



BEFORE THEY WERE MIGRANTS

A Brief History of Shan State
and the Journeys to Thailand

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First edition

To Jao Yod Serk, Sai Murng and Yawdmuang and my many
other Shan heroes.

Foreword

A word can become so familiar that we stop asking what it leaves out. Migrant is such a word. It tells us that someone has moved. It tells us very little about the life that came before the journey.

This book begins with that earlier life.

I wanted to write a short history that a reader could enter without first becoming a historian. Its purpose is to bring the journeys from Shan State to Thailand into clearer view: the homes people belonged to, the powers that shaped their choices, and the long sequence of events behind a crossing that may take only a moment to record.

For Thai readers, I hope these pages offer another way of looking at neighbours whose histories may be less familiar than their presence. For readers elsewhere, I hope they make a distant place more understandable. A person encountered at work, in a market or across a border brings a past that cannot be read from a document or an accent.

My concern for Shan people is part of the reason for writing. It also makes care with evidence essential. Affection cannot settle a disputed fact. A moving account still needs its context, and a familiar explanation may deserve another question. Throughout this book, references allow readers to follow the account beyond these pages. Where the research remains incomplete, the notes say so.

Nor can one short book contain every life in Shan State. Its communities differ, and people who share a language or a homeland need not share the same politics, experience or hope. I have tried to leave room for those differences. Understanding suffering should help us see people more fully, including the choices they make and the work they do for themselves and for one another.

The title asks us to pause before a label becomes the whole story. Before a border crossing, there was a place called home. There were relationships, responsibilities and ordinary plans. Those things matter when we try to understand why someone leaves, why someone stays, and what beginning again may require.

Some of the history ahead is painful. I have nevertheless wanted this book to leave space for hope. A future is also shaped in classrooms,

households, conversations and the steady effort of making a living. The reader does not need to agree with every argument to recognise the value of those efforts.

I hope you finish these pages with a few better questions, a clearer sense of the past, and a little more patience for the person whose story you do not yet know.

Khun Luang Yod

A note on sources

This illustrated history follows roughly two centuries of history, beginning around 1820, to explain how political power, displacement and livelihood loss shaped migration from Shan State to Thailand. It is written for general readers, with special attention to Thai readers. It is published under the pen name Khun Luang Yod.

This is a concise narrative drawn from the sources described at the end of the book. The wider five-language academic review remains incomplete, and this edition should not be read as the final word on the history. Further verified regional scholarship and documented lives can deepen the account.

The research cutoff is 10 September 2026. Recent reports are dated and attributed. The newest local allegations have not been independently verified for this manuscript. Statements about older Thai employment arrangements describe their historical period; they do not establish present eligibility or provide instructions for an individual legal case.

No dialogue, private thoughts or composite witnesses have been invented. Named people appear through published sources. Names used by those sources are retained; they have not been independently identified. No new interviews have been conducted for this draft.

Thai and Chinese original-language scholarship has contributed to the first research pass. The Shan-language material directly examined is chiefly recent local journalism, alongside bibliographic leads. Burmese material now also includes selected passages from Kyaw Win's historical essay on the federal debate. Important historical monographs and manuscripts in those languages remain unread. Consequential Shan and Burmese readings require review by fluent specialists before publication. The source register states exactly what was accessed.

Historical constitutional texts were examined in online transcriptions, which should be checked against authoritative facsimiles for a final edition. Sovereignty, autonomy, household land rights and migration status are treated as distinct questions. No author's credibility is determined by nationality alone.

Small linked source numbers lead to the source register. Its entries distinguish original text, translated text, reviews and unread catalog records. The image captions link to the original image pages and licences. All four photographs are non-generated and reproduced without cropping. The historical map is a scan of an actual 1890 publication; two new maps were drawn from geographic data.

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Shan State in its regional setting



Modern orientation map. Shan boundary represents 2019, not military control.
Data: Natural Earth (public domain); geoBoundaries / Myanmar Analytics Project (CC BY 4.0).

Map 1. A modern orientation map. The shaded administrative boundary represents 2019; it does not show historical sovereignty or current military control.

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Prologue

Before the label

Nang Noom Mai Seng was a legally registered Shan worker when a construction accident in Chiang Mai left her paralysed from the waist down on 4 December 2006. Registration had allowed her to work. It did not settle the argument over her compensation. Officials treated her temporary documents as insufficient for direct access to the Workmen's Compensation Fund. In November 2007, Thailand's National Human Rights Commission found that the exclusion was discriminatory. Human Rights Watch later documented the case in a report researched with migrant support organisations in Thailand.²⁸

Her story presents a question that reaches beyond the building site. How can someone be sufficiently recognised to work and insufficiently recognised when the work causes injury?

A history of migration has to make room for that question. It also has to go back further than the work permit. A document issued in Thailand cannot tell us everything about the place a worker came from, the circumstances of departure, or the family arrangements that made the journey possible. It records the part of a life that a particular authority needs to administer.

This book begins where that record becomes too narrow.

Shan State lies within the internationally recognised borders of Myanmar. That geographical statement is straightforward. The history behind it is much less so. The territory brings together communities with different languages, local histories and political experiences. Earlier rulers governed through arrangements that changed over time. Colonial rule altered those arrangements. Independence brought negotiations about the terms of a new Union. Military power later closed political possibilities that many people had hoped to keep open.

These changes did not remain inside meeting rooms. They affected who could tax a village, move an army through its fields, recruit its young people, recognise its officials, or decide that its inhabitants must leave. A history of constitutions and a history of migration meet at the point where political power changes the practical conditions of home.

The word migrant usually enters the story late. By the time a person is described that way, decisions may already have accumulated over years. A household may have lost a harvest, taken on debt, sent one member ahead, tried to return, or waited for news of a relative. These are possibilities to investigate in an individual life, rather than a biography to assign to every Shan worker. Their importance is that a border crossing can be the consequence of a long process, even when the crossing itself takes very little time.

The argument here is therefore about sequence. To understand a journey, we need to understand the options available before it began. To understand a wage, we may need to understand what happened to a field. To understand a missing document, we may need to ask which authority could issue it and whether approaching that authority was safe.

None of this makes every journey identical. People also move because they want a different job, an education, a marriage, a more interesting life. Ambition belongs in this history alongside fear. A person does not cease to have suffered coercion because they also hope to prosper. Nor must every Shan person establish a history of persecution before deserving fair treatment at work.

For Thai readers, there is another reason to look back. The history on the other side of the border is entangled with the history of northern Thailand. Older connections of language, religion, trade and settlement complicate a picture in which two sealed national worlds suddenly meet when someone arrives to seek employment. Yet cultural connection does not erase the border or automatically confer citizenship. It gives us a reason to understand our neighbours more accurately.

Care over such distinctions is part of telling a persuasive story. Claims about land and belonging carry weight. They can recognise people's losses; they can also erase someone else's presence. Shan history deserves an account strong enough to acknowledge both political injury and the diversity of the country in which it occurred.

The chapters that follow move through roughly two centuries, from the early nineteenth-century regional order to the unsettled circumstances of the 2020s. They spend most time on the changes that help explain migration. They do not attempt a complete history of every principality, armed organisation or government.

The journey begins before a passport, before a labour registration, and before the assumption that someone has come from a place that was always governed as it is today. It begins with a more ordinary fact: people had homes there.

Chapter 1

A place called home

Around 1820 to 1885

The first thing to remove from an early nineteenth-century map is the expectation that it should resemble a modern one. There were rulers, frontiers, obligations and contested places. There were also relationships of authority that cannot be translated neatly into today's categories of province, independent country or private property.

The Shan principalities belonged to that world. A ruler might govern a particular valley and its surrounding settlements while acknowledging a more powerful court. The strength of that relationship could depend on military circumstances, tribute, succession and the personalities involved. Recognition by a distant sovereign and substantial local authority could coexist. Neither should be erased to make the past fit a present political argument.

This is the first difficulty in approaching the history of Shan State. Modern readers want a simple answer to who owned the country. Earlier political arrangements often answer a different question: who could demand what from whom, and with what means of enforcement?

In the terminology used in this book, a *saopha* was a Shan hereditary ruler. The Burmese form *sawbwa* appears frequently in older records. *Mong*, *müang* and related spellings can refer to a town and its associated domain. Their meaning depends on the source and period. A list of towns does not necessarily describe a federation of equal states; a list of tributaries does not necessarily describe districts administered in a uniform way.²⁴

These distinctions matter because two opposite simplifications can produce the same disappearance of ordinary people. One imagines the old principalities as fully independent modern nation-states. Another reduces them to provincial offices of an unchanging central government. Both give the ruler's relationship with another ruler more attention than the conditions under which households lived.

Consider what a cultivated field requires. Water must reach it, work must be organised, tools maintained and the crop protected. Neighbours need workable understandings about access. A family needs to know whether the effort of this season will leave enough for the next. These practical requirements exist under many kinds of sovereignty. They are a useful starting point for thinking about home without pretending that every household followed the same custom.

By about 1820, the regional setting had been shaped by long conflict between Burmese and Siamese power and by relations with China. The next decades added an expanding British presence. The First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–1826 changed the wider balance of power. We should understand that war as part of the surrounding transformation, rather than imagine that a single treaty instantly reorganised life in every Shan valley.³⁰

Holt Hallett, the British engineer whose travels were published in 1890, looked back to an early consequence. He described the mission sent under Dr Richardson in 1829 to encourage overland trade from British-held Maulmain towards northern Siam and the Shan country. A further mission under MacLeod travelled towards China in 1837. The commercial question was already regional: how could traders reach markets beyond the newly acquired coast?²³

Hallett had his own answer. He wanted railways.

His preface is unusually useful because his purpose is so plainly stated. He saw routes through the region as an opportunity for British commerce and a response to French competition. His journey was an exploration of possible railway connections. The hills were places where people lived, but they were also obstacles or corridors in an imperial commercial project.

Reading him requires holding those perspectives together. His observations can preserve details of travel, settlements and cultivation. His classifications and judgments belong to an observer who assumed the desirability of European commercial expansion and missionary activity. He was neither an invisible camera nor the voice of the people he described.

One episode in his account reaches back to Richardson's visit to Maing Loongyee, also called Muang Nium, in 1829. Hallett reports a diminished settlement in a district crossed by armies and raiders. He records the exchange of cattle for enslaved people and other goods. Later accounts in the same chapter describe renewed raids and the difficulty of venturing out without protection. These passages concern a particular borderland, not a representative census of all Shan communities. They nevertheless warn against imagining the precolonial past as a time of universal rural security.²³

The violence in that account also resists an easy national division between aggressors and victims. Hallett identifies different raiding parties and different populations exposed to them. People living along a route could suffer because the route was useful to an army or a trader. Local authority might provide protection, demand labour, participate in coercion, or fail to stop it. A history attentive to the household cannot decide in advance that every familiar ruler was benevolent and every unfamiliar one predatory.

The same chapter describes a town with roads, gardens, monasteries and channels bringing water from upstream. Beside the evidence of coercion stands evidence of organised settlement. This combination is essential. People made homes in a world that could be dangerous. Their attachment to those homes was not made less real by the absence of perfect security.

There is a temptation, when writing about displacement, to describe the lost village as an idyll. That can make a reader care quickly. It can also make the past implausible. A place can contain unequal power, poverty and arguments and still be home. Leaving it can mean losing relationships and capacities that are difficult to replace, even if life there was never easy.

Later colonial descriptions offer further glimpses of the regional economy. Scott and Hardiman's 1900 gazetteer lists tea, livestock, sugar, fruit and other commodities moving through the Shan country. It describes caravans changing routes when tolls or exactions became too burdensome. It also records traders working beyond a single political jurisdiction, including Chinese Muslim caravans and smaller travelling merchants.²⁴

The report celebrates British roads and order. Its praise belongs to a government explaining and justifying its rule. Yet one detail is especially revealing even when read critically: people responded to the cost of authority. When a route became too expensive, they looked for another. Movement could be a response to power as well as to distance.

That does not mean a nineteenth-century trader and a twenty-first-century migrant worker occupied the same legal position. They did not. It means that the relationship between livelihood and mobility has a history longer than the modern labour permit. Roads already connected households to opportunities and dangers beyond their own valley.

Language moved along those connections too. Shan belongs to the Tai language family; linguistic reference works distinguish it from other Tai languages while recording related names and varieties. Relatedness helps explain why Thai readers may recognise words or patterns. It does not make Shan and Thai identical, or guarantee mutual understanding in every setting.¹²

Nor does linguistic kinship establish a political title to territory. A language family can extend across several states. Different languages can coexist within the same town. A person can learn the language of an employer or school without ceasing to belong to another community. The history of language is evidence of connection, not a substitute for the history of government.

The older sources sometimes make this distinction harder to see. European writers used *Shan* broadly in places where modern readers would use more specific names. Hallett's "Shan States" included places now securely within Thailand. His map of the route from Lakon to Zimmé, reproduced later in this book, concerns Lampang and Chiang Mai. The title of his book therefore cannot be treated as a historical boundary of modern Shan State.

There is another warning in the archive. Scott criticised the way Burmese accounts and European interpretations had represented Shan history, but he also doubted the reliability of some chronicles available to him. He observed that local texts could assign primacy to their own principality. His criticism should itself be assessed, especially where he placed European interpretation above local knowledge. Still, the

problem he identified is familiar: histories of origin often carry an argument about who deserves authority.²⁴

An account written for a court has reasons to magnify the court. A nationalist history has reasons to enlarge the continuity of the nation. A colonial gazetteer has reasons to make conquest appear like the arrival of stable administration. None becomes useless for that reason. Each becomes more useful when its purpose is visible.

The country that would become modern Shan State was inhabited by many communities. Their settlement histories were not identical. Neither a Shan ruler's domain nor a later administrative name should make other inhabitants disappear. The gazetteer itself, despite its often objectionable language of race and hierarchy, records a much more varied social landscape than a single colour on a political map can show.

²⁴

That diversity was lived at close range. An early twentieth-century observer, Leslie Milne, described Namkham as a place where traders from India had established themselves, some with Shan wives, and where a small mosque served Muslim residents. The passage belongs to a later period than this chapter's opening. It is useful as a dated glimpse of a connected locality, rather than proof that every nineteenth-century village looked the same.²⁹

Milne also left an account of neighbours helping her when a storm damaged her house. Men came despite the wind; a Shan woman offered shelter and bedding. The scene is reported through Milne's recollection and cannot tell us everything about those neighbours. It does, however, briefly reverse the usual direction of the colonial account. The European visitor was the person in need. Local inhabitants supplied the practical knowledge and assistance that mattered.

By the later nineteenth century, their world was changing. British power had expanded, royal authority in Burma was under pressure, and commercial projects gave new importance to routes through the hills. In 1885, British forces captured Mandalay and removed King Thibaw. The following year brought an annexation proclamation. These were decisive events, but neither the collapse of a court nor the publication of a proclamation explained how authority would actually be established across the Shan country.²⁴

That was the question now opening before its inhabitants. A new imperial ruler claimed the territory. Local rulers still held power, rivalries persisted, and the practical reach of the conqueror had to be built.

For a household, the immediate questions remained concrete. Who would collect the next payment? Which route would be usable? Who could protect the crop? Would the new order recognise an existing arrangement or replace it?

The empire's answers would be written in agreements, surveys and administrative reports. They would also be felt in the way people were governed. The next chapter follows those lines onto the map.*

*To support work alongside Shan communities, visit *Circuit International*.
circuitinternational.org/donate

Fields near Hsipaw



Photograph 1. Fields and a road near Hsipaw, 17 August 2024. Nicoreo, CC BY 4.0.

[Original source](#) · CC BY 4.0

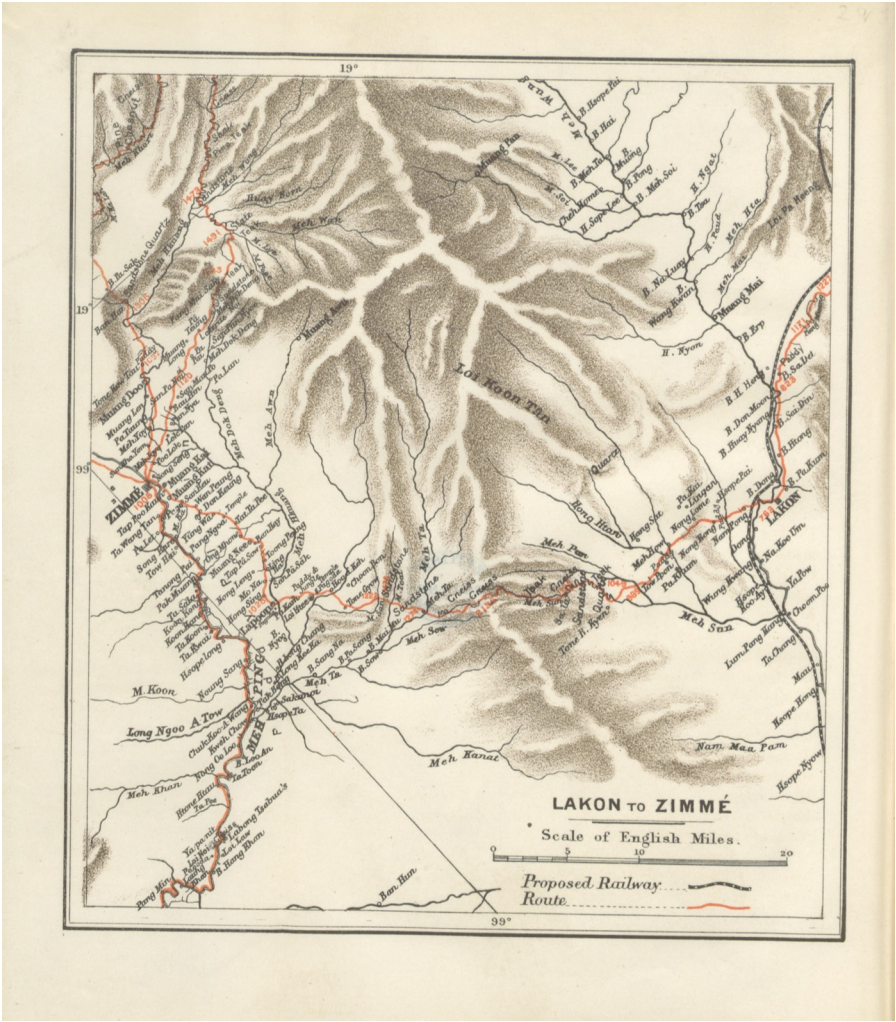
Dokhtawady River at Hsipaw



Photograph 2. The Dokhtawady River at Hsipaw, 1 February 2005. yeowatzup, CC BY 2.0.

[Original source](#) · CC BY 2.0

Lakon to Zimmé



Map 2. Hallett’s 1890 map of the route between Lakon and Zimmé, now Lampang and Chiang Mai in Thailand. The legend separates travel from a proposed railway. The map is not an outline of modern Shan State.

Original source · Public domain historical work; British Library scan marked no known copyright restrictions

Chapter 2

Lines across the hills

1885 to 1945

The map carries two different lines. One marks a route already travelled. The other marks a railway that its maker wanted to exist.

Published in Holt Hallett's 1890 book, the sheet is titled *Lakon to Zimmé*. Its rivers and hills surround the places now known as Lampang and Chiang Mai. The legend distinguishes the traveller's route from a proposed railway. That small word, proposed, changes how we should read the whole image. It records an intention as well as a landscape.²³

Hallett's railway project also reveals the reach of his terminology. His book described "Shan States" on both sides of what became a more firmly administered international frontier. A reader who recognises Zimmé as Chiang Mai can see immediately why the title should not be mistaken for a map of the present Shan State. Regional language and culture crossed boundaries that imperial officials were trying to define more precisely.

The map offers a good way into the changes following 1885. The British capture of Mandalay removed the Burmese monarchy, but the work of imposing a new order continued. Conquest at a capital and control across a territory were different achievements. The British administration's own gazetteer contains long accounts of expeditions, negotiations, appointments and continuing resistance.²⁴

The colonial gazetteer's language is revealing. People resisting British authority appear as rebels or dacoits, a term associated with banditry. Those cooperating could become recognised chiefs or useful officials. Some opponents undoubtedly committed crimes against civilians. But the government's vocabulary also placed political resistance within a story in which imperial authority was the necessary remedy for disorder.

For the Shan principalities, British rule involved a distinctive legal and administrative arrangement. The 1900 gazetteer describes how the Shan States were treated separately from the ordinary application of much law in Upper Burma. Definitions of which territories belonged within the

category were issued and revised. The Shan States Act of 1888, effective in February 1889, vested civil, criminal and revenue administration in local chiefs, subject to restrictions and imperial supervision.²⁴

The chief did not simply vanish when the empire arrived. Nor did the preservation of a chief leave the old order untouched. Recognition now depended on documents issued within the British system. Authority could be confirmed, limited or reorganised by an outside power that claimed the final right to decide.

The gazetteer describes *sanads*, instruments recognising chiefs and specifying restrictions. They deserve attention because they turn the abstract phrase indirect rule into something concrete. A local ruler could continue governing, but the terms of that governance were embedded in an imperial relationship. The arrangement preserved some institutions while changing the source and limits of their recognised authority.

That could have different consequences for different inhabitants. A ruling family might gain security against a rival. A cultivator might encounter a familiar official backed by a new superior power. A community with a grievance against its chief might find that the empire regarded the chief as an essential partner. Continuity in office did not necessarily mean continuity in the balance of power.

The law's treatment of custom is equally instructive. According to the gazetteer, customary law could operate within the states, but within standards and limits defined by the colonial government. The administration retained powers to extend enactments and alter arrangements. Custom therefore became something that officials could recognise selectively, interpret and subject to a wider legal order.²⁴

This matters for the later history of land. It is easy to imagine custom and law as two separate worlds, one local and unwritten, the other official and documented. Colonial administration brought them into an unequal relationship. Recognition could make a practice more enforceable while changing its meaning. Absence from a particular register could reflect the register's purpose or limits, rather than the absence of a lived claim.

Milne supplies a more concrete example in her chapter on the home. Writing about the northern Shan communities she visited in 1906–1908, she describes a young man trying to establish a household. The difficulty begins before a bamboo post can be raised: suitable land close to the village is already occupied. The surrounding rice fields are held by families whose claims extend back through earlier generations.²⁹

On page 98, Milne describes the saopha as the owner of the territory while also recording hereditary rights over cultivated rice land. Families retained those rights across generations while paying annual taxes, partly in money and partly in rice. She says that taking land near a village for another use could involve a lengthy and troublesome process. Her description therefore contains both a superior claim of ownership and continuing household claims. Neither cancels the other merely by appearing in the same account.²⁹

This is an observation in a colonial publication, not a land register or a judgment settling a present dispute. Milne does not provide a survey of all tenures across the Shan States. Her description cannot establish the boundaries of a particular family's holding today. It does show why the sentence “the ruler owned the land” is insufficient as a history of the people who worked it.

Her prospective householder might seek hillside land farther away when no suitable plot was available near the village. In the circumstances she describes, this meant a different prospect for cultivation: fruit rather than the irrigated rice of the plain. A piece of available ground was therefore not necessarily an equivalent replacement for the ground already held by another family. Location, water and the kind of crop it could support mattered.²⁹

That distinction gives substance to the word loss. Counting hectares alone cannot tell us whether a household can rebuild its livelihood. A replacement holding may require unfamiliar work, different tools or a longer journey to market. These are questions to investigate in each displacement case, rather than assume away when an authority says that land exists somewhere else.

The distinction becomes particularly important when later violence separates a family from its papers. If our history begins only with the document that survives, it can reward the authority that controlled the

archive and overlook the people whose records were lost. Equally, memory alone may not resolve competing claims. A serious account needs to put documentary and local evidence into conversation.

The imperial government was also defining territory. The gazetteer's administrative history describes notifications in 1887, 1891 and 1895. Its lists distinguish northern and southern jurisdictions, dependencies and other arrangements. These were not simply names copied from a single timeless political map. They recorded decisions about how an empire would organise a complicated region.²⁴

The same records show the importance of rivers and roads. Scott's account describes the Salween cutting through the country and the difficulty of travel across its terrain. It also distinguishes trading circuits on different sides of the river. A boundary drawn through mountains was lived through crossings, journeys and the ability to carry goods. Physical geography shaped the cost of administration as well as the cost of trade.²⁴

The new government celebrated road building and the expansion of commerce. The gazetteer describes traffic drawn towards roads linking the hills with Mandalay and other centres. It anticipated benefits from railways and from new markets for agricultural products. The promises sound familiar: better connections would bring prosperity, and prosperity would demonstrate the value of the political order that supplied them.

Milne's account offers a check on those promises. In her chapter on government, she strongly praises British rule. Yet she also records complaints about poor village paths. Some cultivators could sell perishable produce only nearby because transport to a larger market took too long. The existence of a railway elsewhere did not remove the difficulty of reaching it.²⁹

Her description of the paths is physical and memorable. Repeated animal traffic left deep hollows in soft ground. Travellers negotiated ridges between holes and muddy stream crossings. At the beginning of the rains, villagers repaired bad sections with turf: some cut it, others carried and positioned it, and another group stamped it down. In her account the work was unpaid. Those details put human effort back beneath the reassuring line of a road on a map.²⁹

The same chapter records another gap between an imperial promise and its delivery. Milne acknowledges that local officials sometimes demanded more tax than was due and retained the difference. She describes appeals to chiefs and, when these failed, to British officials. But she also notes the distances involved and the isolation of some settlements during the rains. Her confidence in British justice should be read beside her own evidence of the obstacles to reaching it.²⁹

A right of complaint has a practical geography. If the official who can hear a case is distant, a complainant needs time, transport and the means to be away from work. We cannot calculate those costs for every household from Milne's account. We can see why the existence of an appeal procedure does not, by itself, establish that protection was equally accessible.

Infrastructure can create opportunities. The historical question is how those opportunities were distributed. A road useful to a cultivator taking produce to market could also help an official collect revenue or a military column reach a settlement. A railway proposed for commerce could strengthen strategic control. These uses need not exclude one another.

Colonial knowledge also extended into language and social life. Leslie Milne's *Shans at Home*, published in 1910, describes childhood, households, village activities, cultivation and belief. It includes chapters by the missionary Wilbur Willis Cochrane on history and literature. Its scale is different from a constitutional document: it asks the reader to notice the organisation of everyday life.²⁹

Milne could be observant and sympathetic. She could also repeat hierarchies of civilisation and make broad judgments about entire peoples. Her account is strongest when we can locate a particular observation and weakest when a generalisation turns a varied population into a single character type. The same reading discipline applies to the officials whose reports she and other writers used.

Her account of market day makes the connection between the village and the wider region unusually tangible. In the northern communities she described, markets rotated on a five-day cycle. The schedule was coordinated with neighbouring places. People making a long journey could arrive the previous evening, before the selling began. A village

that was quiet on another day became a meeting place for people from surrounding valleys and hills.²⁹

Milne describes women exchanging vegetables for cotton, fruit or tea, and locally woven cloth for imported fabrics. Artisans brought paper, hats, pots and silverwork. Kachin visitors and people from other communities joined the market. Goods moved between different kinds of terrain, while the market brought the people producing them into contact.

News travelled too. Milne records discussion of weather, crops, religion and politics. The market was part of the region's information system. A person who came to exchange goods could leave knowing something about a distant place or a development beyond the village. Commerce and communication took place together.

Milne's agricultural chapter shows another kind of coordination. Before rice was transplanted, cultivators prepared nursery beds and managed water through channels and low embankments. Several farmers could share the work of preparing a nursery. When seedlings were ready, friends and relatives helped with transplanting; the host provided food for the helpers.²⁹

The work did not fit neatly inside the boundary of a single household. Water had to reach the fields. Labour had to be available when the plants were ready. A family's harvest depended partly on arrangements with others. Those arrangements formed part of the value of remaining in a place.

Tools also connected the cultivated landscape to the world beyond it. Milne describes Shan blacksmiths from Yunnan arriving seasonally to make or repair blades and plough parts. Their work helped maintain agricultural production across an international boundary. The rice trade moved in the other direction towards markets in Yunnan.²⁹

The imperial engineer's proposed line promised to connect markets. The existing markets were already connected by human effort. A new road or railway entered a working landscape with its own relationships, rather than bringing movement to a place that had previously been still.

By 1922, a Federated Shan States administration had brought principalities into a further colonial grouping. The arrangement gave the

plural states an institutional form that became important in later negotiations. It was still an imperial organisation, with a very different democratic basis from the federal arrangements debated at independence. The recurrence of the word federal should not make those systems interchangeable.³⁰

The difference concerns whose agreement mattered. Federation among rulers under colonial supervision is not the same thing as a constitution grounded in the equal political participation of inhabitants. The first might preserve the position of a dynasty. The second raises questions about citizenship, representation and government answerable to the governed.

Those questions were not unique to the Shan country. They were part of the wider problem of decolonisation: what should replace an empire whose administrative units contained different histories and political expectations? A territory could be held together by imperial power without its inhabitants having agreed on the terms under which they would later govern themselves.

Then the Second World War broke the apparent permanence of the colonial order. Japanese occupation transformed Burma. Chinese forces fought in the region. Thailand, allied with Japan, occupied Kengtung and adjoining areas in 1942. Wartime conquest changed control again.³⁰

For Thai readers, this is an uncomfortable but necessary part of the story. Thailand cannot appear only at the end as the country receiving migrants. It was also a participant in the struggles over the region. The history of Thai involvement contains relationships of kinship and commerce, but it also contains state ambition and military occupation.

Cultural affinity can make neighbours understandable to one another. It can also be used by governments to justify expansion. The existence of related languages does not settle whether an occupation was welcomed, whether it benefited ordinary inhabitants, or whether the occupier had a legitimate claim. Those are separate historical questions.

The wartime years should also make us cautious about treating a change of flag as a complete description of experience. Administration can collapse unevenly. A new authority may reach a town before a remote

village. A family may encounter successive demands without receiving reliable protection from any of the forces making them.

The history is thus more complicated than a passage from Burmese to British to Japanese and back again. Those changes mattered enormously, but the sequence of sovereign claims is only one part of the account. Local institutions, armed power and the movement of people gave each change a different practical meaning.

By the end of the war, restoring British administration could not restore the political world as though nothing had happened. Independence was becoming the central question. The Shan States had a history of separate institutions within the colonial system. Burmese independence leaders sought a Union capable of replacing colonial rule. Other communities had their own expectations and concerns.

The next map would have to be accompanied by an agreement about government. At Panglong, political leaders would discuss the terms of joining a common future. The negotiations did not begin on empty ground. Behind them lay local rule, imperial supervision, wartime disruption and the unresolved question of whose consent could speak for a country.

Chapter 3

What was agreed

1946 to 1948

The Panglong Agreement is short enough to read before an argument about it has gathered momentum. That is an advantage. Instead of beginning with what later speakers say it promised, we can begin with what the text contains.

Signed on 12 February 1947, it records an agreement involving Aung San and representatives of Shan, Kachin and Chin interests. It accepts internal administrative autonomy in principle, addresses democratic rights and privileges, and protects existing Shan financial autonomy. It also sets out arrangements for participation in the Governor's Executive Council. These provisions place negotiation and conditions at the centre of the approach to independence.⁴

The document does not contain a ten-year right of secession. That provision belongs to the separate Constitution of 1947. Keeping the two texts distinct prevents a common historical confusion from distorting everything that follows.

Panglong matters because it preserves evidence of a political undertaking. A common future was being discussed between parties with different institutional histories. It was not described merely as the restoration of an administrative fact that required no agreement.

For a reader far from constitutional debate, autonomy can sound remote. Its everyday content is easier to understand through ordinary decisions. Who appoints a local official? Who decides which language a school may use? Which government raises money, and which must pay for a service? Who can challenge an order that affects a village?

Different systems answer those questions differently. Some responsibilities can be shared. Others require a clear division of authority. A declaration of autonomy becomes meaningful through those arrangements and through the ability to defend them when governments disagree.

Financial questions are especially revealing. An institution can have a formal responsibility and lack the resources to carry it out. A local government may be blamed for a neglected service while another level of government controls its revenue. Alternatively, local control over money can protect an unaccountable elite. The democratic question is therefore both where power sits and to whom its holders must answer.

There is also the question of representation. The presence of Shan representatives in a negotiation cannot mean that every inhabitant of Shan State spoke with a single voice. The region's people differed in language, social position, locality and political preference. Women, poorer cultivators and communities outside the dominant institutions did not acquire equal influence merely because a territory had a representative at the table.

This is not a reason to dismiss the agreement. Many foundational political negotiations have incomplete forms of representation. It is a reason to avoid treating an elite compact as a complete transcript of popular opinion.

The 1947 Constitution established a Shan State Council comprising the state's parliamentary representatives. Under the original arrangement, saophas elected Shan members of the Chamber of Nationalities from among themselves. Constitutional recognition of the state coexisted with hereditary representation.²²

This complicates a romantic picture of the early Union. Autonomy and democracy were related aspirations, but they were not automatically the same achievement. Defending the position of a state could preserve local power against the centre while leaving inequalities within that state insufficiently challenged.

Sections 201–206 provided a conditional secession process available to Shan State. It required a ten-year wait, support from at least two-thirds of the State Council, a presidentially ordered plebiscite and further legal arrangements. The constitutional exceptions must also be read.²²

The passage of ten years did not automatically dissolve the Union. A waiting period and a procedure are not an expiry date. Equally, the existence of the procedure cannot be made to disappear because later governments found it politically unacceptable.

The more interesting question is what the provision tells us about the political imagination of the moment. The constitution contemplated a Union whose structure could include a procedure for withdrawal. That fact helps explain why later debates over federalism and separation carried such emotional and political force.

It also reminds us to distinguish a federation from a loose use of the word unity. A Union can be defended through the belief that its members should remain together because they benefit from shared institutions and meaningful agreement. It can also be defended through the claim that departure must be impossible under any circumstances. Those approaches can produce very different attitudes towards negotiation.

There are practical reasons why a population might prefer a shared state. Common institutions can support trade, communications and public services. A larger political community can offer forms of security that smaller units struggle to provide. These possibilities belong in the history too. An account that treats joining a Union as necessarily irrational cannot explain why anyone would have negotiated to join one.

The difficulty comes when the benefits promised by common government are not experienced equally, or when the procedures for addressing grievances cease to work. A community may then remember the terms of entry with renewed intensity. What once appeared to be a foundation for cooperation can become evidence in an argument about betrayal.

Land provides a particularly revealing example. Section 30 of the 1947 Constitution described the state as the ultimate owner of all land and gave it powers over tenure, subject to the constitution. Section 23 also guaranteed qualified private-property rights and required expropriation to proceed under a law addressing compensation. These provisions need to be read together.²²

A claim of ultimate ownership was therefore already present in the independence constitution. It was not a phrase that first appeared with the military's 2008 constitution. Nor does that phrase alone tell us what rights a cultivator possessed, which authority could alter them or what procedure a taking required. Those questions demand the relevant laws and evidence of their application.

For a displaced family, the distinction is consequential. Recognising state authority over land does not answer whether a particular removal was lawful. Recognising a family's history on a plot does not, without further evidence, settle every boundary or competing claim. A careful account must examine both the exercise of public power and the rights and losses of the people affected.

The legal texts also prevent us from collapsing different scales of belonging. The international position of a Union, the autonomy of a constituent state and a household's claim to a field are related, but they are not interchangeable. A constitutional dispute over the allocation of state power does not by itself decide who cultivated a particular plot or what remedy is owed after displacement.

For Thai readers, there is a comparable lesson about the word foreigner. International borders determine important legal distinctions. They do not tell us whether a person's departure was voluntary, whether their former government protected them, or whether they retain a legitimate connection to their home. A passport can identify a state of nationality while leaving those questions unanswered.

The independence settlement belongs to the earlier part of that longer story. It created institutions and expectations through which people might imagine security in a shared country. The fact that those expectations later became contested does not make them unreal at the time.

We should also resist reading the early Union only backwards from its failures. People in 1947 did not possess a completed account of 1962. They had to make decisions under uncertainty. Negotiation could contain hope, calculation and compromise without any one of those cancelling the others.

The Union of Burma became independent on 4 January 1948.²²

The constitutional order offered a framework in which common government and distinct state institutions might coexist. Its future depended on more than the existence of the text. It depended on how political actors would use it when security, representation and authority came under strain.

Beyond the constitutional text lay a disputed frontier, the arrival of an outside army and an argument over how the Union should share power. The agreement was about to meet its tests.

Chapter 4

A Union under strain

1948 to 1962

On 1 October 1960, China and Burma signed a boundary treaty. Its language is precise in ways that a schoolroom map rarely invites us to consider. It deals with particular tracts and settlements, not only with a broad declaration of friendship.

The Chinese text provides for territorial exchanges and for adjustments involving villages divided by the frontier. It refers to administration, community relationships and livelihoods. It also identifies maps at specified scales and gives the Chinese, Burmese and English texts equal authenticity. The agreement makes border-making visible as a process affecting inhabited places.¹¹

That is a useful place to enter the history of the early Union. The new state had inherited a territory whose internal and external political arrangements carried different histories. It had to establish security, negotiate international relationships and address demands concerning its own constitutional structure. The people of Shan State lived within all three processes.

The treaty's attention to village relationships is especially telling. It acknowledges that a boundary could cut across practical social arrangements. The negotiators did not need a modern theory of migration to recognise that a line could make everyday life more difficult. The problem was present in the work of defining the border itself.

This does not establish that every adjustment was welcomed by every resident. A treaty speaks for governments. Its provisions need to be compared with evidence of implementation and local experience. The point here is narrower and secure: the border was negotiated, and its negotiation explicitly concerned people's livelihoods.

Chinese scholarship offers a further perspective. Historian Shen Zhihua's 2014 article on Cold War boundary settlements interprets Chinese concessions partly through wider diplomatic priorities. He is

critical of the results of Beijing's approach. His account demonstrates that Chinese-language historical writing is not reducible to a single celebration of official policy.²¹

The early Union was also affected by forces beyond its borders. After the Chinese Communist victory, Nationalist Chinese troops established themselves in eastern Shan territory in 1950. Their presence brought the consequences of China's civil war into the newly independent country. It also helped turn local security into an international problem.³⁰

We should avoid treating those forces as a natural extension of the Chinese communities already living and trading in the region. An army, a trading network and a civilian population are different things. Shared language or ancestry does not make every person an agent of a state or armed organisation.

The distinction is essential for the Shan population too. A government may describe an area through the armed force it believes operates there. Civilians inhabiting the area do not thereby become members of that force. The danger of such an assumption grows when counterinsurgency treats ordinary social and economic relationships as evidence of military affiliation.

Security fears can be real and still fail to justify indiscriminate coercion. The presence of an outside army can explain why a government deploys troops. It does not determine how those troops treat inhabitants, whether allegations are investigated, or whether civilians have meaningful ways to complain.

This is where a national security account and a household history often diverge. The national account asks whether the state can defend its territory. The household asks whether a person can travel to a field without being detained. Both concern security, but they measure it differently.

A durable political settlement must find ways to connect them. If state security repeatedly depends on making some citizens insecure, those citizens have reason to question what the state is protecting. If an armed opposition claims to defend a people while coercing them, the same question applies to it.

The constitutional debate intensified as the early Union encountered these pressures. Shan leaders pressed for a more genuinely federal arrangement. The distinction between federal reform and immediate separation became central.⁸

What would reform have changed? In a Burmese-language historical essay published by ISP-Myanmar in 2017, Kyaw Win describes the programme associated with the 1961 Taunggyi conference. It called for a Bamar state, equal representation of states in the upper house, equal powers for the two parliamentary chambers and fairer revenue sharing. Specified responsibilities would remain with the Union, while residual powers would belong to the states. His account places the Shan proposal's approval on 25 February 1961, before the June conference. This is a later account; the original proposal has not yet been examined for this book.³⁶

These were questions about how a shared country would work: who could make decisions, whose representatives could influence them, and how public money would be divided. A national flag could not settle those questions. Neither could simply repeating the word unity. The institutional choices mattered because they determined whether smaller political communities could influence decisions that affected them.

Kyaw Win also recounts objections from mainland party leaders, including Thakin Chit Maung and Ba Swe. Their arguments show that the dispute concerned the balance of power within the Union as well as fears about its survival.³⁶ The parties were arguing over the workings of government and the future of their shared country.

When every request for a different distribution of power is treated as disloyalty, negotiation loses its purpose. A person can participate only by accepting the structure already imposed. The language of unity then risks closing the very processes that might make a Union more acceptable to its inhabitants.

In March 1962, Ne Win's coup ended the parliamentary constitutional experiment.⁸ The military seizure of power sharply reduced the space in which those disagreements could be handled constitutionally. The consequences were not limited to the fate of leading politicians. Closing a lawful avenue for reform changes the choices available to everyone who hoped to use it.

It can strengthen the argument for armed struggle, although it does not make armed struggle the preference of an entire population. It can make silence appear prudent, although silence does not establish consent. It can make departure more attractive, although departure may remain impossible for those without money, contacts or mobility.

The change is therefore a narrowing of political options as well as a change of government. That narrowing will become important in the later migration story. People do not need to participate in high politics for the closure of political channels to affect them. Their access to protection, complaint and representation can change with the institutions above them.

The disappearance of Hsipaw's ruler Sao Kya Seng after his detention in 1962 became one of the best-known personal stories associated with the coup. His wife Inge Sargent later wrote *Twilight over Burma*. The memoir's Thai translation and its reception have helped bring Shan history to Thai readers. A Thai academic review published in 2018 discusses both the book and the sensitivity surrounding its screen adaptation.¹⁹

The title saopha can evoke conflicting responses. For some readers, the title evokes dignity and a lost political order. For others, hereditary rule raises questions about privilege and accountability. Both responses point to matters worth examining. Recognition of the suffering of a ruling family does not require endorsement of every feature of hereditary government.

Nor does criticism of hereditary privilege justify detention, disappearance or the destruction of democratic alternatives. These judgments concern different actions. Keeping them separate allows us to resist the familiar historical bargain in which sympathy for a victim is made conditional on approving everything the victim represented.

The border treaty and the coup, only a short interval apart, illuminate two different capacities of government. States could negotiate a difficult external boundary through an agreement attentive to particular places. Within the Union, arguments about the distribution of power were increasingly treated through the language of danger and control.

That comparison does not prove that an international negotiation would have supplied a simple solution to domestic conflict. The parties, institutions and circumstances differed. It does show why the history cannot be narrated as though all political boundaries and arrangements were fixed beyond discussion.

By 1962, the crucial issue for many inhabitants was no longer only what the constitution had promised. It was what power could do when constitutional procedures no longer constrained it effectively.

The following decades brought a complicated landscape of armed organisations, military campaigns and economic relationships. To follow it, we need to keep a distinction in view that official accounts and partisan histories alike can obscure. An army can claim to speak for a people. The people still have lives, interests and rights of their own.

Chapter 5

Living between armies

1962 to 1995

Aung Kyaw was twelve when men came to take him away. According to the account he later gave Human Rights Watch, they promised education. He entered military training instead. A Lahu boy recruited into the United Wa State Army, he described difficulty understanding commands, separation from his family and work he was too young to perform. He escaped in 2001, aged nineteen. His testimony looks back into the armed landscape of the 1990s.⁷

The story belongs in a history centred on Shan experience because Shan State has never been inhabited only by Shan people. It also exposes a problem that an army's ethnic name cannot explain away. A child's need for education can become the means through which an armed organisation obtains a recruit.

An army requires food, money, transport and recruits. These needs connect military power to civilian life even away from a battle. A family can be affected by conflict without ever seeing a major engagement. The demand for labour or a payment may be the point at which a distant political struggle enters the household.

The effects depend on circumstances. A contribution may be willingly given to a cause. It may be paid because refusal carries a threat. It may begin as support and later become an obligation that a household cannot meet. To understand which occurred, we need more than the name used on the receipt or the flag flown at the collection point.

The same applies to recruitment. An adult may choose to join an organisation out of conviction. Someone else may join after losing a livelihood or seeing no viable alternative. A child may be pressured, deceived or taken. Calling all of these acts voluntary enlistment would erase important differences. Calling all support coercion would erase political agency.

After the parliamentary period ended, the government's claim to defend the Union became increasingly inseparable from military authority.

Armed opponents presented their own claims to protection and representation. Between those claims, inhabitants had to make practical judgments about whom they could approach, which demand they could meet and what conduct might expose them to suspicion.

Consider the position of a village on a route used by an armed group. People may sell food because food is what they have to sell. They may provide it because armed men demand it. They may have relatives in the group without supporting every action it takes. None of those circumstances allows an outside observer to assign a single political intention to the whole village.

Yet counterinsurgency can encourage precisely that kind of collective classification. A place becomes an enemy-supporting area. Its population becomes a source of supplies or information to be separated from an opponent. The political convenience of the category can conceal the varied lives inside it.

The later forced relocations make this danger starkly visible. Before reaching them, we need to understand the less dramatic ways armed power changes a place. Repeated demands can alter the economics of staying. A route that remains physically open may become unaffordable. A field that remains unburned may become too dangerous to reach. An authority can leave a house standing and still make its inhabitants unable to sustain themselves there.

These pressures varied by place. They help explain how apparently economic distress can have political causes. A household may eventually leave in search of wages after military demands have reduced the resources on which it once depended.

The resulting journey can then be misread at the destination. An employer sees someone asking for work. An official records labour migration. Neither observation is necessarily false. Both can be incomplete if they are treated as the whole explanation of departure.

The armed landscape of the period also became connected to profitable illicit economies. It is essential to describe those economies without turning an entire people into a criminal category. A region associated with narcotics contains farmers, traders, children and workers with very different relationships to production and trafficking. The choices

available to a cultivator are not the choices available to a commander controlling a route.

One major reorganisation came in 1989, when mutinies broke apart the Communist Party of Burma's armed structure. The United Wa State Army emerged and reached a ceasefire with the military government. Human Rights Watch's later account describes the arrangement as allowing the force to retain arms and territorial control. The change was a political and military settlement, rather than a simple disappearance of armed power.⁷

A ceasefire can bring real relief. Fewer battles can mean fewer immediate dangers and more room for cultivation or trade. People living through conflict have good reason to welcome such changes. A book concerned with their lives should not dismiss a reduction in fighting because it falls short of a complete political settlement.

But the contents of a ceasefire matter. If armed authority remains, civilians may still face demands. If the agreement excludes other forces, fighting can continue nearby. If it leaves questions of representation unresolved, the conditions for later conflict may remain. The word peace should therefore be examined through what people can safely do, not only through an agreement's title.

The difference can be described in everyday terms. Can a person reach a market? Can a household keep the proceeds of its labour? Can a child attend school without recruitment? Can someone complain about an armed man without fearing retaliation? These questions provide a civilian measure of a settlement's practical effect.

Human Rights Watch's 2002 investigation found child recruitment among government and opposition forces, including organisations with Shan and Wa identities. The findings are dated evidence, not a statement about every organisation's conduct today. They demonstrate why a civilian account must be able to scrutinise more than one side.⁷

Scrutiny across actors does not require pretending that their power, actions or responsibilities were equal. A national army may possess capacities unavailable to a small armed group. One campaign may displace vastly more people than another. The scale, pattern and chain of command must be established separately. Consistent standards mean

asking the same kinds of questions, not manufacturing identical answers.

For Shan civilians, the consequences of these decades included a political environment in which armed organisations often claimed to embody the community. That claim can create pressure inside the community as well as between communities. A person who wants to avoid recruitment may be accused of lacking commitment. A family that seeks safety elsewhere may be judged by people who do not bear its risks.

Migration then becomes a political question even when the person moving does not want to make a political statement. Remaining can be interpreted as loyalty; departure as abandonment. Yet the moral burden of maintaining a cause should not be placed without limit on a household whose members must eat, care for children and survive.

Women's work is especially easy to lose in a history organised around armies. A military chronology records a unit's movement. A household history asks who continued to provide food, care and income while people were absent. It asks how decisions about movement were negotiated within the family and who could carry them out.

The same applies to people who remained in place. Their absence from a migration record does not imply that they were unaffected or that they freely accepted the conditions around them. Some may have preferred to stay. Others may have lacked the means to leave. A history that follows only successful crossings can overlook those whose options were narrower still.

By the mid-1990s, the region carried the accumulated consequences of these arrangements. Armed power had become part of the administration of everyday life in many places. A ceasefire in one relationship did not settle all the others. Political grievances and economic insecurity could persist beneath an apparent reduction in fighting.

The next upheaval would expose the limits of reading a military settlement as a civilian peace. The collapse of Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army in 1996 was followed by a major forced-relocation campaign in

central and southern Shan areas. The movement of armed organisations would be accompanied by the compelled movement of households. ⁶

For the people ordered away, the central question would no longer be how to manage another demand while remaining at home. It would be whether home could remain a place where they were allowed to live.*

*Readers wishing to support Shan communities can visit *Circuit International*.
circuitinternational.org/donate

Chapter 6

When staying became impossible

1996 to 1998, and the years that followed

The order to leave a village is also an order to leave a way of making a living.

A household can carry clothes, some food and whatever money it possesses. It cannot carry a rice field, an irrigation channel or a mature fruit tree. It cannot pack the network of neighbours who exchange work at planting time. Even where a house remains standing, separation from these things can make returning to ordinary life far more difficult than returning to an address.

In April 1998, Amnesty International reported that a relocation campaign begun in March 1996 had affected almost 1,400 villages and approximately 300,000 people in central and southern Shan State. It estimated that about 80,000 had fled to Thailand. These were contemporary estimates, assembled under difficult conditions; they are neither a present population count nor a count of all Shan migrants. The investigation drew on interviews conducted in Thailand in early 1998. ⁶

The dates establish a sequence. The campaign followed the collapse of Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army. Fighting and counterinsurgency continued. A settlement involving an armed leadership had not brought security to the population among whom armed groups operated.

Amnesty described successive relocation orders, killings, forced labour and the destruction of livelihoods. Its report also condemned a reported opposition killing of twenty-five Bamar civilians in June 1997. Its account therefore cannot be reduced to an endorsement of a rival army. The central subject was the treatment of civilians. ⁶

For those compelled to move, displacement began before an international border came into view. The first journey might be from a village to a relocation site, to a town, or to somewhere nearby where a family hoped to find protection. Crossing into Thailand could be a later decision, taken after other arrangements had failed.

That distinction changes the familiar question of why people came to Thailand. A person who eventually sought wages there might already have lost access to a farm. The need to earn money could be an effect of forced displacement. Employment and danger can belong to the same history.

To understand that history, return for a moment to the agricultural work described by Leslie Milne early in the twentieth century. In the northern communities she observed, preparing irrigated rice involved maintaining embankments, directing water, raising seedlings and coordinating labour. Neighbours assisted one another. The observations concern particular communities and an earlier period, but they help make one enduring practical point visible: a cultivated landscape contains accumulated work.²⁹

A field is more than an area on a map. It is the work already invested in making that area productive and the arrangements through which another season becomes possible. Losing access can mean losing both an immediate harvest and the means of producing the next one.

The timing of departure matters. A household driven away after sowing has already spent labour and resources that may produce no return for it. A household prevented from planting faces a different loss that becomes fully visible months later. A short period of displacement can therefore have consequences much longer than the period counted in a record of movement.

Nor does the survival of a building prove that displacement caused little damage. A house can remain while the household loses its animals, tools, documents and access to nearby land. A settlement can be physically intact yet impossible to inhabit safely. Photographs alone cannot settle these questions.

The language of security operations often treats moving civilians as a means to isolate armed opponents from supplies or information. That language describes a military purpose. It does not establish that the people moved were combatants or that collective punishment was justified. A civilian population does not become an army simply because an army has passed through its village.

Once a household has moved, each further decision can narrow the next set of choices. Savings pay for food. Animals or possessions may have to be sold. Work available nearby may be temporary or poorly paid. These are possible mechanisms of impoverishment, not an invented itinerary for a particular family. They explain why the consequences of expulsion cannot be assessed only on the day an order is issued.

People also make resourceful choices within these constraints. Relatives can share a room or information about work. One family member can travel while another cares for children. An existing connection across the border can make a difficult journey possible. Such decisions are evidence of agency, but agency exercised under pressure should not be confused with freedom from that pressure.

The ability to leave is uneven. Someone with savings, transport and contacts has options that a person without them may lack. An older person who needs daily care faces different obstacles from a healthy young adult. A migration history that follows only those who arrive in Thailand can therefore miss people who endured danger because departure was beyond their means.

The problem did not end neatly with the period of the largest reported relocations. In a July 2002 report covering abuses during 2001 and early 2002, Amnesty again described insecurity in counterinsurgency areas, including forced labour, land confiscation, demands for supplies and child recruitment. Its published summary attributed abuses to government forces and also reported child recruitment by the Shan State Army-South.³²

For families abroad, return raises several questions at once. Is it physically possible to reach the village? Is it safe to remain? Can the land be used? What happened to the household's records? Who now exercises authority? A favourable answer to one question does not guarantee favourable answers to the others.

The politics of land become particularly sharp here. A government may argue that the territory lies within its state. A family may argue that it has cultivated a particular field for generations. These are claims at different levels. International recognition of a state does not, by itself, resolve whether an official lawfully took a family's land or whether a displaced occupier should receive restitution.

Equally, a demand for Shan autonomy cannot by itself determine every claim within Shan State. Neighbours can have overlapping evidence. Custom may recognise different uses of the same area. Other communities have homes and histories there too. Repairing dispossession requires institutions capable of hearing these claims, not merely replacing one collective assertion with another.

A person need not resolve the constitutional future of the country before explaining why losing a home was wrong. That is one of the most important distinctions in this history. The right to be heard about a specific loss should not depend on winning an argument about sovereignty.

For Thai readers, the relocation years offer a concrete reason to reconsider the label economic migrant. The label often describes what someone does after arrival: they look for work, take wages and send money home. It may reveal very little about what removed their earlier means of support.

None of this establishes that every Shan worker in Thailand fled the 1996 campaign. Many did not. People moved at different times and for different combinations of reasons. The history supplies questions to ask about a life; it does not supply an answer to impose on everyone who shares an ethnic name.

At the border, however, an official may see a document or its absence, a permitted category or an unauthorised crossing. The administrative encounter can compress years of displacement into a few facts recorded on a form.

Beyond that encounter lay another test: whether the person who had lost a livelihood could earn one by building, harvesting, cleaning or carrying in somebody else's country.

From Shan State to Thailand



Selected places, not a map of measured migration flows or safe routes.
Data: Natural Earth (public domain); geoBoundaries / Myanmar Analytics Project (CC BY 4.0).

Map 3. Selected places discussed in the book. No migration volumes, measured routes or safe crossings are implied.

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Mae Hong Son



Photograph 3. Mae Hong Son, Thailand, 27 April 2007. Vyacheslav Argenberg, CC BY 2.0.

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Chapter 7

The work of beginning again

Thailand and Shan State, 1999 to 2020

For five months, Sai Ti and other Shan workers built a bridge at a Royal Thai Army base in Mae Rim. According to the testimony recorded by Human Rights Watch in 2008, they were not paid. Each was owed more than 15,000 baht. Sai Ti was a registered worker.²⁸

Registration had not made the promised wages arrive.

That simple fact brings us into the gap between the existence of a rule and the ability to obtain its protection. A worker can have a document, an employer can owe a debt, and the worker can still struggle to recover the money. Understanding the gap requires attention to the practical cost of making a complaint, finding assistance and surviving while a dispute continues.

For a person supporting relatives, unpaid wages can create consequences far beyond the workplace. Rent and food still have to be paid for. Money expected elsewhere does not arrive. The person who travelled in order to help may need help instead.

Sai Ti's case and Nang Noom Mai Seng's come from a 2010 Human Rights Watch investigation, with interviews mainly in 2008–09.²⁸

Work itself also changes the migrant's relationship to the place of arrival. Someone hired for a temporary task may come to know a neighbourhood, learn how to negotiate daily life and develop friendships. Earnings may be sent across the border, spent locally, saved for a return or used to educate a child. There is no single timetable by which a temporary worker's life becomes a settled one.

Northern Thailand makes this especially visible because Shan presence there did not begin with the recent migration crisis. Thai citizens with Shan identities, long-established communities and newer arrivals inhabit overlapping cultural landscapes while possessing different legal histories.

A Thai-language study by That Sriratanaban and Nanchaya Mahakhan examined the making of Shan identity in Mae Hong Son through beliefs

about astrology. Drawing on historical materials and field research, the authors explored how religious knowledge, local circumstances and wider cultural influences contributed to a changing identity. Their subject was a particular community, not a statistical portrait of recent migrant workers.²⁰

The study matters here because it interrupts two easy assumptions. One is that everyone recognised as Shan in Thailand must have recently arrived from Myanmar. The other is that an identity is authentic only if it remains unchanged.

A community can adapt its practices and remain a community. A person can acquire a new language without losing every earlier affiliation. Public festivals, religious institutions and household customs can carry different meanings for people of different generations. Historical change does not automatically amount to cultural disappearance.

Anthropologist Jane M. Ferguson's research followed another setting: a community associated with a former Shan armed movement near the Thai border. Nicola Tannenbaum's review of *Repossessing Shanland* describes fieldwork in 2004–07 and the importance of work in Thailand, media and remembered history to the community's identity. The review also cautions against extending that community's experience to all Shan people. This account relies on the review; the monograph remains a priority for the next research pass.⁸

For newer arrivals, cultural familiarity may make parts of life easier. It should never be assumed to remove every language barrier or to guarantee equal treatment. Related languages are not identical languages. Knowing how to speak with a neighbour does not necessarily mean being able to understand an official notice, an employment document or a medical explanation.

The cost of misunderstanding is also unequal. In an ordinary conversation it may be a moment of confusion. In a workplace dispute it can affect whether an obligation is understood or whether evidence can be presented. Translation is therefore a practical part of access to institutions, not merely a courtesy added after the important work has been done.

Behind the individual workplace lies a larger question about bargaining power. When a worker needs an employer more urgently than an employer needs that particular worker, refusing an abusive demand becomes costly. That imbalance can grow when the worker has debt, few contacts, limited information or concerns about status. The exact combination varies; none should be presumed from ethnicity alone.

Human Rights Watch's 2018 study of Thailand's fishing industry documented coercion and labour abuses involving migrants from Myanmar and Cambodia. It is useful as evidence about a particular sector and its mechanisms of exploitation. It is not evidence that all the workers concerned were Shan or that fishing represents Shan employment generally.²⁷

The broader question is whether a worker can leave an employer, obtain wages already earned and seek assistance without an unreasonable cost. Answering it requires evidence about an actual scheme and period. The history of one sector can suggest mechanisms to investigate elsewhere; it cannot substitute for that investigation.

A history centred only on vulnerability, however, would be incomplete. Work also brings skill, relationships and achievement. A building is made by people who know how to build it. A harvest requires knowledge and effort. A household receiving money is connected to somebody's sustained labour. Describing workers only as victims makes their contribution disappear even while asking for sympathy on their behalf.

The more demanding task is to recognise contribution and unequal power together. A person can be capable, resourceful and exploited. Competence does not make an unpaid wage acceptable. Resilience does not remove an employer's obligation.

Myanmar's political transition brought a new peace process. Eight armed organisations signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, while important groups remained outside it. Later conferences revived the name Panglong.³³

A familiar name could carry hope, but it could not itself produce an agreement. The same distinction that mattered after independence

remained: a declared commitment to unity or peace had to be translated into arrangements that people could rely on.

The 2008 constitution illustrated the tensions of the political framework. It prohibited secession, described the Union as the ultimate owner of land and resources, and also provided for certain property rights under law. It recognised several self-administered areas, including areas within Shan State. These provisions concerned different levels of authority and entitlement. Reading one in isolation cannot settle every household's claim.⁵

A declaration about ultimate ownership is not the same as a finding that a particular confiscation was lawful. Equally, the existence of a constitutional property provision does not prove that a displaced family could obtain an effective remedy. The practical question remains how claims were recognised, heard and enforced.

In 2019, Amnesty interviewed a Kachin man from Kutkai detained and beaten by military personnel, and a Shan man reporting detention and beatings by TNLA and SSA-N fighters who suspected him of supporting a rival. Its eighty-eight interviews examined abuses continuing through a declared military ceasefire.³³

Different allegations need their own evidence and attribution. Together, these accounts show why the civilian experience could not be read from the word ceasefire alone. A reduction in fighting between particular forces might coexist with coercion, rival armed demands and fear of detention.

Amnesty also described repeated, sometimes brief displacement that interrupted cultivation. The ability to return after several days did not mean that the interruption was harmless. The work of a season could be disrupted at the moment it mattered most.³³

This pattern complicates the idea of migration as a single decisive departure. Movement can occur in stages: a temporary move within the region, a return, another displacement, a journey for employment. The evidence for any individual sequence must come from that individual's history, but the categories used by governments need to leave room for such complexity.

From Thailand, political developments at home could therefore look different to different people. A person able to visit safely might judge prospects differently from someone afraid to return to a particular village. An election result or a ceasefire announcement could be important without resolving those individual circumstances.

A migrant family's decision about return is made at that local scale. It concerns a place, a livelihood, particular authorities and people who must live with the consequences. Optimism expressed at a conference cannot bear those consequences on the family's behalf.

By the end of the decade, work in Thailand and uncertainty in Shan State remained connected. The person who sent money home was part of an economy spanning a border. The person who waited for conditions to improve was also building a life where they were. Neither could be understood adequately as someone merely passing through a pause in history.

Then, in February 2021, the political framework inside Myanmar broke again.

Market in Mae Hong Son



Photograph 4. A market in Mae Hong Son, Thailand, 1 September 2018. Christophe95, CC BY-SA 4.0.

[Original source](#) · CC BY-SA 4.0

Chapter 8

A future still being negotiated

2021 to the research cutoff of 10 September 2026

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military seized power. Elected leaders were detained, protests spread and the authorities responded with violence and mass arrests. Human Rights Watch's account of that year describes the coup as ending the democratic transition and documents grave abuses against the civilian population.³⁴

For a history of Shan State, 2021 is both a rupture and a reminder that the national political calendar has never described everyone's experience equally. The end of the transition changed the country profoundly. It did not mean that people in conflict-affected areas had enjoyed secure peace until the day before.

The 2019 evidence from northern Shan State, considered in the previous chapter, makes that distinction concrete. People had already been detained, displaced and placed under rival armed pressures during the period of a civilian-led national government. Recognising the scale of the new rupture does not require erasing that earlier history.

The same word federal can still carry different expectations. One speaker may emphasise the powers of constituent states. Another may emphasise equal citizenship, local democracy or protection against military domination. Durable agreement requires these meanings to be discussed rather than assumed to coincide.

The history of Panglong is relevant because it shows why undertakings about participation and autonomy have remained powerful. It is not a set of instructions that can simply be copied into a very different present. The institutions, armed relationships and expectations of inhabitants have changed. A future agreement would have to answer present questions as well as acknowledge past commitments.

Those questions include the place of communities whose names do not appear in the name Shan State. A political arrangement justified as protection from domination must also explain how it will prevent domination within the territory it governs. Otherwise the claim of self-government can reproduce the problem it was meant to solve.

After 2021, conflict and repression also intensified the pressures on everyday life. Human Rights Watch's report covering 2024 describes escalating fighting following the launch of Operation 1027 in October 2023, increased military air and artillery attacks, and renewed flight to neighbouring countries. It records a September 2024 attack on a displacement camp in Pekon Township. These are events in a dated report, not a description of who controls every township at the time of publication.³⁵

The camp matters to the logic of the story. Displacement is supposed to move people away from danger. An attack on a place of refuge can make the first movement insufficient. A family can be compelled to seek safety again without ever having recovered from the earlier journey.

This is one reason the maps here show geographic setting rather than coloured areas of military control. Control can change quickly. Even an accurately dated control map cannot establish that a road is safe, that an area is free of explosive hazards, or that a particular person can travel without being detained. The book's maps locate the history; they are not travel advice.

Recruitment became another powerful pressure. On 10 February 2024, the junta activated the 2010 People's Military Service Law. Human Rights Watch linked the move to increased departures and documented abusive recruitment practices. The distinction between the date a law was enacted and the date it was activated is important: an older text acquired a new practical role during a later crisis.³⁵

A young person's decision to leave in response to recruitment fears has its own chronology. It should not be folded automatically into the history of people expelled from villages in the 1990s. The two experiences may connect through longer patterns of armed power, but their immediate circumstances differ.

The future can become difficult to plan when the danger concerns a demand that may arrive. Education, a job or the care of a relative can be interrupted before any actual enlistment occurs. Anticipation affects behaviour. Establishing that fear existed is different from verifying every incident through which the fear was communicated.

A Burmese-language SHAN report published on 8 September 2026 described alleged roundups and anxiety about forced recruitment in and around Taunggyi and Aungban. Its account relied in part on unnamed local sources. It belongs in the record as recent local reporting, with that attribution and limitation. The underlying allegations have not been independently verified for this manuscript. ¹⁰

A Shan-language editorial published by the same outlet three days earlier looked back over thirty years and returned to the displacement associated with the 1990s. Its significance here is the persistence of that history in contemporary public discussion. An editorial published in 2026 is evidence of how the past is being remembered; it is not a substitute for contemporary documentation of the events remembered. The original-language readings of both items remain subject to fluent-reader review. ⁹

For migrants already in Thailand, developments at home can alter the meaning of a temporary stay. A plan to work for a season may become harder to complete through return. A relative's arrival may change household responsibilities. A document issued for one purpose may not answer a new need for protection.

The administrative challenge is therefore partly one of time. People enter a category at a particular moment, while the circumstances surrounding them continue to change. A workable response has to recognise that a history does not stop when a form is approved.

Thai policy itself can change. In August 2025, Reuters reported a decision allowing eligible residents of nine border shelters to seek legal work. The reported population was about 80,000, with roughly 42,600 of working age. The measure concerned a defined shelter population; it was not blanket work permission for every displaced person from Myanmar or every Shan migrant. This manuscript does not establish the later implementing rules or anyone's present eligibility. ¹⁵

The same care is needed with numbers. A total for Myanmar nationals working in Thailand is not automatically a Shan total. A count of shelter residents is not the same as a count of all people who fled conflict. Statistics answer the question built into their definitions. When the definitions change, apparently comparable numbers may describe different populations.

What, then, can a short history ask of its Thai readers?

It can ask that work be recognised as work, with obligations owed to the person who performs it. It can ask that a claim about danger or dispossession be examined on its evidence. It can ask that ethnicity not be treated as proof of allegiance to an armed organisation. These are standards of judgment, not an assumption that every case will have the same answer.

It can also ask that return be understood as a practical condition rather than a slogan. A person can want to go home and still be unable to live there safely. They can have a connection to land without possessing all the documents an official expects. A serious response must investigate the circumstances instead of interpreting difficulty as lack of belonging. For those who hope to build a fairer political order in Shan State, the history poses a related challenge. The authority to speak for a people has to be matched by accountability to the people affected. A claim made in the name of freedom must leave room for a civilian to disagree, decline recruitment, pursue work or belong to a different community.

No single constitutional formula, migration policy or economic programme can answer all these questions at once. That is a reason to distinguish responsibilities clearly. Governments, armed organisations and employers exercise different forms of power. Each can be examined for what it does to the lives within its reach.

The history remains unfinished. Its agreements, expulsions and journeys have consequences that people are still living through.

For the person living through it, the desired future may be much less abstract than a debate about national destiny. It may mean being able to plan a season, recover a wage, educate a child or visit a home without fear.

Those ordinary ambitions are where the two centuries of this book finally meet.*

*To contribute to work alongside Shan communities, visit *Circuit International*.
circuitinternational.org/donate

Epilogue

The life before the journey

The word migrant is useful to an administration. It tells an office that a person has moved from somewhere else. It becomes misleading when it is allowed to stand in for everything that person has been.

Before the worker, there may have been a cultivator. Before the border crossing, a series of moves within the same country. Before the missing document, an authority that could not be approached safely. Before the search for a higher wage, the loss of a livelihood that once made departure unnecessary.

There may also have been ambition, curiosity and a wish to choose a different life. A humane history does not make suffering the only acceptable explanation for movement. It leaves people room to want more as well as to escape worse.

The two centuries traced here explain why those motives can be difficult to separate. Local principalities became parts of an imperial order. Colonial arrangements shaped negotiations at independence. The promise of a Union raised questions of autonomy and representation that military authority did not resolve. Armed conflict entered the economy of households through demands for supplies, labour and recruits. Forced displacement separated people from the means of staying.

Thailand appears throughout this story. It is part of the older regional world of trade and related languages, a state with its own historical ambitions, and the place where many people later sought work and safety. Its relationship with Shan State cannot be understood only at the moment of an immigration decision.

The argument for taking migrants seriously does not require accepting every claim made by every leader who invokes their name. It requires the opposite kind of attention: distinguishing the person from the organisation, the household's loss from the state's territorial claim, and a promise written on paper from protection that can actually be obtained.

At the beginning of this book, a registered worker was injured on a construction site in Chiang Mai. Her case exposed a gap between recognition for employment and recognition for compensation. The historical record does not allow this manuscript to provide a final account of everything that happened to her afterwards. It allows us to see the question her case raises.

What does recognition amount to when a person needs to rely on it?

That question travels through the book: through a chief's recognition by an empire, a state's place in a Union, a community's claim to autonomy, a family's attachment to land and a worker's attempt to recover what is owed. The arrangements differ. In each, the practical test is whether people can make a claim that power must hear.

To understand Shan migration is therefore to look at more than movement. It is to ask what made remaining difficult, what made leaving possible and what happened when someone tried to begin again.

A person seen carrying materials at a building site has a life beyond the work in front of us. Learning that history does not answer every policy question. It changes the care with which those questions are asked.

Before they were migrants, they had homes. After they arrive, they are still people making a life.

The history ends here. The lives continue.

For those who wish to stand alongside Shan communities, Circuit International offers one way to help.

circuitinternational.org/donate

The author is associated with Circuit International.

A short guide to names and terms

Shan and Tai — Shan is a widely used English name for a people and language also identified through Tai names. Tai is also a wider linguistic designation. It does not mean that every Tai-speaking community has the same history or nationality.¹²

Shan State and Shan States — The singular usually refers to the modern administrative territory. The plural can refer to earlier principalities or a colonial grouping. Older European writers sometimes used the term more broadly, including places in present Thailand.^{23 24}

Saopha and sawbwa — Saopha is a Shan hereditary ruler's title. Sawbwa is a Burmese form familiar from English colonial writing. Recognition of a ruler's authority is a different question from the rights or consent of all inhabitants.²⁴

Mong and müang — Related spellings used for a town and its associated domain, with meanings that vary by language and historical context. A place name containing the term does not by itself establish modern sovereign status.²⁴

Burma and Myanmar — Names used at different times and in different political settings for the country. This draft usually preserves Burma in historical titles and earlier documents, and uses Myanmar for the contemporary state. Burmese can also describe a language; it must not automatically be read as an ethnic label for every citizen.

Bamar — An ethnic designation. It is not interchangeable with all Myanmar nationals, the national army or a government.

Federalism and autonomy — Ways of allocating and limiting public power. Their content depends on institutions and enforceable arrangements. Neither word alone tells us whether a particular household can recover land or obtain a remedy.

Internally displaced person — Someone displaced within their country. Crossing an international border changes the administrative and legal questions; it does not erase earlier internal displacement.

Migrant and refugee — Terms that describe different aspects of movement and protection. A person may seek employment after fleeing danger. This draft does not decide anyone's legal status from occupation, ethnicity or a brief account of movement.

Tatmadaw — A name used for the Myanmar armed forces. Military institutions are distinguished from the country's civilian population.⁷

MTA — Mong Tai Army, associated with Khun Sa; its collapse in 1996 forms part of the background to the relocation period discussed here. ⁶

UWSA — United Wa State Army. The child-recruitment account used in Chapter 5 is from research published in 2002; it is not a claim about the experience of every Wa person. ⁷

RCSS and SSA-S — Restoration Council of Shan State and its armed wing, the Shan State Army-South. **SSPP and SSA-N** refer to the Shan State Progress Party and Shan State Army-North. **TNLA** refers to the Ta'ang National Liberation Army. These are distinct organisations; names and affiliations should be checked for the period discussed. ³³

Panglong — The place associated with the February 1947 agreement and a name later invoked in peace negotiations. The 1947 agreement and the 1947 constitution are separate documents. ^{4 22}

Lakon and Zimmé — Historical names on Hallett's map for places now called Lampang and Chiang Mai. **Dokhtawady** is the river name used by the source photograph at Hsipaw. Historic and modern spellings are retained where changing them would obscure the source. ²³

Sources and reading status

Source numbers are stable across the manuscript. The access statement is part of each reference: a review, a catalogue record and a full text do not provide the same evidence. Links were checked or accessed during the research pass ending 10 September 2026; failures and unread works are identified below.

Texts reports and data used

1 Yos Santasombat. *Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identity in Daikong*. ANU E Press, 2008.

Selected text examined: preface and opening discussion, especially pp. 1–8. English edition of Thai scholarship; not a full-book reading.

[ANU open-access book](#)

4 Panglong Agreement. 12 February 1947.

English transcript examined, all nine clauses. Reproduction, not a signed facsimile; check names and any exact quotation against the original.

[Agreement transcript](#)

5 Constitution of Myanmar. 2008. Constitute reproduction.

Relevant English provisions and preamble examined. Do not treat the text as proof of uncontested present constitutional authority.

[Constitution text](#)

6 Amnesty International. *Myanmar: Atrocities in the Shan State*. ASA 16/005/1998, April 1998.

Contemporary human-rights investigation; opening evidence and methodology examined, especially pp. 1–4. Figures are historical estimates.

[Report PDF](#)

7 Human Rights Watch. *My Gun Was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma*. 2002.

Relevant opposition-forces sections examined, including Shan and Wa recruitment accounts. Historical evidence with dated scope.

[Report chapter](#)

8 Nicola Tannenbaum. Review of Jane M. Ferguson, Repossessing Shanland: Myanmar, Thailand, and a Nation-State Deferred. Journal of the Siam Society 112(2), 2024, pp. 236–239.

Review read in full. Ferguson’s 2021 University of Wisconsin Press monograph was not read.

[Journal review record](#)

9 ရှိမ်း ဂျပာင်း. သမ်သိမ်းပီပခ်,ဂ္ဂွပ်; လၢ,တၢ,တံးခိုခ်းလွပ်; တေဂီတ်းဂီၢ် ဝံခိုင်မး. SHAN, 5 September 2026.

Shan-language editorial accessed; opening discussion examined. Working interpretation concerns a thirty-year historical rupture and its continuing meaning; native-language review required.

[Shan editorial](#)

10 Sai Hseng Aai. စစ်တပ် ပေါ်တာဆွဲမှု သောင်းကျန်း၊ လူငယ်များ သွားလာ သတိပြုရန်. SHAN Burmese, 8 September 2026.

Article body examined. Attributed reports of military roundups and local fear; not independently verified here. No assumption that a term for roundups always means porter labour.

[Burmese report](#)

11 中华人民共和国和缅甸联邦边界条约. China–Burma Boundary Treaty, 1 October 1960.

Chinese transcript examined, particularly Articles 2, 3, 7 and 12. Official-site retrieval failed; facsimile and maps still required.

[Chinese treaty transcript](#)

12 Glottolog 5.3. Shan language entry, shan1277, ISO 639-3 shn.

Scholarly catalog examined. Identifies a linguistic classification and bibliography, not a historical claim to territory.

[Language catalog](#)

15 Reuters. Thailand grants some Myanmar refugees right to legal work. 27 August 2025. Reporting by Naw Betty Han.

Article examined. Evidence of a dated policy announcement; implementing law and conditions at the book's publication require updating.

[Reuters article](#)

19 พระสุธีวีรบัณฑิต and colleagues. สิ้นแสงฉาน TWILIGHT OVER BURMA MY LIFE AS A SHAN PRINCESS. วารสาร มจร สังคมศาสตร์ปริทรรศน์ 7(1), 2018, pp. 295–312.

Thai academic book review; opening biographical discussion and concluding reception analysis examined. Review, not the memoir itself.

[Thai journal PDF](#)

20 ธรรมศ ศรีรัตนบัลล์ and นันทชญา มหาขันธ์ (That Sriratanaban and Nanchaya Mahakhan). การสร้างความเป็นไทใหญ่แม่ฮ่องสอนผ่านความเชื่อโหราศาสตร์. วารสารวิชาการมหาวิทยาลัยธนบุรี 11(26), 2017, pp. 47–59.

Original Thai qualitative study. Abstract, introduction, methods and selected analytical passages examined; findings concern Mae Hong Son and cannot be universalised.

[Thai journal PDF](#)

21 沈志華 (Shen Zhihua). 事與願違 冷戰時期中國處理邊界糾紛的結果.

二十一世紀雙月刊 144, August 2014, pp. 52–61.

Chinese academic article; abstract and Burma boundary discussion, especially pp. 52–54, examined. Critical of Chinese concessions. Article misdates Ne Win's coup as February 1962; not used for coup chronology.

[Chinese academic PDF](#)

22 Constitution of the Union of Burma, 1947.

English Wikisource transcription examined, including sections 23 and 30 on property and land, 154–157 on Shan institutions, and 201–206 on conditional secession. Transcription, not signed facsimile. Additional land provisions checked for this revision; implementing laws and individual title claims are not adjudicated.

[Constitution transcription](#)

23 Holt S. Hallett. A Thousand Miles on an Elephant in the Shan States. William Blackwood and Sons, 1890.

Public-domain digitisation. Preface, chapter IV pp. 30–33 and selected route passages examined in OCR. Imperial commercial purpose explicit. British Library map also visually examined; its scan number 334 is not a printed page number.

[Digitised book](#)

24 J. George Scott, assisted by J. P. Hardiman. Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States. Part I, volume I. Government Printing, Rangoon, 1900.

Public-domain OCR examined in selected sections: physical geography pp. 10–14, critique of chronicles pp. 189–191, trade pp. 276–279, administrative history pp. 313–317; annexation passages also checked. Strong colonial viewpoint. Original scans must be checked for verbatim quotation.

[Digitised colonial gazetteer](#)

25 Natural Earth. Countries, rivers and populated places datasets.

50m countries and rivers, 10m populated places simple, acquired 10 September 2026. Public domain. Used for orientation, not land adjudication. Dataset snapshots retained with the maps.

[Data and usage terms](#)

26 Runfola, D., and contributors. geoBoundaries A global database of political administrative boundaries. PLoS ONE 15(4), 2020, e0231866. Myanmar ADM1 dataset.

MMR-ADM1-20573499, 2019 boundaries, build 12 December 2023, source Myanmar Analytics Project / geoBoundaries. CC BY 4.0. Dataset includes Shan as one unit; does not depict military control.

[Dataset metadata](#)

27 Human Rights Watch. Hidden Chains Rights Abuses and Forced Labor in Thailand's Fishing Industry. 23 January 2018.

Summary and selected labour policy passages examined. Fishery research concerns multiple nationalities and is not a Shan migrant population study. Used only for a bounded comparison of mechanisms.

[Original investigation](#)

28 Human Rights Watch. From the Tiger to the Crocodile Abuse of Migrant Workers in Thailand. 23 February 2010.

Original research with MAP Foundation and Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association. Methods and Shan cases examined, including Nang Noom Mai Seng and Sai Ti. Historical rules and allegations, not a current legal guide.

[Original investigation](#)

29 Leslie Milne, with Wilbur Willis Cochrane. Shans at Home. John Murray, 1910.

Public-domain digitisation. Introduction pp. xvi–xx and selected passages on tenure and house-building p. 98, markets pp. 130–134, agriculture pp. 148–152, and government, taxation and village paths pp. 187–191 examined in retained OCR. Primarily northern Shan observations from visits in 1906–1908; colonial advocacy and generalisations require criticism. Not a land register or a present-day legal authority.

[Digitised ethnographic account](#)

30 Wikipedia contributors. Shan State. Historical overview, accessed 10 September 2026.

Tertiary cross-check for a small number of chronology points and locator for original sources. Not presented as academic research. Detailed disputed claims are excluded.

[Chronology cross-check](#)

32 Amnesty International. Myanmar Lack of security in counter-insurgency areas. ASA 16/007/2002, 16 July 2002.

Report landing-page summary examined; covers early 2001 to early 2002. Includes state and SSA-South child recruitment cases, land confiscation and coercive demands. PDF examination status to be updated.

[Original investigation](#)

33 Amnesty International. Caught in the middle Abuses against civilians amid conflict in Myanmar's northern Shan State. ASA 16/1142/2019, 24 October 2019.

Full PDF accessed; executive summary, methodology and background examined, pp. 8–13. Fieldwork and allegations relate to 2018–19; not a current conflict map.

[Original investigation](#)

34 Human Rights Watch. World Report 2022: Myanmar (events of 2021). 2022.

Country chapter examined, especially the coup, repression, conflict and media restrictions. Retrospective annual report; figures refer to the stated reporting period.

[HRW annual report](#)

35 Human Rights Watch. World Report 2025: Myanmar (events of 2024). 2025.

Country chapter examined, especially conflict escalation and conscription. Retrospective report, not a statement of the military situation in September 2026.

[HRW annual report](#)

36 Kyaw Win (ကျော်ဝင်း). ပြည်မအခြေစိုက် နိုင်ငံရေးပါတီများ၏ လူမျိုးစု ပေါ်လစီ [Ethnic policies of mainland-based political parties; working English title]. ISP-Myanmar, 24 July 2017.

Selected Burmese original-language passages examined: section 3 on federal proposals and mainland parties, including the programme summary and objections attributed to Thakin Chit Maung and Ba Swe. A retrospective historical essay, not the original 1961 proposal or a verified peer-reviewed study. Consequential translations require fluent review; its claim of unanimous conference endorsement is not adopted as proof of universal support.

[Burmese historical essay](#)

Further reading and uncompleted leads

2 Sai Aung Tun. History of the Shan State: From Its Origins to 1962. Silkworm Books, 2009.

Publisher record and author biography examined; monograph and documentary appendices not read.

[Publisher record](#)

3 Thongchai Winichakul. Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of the Nation. Silkworm edition, 2004.

Publisher description examined. Full book required before detailed attribution of its historical arguments.

[Publisher record](#)

13 Foon Ming Liew-Herres, Volker Grabowsky and Renoo Wichasin. Chronicles of Sipsòng Panna. Silkworm Books, 2012.

Publisher description only. A priority example of comparative chronicle work involving a Thai philologist; Tai Lü subject matter is not interchangeable with Shan history.

[Publisher record](#)

14 Imperial Gazetteer of India. Digital South Asia Library, University of Chicago.

Index and volume locator examined. Southern Shan States page image and atlas maps were not successfully inspected. Colonial administrative source requiring critical comparison.

[Digital gazetteer collection](#)

16 Chinese bibliographic locators. 僑赏弥 (东南亚) and 中华人民共和国和缅甸联邦边界条约, Chinese Wikipedia reference lists.

Locators only, not authorities for the book's historical conclusions. Underlying Chinese journal articles and the listed Taiwan academic monograph were not examined.

[Ancient-polity bibliography locator](#)

17 ရှမ်းသမိုင်းမှတ်တမ်း. Catalog attribution: စံအိုက် (စိုင်း); Shan Book Club Cā pe, 2021.

Search-result catalog metadata only; direct record and book text were not retrieved. Title-page verification required.

[Google Books catalog lead](#)

18 Pittayawat Pittayaporn. The Phonology of Proto-Tai. Cornell University dissertation, 2009.

Glottolog bibliographic entry examined. Dissertation itself not retrieved; listed as a linguistic acquisition priority.

[Scholarly dissertation record](#)

31 Wikipedia contributors. People's Military Service Law. Accessed 10 September 2026.

Tertiary verification of 2024 activation date and locator for OHCHR and USIP. Original linked pages remained inaccessible; no detailed legal advice or current quota claims derived from it.

[Limited chronology cross-check](#)

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Cover artwork: generated illustration approved by the author. The landscape and botanical design are symbolic.

M1 Shan State in its regional setting

Original map prepared for this manuscript. Geographic data: Natural Earth, public domain; geoBoundaries, Myanmar Analytics Project, CC BY 4.0. Shan administrative boundary represents 2019.

Original rendering from credited geographic datasets; simplified boundaries are for orientation.

[Source image or dataset](#) · [CC BY 4.0](#)

M2 Lakon to Zimmé

Holt S. Hallett, A Thousand Miles on an Elephant in the Shan States, William Blackwood and Sons, 1890. British Library scan, image 334; shelfmark HMNTS 10055.ee.12. Image 334 is a scan identifier, not a printed page number.

None to photographic or historical content. Reproduced at a smaller display size, without cropping.

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M3 From Shan State to Thailand

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Original rendering from credited geographic datasets; simplified boundaries are for orientation.

[Source image or dataset](#) · [CC BY 4.0](#)

P1 Fields near Hsipaw

Nicoreo, 17 August 2024. Field in Hsipaw. Wikimedia Commons.

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P2 Dokhtawady River at Hsipaw

yeowatzup, 1 February 2005. Dokhtawady River, Hsipaw, Myanmar. Wikimedia Commons, from Flickr.

None to photographic or historical content. Reproduced at a smaller display size, without cropping.

[Source image or dataset](#) · [CC BY 2.0](#)

P3 Mae Hong Son

Vyacheslav Argenberg, 27 April 2007. Mae Hong Son (2007-02-473). Wikimedia Commons, from Flickr.

None to photographic or historical content. Reproduced at a smaller display size, without cropping.

[Source image or dataset](#) · [CC BY 2.0](#)

P4 Market in Mae Hong Son

Christophe95, 1 September 2018. Market in Mae Hong Son. Wikimedia Commons.

None to photographic or historical content. Reproduced at a smaller display size, without cropping.

[Source image or dataset](#) · [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Map data and method

The new maps use an equirectangular longitude and latitude view with aspect correction near 21° north. Natural Earth supplies country outlines, selected rivers and populated places. geoBoundaries supplies the Shan outline: MMR ADM1 boundary ID MMR-ADM1-20573499, representing 2019, build dated 12 December 2023, credited to the Myanmar Analytics Project. Files were acquired on 10 September 2026. Rivers are simplified. Place labels are selected for orientation; omission is not a statement about a place's significance.

[Natural Earth reuse terms](#) · [geoBoundaries publication](#)

Research priorities for the next edition

1. Obtain and read Sai Aung Tun's full history and documentary appendices, alongside original Shan-language histories and monastery records. Record the edition, page and provenance of every consequential claim; a publisher listing is not a reading.
2. Locate the original federal proposals debated in 1961 and the relevant conference records. Chapter 4 now also uses a Burmese historical essay, but the original proposal remains unread. Verify its summary against the document and distinguish conference endorsement from wider political agreement.
3. Read Burmese-language academic and independent histories of the Union, customary tenure and displacement. Compare specific official narratives with specific evidence. Nationality and institutional affiliation are context, not automatic verdicts on truthfulness.
4. Extend Thai-language research beyond the two articles directly examined. Read the original Thai scholarship underlying Yos Santasombat's English edition; examine migration, schooling and labour studies with explicit sampling and methods.
5. Read the Chinese academic works currently listed only as leads, including regional work on Yunnan, border making and Nationalist Chinese forces. Reconcile local place-name variants before drawing additional historical maps.
6. Obtain fluent Shan and Burmese review of the original-language material and consequential translations. Check the 1947 legal transcriptions against authoritative facsimiles. Update contemporary policy from the implementing Thai instruments at the publication date.
7. Expand the civilian evidence through already published, consented accounts and, if commissioned separately, ethically conducted interviews. Retain testimony limits and source pseudonyms. Do not contact people or publish new identifying information without authorisation and consent.
8. Expand the manuscript towards the earlier 24,000-word target only where this evidence adds history, voices or explanatory depth. Commission factual, language and copy editing before treating the draft as ready for publication.