

# AN INSCRIBED BUDDHA IMAGE AT WAT SUWANNA WIHAN (A.D. 1501)

by  
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Wat Suwanña Wihan<sup>1</sup>, about 25 km south of Lamphun on the west side of the Lamphun-Li road, was founded only a few years ago, after a pious layman had donated a plot of land to the saṅgha. In 1973, Phra Maha Khūankham Attasanto<sup>2</sup>, abbot of Wat Suwanña Wihan, invited me to his monastery to read the inscription on a Buddha image which, prior to the foundation of the new monastery, had been in Wat Sapung<sup>3</sup>, about 12 km distant, and which was said to have been cast by the monk Nanthawisutthawangso<sup>4</sup> who, in 1795-96, had played a prominent part in the restoration of nearby Wat Phra Nòn<sup>5</sup>.

The statue in question, made of bronze, is 126 cm in height, including the pedestal, and 71 cm in width measured from knee to knee. The Buddha is seated with folded legs, one superimposed on the other (virāsana), the left hand in the lap, the right hand resting on the knee with fingers pointing downward (bhūmisparśamudrā or māravijaya)<sup>6</sup>.

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- 1) วัดสุวรรณวิหาร ต. น้ำดิบ อ. ป่าซาง จ. ลำพูน
  - 2) พระมหาเขื่อนคำ อุตตสันโต
  - 3) วัดสะป่ง ต. มะกอก อ. ป่าซาง จ. ลำพูน
  - 4) นันทวิสุทธิวงโส
  - 5) วัดพระนอน ต. มะกอก อ. ป่าซาง จ. ลำพูน For details concerning the restoration of Wat Phra Nòn, see : Hans Penth, Die Wiederherstellung des Klosters Phra Nòn in den Jahren 1795-96, in : Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, 6/1974. An edition of the inscription which commemorates the restoration of Wat Phra Nòn is found in : ฮัน เพนซ์, คำอ่านจารึกบนแผ่นไม้กระดาน วัดพระนอน . . . พ.ศ. 2339, ใน : ศิลปากร (18.1) 2517 หน้า 58-65
  - 6) This hand-position is commonly known in North Thailand as Ham Man (ห้ามมาน or ห้ามมาน), probably a derivation from māravijaya.

The inscription, one line at the front side of the pedestal, is in Yuan characters and dialect. Transliterated into modern Thai it reads:

สกฐราช ๑๓ 863 ๓๖๓ [๓] ๑๑๑๑๑๑๑๑(๓) ๘

"The era has attained 863, in the year Luong Lao, in the month 8". This means that the image was made or dedicated to the sāsana in about April-May (8th month) A.D. 1501 (CS. 863). Therefore, the local traditon that the monk Nanthawisutthawangso made the image around 1800 is not founded in fact.

Although the inscription can be read easily enough, it presents a few items that are worth mentioning or are open for discussion.

The word ๓(๓) "month" is written without ๓. One wonders whether this spelling represents a particular pronunciation or whether the scribe just forgot to add the letter; it may also be that the ๓ disappeared while the statue was polished sometime, or that the cast was not successful at this particular spot.

It is difficult to decide whether the scribe meant to write ๓ or ๓. Either spelling is "correct" for that time. One may even wonder whether the vowel is ๓ or ๓.

The hook of the letter ๓ does not end at its usual place, but continues downward and surrounds the letter on its left and lower part. This peculiarity is not often encountered, but it is occasionally found in inscriptions using either Yuan or Fak Kham characters.



The inscribed Buddha image at Wat Suwanna Wihan.

Photograph : Hans Penth 1973



The inscription on the pedestal of the Buddha image at Wat Suwanna Wihan.

*Photograph : Hans Penth 1973*

## REVIEW ARTICLE

Gordon Young, *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand (A Socio-Ethnological Report)*. Bangkok: The Siam Society. 5th edition, 1974. xiv+96 pp., 98 photographs.

It is a good measure of the continuing popularity of Gordon Young's small book on the northern hill peoples that our Society has seen fit to publish a fifth, only slightly revised, edition of the work. The book first appeared in 1961 under the imprint of USOM (United States Operations Mission, Bangkok) for whom the author was working at the time. The following year our Society published a second edition, to which it added a third in 1966, a fourth in 1969 and now a fifth in 1974.

During the thirteen years since Gordon Young wrote this book some thirty-odd professional anthropologists have worked among the northern hill peoples.<sup>1</sup> But to this day it is Young's book rather than the work of the professionals which remains not merely the only acceptable popular introduction to this ethnographic area, but also the standard anthropological text.<sup>2</sup> And yet, as I am sure Young would be the first to admit, *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand* is far from being a work of professional anthropology.

Oliver Gordon Young (his first name is dropped in all but the first edition) is the grandson of the late William Marcus Young (1861-1936), pioneer American Baptist missionary among the Lahu people, first in the

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- 1) See *Social Science and Related Research in Northern Thailand*, Chiang Mai: Tribal Research Centre, Bulletin no. 2. s.a. [1972?].
  - 2) The northern hill peoples, among others, are treated in a recent U.S. Army publication, *Minority Groups in Thailand*, Washington D.C.: Headquarters, Dept. of the Army, 1972. But besides its limited availability, this work suffers from being a library study conducted by people who, though skilled as library detectives, seldom have sufficient personal experience of the area to evaluate the data they discover. A book of data papers which I have edited, *Farmers in the Hills: Upland Societies in North Thailand*, has recently been published in Penang. But this too is largely a library project, conducted by three of my students and myself and published primarily for the benefit of our students at Universiti Sains Malaysia.