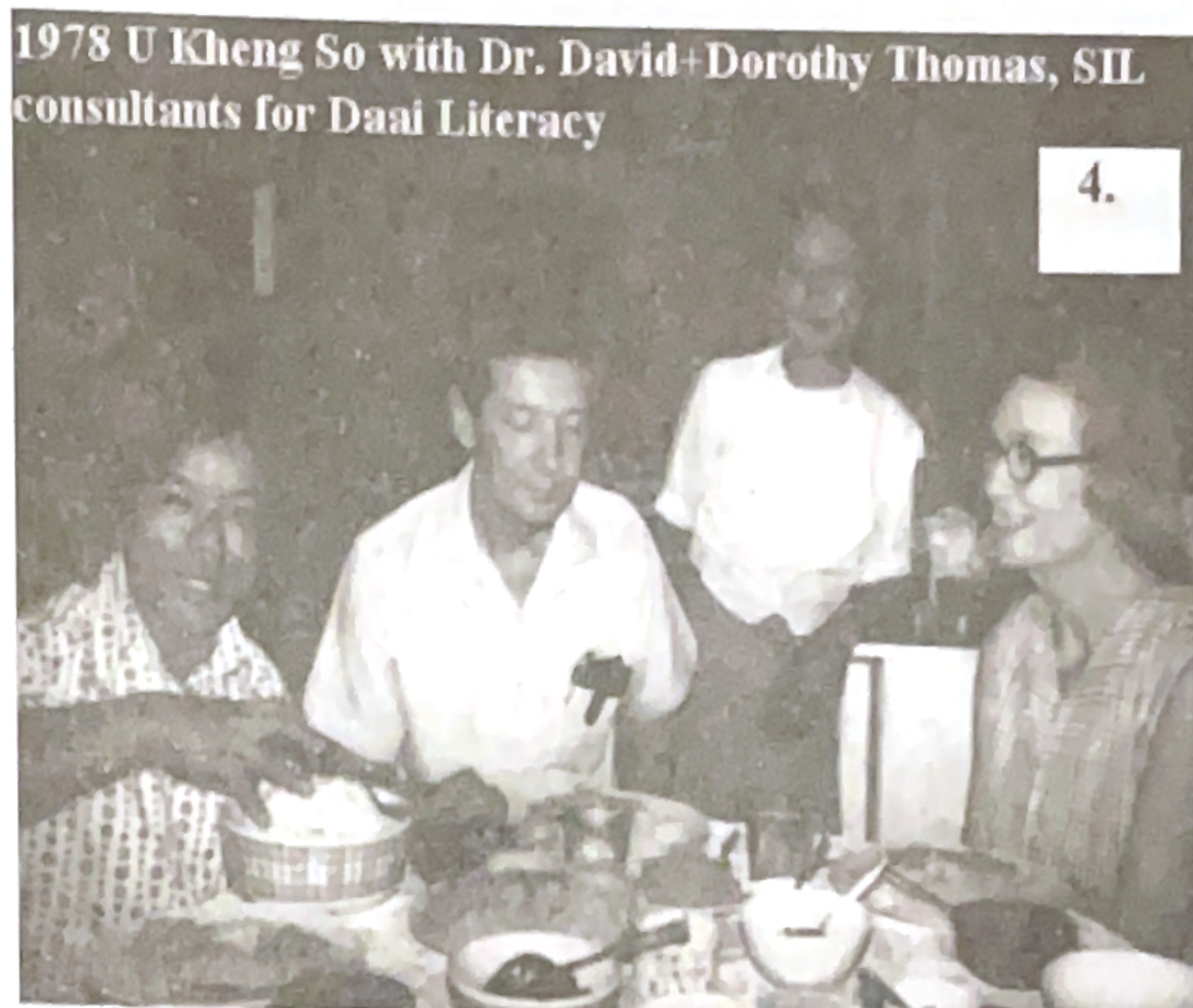


Daai Literacy and Translation

Helga So-Hartmann



In October 1975, I first met U Kheng So. He came to Yangon because he had heard that somebody was interested in the Daai Chin language and wanted to work out an alphabet and do Bible translation. U Kheng So was at that time a student at the Mandalay University, but University was closed because of student riots.

I myself had come to Yangon in August 1974 because the Lord had given me a vision and the command to work for one of the many groups in Myanmar that did not have a Bible in their own language, and many, like the Daai, not even a system of writing.

Before coming to Myanmar, I had studied 'Old German Languages' and linguistics at the University of Vienna, with a degree equal to a MA. After the Lord showed me to go to Myanmar, I attended a Bible and Mission College in Germany, studied Field Linguistics with SIL (where one is taught how to analyze a language and to work out a system of writing for a language that has never been written down before and how to do Bible translation). I had also studied the Burmese language for one year at the University of London.

After I arrived in Myanmar, a German couple with whom I was working together in the beginning, told me to pray especially for two people groups: the Daai Chin people and a group called Maru (a Katchinic language). There were of course no Daai Chin people in Yangon at that time, but while continuing to study Burmese Literature at the University Yangon, I made friends with other Chin people. They told me, that the Daai are a very wild people group, that they hide in the jungle and shoot down officials from the Burmese government, that it is difficult to make friends with them, that they fight a lot among each other that two men would lock themselves in a house and fight till one of them was dead. These tales convinced me that the Lord really wanted me to work for the Daai Chin people because they need the Lord and the Gospel very much. So I prayed for a Daai person to come down to Yangon. But that was not very easy. We contacted pastors and missionaries from other Chin groups who were working among the Daai and asked them to send a Daai girl to Yangon to stay with me, so that I could learn the language. Finally a Lushei pastor from the Methodist church sent a Cho girl (thinking that would not make much difference to me), but along come Kheng So, saying "It is me whom you want, I am Daai!"

At that time U Kheng So was already a born-again Christian. He had learned the Cho literacy in Mindat and knew also something of the Hakka and Lushei languages and their orthographies. He dreamed about working out a system of writing for his own language, but did not get much encouragement because most people at that time thought that the Daai language was too 'uncivilized' to be written down.

So we started to work together. Like I had learned in Field Linguistics, I collected wordlists and stories with Kheng So and wrote the Daai words down in the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). It was not easy, but eventually we got an idea about the system of sounds of the Daai language and started to think about what letters to use for the different sounds. We tried to stay as closely as possible to the already existing Cho orthography, but since Cho and Daai are different languages we made decisions so that the Daai people could learn to read their language in the easiest way possible. We also had help right from the beginning through linguistic consultants from SIL, who came twice a year to Yangon and helped us with the analysis and with questions about the orthography and literacy.

Nowadays I often hear the blame that we were creating an orthography just for one village or just for the Yang group of the Daai people. This is not exactly true. Whenever U Kheng So went back to the Daai area, he made tape recordings of the speech and word lists of other subgroups of the Daai people. We also had many Daai visitors coming to our house who were from different areas and whenever possible I collected word lists of their speech and compared it with the speech of U Kheng So. Eventually we established an orthography and a first provisional Daai primer, which was changed many times according to the advice of people interested in Daai literacy and we also had the continuous help of experienced linguists from SIL, who came to Yangon twice a year to help and guide us in our work.

U Kheng So brought 3-4 young men down from the Daai Chin, we taught them Daai literacy and how to teach the Daai Primer and then sent them back. Some of the earliest teachers of Daai literacy were Mnaai Kheng from the Lääi Sa village and Nääng Kūüi from Nghmukhimding and another young man also from the Kheng area. At that time, about 1978, every body was happy that there was now a script for the Daai language and people wanted to learn and there was no criticism, even though everybody was well aware of the fact that the pronunciation of the Daai language is different from village to village (as it is the case with most other languages, English as well as my own mother tongue, German).

In 1978, U Kheng and I got married. First I had prayed that God would give him a good wife. But since we worked together every day we soon fell in love with each other and believed that God had called us to serve Him and the Daai Chin people together. Getting married was not such an easy matter. Most of my supporting churches at home and also my own family, did not believe that a marriage with such different cultural backgrounds could work well. Also U Kheng So's family did not like the idea very much. But we prayed a lot and were convinced that this was God's way for us. We got married three years after we had started to work together.

In 1979, after U Kheng So had graduated from the University Yangon, we started with the Bible translation work. Before that we had collected Daai folktales and translated easy reading Bible stories. We photocopied the books in small editions and sent them back to the Chin Hills. Starting a Bible translation for a language group with only a few Christians and hardly any churches was not easy. We made decisions about Biblical Key Terms, but there were no Daai pastors and no Translation Committee to discuss these Biblical Key Terms with. When U Kheng So went back,

he checked the translations with people from his own village and also from other villages. One Daai man came to believe in the Lord Jesus after U Kheng So had read to him and discussed with him the first part of the Gospel of Mark. After the translation of the Gospel of Mark was finished, it was checked with a consultant from SIL and we published 100 copies and sent them to the Chin Hills. Then we started to translate the book of Acts.

At that time, in 1982, we noticed that U Kheng was not well. It took the doctors in Yangon over a year to find out that he had a brain tumor and needed immediate surgery. We were eventually able to go to Thailand where he had brain surgery in January 1984 and the tumor was removed. But he was severely handicapped. We had to stay in Thailand for 1 ½ years (U Kheng So, our two small daughters and me) because he was too sick to travel back to Myanmar. I actually did not really want to back to Myanmar with a severely handicapped husband and two small daughters, I wanted to go home with my family to Austria or to Germany. But Daai Chin people, our co-workers and friends, asked me to come back and finish the translation of the New Testament even if U Kheng So should not get well. It was a difficult decision, but I believed that what the Lord had helped me to start He would also help to finish.

So in 1985 we returned to Yangon and eventually I continued the translation of the Daai New Testament, with Rev. Mnaai Nääng (from the Methodist Church), U Kheng So's brother Ling So and his cousin Nääng Küüi. The actual translation of the Daai NT was finished by 1992. It took another three year to test the translation with people from different areas of the Daai Chin land. We did together simple Bible studies in the Daai language of most books of the NT to test the how well key terms and content could be understood. These Bible studies were very encouraging for me because most Daai people whom we had called to Yangon did very well in answering the questions about Bible passages and memorizing Bible verses. Some of the Biblical key terms we changed many times back and forth and we were not always successful in finding terms that everybody could understand. The whole New Testament was checked by consultants from SIL and some books were checked with Dr. Steven Hrikhio from the United Bible Society. Finally the NT was printed in 1996 by the United Bible Society. My supporting churches in Austria and Germany paid for the cost of the publication. The Lord called U Kheng So home in 1994, so he knew that the NT had been translated in his language, but did not see the printed publication.

While we were in Thailand for U Kheng So's medical treatment, I got friendly with an elderly American Christian lady. The Lord used our circumstances and gave her a heart for the Daai people. For several years she did fund raising in US, so that we could support 7 Daai young men to teach Daai literacy in Daai villages and to work also as evangelists. When our American friend got sick and was called home by the Lord, I did not have these funds available any longer. I received funds from my home churches for repeated publications of the Daai Primer and Daai Hymnals. The German Embassy in Yangon gave funds for the publication of books with the Daai folktales.

By the time the Daai NT was printed in 1996, I had moved on to new language project for Literacy and Translation work. At that time the Daai Chin people had Primers, 2 different Songbooks, 2 different story books and the New Testament in their own language. Since there was now a strong Daai Chin church, several different denominations, I was hopeful that the Daai Christians would be able to carry on the work of teaching Daai literacy and of using and teaching the New Testament in their churches. The following years showed that although a lot of literacy material was available, the Daai churches were not really yet mature enough to carry on literacy teaching and Scripture use. Our former literacy teachers had by that time become pastors and were

not able or willing to give time for literacy teaching. Sadly there were not many Daai people were willing to teach Daai literacy voluntarily and because of love for the Lord and their own people. Of course there are various different reasons why the teaching of Daai literacy slowly came to a stop and I do not intend to analyze these reasons here in this place. The main reasons however were a lack of unity among Daai Christians, misunderstandings among different denominations and the lack of a strong leadership promoting Daai literacy. After having worked for over 20 years for the Daai Chin people, the whole further development was very sad for me. If I had looked at it from a human point of view, I would have gone home to my own country to do some other kind of work. But since no human being had told me to work for the Daai Chin people, but it was the Lord himself, I am not looking to the Daai Chin people or anybody else for reward and recognition but to the Lord Jesus Christ only.

This is also the reason why I stayed on in Myanmar and I am now helping two other Chin language groups with the work of Bible translation and literacy. We have also learned from some of our mistakes and the work is now organized in a very different way. The Christian churches in these two language groups were asked to take responsibility and to make commitments for literacy teaching and Scripture Use and to give input into the translation work before we even started with these projects.

Although I am now mainly working with the Mro and Lemi people, I want you to know that my heart and my prayers are still with the Daai people and that willing to give advice and help (within my limitations) if required.

May the Lord bless you all!



Helga So-Hartmann
