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## The Extra-ordinariness of Ordinary Lives

Mandy Sadan

### The Remarkable Life Stories of Burma<sup>1</sup>

The pace of change in Burma in recent years has in many ways been remarkable. Visitors to urban areas of the country, especially Yangon, cannot fail to be struck by the tangible and intangible differences in the ways people are now able to live their lives compared to just a few years previously, mostly for the better. Large billboards display Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's image in public settings, whereas previously small icon-like photographs would have been surreptitiously placed in the corner niches of homes in quiet acts of personal resistance to the military regime. People talk openly and apparently freely about their support for the National League for Democracy, but may also make known some of their criticisms of the organisation and its leadership, remarkably now without this being taken automatically as evidence of pro-

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<sup>1</sup> There are many people whom I would like to thank in the writing of this paper, but most of all I would like to thank Hkanhpa, my husband, for his support and for sharing so many sometimes quite painful memories with me. I would also like to thank all the siblings, Ban Awng, Seng Lawt, Ja Ngai and Ja Mun, and their families for welcoming me into their lives and allowing me to learn so much. My thanks also to Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo for bringing together these papers and for their insightful and supportive comments. My thanks also to all the other participants of the original workshop at Harvard for making such a rewarding and enlightening endeavour with which to have been involved. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Sadan Awng Tu and Maran Ja Bang.

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government inclinations. When I arrived in Yangon in June 2012, my first visit to Burma via the city for nearly ten years, I was struck by how normal the experience at Mingaladon Airport had become, whereas previously I had always dreaded the oppressive sense of controlled fear that permeated the place. Most surprisingly, now I was also struck immediately by how much the shapes and postures of the bodies of the people around the airport and downtown seemed to have altered. Fatter, taller, more assertive: no matter what the future might hold, it was clear that changes have been set in train that can never be completely reversed, or at least only at a terrible cost.

Yet there was another place to which I was heading on this visit: Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State. Notions of political progress in this area of the country are notably easier to challenge. In June 2011, the ceasefire between the Kachin Independence Army and the Burma Army broke down. Just at the time when progress seemed to be taking place at the political centre, the Kachin region seemed entirely out of step with the national mood. Many reporters and people who had worked towards political change in Burma since the early 1990s, and who had in recent years begun finally to take up the interests of the so-called “ethnic minorities” as their allied political cause, expressed frustration at this disconnection. “The Kachin” were holding the country to ransom, were motivated by self-interests or being manipulated by self-seeking economic elites who were out to line their own pockets, they would argue. In these explanations, remarkably little attention seemed to be paid to the reasons underlying the collapse of the ceasefire. These voices spoke only of their determination that another ceasefire should be signed as quickly as possible to smooth out the political landscape. What was so easily forgotten in this situation was that precisely because the previous experience of ceasefire had lasted for seventeen

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years, it was now going to be harder to bring a similar resolution to this new situation in the short term. People understood very clearly what “ceasefire” meant in the Kachin region. Prior experience for many meant that this term had little traction with concerns to bring substantive political solutions to the problems of the country’s peripheral regions and non-Bamar populations.

In June 2012 at least, Myitkyina felt like a very different world indeed to that of optimistic, increasingly middle-class Yangon wrapped up in its own sense of self worth. When I arrived at Myitkyina airport, the positive changes were less noticeable than in Yangon. The most obvious difference was undoubtedly the very large numbers of motorbikes that streamed everywhere. It was perhaps this new mobility, enabling young people to interact with each other over a much wider area and develop their own networks and groups more independently that was perhaps the biggest change that I could discern (Chang 2012). Yet there were other changes, but not of a positive kind. The rhetoric of the packed church sermons was quite noticeably more militant and even militaristic; people also spoke clearly and openly of their displeasure at events in the political centre of the country. This was especially so coming shortly after Aung San Suu Kyi’s visit to the UK. Coming from Britain myself, many made no secret in their conversations with me of their anger at her failure on this visit to engage properly and fully with the issues underlying the recent breakdown of the ceasefire and their many decades of local struggle. It seemed that the local mood of many in Myitkyina at this time was that while no one wanted to fight, this should be treated now as the end game in which the Burmese politicians of all persuasions had to prove finally and irrevocably that they had a commitment to listening to and allowing the full participation of non-Burman communities in the central political decision

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making of the nation if they were to persuade Kachin people that they should put down their arms. Empty words and shallow promises were no longer enough.

On a hot, humid afternoon not long after arriving in Myitkyina, a small group of elderly ladies came to pay a visit. I remembered them well from years ago. They had been close friends of my mother-in-law, part of her prayer circle and her close confidantes who together shared the trials and tribulations of each other's lives over many decades. I had become used to them sitting and chatting away, talking about the problems that particular families were having, about what was going on at the church, where the next prayer meeting was to be held; their conversations were peppered throughout with religious references and appeals to the Lord to support them in their times of trouble. Visits had always seemed to end with a group prayer and then they would each head back to their home to deal with whatever issues may have arisen in their absence among under-employed sons, over-worked daughters and wayward husbands. Yet this time was different; here was evidence of more change. On this visit, they immediately started to talk about the political situation, making their support for the KIA's recent actions very clear, a line of conversation that they had never engaged in with me previously. The KIA was an organisation of which many of them had also been quietly very critical in years past. They spoke of Aung San Suu Kyi and her failure to make insightful or meaningful comments on their situation, and their sense of frustration that for them and their families, things were not better, they were worse and therefore a resort to arms was the only way forward. I was taken aback by this encounter. This was the evidence of tangible change that I had looked for, but on this occasion in a wholly negative sense. When a group of peace-loving elderly women, many of whom have lost multiple children to conflict, drug addiction and poor general medical provision, start to act as flag

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bearers for continued conflict, it is clear that the problems with which national politicians must engage are deep seated and widespread. The present conflict, whether it might be resolved soon or not, reflected a very deep level of frustration and anger in the lives of ordinary people in this region, and that the breakdown in the ceasefire could not be explained away simply as the result of self-seeking interests among resource extracting military cliques.

How these women in their 60s and 70s attached new political meanings to their lives and experiences in this setting was striking. Of course, none of these positions is permanent. Attitudes and interpretations are capable of realignment and rearrangement, but their own memories and experiences over many years were influencing the present hardening of their attitudes. I had come to Myitkyina at this time to pay respect at the graves of my mother-in-law and father-in-law, and listening to these ladies, I could hear my own mother-in-law's life experience running through that of their own recollections. Each life was extra-ordinary in its own way, even though each woman claimed to be only ordinary, yet each provided now a critical reflection on the reasons why ceasefire, for the time being and maybe for a considerable time to come, was no longer considered by them to be a desirable political object. Understanding the life stories of women such as this was vital if their reactions, too, were to make sense in the present.

It is sometimes hard to provide a rationale for drawing attention to the biographies of unknown, "ordinary" individuals, but the objection is only rarely an academic one. Historians have long since moved away from the idea that history is just a record of elites, of "Great Men" in Thomas Carlyle's famous phrase (Carlyle [1840] 1888). More often than not the concern about the biographical representation of "ordinary" people arises from a prejudice within the communities in which those people live. Educational and social hierarchies, the differentiated

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values attached to “popular” knowledge and experience can all create a disinclination to listen to the voices of the ‘ordinary’: they have nothing to say, they are not “clever” enough, they don’t understand what they are talking about; all these are commonly repeated objections to lending a dispassionate ear to the voices of the poor, the ill-educated, the marginalised and the largely invisible.

The main way in which the voices of the ‘ordinary’ in Burma have been represented in recent years has tended to be through anonymised narratives from the various Human Rights and political pressure groups that have such a large presence in any discussion of the country.<sup>2</sup> For obvious and understandable reasons related to ethics, time and funding constraints, such accounts have been used principally to demonstrate the mechanisms of power and oppression that have typified the Burmese military regime in the longer term, not to giving individual, personalised, idiosyncratic interpretations of the contextual flow of everyday lives over time. The individual is largely lost as an actor in his or her own right when, to paraphrase the biographer and historian Amanda Foreman, “your heroes [and anti-heroes] are abstract nouns” (Foreman 2002). The huge amount of highly shocking and complex data that has in recent years been produced by organisations such as Karen Human Rights Group<sup>3</sup> and others has been critical in the effort to incorporate lived experience into political discussions that might produce change, but such

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<sup>2</sup> With reference to the Kachin region alone, there have been many significant and informative reports on social conditions there in recent years by such organisations as Global Witness, 2003, and the ongoing work of the Transnational Institute. The local NGO based in Thailand which seeks to represent the interests of Kachin women, KWAT or Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand, has also given much attention to oral testimony in recent years as in their 2005 report *Driven Away: Trafficking of Kachin Women on the China-Burma Border* made significant efforts at representing individual life stories to produce a body of evidence for human rights lobbying.

<sup>3</sup> The Karen Human Rights Group is one of the most prolific and experienced of groups seeking to both document and archive oral testimonies. Their many reports and other data can be found at <http://www.khrg.org/>

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representations, of necessity, do not gain their power and impact from the individual but rather from collective representations of experience.

However, we have to be aware of the possibility that individual biographies may easily become products of analysis rather than its agents. In any discussion of biography as a tool for understanding the more generalised flow of history and its pathways into contemporary life, rather than the impacts of particular policies or events, we need to distinguish both our method and what it is that we hope to achieve through such acts of listening and recording.<sup>4</sup> What we make of these more broadly drawn biographical accounts should certainly be more than snapshots into other lives; if we are to address biography as a method rather than just an interesting diversion, we need to think about how these stories weave into bigger settings. This is certainly the challenge that confronted me when trying to understand the present political orientations of these elderly ladies in Myitkyina, as well as understanding the life story of my mother-in-law. Yet we need also to allow those individual narratives to express the intense experiences of contradiction and uncertainty that run through all our personal and psychological lives, which is sometimes not possible in settings of political advocacy. We should be wary of trying to “smooth out” the rough edges of inconsistency where the fuller picture raises for us some discomfiting questions. These ladies had not always thought in the way they were expressing their ideas now, and they would no doubt not always think this way in the future. But for the time being, this was the way they saw the world around them, and how they interpreted their own experiences in relation to it.

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<sup>4</sup> For a good introduction to the ways in which oral testimony intersects with good development practice see Slim, 1993. *Learning to Listen* (Sadan, 2008) also incorporates elements of this text and other training documentation produced by the Panos Oral Testimony Programme in a downloadable document available in English and Burmese at [http://www.soros.org/initiatives/bpsai/articles\\_publications/publications/learning\\_20080407](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/bpsai/articles_publications/publications/learning_20080407)

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When individual voices are allowed more space to express themselves, what emerges is often a quite natural assertion of how individuals struggle to accommodate mentally, physically and socially to complex social and political environments. Outlines are drawn of the ambiguous personal and psychological realms in which individuals make decisions about how to manage the gray areas of their lives, where paradox and incongruity become normalised in order to “get on with one’s life”. We read this many times in this volume, but especially in the stories recounted by Bénédicte Brac de la Perriere and Lu Hsin-Chin. Great strength of personality or belief can produce immense powers of resilience, but the internalisation of dark despair may also create a psychological hinterland where self-destructive modes of escape may take hold, especially the oblivion of excessive drug or alcohol use, as we heard over and over again during the discussions at our original workshop, some of which are outlined in the papers in this volume and others which simply entered into our more private conversations in the confines of the meeting room. Every one of the life stories that we discussed had at its core a challenge to the normative model of what we are told one ‘should’ expect from an individual in any particular situation; they were lives that did not follow a straight path and the contradictions that emerged were not easy to resolve other than on their own terms. It is tempting to try to apply pseudo-psychological analysis to the narrative recounted by James C. Scott to “make sense of” the apparent lack of interest in politics that is displayed. Furthermore, so much of the discourse about Burma in recent years has been predicated upon a derogatory notion of “government service” that is easy to forget that this used to be something which was a source of great pride to many and, as we see in the papers by Karin Eberhardt and Ardeth Thawngmung and as a sub-text in my own, for a certain generation this legacy still creates complexity for individuals who try to maintain the



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political boundary-crossing that simplistic accounts would denigrate. As political changes continue to unfold in Burma, it is no doubt a notion of public service that will return for many. Yet rarely even in recent decades have such boundary crossing political activities been seen locally entirely as a contradiction or aberration. These feelings of uneasiness should not be teased away; they are the core issues with which we have to grapple as we use these narratives to improve our understanding of how people live their lives and have lived them in the decades of severe oppression pre-dating some of the recent changes.

The political situation in Burma, despite the current steps towards progress, still presents challenges not least in the ethical issues of making the details of people's lives visible on a broader stage, and this was a theme that occupied a considerable part of our discussions when the authors in this volume first met to discuss this collective endeavour. "Ordinary" can become a euphemism for the un-protected and vulnerable in a country where social status, while by no means creating safe havens in the political realm, can at least be used to identify avenues for seeking assistance. No one would argue that all such threats and harassments have somehow disappeared from the scene overnight in the face of recent developments. This is especially so given the fragility of the situation in many parts of the country and the ongoing anti-Islamic backlash that is destabilising the international image of Burmese society as something defined by Buddhist non-violence. All of these events render such simplistic interpretations meaningless, and yet complexity can only be understood by incorporating the voices of those still implicated in and affected by these difficult alternative political realities. All of us participating in this volume seemed to share a common belief that the individual stories of people who form the social bedrock of Burma can lead us towards more subtle and more nuanced understandings of

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Burma's social and political environment. Yet, in taking such accounts and drawing attention to them, we need also to be sensitive to the implications of projecting those life stories onto a wider stage. Many of the biographies in this volume are of supposedly "ordinary" but in reality quite remarkable individuals, and again and again the boundaries between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, the exemplary and the exceptional became blurred and confused. Burma is, of course, a country where conducting academic research in recent decades has obviously in some ways been very difficult. But, it can also be very easy, especially when exploring the prospects of narrative. The non-conventional fieldwork method of just letting life unfold around you has always seemed to me the best, and least frustrating, approach. Apparently remarkable lives appear so commonplace that the most innocent of conversations can take unexpected turns in which almost unbelievable experiences will be recounted. When one scratches the surface of Burmese lives, it seems that extraordinary experiences shape the social fabric, and extremes of fortune seem to run through every family, with calamitous and heartbreaking accounts of loss set against the tragic-comic vagaries of "good" luck. Perhaps this is not different in essence to the way life is lived everywhere, but the shape of the narrative seems so frequently to have produced such exaggerated peaks and troughs in Burma in recent decades that it forces one to reconsider the capacity of the human spirit to endure.

Another theme that emerged through our discussions was the interconnectedness of the author and their subject; many of us are able to tell these stories because of the extended periods of time over which we have known these individuals and their families. Explicitly or implicitly, we have all become entangled. This is unavoidable, but it has a large bearing on the ethics of research; it influences how certain individuals and their biographies end up being captured by us

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in ways that still privileges some and not others. Many of the accounts in this volume can be reproduced here only because of the sometimes quite intimate connections that the author and the subject have established. Others have emerged because a particular individual has become over a time a focus of interest, a living conundrum, and writing the life story has gone some way to enabling the writer to begin to understand that person, and in some cases to understand better their own assumptions and preconceptions. In either respect, we and they are bound together in this representation. In my own case, I will attempt to outline some of the key facts of the life of my mother-in-law, Maran Ja Bang. It is an account produced by intimacy, but it is also an attempt to understand her, as well as to work out where I stand as an insider-outsider wife in a Jinghpaw family, to clarify those areas in which I may be deemed to succeed and where inevitably to fail. It is also only through an understanding of her life that I can begin to make sense of the lives of the women who came to see me in June 2012 and with whom she shared so much of herself. Without understanding her, I also cannot reflect upon what might make her friends so angry in these present times to the extent that they might support a resumption of conflict, and ultimately therefore, what aspects of their voices they so desire to be heard by those who will apparently not listen.

It became clear at the workshop that most of our accounts would have to be a compromise between what we knew fully about a person and their lives and the need to calibrate that towards a host of ethical, social and political concerns. This is very much the case with the account to follow. What is written here is but a fragment of a wider picture, but it reveals in its essentials the extra-ordinariness of supposedly ordinary lives. It is primarily about Ja Bang, but

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as she was married for over forty years to her husband, Awng Tu, it is difficult to separate one life from the other. It is written out of great respect to them both. (FIGURE 1)

## The Facts of a Life: the Extra-ordinariness of a Kachin Woman

Maran Ja Bang was born in 1944 in the northern Shan States. The Maran lineage is perhaps the most significant of the Jinghpaw lineages to have settled in this area and the local tradition is that they started to move into the northern Shan States as an identifiable flow (although most likely not the first) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> This wave should be distinguished from the endless micro-migrations that have occurred incessantly over time producing the complex web of social relations that one sees across this space.<sup>6</sup> Rather, this tradition relates to what appears to have been a more assertive extension by major lineage groups who were seeking lands to settle. After opening up new cultivation sites with the use of small, militarised migrations, Maran chiefs were subsequently able to call down their *dauma* groups (those to whom they could give wives and who often owed them service) who then came to the

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<sup>5</sup> There are a number of publications in English that give a general overview of “Kachin” history, of which the best in recent years has been Wang (1997). As this account focuses mainly on the Jingpo region of Yunnan, it reflects the interconnectedness of this area with the northern Shan States, too. Other books written in Jinghpaw, such as by H. Naw Awn (1986), also make this assumption. However this statement is also supported by many interviews conducted since 1996 on traditions of migration in the region; all have tended to locate this period as significant for Maran migration. See also Sao Saimong Mongrai (1965), and Sai Aung Tun (2009), for Shan historical perspectives on this area. See Sadan (2013) for a fuller account of how historical migration patterns have contributed to the emergence of modern Kachin ethno-nationalism.

<sup>6</sup> The work of Edmund Leach (1954) obviously points towards some of this complexity although it does not grapple with many of its details outside the “Kachin” context. There is an increasing literature that seeks to address how to conceptualise such complexity ethnographically, of which the work by U Chit Hlaing (F. Kris Lehman) was an important precursor and which has seen its most recent form in Gravers (2007). The edited volume by Culas and Robinne (2009), also indicates the shape that future research into such ethnic conundrums in the area may take.

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area to settle alongside them, shifting the balance of power relations as they did so.<sup>7</sup> These migratory movements established the significance of the Maran lineage in the area in ways that were still significant to Kachin politics and social dynamics well into the twentieth century, when my mother-in-law was born. Some of the most important Maran *duwa* (chief) in the early twentieth century included those of Namhkyek and Howa, but there were large numbers of smaller chiefs who were their kin.<sup>8</sup> One of these was the Hpapin *duwa*, Naw Seng, who was my mother-in-law's grandfather. His territory extended into areas that were largely Wa and Palaung looking north and eastwards, and extracting taxes and other tribute from these areas seems to have required a persistent, uncompromising show of strength.<sup>9</sup> Naw Seng had three sons, Hkun Htun, Ja Naw, who was Ja Bang's father, and Ja La. Hkun Htun was an extravagant, extrovert, thrill-seeker who had been educated in a Shan monastery, became expert in Shan martial arts and, Ja Bang would recall, was covered from his neck to his knees with the deep blue of amulet tattoos. He wanted to travel and felt limited by the Hpapin territory and, having no children, during the Second World War he quickly signed up to join the 101s, the US special detachment which rallied together the Kachin Rangers volunteers and in turn played a critical role in the struggle to remove the Japanese from upper Burma in the India-Burma-China theatre after 1942.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In areas where *dauma* groups were not able to settle in great numbers, such as in North East India, "Jinghpaw" (Singpho) communities established (or maintained) complex sets of political and social relations with other groups, specifically the Tai Hkamti, and has produced a different political shape to the community over time. Sadan forthcoming. Discussion of Jinghpaw lineage relations can also be found extensively in Leach (1954), and Robinne (2007).

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of these chiefs in the 1920s and some contemporary images of the Namhkyek *duwa* and his family, see Dell, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> See Leach (1954) for extensive discussions derived from this idea that Kachin chiefs in the region aped the behaviours of Shan *chaohpa* or *sawbwa*.

<sup>10</sup> There is a very large literature, both published and online on this subject and on the British volunteer force, the Kachin Levies. Both the US and British veterans involved in this region have subsequently endeavoured to engage

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With Hkun Htun disinclined to take on his familial responsibilities,<sup>11</sup> Ja Bang's father Ja Naw, the second eldest, took on most of the duties of tax and tribute collection from the territory as his father got older. The *duwa* was a stern disciplinarian and Ja Bang would recall how he extracted his dues from the surrounding villages with a will of steel. He told his son to travel the area on horseback, and Ja Bang would remember how when Ja Naw went through the Friday market everyone put their heads to the ground as he passed by, as her grandfather had insisted upon it. Ja Naw had two sons as well as his daughter, Ja Bang, and was at this time an ardent believer in Jinghpaw spirit practices, although he was as well versed in Shan language and culture as his elder brother. This was to be important when in a few years time the family was forced to relocate to the ethnographically complex area between Sagaing Division and Kachin State with its patchwork of Bamar, Shan, Kachin and Kadu Kanan villages, among others.<sup>12</sup>

The uncertainties of chiefly power in newly independent Burma were reflected in the Shan States by increasing opposition towards the powers of the Shan *sawbwa* or *chaopha*, a style of authority to which clearly the Hpapin *duwa* had been attracted (Sai Aung Tun 2009). It would make for an uncomfortable relationship between Ja Naw and local communities with long memories of harsh tax collection methods when the rights of the *sawbwa*, and pseudo *sawbwa*, were challenged. However, for Kachin people residing in northern Shan State and elsewhere, a range of possible futures now appeared to be opened up through the creation of the new geo-

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in local development or welfare support programmes to assist veterans who they feel they owe a great deal but who have received no official commemoration for their efforts. See for example, the Burma Forces Welfare Association website at <http://www.qcmilitaria.com/bfwa.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> The family patrimony would be inherited by the first son in this area. This is not always the case in other parts of the Kachin region although the predominance of writings derived from research and experience in this area has tended to privilege this as the normative model everywhere, as in Leach (1954), Gilhodes (1992), Hanson (1913). See Green (1934) for discussion of different lines of inheritance across this area.

<sup>12</sup> See Robinne and Sadan (2007) for discussion of how studies of village networks may be helpful in breaking through the stranglehold of ethnicity as a primary analytical apparatus in such settings.

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political entity, Kachin State. For many, this new political space held promise of alternative possibilities and prospects and many Kachin people now moved to this new state in search of a more stable and prosperous life.<sup>13</sup> Leaving territorial possessions, however, was a more complicated decision than moving when one had nothing left to lose, and the movement of many Maran chiefly families away from the northern Shan States was triggered in the end by the arrival of the Kuomintang and the famine that swept this area in the early-mid 1950s (Lintner 1990).

The Howa family, with whom the old Hpapin *duwa* had closest connections, moved to the Danai region close to the Hugawng valley. This was an area that traditionally looked westwards to India as much as it did to China.<sup>14</sup> Many of the Jinghaw Kachins in this area were Hkahku in origin, which is largely a Jinghpaw geographic term that relates to the central hub of traditional Jinghpaw culture in the Triangle region north of the confluence of the Irrawaddy River. They were stereotypically strident in their regional identity, including their adherence to traditional spirit practices in the face of repeated attempts at conversion by both Buddhist and Christian missionaries. They had also been the community that had most resisted the extension of recruitment fields into their territories by the colonial army in the latter decades of empire.<sup>15</sup> However, although their cultural and religious practices were staunchly “Hkahku” in the Triangle, the deeper into the Hugawng valley one went heading west, the more this became blended with facets of Burmese Buddhism refracted through the lens of north east Indian and Tai Hkamti practice. In the 1950s, U Nu’s Buddhist missionary policies had some impact on this

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<sup>13</sup> Sadan, 2013, for discussion of the climate of aspiration among young, mobile Kachin people in the 1950s

<sup>14</sup> Hannay (1847) is the first to discuss this connection in detail.

<sup>15</sup> Green (1934) discusses the different reactions that were experienced by his recruitment party in the 1920s in a number of different communities

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region and stretching across the Patkoi range into what was then Assam and then the North East Frontier Agency or NEFA.<sup>16</sup> It was in this region that the Jinghpaw morphed into the “Singpho” a cognate term of Jinghpaw arising from dialect differences.<sup>17</sup> The political affinities of this area were increasingly determined by association with the North East Frontier of India and the political framework that opened up there after independence rather than Burma (Mackenzie A. 1884).

The Maran chiefs who arrived in the Hugawng and Danai valleys in the 1950s had great status within this wider nexus of Jinghpaw or Kachin communities, but they had fewer territorial linkages there that could be drawn upon to establish the new lands that they desperately needed as internally displaced refugees (Jinghpaw Wunpawng Htunghking hte Laili Laika Hpung Ginjaw, 2001). The opening up of cultivation sites involved looking for lands that were new or at the margins of the Jinghpaw area. However, their relatively cosmopolitan outlook and higher levels of education made them interesting new arrivals for the remaining missionaries in the Hugawng region who were still in the 1950s struggling to establish a Kachin congregation of any size. Unsurprisingly, many of these settlers from northern Shan State, who arrived as staunch ‘animists’ but with some sympathy for and exposure to Christian missionary efforts towards the economic and educational development in the Kachin mission field around Bhamo, rapidly proved amenable to Christian conversion when they became a more marginal group seeking to establish economic securities in a sometimes hostile environment. They became the hub of

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<sup>16</sup> This comment is derived from field research conducted in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in 2008 and 2009 (Sadan, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> See Sadan (2007) for a full discussion of the various ethnonyms that are used and their historical relationships to each other



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“Christian” identity for the Kachin in the Hugawng where previously there had been much resistance.

Ja Naw took a slightly different tack. Although called to the Hugawng by the Howa *duwa*, he instead decided to take lands that were made available to them as internally displaced refugees just outside Mingone at Namana village, close to the Mandalay to Myitkyina railway line in the southernmost part of Kachin State. This was a predominantly Shan-Bamar area and the assumption in the family seems to have been that Ja Naw was perhaps more comfortable in this environment because of his fluency in Shan and his business acumen, both of which enabled him to anticipate the economic potential of this particular village site. This environment, however, was less amenable to the kind of integration and cultural translation that he had experienced in northern Shan State.<sup>18</sup> The migrants from Hpapin were forced to take lands outside Mingone and in isolation from these other settlements and so they quickly established themselves as a niche rather than blended community there. Very quickly Ja Naw, the strong-willed animist, converted to Christianity from which point he became a devout member of the local Kachin Baptist church, eventually becoming its Deacon. Such shifts indicate clearly the wider societal pressures that were being exerted at this time through changes in the political paradigm of what Independence might mean for non-Bamar communities and the fairly rapid consolidation of ethno-nationalist identities and aspirations that proceeded hand in hand with political disappointment in the 1950s. This was a product of the failures of independence and was not a done-deal before this time.

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<sup>18</sup> Edmund Leach originally went to Burma to investigate the tensions that existed in this area between different communities (Anderson 2007).

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Ja Bang was sent to Mayan primary school in Mogaung Township, the only missionary school in this area and westwards through Hugawng, where she stayed as a boarder. When she reached High School age, she was sent to Myitkyina to stay with her uncle, the adventurer Hkun Htun. After the war he had stayed in Myitkyina where he had joined the Kachin State Agricultural Department as a highway driver. His restlessness was evidently satisfied by the incessant travelling he did along the then still functioning Ledo road that stretched downwards from India to China, and his diaries were full of weekly trips in a grand circle linking Myitkyina, Ledo and Sumprabum. As he had no children of his own, he “adopted” Ja Bang when she went to Myitkyina, along with another girl related to him, which in a Jinghpaw context meant that he took on full responsibility for their welfare and future security. Hkun Htun, the ardent animist-Buddhist with a strong monastic education and fluency in Shan and Burmese had, like his brother, become a devout Christian. At this time, more and more Kachin people were settling in the outskirts of Myitkyina and distinctive Kachin settlements were appearing, often with strong associations with particular schools, notably the Kachin Baptist School where Maran Brang Seng, one of the early founders of the Kachin Independence Army, was working as a teacher, and the mission-founded Manhkring School a few miles to the north of the town. Perhaps the only indication that Hkun Htun still had a more complex understanding of the constraints and possible limitations of allying himself with a burgeoning ethno-nationalist ideology was that he chose to send Ja Bang to No. 1 State High School in Myitkyina, rather than the schools of choice for many Kachin at this time. The complex interplay between self and collective identities and government service that we see repeated throughout this volume are evident also in this case.

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Ja Bang left High School after passing her 7<sup>th</sup> Standard and returned to the family home near Mingone. It was on this visit that she met my father-in-law, Sadan Awng Tu. Ja Bang was a beautiful young girl, small and slightly plump with the high, rounded cheeks and pale complexion that is deemed so characteristic of women from the Shan region. She had a large mole on her face, which many people used to identify her, especially when she became involved in the cross-border commodities trade some years later. But most distinctive about the young Ja Bang was her long, black hair. She never had it cut and it grew down to her ankles. She would recall how as a young girl it would take her many hours to wash and dry; she would sit on the ground with it laid out behind her while it dried in the sun

Sadan Awng Tu was on his first official posting to Mingone, having recently left Manhkring school in the outskirts of Myitkyina to take up work in government service as an inoculation technician working to reduce the prevalence of tuberculosis giving injections colloquially known as BCG.<sup>19</sup> He saw the young Ja Bang and decided that this was the woman he wanted to marry. (FIGURE 2). My *Gu* or father-in-law had had a restless and difficult life. Before the Second World War his family were fairly prosperous as they lived close to Mogaung, the jade mines area and the main China-India trading artery (Lintner 1995). His father had established the Kachin village of Pahuk, just outside Mogaung, which had had been deserted earlier in the century by its Shan inhabitants. He had established it with Walawbum Gam, his close cousin brother (or *kahpu kanau* in a Jinghpaw context) following their devastating feud with the Wadat family, the last large scale feud among the Kachin to be dealt with by the British colonial administration. Their proximity to the mines and the trade route soon made them key

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<sup>19</sup> The term BCG is derived from the inventors of the vaccine, Albert Calmette and Camille Guérin. BCG stands for Bacille de Calmette et Guérin but is never referred to as such

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players in the cross-regional opium trade. Awng Tu's father was notoriously avaricious. One relative recalled to my father-in-law many years later how his father had insisted on being given a full set of pure gold opium weights by two Chinese opium traders who had run out of resources to get back to China, for which he gave them the bare minimum for their journey. When they returned many years later to try and buy them back, he claimed that the weights and scales had been lost. Over time, his business acumen, apparently insulated from too many ethical constraints, served him well and he came to own hundreds of acres of sugar cane fields, from which he used to supply the sugar factory at Samaw, one of the only infrastructural developments in this region developed during the colonial period.

However, the Second World War and its aftermath took a terrible toll. To safeguard the family's wealth amid the increasing chaos, Awng Tu's father went out one night with all the family treasure, reputedly completely filling a large bullock cart, and buried it all in a secret place near the Hugawng Valley. My *Gu* was a young boy at the time and he went along with his father to see where he would bury the treasure. It reveals much about my father-in-law's personality that this was an excitement too much for a young boy to bear and he started to tell people in the village where the treasure was hidden. In frustration, his father had to go out, dig it up again and bury the whole lot once more, which was evidently no easy task. This time Awng Tu was made to stay at home and precautions were taken to ensure that nobody followed him.

Not so long after the relocation, Chinese troops allied with the British and American forces came to be located near to Pahuk as part of the strategy to remove the Japanese from Burma. Awng Tu's sister was a great beauty and it seems that one of the Chinese Captains wanted to take her as his wife. Her father vehemently objected to the liaison, as did she.

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Although the events remain unclear it seems that the Chinese soldiers came one night to try and take her, and her father started to shoot them in defence. As a result the whole extended family was massacred that night, bar my father-in-law and his sister, who was shot and fell to the ground and so they assumed she was dead, and an uncle and brother who had spent the night looking after a nearby sugar cane field. Incredibly, my father-in-law was so soundly asleep that he slept through the whole incident, thus escaping with his life as it was assumed that he too must have been dead. It was only when his brother and uncle returned the next morning to the horrific scene that he woke, covered in blood, to discover what had happened. It was a trauma that must have affected him deeply and he rarely spoke about that night in later life. Critically for his future, too, all knowledge of where the family's wealth lay hidden was lost.

Awng Tu went to live with his uncle in Kamaing and was sent to Mayan missionary school, where he worked as a servant for the missionary there to cover his keep and his education. It established a life-long habit of rising at 4 am each day to pray. In later life, no matter what his condition from the night before, it was a habit that he never, ever broke. The family would be woken every morning to hear him praying, but in the warm, conversational manner that was his way, as if he was just having a bit of a chat with God, albeit one that was loud enough to wake the household. From Kamaing he went to Myitkyina and attended Manhkring School. He was a lover of books and would assiduously collect everything he could find on Kachin culture and history and had a large collection of newspapers and other documents. He was so proud of the first book that Hkanhpa, my husband, and I were involved with which bore the Sadan name (Dell 2000). After we sent him a copy he took it everywhere

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until the whole village, including the rest of the family, got thoroughly tired of having to look at it.

Awng Tu had done very well for himself by becoming an inoculation technician and he went into government service at a time when it was something of which one could be proud. His intelligence was coupled with an extrovert and congenial character, good humour and the distinctively stunning Sadan smile that is a family trait. A great talker and story teller, he could hold an audience in rapt attention and I have many times seen him reduce a room to tears of uncontrollable laughter. All of these things helped considerably in landing such a relatively plumb job. Now he also had chosen a beautiful, strong-willed and intelligent girl to be his wife. There were a couple of issues that had to be dealt with first however. Ja Bang was seventeen and Awng Tu was ten years older, but he thought it best to conceal this possible difficulty by telling her that he was actually twenty one years old. This kind of playful response to a dilemma, combined with a large degree of naivety and sometimes a lack of thought about the possible consequences of his actions, was somewhat typical of my father-in-law. He had a childlike quality about him, which all the family learned how to manage. It was hugely endearing but it could also be a source of vulnerability for himself and his family. His certainty that the age gap could be resolved by pretending it did not exist was also matched by his confidence that it did not matter that he and Ja Bang were of kin groups that were not supposed to marry in this way. He was Marip and she was Maran and there is a taboo against Marip men marrying Maran women. However, the ever-resourceful Kachin have developed a way around the problem; such marriages can proceed as long as double dowry payments are made and, when reversed, the shift can hold true for a number of generations. Issues of age and social taboo neatly dispensed with,

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the couple soon were able to marry and eventually they bought a plot of land in an area of Myitkyina that was rapidly become a central focus of Kachin in-migration to the town: Dukahtawng (Chief's Village). The 50th anniversary of the founding of the village was held in 2009 and both Awng Tu and Ja Bang had their names inscribed in the memorial to the most significant founders of the village.

They married in 1962, the year after which the newly founded Kachin Independence Army or KIA had committed itself fully to armed struggle and began a forced and voluntary recruitment drive (Smith 1999). Life proceeded as well as it could in these early years of marriage, as my father-in-law's government post as BCG technician gave a stable income. Yet the conflict between the KIA and the central government very soon escalated and began to impact on everyone's lives. Ja Bang's two brothers, Zau Tu and Zau La, both signed up early on in the conflict to KIA Battalion Six, which controlled the area close to Hpakant. This prompted her family to leave the troubled railway corridor to move within KIA controlled territory. There they were able to rely more on the jade mining area for their economic security and the bedrock of opium cultivation that became the main agricultural product for farmers in the region (Lintner 1995, 2000; Jelsma et al., 2005). Back in Myitkyina, Ja Bang had six children over the coming years, four boys and two girls although their home life felt tragedy with the death of their second son at a young age. The impact of the conflict began to embed itself in the daily economic struggle as the house began to fill with the endless arrival of young children who had been sent by relatives to Myitkyina for the chance of greater security and an education. All of these extra mouths to feed put huge pressure on Ja Bang with a large, young family herself. After the birth

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of her last child, Hkanhpa Tu, my husband, she opened a general store in the central market area of Myitkyina to boost the family's income.

The roller coaster life of my father-in-law's triumphs and defeats continued. He was elected as Village Chairman, but his natural gregariousness and love of socialising, which was fostered by an official role which saw him constantly feted around the village, soon led to a difficulty with alcohol which smoothed the wheels of all this socialising. It is hard to put such facts about a man's life in print, but the roles of children and father were often reversed, as is often the case in such situations, and the Sadan children often had to ensure the safety of the one who should be protecting them. These were grim days, and he continued this struggle for his whole life, but clearly this flaw, this desire to blot out the realities of life, becomes more understandable when put in the context of the horrific trauma he had experienced as a young boy. What also needs to be stressed in this context, however, is the complete normalisation of such experiences in the Kachin region. Critically, such endemic problems with alcohol remove key family members from the vital contributory role that they should play in face of other destructive forces that became more and more prevalent in Kachin society through the years of conflict, notably the rapid rise in drug addiction, especially opium and heroin use.<sup>20</sup> I have yet to find a Kachin family that has not been afflicted by alcoholism, by drug addiction and in recent decades by the tragic deaths that accompany these illnesses including HIV/Aids; the loss of multiple children from such causes is not considered any longer to be exceptional and it is something that impacts families at all social levels and of all political persuasions. As a mother

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<sup>20</sup> Many local NGOs have documented this deterioration in the situation and I am grateful to Karin Eberhardt for corroborating these statements through their own experience in our discussions during the workshop. See [http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=6138](http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=6138), a 2006 report titled 'Drug Use on the Rise in Kachin State' in the Irrawaddy newspaper which points towards this ongoing local effort to quantify and understand this local tragedy.



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myself, I cannot imagine what pain it must inflict to have to watch all your male adult children, four or even five of them, succumb one by one to heroin addiction and to have to attend so many funerals, as I have encountered on more than one occasion. It is difficult to convey the scale of this social devastation on ordinary lives, and how shockingly normal this experience is within urban Kachin state. The idea that more young men have died in the Kachin State since the ceasefire than during the decades of conflict is derived from this horrifying situation. Shockingly too, while for many years this was largely a phenomenon among young men, in recent years there has been the evidence that serious drug addiction is now not so gender specific and young girls, too, are becoming addicts.<sup>21</sup> This was not the case during most of the years of conflict and it is partly this experience that shapes the present reactions of my mother-in-law's friends to their current political predicament. The peculiarly Kachin dimension of this is that such addictions affect every family because the addicts are expected to remain in the family and are looked after by them. Many details of this story are too intimate to relate here but Ja Bang, too, had to deal with all of these things in both her close and her extended family and had to provide the central core of stability to help all of those who came to rely on her to manage their lives as best they could.

The roller coaster of my father-in-law's luck continued. One day, a young cowherd was watering his cows at the well next to Awng Tu's sugar cane field just outside Myitkyina. Next to the field was a pool, and as was his habit, the boy took out his gold-panning equipment to try his luck. He quickly came across some large pieces of gold and let Awng Tu know that he had a large gold deposit beneath his sugar cane field. Delightedly Awng Tu sold off rights to mine the

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<sup>21</sup> This was the finding of local research conducted by the Kachin National Organisation in 2008

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land in ten foot square plots at 400 *kyat* per plot. His monthly salary was 450 *kyat*. With more than six acres to lease out, he made a considerable amount of money almost overnight and the whole area experienced its own small gold rush. An all too brief period of affluence followed. The excitement of the young boy who had gone with his father to bury the family treasure re-emerged. His traditional Hkahku character saw him distribute the money from this gold very liberally, as is expected in very traditional Hkahku culture; social status is enhanced through ostentatious displays of generosity. Just as I remember my own father dreaming after certain cars should he ever have a windfall, Awng Tu invested most of his remaining money in the one thing that every traditional Hkahku man from the Hugawng Valley wanted: an elephant. The family story is that the elephant was then bitten by a snake and died very soon afterwards. Everything was gone and the roller coaster dipped down again. Ja Bang would sometimes blame this ill fortune on the Sadan genealogy. The name had first emerged five generations ago and referred to Awng Tu's great-grandfather, who was reputed to have had an incredible and violent temper that made him fearless in battle. The name was too strong, she felt, and produced these extremes of fortune.

Things started to unravel and my mother-in-law had to find ways of supporting everybody, her own children and the many others she looked after including the score of associated relatives who bedded down in the house for months at a time. The market shop was no longer adequate to do this so she then started to work as a trader buying goods in Myitkyina that had come across the border with China. She would take these goods to Hpakant, the jade mining area, where she would sell them for a profit. The journey had to be done on foot with the goods carried in a large, traditional basket that would have a strap across the forehead. It was

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backbreaking and arduous. The journey would take three days in the dry season, but more typically nearer to seven, especially when it had rained. My husband recalls how much he missed her when he was a young child as she was constantly walking the difficult road to the jade mines to support the family. It was to prove the kind of hard labour conducted over many years from which your body can never fully recover. It was one of only two times in her life when she cut her hair and even had it permed, as was then the fashion. My father-in-law was apparently furious that she had done such a thing and she never had it cut short again until many years later when she was very ill and it had become too difficult to look after.

On the return journey she would also bring money back to Myitkyina from the jade mines, which was to be used by the KIA.<sup>22</sup> Many older women did this at this time because it was felt that they would be less likely to be searched by Burmese soldiers. Once a year, a special KIO travel document had to be obtained as without this it was too dangerous to try to travel through the KIA controlled area. The permit cost only a few *kyat* to obtain but it acted as a receipt proving one's contribution to the war fund. The main concern in obtaining it however was that the office was some eighteen miles outside of Myitkyina and to get there one had to travel right through the heart of the Northern Commander's most heavily militarised territory. To be caught with the KIO travel document while walking through this region could have had dire consequences, which included being imprisoned for three years.

The need to maximise profits led to an innovative scheme taking off amongst small groups of women at this time. Some, my mother-in-law included, decided to form what might be considered the equivalent of a community bank or loan company. Rather than try to make large

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<sup>22</sup> See Lintner (1990, 2000) for detailed accounts of this area and the experience of conflict.

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individual profits, which was impossible, they decided to pool their resources, taking the profits that they made from selling market goods in Hpakant and then using these profits to provide loans to jade miners on the lower levels of the jade mining hierarchy. Anyone familiar with the jade trade will be aware that at the lower levels the gambling-style nature of the business does not result in either steady or reliable profits; few miners reinvest their capital in more stable economic ventures, or even in better quality jade given the associations the mines have, especially with opium addiction and other vices; endemic opium use often begins out of a need to dull the physical pain of working in the mines for many hours on end.<sup>23</sup> This results in a constant need for capitalisation by those at the bottom of the mining scale. Women clearly had a critical role in the economic functioning of the Kachin region during the periods of most intense conflict in the 1970s and 1980s. They have been significant players in defining the shape of the political economy of conflict and their roles in this area and in many others have yet to be fully appreciated and understood.

Again the roller coaster dipped. The group of women Ja Bang worked with made a number of risky loans in the hope of higher profits and soon lost all their money. Also, her eldest son was now recruited into the KIA. She walked to the base, furious that they had taken him and was determined that she would demand that he be released. When she got there and saw to what extent the camp had been built up, she realised that it would never happen so she turned away knowing that she would not see her son again for many years, realising too that he was perhaps determined as well to stay. The many years of walking back and forth to Hpakant started to take their toll and Ja Bang's health started to deteriorate. Late onset diabetes, high blood pressure and

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<sup>23</sup> The work by Levy and Scott-Clark (2001) is a readable albeit sometimes controversial account of life in the jade mines area.

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a host of related health difficulties frequently saw her body bloated and in pain. The medication was erratically available, expensive and frequently inappropriate or useless, while she struggled to manage her diabetes as best she could. Now having lost all her money, she started a small beef soup stall outside the family home, where she would sell the most delicious beef soup in the morning and early evening. As her children were now getting to adulthood, some of the burden was taken from her shoulders, but nothing was straightforward. With one son in the KIA, one working in the jade mines and one at high school, with one daughter a teacher and one running a bookstall and Awng Tu still receiving his government worker's salary, plus a bit of land outside Myitkyina used as a small-holding and cultivation site, it was possible with careful management to piece together the family budget. But it was not one that could cope with crisis. Unexpected health crises, such as Awng Tu's stomach cancer, could potentially devastate financial security and it is a constant source of amazement to me viewing this as an insider-outsider how wide the networks of support have to reach within the community as a whole and how effectively this is done. Again, this reciprocal generosity helps to put my father-in-law's gregarious generosity following the discovery of his gold into a more nuanced perspective. Slowly Ja Bang was able to find her feet again and set up a medicines stall in the local market, and it was this that largely sustained her contribution to the family purse as her health deteriorated in later life. Ja Bang always had a love of the market. The morning market was situated directly opposite the family house and my husband recalls how they used to hate it when she went off to buy food in the morning because she would not return for hours as she chatted with everyone she met.

Ja Bang had other passions, too. One of them was football. I was living in Burma at the time of the 1998 World Cup and was irate at the fact that the electricity in my quarter would be

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off all day so that it could be supplied at 2am when the football was shown. My mother-in-law was one of the World Cup's most obsessive viewers, and she forced herself to stay awake to watch it even though she would have to rise very early the next day. For her, that month of late night and early morning football was a massively enjoyable distraction from the difficulties of daily life, as well the regime knew so many in her shoes felt. Dukahtawng was notorious for the passion its football team aroused amongst the villagers, and the long processions with drums at the head that marched down to the football pitch for home matches was a rare moment at which community emotion and vitality could be expressed.

Ja Bang's other passion was religion. As she got older, this became a key bulwark in her life, with long meditations with groups of like minded women on retreat becoming a relatively common occurrence, and an almost constant round of activities centred around the church, to which they lived next door. While my father-in-law would wake the whole house before dawn every morning with his loud prayers, Ja Bang's devotion was quieter but came from a deep internal space that enabled her to cope with and find meaning for all that life had thrown at her and her family. Her devotion to the sanctity of the Sabbath was uncompromising. My husband recalls how once when they were very young he and his brother by chance came upon a pool filled with catfish as they were out for a walk one Sunday. They decided they would try to catch some and very quickly filled a large basket to the brim with fresh fish. They raced home, sure that their mother would be delighted. The response was somewhat different. She beat them three times each with a stick, took the fish and threw them in the rubbish, furious that they had undertaken any work on a Sunday.

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The last few years of her life before she died in 2005 were full of physical pain and the almost total blindness that progresses quickly with late onset diabetes. When eventually she passed away it was as if a vast open space had opened up where the heart of the family should have been. My father-in-law struggled to find a new way of living for a while but he also died in 2009. I was always very much in awe of my mother-in-law, especially knowing something of what she had had to cope with in her life and how much she was loved by my husband as by all her children. The closest we came was at the time of our (second) wedding in Myitkyina in 2002. As part of the ceremony she led me up the stairs into the family entrance of the house, leading me by a string of beads that were placed around my neck (Pungga Ja Li 1999). It was the traditional way of marking the entry of a new bride into the family. The Jinghpaw practice of seeing each person as standing as part of a collective individuation that fits with a genealogical entity (in this case she and I were both wives to fourth-born Sadan sons), meant that I was at that moment being taken in to stand socially in the same place as she stood within the family, and that I should express the same characteristics as she did; I even have a mole like her, as is often pointed out (Npawt La 1992). FIGURE 3: My mother-in-law leading me into the family home in Myitkyina. Following Jinghpaw traditional practice, the new bride is led into the house through the family entrance by a string of beads. March 2002. It is a strange feeling to be put on a par with someone for whom you have such feelings of respect and whom you know you could never emulate. She was 61 years old when she died in heartbreaking circumstances in the local hospital. The family struggled to obtain medication and blood for her transfusions and to enable her to retain her dignity in an environment where everything seems to conspire against this. Her funeral service was attended by hundreds who knew the contribution this “ordinary” woman had

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made to the local community, the local church and in providing the simple, loving protection that every mother should aspire to do. She never met her grandchildren in England, and she died before our daughter was born, but she would love to hear every detail about our son as he grew up and yearned to hear him say “Kaja ai i?” (How are you?/Hello) over the dysfunctional telephone line. She recorded some songs and children’s stories in Jinghpaw for him on a tape. We keep it in a draw as even some years later it is almost unbearably sad to listen to. One day, he and his sister will at least be able to hear the soft, fragile voice of a woman who without doubt loved them with a passion, singing songs that came down with her from the mountains of northern Shan State as a child into a tumultuous world of barely controlled chaos. Above all, if they should ever read this in years to come, I know they will be incredibly proud to be her grandchildren.

## **Conclusion**

As an academic there are of course many elements in this story that intrigue me, which suggest new ways of looking at women’s roles in this region, their economic liminality, their contributions to forging regional identities, and so on. These are things that will inspire me to keep learning about this region for many decades to come. But there is also a need simply to understand the lives and listen to the voices of so-called ‘ordinary’ people. That so many women in this region have endured so much and have provided such social steel in times of great threat and danger is something that needs better to be understood, and also needs to be recorded. It is



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this kind of life experience that explains the reaction of the women I met in 2012 to the resumption of conflict in Kachin state recently, even though they had already suffered incredible hardships over such a long period. It is the voice of the angry and the desperate. Kachin women are almost entirely invisible in histories of this region yet even this one life story indicates the critical lack of understanding that such an omission produces. On the one hand, I feel greatly honoured that I am in a position to be able to pay tribute to my mother-in-law, and my father-in-law, in this way, but what is needed now is a greater attention to such narratives on a wider scale. This story is also run through with unanswered questions, the things that will torment you that you did not ask or did not understand at the time. Only by listening, and asking, without prejudice can we begin to resolve the conundrum outlined earlier of differentiating the ordinary from the ordinary, the exceptional from the exemplary, and to understand the complex webs within which lives are lived in contemporary Burma. When and if the present fighting may sooner or later move towards some kind of resolution, it is imperative that these otherwise unheard voices are incorporated into the understandings of those who have the power to influence their lives so forcefully.

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