

Obituary

A singular spirit

Former Shan queen known throughout Burma as the fearless Mahadevi, Chao-nang Hearn Hkam recently passed away in exile in Canada. But her fighting spirit still lives on

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One of General Ne Win's greatest adversaries has passed on. Chao-nang Hearn Hkam outlived the Burmese dictator — who was responsible for the deaths of her husband and son — by 44 days. But it's doubtful she would have counted this a victory.

More likely, she would have just shrugged and said: "Everyone dies; you can't say when or why."

Known throughout Burma simply as "The Mahadevi", Chao-nang Hearn Hkam was the most fearless woman I ever met. As a leader of the Shan State Army, she had to be.

Her stubborn determination was born in the bone. Throughout her life, she resisted the best attempts of others to control her destiny — beginning with her own family, the rulers of North Hsenwi, a princely state nestled in the Shan hills of northeastern Burma.

As a modern young woman of 1920s, she blithely assumed she would go to university and pursue a career. Little did she understand that this wasn't what was expected of a Shan princess. Her family's career choice for her was marriage to an influential Shan prince and political leader, Chaofa Shwe Thaike of Yawngghwe. She spent one year refusing the arrangement. But when it became clear to her that this was her fate, she met it on her own terms. "I will sit on that throne beside you," she told her new husband when she arrived at Yawngghwe palace. "I didn't come here to be your concubine."

Within one year she was elevated to the position of Mahadevi, or Chief Queen. She took the job seriously, learning everything she could about the running of a state and forcing her husband's ministers to include her in their discussions as an equal. If there was one thing the Mahadevi understood in life, it was the value of fighting for equality and dignity.

This is why she felt uneasy when her husband helped lead Shan State into the Union of Burma in 1947. When the new country was created, her husband was awarded the Presidency. She wondered what would become of this new "marriage". As First Lady and, later, as a Member of Parliament, she looked Burma's leaders straight in the eye and delivered the same message she'd given her husband: "Shan State will sit on that throne beside you."

While her husband was a forward-thinking federalist, the Mahadevi was from the "old school", stubbornly proud of her heritage and suspicious of Burma. Her voice had political value, though, striking a chord with the people even as it made the male politicians squirm in their seats. "I was never afraid. I don't know why," she remembered years later.

She criticised both Shan and Burmese leaders for not doing enough for Shan autonomy within the Union. From time to time, this included giving General Ne Win of the Burma Army a good dressing-down. Speaking from a position of power and privilege, she seldom worried about the consequences.

Then on March 2, 1962, she lost her husband, her son Myee, and her political standing in a single, sudden hail of gunfire. One year after General Ne Win's coup d'état, the Mahadevi crossed to Thailand with just the clothes on her back and a fierce determination to win back Shan State from the military dictatorship. "I didn't know if we could win, but at least we could make some trouble," she told me many years later, remembering her role in the founding of the Shan State Army (SSA).

She warned the young soldiers not to waste ammunition on their adversaries. "One bullet, one man," was her advice.

It was a frustrating time. China, the United States and various warlords vied for control of rebel armies. A much larger game was afoot in the Golden Triangle and the Mahadevi's relatively small army was relegated to the margins. As chairperson of the SSA's War Council, she spent the next five years seeking outside help that never arrived.

Not everyone agreed with the Mahadevi's querulous, old-world style, which sometimes seemed out of step with the hotbed of new ideologies that clashed in the 1960s. Still, no one could deny that she gave everything she could to the cause. In the end, she led her



Chao-nang Hearn Hkam in her wedding dress.

people into the struggle but was unable to lead them out.

When I met her, the Mahadevi was living in exile in Canada, no longer directly associated with the SSA but still an active supporter of Shan freedom. I was amazed by her lack of bitterness despite a lifetime of conflict. She had plenty of reasons to feel despair. The memory of people left behind, with no chance to say goodbye, haunted her.

The Burmese junta dangled in front of her a standing invitation to return but she refused, saying she would go back to Burma when it was free or not at all. This took incredible strength of character. The one thing she truly longed for was to return to her homeland.

In these times, the Dhamma sustained her. Although remembered mainly for her tough brand of politics, the Mahadevi had a deeply religious side. In 1953 she and her husband became followers of the great monk and teacher Webu Sayadaw. His lessons later helped her understand the disappointments and obstacles she faced during her lifetime.

"Everyone is human, full of success one minute, down the next. We are all mortal and even Ne Win must die one day," is how she summed up her experiences.

I knew the Mahadevi for just 10 of her 86 years. Our friendship was ruled by many unexpected twists of fate. The latest found me in Chiang Mai — the scene of her most rebellious years — while she passed away in Canada.

Her struggle with recurring cancer was mercifully brief, but still it was hard news. She died on January 17. At first I was upset to be so far away. As it turned out, Chiang Mai was the right place to be. Shortly after learning the news, by chance I ran into some Shan youth.

"I want to be a journalist when Shan State is free," one young woman said with great determination. I recognised that special tone of voice and felt great comfort. The Mahadevi's spirit remained in action.

In 2003, the SSA has had so many incarnations that it bears little resemblance to the small force the Mahadevi founded 39 years ago this February. The quest for freedom and democracy in Shan State has followed many new avenues since.

The next generation, including the Mahadevi's five surviving children — Tiger, Tzang, Harn, Ying Sita and Leun — are working toward peaceful negotiation within a free Burma.

Today's activists come from all ethnic nationalities. They are busy writing constitutional clauses, examining governing structures, planning for democracy.

There's still a long road ahead — but I've never known any Shan person to give up.

In her final hours, the Mahadevi's family invited monks to her bedside to receive donations from her. Her youngest daughter helped hold her hands to the donations, then placed them together in prayer. I have no doubt Chao-nang Hearn Hkam faced the onward journey with a small shrug of her shoulders and a great sense of peace.

◆ Patricia Elliott is the author of *The White Umbrella, a biography of Chao-nang Hearn Hkam* (Post Books, 1999).