During the British colonial period (1885-1948), various Palaung groups used the Shan script to write their languages. Since independence in 1948, these groups have come into more direct contact with the Burmese people and their language, through government and educational institutions. Since the 1960s, the influence of Burmese has become stronger, displacing the older role of the Shan language in Palaung intellectual life. As a result, recent efforts to create Palaung orthographies have followed Burmese models.

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TO READ THIS CHANG as 'assimilation' may be misleading. Rather, Palaung elites see themselves as making efforts to establish a 'standardized' orthography based on the national language, Burmese. Since the political changes in Myanmar in 2010, Palaung leaders have created Palaung textbooks in anticipation of increased local autonomy in education. Wide differences among the Palaung language and several orthographic traditions have posed a challenge to creating a single Palaung orthography. The difficulties in these efforts, together with the challenges posed by creating a standard Palaung language from among the varieties, highlight the evolving internal power dynamics of a diverse ethnic group in democratizing Myanmar.

The Palaung, who call themselves Ta’ang (also ‘Deang’ in China), are an Austronesian upland group living in Shan State in Burma (Myanmar) and neighboring countries, and form several subgroups who differ ethnically and linguistically. These subgroups include the Sameung (or Katur), Rumai, Rukhau, Riang, Thewrai, Palli, Rucing, and Rumau. As an upland people numbering about half a million, the Palaungs have historically been in close contact with the Shan (or Tai), who live in the valleys of Shan State. More recently, Palaungs have come into closer contact with the Burmese through education, the media, and the state. Much previous writing has stated that the Palaung simply imitate or have internalized Shan culture.3

In the 1950s, Leslie Milne observed that the Palaung chronicles were written in Shan.4 In more recent times, Palaungs would use Shan texts for teaching and religious purposes, despite the fact that they speak a language unrelated to Shan. Most Palaung groups are Theravāda Buddhist. When praying, many did so in Shan, which they saw as more effective, virtuous, and nicer to listen to. Those praying in Palaung risked being looked down upon for using a low status language.

Palaung groups have made use of a variety of scripts to write their languages. In 1972, a standardized, official Palaung script5 was adopted in Palaung communities. However, in my fieldwork during 2011-2016 in areas of Shan State where the Palaung languages are spoken, Mandalay and Yangon, some people refused to adopt the script,6 to overcome some of the inadequacies inherent in the older systems and in the 1972 script. I explore some of the reasons for the diversity of scripts among the Palaung and how various groups have coped with this diversity. On-going efforts to revise the script will have to address the continued practice of local communities using their local language and script. Indeed, the creation of an official script is tied to efforts to create a supra-regional Palaung language, called ḫē so (the language of the group). I suggest a reconfiguration of ethnic relations, both among the Palaung groups, and externally with the Shans and Burmese.

Creating a ‘united’ Palaung script
The idea that a single Palaung language was a Miss Maclean, an American Christian missionary. As part of the missionaries' work, Maclean and other missionaries designed scripts for local languages. Maclean tried to introduce her script in 1912. As Buddhists, the Palaung were not receptive. In the following period, however, many Palaung intellectuals took up the impetus and created writing systems based on Burmese and Shan.7 In addition to the generally low esteem in which the Palaung held their own language, many people already knew Shan and thought it enough to simply write in that language, rather than in Palaung. In the 1950s, the drive to create a script again reemerged. The Palaung saw the Shan as a language that had been developed and used by the educated class, even if they were familiar with the script. The lack of a common, standard language meant that if people were to create a shared orthography, they could play in promoting it. The commission incorporated elements from the many different systems in an effort to reach a compromise. They composed a sample textbook in the language of the Sameung spoken in Namkham, the traditional center of Palaung political power. In 1972, representatives of various Palaung groups met and decided to adopt the students’ conventions.

Creating an official language for the official script
The script adopted in 1972 is still used in non-formal education in northern Shan State and Mandalay. A crucial restriction to the spread of its use was that under the Ne Win regime (1962-1988), no language other than Burmese could be used in government schools. In the 1990s, lay education for high school graduates gained some momentum. Yet literacy levels in the standard script is still low. Among many Palaung groups, literacy in their local script tends to be higher.

The question remains, why do so few use the standardized scripts and textbooks? The wide differences in the Palaung language are largely responsible. A textbook in Samlung will be difficult for speakers from other subgroups to understand, even if they are familiar with the script. The lack of a common, standard language meant that if people were to create a shared orthography, they could use their local dialect. The Rumai used the same script as the Sameung, but have created textbooks following Rumausage. The usage a Yon-based script and the

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References
4. Tanimura Ken. 2001. Experiences of ethnic groups that don’t have their own script.8

Above: Racing textbook (left), Ruma-based textbook (right).

Below: Palaung women of various subgroups.

Racing monk who originally created it did not stop using it even after the 1972 conference.

One young Palaung working on the promotion of the Shan language today, “People are aware of the linguistic and social realities which prevent the adoption of a common script. Older people, however, do not want to change the current system because of pride. Currently, some committee members could take suggestions from the people. That way it will be more likely that they will adopt it.”

Starting in 2011, greater autonomy in education has become possible for many Burmese minorities. Palaung have been able to teach their language in government schools after school hours. The new National League for Democracy government, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, has raised hopes that teaching minority languages as part of the regular government curriculum will be possible. In 2014, members of local organizations, including the Ta’ang Student and Youth Union (TSYU) and the Ta’ang Women’s Organization (TWO), agreed to create a textbook to be used in government schools, with the goal of introduction in 2017. Members of the TSYU, which provides education about human rights and the rule of law, have made it a point to communicate only using Palaung languages in their own communities rather than Burmese. They say that it was difficult at first, but that they got used to each other’s dialects over time. Based on their experience, they came to think it possible to create a standard language, not just a script.

With the agreement of the Palaung Literature and Culture Committee, they have translated two books into each of the six Palaung languages. Since the language, vocabulary of each language and choose the words common to the most. This list of common words will be the basis of the ‘official’ Palaung language. For example, the word how (ŋo) is the same among five of the Palaung languages, so it will become the official word. This is a straightforward example. Depending on the word, some subgroups may have very little input, even though they had greater control over their language in the past.

The biggest question now is whether the Racing, who are the largest group and already have their own script, will adopt the new official language. My conversations with Racing speakers suggest that while young people may be more used to the idea of a standard language and script, even people over forty thirty prefer their own script and the Racing language. One Racing monk in his forties explained that for political reasons, adopting a Burmese-based script in the Racing area would be difficult. The Shan State Army is powerful there, and there are only four government schools among the 104 Palaung villages.

The obstacles on the road to creating a standard script and language suggest the continued importance of small, local Palaung communities, their own connections, and their older writing systems. The response among younger generations has been flexibility. As one Racing speaker put it, “If the Racing want to keep using their Yon script, they can study it in the monastery and learn the yunthlone in the government schools. We don’t want to stop them from using the Yon script.”

3

1. Sayagyi U Paw San i Atoppatti [Biography of Sayagyi U Paw San].
2. Tanimura Ken. 2001. Experiences of ethnic groups that don’t have their own script.8

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