The Journal of Burma Studies

President, Burma Studies Group
F.K. Lehman

Editor
Richard Cooler
Center for Burma Studies
Northern Illinois University

Production Editor
Lisa Wilcox
Center for Southeast Asian Studies
Northern Illinois University

Copy Editors
Bob Vore
Lisa Wilcox

Manuscript Formatting
Lisa Wilcox

Subscription Information
(815) 753-1981
Editorial Office
(815) 753-5790
E-Mail
seap@niu.edu
Fax
(815) 753-1776

The Journal of Burma Studies is an annual scholarly journal jointly sponsored by the Burma Studies Group (Association for Asian Studies), The Center for Burma Studies (Northern Illinois University), and Northern Illinois University’s Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

Articles are refereed by professional peers. Send five copies of original scholarly manuscripts to The Journal of Burma Studies, Center for Burma Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115.

Subscriptions are $16 per volume delivered book rate. Members of the Burma Studies Group (membership $25 per year) receive the journal as part of their membership. For air mail add $10 per volume. Send check or money order in U.S. dollars drawn on a U.S. bank made out to “Northern Illinois University.” Visa and Mastercard orders accepted. Mail to: Center for Burma Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb IL 60115.

For abstracts of back issues, visit the website at: http://www.niu.edu/cseas/jbs.html

The Journal of Burma Studies will be abstracted or indexed in the following: America: History and Life; Bibliography of Asian Studies; Historical Abstracts; PAIS International; MLA International Bibliography

© 2000 Northern Illinois University
Center for Southeast Asian Studies. ISSN # 1094-799X
ARTICLES

THE VOC IN BURMA: 1634 - 1680
Wil O. Dijk 1

VENERATING THE BUDDHA’S REMAINS IN BURMA:
FROM SOLITARY PRACTICE TO THE CULTURAL
HEGEMONY OF COMMUNITIES
Juliane Schober 111

A GLIMPSE INTO THE TRADITIONAL MARTIAL ARTS
IN BURMA
Michael F. Martin 141
A GLIMPSE INTO THE TRADITIONAL MARTIAL ARTS IN BURMA

Michael F. Martin

The traditional martial arts are an aspect of Burmese culture that has been virtually ignored by Burma scholars. Yet these martial arts have a rich heritage dating back to the early days of Burma. Historic events, religion, political necessities, and, more have shaped them recently into economic realities. The traditional martial art came close to extinction during the British colonial period, but was revived during the Japanese occupation. In past times, they were utilized for warfare and self-defense. Today the self-defense element remains, while the combat element has been transformed into sports and artistic cultural expression. The present economic conditions and the spread of foreign martial arts pose a current threat to the survival of the Burmese traditional martial arts and require the attention of Burma scholars to document this important component of the historic cultural identity of Burma.

Introduction
There is little that has been written in English about the Burmese traditional martial arts of thine, banshe, and bando; nor has a wealth of information been published in Burmese. Most Burmese martial art traditions have been orally transmitted from teacher to disciple.

\(^1\)Michael F. Martin has practiced the Burmese traditional martial art of Hanthawaddy bando for twenty-five years under its Chief Instructor, U Maung Gy, and served as the President and a Director of the American Bando Association, which oversees the dissemination of Hanthawaddy bando. He is also a discipline of the Shan martial art of Thine Pyaung Pyun under U Ba Kyi and Ko Win Myint; and of the messianic Buddhist martial art of Thine Saka Byu Har under U Soe Ya.

The Journal of Burma Studies
Volume 6, pp. 141-152
©Copyright 2001 by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies
Northern Illinois University
during the course of training. The lack of written documentation has made it difficult to accurately discern facts from myths and legends.

The purpose for this paper is to provide Burma scholars with an overview of the traditional martial arts in Burma in the hope that it may stimulate interest in further fieldwork and documentation of this unique cultural heritage of Burma. The paper draws primarily from published English language sources, the twenty-five years of practice of the Burmese martial art of Hanthawaddy ban to by the writer in America under the Burmese expatriate U Maung Gyi, three field trips to Burma by the writer between 1993 and 1997, and correspondence between Burmese traditional martial art teachers and the writer from 1993 to 2000.

**Historical Period**
The late Burmese martial art master U Chit Than wrote “this manly art (thine) was introduced into Burma in the eighth-century CE.” U Chit Than does not indicate from whence these martial arts came. However, other sources generally suggest that the Burmese martial arts drew first from Indian influences and later from those of China. A noted martial arts historian, Donn Draeger, commented that until the tenth-century CE, Burmese martial arts were primarily influenced by India with that influence being exercised through the teaching of the martial arts by Buddhist monks from India.  

Draeger specifically credits India for the derivation of naban, or Burmese wrestling. Khilton Nongmaithem, the senior Manipuri martial art teacher at Hula Sindamsang in Imphal, India, attributes the shape of the Burmese dha/dah (sword) to India. While Yi Yi Man implies that the Buddhist Ari monks practiced a form of self-defense prior to the eighth-century CE, he does not indicate from whom the Ari monks

---

5Donn F. Draeger and Robert W. Smith, Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts, 155.
6Personal conversations in Atlanta, U.S.A., Khilton Nongmaithem, Senior Thang-Ta Teacher - Hula Sindamsang (Imphal, India), 1998.

142 *The Journal of Burma Studies*, Volume 6
learned their martial art.\textsuperscript{7}

Some time in the eighth- or tenth-century CE, depending upon the scholar, the Burmese martial arts began to be influenced by China. Yi Yi Man cites the famous Japanese martial art master Masutatsu Oyama as claiming that martial arts were introduced into Burma from China around the eighth century CE.\textsuperscript{8} Draeger believes that after the tenth-century CE, as contacts with the Chinese increased, the primacy of influence shifted from India to Chira.\textsuperscript{9} He further states that Burmese boxing - lethwei (alternatively spelled "lethwei" and "lethway") - emerged from Chinese boxing with some Indian influence.\textsuperscript{10} Tiger Ba Nyein agrees, noting especially sharp similarity between Burmese boxing and the self-defense arts emanating from Mainland China.\textsuperscript{11} The Chinese influence can also be seen in the animal fighting styles incorporated within the Burmese martial arts.

In later centuries, the Burmese martial arts were influenced by contacts with traveling priests, merchants, and diplomats from Sri Lanka, India, Tibet, and China.\textsuperscript{12} In his narration of the travels of the Augustinian friar Sebastiao Manrique, Maurice Collis notes the presence of Japanese samurai among the household troops of Siam, Pegu, and Arakan during the seventeenth-century CE.\textsuperscript{13} What, if any, influence these samurai had on the Burmese martial arts is not known. U Maung Gyi, the Chief Instructor of The American Bando Association, to have provided philosophical influences to the Burmese martial arts, said meanwhile, Buddhism, Brahmanism, and

\textsuperscript{7}Yi Yi Man, "A Glimpse into Thaing Art," \textit{Forward}, August 1, 1974, 18-19.
\textsuperscript{8}Yi Yi Man, "A Glimpse into Thaing Art," 18.
\textsuperscript{9}Donn F. Draeger and Robert W. Smith, \textit{Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts}, 155.
\textsuperscript{10}Donn F. Draeger and Robert W. Smith, \textit{Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts}, 162.
\textsuperscript{12}Personal conversations and lectures at various locations in the U.S.A., U Maung Gyi, Chief Instructor, The American Bando Association (Atlanta, U.S.A.), 1976-2000.
local animism.\textsuperscript{14}

The different weapons specialties of the Burmese martial arts evolved or were refined during the various military conflicts to consolidate the three Burmese empires, to defeat Burma's traditional enemy Siam, and to defend Burma against the Mongols, the Chinese, and the British. During the nineteenth-century CE, the Pwekyaung monks practiced "fencing with swords, spears, single-stick, and shields; self-defense; shooting with the knee-bow, the ordinary bow, the pellet bow, and sling-shot shooting leaden bullets; and at the very least, boxing, music and dancing, and such arts profitable in a life in the world."\textsuperscript{15} However, as firearms came into greater use during the nineteenth-century CE, the Burmese martial arts began to move into the background.\textsuperscript{16}

The subjugation of Burma by the British in the nineteenth century CE nearly led to the extinction of the Burmese martial art systems as the British declared certain aspects of their practice to be illegal.\textsuperscript{17} However, small sects of martial art disciples continued to train secretly in the Shan States, the Thaton District, and the Hanthawaddy District.\textsuperscript{18} During the Saya San Rebellion of early 1930s, the martial arts were again observed.\textsuperscript{19} A youth movement in

\textsuperscript{14}Personal conversations and lectures at various locations in the U.S.A., U Maung Gyi.
\textsuperscript{15}U Tin, Myama-
\textsuperscript{16}Ok-chok-pon Sa-dan [The Royal Administration of Burma] (Rangoon: Central Press, 1962), 212.
\textsuperscript{18}Yi Yi Man, "A Glimpse Into Thaing Art," 19.
\textsuperscript{19}U Chit Than, "The Burmese Art of Self Defense."
\textsuperscript{19}Yi Yi Man, "A Glimpse Into Thaing Art," 19. Michael F. Martin has practiced the Burmese traditional martial art of Hanthawaddy bando for twenty-five years under its Chief Instructor, U Maung Gyi, and served as the President and a Director of The American Bando Association, which oversees the dissemination of Hanthawaddy bando. He is also a discipline of the Shan martial art of Thine Pyaung Pyun under U Ba Kyi and Ko Win Myint; and of the messianic Buddhist martial art of Thine Saka Byu Har under U Soe Ya.
\textsuperscript{19}Personal correspondence, U Ba Kyi, Senior Instructor - Thine Pyaung Pyun, 1995-2000.
\textsuperscript{19}U Chit Than, "The Burmese Art of Self Defense," Nation Supplement (Rangoon), n.d.
\textsuperscript{19}Donn F. Draeger and Robert W. Smith, Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts

144 The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 6
the 1930s used the martial arts to instill a martial spirit among its members and to emphasize its nationalistic ideology. Also, the Military Athletic Club that was established in 1933 at the British Gurkha garrison in Maymyo included the teaching of the Burmese martial arts. During their occupation of Burma from 1942 to 1945, the Japanese encouraged the revival and teaching of the Burmese martial arts and also sponsored the introduction of various Japanese martial arts into Burma. The martial arts of Burma gained new respectability during the Japanese occupation. This is the period in which the two prominent Burmese martial art teachers - U Pye Thein and U Chit Than - were made instructors. All known teachers were encouraged to come out into the open to exhibit the fighting techniques of their respective martial art systems. In 1944, there

19Donn F. Draeger and Robert W. Smith, Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts, 155.
19Donn F. Draeger and Robert W. Smith, Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts, 155.
19Donn F. Draeger and Robert W. Smith, Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts, 162.
19Personal conversations and lectures at various locations in the U.S.A., U Maung Gyi.
21Personal conversations and lectures at various locations in the U.S.A., U Maung Gyi.
22U Chit Than, "The Burmese Art of Self Defense."
22U Chit Than, "The Burmese Art of Self Defense."
22U Chit Than, "The Burmese Art of Self Defense."
Michael F. Martin

were sufficient practitioners to stage an exhibition of the Burmese martial arts. U Chit Than attributes much of the success of the revival of the Burmese martial arts to the efforts of the All Burma Youth League, known at the time as the East Asiatic Youth League. These efforts by the League continued after the war.

Immediately after the war, the Burmese martial art systems continued their revival in the newly independent, nationalistic Burma. In 1946 Burmese martial art teachers who had taught at the Military Athletic Club in Maymyo prior to the war established the National Bando Association under U Ba Than. This organization created the eclectic Hanthawaddy bando from its constituent martial art systems and later modified its system of lethawai along the lines of Western boxing. The first All Burma Competition in the Burmese martial arts was held in 1948. The All Burma Thaing Union was formed in the same year with U Pye Thein as President and U Chit Than as Secretary. Subsequently, a number of competitive events were held to support this revival of the Burmese martial arts. Books and articles began to be written about the Burmese martial arts, especially by U Pye Thein and U Chit Than. Subsequent governments of Burma have worked to preserve the traditional martial arts and to reshape them into positive civilian self-defense systems, competitive sports, and artistic cultural performances. This direction has continued into the present.

---

26U Chit Than, "The Burmese Art of Self Defense."
27U Chit Than, "The Burmese Art of Self Defense."
30Personal conversations and lectures at various locations in the U.S.A., U Maung Gyi.
31Personal conversations and lectures at various locations in the U.S.A., U Maung Gyi.
32U Chit Than, "The Burmese Art of Self Defense."
34U Chit Than, "The Burmese Art of Self Defense."
Present Period

The Burmese government has a national martial art association, the National (a.k.a. All-Myanmar) Thine Federation. It is the umbrella organization for government-sponsored martial art systems and promotes the preservation of these systems through funding and competitive sports competition. There are a number of martial art systems outside the Federation. Most of these systems are non-Burman and/or small village systems. The non-Federation systems appear to be dying out in the 1990s as a result of the poor economic conditions in Burma. These economic conditions have caused the closing of many commercial Burmese traditional martial art schools, while other schools turned to teaching meditation and foreign martial arts to survive. Additionally, both the Korean martial art of tae kwon do and the Japanese martial art of karate entered into the scene during the 1990s with periodic financial donations from Korean and Japanese business subsidiaries in Burma. These foreign martial art systems have been gaining disciples in spite of the current economic conditions. In the absence of specific research of this phenomenon, the writer can only speculate that prospective martial art disciples are drawn to the foreign martial arts and willing to expend scarce discretionary income on them possibly because of some inherent status value attached to something "foreign. However, the real rationale underlying this behavior requires further study.

Historically, the martial art systems of Burma had been broadly termed thine. During the British colonial period beginning in the nineteenth century CE, it became vogue to classify the Burmese martial arts into bando, banshei, and thine as Mydwaddy Ye Khaung reports,36

1. Those systems teaching only unarmed defense and attack against either armed or unarmed adversaries are called "bando";

2. Those systems teaching only armed defense and attack against either armed or unarmed adversaries

---

are called "banshei", alternatively spelled "banshay"; and,

3. Those systems teaching both armed/unarmed defense and attack against either armed or unarmed adversaries are called "thine", alternatively spelled "thaing". Thus, thine systems teach both bando and banshei.

In Burma these classifications remain generally valid today. On the other hand, while both The American Bando Association and the Pakistan-based World Bando Association teach thine, they have chosen to call their martial arts "bando" since it is easier for foreigners to pronounce.

Although they are commonly considered by the public to be sports and not martial arts, both lethwai (boxing) and naban (wrestling) are also considered aspects of the Burmese martial arts. Some bando and thine systems incorporate either one or both of these sports into their systems. The two previously mentioned foreign Burmese martial art organizations include both lethwai and naban into their systems.

From the larger thine perspective, the structure of the Burmese martial arts has been traditionally viewed as:

**Dhoe (body)**
A. Strikes, kicks, and headbutts
B. Holds, locks, and chokes
C. Throws, trips, and flips

**Dok/Hlan (stick/spear)**
A. Long weapon - (length longer than five feet)
B. Medium weapon - (two - five feet length)
C. Short weapon - (length less than two feet)

**Dha (sword)**
A. Long weapon - (blade length greater than two feet)
B. Medium weapon - (one - two foot blade length)
C. Dagger/knife - (blade length less than one foot)
The word banshei or thine may also be suffixed to a name of a weapon to identify particular weapon specialties, for example dha-banshei is the banshei specialty utilizing the sword, dok-thine is the thine specialty utilizing the stick, hlan-banshei is the banshei specialty utilizing the spear, and let-thine is the unarmed thine specialty or the bando specialty of a thine system.\textsuperscript{37}

From the writer's Burmese martial art experience, the Burmese martial art systems typically contain one or more animal styles such as the:

1. Cobra Style - Attacks the vital points of the upper body
2. Viper (Russell) Style - Attacks the vital points of the lower body
3. Python Style - Locking, breaking, and choking;
4. Scorpion Style - Pinches the nerve centers of the body
5. Eagle Style - Utilizes double palm and clawing attacks
6. Tiger and Panther Styles - Aggressive striking and clawing attacks in combination with leaping & leg sweeping

In general, a martial art disciple will select the specific animal fighting style which best suits their physical attributes, mental disposition, and personal philosophy. The disciple learns the habits and nature of the actual animal as well as the techniques and tactics of that selected animal fighting style. It is thought that to be successful in the elected animal fighting style, the disciple must both think and fight in a manner characteristic of that animal.

The animal fighting styles tend to incorporate all three fighting distances - long (outside the adversary's arms), middle (at the adversary's arms), and close (inside the adversary's arms) - within the fighting strategies. The time spent at each distance will

vary according to the particular animal fighting style and the nature of the encounter. Though all animal fighting styles utilize weapons from each of the three weapon groups, the specific weapons, techniques, and tactics vary according to the principles underlying each animal fighting style. The shape of the weapons may differ from one animal style to another. For example, a short stick utilized by a cobra stylist is sharpened at both ends to puncture body targets while a short stick utilized by a tiger stylist has a short angular hook at one end to tear body targets.

Each of the major nationality groups in Burma tends to have some type of martial arts. From the writer's experience and fieldwork, it appears that the Burman and Shan martial art systems are presently more prevalent than those of the other nationality groups. Also the writer has noted that the focus of most traditional martial art systems in Burma is toward participation in the competitive sport, artistic, and self-defense aspects of the martial arts. However, the writer has encountered a messianic Buddhist thine system in Upper Burma whose disciples enters into trances and demonstrate martial art skills and feats as tests of their faith and their mastery over the basic elements. These disciples have not undergone any formal training and are said to derive their martial skills from the spirits that possess them while they are in a trance.39

Conclusion
The Burmese have a rich martial art tradition, which deserves the serious attention of Burma scholars. Current economic conditions and the spread of foreign martial art systems presently threaten this aspect of Burmese culture. It is hoped these factors will not lead to the demise of this unique Burmese cultural expression. However given this threat, it has become more important than ever to assist the Burmese with the documentation of this national heritage.

References

Ba Kyi, U
Senior Teacher - Thine Pyaung Pyun
1995 - 2000 Personal correspondence

Collis, Maurice

Draeger, Donn F. and Robert W. Smith

Forward

Gyi, U Maung
Chief Instructor - The American Bando Association (Atlanta, U.S.A)

Myint, U Soe

Khilton Nongmaithem
Senior Thang-Ta Teacher - Hula Sindamsang (Imphal, India)
1998 Personal conversations in Atlanta, U.S.A.

Tiger Ba Nyein

Than, U Chit

The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 6 151
Michael F. Martin

(Rangoon).

Tin, U

Win, Nyan
Chief Instructor - Combat Bando Institute (Yangon, Myanmar)
1993-5 Personal conversations in Yangon, Myanmar.

Ya, U Soe
Upper Myanmar Director - Thine Saka Byu Har (Mandalay, Myanmar)
1997-2000 Personal conversations in Mogoke, Myanmar and correspondence

Yi Yi Man
1974 "A Glimpse into Thaing Art." Forward, August 1, 18-19.