

Sinhalese Derived Buddhism in Southwest China

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Sinhalese Theravada culture is strong in Southeast Asia – Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and southern Vietnam. Sinhalese Theravada culture is little known in the Mahayana dominated China. The paper examines the strong presence of Theravada in Southwest China among non-Han nationalities such as Dai, Blang, De'ang and Wa Achang.

The illustrated paper which traces the growth and present state of Sinhala derived culture, is based on participant observation, texts and a case study of the Xishuangbanna region.

Theravada culture pervades many aspects of daily life in Southwest China, especially the Xishuangbanna region. Theravada developed in Yunnan during 7th -12th century, initially from Myanmar where Sinhalese Buddhism spread widely from the 11th century. The second wave came from Chiangmai, Thailand where again the Sinhala influence began in 13th century. Although the Cultural Revolution of the 1960's destroyed this tradition, the local population could rapidly revive it as Theravada Buddhism had infiltrated many aspects of their daily life. The final phase came direct from Sri Lanka in the 1960's when Dai monks came to Sri Lanka to study. Many of the old temples with their *Tipitaka* libraries still remain, and some of the palm leaf manuscripts have been translated by the Chinese government. Enthusiasm has further increased after the recently opened large Buddhist Centre in Jinghong, the capital of Xishuangbanna with a Kelaniya University trained Dai monk in charge.

There is a strong imprint of Sinhalese derived Theravada culture in Southwest China. It is suggested that Sri Lanka could tap her potential as a dominant player in the use of Buddhism as soft power to foster close relations for the benefit of both Southwest China and Sri Lanka.

Key words: *Southwest china, Sinhalese derived Theravada, Buddhism as soft power*