**Shan New Year 2118 / 2023: Academic and Cultural Presentations**

**Saturday 9 December 2023, SOAS University of London**

**Academic Presentations: Abstracts**

(Arranged in order according to the Programme of the Event)

**Composers of Culture: The Shan Zare Tradition**

Olivia Porter (King’s College London & University of Roehampton)

This paper explores the role of the *zare*, the Shan lay ritual practitioners and textual specialists who compose traditional Shan *lik long* literature. I shall focus specifically on the *zare*s of the Tai Zawti tradition, an elusive Tai/Shan Theravada Buddhist tradition found along the Myanmar-China border, who have a reputation for their mastery of traditional Shan literature and their training of expert *zares*. In this paper I explore how the role and craft of the *zare* plays a particularly key role in the transmission and maintenance of Tai Zawti culture and identity across national borders.

**Olivia Porter** is currently a visiting lecturer at the University of Roehampton, giving lectures on Indian religions and approaches to the study of religion. In 2023 she completed her PhD at King’s College London, titled: “Hidden in Plain Sight: The Tai Zawti Buddhists of the Myanmar-China Border”. Prior to focusing on Shan Buddhism, her training was in Sanskrit and Pali (Oxford, 2016) and Social Anthropology (LSE, 2017). Her current research interests include: Shan Buddhism, vernacular texts, and lay ritual practitioners.

**Traditional Tai Ahom Methods of Preparing Writing Materials: With Special Reference to Sanchi Pat and Mohi**

Manash Protim Chetia a.k.a Chao Sukham Chaosing (Independent Researcher)

The Tai Ahom people, who at present live in the north-eastern part of India, has a big treasure of many ancient manuscripts written in the bark of Saa-Chi tree (Tun-Nam-Saa & Tun-Hom-Saa) written in their unique Tai Ahom script, which shows their rich cultural, linguistic and literary heritage. The traditional writing sheets prepared from the bark of Saa-Chi tree by the Tai Ahom people are of very high quality and with the longevity of 400 – 1000 years. It is, indeed, really a unique Tai art. Recent research says that the Tai Ahom peoples’ art and craft of preparing Saa-Chi-Paat and Mo-Hi are unique traditional skill developed by them.

In this paper, the researcher endeavors to highlight, explore and analyze the Tai Ahom peoples’ traditional skill and knowledge of preparing writing sheet from the bark of Saa-Chi tree and the Traditional dye Mo-Hi.

**Manash Protim Chetia** who is known as **Chao Sukham Chaosing** is independent researcher who is currently working on reviving and uplifting the moribund Tai Ahom Language. He is an accomplished professional with 15 years of experience and proven knowledge of classroom management, course design, and curriculum development. An enthusiastic educator who guides students to outstanding achievements in learning Tai language, understanding Tai cultures and diversity. He has also been invited to many Asian Countries to present his paper on the Tai Ahom ethnic such as China, Myanmar and Thailand. He offered his service as a Chief Secretary in Society for Tai Ahom Resurgence and Foreign Secretary in Indian Tai Forum.”

**The Shan Chevening Fellowship at the British Library**

Sai Line a.k.a Myo Thant Linn (British Library) & Maria Kekki (British Library)

The British Library's Southeast Asia Collections have recently gained a year-long Chevening Fellowship, which will focus on cataloguing Shan language material. The chosen Chevening Fellow, Myo Thant Linn/Sai Line, will read manuscripts in various different Shan scripts and dialects, and catalogue the data in original script as well as with the Library of Congress Shan romanisation system.

**Sai Line** a.k.a **Myo Thant Linn**, a professional zare or manuscript reciter and composer, is currently a Chevening Fellowship researcher at the British Library. At the Shan New Year event, he will briefly discuss his background and the zare tradition in Shan State. He will also give a short recitation as part of the presentation. For the presentation, he will be joined by Maria Kekki, Curator for Burmese Collections, who also works closely with Sai Line for the Shan manuscripts.

**Shan manuscript textiles in the British Library collection**

Jana Igunma (British Library) & Maria Kekki (British Library)

The British Library holds approximately 100 Shan and Khuen manuscripts in three formats: pap kin (scrolled bound paper books), pap tup (paper folding books) and palm leaves. While most of the extant manuscripts are not older than 200 years, the texts contained in these manuscripts are often copies from older manuscripts which are kept elsewhere or, by now, have been lost.

Shan pap kin were usually equipped with textiles, attached to the stab-stitch binding as a form of protective manuscript cover. Often these textiles were custom-made to fit the size of the manuscripts, for example from valuable silk brocades, hand-dyed or painted cotton fabrics as well as imported materials like silk damask, velvet, or factory-made printed fabrics. Occasionally, felt ribbons or cotton ropes were used to secure the scrolled manuscripts.

During a year-long Chevening project, a researcher from Chiang Mai University in Thailand together with curators and conservators at the British Library examined and described manuscript textiles in the Southeast Asian collections in order to add the relevant information to catalogue records. This talk will give an overview of the different types and materials of Shan manuscript textiles that were assessed in this project, with a focus on their physical condition and conservation treatments.

**Jana Igunma** is Henry Ginsburg Curator for Thai, Lao and Cambodian Collections at the British Library in London, where she has been involved in research, digitisation, and exhibitions of Southeast Asian materials since 2004. Jana's main research interests are literatures and arts of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. She authored numerous articles and book chapters on manuscripts, textiles, decorative art and book history in mainland Southeast Asia. Her print publications include "The history of the book in Southeast Asia: the Mainland" (in: The Book, a global history. New York/Oxford, 2013), "Buddhism illuminated: Manuscript art from Southeast Asia" (with San San May, London, 2018), and "The Buddha's Last Birth Tale" (in: The Book by Design. London/Chicago, 2023). Jana is a committee member of the Southeast Asia Library Group and a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Studies (UK) as well as the European Association for Southeast Asian Studies. For the presentation, she will be joined by **Maria Kekki,** Curator for Burmese Collections at the British Library, whose role also covers for the Shan manuscripts at the library.

**Making Merit, Making Museums: Walking around the inner museum at Yadana Man Aung Pagoda, Nyaungshwe Town**

Heidi Tan (SOAS University of London)

Heidi Tan will introduce Buddhist temple museums and discuss why they remain important for Shan communities. She will explore the ‘Inner Museum’ at Yadana Man Aung Pagoda to show how it functions in multiple ways – to speak about Shan history, provide space for socialising and enable rituals such as making merit or *ku’sou* ၵုသူဝ်ႇ. She will also share how photo documentation of this temple museum is being archived by the SOAS Digital Collections Online for open access by all in the future.

**Heidi Tan** is Lecturer in Curating and Museology, at SOAS University of London. A senior curator at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore for many years, she curated special exhibitions on art and material culture of Southeast Asia, including Thailand and Myanmar. She conducted fieldwork in Myanmar including Shan State and was awarded her PhD in 2020 for the thesis: *Meritorious Curating and the Renewal of Pagoda Museums in Myanmar.*

**The Shan in the History of the Irrawaddy Valley: Towards a Federal “National” History**  
Michael W. Charney (SOAS University of London)

Decolonizing the academy promises to do much good in rectifying the imbalance in favour of the West in the creation of the main academic disciplines and the delivery of knowledge about the non-West. Control over knowledge as Said laid out vividly regarding the Near and Middle East is power that simultaneously limits the object just as it empowers the subject. The problem to be resolved is not uniform, however, throughout the non-West, colonization by the West is a common layer that can be identified across the board, but prior to this are layers of other states and other projects whose handiwork was not erased by the colonial state but, in influencing the colonial state, knowledge was inherited from them and filtered into the Western knowledge-building project. Historians usually deal with the lowland Burmese state as a Burman history and those who touch on ethnic minorities write their histories as ethnic and local, a perspective complemented by anthropological work that by its nature is often focused on local, community-specific studies. But what would a history of Burma that, to draw on Dipesh Chakrabarty, provincialises the Burmans and pays equal attention to other co-existing “ethnic” centres of historical, cultural, and religious development within Myanmar in a “federal” way look like? This presentation examines this question by looking at the Shan in the History of the Irrawaddy Valley.

**Michael W. Charney** (PhD, University of Michigan, 1999) is Professor of History and International Studies at SOAS University of London. He spent his career at the Centre for Advanced Studies, National University of Singapore, the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, University of Tokyo, and, since 2001, at SOAS University of London. He has recently joined the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy after eighteen years in the Department of History (now History, Religions & Philosophies) at SOAS, with which he continues to hold a joint appointment. His main research interests are on the history of military logistics, armies and warfare in modern and contemporary Asia, the historical culture of war in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and West Africa, and the emergence of religious and national cultures in Myanmar (Burma) and the greater Bay of Bengal. Prof. Charney is also the current Director of the SOAS Centre of South East Asian Studies, leading programmes on research, teaching and related event activities at SOAS and other partner organizations.

**The Archaeology of the Shan Plateau**

Elizabeth Moore (SOAS) and Khin Kyi Phyu Thant (SOAS)

The archaeology of the Shan Plateau includes many peoples and reaches outwards in all directions. We briefly highlight selected aspects of the prehistory, historical archaeology of the Bagan period plus late Bagan events impacting the border with Yunnan in patterns seen in recent times. The main areas of excavation and exploration are around Inlay Lake but there are also earthworks and artefacts on the east near Keng Tung paralleled by finds in Lanna. Much remains to be done, particularly in understanding the transition from hunter-gatherer to settled habitation and the development of Buddhism.

**Elizabeth Moore** is Emeritus Professor, SOAS, and the SOAS-Alphawood Liaison. She has undertaken research in Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, and Thailand. Prior to completing her PhD at the Institute of Archaeology (UCL) she worked in Nairobi, Jakarta and Singapore. Since joining SOAS in 1992, she has developed a broad-based undergraduate and graduate syllabus for Southeast Asian art and archaeology, including ancient and contemporary aspects of mainland and island areas. For the presentation, she will be joined by **Khin Kyi Phyu Thant**, an Alphawood Alumni having completed the Postgraduate Diploma in Asian Art last session.

**A Brief History of Laikha**

Sao Khun Hti Laikha (Independent Scholar)

This paper is an attempt to document the recent history of the ruling dynasty of Laikha , a small state within Southern Shan State. When and how the state came into existence is a subject of further research. Thus, this paper focuses on the recent history, particularly the involvement of the last two rulers, namely Sao Khun Lai and Sao Noom, in the politics and military campaigns of their time in Shan State, starting with the Linbin uprising in the 1880s. Their involvement in shaping the future of Shan State reached its climax during the rule of Sao Noom, who ruled the state from 1931 until 1958. His main  
contribution was to host the Panglong Conferences that has dictated the fate of Shan State and to lead the Shan Armed Forces during the occupation of Shan State by the Karen National Union militants in the late 1940s. He almost had one more chance to participate in shaping the future of Shan State in March 1962 but his role in the politics of Shan State came to an abrupt end on March 2, 1962.

**Sao Khun-Hti Laikha** is a native of Shan State. Although he is an electrical engineer by trade, he is also a student of Tai/Shan language culture and history. He received his BASc, MASc and PhD degrees in electrical engineering from the University of British Columbia and University of Toronto in 2000, 2002 and 2007 respectively. He currently works as a principal research and development engineer at a multi-national company in Sweden.

**A Manuscript of Tai Herbalism**

Susan Conway (Shan State Buddhist University & Sussex University)

From 2018-2019 Dr Susan Conway taught MA students at Shan State Buddhist University and led a project training local technicians to photograph and catalogue Shan manuscripts. The abbot Phra Vicitta and Zaray Saw (Sai Seng) assisted in the translation of one manuscript written in a defunct Shan script, a pharmacopeia containing remedies for treating illness of mind and body. Ingredients include plants and animal extracts collected from Shan forests and cultivated in home gardens two hundred years ago. Today deforestation means trees, plants and animals are gone. The presentation will feature this manuscript as a record of Shan environment and medical practices in the past.

**Susan Conway** taught Shan Studies at SOAS. Her books “The Shan: Culture Arts and Crafts (2006) and “Tai Magic” (2014) are studies of Shan culture. Her new book, “Tai Herbalism” will be published at the end of 2023. She is currently Visiting Professor at Shan State Buddhist University and a Research Associate at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University.

**Surveying Manuscripts Collections for Future Digitization across the Greater Shan country**

Francois Tainturier (Inya Institute, Yangon, Myanmar)

This paper presents the preliminary findings of a survey on manuscript collections conducted in three locations of the Greater Shan country: south and eastern areas of Taung-gyi, north-western area of Kengtung, and area of Mae Hong Son. This is part of a larger research project on manuscript collections started in 2018 in Northern Shan State at the Punlong Monastery, located near Kyaukme. With little pre-existing knowledge on these collections, the objective of this survey is to assess the historical and cultural significance of these manuscript collections held at monasteries, identify those which warrants digitization, and preserve them in a digital format while ensuring the original manuscripts are properly maintained by their custodians. More broadly, it is also an attempt to understand the local ecosystem sustained around these manuscripts by the monks and *care* and the transnational moves across the Thailand-Burma border they have enabled.

**Francois Tainturier**, a PhD graduate from SOAS, University of London, is the Director of the Inya Institute, a Yangon-based higher education institute dedicated to advancing the social sciences, arts, and humanities as they are related to Myanmar. The Inya Institute supports research on Burma/Myanmar by international scholars and offers research support, space and training to Myanmar scholars. His field experience research includes extensive surveys of Shan areas near Kyaukme, Taung-gyi, and Kengtung for documenting Shan Buddhist heritage.

**A Shan Manuscript from SOAS Special Collections: Tracing the Origin of the Manuscript and the Story of Nang Yi Seng Kaw**

Jotika Khur-Yearn (SOAS University of London)

SOAS Library is one of only four libraries in the UK that house significant collections of Shan manuscripts. The collection of Shan manuscripts in the SOAS Library date back to the early days of the foundation of SOAS during the early 20th century. This paper looks at the significance of one Shan manuscript in particular, *Nang Yi Seng Kaw*, which is now housed in the SOAS Special Collections. As highlighted in this paper, I have attempted to trace the origin of the manuscript, linking it with the story of Nang Yi Seng Kaw and Mong Pan, a former Shan principality, now a township in southern Shan State, in the Union of Myanmar/ Burma.

**Jotika Khur-Yearn** is the Subject Librarian for Southeast Asia, History, Religions and Philosophies at SOAS University of London. Whilst mainly working as a librarian, he also continues his research works in the fields of Pali and Buddhist studies, with a focus on classical Shan Buddhist literature which is largely preserved in the traditional Shan manuscripts and related traditions of practices. Both his PhD thesis (SOAS, 2012) and MSc dissertation (City, 2015) heavily touched on Shan manuscript cultures. He is also a Teaching Fellow of the Shan State Buddhist University, Taunggyi, Shan State, the Union of Myanmar.

**Burma to Myanmar**

Alexandra Green (British Museum)

The exhibition *Burma to Myanmar* at the British Museum is the first exhibition dedicated to the country's complex histories through the lens of cross-cultural interactions and how these exchanges impacted art and material culture. The region is historically diverse, home to different kingdoms, empires, principalities, chiefdoms and kinship networks that, until independence from British colonial control in 1948, had never been a single political entity. The exhibition looks at how to display diversity and seeks to produce a history that does not create minority communities or promote the majority view. This talk today focusses upon the representation of the Shan states in the exhibition.

**Alexandra Green** is Henry Ginsburg Curator for Southeast Asia and Curator of the exhibition Myanmar in the world at the British Museum. She has written and edited numerous books and articles on Southeast Asian art and culture, including: Raffles in Southeast Asia (Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore), Buddhist Visual Cultures, Rhetoric and Narrative in Late Burmese Wall Paintings (Hong Kong University Press), Rethinking Visual Narratives from Asia: Intercultural and Comparative Perspectives (Hong Kong University Press), Eclectic Collecting: Art from Burma in the Denison Museum (NUS Press), and Southeast Asia: a history in objects (forthcoming: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with the British Museum).