

## CHAPTER 6

### DIVERSE BUDDHIST MOVEMENTS IN SHAN STATE

The Phra Khammai-led Shan *Sangha*, a group of monks mainly from Shan State, Myanmar, has been active as a transnational Buddhist movement abroad for over two decades, especially in Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, and Singapore, as well in the UK and a few other European countries, providing education, spiritual guidance, and *Dhammāduta* missions. This chapter discusses the activities of Phra Khammai's movement in its homeland, Shan State. In particular, it will describe the process in which Phra Khammai and his colleagues presently work to carry out their Buddhist education projects while coordinating and connecting with many actors and movements in Shan State. One main actor is the Shan State Sangha Council (SSSC), which has been crucial for Shan *Sangha* affairs for nearly six decades. Although this Shan *Sangha* organization has not been allowed to operate independently from the Myanmar state *Sangha* governing body since the purification of *Buddha-sāsana* program initiated by General Ne Win's government, it has its own rights to exercise for the welfare of the Shan State *Sangha* and related Buddhist communities. Besides the SSSC, Phra Khammai and his colleagues have also been involved and coordinated with the *Lik Long* literacy movement and other sectarian movements led by Shan monks. This demonstrates Phra Khammai's role and influence in the development of Shan *Sangha* education and the revival of Shan Buddhism in Shan State.

#### 6.1 Buddhist monastic education and academic activities

The founding of a Buddhist university in Shan State is by all means the symbol of the Shan *Sangha* movement's greatest achievement in both academic space and *Dhamma* missions. It shows their academic capacity and competency. Nevertheless, those achievements have not come without significant challenges. At the same time, the founding of the university is an advantage that now paves the way for the Shan *Sangha* movement to stand firm in Myanmar and in the Buddhist world at large. This achievement

is not the result of a single individual's efforts, as Phra Khammai himself has repeatedly said, but rather collective efforts. The creation of the university is 'collective action' in the sense that the efforts that have led to the establishment of the Shan State Buddhist University (SSBU) have occurred in a multicultural context inclusive of multiple ethnicities. This provides us a clear view of the Shan *Sangha* network's multiple layers of identities.

At one point, Phra Khammai expressed:

“[The] SSBU, however, is going to be our place and mainly our responsibility. ‘Our’ here means the Tai [Shan] *Sangha* and our supporters. So we must be competent internationally so that we can lead them. I think our international Pali conference has proven to many that we are capable of running a big academic project such as SSBU. Other Buddhist universities in Myanmar and Thailand have shown interest and support to SSBU. So, that is an encouraging sign.”<sup>94</sup>

It becomes clear that the Shan *Sangha* has reserved a place for itself to play a major role in the SSBU once the university is up and running. This is the role that Phra Khammai will lead the Shan *Sangha* and people to play. Nevertheless, they must be ‘academically competent,’ as Phra Khammai warns. Otherwise, priority reservations or nepotism cannot be guaranteed in the long run. The members of the Shan *Sangha* movement seem to well understand that academic qualifications assist them in their goals. Clearly, the Pali conference held in Taunggyi earned them credit from international scholars for their academic competency.

The new university in Taunggyi, is for the time being, known by the working name ‘Shan State Buddhist University’ (SSBU), as “the Rector *Sayadaw* of ITBMU is considering a name from one of the disciples of the Buddha,” said Phra Khammai. He guarantees that the SSBU will be universal and open to all. That means whoever is qualified will be admitted regardless of one's background. However, the main aim and purpose of the institution is to give priority to the people of Shan State. Therefore, those who come from other states and regions within Myanmar must have resided in Shan State at least for a

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<sup>94</sup> Correspondent email circulated to key colleagues of Phra Khammai in early January 2015.

period of two years to qualify for admission. The medium of instruction will solely be English. “English is the medium of instruction [because it] is easier to get started with resources and information, books and documents, as research materials are widely available in the language. It is also true for Buddhist studies, as we have found a wide range of books and academic articles on the topics are available in English,” said Phra Khammai.

Considering the final name of the university may be derived from the name of a disciple of the Buddha, the word ‘Buddhist’ may not be part of the official name. However, it will still likely carry a sense of Buddhism, but one that is less likely to convey a vulnerable and secular atmosphere.

#### **6.1.1 Establishing Shan State Buddhist University (SSBU)**

In November 2014, a number of Buddhist religio-cultural-related celebrations and festivities were held to honor the establishment of the Shan State Buddhist University (SSBU), including a *Kathina* ceremony, a hot-air balloon competition, Shan New Year celebrations, and more. The year 2014 was also coincident with Phra Khammai’s golden jubilee celebrations. Shan New Year events were held from 20–22 November, and Phra Khammai’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday event occurred on 22 November, followed by the announcement of the founding of Shan State Buddhist University. The permitted statement of SSBU project by the government and the members of the Chief Executive Nayaka Committee (CENC) and Executive Nayaka Committee (ENC) is indexed in Appendix B (p. 237).

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Figure 6.1 Dr. Sai Muak Kham, the Vice President, attending Shan State Buddhist University foundation laying ceremony, 23 November 2014.

During the golden jubilee event, Phra Khammai also took the opportunity to convene two conferences: the first international Pali-speaking conference held in Taunggyi on 18–19 December, a month after his birthday, and the second *Lik Long* Conference held 28–30 December in his hometown, Laikha. These celebrations were conducted under the guidance of the Shan sociocultural context and a new academic environment. Certainly, the Pali-speaking conference demonstrated not only the Shan *Sangha*'s Pali language skills, but also their strong academic capacities. This Pali-speaking conference was the first of its kind not only in Shan State's history, but also the first such conference to be held in all of Myanmar. Even among the Myanmar *Sangha*, this academic event raised eyebrows and caused high-level monks to take notice. Through my personal contacts,

Phra Khammai said: “This is to declare to the world that the Shan *Sangha* is ready to face challenges, as we are becoming more academically competent.”<sup>95</sup>

With several programs and activities planned, one of the biggest and longest-ever celebrations to honour an individual monk were underway in Shan State. That was when Phra Khammai turned 50, on 22 November 2014. Among the many events, an official announcement regarding the establishment of SSBU was part of the golden jubilee marking the celebration. This celebration was organized by a chain of networks, and it involved several different groups many people from different countries.

Phra Khammai has come to lead the Shan *Sangha* to operate the *Dhammāduta* journey and to disseminate education through its network. The Shan *Sangha*’s educational and affiliated networks include: Mahachulalongkorn-rajabidyalaya University (MCU), Mahamakut Buddhist University (MBU), International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Yangon, Sitagu International Buddhist Academy (SIBA) in the Sagaing Hills, Sariputta College in Muse, Shan State, and a Buddhist college in Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna), China. Apart from this, Phra Khammai is also acting as a visiting scholar to Bangkok, Indonesia, and Singapore, and conducts meditation and *Dhamma* classes on a regular basis in Denmark, Belgium, and Spain in various Buddhist institutions.

Along with his *Dhammāduta* mission and educational journey abroad for over two decades, Shan monks have now begun to establish Buddhist revivalism in Shan State through education. To establish the SSBU, Phra Khammai associates himself with all of the above institutions. At the official foundation-laying ceremony in Taunggyi, the abbot of Phra Rama IX Temple and followers were present to witness the occasion. They not only witnessed the event, but offered their generosity in the form of donations to the SSBU project in considerable amounts.

The establishment of a Buddhist university was, however, neither an accidental idea nor a sudden aspiration. Phra Khammai may have planned for several years before he announced to have one officially. Members of the modern Shan *Sangha* network acquired

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<sup>95</sup> Interview, personal contact through email in early 2014.

their knowledge of Buddhism through traditional monastic learning in Myanmar for over a decade or more, and then the modern Western method of learning outside the country for many years. In addition, since 2007, Phra Khammai has helped bring together many Buddhist and secular universities with Buddhist studies departments to form two associations: the International Association of Buddhist Universities (IABU) and the Association of Theravada Buddhist Universities (ATBU). Since their inception, he has been the Secretary General of both.

“The concept of SSBU is inspired by the progress of Buddhist universities at home and abroad,” said Phra Khammai. In Myanmar there exists two state-sponsored *Sangha* universities. The first is known as State Pariyatti Sasana University, founded in 1980 with one campus in Yangon at Kaba-Aye Hill and another in Mandalay near Mandalay Hill south-west of the former royal capital. Sitagu International Buddhist Academy (SIBA) in Sagaing is the second, and some other Buddhist colleges within the country have served as additional inspiration for the SSBU. Many universities and independent colleges in the West and Asia with departments or centers of Buddhist Studies also exist. For the Shan monks and Phra Khammai, these Buddhist institutions have served as additional inspiration for them to found their own university. Since the late 1990s, in fact, Phra Khammai has been dreaming about setting up a Buddhist university for those from Shan State and other parts of the Union of Myanmar, as well as overseas, interested in the in-depth study of the Theravada Buddhist tradition and its application to daily life. “Not only have Buddhist universities been a trend for the study of Buddhism at the higher education levels, but a Buddhist university is the place where the best and brightest students can be trained properly for the future of Buddhism itself and that of mankind,” said Phra Khammai.

When I visited the UK in early 2004, Phra Khammai was already working on completing his Ph.D with high speed. In that year, he was also organizing to establish a Theravada center in Oxford, which was later named ‘Oxford Buddha Vihara’ (OBV) following many existing Buddhist centers somewhere in the UK which include ‘Vihara’ as part of their



name.<sup>96</sup> He was thinking of having a Theravada center at Oxford for some time back before he actually started his Ph.D program. On the other hand, he was also offering spiritual guidance, meditation retreats, instruction, and Buddhist teachings to several Buddhist communities, including Burmese, Thai, Sri Lankan, and others in the UK. Before he reached Oxford, he was living at a Sri Lankan Buddhist center in London; there he helped the abbot teach the *Dhamma* School every Sunday for Sri Lankan children to catch up with their native language, culture, and Buddhism.

As an Oxford educator, Phra Khammai has gained access not only to the Western education system, but to international Buddhist institutions worldwide. Having experience with the Western education system and having visited Buddhist universities and institutions worldwide, Phra Khammai wants SSBU to combine the best of what Myanmar monastic traditional learning and some Western universities and Buddhist institutions in the east and west can offer. Myanmar textual study traditions, such as the method taught for *Thamane-kyaw* and *Dhammacariya* levels,<sup>97</sup> are a treasure of wisdom. Phra Khammai further explains: “At Oxford and Cambridge, a tutorial system is the norm; this requires students to write essays for every topic in each subject he studies. Harvard University stresses a comprehension exercise at the graduate level where students are given work to digest and summarize on a weekly basis. At all those top Western universities, students have to learn how to use the library, search for information on their own, and produce a weekly essay, after which they meet the teacher for discussion.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Vihāra* (Pali), meaning chamber of the Buddha or temple.

<sup>97</sup> *Thamane-kyaw* or “brilliant *Samanera*” is one of the many monastic examinations held in Myanmar. As the name suggests, the *Thamane-kyaw* exam is designed to train novice-monks to become “brilliant” ones. The candidate should complete the exam before they receive higher ordination or under the age of 20 while they are still a *Samanera*. It is a non-governmental exam, but is recognized to a certain degree and widely known as one of the national examinations. Pariyatti Sasanahita Association in Mandalay organized the *Thamane-kyaw* election examination in 1950 (1311 Myanmar-era), two years after independence from the British, with the aim of promoting education and turning out a new generation of brilliant *Samaneras* for the propagation of *Pariyatti Sasana* (monastic education). One who has completed the three levels of *Thamane-kyaw* may become competent with not only Pali language, but also with Buddhist literature itself.

<sup>98</sup> Phra Khammai’s SSBU concept, circulated prior to the SSBU’s foundation laying ceremony in November 2014.

Phra Khammai stresses a good level of philological approach to university education. At the same time, he also emphasizes a sound knowledge of the Pali and English languages, as well as a mastery of the Pali literatures, the Tripitaka. By these means, SSBU will ensure that the highest possible standards are maintained both by the teachers and students, individually and collectively. “For the development of SSBU, three components will be adopted from where the top Western universities stand out,” said Phra Khammai. The three components include: (1) the low student-teacher ratio, i.e one teacher to four or five students; (2) the absolute integration of the library in the teaching system, i.e students who do not use the library cannot write an essay, not to mention pass exams; and (3) a good library in which information and resources are up-to-date. “This system is what SSBU aims at adopting in order to serve *Buddha-sāsana* (Buddhism) through a Buddhist university,” said Phra Khammai.<sup>99</sup>

In addition to academic learning, the university will also provide meditation facilities to cater to the spiritual needs and well-being of the students and practitioners. “Today, in the West, scientists are using Buddhist mindfulness meditation (Pali: *Samatha*) to advance neurology and clinical psychology,” said Phra Khammai. As a Buddhist university, the SSBU aims to make some contribution in those developments.

According to my informant, the SSBU will begin with a research program, but the details of the plan, including the syllabi and curriculum, are not yet known. According to my informant, the university is set to officially open on 7 February 2016. The following year will be the period for detailed preparations, such as teacher and academic staff trainings for the actual courses. Phra Khammai describes his approach to education as a ‘learning System,’ meaning both teachers and students are learning together in the classroom environment. A teacher, ‘the knowledge-giver,’ does not necessarily know everything, and students, ‘knowledge-receivers,’ should not be taken for granted as knowing nothing and only accepting what the teacher teaches. With this model, Phra Khammai envisions that in a teaching-learning environment, the relationship between students and teachers

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*



should be one of exchanging knowledge. A teacher may act as a ‘guide’ in most situations, but does not impose his ideas to be accepted as final.

It is clear that Phra Khammai’s thoughts, ideas, and vision of education have a strong Western influence. SSBU’s architecture is a symbolic reflection of Western norms of greatness in education. Apart from information obtained through media and printed materials widely available, according to my informant, the architecture of the university has adopted some forms of European style. Phra Khammai seems to be inspired by the Gothic architecture of top education institutions with high ceilings in a more airy and bright environment.

While several constructions are ongoing, the first stage of SSBU’s development began with the library building. “A good library building and administration system is prioritized,” said Phra Khammai (2014). His concept of a well-designed library includes an environmentally-friendly and spacious building structure with high ceilings and large windows, and thick walls with insulation. For the time being, as of December 2014, Phra Khammai further states: “The master plan for the construction of the whole SSBU is not yet finalized; it is clear, however, that a library which includes some lecture rooms, office space, and a store room is the top priority. Without a library, no university is possible.”

Here, a good library, for Phra Khammai, means a collection of relevant books, either in printed or virtual/digital formats. It is also likely that the library will be installed with modern digital technology, as a library is also about the interaction of wisdom between generations as much as between various peoples with different insights, which means the practical use of the library by serious students and researchers. Phra Khammai has been inspired by the collections at Oxford and other Buddhist institutions, and said: “Over the years, Oxford University has collected over ten thousand books related to aspects of Buddhism. A Sri Lankan Buddhist university at Anuradhapura has over thirty thousand books in three languages: Pali, Sinhala, and English. It will be an enormous task to collect essential books from around the world. SSBU will subscribe to important publishers and

form interconnections with global libraries so that it can keep up with the latest secondary sources of information.”



Figure 6.2 My informant posing for a photo at the construction site of the SSBU library, November 2015. [Photo: Herngseng]

With a good library alone, however, the university may not become an excellent institution. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that from the very beginning, the founders of SSBU will provide an excellent foundation for research orientation. Quoting Phra Khammai’s speech in Chiang Mai, Venerable Sayadaw Dr. Nandamala Abhivamsa, the rector of the ITBMU, was reported to advise him in October 2014 that, “quality must take priority over quantity at any Buddhist university; it is a gradual step. Therefore, in order to achieve that, a firm foundation in academic, financial, university networking, and administrative matters must be established.”

Phra Khammai said: “Ven. Dr. Nandamala Abhivamsa has been a source of constant encouragement and leadership in SSBU. While in Sri Lanka together, he often

encouraged me to set up a Buddhist university in Shan State. He has been doing so each time when I was teaching as a visiting professor at ITBMU.” In November 2014, SSBU was officially opened and the foundation was laid by Dr. Sai Mauk Kham, the Vice President of Myanmar. Now that SSBU is happening, the Rector *Sayadaw* has very kindly agreed to serve on the Academic Committee once SSBU is up and running. Reportedly, he has also made a generous contribution of 10 million *kyats* (USD 9,708, or THB 320,000) to the SSBU, becoming the first donor. “For the development of the SSBU, constant advice and blessings will be sought not only from the Rector *Sayadaw* but other leading *Sayadaws*,” said Phra Khammai. As a developer who has initiated this SSBU project and is committed to its success, he welcomes everyone, from all nationalities and regions, to take part in this rare opportunity—to participate in the historic project of SSBU to make it a success. “One can contribute in many ways: financially, academically, administratively, or otherwise,” Phra Khammai said. The establishment of a Buddhist university in Shan State is a historical landmark and a milestone of the tireless work of Phra Khammai as an educationist and *Dhammadūta* for over two decades. He invites contributions and accepts all forms of help, whether they be small or otherwise, for this important project.

According to my informants and information available, the Shan State government, headed by Sao Aung Myat, is taking an active role in constructing SSBU. Although he was not initially convinced that SSBU could be developed, the Chief Minister of Shan State has formed a committee with the State Minister for Religious Affairs as its chairman. His immediate responsibility is to construct the buildings his position is secured and capable of doing so. This project is also supported by the Shan State government and guided when necessary by Vice President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Dr. Sai Mauk Kham, a native of Lashio, northern Shan State. It is not known, however, whether the central government supports the project, or how far it is willing to go to offer morale support for the development of SSBU.



Figure 6.3 Dining hall with gothic architectural features, SSBU under construction, November 2015. [Photo: Herngseng]

Obviously, SSBU's development is meant for universal purposes, regardless of ethnic considerations, religious beliefs, and differences in political views that people may hold. "A successful SSBU will add to the glory of not just Buddhism in the Union of Myanmar, but also the whole Buddhist world and indeed beyond," said Phra Khammai. He is enthusiastic to develop Buddhist education with a world-class university in Shan State with a global vision for *Dhammadūta*.

### 6.1.2 Organizing conferences

During his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations, there were a number of events associated with the marking of Phra Khammai's achievements. Among the key events include: the first International Pali Conference, the second *Lik Long* Conference, the founding of the SSBU, the provision of free healthcare and dental surgery during the celebration month,

renovation of the emergency care unit (ICU) for a general hospital, the construction of a *Sangha* hospital in Laikha, and so on.

Among them, the International Pali Conference held in Taunggyi was the first-ever forum and gathering for Buddhist and Pali scholars from around the world in Myanmar. “This is to declare the maturity of the *Tai Sangha* in Theravada academia,” said Phra Khammai. The theme of the Pali-speaking conference was “influential figures in *Pariyatti* (monastic learning) and/or *Paṭipatti* (meditation) in the Theravada Buddhist world in the 19–20<sup>th</sup> centuries.” The Pali conference was organized by the SSSC and supported by the Shan Literature Committee from different townships in Shan State with the patronage of the Shan State government and its people.

There were a total of 160 international conference participants, including Pali and Buddhist scholars who presented their work during the conference in Taunggyi. Thai *Sangha* observers from Mahachulalongkorn and Mahamakut and Sri Lankan Buddhist monks were among the participants and supporters of the conference. Venerable Phra Dr. Somlak Gandhasarābhivamsa,<sup>100</sup> abbot of Wat Tah Ma-Oh, Lampang, also chaired one of the sessions. About 30 participants came from the Thai *Sangha* from Bangkok, headed by the abbot of Phra Rama IX temple, and attended the conference as observers. Some of them were among the supporters of organizing team. The second international Pali-speaking conference was recently held at Sri Jayawardenepura in Sri Lanka with foreign scholar participants.

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<sup>100</sup> Phra Dr. Somlak studied Pali and monastic education according to the existing curriculum in Mandalay, Myanmar, for ten years. He speaks Pali and Burmese well. He became the abbot of Wat Tah Ma-Oh in Lampang with the passing of its founder who was a Burmese national. He continues using the Burmese monastic education system with a special focus on Pali-learning at his monastery.



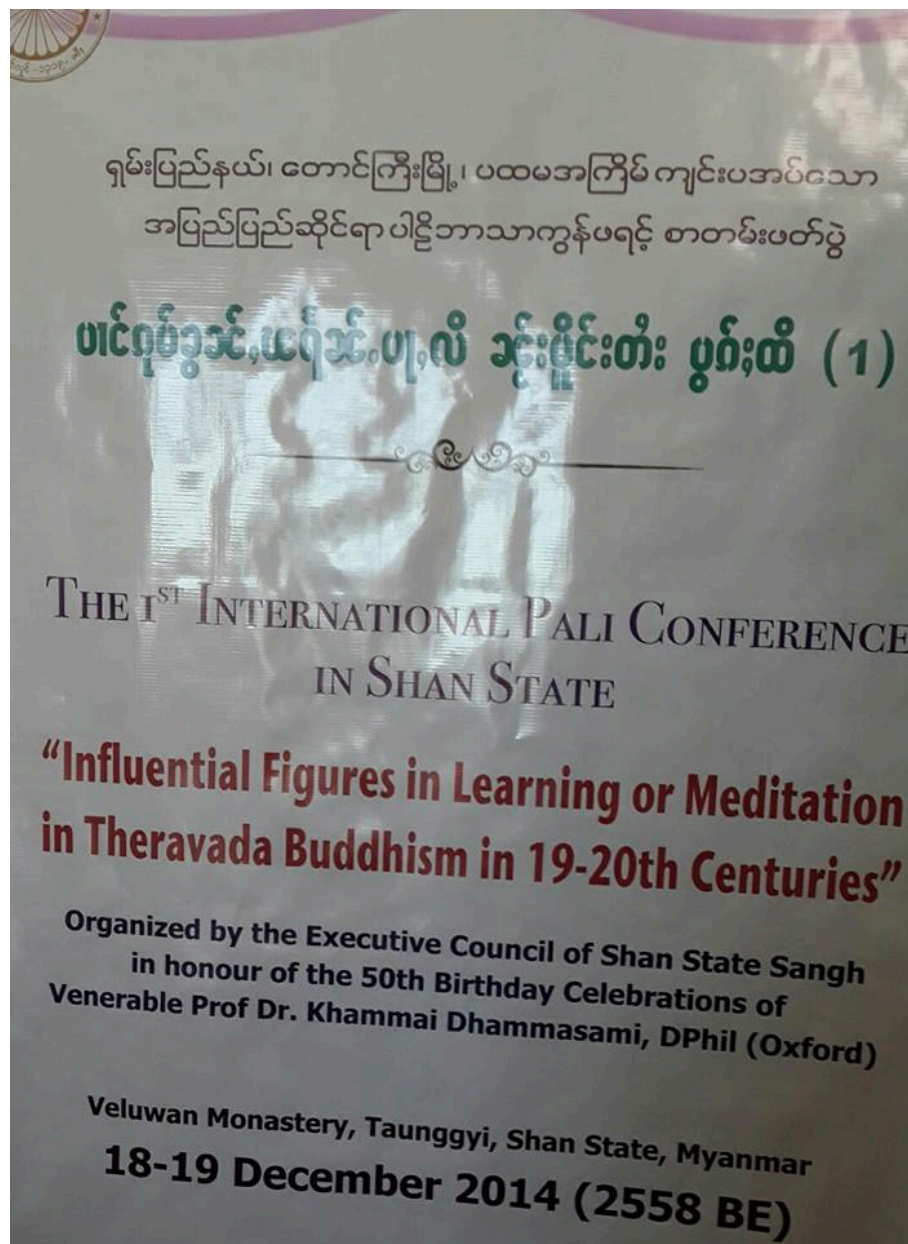


Figure 6.4 The First International Pali Conference in Taunggyi, Shan State – 18–19 December 2014.

In the Theravada Buddhist world, apart from reading, writing, and understanding Pali compressively, speaking the language is an additional skill valued by Theravadin scholars. Pali-speaking scholars among Buddhist monks in the modern time are rare, although many are able to read the language comprehensively. As far as I can foresee, the Shan State Buddhist University will certainly give special attention to including specialized Pali curriculum as a language study apart from learning the texts. The

promotion of Pali language learning will certainly encourage monks not only to read the texts, but also learn to speak the language. Some of the monastic institutions in Burma have actually given special emphasis for young monks to learn Pali language and become capable of writing and speaking. For instance, Mahagandhayon Taik in Amarapura, Pajjotarama in Myaung Mya, in the Irrawaddy Delta region, and some sections of large monastic institutes in Mandalay and Pakokku are among the few to promote Pali learning more than the state monastic education system can offer.

## **6.2 Modern Shan literature and culture movements**

### **6.2.1 Shan Literati Day (*Wan Khumaw Tai*)**

The Shan literacy movement dates back to the 1960s when the Shan State Education Committee began to promote Shan literacy and culture with the celebration of *Wan Khumaw Tai*, or Shan Literati Day. The theme of the celebration is purposively to promote Shan literacy among the Shans, and to preserve and maintain Shan cultural identity on the one hand, and to celebrate an awareness of Shan scholars on the other. For its scholarly aspect, seminars on Shan literature and several competitions such as language skills, poetry-composing, singing, recitation, and writing in vernacular style poetry, and reading of poetic *Dhamma* texts are held. Shan intellectuals engage themselves in several competitions of poetry composition and recitation. Thus, promotion comes in different forms. Promotion also comes in the form of music, with modern songs and pop music culture. The Shans have begun to become aware that there is a need to uplift Shan literacy among the Shans. Subsequently, the Shan Literature and Culture Society (SLCS) emerged in the mid-1970s; branches of this association exist in almost every city in Shan State.

The Shan literacy movement began when Sra Sai Aung Tun led Shan students from Rangoon University (RASU) and Mandalay University to organize to teach language in Shan villages in Pegu, Taungoo, Phyu, and Rangoon regions. This movement was known as '*Ma Ha Toa*,' nicknamed as the 'Five Horses Shan Literature Movement.'<sup>101</sup> After

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<sup>101</sup> *Ma Ha Toa* = Five Ms (horses), meaning five skills of learning a language: *Maw lu* (reading), *Maw tem* (writing), *Maw lat* (speaking), *Maw pawng* (management), and *Maw sawn* (teaching).



attempting to develop Shan literacy in mainland Burma, where Shan people live in villages, they then later moved on to Shan State in every township possible. The rise of the Shan Five Horse movement was in response to the Burmese literature movement known as *Ah-thone-lone* (Three As).<sup>102</sup> Sai Sengya, now the president of the Chiang Mai-based Shan Literature and Culture Society, said: “In 1980, I was one of the volunteers helping to teach Shan with Shan university students in Kyaukme. The place I was assigned to teach is Kung Pao Awn, a village near the famous Goke Hteik Bridge built by the British making the railway connection through Kyaukme and Nawngkhio possible. When I was in the village to help a group of elderly people learn the Shan letters, there an incident of gunshots that occurred in the class at the monastery I was assigned,” according to my personal interview. Another incident also took place at Nawng Ping, at a distance of eight kilometers from Kyaukme. That was when a huge branch of *Mai Hung* (a kind of evergreen large tree) fell on Shan literature-learning students underneath the tree. Among the casualties, eight people were known to have died on the spot, most of them being young students and teachers. According to some rumors that are not independently verifiable, the falling huge branch of the tree was rigged by some unknown group seeking a way to stop the Shan literature movement. That branch could have been half-cut just to be sustained for a few days, and when the wind blew, the branch managed to fall easily. Since then, the Shan *Ma Ha Toa* literature movement was officially banned. Gradually, Shan journals produced in many townships in Shan State, in Mandalay, and Rangoon were also ceased. A Shan monk or someone else in the possession of such literature was subject to be arrested.

### 6.2.2 Shan Tripitaka translation project

Saosra Mongkut is among the high-ranking members of the Shan *Sangha* who has both education in Burma and abroad. He was among the few *Dhammacariya* graduates and a master in Buddhist studies from Sri Lanka. He famously created Shan-Pali scripts and a writing system in the late 1990s, and officially submitted to the Shan State Sangha Council assembly in 2002 for approval. The first book ever written using the new Shan-

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<sup>102</sup> Three As stands for three skills: *Ah-ye* (writing), *Ah-phat* (reading), and *Ah-pyo* (speaking). The Shan responded with its Five Ms (Five Horses).

Pali script was *Lokanīti* with Shan translation by Saosra Mongkut. The script was controversial for its lack of proper research, particularly to Phra Khammai and some lay intellectuals. The Shan-Pali project was actually initiated by Phra Khammai in Colombo in the late 1990s. Due to the difficulty of gathering fellow monks to become interested in the project, and lacking research skills and proper training, the project was unable to move forward. Meanwhile, Saosra Mongkut, bypassing the Shan-Pali project research, took a leading role to create the scripts instead. Saosra Sukham and Saosra Nando were among the people who offered some input. There was an urgent need for Saosra Sukham to submit the Shan-Pali scripts to the state *Sangha* committee to prove that Shans are capable of writing Pali. Amid the controversy, the Shan-Pali script has gradually received recognition and has now become adopted by the Shan *Sangha*. Phra Khammai is known to have disfavored the rushed project. Nevertheless, at one point he said, “In the course of time, if people gradually do adopt it, I have no objection about the new Shan-Pali scripts.”

Saosra Mongkut is a scholar of Shan poetic literature and the current head of the Shan Tripitaka translation project, known as the Association for Shan Tripitaka Translation (ASTT) located in the premises of SSSC headquarters in Panglong. He is the author of many books on Shan literature and poetic *Dhamma*. He has also translated many sutras into Shan. He is in fact one of very few modern Shan critical writers. His critiques may appear in his writings as well as his *Dhamma* talks. He works quietly by prioritizing writing and translating Pali texts into Shan among many *Buddha-sasana*-related literature, but humbles himself as a scholar. For the Shan Tripitaka translation project, however, Saosra Mongkut works not alone but with a team under the guidance of Saosra Dhattaw.

### 6.2.3 *Lik Long* and *Lik Long* conferences

One way to authenticate Shan Buddhist identity is through *Lik Long*<sup>103</sup> literature, which is the oldest form of Shan intellectual and traditional knowledge. The Shan State of

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<sup>103</sup> *Lik Long* is also spelled as *Lik Loung* by other scholars such as Tadayoshi Murakami. *Lik Loung* is actually used by the Shan Literati conference conveners. The term is usually translated into English as ‘Great Texts’ or ‘Great Manuscripts.’

Myanmar is a stronghold of Theravada Buddhism, although Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and animism also exist. Within the state, many different ethnic nationalities, such as Shan, Pa-O, and Ta'ang (Palaung), possess centuries-old Theravada Buddhist literatures composed in poetic and elaborate styles in their own languages. The contents of these literatures are primarily derived from Pali sources, including sutras and relevant commentaries. The poetic style of the works is intended for listening, rather than reading, and its rhyming forms a prominent feature of the compositions. In Shan it is called *Lik Long*, the 'Great Texts.' *Lik Long* is meant to be read aloud by a *Jare* who possesses an appealing voice during functions at monastic religious functions or at funeral homes.

Another achievement of the Shan *Sangha*'s movement is that it has been able to bring together Shan lay-intellectuals and monks in searching for common ground in Shan Buddhism, for example, during the two *Lik Long* conferences held in 2013 and 2014. *Lik Long* conferences are intended to narrow the gap between traditional and modern Shan intellectuals and to bring both traditions together for the exchange of information. However, many *Jares*, intellectuals, and some high-ranking Shan *Sangha* members have recently voiced serious concern about the preservation of the knowledge and contents of Shan manuscripts. Dr. Sai Sangpe, a prominent Shan *Lik Long* scholar, warned at the First *Lik Long* Conference in Yangon in 2013 about the current condition of Shan manuscripts due to both a lack of maintenance and lack of interest in the new generation to study them. Dr. Sai Sangpe noted: "I am sorry to say, but it is true that the condition of *Lik Long* is like it is suffering from cancer. We are in the position of not knowing what exact disease it is suffering from, nor do we know the proper method for its treatment."<sup>104</sup> Today, most Shan intellectuals, including Phra Khammai and many prominent monks and *Jares*, believe that there is the need to revive the *Lik Long* tradition, which forms the foundation of Shan Buddhism and knowledge.

'*Khut-seng khut nai-lik*' literally means 'mining gems from literature,' with the official English translation being "Treasure from Tai Great Texts." This was the theme of the *Lik Long* conferences in Yangon in 2013 and Laikha in 2014, and will certainly appear during

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<sup>104</sup> Video clip, Internet public domain. The First *Lik Long* Conference, 27–29 December, Yangon. Accessed: October 2015.

future conferences. This indicates that Shan *Lik Long* literature is a ‘wealth of wisdom’ that requires unearthing. The Phra Khammai-led Shan *Sangha* and the Shan *Jares* have recently prioritized unearthing pieces of *Lik Long* literature that remain largely uncategorized. Roughly, the contents of *Lik Long* include writings on Buddhism, along with some local beliefs, history, and analysis of the ‘Shan worldview,’ aspects that challenge pre-conceptions about “binary oppositions” in Buddhism (Crosby & Khur-Yearn, 2010: 13); for instance, the binary oppositions or tensions between adherences of the religion (such as monks) and the superstitious masses; between the learning of monks and the assumed inferior understanding of lay people; and between rational/reformed and irrational/superstitious/traditional Theravada practices that made Shan Buddhism transcends as a form of ‘holistic religion.’ (Crosby & Khur-Yearn, 2010: 13). Bringing *Lik Long* to relevancy again is clearly part of Phra Khammai’s goals, as is attempting to create a dialogue between the ‘canonical understanding of Buddhism’ and ‘local popular Buddhism’ by narrowing the gaps and barriers between the two. It is clear that he desires to bring *Lik Long* to the attention international manuscripts scholars for modern study. Attempts at revitalizing the study of Shan *Lik Long* literature can be understood as an important part of Phra Khammai’s movement and network as he seeks to bring local Buddhism and practices to the world stage, at least within the Asian Buddhist context.

The First *Lik Long* Conference was held in December 2013 in Yangon at the Aung Mye Bontha Shan Monastery. The Second *Lik Long* Conference was held in December 2014 as part of Phra Khammai’s golden jubilee celebrations, at his hometown of Laikha at Wat Holoi. The theme of conference, as briefly described in the chapter 3, is to bring together educated monks and lay scholars to hold a Shan-speaking conference in an international style/standard. The *Lik Long* culture in our time is, however, weak, as people who take an interest in studying it are few, so that only a relatively small number of Shan *Lik Long* scholars exist statewide today in Shan State.

In his New Year message published in the SCA-UK newsletter (2015), Phra Khammai comments on the types of *Lik Long* literature and highlights the contents of it:

*Lik Loung* is a type of largely, but not exclusively, Buddhist literature composed to communicate the ethical and meditational messages of Buddhism to the audience. It is intended more for listeners, then [sic] readers. The writing is styled with rhymed and tonal structures. Thousands of long *Lik Loung*, mostly hand-written, remain un-catalogued and are scattered in parts of Shan State where they have not been lost in civil war, their contents yet to be critically studied.



Figure 6.5 The Second *Lik Long* Conference, 28–30 December 2014. [Photo: Internet public domain]

The ‘Great Texts’ are certainly an integral part of Shan culture and literature, and also an integral part of what can be called ‘Shan Buddhism’ in terms of which Crosby and Jotika call a ‘holistic religion.’ However, it does not appeal to young people today as they consider it irrelevant to their way of life. The *Lik Long* movement was initiated by Prof. Sai Aung Tun, who has proposed that degrees for the study of *Lik Long* should be offered once the Shan State Buddhist University is up and running. However, this is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Jotika-Khur-Yern’s Ph.D dissertation is based on the poetic *Dhamma* of Zao Amat Long’s *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta* and the place of traditional

literature in Shan Theravada Buddhism (Jotika Khur-Yearn, 2012), while Tadayoshi Murakami (2009) places his focus on Lik Long and Care: *The Role of Lay Intellectuals in Shan Buddhism*.

As Phra Khammai's Shan New Year 2110 (2015) message for SCA-UK reads:

“*Lik Loung* should and can be considered part of Buddhist and Asian literary heritage. For that to happen, more study and exchange is needed at many levels, among the Shan and interested academics elsewhere. Here, the SCA-UK wishes to congratulate the Hidden Treasure project for cataloging *Lik Loung* in the UK, for example, at the Bodleian Library of Oxford University and Cambridge University Library for its successful completion. The leaders of the project, Prof. Kate Crosby of King's College, Dr. Gillian Evison of Bodleian Library, and Dr. Andrew Skilton, have contributed immensely to the preservation of *Lik Loung*. The funders, the Dhammachai Foundation of Thailand, have been very generous.” (Phra Khammai, 2015)

It is clear that Phra Khammai intends Shan Buddhism to go beyond Shan State with the help of scholars from the East and West. Nevertheless, it is still early to comment as to what form of Shan Buddhism will go global, either holistic or otherwise.

### **6.3 Diverse religious movements**

In theory and as a rule, since 1985, the Shan *Sangha* has followed the Myanmar state *Sangha* order, which is known as the State Sangha Mahanayaka Council, or SSMC, and remains under this umbrella term.<sup>105</sup> Shan *Sangha* members since 1971, however, formed a governing body for welfare of the Shan *Sangha* fourteen years ahead of its Burmese counterpart, known as Shan State Sangha Council, or SSSC. Today, the Shan *Sangha* is comprised of many groups which sometimes connect with each other. Several high-ranking monks work separately depending on their specialized skills, such as *Dhammaduta*, teaching, meditation practices, or social works. In the following, some

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<sup>105</sup> In 1985, Ne Win's government led a program calling for the “unification of the *Sangha* and purification of *Buddha-sasana*.” Under this religious law, nine *nikayas* (Burmese: *gaing*) were officially recognized. It prohibits any new school from being established.

important movements and sects of Shan monks are described. Relationships between Phra Khammai and leaders of these movements and sects are also described to illustrate Phra Khammai's approach to engaged Buddhism.

### **6.3.1 Khruba Bunchum: Charismatic monk of Buddha's kingdom**

Being competent in languages of several ethnic groups within the Mekong sub-region and throughout Shan State, Khruba Bunchum is particularly popular amongst the marginalized groups of ethnic people. Being a *ton-bun* (Thai) or holy-man, he is well-respected from the grassroots to the elite levels, including among local authorities, and in some cases, state-level authorities.

Some scholars (Amporn Jirattikorn, 2014; Cohen, 2002) have identified that Khruba Bunchum belonged to a Thai *Sangha* order, as he was officially ordained in 1986 under the preceptor of Wat Suan Dok in Chiang Mai. Nevertheless, he has spent most of his religio-socio-spiritual life among the Shans and other marginalized ethnic people in Tachileik in eastern Shan State. The period between 2004 and 2012, however, was problematic for Khruba. Thus, his travel within Myanmar was prohibited and he was banned from leaving his monastery in Mongphong. During a period of three years and three months beginning in June 2010 and lasting until November 2013, Khruba spent a solitude period in a cave on a high mountain in Lampang, Thailand. Khruba remained in Thailand until 2013 when he was officially invited to return by the Myanmar authorities. Before his travel was restricted, Khruba was welcome and highly respected even among the elite and ruling class of military officers, including former Myanmar Military Intelligence head Khin Nyunt and Senior General Than Shwe. As a spiritual leader and long-term meditation teacher, he has been highly rumored to possess miraculous powers, such as the ability to read other peoples' minds and being able to foretell the future. Rumors of such supernormal powers have earned him respect and admiration from a mass of followers among different ethnic groups and transnational communities.





Figure 6.6 Sao Sukham (left), Khruba Bunchum (center) and Phra Khammai (right) are dubbed the ‘Triple Lotus’ of Shan Buddhist leaders. [Photo: Internet public domain]

Apart from Phra Khammai, Khruba Bunchum—forest meditation master, cave dweller, and *Dhamma* talk mendicant—is the most influential figure among the Shan *Sangha*. He has transnationally roamed through the northern region of Thailand, eastern Shan State, Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna) in China, and parts of Laos. Buddhists in these regions primarily belong to marginalized ethnic groups. He is also respected by the authorities of these regions. According to Cohen (2000), Khruba Bunchum has taken a Bodhisattva-like vow to revive Buddhism in his Buddha-kingdom (*muang khong Phraphutthacao*), which encompasses northern Thailand, northern Laos, and Eastern Shan State and Sipsongpanna regions.

An interesting point here is that Khruba Bunchum describes himself as being a Shan. According to Paul Cohen (2000, 2001), Khruba’s mother was a Tai Lue from Sipsongpanna and his father a northern Thai. The establishment of a Shan Buddhist center

at Bodhgaya, India, is a landmark named after him as the Khuva Boonchum Buddhagaya Tai (KBBT) Temple. He has been for several years associated with the Shan *Sangha* before this temple was established. Founders and co-founders of the center dedicated it to Khruba Bunchum and named it after him. This center now has two branches in the same area after acquiring new land. The new center is for *Yogin* who practice meditation regularly, and also accommodates pilgrims to nearby Buddhist holy sites. Temple-building is, however, merely one of the tasks that a *ton bun* monk undertakes. Khruba Bunchum is known to have built or renovated several temples and pagodas in northern Thailand and in Shan State.

One of the most well-known Shan Buddhist centers which Khruba Bunchum and Phra Khammai constructed together outside of Shan State is at Bodhgaya, where transnational Buddhist world communities meet. The place chosen for constructing the temple is within the premises of the most holy Buddhist place, the Mahabodhi site. Before he entered the cave at Lampang for three years of meditation in solitude, Khruba Bunchum was said to have told Phra Khammai, “Let us meet at Bodhgaya on the very day of 26 February 2014, wherever you are at the corner of the world,” Sao Pandava, a Ph.D candidate at Pune, reports (Pandava, 2014: 31).

Following the prolific monument-building of Khruba Siwichai (1878-1939) and Khruba Khao Pi (1889-1977) in Lanna Buddhist tradition, Paul Cohen argues that Khruba Bunchum’s movement also should be viewed in the context of religious revivalism. The need for revitalization may involve many factors and circumstances. In his *Buddhist Revivalism in the Tai World* (2002), Cohen describes:

To these exemplars of the modern *ton bun* tradition there was a strong sense of the deterioration of Buddhism due to the failure of the modern state to protect Buddhism and uphold Buddhist morality. To Khruba Siwichai and Khruba Khao Pi, this “dark age” (*kali yuk*) of immorality was represented by the efforts of Siamese authorities, following the *Sangha* Act of 1902, to incorporate northern Thai monks into a national, centralized, and hierarchically-organized *Sangha*, and also to undermine Yuan Buddhism in the name of fundamentalist ideals of reform Buddhism. Khruba Bunchum’s religious revivalism has been directed outwards

to neighboring Tai-speaking peoples who share Yuan Buddhist traditions—a region where he perceived Buddhism to be seriously threatened, at least until recently, by the anti-religion policies of communist governments and by the inability or unwillingness of the Burmese military dictatorship to suppress the nefarious activities of drugs and arms traffickers.

The dark age of moral chaos and crisis precedes the creation of a utopian “Buddha kingdom” or “Buddha Land”—an ideal Buddhist realm that transcends national borders and the sovereignty of the modern nation-state. The corollary is that the modern ‘holy man’ tradition of Yuan Buddhism has proved resistant to control by the modern state, ranging from defiance to evasion. However, constrained by an enduring commitment to meditation and other ascetic practices, the forest monk Khruba Siwichai and his successors have eschewed the type of violent confrontation with the state that is a common feature of millennial movements, such as the 1901/2 *phu mi bun* uprising of northeast Thailand. (Cohen, 2002).

On the contrary, Phra Khammai is not a *ton bun* (“Sao Myat”) like Khruba Bunchum’s Buddhist revivalism, and neither is he a millenarian leader. Nor is he any other form of state-confrontational figure like Khruba Sriwichai or Khruba Khao Pi from the last century of the Lanna Kingdom. Phra Khammai, rather, is a Buddhist scholar and *Dhammadūta* missionary with a global vision to lift the education standards and revive Buddhism in Shan State. Despite these differences in their orientations—one being a scholar and the other a charismatic ‘holymen’—they must have shared a common goal at one point in the Buddhist practices. Interestingly, Phra Khammai himself calls Khruba Bunchum ‘*Sao-paw hsintham*’ (Venerable virtuosity), although the difference in their ages is less than one year. Ironically, they have both proven capable of mobilizing large masses of followers: Phra Khammai with meditation practitioners and educationists, and Khruba Bunchum more intensively focusing on meditation, including in solitary environs. The majority of people who follow Khruba, however, are not practitioners themselves, but rather seek blessings from the respected monk. The blessings that people ask for include good health, good life, and good fortune.

### 6.3.2 Khun Sam Law movement

This section narrates the story of Khun Sam Law movement widely known in 2014 in Shan State (Phorn, 2015). In January 2014, news, rumors, and gossip about a Shan pop-star went viral when he claimed to be the reincarnation of Khun Sam Law. In video clips, widely shared and tweeted across social media networks, Sai Jerng Harn appeared as a ‘modern’ Khun Sam Law. Khun Sam Law was a Shan legendary figure penned by Nang Kham Ku Nang Kham Ku (1853-1919), daughter of Sao Kang Hso, a Shan traditional Lik Long scholar discussed in chapter 2 and in this chapter under section 6.2. Dressed in princely robes or as a spiritual healer, the pop-star received daily visitors at his palace, Haw Seng, located in Wan Napang, Hawan Tract, Kehsi Township, in the southern part of Shan State. Many people in the region believe him to be the incarnation of Khun Sam Law, all the more so as this incarnation seems to have been prophesized by Khruba Bunchum,<sup>106</sup> the Buddhist monk respected across Buddhist communities in the Golden Triangle region. The legend derives partly from the pop-star’s popularity, his co-leader’s credentials of knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, and the well-respected Khruba Bunchum’s prophecy. The movement’s popularity reached its zenith between March–July 2014, and from August onwards, visitors to Sai Jerng Harn’s palace gradually declined, partly due to criticisms voiced by some Shan Buddhists, particularly members of the SSSC. For this reason, Sai Jerng Harn found it more difficult to spread their ideology and expand their activities.

Apparently, the pop-star claimed that celestial beings would communicate with him prior to undertaking any activity. For instance, the number of points ‘227’ in the Chinese game of *mahjong* also equals the 227 *Vinaya* rules of the Buddhist disciplinary codes. According to the logic of *mahjong*, everything in the world is a game; whoever masters the game to become a talented player will be rewarded. The Shan Buddhist *Sangha* does not appreciate this analogy between the Buddhist monks’ code of conduct and the *mahjong* game. However, from another perspective, Sai Jerng Harn’s analogy does not

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<sup>106.</sup> It has been rumored that Khruba Bunchum uttered reincarnation prophecies while meeting Sai Jerng Harn during his visit to the Mong Mao region in 2010. This claim, however, cannot be independently verified. Sai Nanti, Sai Jerng Harn’s helper at his palace, who is interviewed in a video clip from March 2014, claims that Khruba Bunchum has indeed made such prophecies.

imply that the *Vinaya* code is for gambling, as pointed out by numerous Buddhist *Sangha* members, but rather they highlight conflicting expressions in Shan/Myanmar society.

Nevertheless, people in the region believed that the pop-star was the legitimate incarnation of a modern-era Khun Sam Law, judging by the long stream of visitors and devotees that beat a path to his door. While popularizing its movement, the pop-star began to gain more followers. “I am not against any religion, but I adapt to all forms of religious practices, including Theravada Buddhism. Some people are wrongly accusing me as a destroyer of Buddhism,” said the pop-star.<sup>107</sup> Every year in April, on the occasion of the Myanmar New Year celebrations, people tend to devote themselves to religious activities and visit sacred places. Coincident with the occasion in 2014, Sai Jerng Harn’s fame spread further across and beyond the region, when a group of locals produced and distributed VCDs of the Khun Sam Law movement, uploading video clips on Facebook and across other social media. According to news reports and eye witnesses, Sai Jerng Harn received around 300 visitors a day.

The creative re-imagination of Sai Jerng Harn generated the kind of interest that made people visit his palace to view first-hand this ‘modern Khun Sam Law.’ People may be convinced that Sai Jerng Harn personifies the real Khun Sam Law, a kind of savior for the forces of spirit he may have incorporated in his practices. Pilgrims visiting Sai Jerng Harn appear to be joyful and whole-heartedly undertake their journey to the palace to meet the ‘new Khun Sam Law.’ This may be due partly to his popularity as a singer, and partly as a result of the pilgrims being offered the chance of freedom or relaxation. For most of the people visiting his Haw Seng palace, it was a trip down memory lane to the days when they enjoyed encounters with a popular pop-star.

One key leader in the Khun Sam Law movement is Sao Hsintham, a native of the movement’s region of origin. Early in his life, he was received into the monkhood as a novice and has resided at several monasteries and Buddhist institutions in Myanmar for training and education. He was a dedicated student and a well-read Pali scholar. In the late 1990s, Sao Hsintham joined the Ceylon Journey for higher education in Sri Lanka.

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<sup>107</sup>. Khan Sam Law movement VCD, 2014.

After gaining his bachelor's and master's degrees in Buddhist studies from Sri Lankan institutions, he returned to Shan State in 2005, where he became one of the most influential figures in the region, rising to the status of State Sangha Mahanayaka and President of the regional Shan *Sangha*. As a scholar, *Dhamma* preacher, and high-ranking *Sayadaw*, he is well-known among the people and different authorities (the government and the Shan State Army-North [SSA-N]) in the region. However, the Shan *Sangha* and some Shan Buddhists voiced their concerns when he became a co-leader in the Khun Sam Law movement.

Sai Jerng Harn and Sao Hsintham have known each other for many years, with the former treating the latter as a younger sibling. In a video clip, Sai Jerng Harn claimed that the two had indeed been siblings in a past life. Sai Jerng Harn and Sao Hsintham portray themselves as related in kinship, a united and charismatic front in this movement. For the SSSC and the majority of Shan Buddhists, however, Sao Hsintham has been a controversial figure due to the nature of his activities. The SSSC, in particular, adheres to the Myanmar *Sangha*'s views of Theravada Buddhism and is less predisposed to polarity, the spirit world, shamanism, or *alawng* practices (*alawng* is a *Bodhisattva* who will attain Buddhahood when the conditions are fulfilled in a distant future). According to the SSSC, in promoting the Khun Sam Law movement, Sao Hsintham attempted to deviate from the mainstream of Theravada principles and stood accused of breaking Buddhist *Vinaya* rules, including the orthodox traditions of the Myanmar and Shan *Sanghas*. Though some consider Sao Hsintham's practices as unorthodox, he has, however, assured the SSSC that his actions do not deviate from the Shan Theravadin tradition.

Sai Jerng Harn's claims of reincarnation have given rise to a variety of reactions, controversies, and even suspicions among the people, particularly members of the Shan *Sangha*. The criticism has been more pronounced on the part of the Shan *Sangha*, who insisted that the pop-star should desist from making claims of legitimacy and that Sao Hsintham should not support his cause. The *Sangha* saw this movement as 'unreligious' because it aims at benefiting one individual—Sai Jerng Harn—through a mix of religious cult activities, legends, Buddhism, local beliefs, and nostalgia of a bygone era in the Shan Kingdom, as will be detailed later. According to some Shan monks, these views of Shan

history and actual Shan historical events are distorted. Moreover, some sources maintain that Sai Jerng Harn has departed from accepted norms, displaying a lack of respect towards traditional socio-cultural values, particularly as it is rumored that he persuaded a 14-year-old Shan girl to marry him.<sup>108</sup>

Among criticisms by Shan Buddhists, those from the *Sangha* were particularly strong, whose opposition to the movement included a request to the SSA-N to scrutinize the movement's activities. Nonetheless, Sai Jerng Harn's popularity continued unabated, drawing huge crowds to his Haw Seng palace in Kehsi. Although the Shan *Sangha* attempted to invalidate the Khun Sam Law movement and the process by which Sai Jerng Harn's palaces had been acquired, for months devotees and visitors continued to flock to the sites.

However, in early August 2014, opposition from the Shan *Sangha* intensified. A Shan monk, familiar with the movement and a local in the region, said that, "Sai Jerng Harn's movement is alright as long as he does not relate his public talks to the principles of monasticism and Buddhism. But his preaching is contradictory to Buddhism. He destroyed not only the story of Khun Sam Law and its legend, but the principle of monastic rules and concepts of Buddhism."<sup>109</sup> Following comments from some high-ranking Shan *sangha* representatives, the SSSC and Kehsi Sangha Committee attempted to thwart the movement, and the Kehsi Sangha Committee issued a statement on 25 April 2014 requesting the authorities to investigate the pop-star's activities (SHAN, 2014). The SSSC also summoned Sao Hsintham with Order No. 2/2014 (27/05/2014)<sup>110</sup> for clarifications and to ask him to stop supporting Sai Jerng Harn's movement.

On his visit to Chiang Mai in early February 2014, Sao Hsintham declared that, "The Shan course [referring to political armed movements] cannot reach their aim as they do not follow my advice and suggestions."<sup>111</sup> What he meant is that the Shans need to

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<sup>108</sup>. Information gathered from several people, including monks, between April–May 2014.

<sup>109</sup>. Personal Interview with Sao Hsaiwan, Singapore, in June 2014.

<sup>110</sup>. Order No: 2/2014 (27/05/2014) was signed by the presiding president of the Shan State Sangha Council (SSSC).

<sup>111</sup>. Sao Hsintham, personal interview, February 2013.



consider a new approach or an alternative to Buddhism for solutions to their political problems in Myanmar. “Being a Buddhist monk, by using *Dhamma* alone, our cause for emancipation, liberation, freedom, and dignity may not be realized. We need to use ‘other-worldly’ external power to help us,” said the monk, who continues to promote the Khun Sam Law movement in Shan State.<sup>112</sup> It is not clear as to what Phra Khammai thinks about this movement. According to Sao Hsintham, during Phra Khammai’s golden jubilee celebrations in Taunggyi in 2014, the two had a private conversation. Phra Khammai asked him a series of questions as he had heard rumors from other sources and sought to learn whether or not they were true. According to Sao Hsintham, Phra Khammai holds that Sao Hsintham’s actions and attitude toward the Khun Sam Law movement is no deviation of Theravada Buddhism.<sup>113</sup>

### 6.3.3 Reforming monastic education

The most Venerable Pannyananda is a Pali scholar, author of many books, and the current president of the SSSC and Deputy Secretary General for the State Central Committee of the Sangha Maha-nayaka. As a deputy secretary general, he is responsible for education, administration and judicial system in a leading role for four months each year at the office of the *Buddha-sasana* ministry in Yangon. In 2010, he was honored with an honorary doctorate from Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in Bangkok for his leadership and expertise in Pali. He was also conferred an *Aggamaha-pandita*, the second highest ecclesiastical title by the government of the Union of Myanmar, in January 2015 at Naypyidaw. Unlike Phra Khammai, however, he did not join the Ceylon Journey for higher study, nor does he intend his missionary work to be global, as he prefers to focus on locals.

At his center in Loilem, in southern Shan State, Venerable Pannyananda is chief of the Sasana Vipula Dhattaw Institute which has around 130 students annually including novices and monks studying and receiving monastic training. This is one such monastic network institution where student monks make their own choices about what to study.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Sao Hsintham, personal interview, September 2015.

The institution has earned a good reputation for its quality instruction in monastic education. Sometimes, students may make a choice based on their interest or expertise in particular field, such as Pali. A student may want to become a Pali expert in reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension of the Pali Tripitaka. In nearly 30 years, the Sasana Vipula Dhattaw Institute has so far produced over 600 students who have successfully completed some level of monastic education held by the Shan State Pariyatti Saddhammapala Examination Committee. Among these students, many of them have also received state-level certifications.

Moreover, Sariputta College, which is one of the country's foremost Buddhist institutions, was recently established in Shan State in Muse on the Sino-Shan border. The college was founded in 2013 by Venerable Keow Visuddha, who joined the Ceylon Journey in the early 2000s. After returning home, he initiated this new college from the ground up. It is aimed at educating students in Shan Buddhist culture and general knowledge on the Sino-Shan border, where drugs and armed militias reign supreme. While cross-border social and economic activities between Myanmar and China are part of peoples' daily lives, cultural and religious aspects have recently become more important. A Shan Ph.D candidate at Mahidol University in Bangkok recalls that before the nation-state, the region was known to be under a single sovereignty, Mong Mao Long, or the Mao Kingdom. The geographical name Mong Mao survives as a valley for the locals on both sides, although it is politically divided. Certainly Buddhism in the Mao Valley has become a tool to connect people from both sides (Devindābhipala, 2015). On 12 July 2015, the Sariputta College held its first graduation ceremony in Muse. Venerable Pannyananda, the president of the Shan State Sangha Council, conferred the certification award to four graduating members of the *Sangha* (Mawkhom, 2015).

Monastic reform is also led by Sao Hsintham, the same monk collaborating with Sai Jerng Harn in Khesi, within his domain of influence in Mongnawng, Mongnai, and Laikha in central Shan State. He still implements the SSSC's structured levels of education and examination patterns, meaning from Level 1 to Level 6. The difference is in the contents of each curriculum prescribed for each level. Being a Buddhist scholar and well-versed in Pali himself, he wanted to see this reformation with a special focus on mastery of the

language. This, he said, is “the best way not only to master the language, but to explore the Buddhist texts in a more accessible way.”<sup>114</sup> For monastic education in the area, he himself designed the curriculum and syllabuses. His curriculum is largely focused on languages apart from Pali, such as Shan, English, and Burmese, as well. In the Shan *Sangha*’s central committee education system, however, although it has six levels, the curriculums are largely same as the state’s *Sangha* organization. Learning Pali has been easier in the traditional approach, which encourages one to memorize with a special focus on mastering the grammar rather than the language itself. This method has been criticized for requiring students to spend many years before he can really master the language and understand the Buddha’s teachings. That is why Sao Hsintham has chosen to formulate his own syllabuses.

Sao Hsintham’s approach is seen as revolutionary with a modern vision, but still has a long way to go. For over a century, Burma education has largely been delivered through rote memorization so that students can answer questions on exams with answers they have learned by heart. This system is old-fashioned and outdated by any education standard. However, this method has prevailed since the colonial times until the present for monastic education in the country. The SSSC has been reluctant to revive its curriculum for fear of a possible negative reaction from the state *Sangha*. In principle, all high-ranking Shan *Sangha* members agree about the need to modernize the Shan monastic education system and revise the syllabuses. But so far, no one has volunteered to initiate the process or take a leading role in the reforms. According to Sao Hsintham, leading members of the SSSC and Phra Khammai have met with him to discuss education reformation. Everyone agreed in principle that there was the need to do so.<sup>115</sup>

In chapter 2, I have mentioned in detail that the State *Sangha* monastic examination has had three levels since it was first introduced in 1784 by King Bodawpaya by royal decree and named *Pathamapyan sarmepwe*.<sup>116</sup> However, during the period of King Mindon

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<sup>114</sup> Sao Hsintham, personal interview, September 13, 2015.

<sup>115</sup> Sao Hsintham, personal interview, September 13, 2015.

<sup>116</sup> They were called *Pathama sar taw pyan*, ‘excellent candidate for royal examination,’ which soon came to be known by its abbreviated form *Pathamapyan* (Dhammasami (2004:85)).

(1853-1878), on top of the three levels of *Pathamapyan*, there exists *Pathama-kyaw*, the highest level offered for monastic education at that time.<sup>117</sup> This examination was continued by the British *raj* during their occupation. Presently, the *Pathamapyan* examinations still has three levels. In 1985, a primary level, *Akhyepyu-mula*, was added, but it was removed upon the change in leadership of the educational affairs department in the SSMC. Certainly this three-or-four-level system is by any standard not good enough to address the need for modern teaching-learning environments. Sao Hsintham has said that in the history of *Pathamapyan* and *Dhammacariya* examinations combined, there was none who could complete all levels within four years.<sup>118</sup>

As in the time of Myanmar monarchs, the British supported not only examinations, but also ecclesiastical titles, such as *Aggamahā paṇḍita* ('the Greatest Pundit'), then the highest honorary title, which was conferred to the learned *sayadaws*. This tradition has continued with subsequent successors of the Myanmar government until the present. Under the purification of *Buddha-sasana* in early 1980s under Ne Win's government, a new title which was higher than the pundit, *Abhidhaja-mahāraṭṭha-guru* ('the Highest State Tutor') was conferred to the *sayadaws* who excelled with the promotion of Buddhism. In the monastic education sector, a new foundational level, the primary level (*Akhyepyu-mula*) was also introduced and the curriculum for the existing levels were restructured. Under the same program, state monastic education was supposed to be modernized. Not only was a new level added, but the curriculum was largely modified and Myanmar literature (*Myanmar-sar*) was added as compulsory. Nevertheless, modernization attempts have faced strong criticism from the traditionalists who oppose change. After the death of the reformist U Kyaw Lwin, a former monk himself and the chief architect of the monastic education program, a decade later the *Pathamapyan* curriculum was again reversed to its former state, retaining only *Myanmar-sar*.

In chapter 5, we have seen that Phra Khammai's education policy is open for all and looks for quality rather than quantity. For students who are serious to learn and practice

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<sup>117</sup> Sao Kawli Mongpan achieved the *Pathama-kyaw* level, so he was awarded royal monk status by King Mindon. See chapter 2.

<sup>118</sup> Sao Hsintham personal interview, September 13, 2015.

Buddhism, the new Shan State Buddhist University intends to be a place where they will flourish. His education policy is an 'open' system, inviting anyone to get involved. It is very likely that courses will first be offered for research programs. Therefore, those applying to the university should have a certain level of research capability and skills.

#### 6.4 Summary

This chapter detailed how Buddhist education reforms, academic activities, Shan literature, and cultural and religious movements have gained popularity in Shan State. Through this chapter, I have discussed how the Phra Khammai-led *Sangha* movement has been active as a network among the Buddhist academic institutions and Buddhist communities internationally. The nature of Phra Khammai's Shan *Sangha* can be understood in the form of an unstructured or informal network, but with a common theme of Buddhism in action.

With reference to the Buddhist education reforms in Shan State, the founding of a Buddhist university by Phra Khammai as a world class institution is a noteworthy achievement. The Shan *Sangha* and its associates have duly informed followers of the need to develop the *Sangha* network to modernize Buddhist education. Establishing a university requires a well-founded and broad network, as the world today is interrelated and interconnected. The Buddhist concept *Praṭītyasamutpāda* (Pali: *Paṭiccasamuppāda*) or 'conditional interrelatedness' actually provides a strong argument for modern connectivity between technologies and human relations. While this knowledge has come down from several generations of Theravada Buddhist doctrines and monastic education, orthodox Buddhism requires adaptation and adjustment in order to face the modern reality of the world.

Ven. Nandamala Abhivamsa, Sitagu Sayadaw, and some other *sayadaws* have been very supportive and are important figures among the Myanmar *Sangha* who have offered their help to the cause of Phra Khammai's movement. Phra Khammai makes a great effort to bring together progressive-minded monks and laypeople from many nations, including members of the Thai and Sri Lankan *Sangha*, and even those from the Mahayanist

tradition who are prepared to commit themselves to bringing a Buddhist mission to the world.

*Khut-seng khut nai-lik* ('mining gems in literature') has been the theme of both *Lik Long* conferences, held in Yangon and Laikha in 2013 and 2014, respectively. This indicates that Shan *Lik Long* literature is a 'wealth of wisdom,' but requires unearthing. The Phra Khammai-led Shan *Sangha* and the Shan *Jares* (traditional Shan scholars) are currently attempting to categorize the *Lik Long* literature. As has been explained, the contents of *Lik Long* Shan literature manifests Buddhism with some local beliefs, history, and Shan worldviews. It is a mixture of Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements integrated in Shan Buddhism is to transcend the 'binary oppositions' of a 'holistic religion.'

Today, Shan Buddhist rituals are numerous; many of them derive from Buddhist beliefs that the Shans have inherited as their culture. Inherited Buddhist culture is so integrated into the Shan cosmological structure and worldview as to become a significant part of the Shan way of life. Nicola Tannenbaum (1991) supports the argument of how the nature of power in Shan society works: "Power and protection mutually imply each other, and that power is morally and ethically neutral." Several cultural practices were constructed through Buddhist beliefs over time, so that they have become part and parcel of Shan identity. It is thus in line with the saying, 'To be Shan is to be Buddhist.' However, not all Shans are Buddhists. There are sizable numbers of believers of other religions among the Shan, such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and animism or traditional local spirit beliefs. Still, today the majority of the Shans adhere to Theravada Buddhism. The religio-cultural activities among the local Shans include a variety of rites and rituals, such as *Poi Sanglong* (novice ordination), New Year festivities, *Poi Khaowa* (Buddhist Lent retreat), *Poi Awkwa* (end of Buddhist lent), *Poi Kathin*, *Poi Khao-wat*, *Poi Lukhao mai* (new harvest festival), *Poi Sawn-nam* (water splashing / Songkran / Sangkran), etc.

Within these religio-cultural celebrations, Shans express their identities with cultural, traditional, and religious beliefs being well integrated. It is hard to separate them the individual entities of 'religion' or 'culture' in the Shan lifescape (Eberhardt, 2007: 172). Likewise, as an educationist and a scholar, Phra Khammai's religious way of life, apart from his advanced Vipassana practices, is comparably simple as ordinary folks'. It goes

without saying that in village religious life and practices, he follows and respects the local traditions. *Poi Sanglong* has been one of the most important rituals in Shan Buddhist practice ever since the formation of Theravada Buddhism. *Poi Sanglong* is so vital because it is one way of recruiting young monks into the *Sangha* for the continuity and preservation of Shan Buddhism. Therefore, rites and rituals are part and parcel of Shan people's lives as a fundamental source for the development of their cultural identities.



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