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## The Role of Buddhist Temples in Thailand in Transmitting Shan Language and Culture\*

Supin Ritpen

### Abstract

*In the Shan State, Myanmar, Buddhist temples serve as the center for passing on the Dharma teachings as well as transmitting Shan customs and traditions along with informally teaching Shan texts to Buddhist monks and Shan people. After the Shan people had to migrate from the Shan State into Thailand, Chiangmai Province in particular, due to various political problems, the Shan people continue using Buddhist temples as their meeting places, both the new temples they have built upon their arrival and the existing local ones in Chiangmai. Thus, Buddhist temples have become the central meeting places of the Shan immigrants.*

*The objective of this paper is to study the roles of Buddhist temples on the Shan immigrants in five areas in Chiangmai where the Shan immigrants have settled down. The paper explores the roles of the temples through the activities of the Shan people held in the temples.*

*The study shows that the Buddhist temples in Chiangmai play significant role among the Shan migrants, e.g. serving as the center for their gathering to learn, share, pass on and promote their art and culture as well as being the center for Shan language teaching, helping the Thailand born Shan children of the Shan migrants to learn Shan language and culture. The temples also provide all sorts of assistance to the Shan people and serve as an important social network that unite the Shan immigrants. This creates a core conscience of Shan identity in conserving the language, as well as art and culture, resulting in the younger generation being able to take pride in their history and ethnicity in a social context outside their homeland, the Shan State.*

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## **Introduction**

The Shan people have their own history, language and culture, as well as art, that were handed down since the 7<sup>th</sup> Century as recorded in their history. Their origin was founded in the area known as Mawkkhao Maoluang in the north of Myanmar and in the northwest of Yunnan Province, China. Their kingdom was prosperous in the time of the ruler named Chao Sueakhanfa before it began to decline and fall apart around AD 1560.

At present, Shan people have their settlement in five areas: Shan State in Myanmar, northwest of Yunnan, Assam, India, northern region of Laos and northwestern and northern Thailand.<sup>1</sup>

The Shan State and Myanmar were under British rule during the Anglo-Burmese War. After the British pulled out from Myanmar in accordance with the Atlantic Charter, the Shan State and other ethnic minorities arranged to sign the Pangluang Treaty with Myanmar. The essence of the treaty was that all groups would be together for 10 years (1947-1957) and after that, they could exist independently.<sup>2</sup> But after the ten years ended, Myanmar refused to abide by the treaty and forced the Shan and other ethnic minority groups to remain under their rule and ignored their freedom, education, language as well as the expression of their arts, culture and traditions.

These political conflicts between Shan State and Myanmar affected the security and posed a threat to their lives and possessions, including their mental state and ethnicity. In 1996-1997, the army of Myanmar constantly pursued the Shan State Army and civilians, and restricted the people for assisting the Shan soldiers in terms of food, information and shelter. The suppression was so severe that as many as 1,400 villages were wiped out from the Shan State Map. More than 300,000 Shan people became homeless and had to flee across the Thai - Myanmar

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<sup>1</sup> Somphong Wittayasakphan [สมพงษ์ วิทยาศักดิ์พันธ์]. *Prawattisarhtaiyai [ประวัติศาสตร์ไทใหญ่]*. (Bangkok: Project of History and Tai Social cultural in TRF), 2010: 77-79. (In Thai).

<sup>2</sup> Pornphimon Trichot [พรพิมล ตรีโชติ]. *Chonklumyoy lae Ratabanphama (Ethnic Minority and the Burmese Government) [ชนกลุ่มน้อยกับรัฐบาลพม่า]*. (Bangkok : Research Fund Office, 1999: 60). (in Thai).

borders to seek refuge in some temporary shelters and villages where there were some Shan migrants living such as Mae Hong Son, Chiangrai and Chiangmai.<sup>3</sup>

Chiangmai became one of the provinces where a large number of Shan immigrants came to take up residence. In the earlier period, the main purpose for their coming was for commercial benefits. These migrants would live in the city areas while those engaged in the agricultural occupation spread around to mix with other groups or cultures where they were the majority of the residents, or they often mingled with other groups.

The Shan immigrants who formed a specific group or majority population of the community or village would have a temple as the center for their cultural expression and performances. However, those that lived with other groups would find ways to affirm their identity and often participated with the other two groups in conducting their cultural activities.

This paper aims to study the role of the temples in transmitting the language and culture of the Shan immigrants in Thailand through relevant documents, field research and in depth interviews with the Shan people in their annual festivals.

## 1. Shan Temples in Chiangmai Province

The Shan immigrants studied in this paper live in Mueang, Maetaeng and Wianghaeng Districts. They joined in Shan religious and cultural activities in the selected five temples. The context and relationship between each temple and the people are as follows:

### 1.1 Wat Papao (Papao Temple)

Wat Papao is in the area of Mueang District, Chiangmai Province. It used to be the old dwelling of Phra Chao Kue Na, one of the Buddhist kings who reigned over Chiangmai. It was later abandoned until the Shan immigrants who lived in Chiangmai asked for permission from the ruler of Chiangmai to build a temple in this precinct as a center for performing religious activities.

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<sup>3</sup> Yuphin Khemmuk [ยพิน เข้มมุคคี]. *phiteekham sayyainaiwitheelanna* [พิธีกรรม สายใยในวิถีล้านนา]. (Chiangmai: Sangsilp Printing Ltd, 2011: 33). (In Thai).

In B.E. 2432 (AD 1889), Mom Bualai, the consort of Phrachao Inthawichayanonda, the ruler of Chiangmai sponsored the renovation of the lodging inside the temple along with the construction of a chedi preserving the Shan style. She also continually supported the religious activities at Wat Papao.<sup>4</sup>

The abbots of the temple were usually of Shan ethnicity who served to communicate and act as the religious leaders of their temple. Phrakhru Amonwirakhun, a Shanni from Mueangsai of Shan State is the present abbot. He has showed mercy toward the Shan people in Chiangmai Province by opening the temple for culture and traditional activities.

Wat Papao school, in the temple area, gained support from the Quality Learning Foundation (QLF) to provide basic education to children of Shan laborers during weekends. The school has Shan teachers who teach in the Shan language on subjects concerning culture along with providing clothes and lunch for all of their students.



**Figure 1:** Shan's volunteer teacher transmitting Shan language and culture to Shan children.

**Source:** The researcher

## 1.2 Wat Kutao

Wat Kutao in Mueang District, Chiangmai Province was built by the Yuan but the date of its construction was not known. An inscription has it that it used to hold the relics of Mangnorathacho, a Burmese warrior who led his army to battle

<sup>4</sup> Encyclopedia of Culture Foundation, Vol.7 ,Thai Commercial Banks. *Encyclopedia of northern Thai culture*. (Bangkok: Siam Express Management. Co., Ltd., 1999: 3771). (In Thai).

with Ayutthaya around B.E. 2122 – 2156. Most of the abbots of this temple were Yuan ethnics. The present abbot (Khruba Chanta) is also a Yuan monk from Sankamphaeng District, Chiangmai Province.<sup>5 6</sup>

The Buddhist art of the temple is a mixture between Lanna and Shan styles with a large pavilion for multiple functions such as a community hall or exhibition hall. Although the temple was originally a Yuan temple, the abbot has shown mercy to the Shan by allowing The Shan Education and Culture Club of Chiangmai to place an office in the precinct as well as allowing the club to hold meetings of Shan people in Thailand along with other traditional events since 2004. A large number of Shan immigrants in Chiangmai would gather at the cultural events held at the temple.



**Figure 2:** Pagoda (Ku) with watermelon shaped (Ba Tao – watermelon in Northern Tai language), that is the origin of the name "Wat Kutao."

**Source:** Encyclopedia of northern Thai culture, Vol. 1, 1999: 409

### 1.3 Wat Koklang

Wat Koklang is in Mueang District, Chiangmai Province. It was built in B.E. 2410 (AD 1867) in the Yuan community. Though its religious activities are held according to the Lanna ceremonial calendar of the twelve months, it serves as the

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<sup>5</sup> Encyclopedia of Culture Foundation, Vol. 7., Thai Commercial Banks. *Encyclopedia of northern Thai culture*. (Bangkok: Siam Express Management.Co., Ltd., 1999: 3771). (In Thai).

<sup>6</sup> Encyclopedia of Culture Foundation, Vol. 1, Thai Commercial Banks. *Encyclopedia of northern Thai culture*. (Bangkok: Siam Express Management. Co., Ltd., 1999: 409. (In Thai).

center of the Shan immigrants from Shan State who work in different areas as well as the Shan people who live in Chiangmai, Chiangrai and Maekongson and Lampang to perform their rituals.



**Figure 3:** Shan in Poy Sang Long at Wat Koklang, Chiangmai province (2011)

**Source:** The researcher

The main reason for Wat Koklang to become the center of Shan rituals can be traced back to the time when Phraathikan Wirat Kittisophano, the abbot, was loyal to and respected Somdetachayatham, the ruler of Kengtung in the Shan State of Myanmar. He followed the arch monk to bless and preach to the Shan people in many provinces in the Shan State, and became famous and respected by the people there.

Public facilities and utilities were facilitated from Thailand to Shan State through the abbot's connection resulting in increasing respect and loyalty as word spread among the Shan who lived in Thailand. Therefore, on special traditional occasions, such as the Shan New Year, Poi Awk Waa and Poi Sang Long festivals, the Shan people in Chiangmai would ask for permission to hold their celebrations at Wat Koklang since 1997.

The religious art of the temple is a mixture of Yuan, Shan and Tai Khoen traditions where the principle Buddha image is in the Chiangsaen style (Tai

Yuan), while Phra Uppakhut is in a mixed style (Tai Khoen and Shan) and the chedi (pagoda) being a mixture of Shan and Mon art. During the painting of the murals, the artist added current events to the art work such as the portraits of “Chuangchuang and Linhui,” the two pandas that are now serving as Thai – Chinese ambassadors, now in Chiangmai Zoo, along with the history of the construction of the temple and certain folk tales.

#### 1.4 Wat Tiyasathan Taiyai

Wat Tiyasathan Taiyai in Maetaeng District, Chiangmai was built in B.E. 2452 when Nantiya and Saengmam, a Shan couple who were in the first generation of exiles from Shan State, Myanmar donated their land for the temple to be used as the spiritual and cultural center for the Shan immigrants. Wat Tiya Sathan Taiyai has always had Shan monks oversee the temple. The current abbot is Luangpho Siwan Warintha from Pangluang, Shan State, Myanmar.



**Figure 4:** Nantiya and Saengmam, a Shan couple who donated their land for the temple to be used as the spiritual and cultural center for the Shan immigrants.

**Source:** The researcher.

The Buddhist art of Wat Tiyasathan Taiyai is in the Shan style. Even though most of the first generation Shan immigrants have passed away and their descendants have adopted the Yuan culture who are the major population of Maetaeng District into their lifestyle. The abbot and monks of Wat Tiyasathan

Taiyai, who were mainly from the Shan State have put an effort into maintaining and promoting Shan culture for the younger generations of Tiyasathan Taiyai Village.

The temple has a large document room that stores ancient Shan scriptures written in Shan characters which was donated by the Shan people and monks under the scripture preservation project. The monks and scholars of the Shan people here have also initiated a Shan Culture promotion project of Shan reading and writing, crafts and housekeeping for the Shan children on weekends.<sup>7</sup>

Annually, Wat Tiyasathan Taiyai would hold festivals according to the Shan traditions. However, becoming one of the villages under the Sub-District Administrative Organization, Ministry of the Interior and having to follow the policies given by the government together with being surrounded by Taiyuan, the abbot of the temple had to hold other festivals of the Yuan and the government as well. For example, in 2011 the festivals of Poi Ok Wat (Shan) and Kuai Salak (Yuan) were held in October, the Shan New Year and Yi Peng Festival (Yuan) were held in November and Father's Day and Poi Sang Long festival were held together in December as homage to His Majesty the King.

### **1.5 Wat Fawiangindra**

Wat Fawiangindra is situated in Piangluang Sub-District, Wianghaeng District, Chiangmai Province. It is believed to have been founded by King Naresuan the Great when he led his Thai troops through Wianghaeng. Later the temple was left deserted until B.E. 2512 when it was restored by Chao Kon Jaeng or General Mo Heng, who was the president of the Shan State Army, when he used Ban Piang luang as the base for his forces. He also built the monks' quarters and some architecture in the Shan style in the temple. The renovation and patronage provided by the general has made the temple into a center for the Shan Buddhist followers in Piangluang Sub-District.

The recent agreement on the Thai - Myanmar border division has resulted in splitting the temple's compound around two mountains into two parts where the

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<sup>7</sup> Siwan Waritha [สิวัน วารินทะ]. . Nuengsattawath Wattiyasatantaiyai [หนึ่งศตวรรษ วัดติยะสถาน ไทใหญ่]. (Chiangmai : Daocompewgraphic, 2007). (In Thai).

Ubosot (ordination hall) is situated on the Myanmar side and the Chedi and the wiharn (ceremonial hall) are on the Thai side.

One reason for the Shan immigrants to strongly advocate the temple as much as their faith in the older temple, Piangluang, is because it was built by their hero. After General Mo Heng passed away in 1993, his family brought his ashes to be kept in a *stupa* on the hill behind Wat Fawiangindra. Thus, most of the Shan immigrants in Piangluang Sub-District and those elsewhere like to visit the temple and pay respect to their hero.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 5:** Wat Fawiangindra in Piangluang Sub-District

**Source:** The researcher

The current abbot of Fawiangindra Temple, Phra Pricha Panyasaro, is from Shan State. He is an advocate of Shan traditions and customs. He works with the Sangkha Council and Shan immigrants in the sub-district to offer Shan language courses and annual Shan festivals.

All five of the temples mentioned have served as centers for the preservation of the Shan culture and heritage in Chiangmai. Some of them were built or renovated by the Shan people and have Shan monks as abbots. At the same time, the temples advocated by Tai Yuan people would have a Tai Yuan monk as their abbot. This practice and differences have not interfered with their function. Both ethnic groups consider themselves as observing the same religion although their race is different. They are living in a Buddhist society whose cultural roots are

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<sup>8</sup> Saiwan Phio-on [สายวัน ศิวอ่อน]. *Prawatwatfaweinginn*. (Chiangmai : klangweing Printing, 2549) (in Thai).

similar, so they are always continuing to interact, share and support each other in many activities.

## **2. The Roles of the Temples Among the Shan Immigrants**

The Shan people are Buddhist and several of their cultural activities stem from the temples and they often come together in unity to demonstrate that they belong to the Shan nationality. For those reasons, temples have very significant roles among the Shan people. The following are some of the important roles of the temple among Shan immigrants.

### **2.1 The Center That Binds the Shan People's Hearts Together**

The Shan immigrants in Chiangmai take on as their duty to take care of and look after the temples that are close to their residences or are convenient to reach. Some dedicate themselves as the "male and female patrons" (*pho-ok* and *mae-ok*). They come and make merit or offer alms at the respective temples on the Buddhist Sabbath days or special Buddhist occasions. Some perform the role of strong devotees (*pu-sila* and *ya-sila*) by spending the night of Buddhist Sabbaths at the temple during the Buddhist Lent. Some take on the duty of ceremony performers reading Shan texts for funeral rites in Chiangmai. Shan illegal migrant workers in particular demand that the temple arrange funeral rites for their deceased kin. Therefore, it can be said that the lives of Shan immigrants in Chiangmai are bound to the temples, which serve as the heart binding center for all Shan Immigrants.

### **2.2 Promotion of Art and Culture**

Each year there are basically twelve monthly festivals for Shan immigrants to participate in. The temples provide the stage for their art and cultural presentations. Monks, novices, ritual performers and Shan people of all ages and genders get involved and take on the roles assigned to them. Almost all Shan festivals held at temples are means for the promotion and propagation of their art and culture in light of their way of life, namely styles of dress, good manners, food, literature, including details and procedures of the festivals and other relevant aspects of interest depending on individuals and participants. The festivals can be a means to stimulate learning and appreciation among members of the younger generation through participation, involvement, reproduction and

so on, which will be carried out and continually put into practice when they grow up, and then passed farther down to succeeding generations. As a result, if one wants to learn about Shan culture and society, one can start at their temples.

Furthermore, as Shan immigrants live with the Tai Yuan and various other groups of people in their communities in Chiangmai, it is natural that it would result in a cultural mix or hybrid. In this respect, temples become the forum for ideas when the Shan immigrants can choose to blend with or incorporate into their own culture, leading to a form of abstract innovation in the form of new concepts and new tastes along with some forms of concrete innovation like new styles of products and clothing/dress, for instance.

### **2.3 Shan Language Transmission**

Shan immigrants admit that whether they are living in the Shan State or in Thailand, they would not be able to use the Shan language as the first or as an official language, although it is very significant to them and their lives. This is because the surroundings require them to use the mainstream language at both the fundamental and higher levels of education. Thus, the Shan language has become merely the language of a specific group. Nevertheless, the Shan people generally wish to maintain their language as part of their identity and appreciation of their ethnicity.

In this regard, the abbots of Papao, Kutao, Tiyasathan Taiyai, Koklang and Fawiang Indra Temples give significance to passing on the Shan language to the younger generation of Shan immigrants. They therefore arrange to have monks as the main teaching staff and some knowledgeable Shan people or experts as the supporting team members. The curriculum covers fundamental teaching to reading and writing, and is put into real communication among their groups.

Their success can be observed in the teaching of Shan youth and adults who could not use the language at first. In many big Shan festivals, the Shan people of all ages and sex would communicate in the Shan language. Many would look for various kinds of teaching and learning kits for the Shan language, namely books, cassette song tapes, CD Rom's, VCD's, calendars and postcards put out by Shan merchants who always make quite a good profit from this type of product during most large Shan festivals.



**Figure 6:** In Shan festival, Shan people are interested in books and other media

**Source:** The researcher

#### **2.4 Cooperation and Promotion for Ethnic Maintenance**

The Shan ethnic group maintained a large and well-known history among themselves before having to give up their kingdom and migrate from the Shan State, being dispersed to other places. Nevertheless, many of their competent and knowledgeable leaders have managed to create a network within the group to bind the Shan people together within the present state of the world without borders. The MAP Foundation is a prominent organization that incorporates various Shan groups as a network for health and education among ethnic minority workers. The Foundation receives a grant from the UN and other NGO's to form a working team comprising representatives from several Shan groups to evaluate and develop the projects to accomplish their goals and efficiency to benefit the Shan immigrants who live outside the Shan State.<sup>9</sup>

The Foundation oversees four projects as follows: (1) Promotion of Community Health and Potential, (2) Assess to rights for all, (3) Laborers' rights and (4) Communication for ethnic groups. It can be seen that the Foundation tries to provide assistance in all dimensions.

Moreover, the Shan Art and Culture Study Club of Chiangmai Province is one activity in the project to study art and culture along with the identity of an individual, which can be counted as a sub-project of the project for access to

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<sup>9</sup> MAP Foundation. *MAP Foundation*. (Chiangmai: Nuntapun Printing, 2006: 2).

rights for all. The office of the club is located in Pa Pao Temple, Mueang District, Chiangmai Province. It serves as a center for implementation of education, and art and culture of Shan immigrants in Chiangmai with the aim to promote knowledge and pride in their history and expressions, in terms of language and culture, among the Shan youth, and to make it accepted and recognized among the public at large.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the Club also works in connection with the MAP Foundation to promote the physical and mental health of the Shan immigrants so that they will be able to comply to the law and regulations of the new society along with keeping up with news and information around the world

### **Conclusion**

The Shan people have strong faith in Buddhism. Therefore, the temple is considered the center for expression of their beliefs and a place for displaying their art, culture, customs and rituals. The Shan immigrants from Shan State who move to Thailand have steadfastly maintained their beliefs and way of life.

Chiangmai is one of the provinces in Thailand where a large number of Shan immigrants have moved to. These immigrants constantly go to the temple to make merit and sacrifice offerings along with holding annual festivals. This results in a number of temples in Chiangmai playing the role of a place of unification, binding the people's hearts as well as providing space for cultural expression and assistance among the migrants. The temples set up a center for Shan language transmission and become a place for Shan social networks and unity to ensure that the people are able to live a quality life in the new society and join hands in maintaining and passing on their art and culture to the younger generation of the society.

Thus, the temples have constructive roles in providing happiness and security to the Shan immigrants in Chiangmai. As a result, the Shan immigrants have become Buddhist followers who contribute to the maintenance and support of the religion, and the temples become the places that bind their hearts together and provide space for them to express their identity.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Mr. Saengmueang Mangkorn and Mr. Chaiya Khonghuean, 2012, January 22, and 24.

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## Examples of in depth interview cases in the field work

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