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Lik Long (Great Manuscripts) and Care: the Role of Lay Intellectuals in Shan Buddhism

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1. Introduction: Theravada Buddhism, Oral or Literal Tradition?

It is generally said that Buddhism is one of “the Religions of Books” and distinct from the religions of oral culture. Theravada Buddhism, in particular, has inherited their Scriptures, *Pali Tripitaka*, without translation into regional languages and emphasizes the traditional style of the monastic order, *Sangha*, which has a strict distinction between the ordained (monks and novices) and laity. Theravada Buddhism thus has been called “the conservative” in Buddhist traditions.

Most previous anthropological studies on Theravada Buddhism regard that the activities of monks are based on their literal knowledge of the Scriptures, which is acquired in their monastic life. Monks are often described as specialists who have access to literacy, which was restricted in traditional societies. And the custom for men to spend a certain amount of time as a monk or novice in a monastic order provides them the opportunity to learn basic literal knowledge in monasteries. Because of this, most of men are literate on some level and some who spend more time in study attain a higher level of literal knowledge similar to the learned monks.¹⁾ This phenomenon is widely seen in traditional Theravada Buddhist societies in Southeast Asia. Thus Theravada Buddhism is regarded as a “literal tradition” supported by a monastic order.

The aim of this essay is to examine the forms and characteristics of literal knowledge in Theravada Buddhism in relation to oral culture in the region. I will consider how literal knowledge in Theravada Buddhism is practiced and inherited, and whether the oral culture in their region takes part in the practice and inheritance of literal knowledge.

In opposition to the presumption of Theravada Buddhism as literally a “literal tradition,” Yukio Hayashi notes that Theravada Buddhism came from the transmission of ideas and notions through oral traditions and even after the use of writing was introduced, the oral transmission of scriptural knowledge was considered the most effective way to prevent it from being lost or destroyed (Hayashi 2002: 222–224; cf. Collins 1992). Some researchers also point out the importance of the oral/aural dimension in Theravada Buddhism (Ishii 1998, Deegalle 2003). I agree with these remarks about the importance of the oral tradition in Theravada Buddhism, but I will not put special emphasis on the dichotomy between the oral and the written. As Jack Goody acutely pointed out, “it is a mistake to divide ‘cultures’

into the oral and the written: it is rather the oral and the oral plus the written, printed, etc” (Goody 1987: xii). I will now consider the practice of literal knowledge in Shan Buddhism in detail, in order to examine the relationship between the oral and the literal in Theravada Buddhism according to the regional situation.²⁾

2. Shan and its Scripts

As a starting point, I will consider the situation of “Shan” from the viewpoint of their language and script.

The definition of “Shan” remains an unsettled question among scholars today. The word “Shan” is originally a Burmese word and it refers to Tai speaking groups in the eyes of the Burmese.³⁾ Thus the word reflects a Burmese viewpoint toward Tai speaking groups in this area. When we take this word in the broadest sense, “Shan” means Tai speaking groups who live in the neighboring area of the Northern and Northeastern frontiers of Burma proper. It embraces, therefore, various regional groups of Tai. For example, it includes *Tai Long*, *Tai Laeng*, *Tai Khamti*, and *Tai Khoen* in Myanmar, and sometime it includes *Tai Noe* and *Tai Lu* in Southwestern China and *Tai Yuan* in Northern Thailand. When we take the word in the narrowest sense, it means *Tai Long* in the central and southern part of Shan State⁴⁾ in Myanmar and its adjacent area. Because *Tai Long* have been in the neighborhood of the Burmese, they are the primary “Shan” in the eyes of the Burmese. I will take the narrowest sense of “Shan” and will focus on the written culture of *Tai Long*.

Most Tai speaking groups call themselves “*Tai*” with some exceptions. *Tai Long* also call themselves “*Tai*” and use the name “*Tai Long*” only when they make a contrast with other Tai speaking groups. If I were to use the name of this ethnic group as they refer to themselves, I should use “*Tai*” or “*Tai Long*.” In this essay, however, I use Shan for *Tai Long*, because “*Tai*” for *Tai Long* is confused with “*Tai*” for the generic name of Tai speaking groups. Further, the term “*Tai Long*” is little known outside of Shan State.⁵⁾

In the Shan language, there is no single word equivalent of “language.” The idea of “language” is divided into *kwam*, the oral form of language and *lik*, the literal form of language. They do not see their language as an integrated system which could be represented both in the oral and the written, but as two different forms of communication. Therefore, Shan language consists of “*kwam tai*” and “*lik tai*.” *Kwam* refers to spoken words, speeches and songs as the oral. *Kwam* would be the object of verbs such as *up* (speak), *lat* (talk), *het* (make), and *hu* (know). For example, *up kwam*, *lat kwam* (speak or talk), *het kwam* (improvise a song), *hu kwam* (understand speech). *Lik* means scripts, letters, documents, manuscripts and books as the written. *Lik* would be the object of verbs such as *taem* (write), *an* (read), and *ho* (recite). For example, *taem lik* (spell words, write letters, documents, books), *an lik* (read writings), *ho lik* (recite manuscripts or books).

Shan (*Tai Long*) has many neighboring Tai speaking groups, and their languages are phonetically close to each other. In addition, there are some dialect variations among Shan themselves. Therefore, in the oral form of language, we can see gradating phonetic changes among neighboring Tai speaking groups. This makes it difficult to demarcate Shan as one distinct language from the others. In contrast, each Tai speaking group in this area has its

own script. In the written form of language, there are clear distinctions among these languages. Tai speaking groups in this area show both phonetic gradation in the oral languages and clear distinctions in the written scripts. Some examples are *lik Tai Long*, *lik Tai Laeng*, *lik Tai Khamti*, *lik Tai Noe*, *lik Tai Khoen*, and *lik Tai Lu*.⁶ These scripts could be divided into two groups. *Lik Tai Long*, *lik Tai Khamti* and *lik Tai Noe* share the same writing system with a difference in the script form. *Lik Tai Khoen* and *lik Tai Lu* share the same script and writing system based on *lik to tham* of Lanna (*Tai Yuan*), Northern Thailand, which are different from the former group.

This separation between the oral and the written in the Shan language has some influences on their inter-ethnic relations. For example, *Tai Khoen* people in the eastern part of Shan State draw the lines in the linguistic continuum among Tai by the differences in their scripts, not in speech. Shintani, who conducted research on the languages of *Tai Khoen* and *Tai Long*, states:

While their languages are slightly different in tones and vocabularies, we can not distinguish one from the other in their everyday speech. In their perception of languages, however, there is a great distance between them. *Khoen* think that their language and culture are closer to Lanna and Sipsongpanna than to Shan. Certainly in the aspect of scripts, *Khoen*, Lanna and *Tai Lu* in Sipsongpanna are almost same and they are distinguished from Shan scripts. Even though *Khoen* is linguistically closer to Shan in the every aspect except in its script, they do not think so (Shintani 1998: 3–4).

We can see that people are more conscious of the similarities and differences in the written form than in the oral (Ong 1982: 80–82; Goody and Watt 1968: 48–49). People would perceive the differences in speech, but the perception of the differences would not last long because of their similarity. In contrast, the differences in the scripts are visually observed and fixed in the written. So when they write and read the scripts, it more strongly reflects the differences in language. Among Tai speaking groups in this region, even though they can understand each other in speech, script is used as a marker to distinguish their languages, which leads them to the perception of ethnic relations among themselves.

3. *Lik long*, the Focal Point of Shan Written Culture

In Shan, the term “*lik*” means not only scripts or letters but also all kinds of “the written” including personal letters, documents, and manuscripts. Valuable documents or manuscripts are traditionally written on folded papers “*phap sa*”⁷) in ink. And after the introduction of printing technology into the Shan States in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century,⁸) certain kinds of “*lik*” are published, for example, newspapers, periodicals, textbooks for school education, literary works, and Buddhist scriptures and texts. Now Shan has many kinds of *lik*, religious or secular, verse or prose, from the religious “*phap sa*” manuscripts to printed commercial leaflets. In this essay I focus on the “old style” of *lik* in the form of “*phap sa*” manuscripts in order to examine the Shan written culture which has a long history before the introduction of mass printing technology and the school

education system.

Shan in Maehongson, Northern Thailand, classify their manuscripts into two categories, “*lik long*” (great manuscripts) and “*lik on*” (small manuscripts).⁹ Most *lik long* are originally “*phap sa*” manuscripts and some are published as books today. The contents of *lik long* are the commentaries on Buddhist texts and instructive stories adapted from Jataka tales. *Lik on* are also originally “*phap sa*” manuscripts and some are published as books, but the contents of *lik on* are fairy tales, folklore, and writings on secular subjects. *Lik long* are distinguished from *lik on* by its contents. It could be said that *lik on* is the category of the *lik* which are not classified into *lik long*.

As “*phap sa*” manuscripts easily decay in a climate with high temperature and humidity and can be damaged by termites and mice, these manuscripts have been inherited among Shan by means of transcription for generations. The transcribers of these manuscripts are lay intellectuals called “*care*.”¹⁰ Pious lay people ask *care* to transcribe the old *lik long* to make a new one in order to offer to monasteries for merit-making.¹¹ A certain amount of money is paid to the *care* for his transcription. In Maehongson, this manuscript-offering is done on the occasions of some Buddhist rites, for example, ordinations, funerals, merit-makings for the dead, and *Paritta* recitation rites for houses of lay people (see Table 1-1, 1-2). Monasteries stock these manuscripts in the library or on shelves. And some lay people also keep these manuscripts in their homes.

Lik long are not only an offering to monasteries, but they are also read aloud or recited for an audience on the occasion of Buddhist rites with manuscript-offering. A *Care* recites the *lik long*. It is also merit-making for lay people to listen to the recitation of *lik long* by a *care*, as well as listen to a monk’s chant or sermon. The recitation of *lik* is called “*ho lik*.” “*Ho*” means to read aloud or recite the writings.¹² The monk’s chant and sermon is called “*ho tara*,” “reciting *Thamma*” or “reciting Scriptures” in Shan. While *lik long* are recited on the occasion of Buddhist rites, *lik on* are also read aloud to an audience for amusement at home and elsewhere. The manuscript-recitations among Shan have been mentioned in the early studies on the Shan culture.

J. N. Cushing, a Baptist missionary and expert on Shan language in the Shan States of the nineteenth century, classified the Shan writings into two categories, “*lik lat*” and “*lik ho*.” *Lik lat* means the writings of “spoken language,” or writings in prose. *Lik ho* means the writings for recitation, or writings in verse (Cushing 1887: 8; Cushing 1914: 569). Cushing also stated that most Shan writings were *lik ho* in his time. We can see that most of the old style of manuscripts, both *lik long* and *lik on*, are writings in verse for recitation, not for reading silently.

Wilbur W. Cochrane, a missionary and scholar in the early twentieth century, described the manuscript-recitations among Shan as follows:

Religious writings, on the native hand-made paper, may be found all over the British Shan States, piled up in corners of monasteries, under sheds that cover images, in wayside rest-houses, and the houses of the people. There are few homes in which at least one copy of the sacred writings may not be found. Many Shans read their scriptures with manifest sincerity and delight. In their homes, in rest-houses, in monasteries, or gathered round an

Table 1-1 Buddhist calendrical rites and the use of literal knowledge in Maehongson Shan

The lunar Calendar	Name of rite	Monk		Care	
		Chant of Pali text	Sermon	Recitation of <i>lik long</i>	Offering of <i>lik long</i>
5 th	<i>Sangkyan</i> (New Year Festival)	○	○	–	–
	<i>Kanto</i> (“to pay homage”)	○	–	–	–
6 th	<i>Mae wan</i> (“to restore village”)	○	–	–	–
	<i>Wisaka bucha</i>	○	○	–	–
7 th	<i>Poi cati</i> (Sand Pagoda Festival)	○	○	○	–
8 th	<i>Khao wa</i> (Beginning of Lent)	○	○	–	–
	<i>Cam sin non kyong</i>	○	○	○	–
9 th	<i>Tang som to, Poi caka</i> (Rice-ball Offering)	○	○	–	–
10 th	<i>Tang som to long</i> (Great Rice-ball Offering)	○	○	–	–
	<i>Haeng som koca</i> (Yearly Rite for the Dead)	○	○	○	○
11 th	<i>Ok wa</i> (End of Lent)	○	○	–	–
	<i>Kanto</i> (“to pay homage”)	○	–	–	–
	<i>Poi loen sip-et</i> (11 th Month Festival)	○	○	–	–
12 th	<i>Poi sangkhan</i> (Robe-offering)	○	○	–	–
1 st					
2 nd	<i>Makha bucha</i>	○	○	–	–
3 rd					
4 th					

Table 1-2 Other Buddhist rites of Maehongson Shan in Northern Thailand

Name of rite	Monk		Care	
	Chant of Pali text	Sermon	Recitation of <i>lik long</i>	Offering of <i>lik long</i>
<i>Masa, Lum la sang kyo</i> (Funeral)	○	○	○	○
<i>Poi sanglong</i> (Ordination)	○	○	○	○
<i>Wan parik</i> (Paritta Recitation)	○	–	○	○

open fire, Shans may be seen listening with reverence to the rising and falling cadence, as their “reader” chants a birth story of their Lord Gautama, or of the beauty and bliss of Nirvana, pictured as the “Home of Happiness,” the “City of Gems and Golds,” or smiling over semi-religious love songs.... (Cochrane 1910: 214)

Here, we notice that the tradition of manuscript–recitation prevailed among Shan, at least, since the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And the word “reader” which Cochrane used would be interpreted as a lay intellectual, *care*, not a monk. These accounts also show that Shan are earnest donors and listeners of Buddhist manuscripts. They especially regard *lik long* with reverence.

In Maehongson, they offer *lik long* to a monastery for an ordination, a funeral, and merit-making for the dead. Recently, ordinary lay people substitute the printed *lik long* books, which are sold at bookstalls in the market or by book venders, for *lik long* manuscripts, because of the high cost to ask *care* to transcribe these manuscripts. Even so, they never omit the offering and the recitation of *lik long* in these rites. And pious lay people still offer *lik long* manuscripts to monasteries.

In the orthodoxy of Theravada Buddhism, *Thamma*, the teachings of Lord of Buddha, is embodied in the sacred scriptures, *Pali Tripitaka*, and mainly inherited in the monastic order. It is said that *Pali Tripitaka* are sacred because Pali is a classic language which is inherited without translation. The language of these scriptures, however, is so foreign and the contents are so subtle that they are unintelligible to ordinary lay people. In contrast, *lik long*, written in Shan with some Pali and Burmese words, could be understood by listening to the recitation.

This shows the difference between *Pali Tripitaka* and *lik long* in Shan written culture. While monks and novices usually learn from the Pali chant texts or *Paritta* stanza books based on *Pali Tripitaka*, the scriptures themselves are seldom read. *Pali Tripitaka* assures the sacredness of their literal knowledge, but they are carefully kept in a cabinet and not directly handled. *Lik long* are written for recitation. They are frequently taken from the shelves and read aloud by *care* for a lay audience. *Lik long* are also the writings for circulation. The transcription makes *lik long* circulate widely in Shan State and beyond. In the written form, their Buddhist knowledge is transmitted and reproduced as *lik long* by literal transcription and oral performance.

Shan consider *lik long* a source of merit in addition to the *Pali Tripitaka*. The practices of their manuscript-offering and manuscript-recitation show that Shan consider *lik long* one excellent source of merit because of the intelligibility of its content in oral performance, not the authenticity as the scriptures in the classical language. Therefore, people respectfully call these manuscripts *lik long*, “great manuscripts.”

4. *Care*, Extraordinary Laypersons

Many researchers also refer to the traditions of manuscript-offering and manuscript-recitation among Buddhist Tai, for example, *Tai Yuan* in Lanna, *Lao* in Laos, northeast Thailand, and Southern Thailand (Iijima 1998; Dhawat 1995; Suthiwong 1995). In most of these cases, lay people offer the manuscripts and monks recite them for lay audiences, but in the case of Shan, both the donors and the reciters are lay people. *Care*, lay intellectuals, fill the roles of transcriber and reciter of these manuscripts.

The written culture of Shan, before the introduction of the state secular education in the Shan States in the early twentieth century, was inherited by the limited literates. The literates are mainly the men who had been ordained as novices or monks in monasteries for a certain period. Shan has a custom that young boys spend some time as *kapi kyong* “monastery servants” and then they are ordained as novices. Some are also ordained as monks. The periods spent in novicehood or monkhood vary in length from a couple of weeks to several years, but it is normative to spend at least three months in “Buddhist

Lent.”

Shan have used the *Pali Tripitaka* in “Burmese script” since they were under the influence of Burmese Buddhism.¹³⁾ In the monastery they learn not only the Shan script but also the Burmese script. Because of the inefficiency of the old Shan writing system and the multiple language requirement in Shan, Burmese and Pali, the intellectuals who have enough skills to use the writings are limited to some eager learners among the literates. Shan people call these intellectuals *care* (scribe) or *sara* (master).¹⁴⁾

Care are, as we have seen above, the scribes and reciters of *lik*. *Sara* are the practitioners of the literal knowledge for the specific activities such as making talismans or amulets, tattooing, fortune-telling, herbalism and performance of affliction rites. As *care* and *sara* are the names of roles for their activities, they are not exclusive of each other. The same person sometimes fills the roles of both *care* and *sara*. *Care*, *sara* and learned monks share the same literal knowledge because most of them have spent time learning it in the monastic order. The Shan written culture has been mainly inherited and performed by this limited number of intellectuals. We could describe this as a “scribal culture” or “craft literacy” (Ong1982: 93). It is distinguished from “lay literacy,” which is generally taught and learned in modern secular education for all members of a society.

The Shan written culture is mainly based on this eminent skill of intellectuals to use the writings for some specific purposes. Here, we are concerned with the activities of *care* as extraordinary laypersons who have special knowledge of *lik long*, which are highly respected in the Shan written culture.¹⁵⁾

Because *lik long* are written in Shan mixed with Burmese and Pali words, *care* must have enough literal knowledge of Shan, Burmese and Pali and expert knowledge on Buddhism. In addition to their literary capability, a *care* is also required to have “beautiful voice” for reciting *lik long* written in verse. Therefore, when a *care* recites *lik long*, he is requested to read out the rhyme correctly and fluently in a “beautiful voice” for his audience.

They learn the recitation of *lik long* from their masters, monks or laymen. Masters teach disciples in the way of reading *lik long* aloud, phrase by phrase. *Lik long* are written in verse using the old Shan writing system which does not have enough scripts and tonal

Table 2 Usage of writings in Shan Buddhism of Maehongson, Northern Thailand

	Monks	Care
Types of rites	Calendrical Buddhist rites, Buddhist rites of passage Rite of Paritta Recitation for house	Buddhist rites of passage Rite of Paritta Recitation for house
Activities	Chant of Pali scriptures or <i>Paritta</i> stanza and sermon	Transcription and recitation of <i>lik long</i>
Types of writings	Pali scriptures, <i>Paritta</i> stanza	<i>lik long</i>
Language, Script	Pali in Thai or Burmese script	Shan with some Burmese words and Pali in Burmese script
Location	Monastery	Monastery, House of lay people

signs to indicate every pronunciation distinctly. And it is common to find some babblings or onomatopoeias, repetition, and words which are from Burmese and other Tai groups in *lik long*.¹⁶⁾ It is so difficult for beginners to learn by themselves that masters have to set an example of how to read *lik long* aloud for disciples. In the process of learning *lik long*, the disciples orally acquire the literal knowledge from their masters. It is worth noting that a *care* should be a good reciter as well as a specialist of literal knowledge. The *care*'s literacy is for the oral performances of *lik long*.

5. *Khu Mo Lik Tai*, the Paradigm of Lay Intellectuals

Now let us consider the respected intellectuals in the history of Shan in order for us to understand the important role of lay intellectuals in their written culture. From the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century, some distinguished intellectuals appeared in the Shan States and left many works which are esteemed as the essence of Shan written culture.¹⁷⁾ Their works related to the Buddhist teachings are regarded with veneration as *lik long* and these intellectuals are praised as *Khu Mo Lik Tai* (masters of Shan writings). Some say there are twenty masters; others say they venerate nine masters. However, six masters are well known among Shan.¹⁸⁾

Their works have been respected and circulated among Shan in their respective regions for a long time, but it was from the 1970s that they rose to fame throughout the Shan State. In the 1960s, some groups of Shan intellectuals held festivals for their masters of Shan writings, “*Wan Khu Mo Lik Tai*,” as they collected their biographies and remembered their virtues in each place. This movement spread all over the Shan State in the 1970s and made them masters of Shan writings. It would be interesting to explore the process and background of this movement in relation to the revival movement of Shan written culture in the 1940–60s, which included the renovation of the Shan script, the publication of a textbook based on this new script, and the compilation of the *Pali Tripitaka* in “Shan script.”¹⁹⁾ Here, however, I limit the discussion to their lives as *Khu Mo Lik Tai*.

I will take three examples of *Khu Mo Lik Tai*'s biographies to illustrate the Shan intellectuals in that era. The biographical data on *Khu Mo Lik Tai* in this essay are based on Khun Maha's article (Khun Maha, 1970). There are several versions of the biographies of these masters, which do not agree on details.²²⁾ Because I have no means to validate the

Table 3 Six Masters of Shan Writings²⁰⁾

	Name of master	Year of Birth and Death	Age at death	Birthplace
1	Cao Thammatinna	1541–1640	99	Moeng Ting ²¹⁾
2	Cao Kangsoe	1787–1881	94	Mong Nai
3	Cao Koli	1822–1895	73	Moeng Pan
4	Nang Khamku	1853–1918	64	Mong Nai
5	Cao Amatlong Moeng Nong	1854–1905	51	Moeng Nong
6	Cao Nokham	1856–1895	39	Kesi Mancam

historical facts in these biographies, I take these biographies as stories on the lives of the masters which were compiled by adherents. While I do not treat these biographies as historical fact, I do appreciate the value of these biographies as clues to understand the paradigm of the lives of Shan intellectuals.

Cao Kangsoe

Born in 1787 at Weng Lao in Moeng Nai (located in the southern part of Shan State), Cao Kangsoe, at the age of 8, moved into Weng Lao Monastery of the *Yuan* sect as a *kappi kyong* (monastery servant). He was ordained as a novice at the age of 9 and as a monk at the age of 20 in the same monastery. His monastic name was Sumana. He learned *Thamma* in both Shan and *Yuan* style, as well as the secular matters in his novicehood. After his ordination as a monk, he moved to Moulmein in Mon State, the Southern part of Myanmar in present. He spent two years there to learn Burmese and Mon scripts as well as fortunetelling, arithmetic, poetry, oratory and history. After he mastered these subjects, he traveled around Thailand for three years. During his stay in Thailand, he also learned acupuncture, talisman-making, and incantation. Then he returned to Moeng Nai and presided at Weng Lao Monastery there.

At that time in Burma, it was the reign of King Bodawpaya, who aimed to propagate Burmese Buddhism in the Shan States. In 1813 Cao Sumana evaded the intrusion of Burmese Buddhism in Moeng Nai and moved to Kangsoe in Wa State, the borderland to China. The Lord (*sawboa*) of Kangsoe invited him to the monastery in Kangsoe and appointed him as the head of the monastic order in Kangsoe. Cao Sumana stayed at Kangsoe for 38 years and had many disciples and lay followers. He also wrote many works there. So he was called “Cao Kangsoe” or “Cao Sayadaw Kangsoe.”

He left Kangsoe for Moeng Nai in the Shan States at the age of 65. He returned to secular life and married at Moeng Nai, and had one daughter, Nang Khamku, who is also praised as one of *Khu Mo Lik Tai*. After leaving the monastic order, he worked as a fortuneteller, medicine-man, tattooist, talisman-maker, teacher of poetry and recitation, and writer of religious and secular matters. In 1881, he died in Moeng Nai at the age of 94 (Khun Maha 1970: 37–48).

Cao Koli

Born in 1822 at Nong Khao Lam Village near Moeng Pan (located in the southern part of Shan State), Cao Koli, at the age of 6, moved into the *Yuan* monastery as a *kappi kyong* (monastery servant) and at the age of 7, he was ordained as a novice at the same monastery and named Koliya. He learned *Thamma* in both Shan and *Yuan* style. At the age of 19, he moved to another *Yuan* monastery nearby. He spent one year at this monastery as a novice and then was ordained as a monk when he was 20 years old in 1842. He spent 6 years there to learn more Buddhism and then moved to a Burmese *Thudhamma* monastery at Moeng Nai. He stayed at this monastery for 4 years and then moved to Shwe Myin Won monastery at Mandalay to study *Tripitaka*. It was the reign of King Mindon in Burma. Later King Mindon gave him the title “*tripitaka bandita guru bwedu*” to praise his knowledge of *Tripitaka*.

In 1856, he returned to Moeng Pan and presided at the monastery where he had been ordained as a monk, but at that time, the southern Shan States were in the midst of a war among the Shan principalities. And in the religious sphere, Shan monks had faced turmoil from the intrusion of the Burmese *Thudhamma* sect. Cao Koli was in a dilemma between the *Yuan* and *Thudhamma* sects. He left Moeng Pan and traveled around the Shan States. Three years later, he returned to Moeng Nai again, but the situation had not yet calmed down. Finally, he left the monastic order at the age of 39 in 1861 and married at the age of 40. He vigorously worked as a *care* in writing *lik long* and teaching religious and secular matters. In 1895 he died at age 73 at Moeng Pan (Khun Maha 1970: 78–95).

Cao Nokham

Born in 1856 at Pok Tan Loi Village in Kesi Mancam (located in the central part of Shan State), Cao Nokham, moved into the monastery in Kesi Mancam at the age of 10, and at the age of 11, he was ordained as a novice at the same monastery and named Nanticara. This monastery belongs to the *Maeng Kyo* sect in Shan Buddhism.²³⁾ As a *kappi kyong* (monastery servant), he excelled in learning. Even in novicehood, he went on to a higher stage of the liberal arts of both Shan and Burmese. In 1878, at the age of 22, he returned to secular life and earned his living by composing manuscripts on the Buddhist teachings or writing poetic letters for clients. He then moved to Moeng Kung, the big town near Kesi Mancam, to sell his writings. He gained fame as “*care* Nanti” for the skillfulness of his writings and his “beautiful voice” in the manuscript–recitation. The Lord of Moeng Kung became a patron of Nanti and kept a place for him at the palace in Moeng Kung.

In 1881, he moved to Mandalay as an attendant to the son of Lord of Moeng Kung, who was sent as the proof of obeisance to the Burmese king at that time. He learned Burmese culture and customs, especially the composition of Burmese poetry in the Burmese capital for two years. When the son of the Lord returned to Moeng Kung to succeed to the throne in 1883, he went back to Moeng Kung and began to serve the Lord as a secretary at the Palace. He married the elder sister of the Lord and was called “Cao Nokham.” He stayed in Moeng Nai and Kesi Mancam for a while, but he died at age 39 at Moeng Kung in 1895 (Khun Maha 1970: 138–157).

From these biographies, we learn that these *Khu Mo Lik Tai* had been similarly ordained as a novice or monk,²⁴⁾ and studied Shan, Burmese, and Pali languages as well as Buddhist teachings. After spending years studying in the monastery, they returned to their secular life and worked as specialists in literacy. Most of them were under the patronage of Lords of the Shan principalities and some of them worked at the Palace of the Lord.²⁵⁾ This shows that their literary ability not only made these masters venerable in the religious or literary sphere, but also raised their social status. We could say that one’s literary ability was “an avenue of social mobility” in Shan society in that time.²⁶⁾ Their abilities were proved directly by their literary activities, composing or recitation of the manuscripts, not by the titles or degree of Buddhist knowledge in the monastic order. This is why lay intellectuals such as *Khu Mo Lik Tai* energetically wrote their works.

Moreover, we should also note that they similarly went on journeys in the quest for

more knowledge mainly to Burma proper and, for some, to Mon State and Thailand. Through their journeys, they got further knowledge on Burmese and the Pali along with Buddhist teachings. Burmese culture had an influence on these *Khu Mo Lik Tai* in the spheres of vocabulary and the form of script. It could be said that they facilitated the “Burmanization” of Shan written culture,²⁷⁾ but they are not missionaries of Burmese culture. Even though they partially set forward the Burmanization of Shan written culture, they did not abandon the Shan language and scripts. They wrote many works in the Shan language for Shan people.

Shan scripts mixed with Burmese and Pali words are used for aesthetic effect, in the way they thought “sophisticated” at the time of Burmese domination over the Shan States. The readers and audience also favored this style. While the masters accepted Burmese influence in the literal form, their activities were based on the Shan tradition of manuscript-offering and manuscripts-recitation for merit-making. From this viewpoint, one may see the *Khu Mo Lik Tais’* works as the invention of a new style of writing in Shan written culture.

From a historical point of view, their styles of *lik long* are the products of the Burmanization that occurred recently in the long history of Shan written culture. For Shan at present, however, *lik long* written by *Khu Mo Lik Tai* embody the quintessence of Buddhism, *Thamma*, in their language. The reciting and listening to these *lik long* gives direct access to the teachings of Lord of Buddha, and the transcribing and offering of these *lik long* to monasteries is also the reproduction of Buddha’s teaching. These writings are more familiar and “real” than the *Pali Tripitaka* kept in cabinets at monasteries.

6. Orality and Literacy in *Lik Long*

We now consider the usage of the writings in Shan Buddhism by comparing *lik long* inherited by lay intellectuals with Pali scriptures inherited by monks. Both monks and lay intellectuals use the writings for oral performances.²⁸⁾

Monks are often described as specialists who are literate in traditional societies with restricted literacy, but in Buddhist rites, they perform the chants of Pali scriptures, or *Paritta* stanza and give sermons. What monks and novices are first requested by lay people is the oral performance in Buddhist rites, not their literal knowledge on subtle Buddhist philosophy. Among lay people, monks achieve fame because of their abilities in oral performance with a good chanting voice and an instructive and enjoyable sermon, not because of their titles and degrees in the monastic order (cf. Deegalle 2003). Newly ordained monks and novices spend most of their time on memorizing chants. Monks use the writings to read and memorize chants from Pali scriptures or *Paritta* stanza, and refer to the writings to consider the contents of his sermon (Tambiah 1968: 98–100). The same is said of Shan Buddhism. In the activities of monks in Buddhist rites, it is impossible to demarcate the oral and the written. Their oral performances are based on literacy and their literacy assures their oral performances.

Lay intellectuals such as *Khu Mo Lik Tai* and *care* are also described as specialists of literacy. The source of their literacy comes from their education in monasteries. As seen earlier, lay intellectuals compose or transcribe *lik long* and recite them for an audience.

Care, in particular, are required to have a “beautiful voice” for reciting *lik long* in addition to literal capability. They gain literal knowledge for the oral performance because *lik long* are writings in verse for recitation. The lay intellectuals carry out two functions in Shan written culture. 1) Production (by composing) and reproduction (by transcribing) of *lik long*. 2) Oral re-presentation of *lik long* by recitation. The compositions and transcriptions of *lik long* by *care* assure that the *lik long* which inherit the Buddha’s teachings will be performed orally in future. The recitations of *lik long* assure that lay people gain direct access to Buddha’s teachings, which is inherited in the literal form. In this sense, it is impossible to classify their activities in the categories of either the oral or the written.

Further comparison in the usage of the writings may reveal differences between the lay intellectuals and monks. Even though the lay intellectuals have the same source of literacy as monks, their status is clearly distinct from monks in the Theravadin tradition. Monks are regarded as the authentic heir to the teachings of the Lord Buddha as members of the monastic order. They hold the precepts according to *Vinaya* and inherit *Pali Tripitaka* in their monasteries. Hayashi points out the reification of Buddhist teachings in the bodies of pious monks. He says, “Buddhist teachings are contained in the bodies of pious Buddhist monks: their bodies are vehicles for canonical knowledge, which is why people often refer to monks as a ‘body of precepts’ and ‘walking Tripitaka’” (Hayashi 2000: 182). The same is said of Shan Buddhism. In view of Theravada Buddhism as an oral tradition, the transliteration of Pali scriptures into regional scripts, without translation into regional languages, means that Pali has been literally inherited as an “oral language” in Theravada Buddhism, even with some deviations according to the pronunciations of each language.

In contrast with that, the inheritance of the Pali language guarantees the oral tradition of the monastic orders in the region, as oral traditions in the regional cultures need the intelligibility of the teachings in oral performances. *Lik long* are written down to instruct lay people on the Buddhist teachings with translations, explanations, commentaries, and adaptations of Pali scriptures and Buddhist writings existing before. The translations, explanations, commentaries, and adaptations are the features of literal tradition.²⁹⁾ *Care*, as specialists in literacy, often claim to be heir to *Thamma*, because they exclusively deal with *lik long*. Lay people, including the lay intellectuals themselves, think that *Thamma* is reified not in the bodies of *Ku Mo Lik Tai* or *care*, but in the *lik long* which they deal with. The *care* whom I interviewed in Maehongson says,

“We, Buddhists, worship three precious gems of Buddhism, *Buddha*, *Thamma*, *Sangha*. Where is Buddha? We pay homage to images of Buddha in the hall of monastery. Where is *Sangha*? *Sangha* is the organization of monks in monasteries. So where is *Thamma*? *Thamma* is in *lik long* which we recite and listen to.”

The Buddhist teachings are not only literally reified in the writings, *lik long*, but also orally reified in the recitation of the *lik long*. Lay people can have direct access to Buddha’s virtue through these oral performances. *Lik long* are circulated, transcribed, and recited in various occasions. Shan people venerate *lik long* because of its intelligible contents and sensuous features in oral performances.

As we have seen, the orality and literacy of monks and lay intellectuals are practiced differently. Monks inherit the Buddhist teachings which are in the literal form of *Pali* scriptures or texts by internalizing them in their bodies as an oral tradition. The lay intellectuals inherit the Buddhist teachings by composing or transcribing *lik long* as the written and by reciting them as an oral tradition.

Notes

- 1) For example, see Tambiah (1968), Terwiel (1975) and Swearer (1976).
- 2) The field data in this essay was mainly gathered from my research on Shan Buddhism in Maehongson, Northern Thailand in 1996–97 and supplementary researches in Maehongson and the interviews with key informants in Shan State, Myanmar in 2002–03. The research in 1996–97 was supported in part by the grant from Niwano Peace Foundation, Japan and the research in 2002–03 by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research, JSPS.
- 3) I use “Burma” and “Burmese” for the name of the ethnic group, dynasty, its territory, and the state before 1989. The word “Myanmar” is used for the name of Union of Myanmar after the change of English name in 1989.
- 4) I use the word “Shan State” to refer one of the states in the Union of Burma (Myanmar). The word “Shan States” means the Shan principalities in this region before the independence of Union of Burma in 1948.
- 5) Takatani suggests that the name “*Tai Long*” for the Tai speaking group in the central and southern part of the Shan State would be newly invented in the middle of twentieth century (Takatani 2005: 12). In Thailand, Shan are called “*Thai Yai*”; in Lanna “*Ngiauw*.” Both terms are not used in Shan State.
- 6) While the history of Shan script, especially its origin, is still obscure to us, a Shan historian, Sai Kam Mong conducted important research and published *The History and Development of the Shan Scripts* (Sai Kam Mong 2004). The main points of his research are the following. 1) While earlier Western scholars and Burmese scholars suppose that the Shan script was derived from Burmese, he maintains the Shan script is as old as Burmese script, claiming that Mon, Burmese and Shan scripts are all derived from the same source, Brahmi–Nagari scripts in India, and share some similarities. 2) The development of the Shan script started from *lik to ngok* (bean-sprout script) and changed its form to *lik kham yien*, then to *lik to mon* (circular script). The period of change to *lik to mon* (circular script) was the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Shan were under the political and cultural influence of the Burmese. 3) The recent development in the Shan script is the renovation of old *lik to mon* to *lik tai mau* (new Shan script) in the 1940–50s. In this essay, we focus on the written culture using *lik to mon* or *lik tai kao* (old Shan script) before this recent renovation.
- 7) “*Phap*” means a folded paper. “*Sa*” is the name of a kind of mulberry-tree (*Broussonrtia papyrifera*). The paper is made from its bark.
- 8) The printing technology of Shan scripts was invented in 1835 by a Christian missionary and the first printing press was established in Hsenwi under the patronage of the *sawbwa* of Hsenwi in 1900 (Sai Kam Mong 2004: 339). Khun Maha noted that it was in 1904 (Khun Maha 1970: 167).

- 9) The word “*long*” means “great” or “big” in Shan, “*on*” means “small” or “little.”
- 10) The word “*care*” would be derived from “*caye*” which means “scribe,” “clerk” or “secretary” in Burmese. “*Care*” is sometimes spelled as “*cale*.”
- 11) We can see the widespread tradition of manuscript-offering to monasteries for merit-making among Shan (*Tai Long*) and *Tai Noe* in Dehong area, Yunnan (Cochrane 1915; T’ien 1986; Zhang 1992).
- 12) In contrast with “*ho*,” they use the verb “*an*” for reading silently.
- 13) It is only since the 1950s that they had *Pali Tripitaka* in Shan scripts, which are still under revision. There is an exception, the *Yuan* sect in Shan Buddhism. The *Yuan* sect uses the *Pali Tripitaka* in *Tham* scripts inherited from the *Lanna (Tai Yuan)* tradition in Northern Thailand. It is said that the *Yuan* sect is older than other Shan Buddhist sects influenced by Burmese Buddhism (Sai Kham Mong 2004: 67–69).
- 14) The word “*sara*” is derived from “*saya*” which means “master,” “teacher” or “the venerable” in Burmese.
- 15) The activities of *sara* cannot be discussed here due to the limited space. For discussion on some of their activities, see Tannenbaum (1984, 1987, 1995).
- 16) See Peltier (1999: 82). In addition, the vowel changes for rhyme are frequently seen in “Shan old style writings” (Shintani 1998, see Chapt. 7).
- 17) There is an exception, Cao Thammatinna in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
- 18) Before these masters, most of the authors (composers) of the writings were anonymous. It is possible to speculate that the authorship was established in Shan written culture in this era. Suthiwong considers the anonymous authorship in local literature of Southern Thailand and notices three types of “author,” as composer, maker and transcriber (Suthiwong 1995: 225–226). The same may be said of the Shan written culture before these masters.
- 19) For details of the process of the revival movement of Shan written culture since the 1940s, see Sai Kam Mong (2004). And for the relation between the ethnic identity of Shan and this movement in Myanmar and Thailand, see Takatani (2003, 2005) and Murakami (2002).
- 20) This table is made from the biographical data in Khun Maha (1970).
- 21) Moeng Ting is the “moeng” in Gengma county, Yunnan, Southwest China.
- 22) There are some disagreements even in the biographies edited by Khun Maha (cf. Khun Maha 1970; 1998).
- 23) *Maeng Kyo* is said to be the sect which was established by Burmese Buddhist missionary from Burma proper in nineteenth century. For the brief histories of Shan Buddhist sects, see Kang Kham (2003).
- 24) Nang Kamku, the daughter of Cao Kangsoe, is the only exception in six *Khu Mo Lik Tai*. In Shan Buddhist tradition, as well as most of Theravadin traditions, women are not allowed to be ordained as a nun.
- 25) One of the masters, Cao Amat long Moeng Nong, was appointed as the prime minister by the Lord of Moeng Kung (cf. Khun Maha 1970).
- 26) Wyatt describes the situation of the Sangha in traditional Thai society and notes that the many learned monks of non-noble origins left monastic order for government service (Wyatt 1994).
- 27) Sai Kam Mong points out the “Burmanization” of *Khu Mo Lik Tai* and states “the most Burmanized Shan writer, Sao Naw Hkam, used many Burmese and Pali words mixed with Shan in his writings.

This shows the popularity of the Burmese language during the period and also the writer's urge to exhibit his skill in Burmese" (Sai Kam Mong 2004: 139). For Burmanization in the aspect of spirit-worship and the Sangha order of Shan, see Takatani (1998).

28) This would be to say "literate orality" (Ong 1982: 157).

29) Monks make the translations, explanations, commentaries and adaptations in the sermons to instruct lay people, but monks rarely write down their sermons in writing and do not recite *lik long* as *care* do. There is also the scholastic tradition which includes the translations, explanations and commentaries on the scriptural knowledge in the monastic order. Most of these are writings for the monastic inner circle, not for lay people. To discuss this "literally" literal tradition in a monastic order as a whole is beyond the scope of this essay.

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