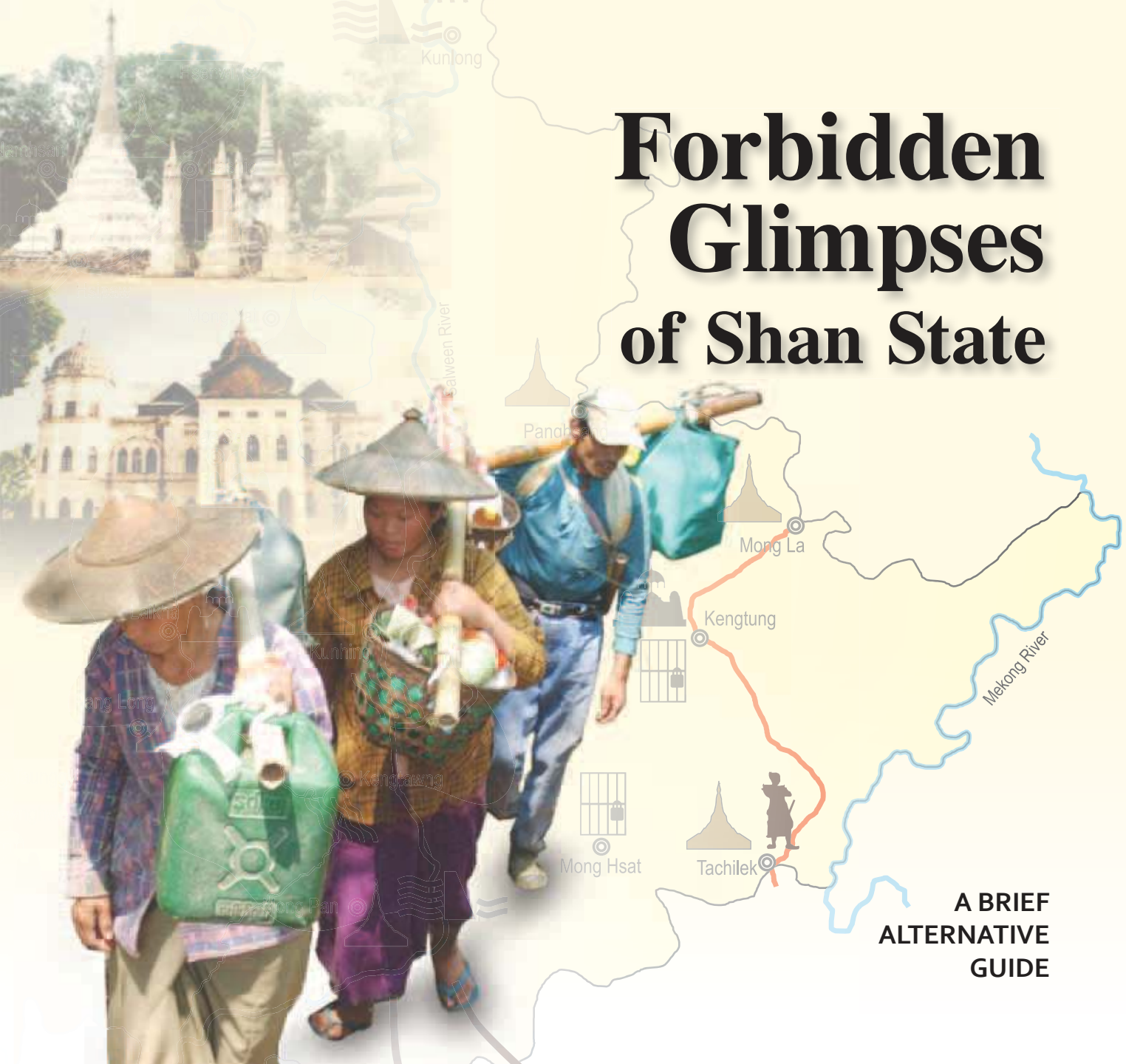


# Forbidden Glimpses of Shan State

**A BRIEF  
ALTERNATIVE  
GUIDE**





# **Forbidden Glimpses of Shan State**

**Shan Women's Action Network**



## Message from SWAN

Debate continues to rage about whether or not tourists should visit Burma and risk giving money and legitimacy to the Burmese military regime. We have fed into this debate by exposing atrocities such as sexual violence, torture and murder by the regime's troops in areas of Shan State out of bounds for foreign visitors, and urging the denial of all forms of support for the regime while these abuses continue.

However, we realize that little attention has been given to more subtle forms of repression by the regime in Shan State, particularly related to culture. Given that experiencing local "culture" is a primary aim of tourists visiting Burma, we feel it is important to expose how Shan State culture, religion and history are being distorted and erased, and gradually replaced by the regime's own homogenized and artificially imposed "Myanmar culture."

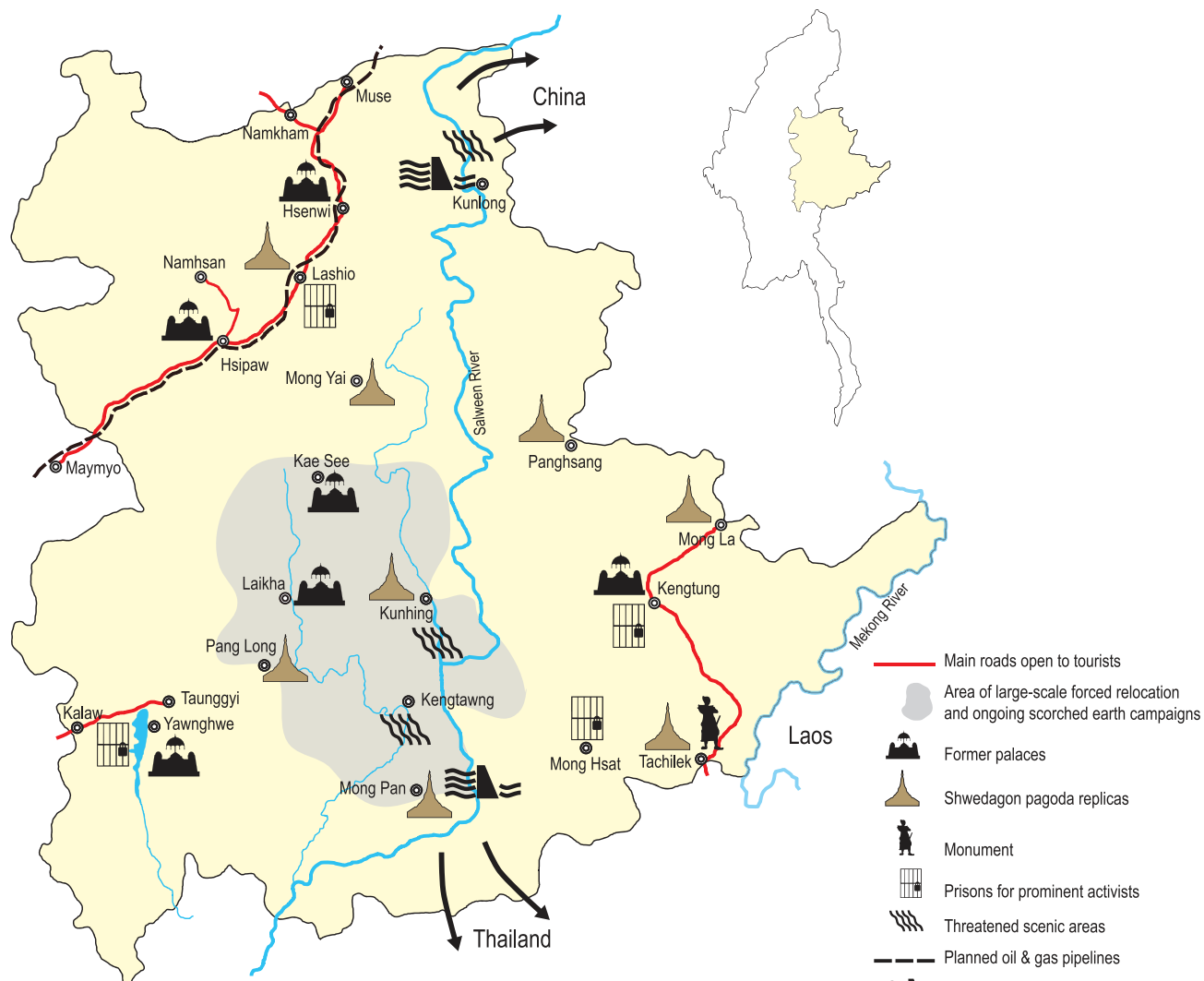
Most of this book deals with these aspects of culture which may be unknown to the average tourist. We have focused on Shan culture, but the process of repression is also happening to other ethnic cultures in Shan State and other parts of Burma.

We have also included photos of areas of great beauty in Shan State that are out of bounds to tourists, but which may soon be lost forever due to the regime's development plans, funded by Thai and Chinese investors. Finally, we have included information about some of the prominent political prisoners from Central Burma languishing in remote Shan State prisons – they will never be physically seen by tourists but their presence should be a constant reminder to us all of the cruel reality of repression in Shan State and the rest of Burma today.

We wish to thank the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) and all our other friends inside and outside Burma who kindly provided photos and information to be used in this book.



## Map of places described in this book



## Where you can go

The vast majority of Shan State is off limits to foreigners. Tourists are only permitted to visit three areas: the Lashio road in the north, the Taungtha and Inle Lake area in the south-west, and the route from Tachilek to Kengtung and Mong La in the east.

## What the regime doesn't want you to see

- Over 150 Burmese infantry battalions are deployed in Shan State to pacify the people and exploit the area's rich natural resources.
- These troops are authorized to live off the land: confiscating farms, extorting and taxing villagers, and requisitioning free labour.
- Various ethnic groups continue to wage resistance against the regime in the hope of gaining justice and equal rights for their people; the regime has consistently refused to engage in meaningful political dialogue with these groups, instead carrying out massive anti-insurgency campaigns to try and crush them.
- During 1996-1998, over 300,000 villagers from southern and central Shan State were forced at gunpoint from their homes and lands in an anti-insurgency operation; most have since fled as refugees to Thailand. To this day, troops are licensed to arrest, torture, rape and kill villagers suspected of supporting the resistance.
- Shan State's beautiful forests, hills and rivers are fast being ravaged and polluted by unbridled resource exploitation by the regime and its cronies.
- While the regime claims to have succeeded in slashing drug production, it continues to promote and profit from the trade, and opium growing has spread to unprecedented levels throughout the state.













*Sao Kya Seng and his wife Inge*









The Yawnghwe Palace, situated near Shan State's famous Inle Lake, is the grandest of the remaining Shan royal palaces. It is a large wood and stone structure, built in the late 1920s and styled after the Mandalay Palace. The last ruling prince was to live there Sao Shwe Thaike, the first President of the Union of Burma.



On March 2, 1962, when the Burmese military seized power, they surrounded the house of Sao Shwe Thaike in Rangoon, and opened fire, killing the former President's 17-year-old son Sao Mee. The elderly Sao Shwe Thaike was arrested and imprisoned in Insein Jail, where he died under suspicious circumstances in November of the same year.

About ten years ago, the palace was officially turned into a museum, called the Nyaung Shwe Cultural Museum (and also known as the Saw Bwa Gyi Myaa Museum or Museum of Shan Chiefs), which was open to tourists and stored the palace regalia. During this time, UNESCO allocated US\$30,000 to repair and refurbish the building, but the military authorities failed to implement any repairs. Then, abruptly in 2006, an order was received from the Ministry of Culture to send all the palace artefacts to the new capital at Nay Pyi Daw.

In September 2007, the palace was reopened to the public as a "Buddha Museum." The interior of the palace has been emptied, and huge pictures of pagodas, such as the Kyaikhtiyo, the Shwedagon and Maha Myatmuni were put on the wall in the former throne hall. None of the signs in the museum mention the history of the building as a palace.



*Above: the last ruling prince of Yawnghwe, Sao Shwe Thaike. Right: the former throne room*





## Communities protecting their heritage

The towns of Laikha and Kae See in central Shan State remain strictly out of bounds for foreign tourists. Formerly thriving agricultural hubs, repeated scorched earth campaigns by the regime's military have depopulated and impoverished the surrounding rural areas.







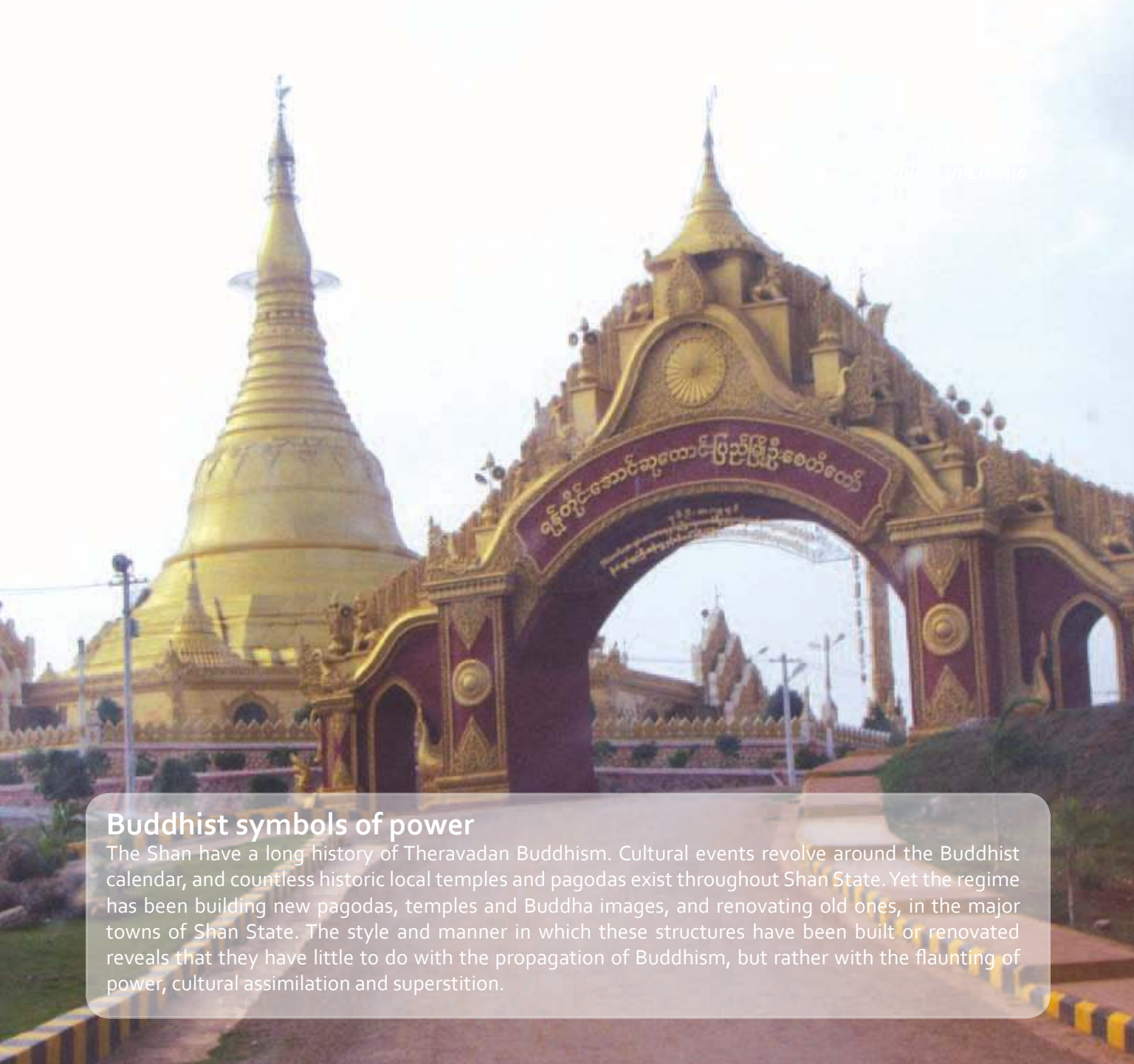
*The regime ordered the reconstruction of King Bayinnaung's palace in Bago (Central Burma) in 1990. It was completed in 2003.*





*The gate at the entrance to Lashio bears the Burmese word "Lasho" meaning "donkey show." In Shan, Lashio means "the town opposite the mountain with many eagles." A few years ago the traditional Shan drums on the sides of the gate were replaced with images of rice plants*





Shan State  
Jawmabin Lashio

## Buddhist symbols of power

The Shan have a long history of Theravadan Buddhism. Cultural events revolve around the Buddhist calendar, and countless historic local temples and pagodas exist throughout Shan State. Yet the regime has been building new pagodas, temples and Buddha images, and renovating old ones, in the major towns of Shan State. The style and manner in which these structures have been built or renovated reveals that they have little to do with the propagation of Buddhism, but rather with the flaunting of power, cultural assimilation and superstition.



In 1997, local military commanders began building a Shwedagon replica in **Kunhing**, one of the central Shan townships where the regime had just forcibly relocated 300,000 Shan civilians as part of a massive anti-insurgency campaign against the Shan resistance. The name of the pagoda was “Maha Kanbawza Pyi Nyein Aye Pagoda” (meaning “Peaceful Shanland” in Burmese). General Maung Aye presided over the ground-breaking ceremony, which was held at 9 am on the 9th day of the 9th month of the lunar calendar (9 is the auspicious number for the military leaders of the regime). According to local custom, monks and local villagers should bury valuables under a pagoda during the ground-breaking ceremony but they were all kept away and only military officers performed this task. After the ceremony, local villagers, including children, were forced to build the pagoda.



A further replica was completed in June 2000 in **Mong Yai**, almost directly in the centre of Shan State, near the state’s highest peak at Loi Leng.



In 2001, another Shwedagon replica was started in **Mong Pan**, the Burma Army’s strategic command centre in southern Shan State, overseeing military operations against the Shan resistance forces based along the Thai border. The pagoda was built on a hill west of the town, on the site of an old Shan temple, which was forced to move to another location. 300 acres of farmland were confiscated for the temple grounds. The 108-foot (1+8=9) tall “Maha Tejadhpati” Pagoda (meaning “Great Power”) was completed in 2003. Until today, military authorities force local villagers to take turns standing as security guards for the pagoda, and insist that the annual traditional Shan novice ordination festival is celebrated at this location.



In January 2003, a further replica was completed in **Panghsang**, the capital of the Wa ceasefire area in northern Shan State. Again, the ceasefire broker, General Khin Nyunt presided over the ceremony.

*The Shwedagon replica in Pang Long  
faces off with the monument to the  
historic Pang Long agreement*









## *The Standing Buddha in Kengtung*

This towering Buddha image stands over 60 feet tall and was completed in 1998 on Loi Jom Sak hill, the highest spot in the town of Kengtung, just west of the lake. The image faces east, with the right arm extended and index finger pointing out over the town – an unusual authoritarian posture which local residents regard with suspicion.

The image was ordered built by then Triangle Region Commander Thein Sein (currently Prime Minister). Burmese artisans were brought in from Mandalay to oversee the construction, and instead of using local builders, Burma Army troops stationed in the town were hired to build the image. During the construction, the area was placed out of bounds to local residents.

According to Shan custom, when a Buddha image is built, a special ceremony is held when monks and villagers place sacred and precious items inside the “heart” of the Buddha. However, during the building of this Buddha, no locals were invited to this ceremony, leaving people suspicious at what had been inserted in the image. After the image was completed, two Burmese monks were called from Rangoon and put in charge of the new temple at the foot of the image.

Local residents are convinced that the image is bringing them bad luck, and avoid paying obeisance there. Sellers say they can sell nothing if they walk past the image on their way to morning market. They therefore make long detours to avoid passing beneath the image. Locals also cite evidence of celestial displeasure at the image: only six months after it was built, the offending outstretched hand was hit by lightening, knocking off the pointing finger. One of the original Burmese builders was summoned to quickly restore it.

## *The renovation of the Baw Gyo Pagoda near Hsipaw*

The Baw Gyo Pagoda is an ancient monument reputed to be over 2,000 years old. It was renovated significantly during 1995-1996 under the orders of General Khin Nyunt.

A committee of Burmese township officials was appointed to oversee the renovation, replacing the former pagoda committee of local elders.

The building has been elaborately gilded and painted, and traces of former Shan donors erased. Instead, stone plaques have been erected describing in Burmese how Burmese generals have renovated the temple.

















**Min Zeya**  
88 Generation  
Sentence: 65 years  
Former political prisoner  
serving 6 years



**Lashio Jail**  
Lies in the north of the town  
17 political prisoners



**Min Ko Naing**  
88 Generation  
Sentence: 65 years & 6 months  
Former political prisoner  
serving 16 years



**Jimmy**  
88 Generation  
Sentence: 65 years  
Former political prisoner  
serving 15 years



**Kengtung Jail**  
Lies in the centre of the town,  
west of Nawng Tung Lake  
8 political prisoners



**Taunggyi Jail**  
Situated at Taung Lay Lone,  
on road from Mandalay to Taunggyi  
9 political prisoners



**Mong Hsat Jail**  
Lies just west of the town  
4 political prisoners



**Ko Ko Gyi**  
88 Generation  
Sentence: 65 years & 6 months  
Former political prisoner  
serving 13 years



## *Behind the gates of Kengtung Jail*

Leading democracy activist Min Ko Naing is being kept in solitary confinement in a small cell, forbidden to go out, even to take exercise. Prison food is such low quality that most prisoners rely on family visits to get proper food, but Min Ko Naing's family are rarely able to visit him because of the distance from his home in Rangoon. Already in poor health from repeated torture while in previous detention, he is suffering from a heart condition, weak nerves, deteriorating eyesight, and a painful growth on his foot, but has been denied proper medical treatment.



*The gate at Kengtung prison*





