood up to today by the Dai people in China, Tai Ahom in Assam, India, Thai people in Thailand, Laotian in Lao and Shan people in the Shan State. It is a vocabulary that is still commonly understood; and perhaps this is also an important indicator of their common heritage. However, we all know that since the great migration from what is now China in the 7th century AD, not only that the different branches of the Tai family came to be known with



various names, but they have also come under the influence of different cultures. Today, in Thailand, for instance, *pi mai* is celebrated twice.

The first one is on 1st January in line with any country in the world using the Anno Domini (AD)

or Anno Domini Nostri Jesu Christi ("in the year of our Lord Jesus Christ") in full or Gregorian calendar. The other one is on 13th April together with the people in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia and Lao who use ancient Indian calendar. April 13th is calculated according to the Indian Saka calendar and the first day i.e 14th April is called *yugâdi*, "the start of an era".

The Thai people call 1st January as *pi mai saakorn* (ปีใหม่สากล), "common New Year", while the April New Year is called *Songkran* (สงกรานต์).

Songkran comes from Sanskrit word *sankranti* (मकर संक्रान्ति), meaning commencement of a year. *Songkran* is also referred to as *pi mai Thai*, or Thai New Year. However, both 1st January and 13th April New Year days are imported from other cultures. Here, it is interesting to note that *Songkran* is celebrated not just by the Thai but also by all other Tai family branches ie. Dai in Sipsongbanna, Shan in the Shan State, Tai Ahom in Assam, Tai Khamti in Arunachal Pradesh, Thai in Thailand, Laotian in Lao. And, *Sankranti* is pronounced in Burmese as *thinkyan* (from the same root), and the Shan borrow from the Burmese and

pronounce it as *saankyan*.

The learned Thai know that the actual *Pi Mai* (ปี๋, ปี๋, /ปี๋) of the Thai should begin on the first day of the first month, which, according to the Tai calendar, falls either towards the end of November or early December. January is the second month and April is the fifth, not the first, in the Tai calendar. We all know that Vesak/ Wisakha Buddhist celebration falls on the sixth month of the Tai calendar or in May in the Gregorian calendar.

When the revival of the Tai culture began a few decades earlier, the promotion of this Tai calendar and in particular the *Pi Mai Tai* (ปี๋, ปี๋), or Tai New Year was given a top priority, because it is believed that this Tai calendar was created by the Tai some two millennium years ago while they had their main administrative centre at a place called Muang Loong and Muang Pa (i.e. the country of Uncle and Aunty), thought to be in modern Southern China. This Tai calendar, which has sixty days a month, came into being before the Tai family was divided into Thai/ Siam, Lao, Shan or Ahom and came under the influence of Indian culture.

In recent years, the common identity, Tai-ness, has begun to be celebrated by some scholars. The conferences held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in Yunnan, China and also in Guhati, Assam, India used the term Tai and explored more than one group of the Tai family. But conferences organized

at SOAS, University of London in 2007 and the one held in October at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand used the term Shan and thus limit the scope of the dialogue and scholastic investigation to the Tai people of Shan state only.

Since last year, the Shan Cultural Association _UK has reached out to their Tai cousins i.e. the Thai and Lao communities in the United Kingdom to join the *Pi Mai* celebrations. This has been made possible by the spirit powerfully symbolized in the Tai calendar. Together, let us now welcome the 2104th *Pi Mai Tai* New Year, which is calculated according to the Tai calendar.

Sawadee Pi Mai Tai! สวัสดีปีใหม่ไท

Mai Soong Pi Mai Tai!

Happy New Year!

May this *Pi Mai* 2104th bring us all good health, good crops, good business, peace and safety! May the blessings of the Buddha be upon us all!

Venerable Dr. Khammai Dhammasami

DPhil (Oxford)

Chairman, Shan Cultural Association _ UK
&

Research Fellow, Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, University of Oxford, UK



News Around The World

Overseas Shan/Tai communities' cultural activities

Singapore

Singapore Shan/Tai youths were invited by the President of Bukit Batok Community Club to join force with local communities in celebrating the 44th Singapore National Day and Variety Show 2009 which was held island wide in August 2009. On 1 August 2009 along with arts Performers from different backgrounds Singapore Shan Youths were proudly presented their unique traditional dance which indeed mesmerised the audiences. Live Performance video clip can be enjoyed on www.shannewyear.com.



California

California Shan/Tai Social & Cultural Society was founded in March 2008 and is a social, cultural and charity society dedicating to preserving and promoting Shan Social and Cultural heritage. Since its inception in 2008, California Shan Social & Cultural Society has organised Shan/Tai New Year Celebrations and engaging in fund-raising events organized by local community.



International Conference on Shan Studies

Held for the first time at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

Reported by Jotika Khur-yearn

The International Conference on Shan Studies was held on 15-17 October 2009 at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. The conference attracted by great number of scholars and people interested in Shan Studies from different parts of the world.

Professor Sumitr Pitiphat addressed, in his keynote speech, that North Vietnam is

Architecture and Royal Palaces, Administration System, Religions and Beliefs, Art, Myth, and Buddhism, Scripts and Texts, Wisdom and Local Knowledge, and Literature and Music. Of the 41 papers, six of them will be published in the Asian Review Journal (Special Issue about Shan Studies) while the rest will be published as the proceedings. The six papers to be published as a 'special issue on Shan Studies' are: 1.

Flow of Food-Route of Taste: The Social Space of the Shan Ethnic Group in Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2. Lanna-Shan State Relations: Love Ties between two cities, 3. The Preservation and continuation of Lik-luong among the Shan (Tai Yai) Communities of Northern Thailand, 4. Quy CHAU Tai Script compared to Shan and standard Thai, 5. Shan Book Printing in Thailand, and 6. Somdej Phra Naresuan and Sao Kham Kai Noi: The Shan connection.

The performing arts include Shan traditional dances, folk songs as well as modern music. The performance of Kinnari and Kinnara bird dances and tuoe (yak) dance as well girl group dance were also performed at the interval of the conference panels.

Remarkably, the exhibition was an excellent showcase and perhaps it is the trademark of the conference; the displays at the exhibition include Shan/Tai traditional food, medicines, costumes, photos of ancient Tai commerce on ox caravans, twelve months festivals of Tai or Shan people including Tai New Year and New Rice Festival.

In brief, it was a successful event and a milestone for Shan studies.



most possibly the origin of Tai people. He gave the bronze drum as evidence of early Tai culture in Vietnam and Southern China. He also points out some remarkable knowledge and wisdom found in the long history of the Tai civilization, including the expertise of irrigation, agriculture and wet rice cultivation is found Tai; cloth wearing with style has been part of Tai culture since the time of immemorial. It is not wonder that same style of weaving are found among different group of Tai people.

The conference activities were divided into three parts: academic panels, performing arts and exhibition. Forty-one academic papers were present under nine panels: Shan in Thailand, Shan Communities,

SCA-UK News in Pictures



At the Amazing Thailand Festival, Milford, August 2009



SCA-UK members and a Shan senior (right) at cultural activities in Oxford 2009



At the UK Buddhist festivals, Gildford, September 2009

The Arts of the Supernatural

Dr Susan Conway (SOAS)

One of the most original forms of art and craft in inland Southeast Asia involves the relatively unknown field of the supernatural. The portrayal of the gods and goddesses of the universe and human and animal spirits demonstrates a unique form of expression. This is complemented by the portrayal of the Buddha and his disciples surrounded by guardian spirits. In abstract form, indigenous scripts and numbers are set in complex diagrams created as mystical life-prolonging formulae. They are referred to as *ang*, *an*, *in*, *yan* or *yantra*.



Example of Shan/Tai magical arts

come alive and transform to full size. In villages along the Shan-Thai border their use is remembered within living memory. They were made from moulded and gilded lacquer.

When hunters captured a particularly rare or ferocious wild animal in the forest, they kept the horns, teeth and skin believing that the characteristics of the animal could be

transferred to them. Etching an image of a tiger on to a small piece of real tiger skin and tucking it into a turban or loin cloth could make the wearer as fearless as the animal. Depictions of crouching tigers are enduring images in old manuscripts and the tiger remains a popular tattoo symbol, particularly among soldiers.

From early beginnings based on indigenous spirit beliefs, mystical formulae developed to incorporate Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, Chinese and Tibetan astrology and Hindu cosmology. These ideas form the basis of a complex faith system involving monks, shaman and lay experts. The lecture will briefly discuss some current practices concerned with healing.

The history of supernatural imagery can be traced back to the earliest cave settlements in the Bronze to Iron Age period (900-600BC). Small stone animal carvings up to five centimetres in length were made for protection. By rubbing the surface while uttering a magic spell (*gatha*) the tiny animal would magically

the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom (ASEASUK).

For centuries the tradition of sponsoring manuscripts has been an important custom among the Shan. The texts focus on Theravada Buddhist ritual practices, romantic and heroic literature, poetry and historical chronicles. This project focused on Shan literary and ritual culture across the Burma-Thai border. The researchers were interested in how *lik*

luong, material has been preserved and whether the education of the recitation specialists (*tsale*), is continuing. Since very little work has

been done to document the range of *lik luong*, the researchers concentrated on Shan temples from different regions. The first temple, Wat Tiyasathan, is near the city of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. It was established by Shan traders a hundred years ago in the village of Mae Taeng. This temple has one of the richest collections of Shan *lik luong*. The second and third temples were in Maehongson province, close to the Burmese border.



Wat Pang Mu is outside of the city of Maehongson. It is a relatively wealthy temple with a long established Shan community. This temple has a well-preserved collection of around one

thousand manuscripts of *lik luong*. The other Shan temple in Maehongson is Wat Jong Klang. It is in the centre of the city by a small lake. Wat Jong Klang is a fairly prosperous temple and is one of the main

tourist attractions in the town. The temple is particularly beautiful and has its own well-arranged museum.

Although the catalogues are still being processed, we can confirm that there is a vast collection of *lik luong* literature. At Wat Tiyasathan, out of three hundred manuscripts, only two contained duplicate texts. The variety of texts, the lengthy introductions about the sponsors and the recitation specialists (*tsale*) connected with each copy makes them key to further understanding of the history and development of Shan literary and ritual practices.



encompasses the *Vessantara-Jataka*, the story of Prince Vessantara who gives away everything he owns, including his wife and children, thereby displaying the virtue of perfect [charity](#). The work also includes parts of the *Tipitaka* (Pali canon), including *Pa-rami* (the culmination of virtue) and *Ub-hassa, Lokavutti, Suttanta* (discourses of the Buddha), *Abhidhamma* (philosophy) and *Pathama Malai, Phra Malai Kao* which is described here.

The first section of the Phra Malai text describes his visits to hell. Phra Malai witnesses human torture as punishment for past actions. He asks the caretaker of hell the reasons why the people are being tortured and is told the types of sins they committed on earth. Those who are suffering ask for his help from the living. Phra Malai returns to the world of humans and narrates what he has seen. He implores the people not to commit bad deeds but to perform meritorious actions. They should listen to the teachings of the Buddha in order to transfer merit to their relatives to help them escape from the tortures of hell.

In the eighth section of the story *Dutiya Malai, Phra Malai Pai*, Phra Malai visits the heavens and returns to earth to describe what he has seen. This text is intended as a way of educating people in the performance of meritorious deeds and informing them of the benefits.

The 25th section of the story lists the benefits of sponsoring and listening to reading of the *Th. VJ*, and the *Anisong Vesan*,

recited the day before the *Th. VJ*. It also states the benefits of sponsoring the reading with emphasis on the individual benefits gained from each section of the story. The 26th section is *Vipak Vesan*, a text describing bad actions in previous lives and their consequences. This text has become popular and is also recited a day before the *Th. VJ*.

As the recitation rituals have become more and more elaborate, they also become increasingly expensive to sponsor. This explains why emphasis in the later sections is placed on the benefits of sponsoring individual chapters rather than a whole reading. This indicates that these sections were added at a later date as a way of attracting much needed sponsorship. As the *Th. VJ* now has so many sections, donors might assume with good reason that they have sponsored the whole Tipitaka.

4. Jotika Khur-Yearn (SOAS) and Kate Crosby (SOAS).

TITLE: Preservation and Continuation of Shan Poetic Literature Among Shan Communities of Thai-Burma Borders

In the summer of 2009, a SOAS based research group carried out fieldwork to analyse a set of Shan manuscripts (*lik-luong*). This research project was led by Dr Kate Crosby, senior lecturer in Pali and Buddhist studies (SOAS), and was funded

People believed in the force of the planets, stars and constellations in shaping their destiny. Practising astrologers in the region use the Chinese twelve-year animal cycle. Each year has a designated planet, a god or goddess, a base element of earth, fire, water, iron, wood or gold, and an auspicious plant. The year a person is born, and their birth day of the week establishes their position in the twelve year cycle.

In terms of universal protection the presiding deity of the heavens is the god Indra who controls the guardians of the world and their attendants. The underworld is protected by water serpents, known as *naga*. Eight celestial bodies are responsible for human fortune, the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn and Rahu god of the eclipse. Because the moon is easily visible and changes its appearance each day, it provides a simple calendar for setting religious rituals. The day of each

new moon and half moon, the day before each full moon and the day of the full moon are auspicious and on the night of a full moon nature is believed to be charged with beneficial power.

The lecture will focus particularly on the supernatural as expressed in arts and crafts of the Shan and their neighbours the Tai Yuan of Lan Na. It will include diagrams and illustrations from rare manuscripts in museum collections and examples from note books still in use today. There will be examples of painted and printed ritual canopies and wall hangings, protective vests and jackets and skin tattoos.

[An abstract of Dr Susan Conway's lecture, The Arts of the Supernatural, to be present at the Shan New Year event at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, 21 November 2009]



Shan Tattoos: Insights into ink and body art

Colin 'Naw Liang' Savage

(<http://all-about-shan.blogspot.com>)

Shan tattoos: a brief introduction

Tattoos (visible, invisible, cartoon, artistic, sentimental, tribal, ethnic, all or none) have skyrocketed in popularity over the last few decades, and they are now a fixture in the public eye through pop culture (mostly music and fashion) and peer promotion. Interestingly, the tattoo boom is not unique to the usual, rebellious or merely fashion-conscious, peer-pressured youth culture in London, New York or Los Angeles (where tattoos may be called tattoos, tats, ink or body art), in Tokyo (called 入墨 or *irezumi*), in Beijing (纹身 or *wénshēn*) or elsewhere, but they are starting to show up in growing numbers of young and not-so-young people in more (perceived) conservative societies worldwide, including India, the Middle East and, most pertinent to this site, Burma and the Shan State. Tattoos are sprouting up and gracing places and people like never before. These are interesting body art times.

However, despite the spread of tattooing and the apparent lax reaction to its growth in more conservative locales,

Burma and the Shan State have bucked this blanket acceptance of tattoos, particularly of celebrities, musicians and other popular figures, by mounted a *pseudo* crackdown recently; most vividly, [the arrest of a popular musician G-Tone in November 2007](#), illustrates the official attitude to ink. Although a shame, it is more disturbingly a clear cultural contradiction. After all, tattoos have a long (albeit confusing) history in South East Asia, particularly in the Shan State.



Despite their confusing significance, tattoos can symbolise either an evil deed (such as incarceration) or the pursuit of enlightenment through the *sangha* (such as joining monkhood). However, Shan tattoos were and (largely) remain reserved to symbolise a rite of passage for boys or spiritual or religious vigour of men, marking a man's merits and beliefs. It is the rite of passage and the spiritual conviction types of tattoos that I will discuss in this post, while further discussion on prison and gang tattoos and branding in South East Asia will be discussed at a later date.

Regardless of their moralistic value (largely applied by the individual), the roots behind tattooing are spiritual, such as for animist superstitions, based on a belief

apparent tension between global Buddhism with a universalistic vision, and national Buddhism with ethnic and nationalistic tendencies.

The Tai Khun have an ethno-political identity as Shan, and an ethno-religious identity as Theravada Buddhists. Their religious culture, language and script are closely connected with neighboring Lan Na (northern Thailand) and with northern Laos and Sipsongbanna, Southwest China. This paper focused on Tai Khun forms of monastic architecture, temple mural paintings and sculpture and the relationship with Lan Na, Laos and Sipsong Pan Na. The way religion is expressed in the visual culture of the people demonstrates its role as a marker of ethnicity. It proves that local cultural customs, linked to ethnic identity, are incorporated within Theravada Buddhist tradition.

2. Susan Conway, Department of Languages and Cultures, SOAS

TITLE: Astrology, Mathematics and Selected Scripts: Interpretations of Power and Protection through Shan Material Culture

The majority population of the eastern Shan States are Tai Theravada Buddhists who retain elements from earlier faith systems. Today mystical formulae are produced by monks and lay experts (shaman and healers), who consult texts on a range of topics including indigenous spirit religion (animism) rites, Chinese astrology, cosmologies associated with Hinduism, and Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. The aim is

to create formulae for positive power and to protect against negative power.

Cabalistic forms of script and numbers set within grids were invented by the Chinese and were intended initially as a diagrammatic representation of man, society, and culture situated in universal harmony with the natural world. Formulae were developed to channel the positive power of nature and protect against negative power, a system adopted by other societies and modified to suit their individual belief systems. In the Shan States these formulae developed as scripts, numbers, cabalistic diagrams and illustrations. The scripts are based on indigenous languages, Pali, Burmese, Khmer and Central Thai. The numbers are calculations of cosmological force or powerful symbols estimated according to Theravada Buddhist lore. Diagrams of Universal harmony are based on Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies. Images of the Buddha and his disciples, guardian spirits, characters from local mythology and representations of mythical animals are represented. These formulae are an important part of a faith system that incorporates a unique Shan world view.

3. Ven. Sengpan Pannyavamsa, Post-graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies (University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka)

TITLE: Primary findings of the *Tham Vessantara-Jataka*, in Kengtung, Eastern Shan State, Myanmar

This paper presents primary findings in research on the *Tham Vessantara-Jataka* (*Th. VJ*), concerning the previous births of the *Buddha*. *Tham*, derived from the word "*Dhamma*" means the teaching of the Buddha. The focus here is on twenty-six parts of the story. In the eastern Shan State city of Keng Tung the story has developed in a unique form. The *Th. VJ*

ASEASUK CONFERENCE, SWANSEA UNIVERSITY, SEPTEMBER 2009, Panel Report

Panel Title: Theravada Buddhism and Culture of the Tai of the Shan States and South-west China

Convenor: Susan Conway (SOAS)

It was particularly appropriate that this year's conference should include a panel on the religion and culture of the Shan. Newspapers and web sites throughout the world report what is happening to the Shan and other ethnic minorities in Burma (Myanmar)

who in total make up over 40 per cent of the population. In the last few years thousands of Shan refugees have poured over the border into Thailand. More re-

cently, according to the Financial Times (September 25th 2009), 37,000 people have fled from Mong La into China.

This panel focused on Shan culture as manifested in Theravada Buddhist ritual practices, spirit rites, arts and crafts, language, scripts and poetry. This is part of an ongoing programme supported by the British Academy to support the documentation of Shan material culture in today's difficult

environment. The panel was honoured by the presence of Abbot Venerable Kham-mai Dhammasami PhD, from the Buddhist monastery in Oxford, spiritual leader of the people of Burma, Thailand and Shan State living in the UK. The participants welcomed his contribution and comments during the discussions.



Myanmar

The session began with a paper highlighting the ethnic-religious identity of the Tai Khoen (Khun) group of Shan from the Eastern Shan states. While Buddhism is considered to be a global, transnational and universally accessible movement, it contains many different national *sangha* groups who are under a number of national governments. This leads to an

1. Clemens Karlsson,
Anna Lindh Library, Swedish National Defence College and the Swedish Institute of International Affairs

TITLE: Buddhist Banners, Elephants and Horses: Ethnic-Religious Identity in the Eastern Shan State of

that ink and body art can protect the body from evil (of course, this ignores the practice of tattoos symbolising previous evil acts.

This association between ink and body art belief deeply links fundamental Buddhist teachings with three core planes of ancient tribal tattooing – these are *pain*, *permanence* and the *blood* (life force) – which mimic a monk's self-deprivation, devotion and discipline, the powerful three-pronged attack that guides Buddhists in their quest for enlightenment. Additionally, much more than the fashion accessory that some tattoos have become in assorted societies worldwide, tattoos, in this sense, depart from art and gravitate to symbolise an act by dedicated followers to truly bond with their gods, obtain magical powers and, through deep meditation, achieve inner peace.

Shan tattoos: a brief history and explanation

Without digging up the complete history of tattoos – did they originate in Polynesia or ancient China or elsewhere? It is the Shan who are credited with not only importing, but mastering the practice of tattooing in Burma, producing tattoos to ward off evil

spirits (animistic), those that recognised devotion to Buddhism (spiritual) or those that symbolise a boy's journey into manhood.

Of these three types, Shan tattoos (to date) have predominately been used to immortalise a rite of passage for a boy as he becomes a man; they are signs of maturity and virility. The act involved young Shan men who were (and, to a lesser extent, still are) tattooed from the waist to knees by the village medicine man. The act took several weeks and was quite painful: indigo ink or vermillion would be injected under the skin by using



a long, often heavy skewer to inscript the tattoo(s), which would be repeated over the period of a few weeks, eventually producing (after several sessions and regular rubbing) a black, then bluish tattoo. The designs mainly consist of animals, the Zodiac and almost invariably include geometric Buddhist patterns (circles, dials, triangles and other). Although often given opium to numb the pain, boys would suffer from the sessions for hours on end, only to have further painful massage sessions to help the ink set. The process was excruciating and lengthy, and it carried a long list of risks, from infections to, in the worst cases, death.

The tattoos: designs and their meanings

A significant aspect of Shan tattoos (and others throughout South East Asia) is the influence of Buddhism on designs and their placement. When choosing a tattoo and where to inscribe it, the village medicine man divides the body into twelve parts, though eight of these predominate: the back, the head and the arms (where illustrations of gods, figures and other sacred mantras, usually in Shan script, are tattooed); and the ears, throat and shoulders (where animals and creatures are reproduced). Additionally, tattoos can be strategically placed, such as those on the chest (popular for soldiers as this is seen as a talisman to protect against bullets) or on other areas in need of protection, such as ankles (to protect against snake bites). Finally, specific designs are often used to symbolise sexual power or stamina (geckos and peacocks); I will let your imagination determine where these might be placed.

[Note: Other methods are also used by the Shan as methods to ward off bad luck or to bring protection. One significant act entails inserting silver or gold discs under the skin to act as a charm, often for those set to go into battle. There is little information available online on this practice, and any suggestions or insights would be appreciated.]

Shan tattoos: a recap

As mentioned above, tattoos are a crucial part of Shan culture, particularly for men, as they are known largely for their spiritual power – they are thought to bring the bearer prosperity; conquer evil spirits; extend one's life; and even protect against gunshots, knives and other weapons. A tattoo in these circumstances and with this mindset is much more than body art: it is a life force.

The 'power' that emanates from Shan tattoos is believed to come from a variety of sources, including the tattoo image; the method by which the tattoo is produced; the tattooist (often called spirit doctor) and the spell that he delivers by blowing on the tattoo and the Shan characters or script, which many believe cannot be read by spirits. However, even during such a spiritually-charged event, a fundamental measurement of the tattoo's power is the money invested, with the most expensive and difficult tattoos always bringing greater honour, power, position, protection and wisdom.

The professional - the tattooist

The tattooist (or *spirit doctor*) was traditionally, though less so in modern times, a travelling herbal medicine man who visited outlying villages during the cool season, usually lodging at monasteries. Spirit doctors chose this time for tattooing especially: the cool season, while traditionally a down-time with little work for the men, providing the ideal

female *tsale* in the Maehongson area) was mostly making her living from manual farm work before joining us on the project.

For us there was an immediate short-term advantage in the amount of under-employed *tsale* expertise in Maehongson. We found ourselves short-staffed with two of our Shan-reading team members unable to join the project at the last moment. Local *tsale* including Tsale Saw and Tsale Pa Mule were able to join the project, and – being on site for far longer than us – were able to conduct interviews of a further 60 *tsale*. We are now in the process of compiling the cataloguing and interview data from the Thai-side of the border.

We have not yet completed our investigations of the collection and *tsale* culture of Lashio, an area active in the conscious preservation of Shan traditions. However, we would like to note one sorry outcome of the sharp division currently made between Shan and Burman culture. Since the 16th century Shan culture was much influenced by Burman, with the effect that Theravada sacred texts in Pali, are preserved in Burmese script even in the Shan context. If we look closely at a *lik luong* insert picture we can see that Pali terms are written in Burmese script while Shan terms in Shan script surround them. There was no Shan script for Pali, since Pali has more consonants, until a recent invention of extra letters for this purpose in 2003, a conscious decision to be able to use Shan in preference to Burmese script. Many of the most beautiful *lik luong* texts draw inspiration and enjoy the poetic variation of Burmese texts and terms. Where we see traditionally developed *lik luong* collections, such as those at Wat Pang Mu, Jong Klang and Phanon, we see that alongside the *lik luong* there



are Burmese script paper and palm leaf manuscripts containing Pali ritual texts, used by all monks whether Shan or Burmese, and also canonical and commentarial texts used as the inspiration for much Shan Buddhist literature. In Wat Tiyasathan the collection is, we could say, artificial, in that it preserves the *lik luong* only in isolation from the Burmese neighbours because of the lack of the current recognition of their integral closeness and the necessity, then, of making extra efforts to preserve the Shan material. Previously the Shan were also then one of the groups who took care to ensure the continuation of both Shan and Burmese culture. It would be interesting to know if the Shan community of areas

where the Cambodian script was hegemonic for Pali, such as Pailin, similarly preserved their *lik luong* alongside Cambodian script manuscripts.

Finally, while the catalogues are still being processed, we can already confirm that there is a vast variety of *lik luong* literature. In the collection of Wat Tiyasathan, out of three hundred manuscripts, only two contained a duplicate text. Now Shan literature has been very little studied, and its Buddhist tradition remains little known. The variety of texts as well as the lengthy introductions about the sponsors and *tsales* connected with each copy indicates that these collections are of great interest for an understanding the history of the Shan and of Theravada Buddhism.



for this is that Wat Phanon is not as central, and so not on the tourist trail. Another reason, however, is that its congregation is made up not of the Thai-born Shan, but of immigrants coming in from Shan State over the Burmese border. This congregation does not have the same financial resources as established Thai citizens do.

Conclusion

An interesting aspect of this study is that we found that almost all the monks officiating at the Thai-side temples in our study are Shan born – in fact it was commonly observed that central and northern Thais, as well as Thai-born Shan boys were unlikely to take on longer-term ordination because of other opportunities available to them. In fact, the recent (2005) purge of Shan-born monks without valid immigration documents by the Thai police, threatened to leave some temples short of the necessary numbers

of monks to service the local community and was one factor in the abandonment of that policy. However, the congregations at these temples vary – from very few Shan at Wat Tiyasatthan, a mixed congregation with a significant number of Thai-born Shan at Wat Jong Klang, a well established Thai-born Shan congregation at Wat Bang Mu and an immigrant Shan congregation at Wat Phanon. The *tsale* were also almost entirely Shan-State born. However, the preservation of *lik luong* at the temple does not appear to depend on the ethnicity of the congregation. Rather it depends on the will and ethnicity of the head monk and the stability of support. For the actual performance of *lik luong* a strong, centralised Shan community is required. We note that the scattered Shan of



Chiang Mai, and floating populations of Wat Tiyasatthan are insufficient to support a thriving *lik luong* tradition. At one temple, at Huoi Surthao, which is an ethnic Padaung (long-necks) village, the Shan temple manages to preserve the performance of *lik luong* by inviting Shan seniors from other villages, having no Shan seniors to come as temple sleepers in their own village.

Interestingly, while many of the *tsale* had come to Thailand in order to make a better living in wealthier Chiang Mai and Maehongson provinces, they noted from their visits to Shan State that the listening to *lik luong* was surviving better in Shan State on the Burmese side of the border, even while the manuscripts there remain under threat of Burman army activity. Some of the Shan state informants we interviewed expressed concern for the safety of their collections.

As a result of the precarious nature of *lik luong* recitation activity on the Thai side, in contrast to the relative safety of the physical preservation of the texts, many *tsale* in Thailand have to make a living from activity other than recitation. All the male *tsale* in our initial interviews observed that they can make a far better living from magical empowerments and astrology, a skill that non-Shan also seek from Shan, than from *lik luong* recitation, a Shan-specific activity. In fact, Tsale Auto, whose fame as a *tsale* brings him invitations to perform all over northern Thailand and Shan State, has virtually given up performing, now working almost full time as a *sara*, an astrologer and provider of magical empowerment. The one female *tsale* we interviewed early on in the project, Tsale Pa Mule (one of at least five

opportunity for spiritual pursuits, including tattoos. Furthermore, the cool season was often a time for reflection by many villagers with the temple at the heart of this activity.

The place - the mandate

Although variations exist between the type of structure, the place (within the local Buddhist temple or monastery grounds) where men were tattooed was always the same: a *mandat* (special structure only erected in the temple grounds) would be set up in an auspicious corner of the monastery, followed by the recitation of sutras and a blessing of the ground with sacred water. The *mandat*, despite style and size, always follow the same basic structure and are built in the same regimented way. Following the site selection and ritual blessing, the spirit doctor and any assistants would lay down a thick layer of clean and well-watered sand before erecting the cloth roof (which is always fringed with illustrations of the eight planets) and walls, which are constructed from blankets and fenced off by slats of woven bamboo. Next, the fresh and watered sand floor would be covered with banana leaves, mostly to produce a pleasant aroma, before being covered with a blanket. The *mandat* is then decorated with important articles, including: an image of the Buddha; a range of different pots of ink; a surgery-like layout of tattooing needles; any number of vases with fresh flowers;

and, finally, a bowl of sandal wood paste. One of the most interesting aspects of the construction of the *mandat* is a rope, which is tied inside the structure to act as a clothesline for the tattooed man's waist-cloth: this rope is thought to be made traditionally by eight girls who weave threads together to produce the rope. Although unable to find out more, this is an interesting concept as it would represent the only truly female aspect in the entire tattooing process. Structurally, the *mandat* had a unique dual exit layout, which was central to the process: an exit on the right was solely for those wanting small tattoos, while the exit on the left was for those seeking fuller, more serious designs.

The tool – the needle

The traditional tattooing tools have three interlocking parts: the head (the heaviest part) that usually resembles a *nat* (Burmese: spirit) or sacred animal; the middle section (hollow and holding the black or red ink) that makes up the largest part of the tool; and the tip (the 'needle' – narrow at both ends and flared in the middle), which may vary in size, but is usually the smallest component of the tool. When completely assembled, the entire tool, which is traditionally made from bronze but can be steel, aluminium or even bamboo (except for the needle), average lengths of 30-37cm (12-15 inches). The tool being used in the

photos (right) is longer than most, but not exceedingly. During fieldwork, various sizes were visible, the shortest approximately 25cm (10 inches) and the longest nearing 60cm (24 inches). Although my research is incomplete, discussions with some spirit doctors revealed that longer needles allowed for better control and, as a result, more intricate tattoos.



The medium – the ink

The ink (𑄓) is made from the soot of crude, peanut or sesame oil and lard that is collected from lamps and mixed with dried fish gall bladder before being tied up in a cloth to ‘ferment’. The soot is then mixed with a handful of leaves of boiled, bitter gourd in a large pot and boiled again. Next, the soot is removed and dried. In the final stage and just before use, the dried soot is mixed with boiled water or pure oil to form a thick paste. The ink is now ready for use, though some minor alterations, including mixing in lime juice and special herbs, can also be undertaken before the ink is applied in the tattooing process.

Traditionally, black ink was the only colour used for tattooing. Although my information is conflicting, the vast majority of tattoos are still produced in black ink only. However, I have heard that tattoos are increasingly using two colours: black ink, which is used for astrological drawings, red ink,

which is used for religious purposes. If a red tattoo or red ink is selected, the spirit doctors will offer the *nat* coconuts, bananas and rice.

The task – tattooing

Now, the recipient of the tattoo enters the *mandat* (via the appropriate door), meets the spirit doctor and selects a tattoo. Although some friends and family are allowed to gather nearby to listen to the process, no one is allowed into the *mandat* to watch, however, it is common for a young assistant to work with the spirit doctor, ferrying messages back and forth about the process’ progress to family and friends.

‡ The only ones allowed to witness the tattooing were four close friends selected to hold the recipient of the tattoo down if required.

There is a hierarchy to the tattooing process that resembles the intent (minor or serious) of those wanting to be tattooed. Anyone who enters the *mandat* from the right entrance is usually tattooed by the lead tattooist initially (he will complete the main sections and outlines only), while the remainder (filling in or secondary design) will be completed by his understudy or

an extremely well-preserved collection of around 1,000 *lik luong*.

The other Shan temple in Maehongson on our original list is Wat Jong Klang. Wat Jong Klang is one of the two central temples of Maehongson, next to the lake in the heart of the town. Interestingly, its very existence is down to the specifically Shan practice of temple sleeping, since it was built on what was originally the site of the temple-sleepers’ quarters for the neighbouring temple. Wat Jong Klang is actually a fairly well-off temple since it is one of the main tourist attractions of Maehongson. The temple is particularly beautiful and has its own well-arranged museum where the *lik luong* are also stored. Nevertheless, the Shan heritage of this temple was under threat during the early 20th century. The abbot of that time returned from education in Burma, hoping to inspire Shan/Burmese learning at this temple, only to find that non-central Thai preaching and education were being suppressed in the Thai government’s centralisation program designed to create a strong, unified Thai state in the face of

European colonialism. This policy forbade the preaching of monks to lay people in anything other than Bangkok Thai. The stringency with which this policy was applied varied from region to region, depending to some extent on the character of the provincial head monk and governor. The provincial head governor of Maehongson was determined to ensure the policy was followed, and this caused a crisis at the temple, with lay people not able to receive teaching in a language they knew and monks unable to preach. This of course then also threatened to break down the traditional relationship of support between the temple and lay community. Fortunately, a devotee of the head



friend of the provincial head governor and persuaded a compromise: that young monks would learn Bangkok Thai while senior monks would continue to preach in their mother tongue. This policy of imposing Bangkok Thai has gradually diminished since the end of the cold war, with greater support and appreciation of ethnic variety over the past decade or so.

While there appears not to be much *lik luong* recitation at Wat Jong Klang, with more performance being found in nearby villages, the temple library has a collection including some very rare texts, some of which may date back to Sri Lankan activity in the area (15th C). However, the cases in which the *lik luong* are preserved had been sealed, only to be reopened for our

cataloguing and we were not able to ascertain when they had last been accessed as the basis of making new copies or for performance. Nevertheless, Maehongson is also a centre for *tsale*, with over 80 in the area. One *tsale*, Tsale Saw, recently

started an organisation to promote the interests of *tsale* and ensure the availability of *tsale* service and education.

The fourth temple included in our list is Wat Ta Pung, Lashio, on the Burma-side of the border. We included this temple because the abbot has been very active in preserving both the manuscripts and the tradition of *tsale* performance.

During our fieldwork, we added a further Maehongson temple to the catalogue. This was Wat Phanon. Wat Phanon is also a Shan temple. However, it is far less well preserved having been in a state of near ruin when the current abbot first took

Shan manuscripts were not treated with the same care as Burmese or Thai manuscripts. This reflected a change in relations between these ethnic groups and the Shan after 1962. While Ven. Warinda was careful not to attribute blame to anyone, we heard many stories at all the places where we conducted interviews, of Shan *lik luong* being maltreated, from being stored inappropriately (rather than in their traditional place either in the pagoda or next to the central shrine), to being burnt, or even used as toilet paper. In fact, we were also regaled with stories of the fate that befell the worst culprits, such as the story of one Burmese abbot using the *sa* paper of manuscripts as toilet tissue, going blind and having to come to the hospital in Shan-dominated Mae-hongson for treatment. This should also be put into the context of Burmese army incursion on Shan villages in the Shan State. On a number of occasions, the Burman army has set fire to entire collections of Shan manuscripts, which – as we shall see when discussing the variety in the collections – means that some texts are lost forever.

We should note that even worn out *lik luong* that can no longer be used for performance are treated with great respect. They can be ‘retired’ to the pagoda (from the library in use, which is located close to or behind the central shrine room next to the head monk’s quarters) or in some cases they are made into Buddha images. We came across one such Buddha image in Mae-hongson where a kind of paper mache of *lik luong* mixed with flowers was molded onto a rattan frame.

Returning to the problematic situation of *lik luong* in the Chiang Mai area, then, Ven. Warinda asked permission from the abbots

to take the Shan manuscripts and store them in his own temple. Local Shan people also then moved their own manuscripts into Wat Tiyasatthan. It should be noted that the preservation of non-central Thai manuscripts in Thailand is also something of a marvel given the Thai government’s attempts in the late 19th and early 20th century to impose a central Thai-only policy on the various ethnic groups of Thailand. As a result of Ven. Warinda’s efforts over the past thirty-five years, Wat Tiyasatthan has around three hundred *lik luong*. However, there is no current *tsale* activity in the Mae Taeng area and the library is not used as the source of new *lik luong* copies. A *tsale* in Chiang Mai described the interest in the Chiang Mai area as poor, mainly

because there are few Shan, and those present live scattered, meaning that there is an insufficient concentration of potential audience and no means for the older generation of Shan, the traditional audience, to get together. There is also a floating population of immigrant Shan who come through Wat Tiyasathan from Burma seeking work in the local area, but they tend to be poor and then scatter to different locations for work.

Two of the other temples we looked at were in the Mae-hongson area, closer to the Burmese border. Wat Pang Mu is a little way out of Mae-hongson on the Chiang Mai road. It is a relatively wealthy temple with a long established and continuous Shan community. It is the oldest temple in the area, predating the establishment of Mae-hongson town itself in the late 19th century. Both the resident monks, including the abbot, and the congregation are Shan, and the temple was the home-temple to a number of particularly famous *tsale* over thirty years ago. This temple has



understudies. It is commonplace for the lead spirit doctor to concentrate his efforts on clientele who entered from the left – those with serious tattoo requests – who require more detailed work and the highest skills.

Before the actual tattooing begins, the recipient of the tattoo prays to Buddha and promises to uphold the Five Precepts – not to kill, steal, lie, drink intoxicants or commit adultery. For serious clients, banana leaves are often spread on expensive silk blankets as the head tattooist chants prayers. Lastly, after the prayers and blessings are completed, the recipient of the tattoo must remain silent throughout a thorough procedure – he must emanate a composed and dignified aura – while he is stripped of his clothes (to be hung on the rope) and is subjected to a thorough leprosy and skin disorders examination. If no medical problems exist, the tattooing then commences.

Initially, the selected designs are marked on the skin with design blocks that have been cut and coated with sooty ink to create templates. Next, the outlines of the tattoo are etched into the skin, with leaves crushed and rubbed into the cuts afterwards, making the black ink turn a greenish black hue, which is considered more beautiful than *pure* black. If a traditional Shan waist-to-knee tattoo was selected, the spirit doctor would start at the waist,

work around it, before proceeding downwards, tattooing one thigh at a time. Depending on the skill of the tattooist, one thigh, from waist to knee, would usually take about five hours; the tattooing starting at dawn to avoid the afternoon heat. The second thigh would not be done until later, often after consulting the recipient, though it is rare for anyone to have both thigh tattoos completed in less than a week. After the new tattoos were completed, assistants would wash the tattooed area with boiled water and herbs, to be repeated everyday by the tattooed person and/or family members, to ward off infection and aid healing. When everything was completed, the newly tattooed person would leave the hut and clap three times, a traditional Shan (and Burmese) display of manliness.

For more information, see [Tattoos: In-vulnerability and Power in Shan Cosmology](#) by Dr. Nicola Tannenbaum[#], the only academic article focused on Shan tattooing to date; or More esoterically, please check out Dr. Tannenbaum’s book “[Who Can Compete Against the World: Power-Protection and Buddhism in Shan Worldview](#)” which also discusses Shan tattoos, though in a more specific, worldview Buddhist context.



The Preservation and Continuation of *Lik-luong* Among the Shan (Tai Yai) Communities of Northern Thailand

Jotika Khur-yearn and Kate Crosby (SOAS)

Introduction

Shan Buddhists use a form of poetic performance to make Buddhist teachings interesting. These texts are read in the context of temple activity on holy days. They are read by specialists, called *tsale*, who have years of training in the specific ways of reciting this poetry, for the rhyming systems are very complex and the texts are usually written in the old style of writing that does not

indicate tone. A normal Shan speaker cannot read these texts. Even listening to them is a skill acquired over time.

The traditional homeland of the Shan straddles the modern boundaries of Burma, India, China, Laos, and Thailand. This is an area that has seen much turmoil over the past few centuries, with almost continuous wars and insurgency and with each country taking different approaches to the cultures of ethnic minorities.

This paper looks at how the Shan have (or have not) managed to preserve both the performance and the traditional manuscripts of Shan poetic literature amidst this turmoil. The research is taking place as part of a project to examine the changing literary and ritual practices of Shan Buddhism across the Thai-Burmese border, and was funded by ASEASUK.



Lik luong manuscripts are traditionally kept in three places: in the temple, in private houses and in the personal collection of the *tsale*. The usual way of promoting the tradition of *lik luong* is that sponsors request a *tsale* to copy and perform a *lik luong* for special occasions such as a funeral, the inauguration of a new house, or to celebrate the new year. However, sponsors may also want to have a new text available, in which case they also ask the *tsale* to make a copy and have a special first-reading of that new copy.

Otherwise, existing copies are used on holy day where the *tsale* recites to the 'temple sleepers'. Temple sleepers are lay people who take on the 8 precepts and stay overnight at the temple, following also the restrictive eating practices of monks. They may listen to just a short recitation of half an hour, or to a complete text in several sessions of about two hours per session.

The audience at *lik luong* performance may vary in age. While people listening to *lik luong* for a new house might be younger, i.e. age 20 upwards, for funerals and on holy days, the audience tends to be older. In the experience of those temple sleepers we interviewed, people tend to become more interested in listening to *lik luong* at the temple when they are aged forty-five and older. Younger people participate by helping them to prepare for

attending the temple and by preparing food at the temple.

Our project

As part of our project on Shan literary and ritual culture across the Burma-Thai border, we were interested in how *lik luong* material has been preserved and whether the education of recitation specialists, the *tsale*, is continuing. Since very little work has been done to document the range of *lik luong*, we decided to undertake catalogues of four temples in very different situations.

One of the four temples is Wat Ti-yasathan, which is near Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. While one of us (Jotika Khuryearn) had done an initial survey in 2005, we created a far fuller list of characteristics to record. We based our catalogue on a combination of the system produced by Terwiel and Chaichuen for their catalogue of Shan texts in Germany and that being using by the Digital Library of Laos Manuscripts (DLLM in Vientiane. The other three temples we only began cataloguing as part of this new project. The three temples are Wat Jog Klang, Wat Bang Mu and Wat Ta Pung. We shall now explain why we selected them and how they differ.

Wat Tiyasatthan was established by Shan traders 100 years ago in the village of Mae Taeng. At that time, the village was on the crossing point of the important Mae Taeng river, which acted as a major transport route from Fang in north down to the river Ping, of which it is a tributary. The river Ping is one of the largest rivers in Thailand reaching from Chiang Mai to Chao Phraya, joining a network of rivers all the way south to the Thai capitals of Ayutthaya and Bangkok. Mae Taeng was therefore an important trading post. It was also important for west-east trade on the oxen route between the southern Shan state and Maehongson. Many of the traders on

these routes were Shan. While several Shan families settled in the Mae Taeng area following fighting with the British and among the Shan to the west, there are now more Tai Yuan and central Thai in the area, especially following land settlement projects sponsored by the Thai govt. Moreover, the area was occupied by the Japanese during the 2nd world war. The effect of this was that the traditional river and oxen trading routes, peopled by Shan, disappeared, as transport shifted onto the roads built under the Japanese and also became motorised. As a result, we now have a Shan temple in a predominately non-Shan area. In fact, after the 2nd world war the temple



was without permanently resident monks until the current abbot took up his position in the early 1970s after escaping from the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, where he had been administering to the Shan mining community in Pailin. As a result, the abbot ensures the support of the temple even by non-Shan by offering a range of counseling, protective and healing rituals, which he learnt from the texts of famous magician monk from the Panglong area of Shan state. Yet this temple has one of the richest collections of Shan *lik luong*. How so? It is thanks to the abbot of this temple.

The abbot of Wat Tiyasatthan, whose name is Ven. Phra Sriwan Warinda, after leaving Cambodia, stayed at and visited a number of temples in the Chiang Mai/Chiang Rai area. In several temples there had clearly once been a thriving Shan community who had donated Shan *lik luong* to the temple. However, if there were no Shan monks at the temple, and in particular if there was a Burmese or Pa-o abbot, the