

Sao Sanda, *The Moon Princess - Memories of the Shan States*. Bangkok, River Books, 2008, 310 pp., 162 b/w illustrations, paperback, ISBN 978 974 9863 37 4

*The Moon Princess* is a poignant story told by Sao Sanda, a Shan princess who grew up in the principality of Yawngwhe where her father was the ruling prince (*saopha*). The history of her family can be traced back over six hundred years, and the history of the Shan for at least two centuries longer. The Shan call themselves Tai as they are ethnically and linguistically closer to the Thai, the Lao and Dai than to the Burmese, who are said to have given them the name Shan. As Sao Sanda argues, the Tai of the Shan States are not one of numerous 'tribes', as described by outsiders, but a settled people with a unique culture, its roots in Theravada Buddhism, spirit religion (animism), and wetland rice cultivation. Their language is part of the Tai linguistic group, they have distinctive scripts, a body of literature and performing arts, and classifiable arts and crafts. Now part of the Union of Burma (Myanmar), the people continue to struggle for independence from the Burmese military dictatorship.

This book complements a growing body of knowledge about the Shan States and Sao Sanda presents the world of her childhood with a light touch. She inhabited a land where tigers and panthers roamed the forests, and she was free to wander through the teak halls of

the royal palace, to observe the comings and goings of courtiers, British colonial officials, and villagers with petitions, all seeking an audience with her father. Among the many visitors to the palace in the 1930s were Colonel Green of the Burma Rifles, and Mrs Green, later to leave their important collection of Shan and Burmese artefacts to Brighton Museum on the south coast of England.

Sao Sanda lived in a polygamous household with complex, and sometimes tense relationships. The apartments in the southern wing of the palace were described as the 'women's domain' where she was pampered by her female relatives. There they prepared for the numerous Buddhist festivals held throughout the year, sewing silk robes for the Buddha images and concocting delicious food dishes served on emerald green banana leaves. The festivals, some of them involving colourful barges rowed across Inle Lake, gave an opportunity to enjoy theatrical performances and puppet shows, to visit medicine men with their exotic potions, and for some, to join the gaming tables.

This world changed dramatically in 1942 when Japan entered the Second World War and occupied the Shan States. Sao Sanda and some of her relatives took refuge in the villages near Inle Lake and her father trod a difficult path in dealing with the Japanese. As the Allies fought back, bombs fell on Yawngwhe and she, like millions of people around the world, took to the bomb shelters. With peace came the winding

down of the British Empire, the signing of the Panglong Agreement in 1947, the creation of the Union of Burma, and the controversial Clause 201 of the Constitution that gave the Shan the right to secede after ten years. It is the failure to implement the promises of Clause 201 that remains at the centre of most protest meetings by the Shan in exile.

In 1947 Sao Sanda left Yawngwhe to complete her education in England, first at school and then at Girton College, Cambridge. As the daughter of the first President of Burma, she led a charmed life with other Burmese and Shan students of her class, and with distinguished western Buddhists, including her future husband Peter, with whom she had many exciting adventures. They travelled through Laos in the 1950s at a time when few people were prepared to make such unpredictable journeys, and they made an epic trip by Land Rover from England via Europe and the Middle East to India and on to Nepal. Obviously intending to spend the rest of their lives in Southeast Asia, they returned to Rangoon and from there made visits to the Yawngwhe palace to be reunited with members of the family. Sao Sanda worked as a newsreader for the Burma Broadcasting Service but, as she admits, she misjudged the severity of political and economic tensions in Burma. Included in the struggle were Shan politicians, agitating for stronger representation and financial aid. For Sao Sanda and her husband, life continued, with interesting work and a busy social life, but eventually it became obvious

that tensions were reaching breaking point.

In March 1962 Sao Sanda was working in Laos when news reached her that her father had been taken into custody by the Burmese regime. Her brother Myee Myee was killed when troops stormed the palace. The first president of Burma ended up in the infamous Insein prison where he died in mysterious circumstances. Other Shan princes were also detained or disappeared, their relatives never learning the circumstances of their arrest and capture. The author chooses to end her life story with these tragic events, although there are brief glimpses of later adventures in Laos, Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong and Oman. The book has a final section reflecting on Burmese politics since 1947. Sao Sanda discusses the policies that have led to centralised government, strictly controlled by the Burmese military with neglect of the Shan and other non-Burman peoples. This includes the suppression of their language and culture. The plight of her family is typical of so many Shan families, some remaining but many seeking a new life overseas.

The early part of this book is an interesting historical record of the Shan States, well illustrated with black and white photographs. Sao Sanda recalls wild animals roaming the forests, even though their body parts were sought for local medicines and charms. Now the forest trees have been felled and, as villagers will tell you, the roar of the tiger is no longer heard. Many of

the Shan palaces belonging to her relatives have been destroyed or are in poor repair although the Yawngwhe palace has survived and is now a museum. Tourists flock to see the Buddhist festivals around Inle Lake that were part of her childhood and this book provides excellent background reading for those interested in a fascinating people and culture, suppressed in the current political climate.

Susan Conway

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