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Shan State of Mind: Kengtung

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

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KENGTUNG, Burma – Until very recently, Burma's Shan State was, for me, *terra incognita*. For a long time, even after having seen its verdant hills from the Thai side of the border, my mental map of Southeast Asia represented Shan State as wheat-colored mountains and the odd Buddhist *chedi* (temple). I suppose this was a way of representing a place I thought of as remote, obscure, and beautiful. Beyond that, I'd read somewhere that Kengtung, the principal town of eastern Shan State, had many temples.

My efforts to conjure a more detailed picture of Shan State inevitably called forth images associated with the Golden Triangle; black-and-white photographs of hillsides covered by poppy plants, ragged militias escorting mules laden with opium bundled in burlap, barefoot rebels in formation before a bamboo flagpole. These are popular images of the tri-border area where Burma, Laos and Thailand meet as haven for "warlord kingpins" ruling over "heroin empires." As one Shan observer laments, such images, perpetuated by the media and the tourism industry, have reduced Shan State's opium problem to a "dramatic backdrop, an 'exotic unknowable.'"¹

Perhaps my abridged mental image of Shan State persisted by default, since my efforts to "fill in" the map produced so little clarity. Westerners who write about the



Rural Kengtung. "The State of Kiang Tung... a long straggling, ill-defined, tongue of country, which runs between two foreign nations, and ends on the borders of a third ... can never be anything but a source of weakness to the integrity of the Burmese kingdom. It will, like the Irishman's coat tails, be dragging along the ground—a constant challenge to outsiders to tread upon it." – Lieutenant G. J. Younghusband, 1887

¹ Chao-Tzang Yawngwhwe, "The Political Economy of the Opium Trade: Implications for Shan State," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 23, no. 3 (1993), p. 307.



state bears the name of the Shan ethnic group, Shan people make up only about 50 percent of the population. The mountains of Shan State are home to a patchwork of hill dwellers, including Akha, Kachin, Lahu, Palaung, Pa-O and Wa, who traditionally existed aloof from lowland political systems. The Thais and the Shans are linguistic cousins. In fact, "Shan" is the same word as "Syam," i.e., Siam; in literary Burmese, "Shan" is spelled "Syam."³ The Shan do not call themselves "Shan" but Tai, and are known to Thais as "Tai Yai" (Great Tai).

In pre-colonial times, the hereditary rulers of the Shan states paid tribute in the form of gold and silver flowers to Burman kings, signaling a formal submission to the Burman overlord in exchange for substantive autonomy. For several Shan states, including Kengtung, this ambiguous arrangement had the advantage of forestalling interference from Siam, though tribute from Kengtung and other Shan principalities sometimes flowed in that direction as well. The Shan rulers were not united, and the tributary relationship was reproduced locally among the greater and lesser states. Sometimes the Shan rulers fought the Burmans; sometimes they fought one another. The British historian and colonial official, G.E. Harvey, wrote of a "bedlam of snarling Shan states ... wriggling like worms."⁴ Under British rule (1886-1948), the Shan states formed part of the "Frontier Areas," the peripheral hill tracts administered separately from Burma Proper, and the Shan chiefs retained

recent history of the region are sometimes compelled to remark on its bewildering complexity.² What did I know about Shan State before I walked across the bridge over the Sai River into Burma?

* * *

Shan State is Burma's largest administrative unit, 60,000 square miles of mostly mountainous terrain, cleaved by the fast-flowing Salween River. Though the

significant internal autonomy.

The union of the Shan States with independent Burma in 1948 was achieved with a guarantee of the right to secession. The fledgling country was immediately beset with internal conflicts. In the 1950s, the Shan States became the scene of fighting between the Burmese Army and CIA-backed, Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang) troops who had fled Mao's China. By the end of the de-

² See, for example, Bertil Lintner, "The Shans and the Shan State of Burma," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 4, no. 4 (March 1984): 435, and Shelby Tucker, *The Curse of Independence*, London: Pluto Press, p. 172.

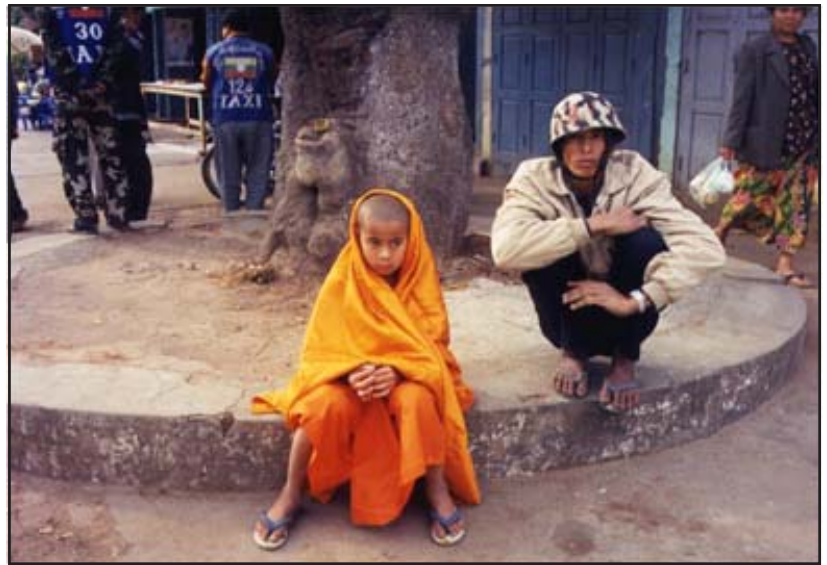
³ Yawnghwe, p. 320, note 7. One Tai Yai man in Kengtung told me that "Shan," being a Burmese word, had a derogatory connotation.

⁴ Cited in Robert L. Solomon, "Boundary Concepts and Practices in Southeast Asia," Santa Monica: Rand, (RM-5936-1-ARPA), December, 1969, p. 4.

cade Shan-nationalist insurgent groups were fighting the Burmese Army. Meanwhile, the efforts of Shan leaders to secure greater autonomy through a federal system precipitated General Ne Win's 1962 *coup d'état*, inaugurating a period of military rule in Burma that continues today. For the next quarter century, Burma closed itself to the world as the military government pursued the "Burmese Way to Socialism." During this period, Shan State was wracked by myriad insurgencies, which contributed to the development of an opium-based economy.

What I'd read about Shan State's current situation offered even starker images of conflict and turmoil. Although only one rebel group, the Shan State Army-South (SSA), is still operating, the Burmese Army has been expanding its presence in Shan State, with nearly a quarter of its 400,000 troops now stationed there.⁵ The Burmese counter-insurgency strategy is known as the "four cuts," that is, cutting rebel sources of money, recruits, food and intelligence received from the local population. The strategy is, in effect, a war on the local population. In 1996-97, the Burmese Army carried out a massive forced relocation from areas in the south-central part of the State, i.e., areas where the SSA operates, displacing 300,000 people. As many as half of this number of displaced persons became refugees in Thailand. The Burmese campaign to pacify Shan State is ongoing, with continued reports of forced relocation, forced labor and other human-rights abuses. Most disturbing is the report released last year documenting the Burmese Army's systematic rape of Shan women as a tactic of war.⁶

Much of Shan State is controlled not by the Burmese



A novice and motorcycle-taxi driver, outside the Kengtung market

Army, but by former insurgents who have been granted autonomy in exchange for ceasing hostilities. The preponderant power in much of Shan State today is the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest and best equipped of the insurgent groups to sign a cease-fire with the Burmese government. The UWSA is forcing tens of thousands of people to move from areas near the Chinese border to areas near the Thai border, ostensibly as part of their opium-eradication campaign. Amphetamine laboratories in UWSA areas continue to churn out millions of speed tablets for export to Thailand. The cease-fire groups, including the UWSA, are supposed to turn over their arms once the Burmese have completed a new constitution, but there is no prospect of that in the foreseeable future. The National Convention, handpicked by the military and charged with drafting the constitution, has not met since 1996.

* * *

Kengtung was once the seat of power for the largest and most prosperous of the Shan states. Somerset Maugham visited Kengtung in the 1920s and wrote about it in *The Gentleman in the Parlour*. Before reaching Shan State, he met a former colonial official who had spent five years posted near Kengtung and who "spoke of Keng Tung as a lover might speak of his bride. [Living there] had been an experience so poignant that it had set him apart forever from his fellows." Kengtung still has the power to evoke this kind of wistfulness in visitors, though Maugham's own impressions of Kengtung were restrained. "I kept the emotion with which Kengtung filled me well under control," he wrote. He found Kengtung pleasant enough, mostly because he could sleep late, eat breakfast in his pajamas and read all morning without having to worry about his mules.

Like Maugham, I found Kengtung attractive, quiet,



A residence of the saopha, former hereditary chief of Kengtung. I was told the rightful owner now lives in exile in Colorado.

⁵ Since 1988, the Burmese armed forces have grown from 186,000 to 400,000.

⁶ Shan Women's Action Network and the Shan Human Rights Foundation, *License to Rape: The Burmese Military Regime's Use of Sexual Violence in the Ongoing War in Shan State*. May 2002, p. 8.



A monk

sign of antiquity.

One has the sense that Kengtung has changed little in the past several decades. This is a consequence of Burma's long isolation during the years the country trod the "Burmese Way to Socialism" (1962-1988) as well as the fact that Shan State has been a scene of almost continuous armed conflict since the beginning of World War II. It was only a decade ago that the Burmese authorities began to allow foreigners to visit Kengtung. There is a cliché about travel to Burma that on arrival one sets one's watch back 30 minutes, but travels back in time 30 years. Certainly Kengtung's rusticity is a draw for tourists. Even the self-conscious visitor is not immune from its appeal. Nor is the pull of "nostalgia" exclusive to Western visitors. Thais are visiting Burma (and Laos) in greater numbers, often with the intent of re-experiencing the ambience of Thailand's recent past.

The Kengtung market is large and lively, but outside of the market I saw little activity. The most common sight in Kengtung is that of three or four motorcycle-taxi drivers sprawled together in the shade of a tree or a wall, playing checkers, waiting for a fare. They wear vests emblazoned with their numbers and the Shan State flag. The

sunlit, dusty and torpid. Kengtung feels *old*. Some of the ancient gates that once offered entry through the wall surrounding the town are still standing. Many of the buildings are colonial leftovers, with several architectural examples to be seen.⁷ As I'd read, Kengtung is a town of temples, many with gleaming gold *chedis* and elaborate tin gables ringing their tiered roofs. The streets of Kengtung roll and curve, joining one another as if by chance, another

town's temples may be Kengtung's signature, but these ubiquitous surplus drivers appeared to me, in their idleness, a serviceable emblem of somnolent Kengtung.

The people of Kengtung impressed me as open, self-assured, and warm. I encountered among the Shan I met, including several of those motorcycle-taxi drivers, no trace of obsequiousness or avarice, which made my encounters with them pleasant. My few brief encounters with Burmans were less pleasant, though in fairness I met no Burman in Kengtung who was not an official. I was subjected to some minor bureaucratic bullying. It cost me nothing more than a little time, but gave me the flavor of vexation and powerlessness that marks the local people's interactions with officials. It is telling that the only Burmans I met in Kengtung were in uniform. Unsurprisingly, many local people I met viewed the Burmese Army as occupiers, or carpetbaggers at best.



A Burman police officer

The political situation in Burma is conventionally portrayed as a morality play, a conflict between democracy and military dictatorship, pitting Nobel laureate and National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi against the military junta that calls itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and is supported by the Burmese Army, or *atmadaw*.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Burma's martyred independence hero, General Aung San,⁸ rose to prominence in the summer of 1988 during nationwide pro-democracy demonstrations in Burma that ended with the deaths of several thousand people at the



Shan children at play

⁷ The Army razed the Kentung palace, home of Kengtung's traditional ruler and jewel of Kengtung architecture, on November 11, 1991, to make way for a hotel. The destruction of the Kengtung palace is seen by many people as part of a wider effort by the regime to destroy Shan identity.

⁸ Aung San became the leader of Burma's independence struggle during World War II. He cooperated with the Japanese as chief of the Burma Independence Army, but later switched to the Allied cause, founding the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League. Aung San negotiated the agreement that secured Burma's independence from Britain. Aung San was just 32 years old when he and six members of his Cabinet were assassinated in July 1947, some five months before Burma officially achieved independence from Britain.

hands of the Burmese Army. In the 1990 parliamentary elections, the NLD won 392 of 485 seats, while the Army's National Unity Party won only ten. The junta, then known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council, refused to hand over power, and instead stepped up efforts to destroy the NLD, intimidating, imprisoning or co-opting its members and closing its local offices. The regime vilified Suu Kyi, calling her "axe handle of neo-colonialists" and "Mrs. Race Destructionist," for her marriage to a foreigner, the late Michael Aris, with whom she had two sons. She was under house arrest from 1989 to 1995 and again from September 2000 to May 6, 2002. Suu Kyi's ongoing, non-violent struggle for representative government in Burma has been marked by her personal dignity and steadfastness in the face of the Army's brutality.

The military government, meanwhile, claims to champion three main causes, namely, non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and the perpetuation of national sovereignty.⁹ In pursuit of these causes, the SPDC has thwarted the will of the people as expressed in the 1990 election, run the Burmese economy into the ground, extinguished the rule of law, conflated Burman identity with national identity at the expense of ethnic-minority rights, created a police state, and carried out widespread, systematic abuses of human rights, including arbitrary arrests and detentions, executions, forced labor, forced relocation, torture and rape.

For these reasons the Burmese military regime is widely condemned. However the simple formula "NLD

good, SPDC bad," does not do justice to the complexity of the political impasse in Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD have been criticized for being too rigid and too unwilling to compromise. I have heard from Burmese in Thailand who believe that the NLD must share some of the responsibility for the lack of progress in national reconciliation. Some see the NLD stance against trade, investment and aid in Burma as problematic. Robert Templer of the International Crisis Group urged the world community to address Burma's humanitarian and HIV-AIDS crises, stating that the problem is so dire it "cannot be put on a back burner until the political situation improves or a more amenable regime is in power." Templer further argues that there are, "no indications that existing aid programs have any significant political costs."¹⁰

Some argue that the SPDC-NLD conflict may be, "interpreted as a clash between the values of 'traditional' indigenous communalism versus the values of modern and 'Western' individualism."¹¹ This is certainly the way the SPDC views the conflict. Those who accept this line of reasoning point out that the democratic transitions in the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand followed long periods of authoritarian rule and capitalist economic development. Some also point to Western double standards, noting that the West trades with many autocratic regimes, including China and Vietnam, but refuses to do business with Burma.¹²

Mary Callahan, a prominent Burma scholar, believes that urban Burmese critics of military rule in Burma usually draw distinctions between the senior officers of the SPDC, the institution of the army, and the individual soldiers. While many revile the junta, some still respect the institution of the army as the instrument of national independence and unity, and may have personal links to members of the military. Even Aung San Suu Kyi professes respect for the Burmese Army, an institution founded by her father. When it comes to the ethnic-minority areas, however, these distinctions are not meaningful. "In places like [Shan State], the institution of the armed forces and its leaders are seen as part of the same package of attempted domination and subjugation by Rangoon."¹³

* * *

I had been warned by guidebooks and acquaintances not to speak about politics in



This message from the Burmese Army greets visitors to the giant diptocarp tree near Wat Pha That Jom Mon.

⁹ Although the Burmese Army is the self-proclaimed savior of Burmese unity, the cease-fire agreements that cede authority to armed minority groups seems a greater affront to the vaunted unity of Myanmar than the federalism that the junta fears.

¹⁰ Robert Templer, "Humanitarian Help Can't Wait for Politics," International Herald Tribune, April 17, 2002, available at <http://www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/showreport.cfm?reportid=636>.

¹¹ R. H. Taylor, "Political Values and Political Conflict in Burma," in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1996, p. 33.

¹² David I. Steinberg, "The Trouble with a Harder U.S. Line on Burma," International Herald Tribune, February 11, 2003.

¹³ Mary P. Callahan, "Cracks in the Edifice? Military-Society Relations in Burma Since 1988," in Morten B Pedersen, Emily Rudland and R.J. May, eds, *Burma Myanmar: Strong Regime, Weak State?* Adelaide: Crawford House, p. 31.

Burma, and I was prepared to heed the warning. To talk politics in Burma is to put those with whom one speaks at risk from the dictatorship's security agents. I went to Shan State content at the prospect of seeing what could be seen, and keeping my ears open. I discovered that some people in Kengtung were willing to share with me their views about the SPDC, the Army and Burma's future. A walk around Naung Tung Lake led to the first hint of this willingness. Several teenagers, boys and girls, were leaning on a railing, watching two fishermen on a raft haul in their net. In the distance I saw an enormous standing Buddha image and asked the teenagers about it. "That's the Army Buddha. The Army built it," one informed me. "No one goes there."

During my stay in Kengtung, there were several things happening that led to talk of the regime. The most pressing problem was Burma's banking crisis. Beginning in February 2003, there was a run on private bank deposits. The government responded by limiting withdrawals to no more than 100,000 kyat per person,



Soldier and chedi, Kengtung: "There is undoubtedly no community of language, culture or interests between the Shans and Burmese save religion, nor is there any sentiment of unity which is the index of a common national mind." - Shan State Independence Army statement, 1959.

per week, less than US\$100 at the unofficial exchange rate. The kyat was trading at about 950 to the dollar, and only a month before it had been trading at 750. People were anxious, and desperate for cash. I heard about one woman who convinced the bank to allow her to withdraw more than officially permitted by explaining that she needed the money to sponsor her son's ordination as a monk.

That the government had mismanaged the economy and was attempting to forestall economic collapse was taken as given. I also heard a rumor that Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was behind the banking crisis. According to this theory, Thaksin had pressured the Burmese government to limit withdrawals during his recent visit to Rangoon. He hoped the crackdown would undermine the Wa drug traffickers and thereby aid his war on drugs. Given that the UWSA controls its own banks, this theory doesn't seem to have much merit.

I also encountered a rumor about an imminent Shan State Army Army-South offensive. The SSA-South is, along with the Karen National Union, among the only remaining insurgent forces still fighting against the Burmese Army. A letter from the SSA that warned local people of the possibility of fighting had been circulating in Kengtung. One man I spoke to said he thought prospects for fighting were linked to the visit of the UN Human Rights Commission special *rapporteur* for Burma, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro. If the visit went well, the SSA probably wouldn't launch an attack. If it went poorly, fighting would likely flare up.

In fact, Pinheiro's visit was a disaster. After discov-



Wat Zom Khun



Myanmar Mayflower Bank, one of the banks said to be controlled by the United Wa State Army

ering a listening device planted under the table where he was having “confidential” meetings with political prisoners, Pinheiro stormed out of Burma two days ahead of his scheduled departure. The SSA offensive never materialized.

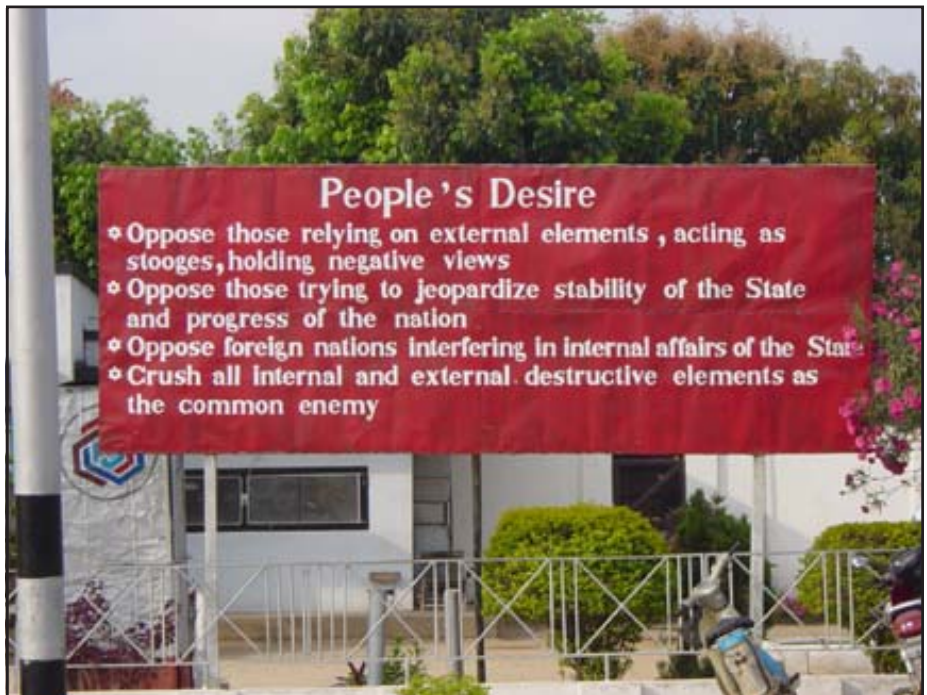
What was interesting about this rumor was the enthusiasm it generated in the man who related it to me. My understanding was that the SSA was on its last legs, had only a handful of men under arms, and had, of necessity, fore-sworn offensives, saying it would only defend itself from attack. However, this man believed the SSA was a viable vehicle for changing the status quo in Burma. He was a family man, not a rabble-rouser. His livelihood would suffer if fighting again closed the border with Thailand. Prices would rise while his income would fall. This didn’t concern him. He wanted to see a blow struck against the Burmese Army. Something had to be done, he said.

I ended up spending some time with a retired teacher I’ll call Sai Yawd. He spoke Thai, English and Burmese, had three gold teeth and liked to wear a yellow hard hat. His father had been killed in 1942 when Thai planes bombed the Kengtung market before Thai-

land annexed Kengtung with Japan’s consent.¹⁴ He had no ill feeling toward the Thais and, as in several Shan homes I saw, he had a picture of the Thai king and queen hanging on his wall. He told me he spent time in prison in the late 1960s for having contact with Shan rebels.

In the evening, once the electricity was flowing, Sai Yawd and I watched Thai news programs on his television. The news brought images of U.S. aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf and U.S. troops in Kuwait. The U.S. was seeking a second Security Council resolution authorizing use of military force to disarm Iraq and it wasn’t going well. Sai Yawd followed the news closely. He was interested in what was happening in Washington, New York, London and Baghdad. The images of U.S. jets launching from the carriers excited him. Sai Yawd looked forward to seeing the U.S. bomb Iraq and force Saddam from power.

Sai Yawd’s interest in the looming U.S. invasion of Iraq betrayed his hope that the U.S. would someday crush the Burmese military dictatorship. Bush, whom he admired, represented for him the power of the U.S. The tyrant Saddam had brutalized his people, and now the U.S. would free the long-suffering Iraqis.¹⁵ Had not the Generals in Rangoon brutalized the peoples of Burma? Were they not tyrants? I agreed that the principle appeared to



A government billboard outside the Kengtung market.

¹⁴ Chatichai Choonhavan, who as Thailand’s Prime Minister four decades later advocated turning the region’s battlefields into marketplaces, was a lieutenant in the Thai army that occupied Kengtung from 1942-44.

¹⁵ Interestingly, it was a Burma-born ethnic-Chinese Marine, Corporal Edward Chin, who placed the U.S. flag over the head of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad.

be the same, but that he'd better not hold his breath waiting for the U.S. to bomb Rangoon. He asked, "Is the suffering of Shan and Burmese people less than that of Iraqis?" I said I believed it was not, but that he shouldn't confuse the interests for which the U.S. was going to war with the rhetoric of freedom used to justify the war. I could envision no circumstance under which the U.S. would "liberate" Burma. Perhaps, I said, if you could prove that Osama bin Laden was hiding in Rangoon. He laughed at this, but his faith in the righteous might of America made me melancholy.

Later, Sai Yawd arranged for me to meet a local NLD official. When we arrived at the restaurant at the appointed time, there was some discussion about where we should sit. If we sat inside, there was a good chance we'd be within earshot of any army officers who happened to be there. If we sat outside, we could speak more freely, but we'd be sure to be seen by any officials or army officers on their way in. I couldn't see that it made much difference, and was beginning to wonder if meeting at a restaurant was such a good idea. Finally we sat inside, in a corner of the restaurant separated from the rest of the dining room by a sheet strung up as a curtain between two cabinets.

While waiting for the NLD man, Sai Yawd told me about another NLD official who had recently died in prison in Kengtung. U Sai Phat, vice chairman of the NLD in Shan State, had been arrested early in September 2002 for attempting to organize NLD supporters. According to authorities, he died in prison from cerebral malaria. "That's not true," he told me. "He was poisoned by the army. They did it slowly. It took a month to kill him."¹⁶

The NLD man arrived alone, wearing a winter coat and a *longyi*, the sarong worn by Burmese men. Sai Yawd introduced us, and the man said we could speak Thai. Sai Yawd disappeared to order our food, and left me with the NLD man. It was slow going, with each of us speaking a second language.

I explained that I was interested in the NLD and its organization in Kengtung. He said it was very difficult to organize. He said the party had many sympathizers, but few members. Membership in the NLD was risky, but there was real support for the Party in Kengtung. Aung San Suu Kyi had visited Kengtung in November, and thousands of people turned out to hear her speak. (Later, he gave me a video compact disc of her visit. Judg-



The office of the National League for Democracy in Kengtung

ing from the crowds, he wasn't exaggerating.) People need to see the NLD is not afraid, he said.

I asked how, given the unwillingness of the Burmese government to relinquish power or even engage in serious talks with the NLD, his office planned to proceed toward the goal of a democratic Burma. He said the NLD stood for justice and freedom, and that this message needed to reach the people. This wasn't much to work with, I thought, but I had a sense of the difficulties facing the NLD. Just trying to organize could get a person imprisoned and poisoned.

Suddenly, the lights went out. Nothing unusual, I thought. Sai Yawd slipped through the curtains. He looked panicked. "The army is here," he whispered. I

¹⁶ I learned later that U Sai Phat had been imprisoned by authority of Section 5 (j) of the Emergency Provisions Act (Burma Act 17, 1950). The Act states:

Whoever does anything with any of the following intent; that is to say – [...] j. to affect the morality or conduct of the public or a group of people in a way that would undermine the security of the Union or the restoration of law and order... shall be punished with an imprisonment for a term which shall extend to 7 years or with fine or with both. (Section 5, Emergency Provisions Act; available at http://www.geocities.com/blc_dc/epa_e.html).

There are some 1,300 political prisoners in Burma, including 116 members of the NLD. According to the Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 70 political prisoners have died in detention in Burma since 1988. Naw Seng, "Fears for Missing Political Prisoners," *The Irrawaddy*, January 2003, available at <http://www.irrawaddy.org/news/2003/jan17.html>.

thought, "Had they turned out the lights? Why would they do that?" Then I thought to myself, "I'm just having dinner and talking to someone. We haven't done anything wrong." Not that my judgment of what was right and wrong carried any weight in Kengtung.

We sat together in the dark without speaking. I could hear the voices of the waitresses, and some patrons outside. After several minutes the lights came on. The three of us continued to sit quietly. The food arrived. I looked at my companions in turn, but couldn't get a read on the situation. Finally, Sai Yawd got up to see what was going on.

The NLD man said nothing. He was coolly dismantling a fish with his chopsticks. A young Akha girl, maybe 13 years old, with pink-painted fingernails, served us rice. She gently reproached me for putting the fish bones on the edge of my plate; I was meant to put them into the bowl she had provided. Her poise impressed me. I discovered that I had lost my appetite.

Sai Yawd returned to tell us that some army officers had arrived, but that they had gone to a VIP room. Still, it wasn't safe. That was the end of my meeting with the NLD. We finished our meal quickly and in silence.

* * *

One day I was walking along a road leading out of town when several young children on a balcony across the street called out to me, "Hello. I love you! I love YOU!" An old man standing outside his house watched me and laughed. I greeted him in Thai.

"No, no," he responded in English. "Do you speak Chinese?"

"No Chinese, sir. Just English."

He laughed again and clapped me on the shoulder. "OK, we can speak English." He invited me into his house. The front room had a cement floor. Four chairs upholstered in red vinyl faced each other across a coffee table of smoked glass. High on one wall were graduation photos of his three grown children. They were dressed in black gowns with colored ribbons across their chests. Staring and impassive, his photographed children looked as if they had been gift-wrapped.

His name was Mr. Wu, and he was happy to be able to speak English with me. He was jolly by nature and laughed freely. Mr. Wu served me tea.

"I have so few opportunities to speak English," he said. "I always tell my children, 'Don't be shy to speak English.'" Mr. Wu was not shy.

"I am 71 years old. I was born in China, in Yunnan. Yes, I came to Burma when I was 17. I went to the convent school in Lashio for six years. The nuns were from

Italy. They taught us to speak English. But it was so long ago. Now, I cannot speak well."

He was being modest.

"Why did you come to Burma?"

"The Communists came, you know, so we left. My family was Kuomintang, we could not stay there. I never went back to China. My whole life as a man I spent in Burma. My autobiography is very long."

"After school in Lashio, I was to go to Taiwan on a scholarship, but I was the last one in line. No scholarship for me. They told me 'wait until the next year,' but I was young and so impatient. My fate was not yet fulfilled.

"I became a driver. I had a Willys jeep, from the U.S. I drove from Mandalay to Lashio to Kokang. I drove for three years, taking passengers. But that was not good work. I was always driving; I was too unsettled. Because I was young, I could do it, but I wanted to settle down."

Mr. Wu told me how he spent the next three years in Rangoon, studying radio repair ("tubes, not transistors") before returning to Lashio to open his own shop in 1962.

"But my fate is unlucky. The government took everything. They said they would pay me, but they took everything. I was never paid anything. I remember, it was April 7, 1967, they took everything from my shop."

Mr. Wu shook his head and chopped the air with his hands. "It was very cruel. Nobody could take revenge." He was quiet for a moment. "We are obedient."

"What did you do next?"

"I went to Kachin, to the hills. I became a miner. I mined for rubies and jade. Oh, it was very terrible!" He laughed as he said this. "Work was so hard. Often, there was nothing. There was no hope. I was a miner for three years, wandering here and there. I don't know why, my fate is fixed in three years, three years, every time." He laughed again.

"In 1970, I followed Lo Hsin-han to Kengtung." Mr. Wu gave me a sly look, and waited for me to respond.

"I see." Lo Hsin-han is a Kokang Chinese and an important figure in the history of the Shan State opium trade. Indeed, Lo's career is representative of the relationship between insurgency, opium and the Burmese regime in Shan State. Born in Yunnan, Lo started his career in the 1950s as a rebel and opium-trafficker. In 1963 he transferred his allegiance to Rangoon, becoming a leader of a Ka Kwe Ye, a government-sponsored home guard unit. In 1972, U.S. officials identified Lo as "the kingpin of heroin traffic in Asia." In 1973, Lo switched sides again, allying himself with the insurgent Shan State Army. To-



A sign outside Tachilek warns of consequences for drug traffickers. Tachilek is a major transit point for methamphetamines headed for Thailand.

gether, Lo and the SSA offered to sell all of the opium under their control to the U.S. government. The day their offer reached the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, Lo was arrested in Thailand and later extradited to Burma. In spite of being sentenced to death, Lo was released by the Burmese in 1980, whereupon he returned to Shan State and established a “people’s militia unit.” His return to prominence as a drug trafficker coincided with the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma in 1989. At this point Lo repaid his debt to the regime by acting as a go-between for Khin Nyunt and Wa leaders, paving the way for cease-fires. Lo is now the chief executive of Asia World Company, Burma’s largest conglomerate.

“And what did you do when you were with Lo Hsin-han?”

“I fixed radios!” Mr. Wu chuckled. “I followed Lo Hsin-han, you know, but I had my own business at the same time. And I met my wife here. She is Shan.” He called to his wife, who was in the back room. No one came. He looked over his shoulder, then went to fetch her, but came back alone. “So shy,” he explained.

“I understand.”

“I have three children. My boy is oldest. Now he works for Hong Pang, you know?” I knew.

Hong Pang is the UWSA front company. They had built the road on which I had traveled the 165 kilometers between Tachilek and Kengtung. In 1925, it took Sao Sai Mongrai, the last prince of Kengtung, eight days

to travel from Kengtung to Tachilek by mule train.¹⁷ Just a few years ago, the trip by car took ten hours. Now, thanks to the new road, it takes half that time. It is rough by most standards but compared to the laterite trails more common to Shan State it is a superhighway. Hong Pang built the road at a cost of US\$60 million when the Burmese government ran out of funds. Now, Hong Pang collects a toll from vehicles using the road. I noticed that a UWSA truck with UZI-toting guards was waved through.

“What does your son do?” I asked.

“He is an accountant. Nothing to do with ‘*ya ma*.’” He used the old term for amphetamines. [Later I was shown a Hong Pang livestock compound that supposedly housed a chicken ranch. No one has ever seen any chickens there, I was told. It was a way of explaining that the facility is an amphetamine factory.]

“Of course. You must be proud.” I found it strange to think of Hong Pang having flesh-and-blood employees. I realized then that I had a cartoon image of Hong Pang, as if it were a corporation run by a James-Bond villain.

“Yes. He is an accountant, a salary man. He has worked two years with Hong Pang Company already.” The son probably sends money to his old man, I thought. He probably paid for that refrigerator in the corner. Only later did I wonder how it operates on four hours’ electricity per day.

“And my daughters. One studied English, the other studies botany.”

“It seems that life in Kengtung has been good to you and your family,” I said.

“Yes, Kengtung is my home. My wife was born here. My children were born here. But it has changed. Now there are three groups here.” Mr. Wu stopped himself. “No, I cannot say. Better not to say.” I pressed him a little, anxious to hear from him what was really going on in this sleepy town. He stood firm. “It is better if I don’t say.” Mr. Wu had reached the limits of what he could share with this foreign stranger.

“The Chinese say, ‘Don’t look up. You will feel downcast. Don’t look down. You will feel self-satisfied. Just look forward.’” Both arms shot out in front him. “Yes, we always say that.”

Just look forward. It was a sound formula for survival in a dictatorship.

When I left, Mr. Wu shook my hand and asked me to visit again. The children across the street took up their chant once more as I walked away: “I love you! I love you!” □

¹⁷ Sao Saimong Mangrai, *The Shan States and the British Annexation*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1965, p. 300.



*(Above) Just outside of Tachilek stands the Hong Pang toll gate. It's a modern structure, with automated gates and digital monitors that display the toll fare.
(Right) "Hong Pang Sign"*



Fellows and their Activities

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Alexander Brenner (June 2002 - 2004) • **EAST ASIA**

A linguist who has worked as a French-language instructor with the Rassias Foundation at Dartmouth College and also has proficient Mandarin and Spanish, upper-intermediate Italian, conversational German and Portuguese, and beginning Cantonese, Alex received a B.A. in History from Yale in 1998 and has just completed a Master's degree in China Studies and International Economics at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He is preparing for his two-year ICWA fellowship in China with four months of intensive Mandarin-language study in Beijing. His fellowship will focus on the impact of a new government and a new membership in the World Trade Organization on Chinese citizens, institutions and regions both inside and far from the capital.

Martha Farnelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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