

# **A Review on *Cultural History of Myanmar* by Theik Pan Soe Yin**

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## **Abstract**

The book *Cultural History of Myanmar* by Theik Pan Soe Yin deeply represents the position and perspective of local scholars on the origin and development of Myanmar's culture and is of precious research value. After reviewing the definitions of "culture" and "cultural history" in the introduction part, this paper reviews the author's views in this book from four perspectives, including the definition of culture and the unity of the whole and the individual, the origin of the nation in Myanmar, the attitude to the influence of Chinese and Indian cultures, and the research object of this book. The book provides us with a variety of perspectives and important references for our study of Burmese culture, which is of great significance for an in-depth understanding of Burmese culture.

Keywords: Theik Pan Soe Yin; Myanmar; Cultural history; Review

## **1. Introduction**

Theik Pan Soe Yin, a Burmese historian, once published a book named "History of Burmese Culture" at the end of the last century. From the perspective of Burmese people, he systematically discussed the origin, development and formation of Burmese Culture. It is of great academic value and practical significance for the domestic academic circles to have a comprehensive understanding of Myanmar's cultural origin, characteristics and rich and colorful cultural features, so as to better study the historical origins and characteristics of Myanmar's national character, and also for cultural exchange between China and Myanmar and the deepening of the mutual understanding between the two nation.

As the core of "cultural history", the definition of "culture" is complex and diverse. For example, the British historian Peter Burke (2008) pointed out that in Britain and Germany after the 19th century, the word "culture" (or "Kultur" in Germany) was used more and more frequently, while the French preferred the word "civilization". In China, Liang Qichao (1987:98) defined "culture" as: " a valuable common work accumulated by human mind." At the same time, he defined the content of "culture" as: " a kind of business and karma that contains human material and spiritual world" (Liang Qichao, 1987:102-103). As for the definition of "cultural history", Karl Lamprecht, a German historian, raised this issue in 1897. In his book *What is the Cultural History*, Peter Burke (2008:3) said that the common basis of cultural historians was to pay attention to the symbol and its interpretation. Symbols, whether conscious or unconscious, could be seen everywhere from art to daily life. It is one of many methods to study the past with semiotics. He also gave a definition of "cultural history", that is, "although cultural history has no essence, it has its own history". Therefore, due to the diversity of the definition of "culture", there is no unified and universal definition of "cultural history". However, Chinese scholar Zhu Weizheng (1984:60) believed that "culture is a whole, a whole branded with the special mark of human practical activities. Therefore, the so-called cultural history is the history of the overall development process."

In a word, cultural history can be understood as a branch of history which studies human culture. *History of*

*Burmese Culture*, written by Theik Pan Soe Yin, made a detailed discussion on the history of Myanmar's clan name culture, material culture, social culture and spiritual culture. This paper has focused on a review of the *History of Burmese Culture* by Theik Pan Soe Yin, trying to show some of the views and characteristics of this book from a macro perspective.

## 2. The Definition of Culture and the Unity of the Whole and the Parts

There are different opinions on the concept of "culture". Raymond Henry Williams, a British cultural scientist, once said that "culture" was "one of the most complex two or three words in English." American anthropologists Alfred Louis Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn listed 164 different definitions of culture in their book *Culture: Critical Analysis of Concept and Definition* published in 1952.

At the beginning of the book, Theik Pan Soe Yin (1974:14) also gave his own definition of culture: "culture is the rules, laws, customs, codes of conduct formed according to people's ideas, and the intelligence quotient, knowledge, technology, experience, ideas and creativity inherited from human society, which are adapted to the natural environment and people's interaction". Moreover, he summed it up as "culture is a national life mode". The author did not divide the definition of culture into broad sense or narrow sense, but his definition of culture belonged to the concept category of "broad culture", that is, the sum of material wealth and spiritual wealth created in the process of human social practice. This also provided a basic premise for the author to systematically discuss the development of Burmese Culture.

In addition, we know that the formation of a regional culture is always affected by the surrounding culture. Myanmar, as a country in Southeast Asia, is not an isolated region, and its culture has been interacted with neighboring countries or cultures. In the second chapter, the author summarized the culture of Southeast Asia, intending to study the development of Burmese Culture from the comprehensive and connecting perspective. At the beginning, the author stated that "if we only focus on Myanmar itself in the study of the cultural history, it will cause shortsightedness of vision and is not correct" (Theik Pan Soe Yin, 1974:19). The cultural characteristics of a country are often related to its geographical environment. Due to its unique geographical conditions, Myanmar has been influenced by Indian and Chinese culture in the stage of cultural formation, which is an objective reality that cannot be avoided in the study of Burmese Culture. At the same time, the author believed that "Burmese Culture is the result of selective acceptance and transformation of Indian culture on the basis of its original culture" (Theik Pan Soe Yin, 1974:134). However, if we think that Myanmar has completely accepted the Chinese and Indian culture, its implied meaning is that before the introduction of Chinese and Indian culture, the people living in Myanmar were in a barbaric stage, which is also very inconsistent with historical facts. It can be seen that the history of Burmese Culture written by Theik Pan Soe Yin is actually a systematic and scientific discussion on the development and formation of Burmese Culture on the basis of the unity of integrity and individuality.

## 3. The Origin of Myanmar

To discuss the origin of the Burmese people, we have to mention the ethnic groups that arrived in Myanmar in history. As early as three or four thousand years ago, there were Negritos and a kind of primitive inhabitants who spoke the South Asian language in Myanmar. They were in a state of hunting and were primitive residents of the stone age in Myanmar. In the late Neolithic age, both Theik Pan Soe Yin and Burmese historian Bobashin believed that the Xiluan-Malay people were the first to enter Myanmar. The Xiluan-Malay people brought a higher level of culture and were the earliest foreign people who arrived in Myanmar and Indochina Peninsula

two or three thousand years ago" (Theik Pan Soe Yin, 1974:29). Xiluan-Malay people learned how to hunt, fish, gather and practise slash and burn cultivation in their daily life. After staying in Myanmar for several centuries, the Xiluan-Malay people continued to move south into the Malay Peninsula and the South Sea Islands. Later, "the ancestors of Meng, Benglong, WA and other nationalities came to Myanmar around the 10th century BC". "They used farming as their means of living, and changed the way the people lived, the diet and the organization of living together." (Theik Pan Soe Yin, 1974:31) The ancestors of Meng, benglong, WA and other nationalities are also known as the Mon Khmer people of Pu system in Chinese academic circles. The Mon Khmer language group is the first ethnic group from Southwest Yunnan to settle in Myanmar, including Meng, WA and Bulang. Their ancestors are called Baiyu in Chinese history books. However, the author did not explain the relationship between the ancestors of Meng, Benglong, Wa and Puyue ethnic groups in China.

Theik Pan Soe Yin listed several conjectures about the origin of the Burmese people in Myanmar academic circles. The first is the hypothesis of "Diqiang" nationality recorded in Chinese historical records; the second is the hypothesis of "Gugunuo" river translated from a sound in eastern Tibet; the third is the hypothesis of Gansu Province in China. However, it is generally acknowledged that the first claim originated from the Qiang hypothesis, which was also put forward by the British scholar Luce in the 1930s. According to the language family, the ancient Qiang tribes in China belong to the Tibeto Burman language family. This ethnic group entered Yunnan from Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan in the 4th century BC, and moved southward along the Nujiang, Jinsha and Lancang River valleys, and entered Myanmar in the 1st and 2nd centuries BC and settled in the middle and lower reaches of the Irrawaddy River. In the process of this pre-Burmese tribe advancing southward, there was differentiation and integration, forming the Burmese, ruokai, Daoyou, Yinda, Tuwa, Danu, Yiwo and other Burmese ethnic groups (Zhong Zhixiang, Yin Xiangling, 2014:9). Theik Pan Soe Yin's view on the Diqiang tribe and the migration direction are basically consistent with the views of Chinese scholars.

In the history of Burmese Culture, it is seldom mentioned how the Shan nationality became a member of the Myanmar nationality. It is more about the various advanced cultures brought to Myanmar by the Nanzhao Shan State and the confrontation between the Nanzhao Shan State and China. "In the process of the formation of Burmese Culture, the extraterritorial countries that made special contributions are the Shan nationality countries of Nanzhao, which we call the enlightenment teachers of Myanmar" (Theik Pan Soe Yin). The Shan people originated from the Baiyue ethnic group in the southeast coast of ancient China. After the Qin and Han Dynasties, the Yue people moved along the Pearl River and Jiangxi Province to central Yunnan Province, and then went south to Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. They entered Myanmar at about the beginning of A.D. or around the first century A.D., and established their own country in Shan state of Myanmar (Jiang Yongren, 2002:77).

So far, the origin of Myanmar nationality has been clear. They come from three language groups of two major language families, and their ethnic origins are all from China. They are the mon Khmer language family of the South Asian language family, including Meng, Benglong, WA, Yinnei, and Denuo; the Tibetan Burmese language family of the Han Tibetan language family includes the Biao, Qin, Karen, and pre Burmese; the Zhuang Dong language family of the Sino Tibetan language family, such as the Shan nationality. However, it is worth noting that *History of Burmese Culture* does not systematically summarize the origin of Myanmar nationality, which is different from the academic circles in China.

#### **4. The Comments on the Influence of Chinese and Indian Culture**

On the influence of Chinese and Indian culture on Southeast Asia, Theik Pan Soe Yin (1974:26) said, "in fact, before Indian and Chinese culture was introduced into Southeast Asia, the local ethnic groups made efforts

to develop and form their own national culture, and formed their own unique cultural forms." Theik Pan Soe Yin did not deny the profound influence of foreign culture on the national culture of his country, nor did he think that the national culture of his country had not been formed before the introduction of foreign culture. In fact, before the introduction of Chinese and Indian culture, the ethnic groups in Southeast Asia had the following cultures: (1) women's status was relatively high, and the family inheritance was dominated by women; (2) the production and cooperation ability generated by irrigation agriculture; (3) domestication of cattle and other animals; (4) use of iron; (5) water transportation; (6) belief in gods; (7) worship of ancestors and land; (8) the construction of temples in highlands ; (9) urn burial; (10) myths and legends (Theik Pan Soe Yin, 1974:27-18).

Theik Pan Soe Yin (1974:122) believed that compared with Chinese culture, Indian culture had a greater influence on Burmese Culture. "In the communication with India, Indian culture has not only brought a significant impact on the development of Burmese Culture, but also has a deeper impact on the development of Burmese Culture compared with other countries." It is undeniable that the influence of Indian culture on Burmese culture has lasted a long time and a wide range. Indian culture has deeply influenced Myanmar's religion, literature, art, ideology and architecture. In history, Myanmar selectively absorbed Indian culture and developed Burmese Culture with its own characteristics. For example, Myanmar rejected India's caste system and opposed Brahmanism. Compared with India, Myanmar has a higher status of women.

However, Theik Pan Soe Yin(1974:131) believed that the reason why Myanmar accepted more Indian culture was that "the communication channels between the eastern and Western countries in the north of Myanmar and Myanmar have been unstable for a long time, so the upper Myanmar region is not peaceful", while "Indian businessmen are kind and friendly, and their communication with Myanmar is more appropriate". Moreover, when talking about the communication between China and Myanmar, Theik Pan Soe Yin (1974:109-117) believed that "the communication between the Diqiang and the Han people, the ancestors of the Burmese people, was not peaceful and friendly. The Diqiang people were abused and driven by the Han people before they were forced to move to the south." Our communication with the Han people did not show that we were willing to share the culture of exchange, but full of a brutal attitude towards others. " In fact, Professor Xu Qingzhang (2014:95-96), a Chinese scholar, has long refuted this conclusion, saying that it is "very subjective, one-sided and difficult to be convincing. Although the Han people had the historical facts of expelling the Qiangdi people, with the passage of time, this kind of historical facts which happened in the 2nd to 3rd century AD have been gradually submerged or replaced by new historical facts. In the later period, when the Burmese people contacted with the Han people, they could not have the mentality of hostility. "If we only use the code of law and the spread of Buddhism as the proof of friendship, it will inevitably lead to a wrong diagnosis that ignores the historical conditions at that time and does not make specific analysis.". It can be seen from this that Theik Pan Soe Yin's attitude towards the Han people was mixed with many personal subjective emotion, which did not fully show the prosperity of cultural and trade exchanges between China and Myanmar. In addition, when describing Tibet Autonomous Region of China, the author used words of the same level as "state". The first edition of "History of Burmese Culture" was published in 1974. In 1959, China formally exercised comprehensive jurisdiction over Tibet and established the Tibet Autonomous Region on September 9, 1965. It is difficult to judge whether the author is negligent in writing because of personal reasons or the limitation of the times. However, the history of friendly exchanges between the people of China and Myanmar has always been the mainstream of history, which can stand the test of history.

In a word, India's communication with Myanmar was earlier, and Indian culture had more influence on Myanmar's ideology and regulations. China's influence on Myanmar includes not only close economic exchanges, but also the spread of advanced culture to Myanmar. Myanmar has adopted foreign culture according to local conditions and formed its own national culture.

Subject Study of Myanmar Cultural History

## 5. The Main Research Subject of History Of Burmese Culture

Myanmar is a country with many ethnic groups. According to the official data of Myanmar, there are 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar, including 8 main ethnic groups, namely, Burmese, Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Mon, Kachin, Qin and Kaya. In terms of religion, there have been several religions or different sects of the same religion in Myanmar in history. Today, in addition to Theravada Buddhism, there are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and deity worship in Myanmar. Due to the limitation of space, Theik Pan Soe Yin's "History of Burmese Culture" is actually a cultural history focusing on Burmese people. The book discusses in detail the origin and significance of the name of "Myanmar", the origin and development of the Burmese, the culture of the Biao and the Mon, the communication between the Burmese and foreign countries, the Buddhism and the creation of the Burmese Language, as well as the social system and cultural characteristics of the Burmese people. It is a pity that Theik Pan Soe Yin's history of Burmese Culture does not give a brief overview of the cultural development history of other ethnic groups.

## 6. Conclusion

Theik Pan Soe Yin's *History of Burmese Culture* outlines the general picture of the development of Burmese culture from the origin of Burmese people to the invasion of colonists. Burmese culture is a compound culture formed after Myanmar local culture selectively absorbs foreign culture. On the basis of Myanmar's original local culture, with the Theravada Buddhism as the main body, with the Biao culture and the Mon culture as the development cornerstones, Burmese culture critically absorbs the beneficial parts of Indian culture and Chinese culture, and finally develops into a culture with unique Myanmar national characteristics. In a word, from this book, we can understand the background and origin of Burmese culture, and clarify the context of its development. At the same time, combined with the background of this book, we can know that many things in Myanmar had to be rebuilt at that time, when it was particularly important and necessary to maintain and promote the national culture and strengthen the cultural confidence. In any case, *History of Burmese Culture* provides a variety of perspectives and important references for us to study Burmese culture, which is of great significance to the in-depth understanding of Burmese culture, and has enlightening value for the study of Southeast Asian culture.

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