Bangkok Post

OUTLOOK

Vol. L No. 77

SECTION • THREE

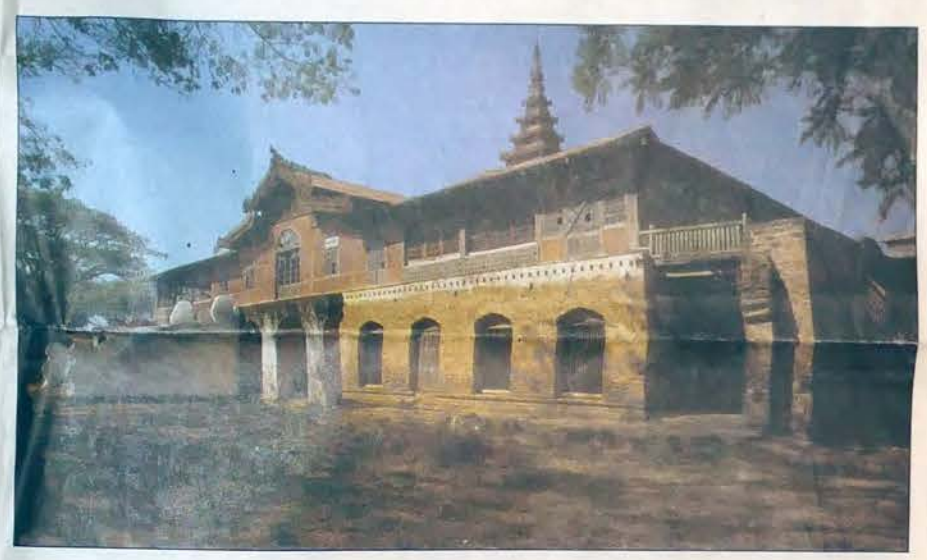
Saturday March 18, 1995

Still waters run deep

Once a princess, later an armed rebel, Sao Yawnghwe has always been a progressive who sought to bring political enlightenment to her people. Today, half a world away, she looks sadly at her homeland, where all reminders of her contributions to democracy have been officially erased. PATRICIA ELLIOTT reports. Pictures by DON JEDLIC.

LEFT
A rare picture of Yawnghwe Mahadevi.

BELOW RIGHT:
A quiet corner of the palace.



RIGHT
Now a museum, the forlorn Yawnghwe Palace witnessed the tumultuous days of the Shan royalty.

If the Burmese junta's much-touted Visit Myanmar '96 campaign is successful, next year thousands of foreign visitors will descend on Inle Lake.

The lake's calm, narrow waters stretch like satin between two smoke-blue spurs of the southern Shan plateau. At its head is Yawnghwe, a languid little town where optimistic tourism authorities have called for a doubling of hotel rooms, from 200 to 400, within the year.

The town features a crumbling old museum set in a large garden of tamarind and flowering *paduak* trees. A few squatters have taken over the museum's outbuildings. Graffiti adorn some of the walls. The main entrance is dusty, dark, and junk-strewn. Upstairs, attendants stand guard over a display of fading, curled photographs.

There are few clues to this building's history and purpose. Much of the area's true history rests in the memory of a 79-year-old woman who lives in a nondescript city on the vast North American plains. It is a cold, windswept place far removed from the coconut groves and hyacinth-choked canals of Inle.

The woman introduces herself as Sao Yawnghwe and adds, "Just call me Sao." On the surface, a simple, informal introduction, but the true meaning is: "I am a princess of Yawnghwe. Just call me princess." Thais would call her *chao* or *chao nang*.

She lives alone, her five children scattered across the continent. Her days are spent reading about history and Buddhism. She cooks her own meals in a tiny kitchen. Sometimes in the evening she joins her neighbours for a friendly card game.

Although thin and often ill, she still moves and talks with the inborn quickness of a natural leader. Sao Yawnghwe was no coddled, spoiled princess: once she was a member of the Burmese parliament and, later, the leader of a rebel army.

She was born on May 27, 1916 in North Hsenwi, a large Tai princedom in northern Shan State. Her father was a famous rebel chieftain who, through hard fighting and careful negotiations with the British colonialists, managed to take the throne as one of 33 independent rulers of mountainous Shan State.

The young Hsenwi princess attended convent schools in the hill stations of Maymyo and Kalaw. She loved her studies and vowed to be a "modern girl" who would somehow escape the chains of feudal marriage. But in 1937, at age 22, she was given in marriage to Sao Shwe Thaike, the powerful ruler of Yawnghwe in southern Shan State.

Forty-one-year-old Sao Shwe Thaike had had two previous wives, commoners who had both died of tuberculosis. Rumour held this as a sign that only a true princess could live under the seven-tiered roof of Yawnghwe Palace. Whatever the case, the Yawnghwe prince was impressed by his new wife's educated, confident manner. One year later she was elevated to the status of *mahadevi*, or Chief Queen.

For the first few years of marriage, the mahadevi settled into the traditional life of a Tai ruling family. Some of this life may be glimpsed by today's visitors to the Yawnghwe museum. The museum is in fact the family's *haw*, or royal residence.

Construction of the *haw* was completed in the late 1920s. It is a rambling structure built in the Mandalay tradition with hardwood from the *injin* tree.

Sao recalls long days spent in her royal apartment, reading or simply gazing from her second-storey window. At first she felt isolated and defenceless amid the prince's extended family. "But it wasn't so boring you would die," she laughs.

The royal family, which grew to include two minor wives and twelve children, occupied three attached apartments, each topped by a small altar room for private worship. The children loved to sneak out the altar room windows and scramble across the royal rooftops.

The family's living quarters opened onto the first of three massive halls. The inner hall, today identified in English as "the Inner Levee Hall", is where the palace's main Buddha images were housed. It was accessible only to immediate family members.

The middle hall is where the prince instructed his ministers on the administration of the state. When delivering official pronouncements he sat on a ceremonial gilt throne.

The outer hall, huge and sunlit, is where the prince's subjects came to pay homage twice yearly, in April and November. On these ceremonial occasions the Buddhist clergy ascended to the hall via a decorative eastern staircase known as the Dragon Stairs.

Ordinary people used a simpler stairway on the hall's north side. Inside, they knelt before the prince and his mahadevi, who sat side-by-side on gilt divans. The hall's impressive throne was reserved for the palace nat, or guardian spirit.

The prince's subjects paid taxes to the state and were also expected to bring offerings to the Homage Ceremonies. In return they expected the ruler to provide education, health care, justice, roads, and other basics. Princes who ruled poorly faced endless popular rebellions and court intrigues.

Today the great outer hall stands eerily quiet. Once it rang with the laughter of the royal children, who irreverently used the place as their favourite playroom. They raced each other from pillar to pillar and clapped their hands at the bottom of the Dragon Stairs to hear the echo.

Beneath them, in the main floor offices, the prince and his officials busied themselves with the daily tasks of government. The administration of Yawnghwe principality was, for the most part, fair and progressive, according to Sao. It was also peaceful.

"If we had one murder a year, it was rare," the former mahadevi says. Gradually, the lonely princess involved herself in state affairs, becoming a respected voice for Tai unity.

During World War II, however, the main floor offices became the domain of Japanese soldiers.

Prior to the war, the prince had served as a British Army officer. "The British were paramount," explains Sao. Like the Mandalay kings of old, their empire seemed indestructible. But, just like the Mandalay kings, the British melted away almost overnight in early 1942.

Sao Shwe Thaike gathered his family and fled to a maze of canals and floating gardens that ring Inle Lake. They lived for a time among the Intha fishermen, who are famous for their ability to swiftly propel small boats by hooking one leg around a single oar.

A ruler cannot remain in hiding forever, though. Eventually Sao Shwe Thaike presented himself to the Japanese officers, who were under orders to maintain a semblance of traditional government in Shan State. The family returned to the *haw*, where Sao remembers spending fear-filled days and nights on the second floor listening to the comings and goings of the Japanese soldiers below them.

During that time, Sao carefully hid a phonograph recording of *God Save the Queen*. The record was her eldest son Tiger's favourite. When the stubborn five-year-old finally found his record and put it on the gramophone, the entire family flew into a panic. Despite their worries, the family survived three years of Japanese occupation intact.

The war signalled the end of a way of life, though. The British returned in 1945, but without a plan or commitment to Shan State. In February 1947, Shan leaders gathered at Panglong, where they decided to throw their lot in with the emerging independent Union of Burma.

The date of signing, February 12, is still celebrated as Union Day, and replicas of Panglong's commemorative Unity Monument can be seen throughout Burma. Ironically, the real Unity Monument is off-limits to tourists because it lies in a so-called "black area" of continued civil war.

In the old days, too, unity was often just a surface concept. An-

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The royal tombs of Mahadevi's husband and his first wife and child. No one knows if she can join this restplace given her political stigma.

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xious to prove that their new country was multi-ethnic, in 1948 the Burmese selected Sao Shwe Thaike as president, a largely ceremonial position.

That year the family packed their bags for a new life in Rangoon. There Sao Yawnghwe served as the First Lady and later as a member of parliament for her birthplace, Hsenwi. Husband and wife became outspoken proponents of the new democracy. The princes of Shan State gave up their traditional powers, although many went on to serve admirably in civilian positions.

When the fledgling democracy crumbled on March 2, 1962, Sao Shwe Thaike was a major target. The Burma Army surrounded the family's Rangoon home and opened fire, killing Sao's third-eldest son, Sao Myee. The president was hauled off to jail, where he died on November 21. His remains were taken to Yawnghwe to rest beside those of his son and his first wife.

One year later Sao gathered her children and fled to Thailand. "I don't know why, but I was never afraid," she says. Operating from Chiang Mai the exiled queen worked with her second son, Tzang, to form a rebel army.

The Shan State Army (SSA), however, was soon swallowed into a complex netherworld of opium smugglers and Cold War intrigues. Alliances were made, deals were cut, and, in the end, Sao lost control of her army. She left to join eldest son Tiger overseas.

It is her role as rebel leader which has ensured Sao's erasure from official Burmese history. While her husband is still recognised as a founder of modern Burma, Sao's own considerable contribution is ignored. Photographs in the palace-turned-museum feature the prince's first wife who died of TB.

The only official reference to Sao is contained in a book called *The Conspiracy of Treasonous Minions within Myanmar Naing-Ngan and Traitorous Cohorts Abroad* (SLORC, 1989). The book describes her as a traitor who "cajoled" students to revolt and organised "civil servants and police and even bandits and thieves" to fight against the government.

Today Sao Yawnghwe still hopes for a peaceful, free homeland. Although she and her children live in scattered exile, they are united in their attempts to restore democracy to Burma. Sadly, with each passing year it seems increasingly unlikely that she herself will see this dream fulfilled.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, night falls on Yawnghwe. The *haw's* new guardians turn up their stereo to scare away the ghosts of the past, echoing their government's fear that Sao's dream still haunts the quiet waters of Inle Lake.