

# Who are the Tai Zawti? Hidden in Plain Sight: the Zawti of the Myanmar-China Border

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## The Mystery of the Zawti

A mysterious group called the Tai Zawti have been mentioned in writings on Burmese Buddhism as a heterodox, austere and persecuted Shan tradition but these references are never more than one or two sentences long. So, who are the Zawti? What do they believe? And why is so little known?

These are the starting questions that have guided my PhD research.

The Zawti are not only elusive in scholarship but also among the wider Shan and Burmese population.

One of my initial tasks was establishing contact with Zawti communities. By chance, I attended a *wan sin* (temple sleeping) event in a village in southern Shan State. To my surprise, it was a Zawti village. From there, I have been able to trace a network of Zawti communities throughout Myanmar and across the border into China.

I began visiting Zawti *tai wat* (temples with no resident monks) throughout Myanmar. In February 2020 I attended the *Zawti poi sang long* (novice ordination festival), the biggest event in the Zawti calendar which takes place only once every three years. Along the way I have been given key Zawti texts which I have begun to translate and will be a key part of my PhD thesis.



Left Newly ordained Zawti novices returning to the monastery in Mohnyin, February 2020. Above Right: Traditional Zawti home altar filled with *lik long* text rather than Buddha images in Pang Long, Shan State, November 2019.



## In what ways are the laity austere?

- Always very strict on the five precepts (rather than just on precept days).
- No Buddha images in the home, only at the temple.
- Temple sleeping is practiced on full moon days (lay people stay overnight at the temple).
- Don't eat food that has been offered to Buddha images, all food is ritually disposed of in a pit designed for this specific purpose (Most Burmese and Shan Buddhists eat food that has been offered).
- No buying live animals at the market, only buy meat that has already been butchered.
- Do not consume alcohol (Most Burmese and Shan Buddhist lay men drink alcohol).
- Livelihoods that Zawti laity must refrain from: anything that involves livestock or being a porter/ broker for goods such as drugs, weapons or alcohol.

Why might the Zawti's strict adherence to the five precepts cause tension among the wider Burmese sangha?



The Abbott of the Kyong Loi Zawti Monastery about to step on a devotee. This tradition is a reenactment of the Story of Sumedha in which Sumedha offers his body as a bridge for the Buddha to walk over. Note the yellow curtain on stage. The curtain is used during public ceremonies to allow the monks to compose themselves in privacy during long ceremonies.

(Photo: Taken at the Poi Sang Long Festival in Mohnyin, Kachin State, Myanmar in February 2020)

## Brief Zawti Timeline

1654 CE- The birth of Varajoti, the founder of the Zawti tradition and who the Zawti are named after (Pali: *joti* 'light'/'radiance').

1674 CE- Varajoti ordains as a bhikkhu aged 20.

1684 CE- Varajoti is discovered in the cave by a hunter. Varajoti establishes a group of 8 disciples.

1744 CE- Varajoti passes away aged 90 years.

1763-1776 CE- Zawti heresy suppressed in the time of King Hsinbyushin.

1777 CE- (approx.) The Zawti settle in Loi Leik (Dehong, China) and remain there for at least 82 years.

1783 CE- Men sent to seize Zawti in Sinbyugyun were punished because they allowed the Zawti to escape by taking bribes.

1835 CE- Sao Wannawaddy and followers set out on foot to Rangoon and established a monastery there.

1859 (approx.)- 1909 CE- The Zawti relocated many times. This has resulted in a network of Zawti communities scattered throughout Shan State, Kachin State and beyond in Mandalay, Yangon and Dehong, China.

1909 CE- The Zawti established a monastery and settled in Mong Yang (Mohnyin, Myanmar).

1980 CE- The Zawti are absorbed into the Thudhammā *gaing* during Burmese Sangha Reform.



Above: A young Zawti *sang long* novice and his father on the pre-ordination procession in Mohnyin, February 2020.

## Monastic Rules

- All Zawti monks are ordained at the Pannyalankara Kyaung Zawti Monastery, the headquarters in Mohnyin, Myanmar.
- Novice ordination takes place only once every three years.
- Unlike most Burmese and Shan monks, the Zawti monks:**
- Don't ever wear shoes or slippers.
- Don't use any form of transportation (except boat).
- Always cover their shoulders when giving public sermons.
- Require a curtain on stage during public sermons.
- No direct communication with the laity, a *zare* acts as an intermediary.
- No mobile phones.
- No modern music or books.