

# Where to Begin? A Brief Intellectual Biography of F. K. Lehman (F. K. L. U Chit Hlaing)

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F. K. Lehman, (F. K. L. U Chit Hlaing) retired in 2009 at the age of eighty-five from the University of Illinois where he had taught since 1959 and mentored dozens of doctoral students in anthropology, Asian studies, linguistics, and Buddhist studies. His publications include more than sixty articles and his classic study tribal kinship systems, *The Structure of Chin Society* (University of Illinois Press, 1963 and 1981). Where to begin in tracing such a long and productive trajectory of research and teaching about Theravada Buddhist civilizations and their intersections with tribal societies in the peripheries of lowland kingdoms in Southeast Asia?

No one can replicate all that he has come to know over the course of nearly a century about the history, cultures, languages, ethnicity, and religion of the region. His academic journey started with his doctoral work at Columbia on classical Indian civilizations, and later expanded to Tibeto-Burman linguistics, to the anthropology of lowland and upland cultures in Burma and Thailand, and to his most recent work on trade networks in Yunnan, Southwest China.

Few scholars today are able to bring to the study of Asia the depth of academic knowledge, transdisciplinary work and personal insight into the region's history that result from his

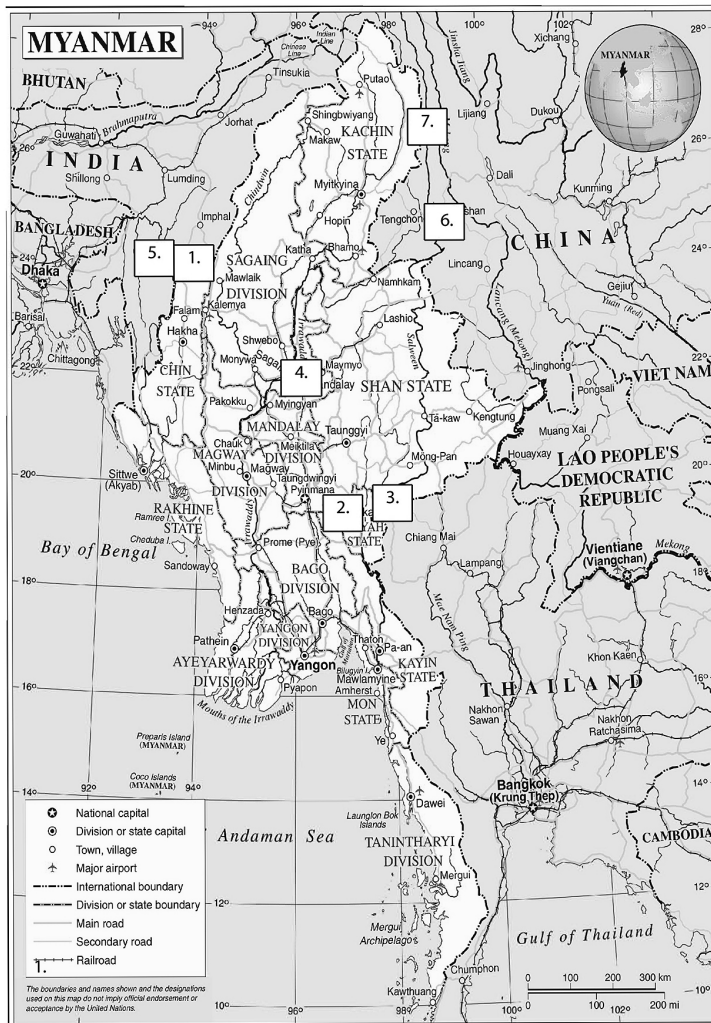
lifelong involvement with Asia.<sup>1</sup> His exceptional biography spans vast life experiences in colonial India, Southeast Asia, and the global prominence of contemporary Chinese trade patterns. Born in New York City in 1924, he spent his first four years in Calcutta, India, where his family members were gem merchants and subsequently lived with the family in Lashio, in Burma, then a center of the gem trade. He returned to New York in early 1941, and New York University, 1946–49, for his undergraduate education in mathematics, the social sciences, and languages in 1950. He received his doctorate from Columbia University in anthropology and linguistics in 1959, with a dissertation on the cultural history of India. Professor Lehman joined the University of Illinois first in 1952 to work with Julian Steward and then moved to the Human Relations Area Files at Yale, working on the new files for Southeast Asia, thence to a post-doctoral training in Indology at the University of Pennsylvania, only to return to Illinois again in late 1958, when the newly founded Department of Anthropology there recruited him. He returned to Burma in 1957–58 and again in 1961–62 to work with the eminent archeologist of Pagan, Gordon Luce, at Rangoon University and to conduct ethnographic fieldwork among the Chin tribes. Since then, he has continued to return to Southeast Asia many times. He has carried out ethnographic work among the Chin, Kayah, Lushai, Shan, Karen, Burmese, Shan, Thai, and Yunnanese on a wide range of topics that include studies of ethnicity, kinship, religion, cultural history, and linguistics.

For most of his tenure at the University of Illinois, Professor Lehman was Director of Graduate Studies and supervised more than two dozen dissertations there. In the course of his career, he also contributed to many professional organizations and has been a dedicated steward of the study of Burma and its ethnic minorities. Since 1974, he has served as Chairman of the Burma Studies Group, a unit within the

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1 See Professor Lehman's webpage at: <http://www.anthro.illinois.edu/faculty/lehman/>

## Fieldwork Sites of the Ethnographic & Linguistic Research of F. K. L. U Chit Hlaing (F. K. Lehman)



1. Chin Hills, Burma. 1957–58 Hakha area/Hrarnng ,1960–61 Mindat area/NgBong
2. Kayah State, Burma. 1961. Kyebogi
3. Mae Hongson, NW Thailand. Summer 1965 and 1967–68. Shan (Mawk Champe) and Eastern Kayah
4. Mandalay, Burma. 1980–81 (Palace dialect and Burmese social organization), 1999 Buddhism
5. Mizoram, India. Winter 1989–90. Mara (Lakher) language and Mizo (Lushai) kinship
6. Yunnan, China. Summer 2001. Wa (Headhunting and other matters) Porok Wa Buddhism
7. China-Burma border, study of cross-border gem trade: Ruili and Tengchong-He Shun (Yunnan, China) Mandalay, Myitkyina, Lashio (Burma)

Southeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies. His efforts were also instrumental in the creation of the Burma Studies Foundation and in the establishment of the Center for Burma Studies at Northern Illinois University. Many of his students and colleagues have benefited from Professor Lehman's intellectual generosity and from his comments on their work as not much escapes the attention of this consummate critic who lavishes his careful attention on countless unpublished manuscripts. His intellectual influence is reflected among many classic studies on Southeast Asia and acknowledged in the works of Melford Spiro, Michael Mendelson, Stanley Tambiah, Clifford Geertz, Charles Keyes, and James Scott, among others. To this list of distinguished scholars who acknowledge their debt to Lehman's generous critiques, the names of his many students must be added: Paul Durrenberger, Michael Aung Thwin, Maran LaRaw, Penny and John Van Esterik, Ann Hill, Mark Woodward, Nancy Eberhardt, Lorraine Aragon, Cornelia Kammerer, and I, among many others who profited from his intellectual guidance.

Professor Lehman was a consummate teacher and exceptional mentor to his students at the University of Illinois and in Asia and put his imprimatur on more than two dozen dissertations he directed. Few are as gifted, inspiring, passionate, observant, and dedicated. Those of us who were fortunate enough to benefit from his generous and untiring teaching recognized his writing as an extension of his lectures. His students have credited him with many insights into their ethnographic quandaries, puzzles he illuminated for them and with them. Many of his essays grew out of conversations with colleagues, comments prompted by his students in his seminars, and amended clarifications delivered in front of the mail boxes in 109 Davenport Hall, where a significant part of graduate teaching and learning occurred in the course of nearly six decades at the University of Illinois.

Graduate study in anthropology at Urbana in the 1970s was a vibrant and exhilarating experience and being one of Professor Lehman's students was a special privilege. The door to his office was always open and he was most generous with his time. His students benefited tremendously from his knowledge, his willingness to teach countless tutorials in his office and from his permission to use his rare and unrivaled library. Professor Lehman engages his subject directly and with the precision of an explicit logic that often leads to an inevitable object lesson: "Well, what you mean to say..." His teaching was enhanced by his photographic memory that allows him to read passages as though they were imprinted in his mind and his remarks often motivated research his students undertook. He profoundly shaped my academic life as a teacher, mentor, and friend. A comment he once offered in passing, namely that the Burmese encounter with modernity was characterized from the earliest times by both conservative authoritarianism and progressive engagement with the West, encouraged me to explore how Burmese have engaged these issues in the course of the British colonial project and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

Both Kris and Sheila Lehman have also always been welcoming to students and opened their home to them in Urbana and abroad. I owe a special gratitude to them for their hospitality when I arrived in Yangon in 1981 and for their tremendous patience with my neophyte ways. Sheila, in particular, taught me the foundation of proper Burmese decorum, style, and fashion. As they prepared to return to the United States, I moved into the house they had made their home in Mandalay. I also recall with great fondness one evening when Kris and Sheila were visiting us in Arizona and my then nine-year-old daughter proudly recited for them "Makavity, the Mystery Cat," a poem by T.S. Elliot she had worked hard to memorize. Kris responded with a complete

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2 I trace how these cultural tendencies played out in modern Buddhist contexts in a book on *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar* (2010).

recitation of Lewis Carroll's "The Jabberwocky," leaving my daughter to ponder the mastery of reciting poetry.

## What Comes Next?

In 2009, Kris returned from field research in China and Burma, accompanied, as always, by his wife Sheila, Daw Mya Thwei and, this time, also by their two grandsons, ages eight and thirteen. Before their departure, Kris told me he planned to teach them pre-calculus, while Sheila was teaching them how to write fieldnotes. The plan was for the boys to become novices, which they did, at Mahamyain Monastery in Mandalay whose abbot had also ordained Saya Lehman in 1988.

Since his official retirement, Professor Lehman has published several articles per year. The essays in this issue by Anne Hill, Penny Van Esterik, Charles Keyes, and myself were presented initially in a panel honoring the work of Professor Lehman at the meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Philadelphia in March 2010. They are published here, in revised form, to show how Professor Lehman's former students continue to engage his work.

In an interview with Alan MacFarlane, an anthropologist at Cambridge University, Kris Lehman remarked that he especially admired two personality traits in Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf: namely his ability to continue to grow intellectually and his kindness and generosity in his personal interactions.<sup>3</sup> These, clearly, are the gifts Professor Lehman bestows on his students and colleagues.

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3 Alan MacFarlane's interview with F. K. Lehman on 29 October 2003 in Kunming, Yunnan, can be viewed online at <http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/Lehman.html>.