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THE SHAN OF BURMA

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CHAO TZANG YAWNGHWE

THE SHAN OF BURMA

Memoirs of a Shan Exile

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
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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 (Myanmar[1]) 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 Loumpha, 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 Yawnghwe 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 Yawnghwe, "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 Yawnghwe, "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 Yawnghwe, "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 Yawnghwe
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 Yawnghwe. 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 lift 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 Yawnghwe
(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 gratitute 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.

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