The preservation of lik-luong poetic literature among the Shan communities of Northern Thailand

Jotika Khur-yearn
Kate Crosby

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/arv

Part of the Asian Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.58837/CHULA.ARV.22.1.4
Available at: https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/arv/vol22/iss1/5
The preservation of *lik-luong* poetic literature among the Shan communities of Northern Thailand

Jotika Khur-yearn and Kate Crosby

Abstract

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.

Introduction

*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 days when the tsale recites to the “temple sleepers.” Temple sleepers are lay people who take on the eight 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, age twenty 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.

Picture 1: Cataloguing of lik luong manuscripts at Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Chiang Mai
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 catalogue the manuscripts of four temples in very different situations (see picture 1).

One of the four temples is Wat Tiyasathan, which is near Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. While one of us (Jotika Khur-yearn) 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 used 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 Jong Klang, Wat Pang Mu, and Wat Ta Pung. We shall now explain why we selected them and how they differ.

Wat Tiyasatthan was established by Shan traders a hundred years ago in the village of Mae Taeng. At that time, the village was a crossing point on the important Mae Taeng River, which acted as a major transport route from Fang in the north down to the Ping River, of which it is a tributary. The Ping is one of the largest rivers in Thailand reaching from Chiang Mai to the 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 east-west trade on the oxen route between the southern Shan states 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 government. Moreover, the area was occupied by the Japanese during World War Two. 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 motorized. As a result, we
now have a Shan temple in a predominately non-Shan area. In fact, after World War Two, the temple was without permanently resident monks until the current abbot took up his position in the early 1970s after escaping ahead of the advancing Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, where he had been administering to the Shan mining community in Pailin. In response to the multi-ethnic context, the abbot ensures support for the temple, even from non-Shan, by offering a combination of counseling with protective and healing rituals, which he learnt from the texts of a 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 again to the abbot of this temple, Phra Siwan Warinda.

After leaving Cambodia, the abbot of Wat Tiyasatthan, Phra Sriwan Warinda, 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 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. 6 While Phra 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 Maehongson 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 Maehongson where a kind of paper mache of lik luong mixed with flowers was molded onto a rattan frame.

Phra 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 nineteenth and early twentieth 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 their homes are located in different places rather than in
concentrated communities. This means 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 they scatter to different locations for work.

Two of the other temples we looked at were in the Maehongson area, closer to the Burmese border. Wat Pang Mu is a little way out of Maehongson 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 Maehongson town itself in the late nineteenth 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 an extremely well-preserved collection of around a thousand 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, situated 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 twentieth 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 monk was also a close friend of the provincial head governor and negotiated a compromise under which 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 (fifteenth century). 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 eighty in the area. One tsale, Tsale Saw, recently started an organization 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 Shan temple, Wat Phanon. However, Wat Phanon is far less well preserved, having been in a state of near ruin when the current abbot first took charge around thirty years ago. One reason 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 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 more experienced tsale were also usually 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, centralized Shan community is required. We note that the dispersed 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 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 experienced 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 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 sixty *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 sixteenth 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* (see picture 3), 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 from 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 of making extra efforts to preserve the Shan material. Previously the Shan were also 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 *t-sales* connected with each copy indicates that these collections are of great interest for understanding the history of the Shan and of Theravada Buddhism.

*Notes*

1 We would like to express our gratitude to the research committee of ASEASUK for this funding. ASEASUK is the acronym for the Association of South-East Asian Studies, UK, one of the functions of which is to provide grants for research into the region by UK-based scholars (www.aseasuk.org.uk).

2 Barend Jan Terwiel with Chaichuen Khamdaengyodtai, *Shan Manuscripts* Part 1. Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 2003. We would like to thank David Wharton for guiding one of us (Kate Crosby) through the system being used by the DLLM in Vientiane in early May 2009, in preparation for our project. For details, visit DLLM website www.laomanuscripts.net. While the DLLM does not provide summaries for their Laos manuscripts, we were influenced by the summaries David Wharton has been producing of Tai Neau literature on a separate project. Thus we have attempted to include in our catalogues summaries of all the manuscripts examined. Terwiel and Khamdeangyodtai have also included summaries for some of the particularly interesting entries in their catalogue.

3 We would like to thank Ven. Khammai Dhammasami for his suggestion, at a planning meeting in August 2008, that we include the temple Wat Ta Pung in Lashio. Initially Khammai Dhammasami had hoped to participate in the cataloguing, but was unable to do so. However, we are very grateful for his good offices in organizing the Lashio work and also preliminary work by Tsale Saw in Maehongson.

4 The information we provide here about the different temples is based on interviews we conducted during July 2009 with local people, but especially with the head monks of the three temples in Thailand. We would like to thank Phra Siwan Warinda, the abbot of Wat Tiyasathan, Phra Sasano, the abbot of Wat Phanon, and Phra Jitta, the abbot of Wat Jong Klang. Wat Tiyasathan has also recently published a commemorative volume to mark the centenary of its foundation, which contains some information relevant to its history. The information about Wat Ta Pung in Lashio was provided by Khammai Dhammasami, personal communication, August 2009.

5 Interviews with the head monk of Wat Tiyasathan and with the descendants and some devotees of Wat Tiyasathan, particularly the daughter in law of Mr
Nantiya, the founder of Wat Tiyasathan on 16–19 July 2009.

6 1962 is the date of the military coup which marked the end of democracy in Burma and the concurrent diminishment of the negotiations between the Burman majority and other ethnic groups, particularly the Shan, which marked the federal nature of the pre-coup Union of Burma.

7 Information about the founding of the temple had been handed down to the current abbot by his predecessors. Interview, 22 July 2009.

8 We and Tsale Saw of Maehongson, who was working with us, were particularly interested by the presence of the Sihalavatthuppakarana, a medieval collection of stories from Sri Lanka. For the Pali version, see J. Ver Eecke, *Le Sihalavatthuppakarana: texte Pali et traduction*, Paris: EFEO, 1980. A summary of the Shan version will be included in our forthcoming catalogue.