

THE SHAN OF BURMA

The **Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)** was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued more than 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

CHAO TZANG YAWNGHWE

THE SHAN OF BURMA

Memoirs of a Shan Exile



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
SINGAPORE

Published by ISEAS Publishing
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg

Website: [<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>](http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

© 1987 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

First Reprint 1990

Second Reprint 2010

The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the author, and his interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publishers or its supporters.

ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Yawnghwe, Chao Tzang.

The Shan of Burma : memoirs of a Shan exile.

(Local history ; 16)

1. Ahoms (Indic people)—Burma—History.
2. Ahoms (Indic people)—Burma—Politics and government.
3. Shan State (Burma)—History.

I. Title

II. Series: Local history and memoirs (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) ; 16.

DS501 1595L no. 16

2010

ISBN 978-981-230-396-7 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-230-601-2 (E-book PDF)

Photo Credit:

Cover photographs (from left to right): Shan United Army recruits attending a class, Saw Yanda, and Yawnghwe Hall.

Photographs on Yawnghwe Palace (on the cover and page 4) and the Shan United Army (on the cover and page 28) were reproduced with the kind permission of Bertil Lintner.

Typeset by International Typesetters Pte Ltd
Printed in Singapore by Utopia Press Pte Ltd

Contents

| | |
|---|---------|
| <i>Foreword</i> | vii |
| <i>In Memorium</i> | xi |
| <i>Preface</i> | xiii |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | xvii |
| PART ONE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 1 A Native of the Shan Hills | 3 |
| PART TWO: SHAN-BURMESE RELATIONS | 45 |
| 2 An Overview of Shan-Burmese Relations | 47 |
| 3 The Development of Shan-Burmese Relations | 62 |
| 4 Shan-Burmese Relations from 1948 | 91 |
| PART THREE: WHO'S WHO IN SHAN STATE POLITICS | 143 |
| 5 Historical and Political Personalities (A Personal Perspective) | 145 |
| <i>APPENDICES</i> | 237 |
| Appendix I: Historic Decisions and Agreements Prior to Independence | 239 |
| Appendix II: Shan Proposals to Terminate the Opium Trade in the Shan State | 246 |
| Appendix III: Notes on the Film, <i>Opium Warlords</i> | 249 |

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| <i>Abbreviations</i> | 253 |
| <i>Glossary</i> | 255 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 257 |
| <i>Index</i> | 261 |
| <i>The Author</i> | 277 |

Foreword

The second printing of Chao Tzang Yawnghwe's *The Shan of Burma: Memoirs of a Shan Exile* is a timely re-introduction to the world of political literature of the most poignant and ground-breaking study of all the ethnic conflicts that followed the independence of Burma (Myanmar¹) in 1948. Since its first publication in 1987, the book has remained essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the patterns of state failure and humanitarian tragedy that have befallen the long-suffering peoples in this deeply troubled land. Chao Tzang's insightful writing is never an armchair analysis nor a militant polemic. It is the riveting description by a remarkable intellectual, who was eyewitness to many of the most controversial and epoch-shaping events in Burma's ethnic politics from the mid-20th century onwards.

Born into a leading political family, Chao Tzang's life was a personal odyssey during which he constantly engaged with the many challenges of his age. The different names by which he was also sometimes known — Eugene Thaike, Khun Loumpa, and Sao Hso Wai — reflect different passages in his career. However, neither the privilege of his background nor the many hardships he suffered deflected his life-long determination to see democracy and equality established for all the peoples of Burma. As a boy, he was in Panglong during the historic conference; as a tutor, he was at Rangoon University during General Ne Win's military coup that led to the deaths of one brother and, later, his father in prison; and into middle-age, he served as a key leader in the Shan resistance movement until a combination of ill-health and political encirclement forced his retirement from the field.

The Shan of Burma is a vibrant analysis of this first, turbulent period of his life. Chao Tzang structured his study around three main prisms: that of personal narrative, historical commentary, and vignette biographies of the leading actors, many of whom were previously unknown in the outside world. The book was prodigious in new insights and rare detail on many unrecorded aspects of Shan history, from the pre-colonial era through to the modern. The writing has a seamless flow that brought

lucidity and explanation to what had, until then, been regarded by many international observers as only intractable problems in one of Asia's least studied lands.

After independence, Burma's national landscape had become characterized by militarized politics, ethnic division and countrywide impoverishment in which a rampant trade in illicit narcotics developed a powerful momentum of its own. Chao Tzang confronts these issues head on, and it is his always frank depiction of events in the conflict-zones that forms the cornerstone of his account. The day-to-day struggles of the Shan nationality movement are starkly illuminated as Chao Tzang describes how the Shan State Army became caught between the competing pressures of military government offensives, China's support to insurgent communists, the thriving opium trade, Kuomintang remnants, and rivalries with other ethnic and militia forces that, at times, become almost too numerous to detail.

Chao Tzang, however, never loses sight of his conviction that all the conflicts that caused such precipitate, socio-economic decline in Burma are, at root, political in nature and can only be addressed by political solutions. In particular, he argued that since independence there had been two unresolved struggles for state power taking place: one for control of power among the ethnic Burman-majority "at the centre", and the other for control between the centre and the "homelands" of the non-Burman peoples around the international frontiers. The result was that the whole country had become entrapped in what he describes as a "politics of violence" that had to be ended. Equally important, he forewarned the international community that only "good government" could resolve Burma's illicit opium trade; "military" approaches, he reasoned, would never do this.

I first met Chao Tzang in 1984 when he was finishing his manuscript. From the outset he made clear his belief that peace would be very quickly brought to Burma if only the country's military leaders would — as in other Southeast Asian countries — choose a political path. The book was written towards the end of the Cold War when communist actors were still influential in the field. But in the 21st century, all of Chao Tzang's hopes and convictions for political solutions through dialogue continue to have meaningful resonance.

Following completion of "The Shan of Burma", Chao Tzang joined other members of his family in exile in Canada. Here he completed his Ph.D. in Political Science at the University of British Columbia under

the thesis title: “The Politics of Authoritarianism: The State and Political Soldiers in Burma, Indonesia, and Thailand”. During these exile years, he also taught at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. He became a renowned analyst on both Burmese politics and narcotic issues, frequently attending international conferences and contributing to different publications.²

However Shan politics and the cause of ethnic peace in Burma remained his abiding passion, and from the mid-1990s he returned closer to the field. He became co-founder of the United Nationalities League for Democracy (Liberated Area), advisor to the National Reconciliation Programme and the Shan Democratic Union, and chair of the working committee of the Ethnic Nationalities Council, where he tirelessly promoted dialogue and political solutions to Burma’s continuing conflicts.

In a democratic world, there can be no doubt that Chao Tzang Yawngnawe would have become an exemplary leader in his country. It is a tragedy therefore that his life was prematurely cut short by illness when he died in July 2004 at the age of sixty-five just at a time when a new generation of young people and international academics was coming to learn more of his experiences and work.

The re-publication of *The Shan of Burma* thus marks the most fitting epitaph to his life of both personal struggle and scholarship in the field. In the Preface Chao Tzang, who was then taking sanctuary in Thailand, is modestly aware that he was writing his memoir without access to primary sources. He was, he wrote, having to deal with “living history” that had not yet been “anointed” by the works of “established scholars”. However from the first moment of publication, *The Shan of Burma* set a new benchmark in writing about ethnic politics and the long-standing challenges of socio-political reform in the country. The “living history” he so personally captured is as relevant to Burma scholars in the 21st century as it was at the very first printing. There can be no more vital legacy than this.

Martin Smith

Author of Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity

September 2006

Notes

1. In 1989, the official name of “Burma” was changed to “Myanmar” by the military State Law and Order Restoration Council that had assumed power

the previous year. The terms can be considered alternatives. In the English language, Burma is still widely used, including for historical writing. This reprint will retain Burma, as in the original edition.

2. See example, Chao Tzang Yawngghwe, “The Burman Military: Holding the County Together?”, in *Independent Burma at Forty Years: Six Assessments*, edited by Josef Silverstein (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1989), pp. 81–101; Chao Tzang Yawngghwe, “Burma: The Depoliticization of the Political”, in *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority*, edited by Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 170–92; Chao Tzang Yawngghwe, “Shan State Politics: The Opium-Heroin Factor”, in *Trouble in the Triangle: Opium and Conflict in Burma*, edited by M. Jelsma, T. Kramer and P. Vervest (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), pp. 23–32.

In Memorium

“Chao Tzang” or “Uncle Eugene” as he was affectionately known amongst Burmese democracy activists was a man of many contrasts. His neighbours in Canada would not have guessed that the mild-mannered absent-minded academic had lived through one of the most turbulent periods of Burmese history and that he was himself a key actor in the making of that history. True to his self-effacing and democratic aspirations, few of his friends actually even knew his real name, let alone his royal lineage. Eugene was a name given to him by nuns in primary school and Tzang — “Elephant” — was his nickname as a child. As a son of the ruling “Saopha” (Celestial Lord) of Yawnghwe, he was officially named Sao Hso Lern Hpa — “Prince Tiger of the Celestial Moon”. In those days, the ruler of Yawnghwe ruled his territory as a traditional Shan monarch.

Chao Tzang was born on 26 April 1939 in Yawnghwe in the waning years of the British Empire. His earliest memories were of World War II. He witnessed the historic Panglong Conference where modern Burma was born. Later, his life was transformed from that of a royal prince to that of the son of the first democratic republican president of the Union of Burma. His political consciousness was awakened by the civil war that broke out soon after independence. While studying at Rangoon University, he was disturbed by the direction the country was taking under General Ne Win and soon established clandestine ties with the Karen and Shan resistance. He also began touring Shan State to see what was happening at the grassroots level. In 1962, he had two narrow brushes with death. First, in the early hours of 2 March, when the Burma Army surrounded our home in Rangoon and opened fire. Miraculously, only one brother was killed. Chao Tzang, who rolled off his bed on the ground floor, later found his mosquito net riddled with bullet holes. On 7 July, he was visiting his future wife on campus and was attracted by the noise of students protesting the military coup. As he watched, he saw the troops facing the students cocking their arms and opening fire. Students fell to the left and right of him. These incidents brought home to him the reality of military rule and he was once again transformed — this time into a revolutionary to rid his

homeland of injustice. Chao Tzang joined the Shan resistance after our father died in prison, and for the next twelve years lived in the jungle as a guerrilla commander. But as the fortunes of war declined, his life was once more transformed and he became a stateless refugee in Thailand, living at the mercy and generosity of friends and strangers. When he, his wife, young son and young daughter were accepted by Canada for resettlement in 1985, he decided to continue his studies and finally earned his Ph.D. in political science when he was close to sixty — a time most other people retire. He wanted to learn, apply his knowledge to resolving the intractable problem that has plagued his homeland for the last half a century. To the end, he dedicated his life to finding a political solution, to educating, encouraging and mentoring young people, especially women to think for themselves and to fight for justice and equality.

Having lived as one of the highest in the land and also as one of the lowest, he did not stand on ceremony. He was very approachable and was able to put everyone at ease. He did not put on airs as a prince or pretend to be a macho military man. Instead of regaling his listeners with his military prowess and with his many brushes with death as a guerrilla commander, Chao Tzang would often entertain his guests with hilarious stories of his inexperienced and inept military leadership. Although Chao Tzang is to be admired and emulated, he could not have lived as he did without the equally strong commitment and support of his faithful and long-suffering wife of forty years — Nu Nu Myint of Kengtung. She sacrificed her career as a headmistress and joined him in the jungle when he had no future to offer her. She stuck by him through thick and thin and took care of the family in order that he could pursue his dream. In commemorating the life of Chao Tzang, we must pay tribute to Nu Nu's dedication and to her family.

Friends and family noticed a change in Chao Tzang in March 2004. He was very subdued and started to lose his balance and memory. After numerous consultations, he was finally diagnosed as having a tumor in his brain stem in late April. After a brief recovery from chemotherapy, he passed away quietly on 24 July 2004.

Harn Yawngghwe
Director
Euro-Burma Office
Brussels
September 2006

Preface

Shan State in Burma today has its capital at Taunggyi. Administratively, there is a Northern and Southern Shan State with their capitals at Lashio and Taunggyi respectively. At the time of the Tai Mao kingdom around the twelfth century, there were nine Shan principalities or states, seven of which are in present-day Burma. Although the British were in the Shan area by the late 1800s it was only in 1922 that they grouped the Shan principalities into the Federated Shan States.

Shan State has generally been out of bounds to foreign visitors since the military coup of 1962. The few places open include Taunggyi and the Inle Lake of Yawnghe. Given the situation where accounts of Shan State politics are sensationalized with reports of opium wars, narcotics armies, drug trafficking, warlords and opium kings, and given the current paucity of knowledge regarding socio-economic, political, and historical realities, I felt despite feelings of inadequacy, that I should try to fill the information gap with respect to not only the Shan, but the politics of Burma as well. I am not a scholar.

My problem was compounded in that books dealing directly with the Shan and their homeland are few. Moreover, except for Chao Saimong Mangrai's *The Shan State and British Annexation* (1965), none deal with politics. Of course, all histories of Burma by such distinguished historians as Hall (1955), Harvey (1925), Christian (1945), Tinker (1967), Htin Aung (1967), Maung Maung Pye (1951), Trager (1966), Silverstein (1977), and Steinberg (1982) do contain references to the Shan and Shan States. However, in the parts dealing with post-1948 Burma, one is able to perceive, it seems, the reluctance of these scholars to dig too deeply into areas which would offend the powers that be in Rangoon. In reading some of these works on Burma, one can almost imagine these otherwise scholarly writers muttering curses against the non-Burmese, especially the Shan Chaofa (or *Sawbwa*, in Burmese) for surly opposition to Burmese leaders nobly engaged in the task of nation-building.

I feel that the greatest flaw in current works dealing with post-1948 Burma is the confusion over the term "nation-building" in general, and

more specifically, its connotation within the internationally recognized political perimeter known as Burma, which, in reality is a composite of many homelands. That is, it is composed of the homeland of the Burmese, a broad plain lying on both sides of the Irrawaddy River that flows into the sea between the Gulf of Martaban and the Bay of Bengal; and surrounding this Burmese plain in an elevated horseshoe (comprising 60 per cent of the total land area of Burma) are the homelands of the Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Shan or Tai/Thai, Karenni, and Karen.

Although the Burman or Burmese are more numerous, the non-Burmese ethnic groups constitute collectively quite a large minority. Census taking in independent Burma has strong political overtones in addition to obvious flaws such as the lack of trained personnel, the state of war, lack of roads and communications infrastructure. It appears to be in the interest of Rangoon to deflate figures for Shan, Karen, Kachin, and to inflate the Burmese population. For example, the Tai or Shan population was 1.6 million in 1973 as compared to 1.3 million in 1931 (an increase of only 0.3 million within 42 years), whereas the Burmese population reportedly increased from 10 to 20 million in the same period. Moreover, both British (1931) and Burmese authorities (1973) included in Burmese figures substantial numbers of Shan, Mon, Karen, Chin, and others who dwell in Burma Proper. The Arakanese were counted as Burmese, much to their displeasure. Finally, as an example, the government of Kawthoolei (Karen nationalist movement) claims there are roughly 7 million Karen even though Burmese authorities fiercely dispute this figure.

Taking into account the geographic and demographic factors and even ignoring the complex political and historical circumstances shaping these ethnic entities, it must be recognized that the task of nation-building in Burma is not easy as it requires great wisdom and statesmanship which flashed — alas, too briefly — in the person of Aung San, Burma's George Washington. The subject of this monograph is, then, nation-building in Burma from the viewpoint of a Shan nationalist, and covers the relationship between the Shan and the various Burmese centres of power from the Pagan period (1044–1257) to the 1980s.

I write on those few momentous and dynamic years before independence (1945–48) without recourse to important primary sources — that is, participants who played important roles then, and also in Shan politics and administration up to 1962. This is so for the following reasons. At present I cannot return to the Shan State; also, the voices of these men have been silenced, some by death, but the majority by the fact of their being on

the “wrong” side of the political struggle. As such, they not only suffered for their convictions, but have since the coup of 1962 been cast into the wilderness — becoming a “lost and silent generation” of Shan leaders.

Nonetheless, though I was involved in the Shan rebel movement (1963–76), and though I lack academic qualifications, as well as access to primary sources, I will try my best to be factual. Though footnotes to documents will be scanty, what I put down as facts can be checked by anyone who cares to speak to and question any knowledgeable native of Burma or the Shan State. I am fully aware that I am treading on uncertain ground because I am dealing mostly with living history, the realities of which have not become facts since they have not been thus anointed between covers of published books by established scholars.

In keeping therefore with such circumstances, I shall in the first part of my monograph relate my involvement in the Shan nationalist movement which, I hope, will give the readers a feel for the forces and events shaping the life and the thoughts of one man, a native of the Shan hills — rather like serving a few glasses of Shan wine before the main meal.

One more word in conclusion to this introduction: I do not claim that in the Shan struggle to preserve their identity and rights as a nation which has since the late 1950s taken the form of open warfare — as it did before 1885 — that Right is always on the side of the Shan. At any rate, in politics, Right is seldom Might. In other words, those powerful and ruthless enough will have no difficulty in achieving what they want, in committing grave injustices, or riding roughshod over truth. Nowadays, no matter what, Might usually triumphs over Right. However, one must not forget that Might, like Fortune, is not only fickle, but in the end, only creates more problems. After all, the embracing of Might is but a rejection of Wisdom, and, stupidity gets no one anywhere.

Chao Tzang Yawng hwe
(*Eugene Thaike*)
Chiangmai
1984

Acknowledgements

For a person such as myself whose life has been eventful, having been born in the midst of political turmoil which still rages on in my homeland, the debt of gratitude I have accumulated from the people I have come across — fortunate for me and unfortunate for them — needless to say, is indeed overwhelming. Everyone I have met in Thailand and particularly in Chiangmai has been not only courteous and kind, but also generous and compassionate. I am, as such, humbly grateful to all and deeply regret that I am unable to list all their names.

I would, however, like to cite some of those who have provided assistance in the writing of this book: M.R. Dr Sukhumbhand Paribatra, and Mrs Piensuvan Nakprecha, for their most valuable help; Dr K. of Chiangmai, a scholar and a man of all seasons, who has been not only a great teacher but an inspiring example as well; Mr Bertil Lintner, a serious student of politics and history, for kindly lending me books and materials on Burma and providing photographs; Mrs Frederika Scollard and a friend for editing and correcting my all too numerous errors in grammar and composition; Nu Nu Myint Yawngnhe, for making numerous trips to buy stationery supplies and to make photocopies, and generally keeping things in order; Khun Kya Nu, a long-time colleague and friend for checking out facts and dates; and the Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, Professor K.S. Sandhu for his encouragement and support.

And last, but not the least, Mr Adrian Cowell and Mr Chris Menges, of ATV, London, for bringing to the attention of the outside world, at great risk to their well-being, the tragic plight of the poor peasants of the Shan State with its anarchy and war which has made life for them meaningless and devoid of hope.

PART ONE

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
INTRODUCTION

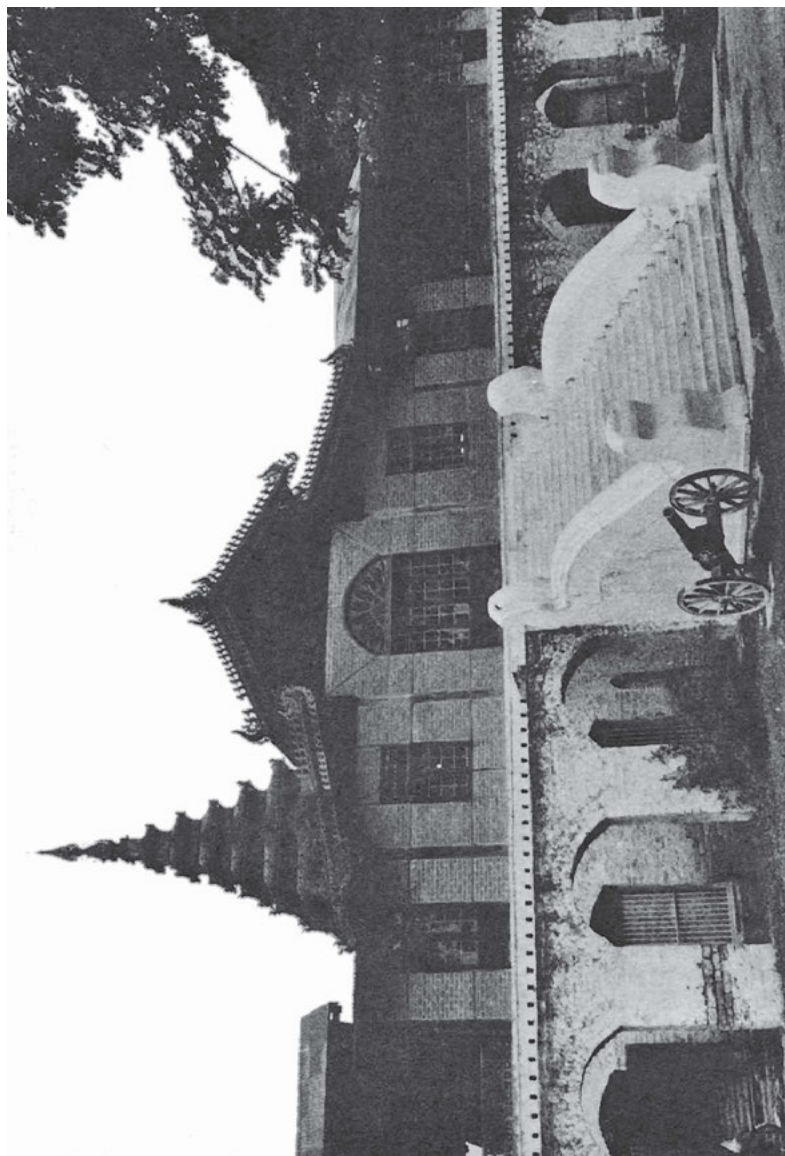
1

A Native of the Shan Hills

The Early Years

I was born in 1939 in the Federated Shan States, then under the British flag, in a princely manor — the *Yawnghwe Haw* (Shan for Yawnghwe Palace). My birth took place in a temporary hut in the northern garden of the palace, built specifically for childbirth¹ as was customary among Shan ruling families. My earliest memories are of World War II, of delicious Japanese rice-cakes, bespectacled Japanese officers with long swords and shining boots, sounds of aeroplanes, being carried by adults in the dark of night to earthen bombshelters, and looks of fear and uncertainty on adult faces. Then, the balmy days in the Inle Lake, and always on the move, we children enjoyed running across green and fragrant padi fields, hiding in cool bamboo groves, and swimming in the lake. Japanese soldiers often appeared, but so did, I recall vividly, two men with blue eyes and red hair clad in green (in contrast to the dusty yellow of Japanese uniforms). They were, we were told, men belonging to the *Maha-mate* army, that is, the Allied forces. We enjoyed the strange texture and taste of cheese and chocolates, and pored over magazines filled with photographs and coloured cartoons (mostly caricatures of Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo) brought by these strangers.

When the war ended, we children travelled with my mother and relatives from Yawnghwee to Hsenwi, her hometown (a distance of 200 miles by car).² On the way, we saw for the first time men who were blacker than the *kula* (Indians), whose teeth shone in their dark faces like half moons in the starless night. Men of importance (we were told), of different races came and went, many staying for days at Yawnghwe Haw.³ We, like the adults around us, were greatly amused at seeing Burmese men in sarongs and pink silken caps perched daintily on their



Yawngghwe Haw, where I was born. It was built by Sir Chao Mawng, the Chaofa of Yawngghwe (1864–85) and my grand-uncle (1897–1927). It is the only Shan Palace not destroyed in World War II. Photo courtesy of Bertil Lintner.

heads since men in the Shan State always wore Shan trousers — similar to Chinese ones. We were also taken to a town called Panglong, where two very important and historic conferences were held resulting in the Panglong Agreement of 1947 which shaped and changed the course of our history. But as children we noticed only the stalls selling cooked food and toys; the nightly entertainments (*zat-pwe* or Burmese opera, movies, dances by hilltribe performers, Shan men tattooed all black doing fierce sword dances); the sporting events (pillow fights, sack races, climbing the greased pole, football matches); and gambling booths offering games to suit every pocket and taste.

Around the age of six, I was sent with my elder brother to a Roman Catholic convent in Kalaw (Loi Ann in Shan), but we contracted typhoid and came home in an ambulance. We recovered and were dispatched to the far north to Hsenwi, again as boarders at a convent. At one time my father, Chao Shwe Thaike, while President of the Union of Burma, came on tour to Hsenwi, where he also attended the wedding of his eldest son.⁴ We stood in line with other school children, waved little flags as the motorcade passed, and later joined the family at Hsenwi Haw.

Due to a congenital heart defect, I was not allowed to fly,⁵ and was left at Hsenwi when my older brother flew with the rest of the family from Maymyo (where we joined the family during the summer vacation) to Rangoon. While at Hsenwi, I was caught in a battle lasting two days between Kachin mutineers of Captain Naw Seng⁶ and Kachin battalions loyal to the government.⁷ It was a confusing period filled with rumours and movements of armed men. My uncle, Chao Hom Pha, the Prince of Hsenwi, was at one time abducted by Naw Seng, which caused great excitement among his subjects.⁸

There was fighting everywhere, and it seemed to me at the time that every male adult was a soldier of some sort.⁹ I was then living with different relatives, passing from one family to the next, like an orphaned child, and moving from town to town. Finally, perhaps in 1950, I rejoined my family in Rangoon, no longer a nomadic orphan, but as one of the sons of the Union President.

Although my father's term as President ended in 1952, his services were retained by U Nu's AFPFL (Anti-Fascist Peoples' Freedom League) government,¹⁰ as Speaker of the House of Nationalities (the Upper Chamber of Burma's unicameral Parliament), up to 1960. My family moved into our own house which had formerly belonged to an Indian tycoon,¹¹ on Kokine Road, Rangoon. My days were like those of any growing

schoolboy — school, homework, play, “boy scouting”, friends (from among children of ministers, top military officials, senior civil servants, prominent politicians, wealthy merchants, aristocratic landowners, and so forth from the Methodist English High School,¹² considered exclusive, and the best in Burma).

I matriculated at eighteen, and enrolled at Rangoon University in 1957. In this institution with its political tradition, which had nurtured nationalist leaders such as Aung San, U Nu, Ba Swe, Kyaw Nyein, I was introduced to politics. Here, I met people who vehemently opposed the government and who could talk about nothing but the armed overthrow of capitalism — seditious but exciting for one who was keen on history, and had visited Mao’s China when the family was invited to do so by Premier Zhou Enlai (Chou En-lai). The private family tour of the People’s Republic of China (April and May 1957), the meeting with legendary revolutionaries¹³ who figured so prominently in Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China*, as well as seeming happiness and buoyancy of the people under communism,¹⁴ not surprisingly gave me much food for thought. It impressed on me that oppression and exploitation of the humble and poor were very wrong and inhumane.

It was at Rangoon University that I first met other young Shan, and got to know personally Kachin, Karen, Mon, Arakanese, Chin, and other students. The more vocal and outgoing ones were as political as their Burmese counterparts though less anti-government, but all distrusted Burmese intentions which they perceived to be Burmese domination and subjugation of other ethnic groups. Noticeable was that all these young non-Burmese regarded communism as the ultimate evil, and thus shunned or avoided the Rangoon University Students Union leaders and activists who professed Marxism, and allegedly had contacts with secret communist cells in Rangoon.

Having gained friends from my homeland, I began, every summer, touring as much of the Shan State as I could — travelling on motorcycles, local buses, bullock carts, and on foot; and putting up in monasteries or homes of friends, relatives, and casual acquaintances. On these exploratory trips, I often heard tales of atrocities involving Burmese soldiers: villages razed, wholesale looting, disappearance of people, beating and torture under questioning about secret arms caches, molestation and rapes, shooting of livestock and poultry, and wanton killings.

My involvement in the politics of national awakening was further deepened when my mother, the Mahadevi of Yawnghwe was elected MP

(Member of Parliament) of the Lower House (Deputies) for Hsenwi in 1956.¹⁵ Thereafter home became a political headquarters of sorts. All day and for half the night people ranging from Shan *chaofa* (princes), to MPs and other political leaders (Burmese, Shan, and other ethnic groups), Shan monks, and student leaders drifted in and out.

It was my father, the Yawnghwe prince who had encouraged my mother to enter politics. He was very much disturbed by the apparent Burmese disregard for the Shan State government and Shan autonomy.¹⁶ Burmese soldiers acted in a manner that made the natives see them as predatory foreign occupation force (which seems to be still the case today). But since my father was also the Speaker of the Upper House, he could not directly interfere. He therefore devoted his energy to having Buddhist texts translated from Burmanized Pali to Shan — a move which “Shan-ized” Buddhism. It catalyzed a mini-cultural revolution and resulted in the revival of Shan literature which in turn increased national awareness and activities.

I myself was swept along by the rising tide of nationalism, initially as a shy and nervous participant. But after the first military takeover (1958) when several Shan student activists¹⁷ from the university went underground to join the Noom Suk Harn, the first Shan resistance organization at the border, and the remaining student leaders dropped out in fear, I worked at keeping the spirit of nationalism high on campus.¹⁸ I was not only successful in this task, but was by 1961 able to unite all on-campus non-Burmese student associations — Kachin, Karen, Arakan, Pa-O, Karenni, Chin, and Shan — under the wing of the Nationalities Students United Front which was as powerful as the Rangoon University Students Union.

While thus engaged on campus, I established clandestine contacts with both the Shan and Karen movements, often slipping into the jungle to meet their leaders.¹⁹ It was a dangerous venture and, in retrospect, of dubious value. However, being young and fired with zeal and patriotism, I did not lose much sleep over the risk I was taking.

After the head of the Burma Army, General Ne Win, was invited in 1958 by the then Prime Minister U Nu to take over power, the military really got down to, in its own unique style, restoring stability and law in Shan State. Units were sent into the countryside to clear the whole region of rebels, foreign intruders, and those planning rebellion and secession.²⁰ This vigorous exercise²¹ to restore stability resulted instead in an armed uprising in which Shan rebels captured the town of Tangyan in 1959,²²



Chao Kyaw Toon, hero of the battle of Tangyan in 1959. This picture was taken at Camp Pang Tong (1960).

retreating only after about a week of fierce fighting and intense strafing by the Burma Air Force. Though the Burma Army won the battle, the rebellion smouldered on in the form of small armed bands scattered all over the Shan Country.²³

This development put those directly responsible — the Head of Shan State, the Shan civil administration, the *chaofa*, MPs, politicians, and Shan political parties in an awkward position. Since anything concerned with the military and defence was beyond their jurisdiction, they became mere on-lookers. What was most worrying was that the numerous military sweeps were alienating the bulk of the rural population.

If peace and stability in Shan State were to be restored and rebellion nipped before it developed into anything threatening, it was imperative that some control be imposed on the Burmese military which meant that the Shan government should be given more power. Responsible Shan leaders reasoned that if more power was vested in the Shan government under a genuinely federal arrangement,²⁴ nationalist extremists would lose whatever support they hitherto enjoyed. Besides, the correction of imbalances in the hastily²⁵ drawn 1948 constitution would, Shan leaders reasoned, remove all serious friction within the Union and thus strengthen unity.²⁶

These thoughts and ideas took on a more concrete form after the general election of 1960 in which all parties and personalities seen as pro-military throughout the Union were defeated. This took the form of a proposal by the Shan State government to U Nu whose party had won a landslide victory at the polls (on an anti-dictatorship platform), for reform of the Union constitution. It in time became a movement as the Karenni government, as well as the Kachin, Mon, Arakanese, Chin, and Karen leaders and parties expressed support.

Needless to say, the constitutional movement captured the imagination of all classes in Shan State. I attended several meetings organized by the Shan government at Taunggyi to explain the movement's aims, and in 1961, I even persuaded delegates of the Shan literary and cultural seminar to march around the town in support of the proposal for federation.²⁷ Like everyone else then, I believed that with the rejection by voters throughout the Union of anti-democratic tendencies, whatever conflict there was between the Burmese centre and the non-Burmese would in time be resolved through peaceful and democratic give-and-take.

However, this was not to be. I was rudely awakened at about 4 a.m. on the morning of 2 March 1962, by sounds of gunfire, faintly at first

but growing louder as I grew more awake. The gunfire was directly outside the home, and bullets smashed through window panes and frames, thudded against or ricocheted off walls. A military unit had crept up to our home in the dark, and surrounding it on two sides, had opened fire.²⁸ My younger brother, Chao Mee who was only seventeen years old was killed “while resisting the armed forces in its performance of duty”, according to the authorities concerned.²⁹

Amidst the smell of cordite, the Yawnghwe prince, Chao Shwe Thaïke, who was former Union President, twice Speaker of the Upper House, and MP (Upper House) for Yawnghwe, was taken away at bayonet point and put in an army van that morning before the light of dawn.³⁰ That was the last time I saw my father. One day in November 1962, I received a phone call from a Major Thein Shwe who said he was a classmate of my elder sister, Chao Sanda.³¹ He wished to meet me. The Major took me to meet Colonel Lwin, the head of the dreaded MIS (Military Intelligence Service) who informed me that “the President” had expired in jail.

The meeting took place at Dagon House, a special meeting place for top army brass and for the reception of foreign military guests. I was offered cigarettes (Benson & Hedges) and scotch and soda. While I sat there numbed by the news of my father’s death, wondering if he had been tortured and finally injected with some poison, the Major and his boss solemnly discussed, of all things, the fighting between the Chinese People Liberation Army (PLA) and the Indian Army at their mutual border.

The cremation of the Chaofa *Luang* (Shan for “senior”) of Yawnghwe was held in Yawnghwe tow, drawing large crowds from far and near — the Padaung with their long-necked women, Pa-O men and women in traditional black, the Intha (Inle Lake dwellers) in brown homespun, the townspeople in sombre clothes, and relatives in the white of royal mourning. A couple of Burma Army men³² resplendent in green and red bands on caps and tabs on collars, coloured ribbons on chests, and gold insignias on shoulders were there for a while, and left without the usual pomp.

That year, 1962, I had another brush with shots fired in anger, again in Rangoon. Following the coup in March, feelings against the military on campus were high as the takeover was seen as an usurpation of power by neo-Nazi elements. Aware of this the new regime introduced

new campus rules and regulations which resulted in a series of student protests. On 6 July, there was one such protest, and the next day the police were sent in. Shots were fired wounding several students,³³ but the police were chased out. The students then proceeded to close all campus gates, hoisted red banners of the Students Union all over the campus, made fiery speeches against the military, and declared the university a “fortress of democracy”.

On the evening of 7 July, the regime unleashed its soldiers, armed with newly issued West German G-3 assault rifles, against the student body. I worked as tutor in the Department of English, and that evening I found myself near the campus main gate (on my way home from the judo gym). I had stopped to talk to several students from my tutorial class. Many students were waving red banners and hurling insults at the military when a volley rang out. I jumped into a nearby ditch. When the firing stopped, those not hit, myself included, ran. Another volley was unleashed. We hit the dirt. The firing ceased. We then started running again, and another volley was fired. And so it went.

The military declared that soldiers had had to break up an unruly student mob, and maintained that minimum violence had been used. Only sixteen shots were fired resulting, most unfortunately, in sixteen deaths.³⁴ The university was declared closed, and the Students Union Building — popularly regarded as a home away from home of the young Aung San, Burma’s Architect of Freedom, during his university days — was flattened by demolition charges, the sound of which was heard throughout the capital. It is still widely believed that dead and wounded students were dumped into this building before it was demolished.

The violence of 1962 heralded the supremacy of force, and the death of democracy and reason. I felt there was no other choice left but to answer the call to battle — for the Shan, as well as for democracy. This I did in April 1963, several months after the cremation of my father.

Answering the Call

Before I proceed to give an account of my personal experiences in the Shan nationalist movement, I wish to first give a very brief sketch of the Shan.

The people known to the outside world as the Shan, do not refer to themselves as such. The name they use for themselves is “Tai”, and like their brothers, the Thai or Siamese, they believe that their original

home was in south China covering the provinces of Sichuan (Szechuan), Yunnan, Guizhou (Kweichow), Guangxi (Kwangsi) and Guangdong (Kwangtung) — a belief which is dismissed by almost all Chinese scholars, and Western ones too, as being without factual foundation. However, neither the Shan nor Thai should be blamed because if this story of origin is a fabrication, it was the invention of Western scholars. Before the coming of Westerners, the Shan or Tai and their brothers, the Lao, northern Thai or Tai-Ping and the Tai-Ahom, all believed that they were descended from Khun Lu and Khun Lai who came down from heaven on ladders of, according to different chronicles, gold, silver, or iron. In all chronicles there is a story of a servant of Khun Lu and Khun Lai, named Pang-ku, or Lang-ku, who tricked his masters into letting him eat the head of the chicken sent from heaven, and as a result, he became the king of Muang Kae (China). A very tall tale, scoffed Western scholars when they heard the story, and the natives, very much impressed by Western wonders and wisdom, could not help but agree. Somehow, they did not seem to have wondered why similarly fanciful tales of Adam and Eve, Noah and his Ark, among others, were not summarily dismissed by the West as was the story of Khun Lu and Khun Lai. Perhaps it was because they were so overawed.

Since a comprehensive research on the early history of the Tai-speaking people (Shan, Thai or Siam, Lao, Tai-Ping or Khon Muang, Tai Chuang, Tai Chong, Thai Dam, White Thai, Tai Nua, Tai Mao, Tai Lue, among others) has yet to be undertaken, all that can be said about the Tai or Thai is that by the late twelfth century, they had evolved somehow into a people with enough skills and prowess to establish kingdoms. At about this time, coinciding with increasing pressure of the Mongol rulers of China on the kingdom of Nanchao, the Tai had established various kingdoms near the southern rim of Nanchao.³⁵ These were the Tai Ahom kingdom of Assam, the Shan kingdom of Ava, the Tai Mao kingdom, the Lao kingdom of Lan-Chang, and in present day Thailand, the kingdoms of Payao, Chiang Rai (later moved to Chiangmai), and Sukhothai and the Shan kingdom at Martaban.³⁶

The Tai people known as the “Shan” — the subject of this paper — are those who constituted and established the Tai Mao and Ava kingdoms which had close connections and continuing relationships with Burmese kingdoms. Within the context of the history of Burma, it will be seen that there were then two Shan centres of power — Ava, and the Tai Mao kingdom.