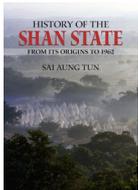


Sai Aung Tun: History of the Shan State from its Origins to 1962

Written by Reinhard Hohler
Monday, 11 July 2011 15:09

Published by Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai 2009, 655 pages.
A Book Review by Reinhard Hohler, Chiang Mai (24.12.2008)

The voluminous work about the important and - unless now - much neglected "History of the Shan State from its Origins to 1962" written by Professor emeritus Sai Aung Tun was made possible only after obtaining a research grant by the Toyota Foundation. Collecting the published materials in libraries, such as the Yangon University, British Library in London and Cambridge University, Sai Aung Tun also made an in-country research trip within the Union of Myanmar, visiting places like Taunggyi, Lashio, Muse, Nam Hkam, Mong Mit, Keng Tung and other places of historical importance. The book, showing a Buddhist pagoda field at the foot of the cave in Pindaya on the front cover, is now the ultimate reference work for the Shan State within the Union of Myanmar and a comprehensive addition to any library collection on Southeast Asia and beyond.



Sai Aung Tun was born in 1932 and is a native of Hsipaw in Shan State. Appointed as tutor in the History Department of Yangon University in 1957, he was sent to the US University of Denver, Colorado to obtain a Master of Arts degree in International Relations. Later, he was posted to "history departments" in Taunggyi, Mandalay and Magwe. From 1970 to 1980, he was the principal of Myitkyina College of Kachin State. From 1980 to 1985, he was recalled to Yangon and appointed principal of the Institute of Foreign Languages at Yangon University. Since 1992, Sai Aung Tun is the appointed vice-chairman of the Myanmar Historical Commission and has conducted PhD and MA classes at the University of Mandalay-Yangon until the present.

The book's contents are divided into an introductory preface, twenty chapters, appendixes, notes, glossary, bibliography, and indexes of persons and places. Also, there are 22 maps and 57 illustrations, including 3 illustrations within the appendixes. The maps 1-8 are in colour and come in a separated part of the book (see between pages 24-25). These maps were realised in 2005 by Mr. Guy Lubeigt and Carole Duval from the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), except Map 3 that shows the probable origin of all the Tai people in China to which the Shan people belong to.

In Chapter 1, Sai Aung Tun tries to explain "Who are the Shan?" and "Where was their early

home?" To facilitate discussion, the author gives the time period of three thousand years at least for the Shan – calling themselves Tai Yai etc. - to march down to present-day Myanmar from their original home in China. These ethnic Tai peoples were always on the move to practice wet-rice cultivation. It is believed that the Shan entered present-day Myanmar beginning in the first century AD or even before that time.

That the Nan-chao Kingdom (7th-13th centuries) centred at Dali in China's Yunnan Province was a creation of a branch of the Tai peoples is nowadays very controversial and reflects an old theory. The new theory is that Tibeto-Burman peoples created Nan-chao instead. But when we come to the Mong Mao Kingdom, we arrive on firmer ground with a list of 45 kings, which ruled from 568 to the beginning of the 17th century (see Appendix 1).

Now, in order to make an easy study of the Shan people in Myanmar, they are classified into five sections:

Shan of the Northwest part (Tai Leng and Hkamti), Northeast part (Tai Nua or Dehong), Eastern part (Tai Yai, Tai Hkun, Tai Lue, and Tai Yun among others), Southeast part (Kayah State Tai Yai) as well as Shan of the central and lower part of Myanmar. All these sub-groups have own alphabets and scripts like the Tai groups in Viet Nam, Lao PDR and Thailand.

In Chapter 2, Shan State is localised accordingly. Shan State proper forms the eastern portion of the present Union of Myanmar and consists of 52 townships. Bounded by Kachin State on the north, People's Republic of China on the Northeast, Lao PDR and the Mekong River on the East, Thailand on the Southeast, Kayah State on the South, and the Mandalay Division with its "Ruby Mines" area on the Northwest. It is the wild Salween River (Nam Khone in Shan), which separates the mountainous Shan Plateau into two parts, flowing from North to South and emptying itself into the Gulf of Martaban, a part of the Indian Ocean. A remarkable tourist destination is Nong Ang La or Inle Lake with its floating island gardens.

Interesting to note is that Shan State was originally divided into some 46 different "feudal" states, what really explains the political chaos that nowadays exists, since the British have conquered the country in 1885 under their principle of divide and rule. The feudal system in the past acknowledged the rule of a "saohpa" in his state ("mong"), who descended from the sky and had the right to rule the farming subjects. This administration was organised upon the "ban-mong" system, similar to the one that had been practised among the Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, and Tai Khao in the northern part of Viet Nam.

Also, the central organ of government was located in the palace called "haw" in Shan, while the economic system was based upon a rural-agricultural "wet rice" cultivation ("na"). This system involved preparing the seedlings, transplanting, winnowing, broadcasting, manure and guarding against pests and disease. Depending on the topography of hills and mountains, shifting cultivation ("hai") was practised with the loss of flora and fauna. Furthermore, plantation and

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garden crops abound, such as cotton, “taung” leaves, tobacco, sesame, groundnut, tangerine, coconut, banana, tea, ginger, mustard, coffee, betel, and indigo gram among others. Only since the 1980s, the state authorities provided farmers with a modern irrigation system, including dams and canals.

The author also gives a very helpful insight into forest products, such as teak, pine, paper mulberry, silk-cotton tree, bamboo and many other plants. A list of some 33 animals of the forest is mentioned together with 54 different birds. Especially the elephant (“tsang”) is outstanding and mainly used to exploit the forest (pages 69-72). Livestock farming is carried on quite extensively, including pack animals, while mineral resources abound, such as coal, gold, silver, lead, iron, copper, salt, and pottery clays. Gemstones like rubies, sapphires, jade and amber are extracted in commercial style and together with the blooming arts and industries, such as “lacquer” work, make the Union of Myanmar one of the richest countries in the world.

Chapter 3 highlights the Shan hegemony in Upper Myanmar after the fall of Bagan (1044-1287) through the Mongol invasion with the successful establishment of the three historical cities of Pinya, Sagaing and Ava (“Inwa”) from 1287 to 1555. It also tells the story of the Shan King Wareru (since 1287) of Lower Myanmar, who contributed the law book “Wareru Dhammathat” to the development of ancient Mon-Myanmar laws. After the decay of the Shan dynasties, Myanmar was unified under King Bayinnaung, who became the Burmese “hero” even until nowadays under the Military Government of the Union of Myanmar.

To make a long story short, the following 17 chapters become more and more political, starting with the political situation before the British occupation and ending with the British administration in the Shan States (Chapters 4-9). After the Japanese conquest of Burma and the Shan States, it came to the first multinational political conference at “Pang Long” in 1946 and second one in 1947 with its historic agreement (Chapters 10-13).

Finally, the author arrives at the Kuomintang incursion into Shan States and the creation of eastern Shan State with the transfer of feudal power to the Shan State Government from 1948 onwards, when the independent Republic of the Union of Burma was established (Chapters 14-16). Lastly, there came a proposal for revising the constitution and the all states conference in Taunggy under Prime Minister U Nu in 1961, where the federal principle was discussed. But all the hope for a resolution faded away with the coming of the coup d’etat under General Ne Win on March 1, 1962 (see Chapters 17-20).

In 2009, generals still rule the country. Why General Than Shwe is not becoming a king, I wonder?

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The very useful bibliography at the end of the book should encourage scholars and students alike to dig even deeper into this important, so far neglected history of the Shan State within the present-day Union of Myanmar. Very special thanks should go to Ms. Trasvin Jittidecharak, Publisher of Silkworm Books, for her active help to publish this book.

Reinhard Hohler was a long-term student of Armenian Professor Emanuel Sarkisyanz at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, who is the “Nestor” and expert world wide on history and politics of Burma/Myanmar. The professor’s magisterial thesis was “Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution” (s-Gravenhage 1965).

Sai Aung Tun turned 80 yesterday, 10 July 2011 – Editor