

# **Literacy and Language Maintenance in Chin State, Myanmar**

**Bawi Hu**

Adult Literacy Project

Chin Association for Christian Communication

There are seven States and seven Divisions in Myanmar. Chin State is one of the states. There are nine townships in Chin State of which the people of the three townships Hakha, Thantlang, Matupi speak the Lai language. Besides these townships, there are also Lai speaking communities in Falam, Paletwa and Mindat townships in Chin State, and in Rakhine State and Magwe and Sagaing Divisions within Myanmar. Outside Myanmar, there are Lai speakers in Lai District and Chintuipui District in Mizoram State in India and Bawm in Bangladesh. We may perhaps estimate the total population who speak the Lai language to be roughly 350,000.

Lai has been a written language written since the 1890s. Before Burmese independence in 1948, Lai was the medium of elementary education in the Lai speaking areas of Chin State. But after independence the government made Burmese the medium of education and allowed the study of Lai only up to the second standard. For this reason, Lai literacy has receded in the past fifty years. Therefore the Chin Association for Christian Communication plans to teach those who cannot read and write well. This paper will review briefly the development of literacy in Lai and the current situation with respect to Lai language maintenance.

## **1. The Pre-Colonial Period**

### **1.1 Geographic Features**

Chin State lies between latitude 24° in the north and 21° 45' on the south, and longitude 94° 5' on the east and 93° 20' on the west. The distance from north to south is 250 miles and its breadth varies from 100 to 150 miles. Its area is 13906.97 square miles or 89004.59 acres. It consists of high mountains

intersected by deep valleys and rivers and is utterly devoid of plains.

## **1.2 Population**

The total population of Chin State was over 421,000 at the end of December, 1995. The population of Lais, who speak the Lai language, affiliated with the Chin Association for Christian Communication (CACC) is 145,000. Thus the Lai speaking groups under CACC are about 35 percent of the Chin population.

About the same number of Lai speaking Chins live outside the CACC area. About 25,000 live in Falam, Paletwa and Mindat townships in Chin State. About 25,000 live in Magwe Division and 35,000 in Sagaing Division of Burma proper. Thus the total population of Lai speaking Chins in Myanmar is 230,000.

A considerable number of Lai speaking Chins live in India and Bangladesh. About 140,000 live in Lai and Chintuipui Districts in Mizoram of India. There are another 50,000 Bawm in Bangladesh. Though they live outside Myanmar, these people speak and write the Lai language and eventually we may work together for the development of Chin literature and culture.

## **1.3 Administration**

Until the British annexation in 1890, the Chins lived independently under their own chieftains. They had their own customs and traditions on which the administration and judicial system was based. There had never been outside rule although commercial contacts with the Burmese existed in small scale.

The expedition order to invade the Chin Hills was issued on 5 September, 1889 by the British Army Headquarters and British troops swiftly reached Hakha, the capital city of Chin State on 19 January, 1890 under the command of General Simon. However, the Chins in the northern Chin Hills refused to surrender to the British invasion of the land and the fight between the tenacious Chins (the Lais) and well organized British armies lasted for five years. Finally, the native warriors

surrendered and were disarmed in 1895. The Chin Hills were then added to the British Empire. The British Government however allowed the chieftains to maintain certain judicial and administrative rights in accordance with their own customs. At the Panlong conference on February 12, 1947, the Chin chiefs agreed to join the Union of Burma and became one of the states of the Union when Burma attained independence from the British rule on January 4, 1948.

## **1.4. Religion**

### **1.4.1 Animism**

Before the arrival of the American Baptist Missionaries on March 15, 1899, the Chins were animists. They did not know God consciously, but they did believe there was a supernatural being in their unconscious mind. They sought that supernatural being in big trees, huge rocks, high mountain peaks and deep valleys, as they believed the powerful spirits (nats) or gods might dwell in those places. Sacrificial animals were offered to the spirits to propitiate them lest they might do harm to human beings.

### **1.4.2 Christianity**

The American Baptist Mission sent Rev. Arthur E. Carson to the Chin Hills to preach salvation to the Chin people. Rev. Carson and his wife Laura Carson arrived at Hakha on March 15, 1899. They learned the language and preached about Christ and Christianity. They found the first convert after five years of labor in 1904. Today about 90 percent of the Chins are Christian.

## **2. Literacy**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Myth has it that once the Chins indeed had writing of their own but lost it completely to dogs because it was written on leather. Notwithstanding the myth, the Chins definitely had no writing before the British annexation of this small mountainous region in 1890. The history of Chin literature is therefore conveniently traceable to the British colonization of

Burma which opened up the country to the American Baptist Missionaries.

### 2.1.1 Surgeon Major A. G. E. Newland (IMS)

Surgeon Major A. G. E. Newland was a medical officer in the southern column under the command of General Simon which advanced into the northern Chin Hills from Kan and reached Hakha in 1890. He took interest in the Chin language and employed Ngaih Ling, an enterprising lad from Hakha, to teach him the language. He taught the young man English and learned Chin (Laiholh) from Ngaih Ling. When he became well versed in Chin he started work on Chin writing using Roman letters, which he adapted to the Lai language in 1894. Major Newland eventually married a young beauty of noble class from Hakha. His book *A Practical Hand-Book of the Language of the Lais* was published in Rangoon in 1897.

He used the spellings and writing styles as below.

(1)

Kema k' kal" lai	---	I will go.
Nangma n' kal" lai	---	You will go.
Amma a' kal" lai	---	He will go.
Zé da?	---	What?
Zé tin" da?	---	How?
Zé hé in?	---	What?
Ho" i da?	---	Whose?
Koi?	---	Which?
Koi in da?	---	Whence?
A ho?	---	Whose?
Pá zé za: da?	---	How much?
Zé kóng: a da?	---	For what reason?
Zé an the: da?	---	What does he say?
A tup" len ko.	---	He cries continuously.
Nangma rung	---	your pony
Hún" ko shé	---	Please come.
Kla	---	month
Kla de	---	next month
Kúm	---	year

Kúm vé	---	next year
Ni shuak n'ák	---	east
Ni ktla n'ák	---	west
Ní hín	---	today
Tai twén	---	tomorrow
Ni zan	---	yesterday
Kwa dé lai in	---	at dawn
Twen thé	---	early
Fak pí ktlai thwa.	---	Hold it firm-ly.
Na tung maw?	---	Have you arrived?
K' rí shwel" lo.	---	I was not at all dark.

He used diacritics like ´, ", ' and -.

### 2.1.2 Rev. Arthur E. Carson

Rev. Arthur E. Carson was the first Baptist Missionary to the Chin people. He and Mrs. Laura Carson arrived in Hakha on March 1, 1899. They first learned the Chin language as they prepared to undertake mission work there. They picked up the language fast enough and continued to work on Chin orthography. Rev. Harry Tilbe, Ph. D., D. D., LL. D., was another missionary working in Prome at the time. Fortunately Dr. Tilbe was a learned scholar whose service would be immensely helpful to the Carsons' plan. Dr. Tilbe accepted their invitation and arrived in Hakha in 1900. Together, they studied the writing system, particularly the spellings and diacritics of Major Newland's book and worked to improve Chin literacy.

Some diacritical marks such as ´ and " were dropped from the system; but a new one, ^, was nevertheless introduced. They continued to use - and ' in their updated writing system. In 1910 Laura Carson published a textbook *Lai Rel Nak Tsa Ok*, No. 1. In the book they used the following spellings and diacritical marks like ^, ' and -, as in the following excerpt.

## (2) Ûitso

Kêma ni Ûitso p'kat k' ngê. A tampî a thã Ûitso a' hsi î kêma hkã a' k' dawth fawn. Kannî inn hkã a' hngãk tawn. Zân ã mî fiar ni inn hkã a' nai ahcun a fãk pî in a' au î mî ni a' kli.

I have a dog. He is a very good dog and loves me very much. He protects our house. If a thief should get near the house at night, he barks loudly and the man runs away.

As time went on the missionaries changed slowly the pattern of writing and the usage of diacritical marks. They later printed a hymn book in Chin entitled *Hla Sa Ok* in 1918 and was written as follows.

(3) K' LAM ZHESU A' K' HMU SAK  
(All the Way My Saviour Leads Me)

K' lam Zhesu a' k' hmu sak,  
Ze-bia-da k' herr ri hnga;  
K' lu nun lio ã dawmktlai tu  
Buar hswel nak n'um hnga maw.  
Vantsung dai nak le ngam nak hka,

Zhesu zhum nak in k' hmu.  
Vole i k' hwa mi viete  
Zhesu ding to in a' tse.

Jesus shows me the way,  
What other message do I need?  
He looks after me my whole life,  
How can I go wrong?  
In following Jesus I find  
Heaven's peace and tranquility.  
Everything I do on this earth  
Is judged correctly by Jesus.

In this pattern of writing they omitted the diacritical mark ^ but continued to use ' and -.

### 2.1.3 Rev. Dr. Joseph H. Cope

When Rev. Arthur E. Carson died in Hakha in 1908, Rev. Dr. Joseph H. Cope, B. Sc., B. D., D. D. arrived there the same year. The British Government appointed him Inspector of Schools for the whole Chin Hills. So he held a dual position as educator in the civil service and missionary in the Baptist Mission Field. Being a scholar he studied the Chin language systematically with the help of Mr. Hau Dala from the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram State, India). They omitted diacritical marks altogether from the writing system, changed some spellings and introduced new word combinations to avoid complications as shown below.

- (4) Vulei rientruen a di tikah,  
Na liennak in ka tei tikah,  
Keima sinah um ko ri tua,  
Ka thihnak ca ka tri lai lo.

When my work on earth is done,  
When I have triumphed by Your greatness;  
If You will abide with me,  
I will not fear death.

Dr. Cope wrote many textbooks in Chin and prescribed them as school textbooks in primary schools throughout the Chin Hills. During the colonial days all subjects were taught in Chin up to the fourth standard. When primary students passed the fourth standard they could read and write fluently in Chin.

Dr. Cope contributed much to the development of Chin literacy as well as to the standard of living of Chins. He is remembered as one of the outstanding missionaries. He died and was buried in Hakha in 1938.

### 2.1.4 Rev. Dr. Chester U. Strait

Dr. Chester U. Strait arrived with his wife in Hakha in 1925. Like his predecessors, he first studied Chin literature and learned the language. Later he translated the New Testament from English into Chin and had it printed. He revised and updated the previous spellings almost to modern usage as shown in the following sample.

- (5)      Vawlei cung hnangamnak um lo,  
             Zihmanh a tling kho lo;  
             Vawlei cung sau nuamhnak um lo,  
             Sifahnak ram a si.

There is no security on earth,  
 Nothing works out;  
 There is no lasting happiness on earth,  
 It is a land of suffering.

He returned to the USA in 1940 after 15 years of service in the Chin Hills.

### 2.1.5 Rev. Dr. Robert G. Johnson

Rev. Robert G. Johnson and his family arrived at Tiddim, another mission post in the Chin Hills, in 1946. He was transferred to Hakha in 1947. He opened a Bible Training School at Hakha in 1948. He prepared the Chin Hymn Book with solfa notation which was published in 1970. Together with Rev. Dr. David Van Bik, a native Bible scholar, he started to translate the Holy Bible into Chin. With negligible changes, he followed the spellings and word combinations adopted by Dr. Chester U. Strait. The then Burmese government ordered all the missionaries to leave the country in 1965 and Rev. Johnson had to return to America in 1966.

The Baptist missionaries came to Burma and the Chin Hills with the following aims and objects:



1. Spiritual enlightenment
2. Economic development
3. Educational advancement

With the attainment of independence in 1948 the Burmese Government, in its attempt to solidify its grip on ethnic groups, changed the colonial education system and ordered Burmese to be the medium of instruction in all schools and colleges. Before independence all subjects in primary schools in the Chin Hills were taught in Chin. English was the medium of teaching in middle and high schools, and Burmese was merely a compulsory subject along with mathematics and English. The radical change in political climate of our country adversely affected the Chins who had just awakened to a new beginning in religion, education and economic order. After independence the state scholars in the Chin Hills were ordered to stop teaching Chin after the second standard. It meant that primary school students were permitted to study Chin for three years only. The change in educational system thus enormously weakened the students' knowledge of their own written language. Because they have to stop studying Chin at seven they can hardly read or write Chin when they leave school at eight or nine. No textbooks or reading materials in Chin are provided by the Government which is the sole supplier of educational books and materials. Its policy was to promote only Burmese, with no consideration for the needs and aspirations of ethnic groups.

### **3. Chin Christian Literature Society (CCLS)**

The Chin Christian Literature Society was formed by seven Baptist Associations in 1988. They were as follows.

1. Hakha Baptist Association
2. Thantlang Association of Baptist Churches
3. Matu Association of Baptist Churches
4. Matu Baptist Association
5. Zotung Baptist Association

6. Chin Baptist Association, Kalemyo
7. Gangaw Baptist Association

The aims and objects of this Society were to promote Chin literacy, spiritual enlightenment, and educational advancement. Many copies of Chin Readers from KG to standard four, the Holy Bible (Lai Baibal Thiang), the Chin Hymn Book (Krifla Hlabu) and other religious books, newsletters and journals were published in Chin and distributed to all Christians.

#### **4. Chin Association for Christian Communication (CACC)**

The Chin Christian Literature Society was reorganized in 1993 as the Chin Association for Christian Communication. It includes eleven Baptist Associations, two groups of other denominations, three local Baptist Churches and a few individual members.

The Chin Association for Christian Communication carries on a wide range of activities for the material as well as spiritual development of the Chin people, and comprises four Units and three Projects in its program.

##### **4.1 Unit1. Mission and Education**

Under this Unit, the Chin Christian College (CCC) was established in 1990. It offers a 3 year course for a Bachelors of Religious Education (BRE), a 4 year course for a Bachelors of Theology (Bth) and a 4 year course for a Diploma in Theology (DipTh).

##### **4.2 Unit 2. Literacy and Culture**

As almost all Chins are Christian, this Unit published 7000 Christian Hymn Books, 2400 Sunday School Lesson Books, and a number of other religious books. It published 21,000 copies of Chin Readers from KG to standard four, 5000 copies of the CACC Journal (1994), 4000 copies of the CACC Journal (1995), 2000 copies of the Chin-English Dictionary, and 3000 texts for the Adult Literacy Project.

### **4.3 Unit 3. Audio and Visual**

This Unit produced the following numbers of cassette tapes.

1. Cinrung group	1000
2. Lungrep ngei lo	800
3. Dawtnak	1000
4. Seino rian	700

Besides these, 3000 copies of a 1996-1997 Calendar with Chin cultural background information were also published.

### **4.4 Unit 4. Finance and Property**

The main source of financial support comes from the member Associations of CACC (2 percent every year). It owns 4.95 acres of land for the construction of a permanent campus for the Chin Christian College, with another 10 acres to be acquired.

### **4.5 Project 1. Chin Christian College Project**

The Chin Christian College (CCC) has three courses as described above. All the theological subjects are taught in English. It is a member of the Zomi Theological College, ZBC, the Association for Theological Education in Myanmar (ATEM), MCC, and the Association for Theological Education in Southeast Asia (ATESEA), Singapore. It has 5000 volumes in its library.

### **4.6 Project 2. Vocational Training Centre Project**

Because the Hillside Agricultural System is practiced in Chin State, agriculture is taught as one subject in the Chin Christian College.

### **4.7 Project 3. Adult Literacy Project**

As already noted, the Government of Myanmar allows Chin to be taught only to the second standard in public school, which is not sufficient as a basis for functional Chin literacy. So the Chin Association for Christian Communication plans to

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establish reading classes in the Chin Christian College. Since almost 45 percent of young Chin Christians cannot read or write Chin, an Adult Literacy Project to promote understanding of the Bible and the Christian Hymnal has already been established. Its main target is to increase literacy through the Churches, but it is directed to non-Christians as well.

The Adult Literacy Project is a four year program, which began in March, 1996. Forty-three teachers are being trained for 43 centers. At present, 980 people are taking Chin literacy courses which last one month. The overall plan is as shown below.

Year	Centers	Teachers	Students
1996	108	432	17,280
1997	133	532	21,280
1998	125	500	20,000
1999	63	252	10,080
Totals	429	1716	68,640

We hope that by the end of 1999, all Chins will be able to read and write effectively. This is the ultimate purpose of the Adult Literacy Project. We feel that the project has good prospects for success, and that it will contribute to the development of the Chin people as a whole. We have the cooperation of other Christian organizations, and it is widely assumed that this project has a unique contribution to make. There are however severe financial problems which limit our capacity to provide notebooks and pencils, or candles and kerosene (since classes are conducted in the evening). At present all teachers are volunteers, and the support of Church is indispensable.