

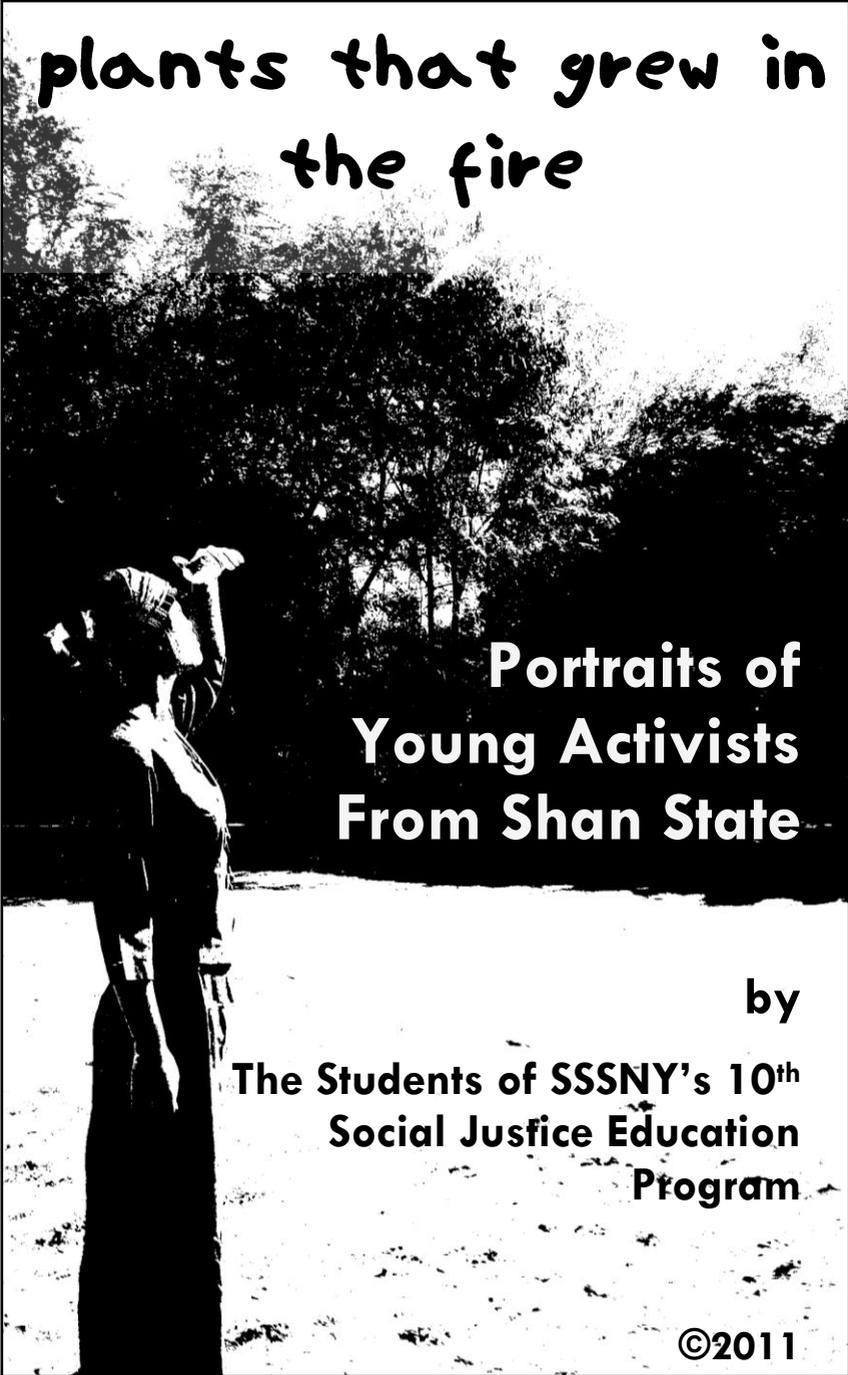
# plants that grew in the fire

Portraits of Young Activists From Shan State



by

The Students of SSSNY's 10<sup>th</sup> Social Justice  
Education Program



plants that grew in  
the fire

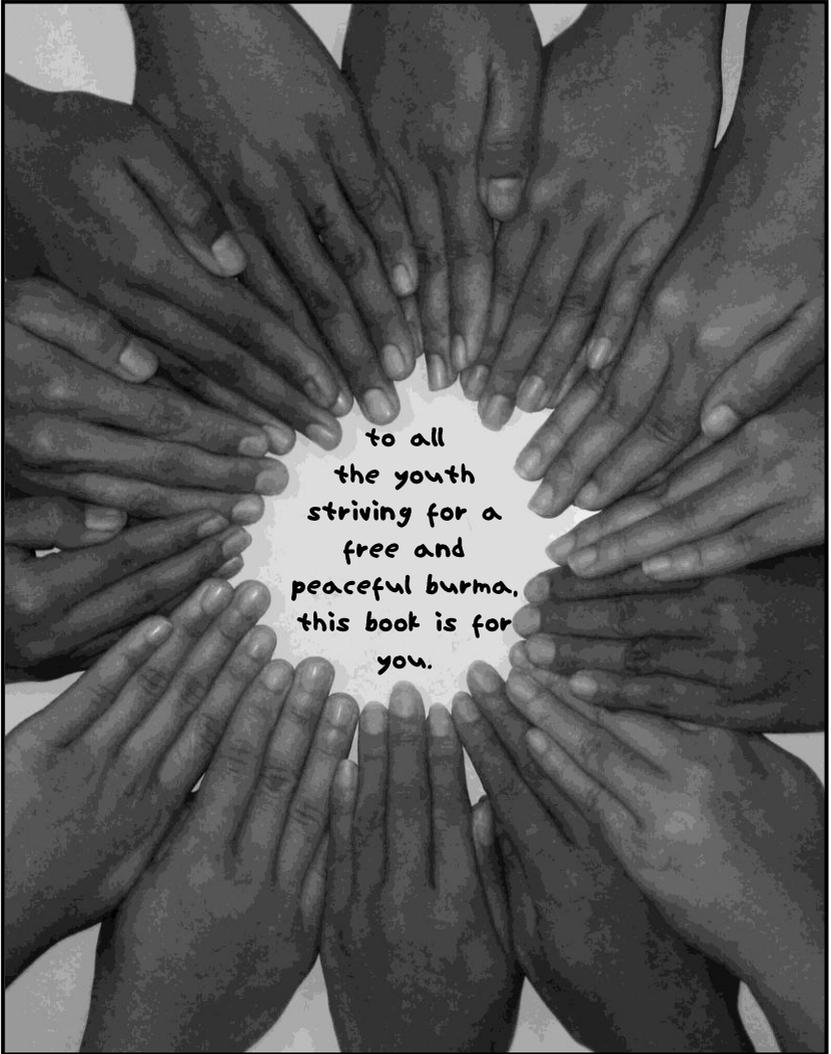
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**The Students of SSSNY's 10<sup>th</sup>  
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***We are grateful for the support of all those who make SSSNY possible: our advisors, donors, staff, teachers and our director, Nang Charm Tong.***

***Together you give Shan State's students the knowledge and strength to build a better future for themselves, their communities and their country.***



to all  
the youth  
striving for a  
free and  
peaceful burma.  
this book is for  
you.

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# introduction

Fifteen years ago, a widespread scorched earth campaign set Shan State on fire. In the late 1990s, Burma's military regime systematically destroyed the landscape and livelihoods of their country's largest and most ethnically diverse state uprooting over three hundred thousand people. The children born into these "Hell Years," as one of our students calls them, grew up in a political inferno, encountering war and suffering human rights violations during their most formative years. Surviving these circumstances fueled their motivation to join the struggle for democracy in their homeland, but also left them unsure of their role in a mature movement. While they are too young to remember the student uprisings of 1988, these students are of an age in which they have experienced the aftermath of government-sponsored terror and oppression. They are old enough realize that for their country to change, the citizens must be empowered through education. That was the inspiration for this collection of stories.

This book is evidence of these students' transformations from victims of government abuse to activists for change. The 10<sup>th</sup> SJEP graduates are joining the hundreds of other SSSNY alumni already working in communities in Shan State and on the Thai-Burma border, bringing hope to the people they represent. While security requirements necessitate that identities be kept secret, their photos and stories explain how this group would like to be seen—as plants that sprouted from a scorched land, as eager students who are developing into powerful champions of justice, freedom, and peace.

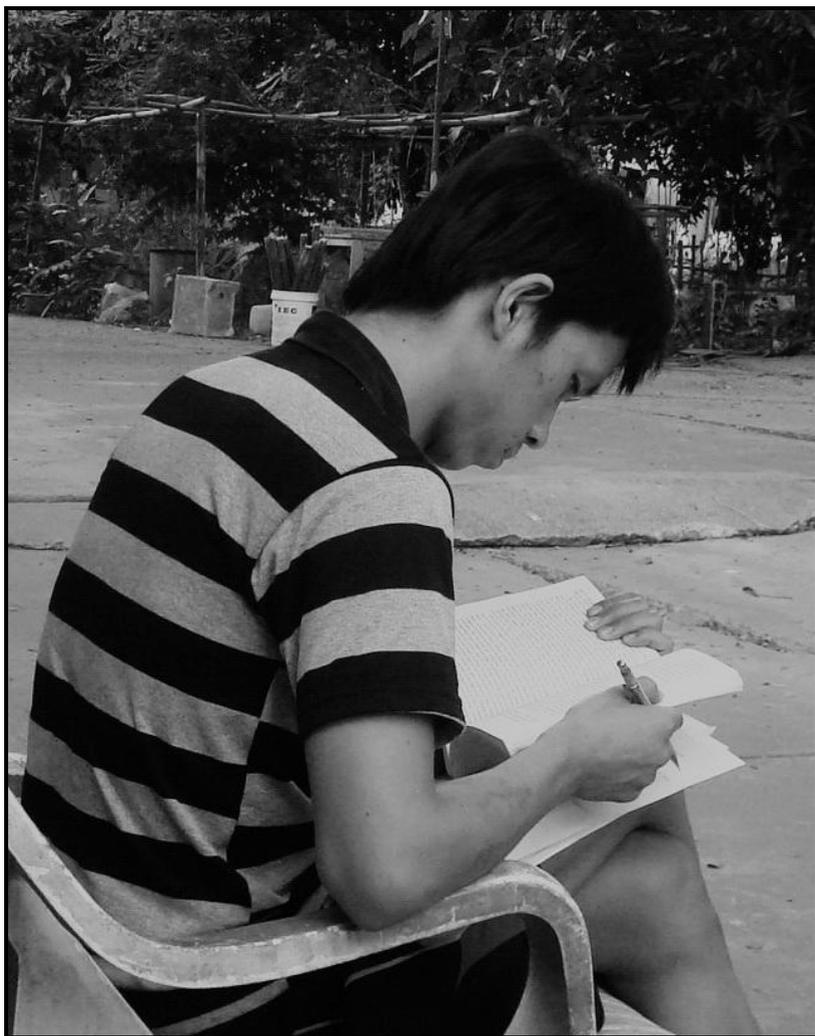
**sally kantar**

10<sup>th</sup> SJEP Teacher

SSSNY

February 2011

the moon behind the cloud



nor turn

I heard the voices from the students that were reading the books in the primary school beside the road every day when I took my cart in front of the school. Students turned their faces toward me when they heard the sound of bells of my oxes. I really wanted to be their friends as I heard their conversation. But my life and my clothes were different in comparison. They were busy with their education. I was busy with my cows and oxes in the forest that was far from the city.

Not only me but also my friends had to look after oxes, cows and buffaloes. Not only me that lacked opportunity. During the daytime I collected firewood as the oxes were eating their grass. When the sun set over the mountains my oxes came as usual and I led them, dragging the cart with firewood inside it. I sold it in the town before I reached my home. I spent time with my oxes from morning to evening every day. I never dreamed that the light would shine on me to see the better way in my life. As a child, I had lack of opportunity. I didn't understand it. Was it because of luck or poverty? Who could say rich children were lucky and full of rights and opportunity. Who was born good and bad in measurement? This question came out of my brain as I sat on my cart across from the small town.

Some days I went to work with my parents to get some money. My parents made money for the whole family. For me, I just earned for myself. The jobs were not normal jobs. It depended on what the owner needed us to do and also depend on the season. In the rainy season it was time

for growing crops, so we went to grow crops such as rice, bean, corn, and peanuts. I earned money the same as my parents. It was 250 kyat for each day (less than \$1). In the harvest time, we also earned the same as the growing time. But I didn't go every day because I needed to take care of my oxes. I needed grass for them to eat. I couldn't work every day but instead of working with my parents, I also collected firewood to sell. Whenever I went in the forest, I also brought my cart with me. So I could get a little bit of benefit from it. My parents were very kind to me. They didn't take my money that I earned. Even though they couldn't afford education for me, they taught me discipline to be an adult in a difficult situation. When I handed money to my father, he refused it.

“However hard you worked, however much money you got, I couldn't take your money. It was your energy. You did it, you will get it,” my father said, so that I would understand him. He wanted to train me to be a good person. It meant that he wanted me to be able to make money for myself. So I love them and sometimes I bought clothes for my younger brother and sister too. Sometimes I gave them some money. I supported their education, because they still had a little bit of opportunity to go to primary school. As for me, I just looked at them doing their homework at night. In the morning, my mother prepared me a lunch, and also my brother and sister. Day after day, I just accepted that my dreams would not come true.

Sometimes, I went back to my old village with my father to farm secretly, living in the forest, cutting the trees to make a farm for the family, within danger all the time, afraid of the Burmese soldiers. We didn't have a place to grow in the town. One night, in the forest, me and my father had a conversation. It was a very deep, dark night. We laid down on hard ground under the sky full of bright stars.

“Did you want to go to school like your brother and sister?” my father asked me. “Are you jealous of them?”

“Yes,” I replied. After that, he kept quiet and silent. By looking at his face, I immediately understood him, that he could not afford my education. I felt I couldn't keep the silence any longer, keeping it in my heart, without pouring out anything.

After a while, he broke the silence again and asked me, “are you satisfied, working hard with me like this? Have you ever dreamed of your future? Am I an example for you to keep going on? You will not be a child all the time. You will be an adult in the future. Do you want to be an uneducated person like me and work as a farmer like me?”

I said nothing because it was an extremely difficult question that I couldn't immediately answer. I didn't make any decision at that time. So, I kept this question in my mind for several months, expecting to make a decision. The days went by. I spent my time as a boy taking care of cows, working as hard as adults did, earning money for myself. I tried to overcome that struggle in many conditions.

After the Buddhist Lent, it became harvest time. In December 1990, we had enough rice and peanuts, so my father sold some of it and we got some money. At that time, father continued his question that he had asked me when we were in the forest.

“You will leave us to get education and a better life, or live with us here without knowledge and education? If you stay, you would never change your life, you would be a farmer like me,” he said.

These questions made my heart beat faster and faster, because it was extremely difficult to reply to him. So I considered it and decided to leave them for the first time in my life—I was 13 years old. I expected I would see them again one day. So at six in the morning on a full moon day, me and my father left our home, town, everything. When we reached where some friends lived, my father left to go back to our house. As for me, I had to continue the dangerous trip. I risked my life walking in the jungle, sleeping on the hard ground, using the bamboo instead of plates to eat, using fire to keep warm at night, instead of blanket. Sometimes I slept while I was walking. It took several months to reach the Thai border. I was proud of myself after I overcame the difficult situations on the trip.

Since then, I have had an opportunity to get education. I was a student at the IDP camp school on the border for nine years, staying in the dormitory with other students. Now I am 24 years old. Most of the students' lives are the same as me. They made a decision like me. It made

me understand the life of children in Burma and my dream became true, to get an education. After nine years as a student, I was a teacher for one year. So as I was a new teacher without training, not yet full of knowledge, I applied to SSSNY to learn more.

Sometimes I can't believe what kind of person I am. Am I cruel, selfish and bad because I left home for education? What was the better way for me to decide? But when I stay with the children on the border, I am very happy. I stay with them, I eat what they eat. They and I left home the same way. I will be back at this school again, continuing to teach them and share my new knowledge. I hope these children will have a better life.

# addicted to freedom



## pon li

Tachilek is my hometown. This town is always full of people and busy. It's also on the border with Thailand and Burma. I grew up there, but I didn't study there. I attended school in Rangoon since I was twelve years old. My life changed when I failed the tenth standard exam two years in a row. At that time, I left school and I met with a monk that changed my life and a teacher that changed my brain from upside down to the right side.

These two people made me start to think about the situation in Burma. The one thing that I always keep in my mind is that I must do something to bring the change to Burma. My life and my ideas and my views changed in only three years after my last government school exams. But these three years were the most important time for me. I knew nothing about Burma but became a person that was hungry for freedom and justice, and wants to come out from under the control of the worst dictator.

When I was in school, I was always discriminated against by my friends because I was a Shan person. One day, the worst day, the day I won't forget, is the day I heard hurtful words from two of my Burmese classmates.

"Your mother sells sex so you get money to study at the same school as us," they said. "It's not only you—it's all of your Shan people that do this kind of job to earn money." They laughed at me.

Because of this, I cried and I went to the teachers to tell them about this. But they did nothing to my classmates. That time, my classmates also cried as I cried. My teachers didn't even scold them, but put makeup on them to comfort them because they were crying. She didn't do anything for me and sent me back to my classroom. I didn't understand why the teachers did that, but now I do. This is one of the ways that the regime's ideas enter our lives. The teachers allow the students to discriminate against each other. It makes us hate each other, stereotype each other. And the hatred keeps on going, even when we grow up.

When I failed tenth standard, I met with a monk that showed me the light and the right way to go in my life. I studied with him and my other friends at a monastery for over one year. We studied English speaking, basic grammar and history of Shan State with Shan literature.

One day the monk sent me to Southern Shan State with one of my teachers to attend a training there for three months. At that time, I didn't know the place I was going was in the danger zone. But when I arrived there, I didn't think it was dangerous. While I was living there, I started to compare people's lifestyles in Tachilek to the people in this area. I saw differences between them. The people in my hometown had enough food to eat but many were doing illegal trading activities. But the people here, they have no food to eat, and didn't even have clean drinking water. When I saw the children sing the Shan New Year song, I cried with sympathy. I pitied them because they suffered from malnutrition.

During this time, I also had a chance to meet with a teacher who changed my ideas. He taught me not to hate Burmese people, because they are like us—innocent. He taught me about the situation in our country and how we need to challenge the regime and struggle to get freedom for our country. After three months, I had to leave. But this place was very important to me—it changed my life and made me know about myself, who I was, and what I must do.

I applied to SSSNY. It was my third time. Luckily, this time I was selected. I waited at my home for the time to

come when I could come to SSSNY. I started to learn about the people's lives in my hometown. I saw that most of the young people there were in danger. Some of the young girls sell sex to get money and some of the boys sell and use *yaba* (methamphetamines) to get money. I noticed more and more of them using and selling drugs.

It was very sad for me when I found out my brother was also doing this. I tried to stop him, but he refused. He asked me a question I could not answer.

“Can you and our parents give me enough money for what I want to do and buy?” he said. He knew that we could not give him this. We could only give him food and a chance to go to school. Not a new mobile phone, motorbike, or high fashion clothes.

It made me cry almost every day, and it was a nightmare that I always dreamed of. Sometimes I couldn't sleep because of this. I think the one who makes this problem happen is the military regime. They allowed the drug dealers to sell *yaba* illegally and then they take half of the money that comes from selling it. They use the innocent young people like their toys and destroy their lives. It doesn't only happen in my hometown, but also all around Burma.

All of these things that happened are my lessons that I'm going to use when I work with others to bring change in Burma. What happens now in Burma is the system of government that acts like an iron curtain. I want to lift the

young people in my hometown up from darkness of the the military regime's plans. I want to let the rain of freedom fall all over Burma and I want the light of democracy to spread. I want the power of education to influence the people. If people have the right to get knowledge, I'm sure that we'll be able to unite under the freedom of democracy.

**children do not need to know**



*(The author at age 4 or 5, before she started school.)*

**mune nouny**

I was born in December in 1987 in a village surrounded by mountains in Southern Shan State. When I was two years old, my parents divorced and my father left our house. He never returned. At that time, I knew nothing about why my mom and dad had to separate. When I was six years old, I had to go to school. I saw that my friends had a mother and a father, but I just had my mother. I didn't understand why.

I asked my mom where my father was. I had not seen him since I was young.

"Where did he go?" I said. My mom looked at me silently. She was upset and said nothing. It seemed she was surprised by my question. I had never asked her this before.

"Never ask me this question again," she said quietly. I was confused. I never asked my mom this question again.

Even though my mom was a single mother, she was very brave and worked hard for me. She sold noodles in the market. The market was only open once a week, so she did not make a lot of money. She saved money each week to buy me clothes, food and pay for my school.

She also had to pay taxes to the SPDC in the village. If the people in the village had a car or motorbike, they had to work without pay as drivers for the SPDC soldiers. If they didn't, they would be punished. The same thing happened if we didn't pay them money each month. It was called "tax," but we never got anything for paying it.

One day, I saw my mom take some rice and money to the head villager's house. I didn't understand why we had to give it to them—it was part of the taxes.

“This is our money. Why do you have to go and give it to them?” I asked her.

“Children don't need to know. That's not good for you,” she answered.

Unfortunately, my mom and I didn't have a chance to stay together for a long time. When I was eight years old, she sent me to the city to attend school with my cousin. In my village, there was only a primary school, not a good quality education. Also, I think my mom didn't want me to know about the situation in my hometown—the taxes, the SPDC's abuse. She loved me and wanted me to be an educated person, so she had to live alone and save money to pay for me to live in a boarding house.

Eventually, my mom had to go to Thailand so she could work and send money to support me. She wasn't making enough money selling noodles in the market. When I was in eighth grade, I learned that my mother was working in a food stall in Bangkok to send me to school. I decided to leave the school, because I wanted to come to Thailand to help her. She was angry with me and returned to Shan State to find out why I quit school.

“A person who is not educated has to come to Thailand and work for other people,” she said. “I want you to have a better future.”

But she also knew that in our village, there were no jobs. I wanted to join her in Thailand, and she allowed me to do that. I lived with her in Bangkok for a year. I saw that she was getting older, so I supported her to return to Shan State. She planned to stay with her brother and help raise her young nieces and nephews. Their mother had died from a heart attack. I continued working in Bangkok for five years, as a nanny, factory worker and cook, sending money back home whenever I could.

I always remembered my mother’s dream for me to become an educated person. I heard about SSSNY from a friend and hoped that one day I could apply for this school. After five years in Thailand, I started to join other migrant youth and teach migrant children who have no chance to attend school. After that I applied to SSSNY and I was selected. This school gave me the answers that I wanted to know when I was young—about the SPDC, their dictatorship, and the abuse of human rights in my hometown. I know why people migrate to Thailand, and why my mom protected me. I am very thankful for this. Today, my mind and eyes are open because of my mom. She gave me the opportunity to stand in the world. She is always the hero in my heart.

standing on the border,  
looking back towards home



### tehseng

War brings only sadness, death, conflict, loss, and separation from one another. My family's life has passed the hell war. Who starts the war does not matter. What matters is the effect to the civilians. My family was almost killed from the Burma Army's bombing in 1996, and again in 2002 Burma's army shelling and burning our villages.

I was born in a conflict area. My father was a driver. My mother was a farmer. She fed the pigs and took care of us. She also makes traditional *tom lao*, which is rice alcohol. My older brother was able to attend school in my village.

For me I just stayed with my mother. My father was always away from us because of his driving. He was always ambushed by Burma Army troops. My village was called "Moung Taw," it was controlled by the Mong Tai Army (MTA) and it was rich with coal, forests, a river, and land for agriculture. Some were farmers and some were in the business of taking things like food and manufactured things from the Thai-Shan (Burma) border to my village. My village was about 20 kilometers away from the border, so it was easy for the people to transport to Thailand. Most of the people who lived under MTA control, they truly believed one day MTA could bring independence and freedom to Shan State. Then they could go back to their old town that they had to escape because of Burma's military regime.

The lifestyle of these people continued happily until one day. The climate was going to change from rainy season to winter. SLORC troops attacked by jets in Moung Taw. My aunt was living in the first village they attacked. Then the troops continued their attack, and targeted my village to bomb immediately after. A lot of people had never seen the jets before. Some of them tried to see this new airplane, so it was easy to for the Burma Army to kill them. No one could fight back and no one could stop them. We can only wish for them to stop bombing. A lot of people in my village were killed; the houses, the temple, and the road were destroyed. The children lost their parents and became orphans.

After that, the SLORC troops kept bombing in my village day by day. The situation was worse; people did not have enough food and most of the people lost hope. Soon after that, something happened that the people in my village had never thought of before; it was that MTA surrendered to the Burma military in 1996. Then people knew that they could not live in the village any longer, because for sure the Burma Army would abuse them. Some people moved to Thailand to live with their relatives. But some people did not have relatives in Thailand, they had to live on the border on the Burma side near Thailand. A few people still lived in that village.

We escaped from the old village to begin our new life on the Thai-Burma border. We did not have any relatives in Thailand or enough money, so we had to live on the Burma side with our relatives. My father was a driver for my relative to earn some money for us to study. My mother did farming and looked after us. My brother and me tried to attend Thai school on the Thai side. We walked across the border every day for the education. Thai soldiers allowed us to do that even though we are not their citizens. We stayed with our relatives for about a year, and then we built a new house from bamboo in the same village. Then my mother gave birth to my sister in 2000.

The people in this village cut trees to sell, imported things from Thailand, and transported people from the border to the township. For some jobs, people had to carry very heavy things on their backs over the mountain into

Burma to make money. My father's job was to drive people to and from the border. Since this area had changed the control from MTA to the Burma Army, the businessmen who had the power with their guns started to do anything that they wanted. They began to sell the drugs, including heroin, freely. No one could oppose them. Then a lot of people who needed a lot of energy for their work carrying goods across the border became addicts. Teenagers also became addicted to drugs. This village was not quite good to live any longer.

One day in 2002, in the morning, the winter was going to change to the rainy season. Everyone was sleeping. Suddenly the voice of the gunfire woke everyone up to find the place to save their lives. We did not know who was fighting, we only knew two sides were shooting at each other. One hour passed, and we heard the voices of Shan soldiers who were chasing and shooting at SPDC soldiers past my home. One of the Burmese soldiers got injured - he was not dead yet and he made a terrible sound. That sound was very terrible for anyone to hear. Even though we knew who was fighting, we could not escape to Thailand because the fighting looked like raining - it was very strong. We could not get out from our home because anyone could be the enemy.

After 2 hours, the situation slowed down, then we could escape to Thailand. My father decided to wait in our home. He said then he would follow us. My brother and me went to Thailand first. My mother did not come with us right

away – she told us to run as fast as we could. While we were running to Thailand we saw a lot of dead bodies, blood, and bullet casings on the road. My mother also followed us but when she was running, the situation got stronger, so she had to hide and wait until midday when the situation slowed down again. Then she could escape to Thailand. My brother and me had already arrived at the Thai border an hour before.

While we were waiting for our mother, the Thai soldiers took many refugees to stay in different temples. Finally my mother and my sister arrived. She and my sister were safe, but they looked very, very worried and tired. 15 days later, my father also arrived safely at the camp. He came late because he was hoping that the fighting would stop and we could go home. But, the Burma Army wanted this area very much, and so he had to leave our home and everything in it and come to join us on the border.

We had to stay in the temple and got aid from the kind people that wanted to help us. After that a lot of organizations started to help us. The life in the temple involved staying with a lot of people, and it difficult. Sometimes we had the problem with the food, like someone got a disease from it. Sometimes we had a problem with a group of people, because we were from different villages. Some were Shan, some were Chinese, and some were different ethnic people who lived in the mountains. There was no leader and if we got food or materials, people would try to take something at the same time.

At this time all of the refugees lived in different temples and the Thai government wanted us to be only one group and to live in only one place. This time was near Buddhist Lent, then all the refugees moved to live in the same place. At this time, we started to build a school to study English at night. During the day, we studied Thai in the temple. One man called Sai Leng, who could speak Shan, Burmese and English, and who was educated, volunteered to be the leader of the community, and he is the leader until now. Even though he knew this job had no salary, he volunteered anyway. The leader has a belief that the children in our community must study English, because he truly believes that the children will get an opportunity from this. He is also an English teacher until now.

In the new camp, we lived in plastic tents with sixty other families until the beginning of the summer. Then we moved to live near the border. There, we lived in blue plastic tents for one year. Then we started to build houses and a temple in 2004 because a lot of refugees were Buddhist. It became an unofficial Shan refugee camp, and the only one like that. It still exists today. Not all the people who escaped from this war live in this camp. Some live with their relatives, and some become migrant workers. Many people don't believe that education could help them in their life. However, a lot of people want to continue to stay as one group in this camp. They don't want anybody to destroy this camp or separate the people from each other.

However, the people have a strong belief that they don't want to live and stay in Thailand forever. Even though they live on the border, they are always looking back towards their homeland. They want to go home to hunt, to make a farm, and to live in their old lifestyle. They always say, someday, they will go.

the helping hand of my  
teacher



khun nay rain oo

There is one primary school in my village without enough teachers but hundreds and hundreds of children who really need the education for now and for the future.

I was one of them.

I was trying to attend school, but was full of fear at that time. On my first day, it looked like I was going to fight the war and be killed because I was really afraid of my teacher's stick in her hand.

One teacher had to teach up to 50 students so the teachers had to shout all the time and they had to use the sticks to make the students obey them. Because of this kind of situation, the teachers didn't want to be patient with the students. So some children were afraid when they saw others beaten by the teachers. This kind of method made some students not want to attend the school anymore, because they had to be afraid all the time. With a lot of fear, they could not pay attention to the lessons. They learned nothing from the lessons. If they couldn't answer when the teachers asked the questions, then they had to be punished by the teachers again. The school couldn't be the comfortable place for the students and feels like the prison for them.

I was the one who was really afraid of this kind of system. I escaped the school every day after the first week after I saw what was happening between teachers and students. I felt that I wasn't going to get the education because I couldn't see anything to be interesting and happy for me. But the classroom looked like a lot of people were

holding a demonstration. The children in the classroom looked like businessmen competing in the market. It made me feel very uncomfortable. So I escaped the school and I went to the monastery to stay, talk and play with one of the monks instead of going to school. This monk had mental problems, but he liked to make jokes with the children, so I went to visit him every day. I tried to avoid the fear in the school.

My parents didn't know about me, that I escaped from the school every day, until six months later. When they knew, it was very late to do anything for me. So I had to attend first standard again the next year. But the situation in the school still hadn't changed, so I had to be the same as in the past year again, always escaping.

I could not pass my first standard until I met my favorite teacher. She was Chinese. She didn't change the whole system of the school, but she didn't use the system like other teachers used. She used her own method that made me and other children want to attend the school without fear in my mind. She never used the violence or any kind of stick to teach the children, only her peaceful words to make the children understand what she was saying. She was very kind to me and I didn't see any sign of tire in her face. She was very happy to teach the children.

My hero, the Chinese teacher, brought me into the new meaning of life. There were only four teachers in the school and most of them didn't like to live in my village because it is far from town and not comfortable. But she

lived in our village the same as us. She taught me to pass first standard when I was nine years old. I could not pass first grade for three years before she came to my village. I am Pa-O, so my language is very different from Burmese, which is used in school. I didn't understand any words of Burmese. This teacher spoke slowly, used actions, and gave me special homework to practice basic Burmese vocabulary, three or four words each night. I practiced writing the letters. She held my hand and helped me to write. After that, I never failed my examinations and I passed every standard, every year, until I got a chance to be a first-year university student.

It has still remained in my heart the things she did for me. I can't explain how good she was to me. She gave me the power to go through the challenges. She showed me what is right and wrong. She showed me the way to run out from the dark place. When I studied with her, I felt very different—full of peace in my heart and my thoughts and no fear could stay in my mind.

I think that is a fact: every person has fear when others do something bad to them. So it is better to use the peaceful way rather than we use the stick to teach the children. Because then, in their hearts, children don't have any idea to be harmful to anyone. They will say the truth for the questions and they will show the real reaction if someone scares them.

The children are very important for the future of our country: they are going to be the leaders. They are the

persons who will rescue and judge our country's life. So what will happen in the future may be the same as what they had practiced in the school. I hope in the future, there will be a good system of education used in our country.

## surviving in the jungle



*(The author pictured at age 12, two years after his journey to the Thai-Burma border)*

**sarm lwin**

I looked every way and only saw mountains full of trees. I heard song from birds and people who lived in this village busy with their jobs. At night cattle came back, also villagers got back from their farm and they enjoyed food with their families. This included me, until the worst day that I didn't hope would happen.

Beginning in 1996, one morning Burmese military came into my village and they said, "You have three days to move into the township, Kunhing. After that, if we see you in the village, we will shoot." So we had to move between my village and township faraway. There was no transportation so we had to carry our things as much as we could—clothes, rice, food, many, many things.

Our life in township where we were forced to go was difficult because we didn't have place to live, we didn't have jobs to do, and Burmese military always said, "You can't go far from the town. If we see you in the jungle, we will shoot." Many people came to Thailand. Foods were more expensive than before, so rich people became poor people, poor people became beggars, and many people got disease. At that time, many people left from town and came back to the old village. It included my family, we came back to farm. Because of this, my brother was shot by Burmese military and they burned our crops.

Shan State Army South came and they noted what happened, how much we lost. One of them talked to about studying at the Thai-Burma border.

“You are so young, do you want to study? I will help you,” the soldier said.

I replied, “No, I don’t want.” I was about 6 or 7, so young.

He continued, “When you change your mind, please tell me.”

Actually at that time I never learned in school. I spent time with my family until my mother died. She got sick because we lived in the jungle and we don’t have medicine. Even though we knew she got sick, we couldn’t take care of her. She was so tired. Before she died, she said, “If I die, you should make a decision. Don’t stay like this.”

After that, my father said, “You should join school. Don’t worry for me. Remember what did your mom say. I also don’t want you to get suffering like this forever. If we are lucky, we will have a chance to see each other again.” Then he sent me to the Thai-Burma border when I was ten years old.

My journey between southern Shan State and Thai-Burma border lasted 6-7 months because we had to walk in the jungle. We had to dodge Burmese military all the time, so sometimes we had to sleep on the slope of mountains. We had to sleep against the trees. Sometimes we slept at the top of the mountains, sometimes at the valley. We didn’t have blanket in our bag. We just had rice to eat and water. We ate food two times for one day. In our food we had to

put plants so that we could eat less rice and make our rice last for a long time. Even though we did like this, sometimes we can only eat one time for one day. It was difficult to get rice and sometimes we didn't know where is the village to get more rice. When we cooked, we only had salt and when we ate I didn't see spoon or plate so we used leaves instead of plates.

When we arrived at the Salween River, we cut bamboo to make the raft for cross the Salween. Our leader said, "Don't go anywhere. There are many mines and remember Burmese military are behind our backs so you must be ready." After we finished across, our rice was gone so we had to eat inside of banana trees, plants, fish, crab, frog, turtle, snake, birds, deer, pig, hen for three days.

When we arrived at border, many people welcome us and ready food for us, also clothes. For me the clothes were so big, but I had to wear it because my clothes were almost broken. Later I arrived in another IDP camp on the Shan border to attend school. I was sick for many months, coughing blood. My hair fell out. I felt so weak. Maybe I spent my energy a lot because I was so young and walking a lot and I didn't enough food.

When I think about my past time, it's difficult to believe. I almost don't know how can I pass it. Even though I passed it, I didn't know before the situation of the military's Four Cuts campaign by the Burma Army, I learned for the first time at SSSNY. Because of Four Cuts campaign, it made me far away from my family. So for the future I will help

children at the border in Shan State that don't have a chance to study or a place to live. They need warmth. I will help them as much as I can, because when I see them, I think about my past. I want to give them energy to help them to survive. Fight for your life for the future. Don't give up.

## the everyday crisis in our life



### nu aung marip

I'm Kachin, living in northern Shan State. One night, I was sleeping in my bedroom around 11:30 pm. The room was close to the garden. At that time my dog barked loudly for a long time. I got up suddenly and looked out of the compound into the garden. I told my father and brother because I couldn't do anything. When we looked around the garden, there were three child soldiers who were stealing vegetables and some fruits. My father asked them about the reason. They answered back that their commander forced

them to damage the things and steal the villagers' property. They said if they did not do anything, the leader will punish them. They said it was difficult for them to survive in their life.

Not only do child soldiers lie and steal, but also they can be robbers and murderers, especially during people's journeys. Many young women face rape. The child soldiers are quite young, they couldn't think about conscience. They have no schooling. They look like beggars. For this reason, our village leader gave warning advice to the villagers. One of my classmates who was 17 years old, she loved a soldier. She thought that guy really loved her like that. After a few months, she got pregnant, but when the soldier found out this news, he ran away immediately. She felt seriously ashamed to friends and family too, and tried to kill herself. I really feel sympathy for my classmate. Her family and me were trying to encourage her for a long time. Finally, she gave birth to the child in the hospital. She could console herself again. And after three years, she married with one Kachin man in the village.

Before this school, I was not clear about the people's freedom and justice. I couldn't think about how to create social change. Now I have become convicted about rights and equality. I want to promote knowledge and consciousness to the people in the community. I understand I have a responsibility to share about my knowledge from my studies. I hope they want to know and to change their

society. We need to prevent the life of crisis and suffering in my country.

## the change in my learning



### phong wan

When I entered the 8<sup>th</sup> Social Justice Education Program Closing Ceremony of SSSNY, I was with my brother. He was a 7<sup>th</sup> training student, but I was not a student or alumni. My brother greeted his friends and introduced me to them. Unfortunately, they called me to look at the computer. But, my brother said that I could not use the computer. In fact, I really could not use it, because I just arrived in Chiang Mai one week ago, and I had never learned. I saw his friends laugh out loud. I didn't know what

did they laugh about, but I felt like they laughed at me because I can't use computer. So I feel angry and sad inside my mind. I told myself, "You will have to show the others what you can do." However, now I have to thank them. Whether they meant to laugh at me or not, it made me totally change my thought and opinions about education as I was never interested in it or thought it was important when I was in Burma.

When I was in Shan State I had never been interested or known how important education was. I was not the top student. I always got the lower marks in the class. I just loved to play sports like aerobics, football, badminton, and any other sports. I never knew what was happening in the country. Even though the monks demonstrated for freedom for all people in Burma in 2007, I didn't know why were they doing that. The political ideology was not interesting to me at all.

I was a child who had to separate from my family since I was 10 years old because of family problems. So I went to live with my uncle. I often told myself to be brave as I had to face many challenges. Many people lied to me about what my brother did, to protect my security, as he was part of the community development group. My mom told me she will come back to me and take me with her, as I didn't want to live with my uncle, because they didn't think much of me. My mom just told me that year by year, and she didn't come back to me. I didn't understand, why did she

lie to me, but it has become clear to me. She told that to me because she wanted me to keep on my studies.

During the time I lived in Burma, I thought why do people want to go to Thailand? I thought maybe they could get a comfortable life and make a lot of money for their family. I saw the people who had their daughter come to Thailand—they have a big house and beautiful clothes. But I had never imagined that there were millions of migrants and refugees who run away from oppression and abuses from the Burmese regime.

The main reason I came to Thailand at first was to continue to study more, as my brother always persuaded me to do, even though I wasn't interested. But the minute and the second I entered the 8<sup>th</sup> SJEP Closing Ceremony, it changed my life. It made me know how important education is. And when I went to construction camp with my brother where he taught English for the people in the camp, it made me want to work in the community to get our rights and freedom back that we had lost since we were born.

Luckily, I got the job at Shan Youth Power (SYP) and started to work in media (to be reporter) and learn how to write news. It was funny because when I was in Burma, I used to use newspaper as a rag for cleaning. I never watched the news, but I became someone who worked for media as a reporter writing news. When I finished my writing I always thought, "will other people read my news?" 😊

The funny thing is I have learned about my country in the other country. Actually, it shouldn't be like that, as I was one of the citizens. I should know what was happening when I was there. But it is not only me, millions of people are still left behind. They don't know yet what is happening in their own country. They just focus on their life; how to make money, get food, and survive day by day.

The result of me finishing 10<sup>th</sup> SJEP is the difference of my mind. The person who had never been interested in studies or known about politics now knows about the ideology of politics and the idea of helping my village, community, town, and country on how to improve their life.

After the school, I will be at my mother organization and helping with community development, as I am interested in it the most. Democracy is only the name—people need the chance to learn what to do in a democracy for it to work. If we really want it, we have to start and act for it now. I will be part of it.

# journey for survival



nang cherry

I crossed the Thai-Burma border using an unofficial route. This journey made me know how difficult and dangerous it is for migrants to Thailand. It made me feel sorry for my mom that she used to migrate to Thailand and support me to attend school in Burma. It made me want to write this experience to share how much our people in Shan State suffer from not having food, education, security and freedom.

When I came to Thailand I was 22 years old. It was 2008. My mother didn't want me to stay in Shan State because there are no jobs. My mother and my older sister support my education until I finished university. My mother had been a migrant worker in Thailand, working as a cook in Bangkok and traveling back and forth for twelve years. My father died when I was eight years old. We have four sisters and brothers in our family. I was the youngest sister. I was raised by our relative.

At first I didn't want to come to Thailand. I want to make business with my aunt trading Thai food because it was difficult to find a job in Burma. Even though I finished university, the government didn't have any job for graduates and citizens. I had attended three-months short course to be a pharmacy aide. I got certificate. But it did not help anything, just waste money and time. I applied for a job in medicine company in Taunggyi but I failed in the interview. The interviewer asked questions. I couldn't understand what he asked because he spoke English by a strange accent. Not only I couldn't understand, but also other friends who

applied couldn't understand. The reason that we failed interview was not that we were not good in English. Actually, they chose men. They said if they chose men it is easier to travel than women. For women in Burma, we cannot travel alone. So I felt very bad, why they discriminate men and women even though our skill was the same. I didn't want to work under other people or owner. My mother didn't allow me to make business with my aunt. She said it doesn't help anyone. She had final word.

So I brought 4-5 outfits, books and warm jacket in my backpack. I left with my mom and my relatives. Four of us rode in my aunt's truck for one day. We had to lie to say we are visiting my aunt's village because if the Burma Army troops know, they won't allow us to travel. They will ask extra money and make trouble for us. When we crossed the Salween River, we had to pay extra money for the troops. They said my age was not full, not 25 years old. We had to sleep in my aunt's village one night. And then we travel by truck for two hours to another village. We met another group waiting to migrate to Thailand too. All of us were twelve people.

We had to wake up early because we start to walk at 4:00 a.m. to continue our journey. If not that time, it is not safe for us, because there were a lot of Thai and rebel soldiers patrolling. If they saw us, they can shoot us. They might mistake us for another rebel group. And also Thai soldiers might shoot us or ask for extra money.

We start to climb mountain at 4:00 a.m. We traveled with four guides. They walked two in front, two in back of us. One of the guides was using *yaba* (methamphetamines). We often had to wait for him while he used drugs. It wasted time in the day so we had to walk more at night. After one hour of walking I threw my clothes in my bag into the forest because they were too heavy. I didn't want to bring anything. I was very tired.

We took vegetables from a passing farm. We stop only one hour. We had lunch with chili, soybean, vegetables and sticky rice. We had to walk in the stream. At night we had to walk on big rocks. It is very slippery and dangerous. My muscles cramped. One of my legs couldn't curve or walk but I couldn't stop. I was afraid to be left behind. My mother too, she was in pain. I tried not to show my feeling of how much I have pain.

"How do you feel?" my mom asked me.

I said, "I'm fine." I lied to her because I didn't want her to worry for me. I walked with a stick to help me.

When we arrived in Thailand it looked like Shan State. We had to wait to be taken by a broker in a truck. We had to pay them 4,500 baht per person (\$150). We had to ride three persons per one seat. After about one and a half hours we had to stop again because we couldn't cross at chosen gate. So we had to walk again around gate. We had to walk and cross river for two hours without food, water since lunch yesterday. We walked with empty

stomach. The brokers wait other side to pick us up. They trade the people for money. We paid final fee when we arrived at my sister's room in Northern Thailand. We didn't trust them if we paid all of our money—they could take us to another place. That's why we paid them at first 3,000 baht (\$100) and then when we arrived the place that we want, we paid the rest.

I want to remind all of my people that most of us in Shan State had to face this dangerous journey too, because we don't have education, food, security, health care in our country. So we don't have choice, we have to migrate for our survival. After we arrive, it is still not secure for us. I want to ask and think deeply in ourselves, who made this situation to be like this? Who made us suffer from lack of food, housing, education, security? Who made us lose our land, property, relatives and made us migrate to another country? Think carefully, is our government taking responsibility for the citizen? Every day that we suffer in our life is because the military regime did it, created it. So why don't we fight back for our freedom, land, for our country? We need the country that has safe place, peace and the chance to stay together with our family. If we have hope and unity we can get it.

**one day, i will tell you**



**ying ying**

In the world, there is a lot of fighting and problems that make people have to flee to other countries. This is what happened to my family. My parents had to move to Thailand when I was only two years old. I didn't know why we had to leave our hometown to start a new life. My parents became migrant workers and they had to work in the farm in Northern Thailand.

When I was five years old, I started to go to Thai school. I met many friends. I did not understand their language, because I could speak only in Shan. They were Thai. After I finished primary school, I decided to continue middle school. My parents also supported my education at that time, because I was so young. I couldn't start work on the farm yet.

For twelve years, I learned in Thai school about Thai culture and language. Now I can write and speak in Thai very well. However, for people who cannot read and speak in Thai clearly, they might discriminate or look down on them.

I had many friends. One day, one of them asked me a question. I knew her for about two or three months. Because of my name, she knew I was not Thai. She just wanted to know about my background, about why I came to Thailand.

“Where did you come from?” she asked.

“I come from Shan State,” I said.

“Where is Shan State?”

I said, “In Burma.”

“So you are Burman?”

“No, I’m not. I’m Shan.”

“But you come from Burma. You should be Burman.”

At that time, I couldn’t explain to them where I really came from, because I did not know about my country. I felt uncomfortable. I didn’t know where Shan State was. On the map, I couldn’t find it—only Burma. I hoped in the future I could tell her about the country where I come from.

At school, I tried to think about the lessons I had to pass. I just wanted to be strong so I can stand up in the big society. Before I left middle school, I could not decide myself if I should continue to high school or help my family to work. However, at that time I was only 16, and in my mind I always thought that I should learn more. But I also thought that my parents were getting older every day. If I don’t work now, when am I going to work? I used to ask myself this question.

I knew which way my parents wanted me to do: they wanted me to get a job. They did not want to tell me, because they wanted me to decide by myself. But my parents saw most of my friends who were the same age as me—they can work and they can help their families to make

money already. Sometimes their mothers talked to my mother.

“Your daughter is adult enough to work,” they said. “Look at my daughter, she can work and make money very well. Why don’t you send her to work with us?”

After I heard that, I was so upset. I felt like I was a person who could not help my family. I just learned, while my family worked hard growing vegetables on the farm. If I went to school, I thought I could improve my family’s living standard. If I got a high education, I can get a good job. But learning takes a long time.

“Now we are in Thailand,” my mother reminded me. “Even though we try to get high education, it doesn’t help us. We can do nothing freely in this country. Don’t hope too much.”

I did not share my mother’s idea, because I thought our futures depended on us. Nothing is impossible, if we try. So I stayed in school, and I tried my best. One year earlier, I had started attending classes at the Shan Youth Power School in the evenings and weekends. It was a special school for migrant children in the migrant camp where I lived. Our classroom was quite small and made from bamboo, but it was made by the students’ parents. Our teachers were kind and inspired the students to love their own culture. I learned how to read and write in Shan and how to speak English.

Before that time, I never thought about migrant children. But after I had a chance to study, I knew that these students didn't have a chance to go to Thai school like me. Some of them had just arrived in Thailand, and some of them didn't have enough money. The teachers encouraged me to continue my education so I could help the other children. I was also a migrant child, so I had experience with how they think and feel about life in Thailand. I could help guide the way for them to begin their future.

The teachers from Shan Youth Power encouraged me to follow my dreams. They all had graduated from SSSNY. They said this school gave students from Shan State a chance to study and most graduates can work for their communities. So I began to be interested in this school. I talked to my mother about taking the exams to attend SSSNY. But the exams are not easy. We have to have enough English to talk about our experiences and we have to take a lot of tests.

“How can you know if you will pass it?” my mother said. At that time, I also wasn't sure. I told her if I don't pass it, I will work for one year and try to attend next year. I felt worried about the results of the exam. I thought about what will happen if I was not selected. I would have to work in a restaurant washing dishes or serving food. I would have to live with other people because my home was far from the town.

But this school selected me. It saved my life from becoming a migrant worker. It gave me a chance to continue

my education and learn about my own country. Now, I can tell Thai people what happened in Shan State, why we had to flee to Thailand. I will be able to help my community and to improve migrant children's knowledge in the migrant workers' camp. My mother also changed her mind. Now she tells me whatever I want to learn, she will encourage me.

She said, "This is your future, do your best."

I will not disappoint them.

the phone call that changed  
my life



nang rat kham

I came to Thailand in 2008 when I was 18 years old. I went to live with my grandfather on the Thai-Burma border. At that time, I couldn't speak Thai, so I didn't have a job. I have to stay with my grandfather about six months.

A girl from my village was working for Pa-O Women's Union. It is an organization that helps. I am Pa-O, we are an ethnic group in Shan State. She called me on the phone at my grandfather's house. She told me about the intern program. Interns study basic things and live at the organization's office for six months.

"You will just study English," she said. "You can come."

"Yes, I'm interested." I said. "Next month, I will come."

I didn't know anything about politics. I just wanted to learn English. I was interested to learn about it. English is the international language, very popular in the world. So I really want to learn.

My grandfather drove me to the Pa-O Women's Union. When I arrived the first thing I learned was simple English grammar, the same as teaching children. They have to teach me basic verb. We have only four girls in class. Only one who had not studied English before: me. Very difficult for me to learn—I didn't want to learn more. I only knew about verb and using grammar.

When I lived in Burma, I had to study English but the teacher only spoke Burmese. We went to school, Grade 1 to Grade 10, we had to study but we didn't know the meaning. Also how to use sentences, we didn't know. We just saw the word in the book. This learning doesn't make us think, only read in the book. We couldn't share idea or opinion to each other. The teacher reads and students have to memorize. The next day, the teacher repeats. When the students can't answer, the teacher beats the students. We just only memorize, not think our own idea. When I attended Burmese school, twelve years of my education I know nothing. I didn't get enough education and I can't continue because it was very expensive.

I arrived at Pa-O Women's Union and studied English for two months. We started to study human rights. I never knew about human rights when I lived in Burma. When we studied human rights, we didn't agree with our teacher and also argued with each other. We had to study a long time. At PWU, when I studied, very different from Burma—I had never talked and shared my ideas before. We didn't have a chance to share with our friends in Burma.

In Burma I only knew the military government wasn't good, but not why. I don't know. When they talk to me about how government soldiers rape the women and torture the people and also burn the villages, I didn't believe the stories. I didn't change my mind. I argued with them. But when I saw a video about a Karenni village burned by the soldiers, the villagers had to run and carry their things on

their back. The children had to walk very far in the mountains, sometimes in rainy season. They had to sleep under the trees. After that, I believed the Burma military really burned the villages, raped, and tortured like this.

As an intern, I studied many subjects I have never studied before: women's rights, peace building, history of Burma, and a little computer. We only had two computers. When we studied women's rights, we didn't agree that women and men have the same rights. My mother and father said girls don't play with boys, you are not the same. When I ate every meal, I had to eat after the boys ate. I had to eat the extra food my brother did not eat. My friends were the same as me. So I believed my parents. We were supposed to study women's rights for one week in the intern program, but we had to study for one month, because we needed more time to understand it. Now I believe girls and boys are equal. We need the same rights, the same education, the same chance to be a leader.

This organization—PWU—saved my life. If they didn't call me, I wouldn't know anything I know now. I wouldn't know people have rights. Now I know how to protect myself and my rights. I know what happens in Burma, it's a very difficult situation. Now at SSSNY I can continue my education. I want to share it with my friends who don't know about this. They can be educated people, and it might save their life like mine.

# where are the migrants' rights?



**mwe awh**

When I was a child, I lived in one town with my family in Shan State. It was very peaceful. Every day the

villagers went to do their jobs in their farms. Everyone enjoyed their work.

However, one day the Burmese military came into our town. They forced us to move to another place. We were separated from our relatives. We had to live in the jungle without a home for ten days in hiding. After that, we built a house from bamboo. Other people did too, and it became a small village in the forest. We grew crops like rice to feed ourselves. At that time, I was 5 years old.

In our new village, there was no school and no teacher. I had no chance to study. I had to go to the farm with my parents every day, because at this time I didn't have a brother or sister to take care of me. I had an older brother and older sister, but we had to separate when the Burmese military came to the town. They left with other people. I didn't know where they went.

One day, I played with my friends. I didn't go with my parents to the farm. The troops found our village. At that time, all of the children ran into the deep jungle. We didn't see our parents. We stayed in the jungle for one day and one night. We didn't have food. We didn't know the way to return to our village. I felt afraid of animals like tigers, and the military. That night, we had to sleep on the ground. But in the morning our parents found us again.

When we came back to our village, we stayed for four or five more days. The Burma Army soldiers came again and they forced us to move from our village the

second time. After that, they burned it down and said, “no more village.” They took a lot of things from us, like chickens and rice. They raped the girls and women in our village. Even if their husbands were there, they raped them. They also punished and tortured a lot of villagers. They forced the boys and men to carry their weapons for two or three days and they didn’t give food for them. This happened many times for the next three years. We couldn’t stay, we had to move. But we didn’t know where to go.

We knew Thailand was peaceful, and we started to go to Thailand. But we didn’t know the way. When we went to Thailand, we walked for fifteen days. I hurt my foot. I couldn’t walk. We had to wait for it to heal in the jungle. When I felt healed, we continued to walk to Thailand.

We crossed the border using an unofficial route. We called our relatives who were already in Thailand to pick us up. We came by the truck, but my mother stayed behind to wait for other relatives who had not arrived yet at the border. But the truck driver had to pick us up. He couldn’t wait because he was afraid the police would see us and arrest us, and also arrest him too. We crossed the border before my mother. My mother had to be picked up by motorbike and she had an accident. She hurt her leg and she couldn’t walk very well when she arrived.

I was eight years old when we came to Thailand in the year 2000. But I looked small because I had not enough food when we lived in Shan State. We went to stay in a town called Fang in Northern Thailand. A lot of people come

from Shan State to work in the farms in Fang. We met my brother and sister there. They came before us. My parents and brother picked chilies, onions, and grew rice. My parents got 70 or 80 baht per day (\$2.50) but my brother got 50 baht (\$1.50) because he was small. He was 13 years old. He couldn't carry the heavy things.

Sometimes I had to work with my parents because we didn't have enough money. My parents had to pay for their migrant worker ID cards. Sometimes people have to work at night to save money. Sometimes their employers don't pay equally for the jobs that they do, but the people can't complain because the employers might call the police to arrest them. Migrant workers have to pay more and more money for the work permit registration. My parents had to pay 11,500 baht for each card (\$380). They can use this card for two years and then pay more money for a new one. This card only allows us to work in the farm in the province. If we leave the province, we will be arrested and sent back to Burma.

Migrant workers need good employers, fair salaries, and the same rights as other people. They also need their children to get good education to improve themselves. Two years after I came to Thailand, I had a chance to study at a school and my parents were really pleased. It was supported by the Shan Women's Action Network. We learned Shan, English and Thai. Our school was made from bamboo. I studied there until I was 17 years old.

When I was 18, I became one of the students at SSSNY. After I finish this school, I would like to be a journalist because I want to collect information about how much our people have been violated by the SPDC military government and how our people became refugees and migrant workers. I would like to raise awareness about this so the international community will know how much people suffer from conflict in Shan State and exploitation in Thailand. The whole of Burma has been violated by the SPDC. I cannot forget this. I always keep it in my memories.

# the importance of news for shan state



## sao zerng

My name is Sao Zerng. I had worked at a community radio broadcast station at Thai-Shan-Burma border as broadcaster in 2008-2009. It broadcast the news about violence or abuses, healthcare information, political history and ethnic songs to inside Shan State every day. But it is not able to send to the entire Shan State because its engine is radio FM, so only people who live within 50 kilometers of central broadcast station can receive it to

listen. When I was young I didn't hear about this kind of radio. I had only heard the news radio from Norway for 15 minutes per week in Shan language.

In 1997, I was 13 years old. This year people in Shan State gave it the name "hell year" (hell years were in 1996-1997) because military junta destroyed many villages and killed lots of innocent people of the central and southern areas of Shan State by Four Cuts Policy. Hundreds of thousands of people were displaced. Some fled to the Thai-Shan-Burma border.

Even though people were moving to Thai-Shan-Burma border, many of the crimes and injustice committed against our people have not been told. So this is from my memory what I had seen about one village, which is near my village.

One day in the afternoon, I saw huge black smoke was spreading on the sky at the southeast side of our village. It is far from my village two miles. I was surprised and I couldn't ask anyone what was happening there because nobody was near me, and I just took a bath in the stream, which had been flowing across the field. I asked my mother about it when I reached at home. She said that Burmese soldiers burned the village and forced them to move to near our village. After a few days, I heard about how one man and many cows and buffalo were killed by SPDC troops. And also they raped the Palaung or Ta-Ann woman at the farm. At that time in our village, it was very silent and everyone was afraid of the Burma Army troops

because their action was like the cruel people or wild people. When they reached a village, they would take the property that they wanted such as rice, fruits, chicken, dogs, salt, chili. Nobody can ban them because they had a license to do it.

The military ordered to the villagers that they had to move in three days to the place where they ordered. If the villagers carried their properties, the soldiers would come to burn the houses or rice stores. One of my relatives whose house had been burned by the Burma Army said that one soldier came in his house and said, "Why you don't go to help the house that is burning?" So, my relative went to get water. When he was walking towards a well, he saw another soldier holding the fire stick and was burning one house by one house. My relative understood the soldiers had planned to burn the village, because before he thought they wouldn't do that really. It included his house. We got the news from another township by villagers to villagers talking, because we didn't have phone or any newspaper to read to know about the situation in other townships. The military banned the selling of batteries and didn't allow people to listen to radio from other countries, such as BBC.

When I was 15 years, one day at 7:00 pm I was visiting my friend's house. Some soldiers went in the house and pulled us outside and they said that I and my friend have to go with them at once without reason. We replied, "Why?" So they began to beat and kick both of us. I wanted to ask who was the perpetrator and who was the

victim? Maybe when we go to the court, the judge would decide we had to go to jail because we were criminals for refusing soldier's orders. One of my relatives who was driving the car came back from the town to our village. These soldiers ordered him to stop the car and ask some questions like, "Why did your car come back so late?" He was pounded by their gun on his right shoulder. He went to get treatment at the hospital in the town. He became like a half-dead person. Even now, he cannot use his right arm.

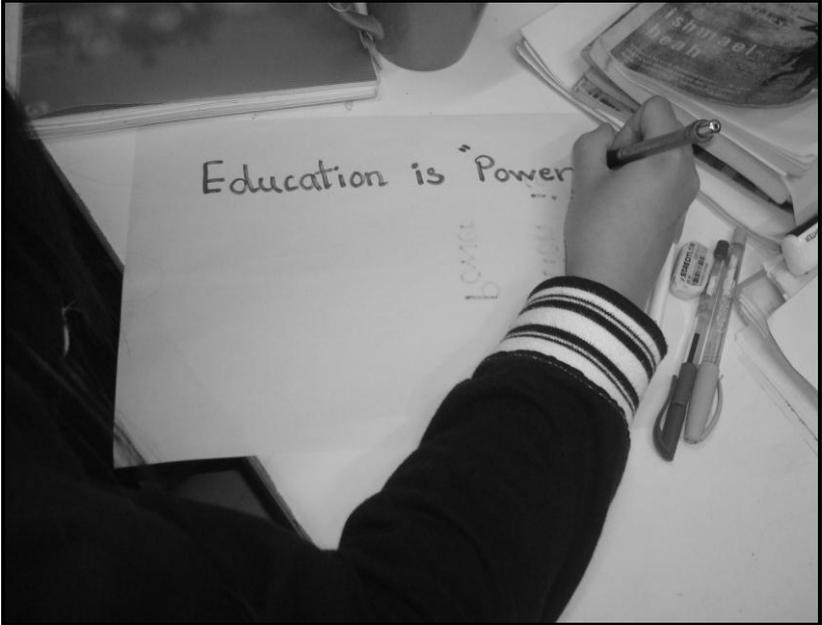
Soon after this incident, the radio station started to broadcast about the military regime abusing human rights. It is based on Thai-Shan (Burma) border. The villagers may understand that widespread abuses are happening every day. It gives another choice of news other than state media.

If citizens know what is happening everywhere, they will understand what the Burma Army is doing to the citizens and they will be against regime in some way such as protest. The villagers will improve communication, exchange information, share to each other, and compare the information from each area. They will know the corruption of the government and they won't accept or believe whatever the military is saying. They can improve knowledge from radio. For example, governments should take responsibility to provide citizens' basic needs, health care, free education, and good transportation.

For over one decade in the past, I couldn't listen to my language on the radio adequately. Nowadays, we have broadcast station, but it can't broadcast to the whole state. I

hope that one day we will have the radio which the whole state can listen to. And I'm thinking to work with the broadcast station in the future after I graduate from the School for Shan State Nationalities Youth.

# upside-down university in burma



## khai muk

I believed that if I went to university, I could have a good standard of living. I thought I would have a better job and enough salary. I wanted to support my family to live in a good condition. But I realized that my expectation was opposite with the reality in the University of Taunggyi in Burma.

When I passed tenth grade, I did not get high score so I just had to choose the simple subjects. But some of my friends got high score and they were also rich so they could attend the engineering program. I and my friends were disappointed because we tried very hard in tenth grade. But we got the results that said we would go to study economics. I felt it did not matter what subject I got, because I did not have a choice.

I did not have enough money to go to “everyday learning,” so I studied in “distance learning” because it was cheaper than going every day. Before I went to attend first year, I had to do the first assignment. One of my friends tried to do the assignment on her own, but failed. Other students told me that the only way to pass each assignment was to pay money to an official. Even if I did it correctly, I will fail if I don’t pay a bribe. So I had to pay the bribe every year for three years.

I had to take tuition outside of the university for every subject. I hardly went to the class in the university. Teachers didn’t teach every day. If they taught, I couldn’t understand, because they taught very fast and did not care if the students could follow or not. They just wrote the letters on the blackboard and let us copy.

With the tutors, it was a little bit better than the university. I tried to learn on my own by memorizing worksheets. I did not feel I was a university student. I didn’t feel I was learning much. I knew even if I finished university, my knowledge would not improve as I expected.

However, I finished university and got a Bachelor's degree in Mandalay. I applied for a job as an accountant at a government office in my hometown because it was connected to economics. But when I asked for applications, they had two answers for me. The officer said there were no vacancies for jobs yet. They said I had to wait until the job openings. But if there was an opening, I would have to pay a bribe to the manager for my application to be considered. I didn't know how long I had to wait to work as a civil servant. I also didn't have enough money to give them even if I got a job. I couldn't find money by myself and I didn't want to give trouble to my family to find money for me. If we were poor, it was too difficult to get a job in a government office.

One time I met a rickshaw driver in Rangoon. I had a conversation with him when he sent me to go to my friend's house. He said he had got a Bachelor's degree in this city, but he couldn't find a job in a government office because his family was very poor and it was difficult to support him again. They already supported him for three years. So he had no choice, he had to do this job to support his family. "In Burma, even if you are an educated person and hold your official document, if you have no money, no job for you," he said. He was very disappointed about that.

I was disappointed too. I asked myself why I had to waste my time in Burma for a long time. I spent my energy, time, and money in the university. If I knew the result would come out like this, I should have come to Thailand before. I

told this to my family. Instead of wasting the time I should earn money, a lot. So I decided to come to Thailand and I became a migrant worker for three years.

I got a job in at the market in Northern Thailand. I had to work 10 or 12 hours a day. But I was very low-paid. Thai people also worked the same hours as me got they got a very high pay. They always looked down on me because I came from Burma. I had to work illegally. Even though I had a migrant worker card, I always had to be afraid of the police. If I met with the police while I was working, they would arrest me if I did not pay a bribe to them. I was not happy with my new experience.

“Why don’t you work at the government office? Why do you come to work in the market here? You finished university,” one of my Thai friends asked me. Those words made me very sad. “In our country, people who finished university would not do this kind of job, they would do a comfortable job in the government office or a private company,” she also said. To me, I understood that the meaning was I had not ability work in this kind of job. I didn’t blame her for talking to me like that. I had more energy to not give up, to continue my education again.

Even though I didn’t really have free time, I learned by myself because I had to focus on the business. I had responsibility to support my family and also my sister to continue to go to university. So that took me three years to have the chance to study again. I never stopped wanted to continue my education, so people asked me why I did not

give up. I said when I had a chance, I had to learn as much as I could. Education is the only way that can solve the problems in the family and community and society.

I was very lucky having a chance to learn in SSSNY. Now I know a lot of subjects that I had never learned in Burma before. All subjects are very useful, and show us how to work together and how to develop the community. I want to use my knowledge to educate the children who are hungry for education. I want to share my skills to my friends, family and community. I will continue to learn new information and I will do my best in my work, as much as I can.

I want to give a suggestion to our new generation in Burma. If you finish Grade 10 in Burma, it is difficult to get a good and real education. Come to learn at the border. Or learn the skills that are useful for you in your daily life, so you can support yourself and your family instead of wasting time in Burma's universities. If you do not have a comfortable situation, you have to think carefully how to use your valuable time in your life.

SSSNY is as valuable as water for seeds to grow into a strong tree and roots. This tree can produce beautiful flowers and delicious fruits in the future for the people of Shan State.

# a cold war in the village



nanta

In the winter, the cool wind blew into the windows. I was five years old and I didn't have any brothers or sisters. My mother's name was Noan. One early morning, she was going to cook. She took the rice cooker and went to the drum. In the countryside, metal drums were very popular to put rice in because the mouse or rat cannot go inside. While my mother was taking rice from the drum, I woke up and I didn't want to sleep. I went to the drum where my mother was and she said to me, "Go to sleep, it is very early and it is very cold." But I didn't go to bed again.

I heard the shooting of guns happen north of our home, at first just two or three times. My mother and me stopped taking the rice and listened. After a minute the noise of their gun and bomb grew more and more and it did not stop.

During the fighting, we could not go out or escape from our house, but we were very lucky that we had a bunker beside our house. My mother put me into the rice drum and she said, "Stay here. I will come and take you later." She took everything and ran down to the bunker. She ran again and again. The rice was up to my knees. While I was waiting in the drum, I saw a bullet go through the ceiling wood. I thought the bullets could not come through the drum because it was iron. After that, my mother came back and took me and ran down to the bunker. When I arrived at the bunker everybody in my family was in there, and I was the last person.

On that day, we could not cook or eat because we had to stay in the safe place and the fighting did not stop until the afternoon. Then the shooting gun slowed down about ten minutes. One of my uncles ran to our house and collected some fruit for us and we ate them for the first meal on that day. But in the night, the shooting guns continued and we could see the color of the bullets that went over our farm. They were red or green, many colors. We could see very clearly.

The second day, in the morning, we were very hungry and my uncle found the way that we could cook, because beside our bunker there were some mango trees. My uncle made a fire under the mango trees. It was just for when the shooting guns slowed down that we could cook. We had to wait in the bunker all day. And in the night it was non-stop fighting.

The third day, we woke up and we were going to cook. Suddenly a soldier from SSA came and told us, "Today you have to go away from here because we will have very big fighting. You have to go now." I was in the bunker and I was very sleepy, but after I heard that, I didn't want to sleep.

"Come on, take your things that you can. We will go to another village," my mother said. She collected our things—clothes, rice, etc.

We started to carry our things and walk over the road. At that time, I saw one of the Burma Army soldiers was

shooting at us, but no one was shot by him. I heard the noise of his gun but felt nothing around me, the bullets didn't come. The soldier wore green clothes and the green hat. On his hat was a white moon. He stood under the jackfruit tree. When we had free time, we used to go and play under this tree, all the children in my family.

All day, we didn't eat our meal and we had to walk very far and in the afternoon we arrived in a village. We were very scared. We heard that news that they would move to this village. In the night, we could not sleep. We could still hear the shooting gun in my village. We stayed in that new village for seven days and the Burmese military didn't come. After that, we returned to our hometown again.

When we arrived in our village, the bad smell from dead thing was around the village. When everybody arrived, they had to clean dead bodies and animals and everybody worked and helped each other. But one day, my neighbor stepped on the landmine and he died, even though he just escaped the fighting. Everybody in the village felt very sorry about that and they had to walk around very carefully.

While we were clearing our village, one of my uncles, who had a problem with his mind, found an RPG, a big bomb. The explosive part already came out. But he made a fire and put it in the fire. I had never seen this thing before. I held onto his pants and stood behind him and watched. He used his hat to fan the fire. It grew bigger and bigger. After that, my other uncle saw and said, "What are

you doing?" He took the bomb out of the fire with his bare hands and threw it though the window into the river.

"This is a bomb. It can make our home destroyed," he explained to me. After that, when the Burmese military came back, I saw them try to get fish in the river by using this same bomb that my uncle threw away. They dug the soil, put the bomb in, ran out from the river, but the bomb did not work. They didn't come to find the fish again. They didn't dig the bomb out, so we knew it was still in the river.

After that, we lived in our hometown again. My grandmother was the leader, the head villager. When the SSA or the Burmese army want something from another village, she was responsible for bringing information and news to other villages. It didn't matter if it was the night or the day. She could not use the flashlight, she had to use the fire stick. If the Burma Army troops saw the flashlight, they would shoot immediately, because they thought only the rebels had that flashlight. When my grandmother used the firestick, they could see who she was. Some of the villagers said we were corrupt, because when the Burma Army troops asked us to kill a pig and give meat to them, the people thought we got benefits, like keeping the meat. But we got nothing. This pig was not our pig, or the villagers' pig. We had to collect the money and buy from another village and bring it home and kill it for the soldiers. My grandmother had to do it because the villagers chose her to be head of village.

We stayed in our village until the military ordered us to move our hometown to the city because they thought our village was a place for SSA. They said they will let the village jungle grow over the village like a broken village. But a few months later, they came and developed it, building a road, temple, and restaurant. When the villagers tried to go back, the military government told them they had to buy the land if they wanted to stay. No one had money. No one wanted to live in the city because all of us were farmers. My villagers had to separate from each other and live in other villages. For us, we went to Panglong city until we came to Thailand. I have never gone back to my hometown again.

# my relationship with the hill people



hsen zain

In our village, my family went to sell things that hill people needed on the mountain. Many of the hill people are farmers who grow tea like steps on the mountain. My parents slept or stayed at the village head's house there. When something happened, whether it was a good or bad thing, the hill people came to our house first. They came to ask for help, to relax, or to feed their horses and cows. We depended on each other.

Sometimes my brother liked to play with the hill people's children who were the same age as him, but my older sister did not really like them. Also me, I didn't like them. I heard my neighbors and relatives say that they were dirty, uneducated people, because they lived in the mountains, ate betel nuts and had black teeth. Sometimes the older people had really long fingernails and hair, because they never cut them. Their hands were stained from working with tea. Because they had a different lifestyle, other people looked down on them. Also me, I believed and thought like other people.

"Why do you work with the hill people?" I asked my father one day. "They are very dirty and I don't want them to come into our house. I don't want to touch them."

"Who told you that?" my father answered. "My daughter, don't say things like that. They are also human. We have the same value. We have to respect them like other people. Don't discriminate because we are different ethnic groups."

My father stopped and breathed deeply. “Every day that we have money to buy food or the things in our house, every day that we support the three of you to go to school—all of this we get from the hill people. If there were no hill people, I think, we will go to beg in the market. No one else helps our family, not your grandfather, grandmother, uncles or aunts. Only the hill people help our family. Don’t discriminate and look down on them.”

“I didn’t know,” I said. “I just heard what some people told me.”

“Don’t forget the things I taught you. You will understand one day,” my father said.

After that, I thought for a long time and began to understand how they helped our family. I started to make friends with the students at my school who came from the hills. Sometimes when people in my village saw a beautiful or handsome daughter or son from high in the mountains, they would say, “Oh! They look like a Shan, not a hill person. I think they are half-Shan.” If they saw an ugly Shan child or baby, they’ll say it’s really a hill person. Sometimes my relatives said this to me, too. They said that I must be a hill person and my parents found me on the mountain, because I had darker skin than my brother and sister. I didn’t think this was true. When I heard people talk like that, I tried to ignore these bad things and I never followed the way I thought before. I didn’t care what the society said or told me.

My father continued to trade with the people on the mountain. In 2005, my father and the hill people's village head started to grow and make tea in one area on the mountain. One year later, the Burmese military found out about this. They wanted to control all of this area and they came into the village. First the soldier ordered my father to leave the area. He walked all night until morning, until he arrived at our house. He didn't stop anywhere. About ten days after that, the village head and some villagers came to our house and asked for help. The Burma Army burned down their village and many people died.

Once we knew about this, my family could help them. Also some people in our village helped them. But many people, they didn't want to help. They said they didn't want to live in the same village with hill people. They said that they were very dirty and uneducated. All of the villagers who wanted to help the hill people donated money so they could stay in a small area of land near our village. Because they got some money, the other villagers did not complain about the hill people living near us.

Before I didn't know, but all of these events are human rights abuses. I had never learned about human rights in Burma and I never heard about it. When I learned about human rights in this school, it made me understand more than before. Not only the military government oppresses us. Also our ethnic groups discriminate against each other and abuse each other's rights.

I am thankful this school gave me the opportunity to become a student in this program. It's only a short time, but it gave me a lot of knowledge for my future. It opened my mind and eyes. Also it taught me to understand human rights. Now I can explain how sad and sorry I feel that before I have stereotyped the hill people in my mind and my action.

These words are from my heart. Please forgive me. This story has passed by four years but I still remember. It's embedded in my mind. This story reminds me all the time that I can't look at the other group with stereotypes and segregation. I also hope if I share this story, it can stop other people from looking down on other groups. My wish is that we won't discriminate against each other. I want the people to throw away the idea of stereotypes. All of our ethnic groups need to start to communicate, help each other to become united, and work together to get our country back.

## once upon a time in my life



### yawd phu

I was born in 1992 in the place that is inside Shan State. I was the eldest son. My parents were traders. Even though my parents didn't make a lot of money from their jobs, we had enough food to feed us. We didn't have to worry about money and starvation. That time was one of the happiest times for me. I could stay with my family. I didn't think so much about the future. I only thought about eating, playing and how if I died, I would like to be born to my parents again.

At that time, my father stayed with his big family. It was difficult for him to save money because we had to share the things with each other. My father did want to share, but for big items, he couldn't support. He wanted us to have a

good life. So he decided to move to another place. My parents and us moved to my mother's side, to the village. In the village, my father thought that it would have more opportunities to do business and safer than other places. Because other parts of Shan State had been forced by Burmese soldiers to live in the town.

When my father traveled, he bought presents for us. I didn't think that those presents would be the last presents from my father. In early 2001, my father was accused of supporting the Shan resistance, because his old friend from childhood had joined. They sometimes met at festivals in town and talked about business and life. So Burmese soldiers arrested my father. They told my mother that they wanted to discuss and ask questions to my father. For a few days, my father didn't come back and my mother went to the military base and asked about my father. They said that they didn't know anything about my father. My mother went to every military base and town, but up to now my mom didn't see my father.

After this happened, some people in our community didn't let their children come and play with us. I didn't know why they treated us in different ways. However, some treated us more kindly than in the past. Now I got the answer why they don't want to connect with us. Because if they were related to us, they might think that they might get trouble like us. They were also afraid to get arrested and lose their business. I don't blame them that they are bad and

unkind. They have their own reasons and love their family. Also, our society always avoids those kinds of problems.

My mom sent me to the town for studying. I did not know why. During the time I was studying, my mom always encouraged me to do the best I could. I had many friends that understood and helped me. Even though they knew what happened to my dad, they comforted me and helped me with my studying and so on. I finished high school normally, but I have learned many things from my friends' lives and my life.

I wrote this story because I would like some of our people to understand why we don't want to become like this—if we can choose, we will choose to stay with our family. Even if you don't want to connect with people like us, I want you to sympathize with how we feel—fatherless, motherless. There are many problems we have to face. We sometimes can overcome it, sometimes we can't. That is our fate. We can't change our past, but we can deal with better, as much as we can.

my beautiful town



hseng on

Mong Su town is a small town in Shan State. Most people's jobs are farmers. We all had a peaceful life in our beautiful town. Every morning all people went to carry water and wash their clothes in the Nam Nga River and the smaller Nam Su River. It looked like a ceremony, but it wasn't. It was part of our daily life. In the town, we had many places to visit—apple and pineapple farms, waterfalls, and pagodas on the mountain.

My grandfather's house was beside the Nam Nga and Nam Su Rivers. We used the small Nam Su River to make a water wheel to produce oil to sell in the market. We didn't know how to make electricity. The wheel spun and the spinning changed peanuts into oil. This is our traditional way, so the river is very important for us.

Outside the town, on the mountain, hill people lived. One day, some hill people found rubies in their village while they were digging to plant vegetables. They brought the rubies to exchange for food at the market in the town. They didn't know it was a ruby—they just thought it was a beautiful rock. When the Burma military found out about the ruby, they came and took all the land. The hill people had to move their village to another mountain, without reason. The soldiers came and clear-cut all of the trees on the mountain and sold the land to a mining company so they could find the rubies. Some of the wood that they cut they sold to the mining company. Some of it they sold to China. When people around Burma heard about the rubies, they

travelled to find work in my town. The population grew quickly.

A few years later, the water in the river changed from clean to dirty. Also, many people threw their garbage in the river, because they thought they couldn't use the river anymore. We were all very upset about that, because before we used it for our daily life. The small Nam Su River was dry. My grandfather lost his job, because we couldn't use the water to spin the water wheel machine. When rainy season started, the low places flooded. Many farms were under water. At this time, I was so young, I was afraid because my grandfather's land also sunk in the flood. Before we never had a flood, but when the mining company came, people lost their farms because of flooding.

Many people went to work in the mines. When they came back, they got a new idea to use the dynamite from the mines for bombing the fish in the river. It was very easy to get the fish, and saved time for fishermen. The dynamite became popular in the market. They didn't know that this way killed more fish than they needed. Now in the river all the fish have disappeared, because most people don't understand the impact of the dynamite on the environment.

"Development" is having a negative effect on my hometown because the military government didn't plan or prepare for the future. Even though the local people reported about the polluted water to them, the government didn't solve the environmental problems. All the people in Mong Su Town suffered because of the mining. They used

the water from the Nam Nga and Nam Su since they were born, but now they can't use it anymore. They feel like they lost a part of their life.

The water in the river will never be clean or useful again if the mining companies still work to find the rubies in Mong Su. We all want the water to become clear again, so clear that we can see the bottom. Then we will have beautiful days, like before.

waiting under the sun



zarm

There was a special day at school when I was seven years old in Mong Su, Southern Shan State. A visitor was coming. I wore yellow Shan traditional clothes and went to the football field at 7:00 a.m. with all other students. Most of the students were dressed in school uniforms—white shirt and green *longyi*. Some students wore traditional clothes like me. There were not only students but also some citizens and officers who worked for government.

Everyone went to the field, excited to meet one of the country's leaders. The visitor was General Khin Nyunt, the man who was the second general of Burma's military. I saw General Khin Nyunt in television. He and other generals went to *pagoda* and some schools. They donated money, giving charity and opened new ceremony in some places. At that time, I knew General Khin Nyunt and military were soldiers who had command in Burma, like by calling citizens to be porters for them, fighting and arresting who were the country's "enemy." They took the natural resources such as ruby, jade, gem and went back to Rangoon.

I didn't know that General Khin Nyunt and the military junta did human rights abuse, built dam, sold natural resources for weapons and raped lots of women in Shan State. They destroyed our culture and traditional beliefs that concern with our history. We were not allowed to learn our ethnic language. They took land. They extorted money and property from citizens. They forced citizens to move to another place and burned the villages. I really didn't know.

I and all students and government officers were ready to welcome the general. We were waiting and waiting. We asked the teacher about when he would come but our teacher also did not know. We looked to the sky waiting for the helicopter to come.

The teacher taught us when the general came we had to greet him and pay respect to him, like saying, “Hello Father! Be healthy be wealthy!” We had been waiting under the hot sun with no trees, no shade. We sat down on the ground. Some children, because of very hot sunshine, fell down, passed out. At around 11:00 a.m., we heard the helicopter sound coming toward us, but it passed our township to the ruby mountain. We wanted to go home because we were hungry. We had just a little breakfast and we didn’t have lunch. The teacher didn’t allow us to go home and eat because the general would nearly come.

We had to wait until the helicopter flew over the area again—away, gone. That meant Khin Nyunt had left our township. Mong Su citizens waited and got nothing. We asked the teacher why they didn’t come, why we have to wait for a long time. Teacher told us generals were busy, they have important jobs to do.

When we were allowed to go home that was around 3:00 p.m. We were upset that Khin Nyunt didn’t tell us that we should not have waited a long time. We should have studied and learned at the school. I found out later the General Khin Nyunt was on the ruby mountain, visiting ruby company based there and took rubies back home. So this

reason he didn't care about citizens. He cared about ruby more than the citizens.

A few years later, students spent all morning waiting for the government representative to visit again. They were going to open a new building in our school (paid for with the villager's money) but they came late, in the afternoon. They gave speech and announced that the school would get ten new computers. I saw the government give a small gift box to the headmaster instead of the computers. They left by helicopter again.

However, the government said they would give the computers later. Many months later some computers came, but not enough. In our school, the one who could use the computer must be the best in class, teachers' children, or government officers' children only. But for me, I never had the chance to touch them or use them. I could just look at the locked door of the computer room.

If I had the chance to meet the military government again, I would like to tell them citizens have to come first before other things. I would ask them to take care of the citizens more than their rubies.

# my difficult life



mary

I was born in 1990. While I was still in my mother's stomach, together I and my mother voted for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD (National League for Democracy) in the 1990 election in Burma. We went by ox-cart to vote. That year, the NLD won that election, but the military junta took power from us.

When I was young, I lived in a small village in the countryside. My parents are farmers. While I attended school, I never ate snacks. My parents didn't have enough money, but they tried to buy things for us like instant coffee and cookies sometimes. I did not have free time. I pitied my parents and I always looked after my younger brother and sister. Even at festival time I did not have a chance to play with my friends. And when I was young I really loved eugenia flowers. Wherever I went outside, I always picked this flower.

When I was eleven, my family's life was all right. My parents had a farm, property and a lot of cows. But suddenly my family's economic situation went down. My father got a serious disease and almost died. We treated him at the hospital and looked to astrologers. When we asked the astrologer for help, we had to pay many things to him, such as cows, hen and coins. We went there many times. We spent about six million kyat in two years (almost \$6,000). We sold our property until it was almost gone and we had debt a lot. When my father was better, he could not walk and stand himself. He practiced walking again holding a stick.

That year both my father and mother were not in a good health care situation. Thus, my sister had to leave school. After she left school, she always felt sad and cried all the time about her education. My sister had to support my family. She had to earn money with dangerous jobs.

In my village, we did not have school, electricity, library or good transportation. So all of my siblings had to move from home to study very far away. My brothers have stayed many places, such as temple and government building. There it was free for students. But they did not have enough food. I had to stay in other people's home in the town. There, my host had four children. Their house was far from school. I did not have lunch time.

One day, on a school day, my host ordered me to look after their children in the farm. "If you don't go, you must leave my home now," they said. In my life I never have wanted to be absent in my class. I was so sad that I went back to my home. I stayed there half a year.

From my home, I had to go to school at 6 a.m. and come back to my home at 5 p.m. every day on bicycle from my village. I had to pass through forests and villages to town. In the raining season I faced some problems. Mostly I have to lift my bicycle along the roads and carry it on my shoulder. My bicycle was always damaged. The men were disturbing and the mud was very deep while I was traveling. But I didn't have any big problems from them. At that time, no one from my village attended school with me in the town. I usually was alone to study in the town.

Later in my life I went back to stay with my grandparents. They were not my real relatives but accept me like their daughter. I lived in this house for three years. While I stayed there, I have to take care of grandmother because she is a paralyzed person. I took care of everything for her. My grandfather was a strong religious person. He always went to church at five o'clock every morning. I was cooking at five o'clock every morning. On holiday I had to work for other people's farms because they had a lot of farming to do.

In 2005, when I was fifteen years old, I went to study at a Christian boarding house in Loikaw, Southern Shan State. We did not have enough food. We had only roselle leaf with our rice every day. The rules of the boarding house were very strong for students. But I was happy to live with many friends. In there we had 70 students. We paid with rice and 4000 kyat for each month. But that year, I failed my tenth standard examination.

The last year I was in school, I tried to study an extra year for my exam. I went to a new town and lived with my teachers. I was very upset all the time because I did not know anything, but my classmates were very intelligent and very quick in the class. I could not follow them, so I was so sad all the time. I always came back to my home to ask my parents' permission to leave school. But my mother always cried and never allowed me to leave school. My life was darkness. I asked the question to myself: should I go to work and leave school? I did not have any idea. I went back to

the city to try my best. It was only three months left until the exam.

That year I passed tenth standard examination. At the teacher's house, we have to pay three million kyat a year. But three of my siblings in this house—we did not have any money to give anything to them. They have compassion all the time for us. When I passed high school, my relatives, my tribe, and all my friends were happy for me. In my village, the girl did not go to school.

After that, I worked in the farm with my sister. We worked hard at the farm from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. I struggled to work the farm on my own for two years. At first, we got a lot of benefits from it. But we had to give back our debt from when my father was sick. I hoped to study in university but the water flooded my farm. I was hopeless in my life for more education.

My brother called me to come study on the Thai-Burma border. I was so glad in my life. I was surprised to study freely history and political issues here. But it is very difficult for me, because I have never been anywhere in Burma. I just stayed in my town before. But now I would like to share my new awareness, knowledge and experience of what I know to the new generation. In my heart I have compassion for poor children in rural areas. Because now I am here on behalf of my people in my village and everywhere. The only girl in my village who had a chance to study away is me. I will apply to more schools to get experience to share to other people.

Before, I eagerly wanted to attend university in Burma. But after I attend SSSNY, I would not apply anymore to Burmese school, because we waste our time for a long time and have to spend a lot of money there. Now, I will try to learn on my own after I'm finished with this school. I will join with my organization for activists to get experience. I will not give up on bringing democracy to Burma. When my mother voted for Aung San Suu Kyi, she was hoping for freedom for us. In my life, I want to have a chance to vote for democracy too.

## never dead



### ၁၀၈ phon

In our culture, we believe that if we hear the *nok-du* bird sing at night, something bad will happen to us. Some people didn't believe that, but I do. In 2005's winter season, I heard the bird sing at night, "Du-do! Du-do!" I felt afraid as I fell asleep. In the morning, everyone told about this bird everywhere in my village.

Four or five days later, we had a visitor come from Rangoon. He stayed in our head villager's house. I didn't

know his name. He was around 40 years old and spoke Burmese. He was short, his face very strong, and had large eyes.

At the same time the visitor from Rangoon came, Burmese soldiers also came to our village. They always came and we felt nothing for the military regime. At night, they asked for two chickens for their dinner. We had to find it for them. When the soldiers came they always did things like this—it was normal for us. All of them drank and sang the songs and made noise. The visiting man drank with them because he could speak Burmese and understand their language. I couldn't sleep, so I read a Shan story and fell to sleep.

In the morning, my mother and I woke up and prepared breakfast and the food that we will eat in our farm. My dad gave food to our ox outside. Suddenly, I heard bullets' sounds from my friend's house, and noise around our village. The soldiers were arresting all of the men in our village. One soldier came into our house and beat my dad. He pointed his gun at my dad and took him away. I tried to stop them but they took my dad anyway. We cried.

They took all of the men to the temple and asked for their gun. It was missing. The visitor from Rangoon was also missing. They said this visitor was a Shan soldier. They blamed us and said we were connected with Shan soldiers to fight back against Burma's military.

By 9:00 a.m. there were only women, children, and old people left in our village. My younger sister and brother had to go to school. When my mom prepared lunch for them, she said to my sister, "Tonight don't come back to our village. Stay at your aunt's house." She did this every time the situation wasn't so good.

This day, none of the villagers could go to work. The Burmese soldiers stayed around our village. They didn't allow us to go out of the village. They thought we would send information to the Shan soldiers. The Burma Army also sent more soldiers to our village. They tortured the men and asked for their missing gun. At night, my dad didn't come back. He had to stay at the temple with all of the men. In my village, it was quiet. Everyone stayed in their house. I heard only footsteps and dogs on the road. We had to blow out the candles. I was very troubled this night. My mom cried and I also cried with my mom. We were worried about my dad and my younger brother and sister.

The next day, my mom prepared breakfast for my dad, but the soldiers ordered everyone to close our houses and go to the temple. No one could stay at home. If they didn't find their missing gun, they will burn our village. We had to go. I held my mom's hand. One woman didn't go with us, because she had a new baby, just about one month old. She was my mom's friend. We left her to hide at home. She didn't come out, and stayed quiet in the house.

When we went inside the temple, I saw a lot of people sitting there—over one hundred villagers the SPDC

arrested. There were some children running and crying to find their mother and food. There was noise. When I saw this, I started to cry and hold my mom's hand very strong. My eyes found my dad. I heard someone call my name—it was my dad. He sat near the window. When I saw him I was happy and sad at the same time, because he was still alive but some families were separated. My dad said they sent six men to the town to ask for information. They tortured them under the tree. I looked at the place where my dad pointed—there was some blood and rope.

When we were all in the temple, I heard the motorbike come and the soldiers ordered us to stop talking and sit in a line. Everyone was quiet but some children still cried because they were afraid. Their parents tried to stop them. A few minutes later, the leader came in to the temple and told us they had to find their gun. If they don't see it, they don't give us food. Not until they can find their gun. He also ordered the soldiers to go to check our village to make sure no one was left. If they saw people, they will shoot and kill them. I became worried about my mom's friend. She was the only one left in our village.

The commander took the soldiers to discuss a long time under the tree, and then he went back to the town. The first day, we didn't have food and at night, it was very cold. Over one hundred people had to sleep on the floor. I was very hungry. Children cried and didn't stop. They asked for dinner. I didn't sleep all night because the soldiers drank and made noise. The next day, some people had to go in

the jungle to try to find the missing gun. We were like this for four days. We were quiet because we didn't have energy to talk. Children fell asleep. I didn't think they would survive.

But that night, a soldier secretly gave us rice—about five cups. They said when we finished eating we had to clean the bowl very well. If the commander knew about this, they would get killed. Five cups for over one hundred people—how could we manage? We put rice in the pot and put in a lot of water. We didn't have spices, but we had to eat. Everyone flocked to the rice pot. After we finished, we cleaned it like the soldiers said.

In the morning, the commander came again. He asked why nothing changed. Now his order was very strong. He said some women had to go find the gun in the jungle. They would take the men to the town to ask again. He ordered thirty women to go with them, also my mom. When they took my mom, I cried and my mom also cried. But they didn't care. I held my mom's hand very strong. They tried to separate us and beat my hand. One soldier showed his gun to me, his face like he would kill me. I was very afraid.

After the women went to find the gun, they took one family—husband and wife together—to go under the tree where my dad said they tortured six men. They tortured the man in front of his wife and told her if she didn't tell them information, they would kill the man. I sat in the temple and heard their cries. When the sound was gone I saw the two of them come back into the temple with blood on their faces.

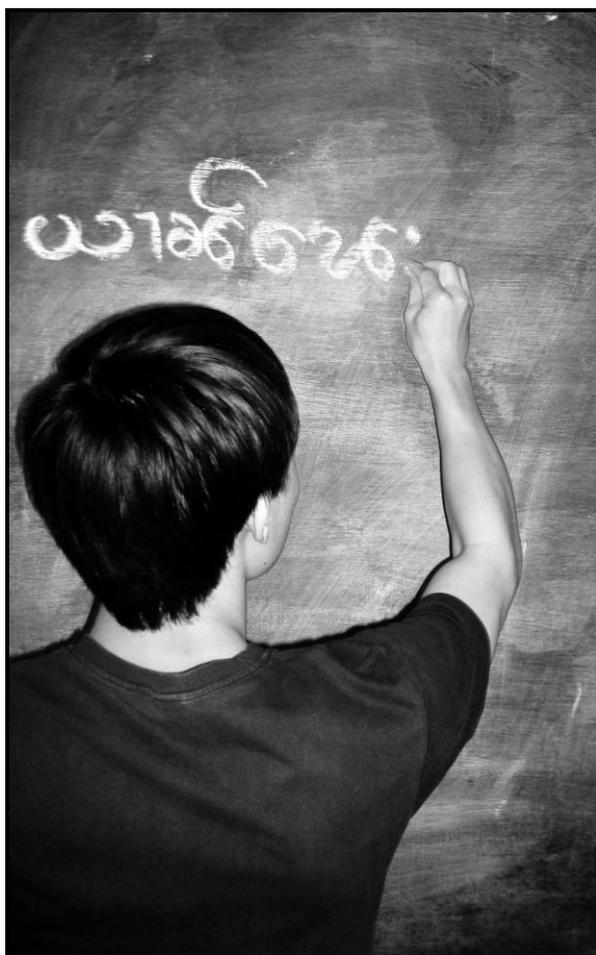
The soldiers used wood to beat the man and his body was bloody. They also used a knife to cut his skin on his back. I closed my eyes. My heart jumped very fast. But the soldiers didn't stop yet. They took another family out to the tree again.

At night, my mom didn't come back yet. All of them were still in the jungle. The next day was our final day, the sixth day. If we didn't find the gun, they would burn our village. I couldn't sleep. Someone cried, never stopping. At about 3 a.m. the soldiers came in and woke us up. Their voices were noisy around the temple. All of us thought we were going to die. But we were lucky. They said they found their gun. The visitor from Rangoon stole it that night when they were drinking together. But we were still responsible for giving money to them because when they found the visitor in the jungle, they fought each other. The visitor was killed and also one of their soldiers died. We had to pay compensation for this soldier. How much total I don't remember, but each family had to give 50,000 kyat (about \$40).

My mom's friend, who we thought had died, was still alive. She told us she was almost killed when she escaped the SPDC by running into the jungle. She was carrying her baby, so she took a cloth to put on her son's face to prevent him from crying. If her son cried, the SPDC would have seen them and killed them. At that time, she couldn't think about anything else. She felt like a bad mother because she almost smothered her son.

After these events, some families came to Thailand immediately. Even now, they say that if the SPDC controls Burma, they will never go back to our hometown again. At this time, we didn't die. But our memories of this event also never die. The pictures are still alive in my mind. I'll never forget.

## teaching in the blood



("Yan pay" is Shan for "to be far from danger")

luan khur

It is not easy to be a good teacher. As for me, I have never been to the school. What it looked like, I did not know. When I was young I just followed the animals such as buffalo or cow day by day, because I was afraid that buffalo would go into another person's farm and destroy their crops. If they went, I was fined. I had to take care of them every day. The school wasn't far from my village, but my parents had no money to send me to study in the school. So later, I became a teacher who has learned from nature and listened to the songs from the animals in green field.

I was 19 years old when I had my first time teaching. Some students were the same age as me. The lessons that I taught them, it was Shan language or Shan alphabet. At first I wanted them to be able to read and write and know the way to use the words in sentences. I taught them to practice together. It made them help their friends. Someone says the words and someone had to listen and write down on their papers. They were very happy because they loved to say the words and write. When they wrote the words correct, they clapped hands for their friends. If someone did not get it, they encouraged them to be able to get it.

There were 50 students in my class. The first time of the class I was very shy to stand in front of many people and I did not know what am I going to say to them. Then to make eye contact with them was very difficult for me. When they asked me the questions, sometimes I couldn't give the answer, but I tried to answer as much as I could.

After the class it made me understand more or know the definition of a teacher. It wasn't easy. When I was teaching, I knew that I needed to study more and read a lot of books to improve myself and my skill. The most important thing is to develop children's skills such as writing and reading and have more activities in class. They also loved a smiling face when I was teaching the students or when they were bored. I usually joked with them. This was to make them interested in the lessons.

In the class we did not have books, pencils, or a table to lay the books on. Most students did not have enough pencils to use. Some students had to share with them. Not only pencils, also notebooks. We gave blank papers for them to use as books. At first we did not have a blackboard, but we asked the villagers to build one. But until we had one, we had to paint the walls of the monastery black to use as a blackboard. We wrote so much on the wall that we painted it again.

Some students' parents are poor. They have no money to support their children to go to school. To buy something like pencils or books, it was not easy for them. These children, even in cold season can't wear the clothes that keep their body warm. They have to imagine it in front of the fire. When we were looking at their feet, we saw they were all white that turned into red color because there were no shoes for them to wear.

In some villages they invited us to teach, because their villages were very far from the town or school. Some

villages had government school but the children did not attend it. The teachers are Burmese and could not speak Shan language. Most of the students are Shan. When teachers were explaining the lessons or teaching them, the students did not understand. When the students did not get the lessons, the teachers punished them by beating and knocking their heads. This makes the students afraid and they refuse to go to school.

However, in many villages there are no schools and they wait for someone that can give the knowledge and guide them to the right way of education. When we went to these villages, they were very pleased. The students' eyes were full of tears when they closed. The rain dropped on their faces one by one. They were so happy. And that time, what should I do, I did not know. I looked at the sky.

It was difficult for some students who left school earlier than normal to work in deep jungle for growing opium even though their age was so young. Their parents did not have enough food to feed their families. Even though they grow crops or farming twice a year, they also still lack food. They have to do this job to survive. When they go to work, on foot, it takes 2-3 days to get there. They could not grow opium near the villages. They do not want the military to know. If they know, the villagers are arrested. This is a hard job and dangerous. No one would do it if they had another choice of job. Some children become addicts, because they don't know it will be dangerous for them. They

only want to try it. After they try, what'll happen, no one can imagine.

I am very sorry to say that I could not get these children back to school to continue their education. I always thought it's unequal. I don't know where is the answer. I taught them about the dangers of drugs. Also, I wanted them to know our culture. To love and know our culture is very important in our society. We depend on this. We all have a hope in the future. It is possible under the sun. If we try, we will get it. No one will do it for us if we don't try by ourselves. We need to be active during the time we are breathing. I always asked questions to make the students think about the future to become good people and the leaders in our society. They could provide for other people who are suffering and hungry for education.

When I was teaching, I wanted my students to also be teachers. We needed more teachers. I asked them to practice to teach the children. However it was very difficult for us, because if we are not free we can't go and teach them. So we all thought that it's a good way—to make them teachers too. While we are busy, they can continue educating the children.

But this was only for one year and every year is not the same. Some years, the head villager did not invite us to his village. We had to stop teaching there for about two years, because the head villager was connected to the military government. They did not want us to teach our own language or literature and culture, because they did not

want the children to know about it. They wanted them to forget all that concerns with Shan. When the head villager changed, they welcomed us back so we could continue teaching them again. I hope that in the future the children's life will be easy and better than this.

## our present simple life



### mawt wan wai

The population in my village is about a thousand people. They are farmers. Over time, the situation in Shan State did not improve, and the villagers were busy trying to survive and forgot to build the skill and knowledge for their life. We all forgot. We became the same as what the Burma military was planning for us. Even though the situation of our

lives got worse, we tried to adapt to fit with that situation. Even though I studied at this school only ten months, I grew roots at the bottom of my heart to improve the education in the future. It was my duty. This is the story of the village I am a part of, the village I want to change.

As everybody knows, farmers in Shan State are some of the poorest people. But the farmers from my village have to pay the highest tax in present history. We have three levels for paying taxes to the Burma military. There are landowners, businessmen, and the poorest people—the farmers. Every house must pay on time, every time that the Burma Army asks for it. The amount changes depending on what they need. We can't delay or refuse it. The people have never tried to do this. Most of the villagers can't speak Burmese language and don't understand the law. Our head villager can speak Burmese a little bit. At first he was a good person, but now he is an alcoholic, always drinking. No one wants to take this duty to be the head villager, so he has had to take that place so long. Most people say 'thank you' to him even though they're suffering. They can't trust anybody; it's dangerous to have enemies, because if other people hate you, they can tell other people to kill you. And so nobody wants to be the head of the villagers.

From the time Burma got independence from British until now, we have had six people graduate high school and five people graduate university from my village. I'm one of the people who studied in Burma's schools for a long time and didn't get a real education. I like history. Even though I

got a degree in history, I knew nothing about it. I didn't know what is real or propaganda. When my friends and old people asked me about history or geography, I couldn't answer them. But most children left the school when they were in elementary level. In the whole of my life, we have never had reproductive health training or other general knowledge trainings in my village. When we saw the people who were very thin and had a cough, we avoided them. We were afraid and believed that they had HIV/AIDS.

I have never seen our villagers think politically. We never listened to the news. Only about 3-4 people listened to Radio Free Asia in Shan language. No one dares to talk about politics. The only thing we always had to think about was a bit of money. We don't know how to make business from our township. The crop price was too low. My people became migrant workers in Thailand.

Most children in my village don't have education. If we attend school we have to pay for textbooks and tutors, and parents don't have enough money for this. Another thing is they see the situation of the education is bad. Even if they spent time and money over ten years to get an education, they cannot get the job to earn money. Boys have to be a novice monk and study from the monastery or in another city. When they get older, they can change back to be simple people (civilians) and go to Thailand to earn money for their family. Most girls didn't get any education, so they have to do really hard work or become sex workers in other countries. After 15 years of age, they spend their time

becoming migrant workers. They must send at least 3,400 baht (\$100) to their family each month for food and for paying the regime's taxes.

I always ask this question to myself: why do all of my people's lives end like this over many decades? Our lives look very simple, but it's really terrible. I have one dream for my people: I want them to get the real education, the same like SSSNY's school. When I told my friends about SSSNY and about how I wanted to join its program, they were afraid for me. I tried to explain to them, but they didn't understand me. My friends were honest with me. They said, "If you can separate with your family, relative, village, hometown, the whole of your life—then you can go." They are worried that I will be taken to prison. But I wanted to study community development, and so I need to work and help my people to understand that we have to join with each other. I can't separate from everyone in my hometown. I have to have more connections with them. I'm sure that one day, we'll have the school, the system of teaching, and the real education in Shan State the same as SSSNY.

## my summer holiday



### byin pu

I really enjoy studying. I finished Grade 7. I was hoping that my family could pay for classes for me. I always believed that if I could attend extra class I could get more knowledge. But my parents could not pay. Sometimes they did not even have enough money for our food. At school, I used to fall asleep on the playground because I was so hungry. I was not happy. I could not continue my education. I had to find money for Grade 8 during three months of summer holiday.

During the summer holiday I went to work with another family in the forest. We had to cut down the trees to make a farm. I had to get up at 4 a.m. to cook breakfast and lunch for all farmers. But I feel very tired, I had never worked as a farmer before. I thought I was not grown enough to do this kind of job. My challenges were having to carry the wood and clean up the wood so people could farm. We had to work everyday. We grew rice on the farm and some vegetables around the outside—chili, pumpkin, bean, sweet corn and cucumber.

Sometimes I faced problems, big problems. For example, sometimes my nose was bleeding, but I could not stop my work. I just used some leaves and put them on my nose. I didn't have tissue. In the evening when we returned home, we had to carry the firewood for cooking. And when we arrived at home, it was dark. We went to take a shower in the river. After we finished a shower, we had to carry the water pail back to our home. We didn't have running water in our home.

Usually a lot of men were at the river. They had migrated from other parts of Burma to work in the mines in Shan State. I was very new in this area. It was my first time to farm, to work with these people. When we went to take a shower, the men looked at us. I felt we will be in danger. At first, I didn't know how to change my clothes. There was no place that we could go to change our clothes. Sometimes, I was shocked by them looking at us. The men came and spoke with us at night in our home. They said they wanted to

be friends, they said that Kachin girls were so nice. But in my mind, I can see they were not good people for us.

One evening when I went to take a bath, I had to wait a long time to get a little water. It was dark. I was ready to go home. Two men came. They were looking at me, maybe thinking when will I go. Only me, I was the only one there. I didn't see them. One of the men came out and wanted to hug me. But I couldn't see who he was, it was very dark. I think he was not a teenager, maybe a little old. He smelled very bad like alcohol and smoke. I said, "Go away!" I told him if he didn't go away, I would make a noise. I was very angry. He was strong and held me. I didn't know what will happen. I used all of my energy to scratch him with my fingernails, to push him, to get him off me. I think I am small, and he is strong. He said nothing. I escaped. I wanted to find out who he was, but in the morning I didn't know. In this area there were 600 men, a lot of workers.

I felt very sad, I don't want to stay in this life like this, this condition. But I needed money for my education. I had already managed that if I worked for three months, I could get 15,000 kyat (about \$13). After this, I was hoping to continue my education. I already told myself not to give up.

One day, in the evening, one of my friends went to carry the water to the bottom of the hill. After we got the water, we had to walk a long time because the hill was very high. When we walk, we had to take a rest in the middle of the hill. The farm workers' base was nearby. One man, he saw us, lifted his *longyi* and showed himself to us. I was

shocked and shouted out, “Oh my God!” and called my friend. It was very stupid, I said. I could not continue my job, I quit. I don’t understand why that man showed us like that. I always stood in front of my house, prayed to the God that I wanted to go home. But I faced a lot of challenges.

I went home. I bought candy for my family and two of my younger brothers. A week later the school was open. The teacher started to collect the list of the students. I had heard that 8<sup>th</sup> Standard students had to pay 8,000 kyat (\$7) for the school course. We also had to buy school supplies. I just only had 15,000 kyat. It was enough for me, but I had to think about my two younger brothers. I didn’t have enough money for them. One was ten, the younger one was eight or nine. I don’t know how to decide. So I started to cry in my bedroom. *(This happened so long so ago, but I can’t get rid of the memory of that, the difficult life. Even though this was ten years ago, it still remains in my heart.)*

Monday, early morning, I went to register at my school. When I opened the door to the class, all of my friends were already studying. I really wanted to join with them, but I cannot. Even though I have enough money for the course, it was not enough for the whole year. So I didn’t register for my course. I was crying at the door-side. No one saw me.

I went to visit my mom in the hospital. She was waiting for my sister there. My older sister needed a lot of money for a special operation on her stomach to take out her appendix I told my mom that I wanted to go to China to

earn some money, but she said, “No, you can’t. You should study. You have a little money, you should attend the school.” But I said nothing, because she looked so sad. She was crying in front of me. “I’m sorry that I cannot offer you to go to school,” she said. I was really sad, too. It was not only me that needed money to go to school.

I decided to drop out of the school to make money to support my family. I would go to work to make money in the other country for one or two years. After I earned enough money, I would help my two younger brothers to continue their education and maybe do some business in my town. They were always my goal and aim. So I decided to go to China. I was very hopeful with my wish that one day I would become a rich woman and I could help poor people. But I worked for 16 months in China and never got paid any money for my work. Now, I am learning how about social justice and I want to start a project to help women and children who are suffering like I was. I hope in the future our society will change so we can have a better life.

## blood jade



## hom oun

In the middle of November in 2006, at about 10:00 in the morning a message came from the walkie-talkie on the jade mining site...

*"Attention...Attention...Attention! The new site to ABC...the new site to ABC...the cage fell down to the bottom of the shaft...two men fell with it, one escaped...all steel rope and cage fell down...we haven't got any contact with the group under the ground..."*

I woke up frightened that morning, because I as soon as I woke up I had misgivings about the day, like something bad was going to happen. I decided to go to the ABC site, one of my company's mining sites. Before I went to ABC site, a geologist asked me to go with him to new site shaft to check the project. I refused him and said that I had to survey the border of ABC site with Ever Winner Company. I thought that I escaped from death, because if I went to the new site, I could have faced trouble.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 2005, I arrived in a company that was built on a little island in the middle of Uru River in Hpakan, Kachin State. The manager dropped me off and introduced me to the site manager. He drove to ABC site. The site manager asked me for my documents and I gave him my Government Technology College mining diploma. Then he gave me the rules sheet and told me to take a worker suit and blanket from the storage. But he didn't say where to go, or tell somebody to show me the room. I went to storage and a staff member gave me five thin blankets, toothpaste, toothbrush, soap, detergent and the green suit. But they didn't give me a pillow or mosquito net. I had heard that there is a lot of malaria disease in this area before. Fortunately, I brought a mosquito net from my home, but why don't they give to the workers? They can get malaria disease easily.

At 5:00 p.m., my senior mining engineer came back from the work and he gave me a room with his assistant. I was happy that engineers and geologists warmly welcomed

me that day. I used a blanket as a sheet and put the clothes in my rucksack to make a pillow. I went bed with four thin blankets and the weather was very cold.

The next morning at 6:30 a.m., I went to the dining hall to have breakfast. They gave the workers rice and boiled bean for breakfast. A worker told me that we have to eat rice with boiled bean for breakfast, yellow bean soup with a small bowl of fried vegetables for lunch and dinner. In one week, they treated us to egg on Wednesday, fish on Friday, and fatty pork on Saturday. Managers and senior engineers got better food such as chicken and pork soup, and vegetables mixed with meat. We got twelve hours a day off per month and we were given only 10% of our salary to use. We could send the rest of our salary home, or take it when we went home.

I tried to get a phone call to contact my home and my friend for my fourth year university results. But I couldn't go out of the site and there were just two telephones that were used in the office for the company. I didn't know how to ask permission to phone and I hadn't really started work, because my senior engineer told me to relax for a few days and practice with the survey instruments. The next day, I went to the phone room and asked the phone officer to get contact with my home and friend. I asked my friend to call me back when the school announced the result.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> of January, 2006, my friend called me and said was sorry for me because I failed. I was very upset about my result, because I felt very sure about my result and

came to work in Hpakan. I phoned my mother and she consoled me that I can attend university next year. I cried very much because she wasn't angry and didn't scold me. Unfortunately, after I finished my phone call with my mother, the site manager called me and I went to him.

“You stupid boy, you've just arrived a few days ago and used a lot of phone calls. Do you think that's your phone? We use it for the job. Who do you think you are?” he scolded. I told him, still crying, that I contacted my parents and asked for my university result. I've just used the phone 4-5 times, I explained. But he didn't care about anything and continued to scold me for about fifteen minutes. I went back to my room and asked myself if I was so stupid to use those phone calls. I fell asleep thinking a lot about my education and how to work in this company. When my senior came back, I told him about my result. He said not to worry so much and consoled me. A geologist also consoled and encouraged me to continue my education later. Then my senior told me to go with them the next morning.

We went to the new site with a truck. On the way, I saw the top of several buildings and a temple that were submerged in the soil beside the Uru River. I asked the assistant engineer about it. He said that a lot of companies located upstream threw the soil waste in the river and it covered the buildings as the sediment in the river grew from the waste. We arrived at the new site after an hour and I worked with them in the old incline shaft, surveying. It was

wet and hot. At the end of the shaft, there was low oxygen for breathing, rotting water, and we got tired. We couldn't climb up the shaft because we couldn't breathe enough oxygen to climb. We had to wait for half an hour for the cage to pick us up because the railway in the shaft wasn't good and they had to fix it. The incline shaft was not stable, because it was old—there were broken beams and posts, broken railway parts, and the rock wall collapsed in some places.

In the middle of January, we had to move to live at the new site. I lived with four geologists that were the same age as me and arrived a few days after me. From our room, I saw a huge pile of soil waste from several companies. It looked like a mountain and was about 200 feet high. There were a lot of people who looked for jade in the pile of soil waste. Some people were at the top of the pile near where the truck came and dumped the waste. Some people were at the bottom of the pile. There were a few workers to check the trucks, where they can dump the waste and blow the whistle for the truck to dump, and warn the people to avoid the falling soil. There can be huge rocks contained in the soil waste that could kill people. Sometimes we heard the people died, getting crushed or cut in half by a big rock.

When the winter passed, I got 3000 kyat (almost \$3), which was 10% of my salary. We couldn't take the twelve hours off for two months because some workers from another site fought when they went outside. So the workers

from the eight sites in our company couldn't take a day off for two months. I couldn't contact my family for two months, because we could only make a phone call when we went outside. And if I wrote a letter to my family, the post will take a few months or the letter can be lost on the way because the post is very difficult from Hpakan to my hometown in Shan State. Later I found out there was a mobile phone in the ABC site, but it was very far from us. I could phone once or twice a month when we had to survey on the site. After a few months, they started to charge 35 kyat per phone call. I thought it was because of me.

In the middle of April, there is a water festival we call "Thingyan" in Burmese. It's the Buddhist New Year. I thought we could get a holiday for this big festival in our culture. But the company management decided we couldn't get holidays in the festival. They just stopped one working shift for one day. At other companies, like the Chinese companies, they gave holidays for their workers and they gave 50,000 kyat (45 dollars) for people who work on holidays.

In May, there was an announcement of a promotion of the workers' salary and annual bonus. I got 45,000 kyat (\$40). When I attended university, I used 70-80,000 kyat per month for food, my room, bus tickets, and other living expenses. I asked myself how many years I would have to work to earn back the money I spent for my education.

The summer passed and the rainy season began. We sometimes surveyed in the forest, where there were a lot of

mosquitoes which can easily bring malaria disease. Back at the site, we were worried about the rain that would fall at night. The new buildings weren't finished and we had to stay in the old building for several weeks. The roof of the building was very old and the rain could leak easily. When the rain fell, it was wet everywhere in the upstairs of the building. The workers couldn't sleep very well and their beds were wet from the rain. We lived downstairs and we weren't wet a lot.

A supervisor and site manager lived upstairs. One night when the rain fell a lot, the supervisor used a knife and cut the plastic that was put on the upstairs floor because he couldn't sleep and we weren't wet downstairs. He wanted us to be wet like him. The rain leaked and fell down into our room because he cut the plastic. We couldn't complain, because he was the supervisor of the site. After a month, we moved to the new building and a lot of rocks from the pile of the soil waste covered the floor of the old place.

In the rainy season, when the rain fell, a lot of bridges were covered from flooding. Some wooden bridges built across the Uru River disappeared from the flow of water. We had to cross the river by boat where we used to cross by truck. When the rainy season ended, a lot of roads changed the direction and the buildings that I saw when I'd just arrived had totally disappeared. In some villages which were near the stream and river, the people had to use their own money to raise their houses. If they didn't do it, their houses would be covered by the soil from the river. But the

companies and government didn't do anything for the villagers.

One village had to move when the authority ordered that a company called "Htoo" was going to make a mining site on the village. We got the information that the company owner was Tay Za, one of Burma's wealthiest businessmen. Tay Za has close relations with the military government. We heard a rumor that they gave the villagers 1 million kyat (\$900) for small houses and 1.5 million kyat (\$1,300) for big houses. The company made the place to build the village again and the villagers had to stay at the temple before they can build new houses at the new place. For making the new place, Tay Za's company didn't have to use money because the military general of Hpakan ordered all mining companies in the area to donate their machines and labor to clear the land. They said that they will give the fuel to use the machines but everyone knew that the companies had to use some fuel by themselves at first. For the villagers, they just got enough money to rebuild their houses and some lost their money because their old houses were worth more than the compensation. Also, they had to use extra money to remove their properties.

In the middle of November, a bad day came to our site and there was an accident that killed two laborers. All workers were very upset about that because they shouldn't have died. A lot of workers thought that accident was caused by the operator who didn't have enough experience to control the machine. He just worked for two weeks in the

company and hadn't attended any training about how to use the machine.

We sent another cage to go down the mining shaft to rescue the rest of the four laborers that were working in the shaft when the accident happened. We brought up the bodies in 3-4 hours and safely rescued the other laborers that remained in the shaft. The mechanics checked all parts of the machine and they couldn't find anything wrong in the machine. So they cut the brakes of the machine a little, to say to the police that the accident was not the company's mistake, like the brakes broke themselves. They gave money to the police not to do the investigation.

Most of the laborers think the operator made a mistake and pressed the clutch instead of the brake. This accident was caused by the carelessness of the operator. When the operator pulled the cage up, he had to pull until another laborer put the steel bar across the mouth of the shaft. After that, the operator can stop down the cage and rest it on the bar and the laborers can get out from the cage. But he didn't wait for the bar to cross the mouth of the shaft and the cage fell down. The cage free-fell down the shaft and was too stunned to press the brake and get control of the machine back.

No one took the operator to the court for the accident because the company gave the money to the police. They gave about 1 million kyat to the relatives of the two laborers who died in the accident. The company buried the two laborers within four hours of the accident. Their

relatives couldn't see them for the last time. Do you think that is fair for the two laborers and their relatives?

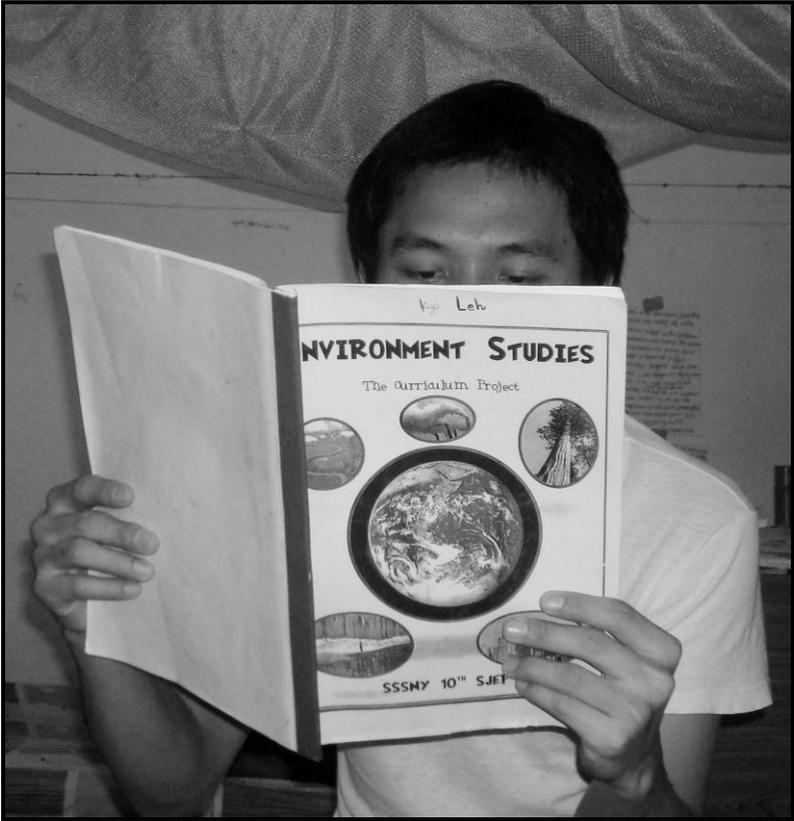
Most of the operators of the mining shaft were careless for the safety in the job. I used to go down many times in the cage. At first, they dropped the cage down slowly and after about 20 feet, they dropped the cage very fast, mostly free. I forgot to breathe at that time and we arrived under the ground, nearly 500 feet deep, in one or two minutes. They pressed the brake when the cage was near 400 or 450 feet and we got there slowly. But I thought they shouldn't do like that because if something was wrong with the machine and they guess wrong by looking at the indicators on the steel string of the cage, anything can happen to the laborers in the cage.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, 2006, I left the company because of how careless the company was for safety. I left because of their inhumanity, their thinking less of human beings, and their injustice. I took the truck with some other laborers from Hpakan to Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State. We arrived at night and slept on the bench of the train station waiting to return to Shan State. I had to work for two months to earn money to go back home, and I didn't want to use thousands of kyat to sleep in a hotel for a few hours. I just earned about 250,000 kyat (\$250) in 11 months of work as an assistant survey engineer in the jade mines.

I was ill twice in ten days when I got home to Shan State. My mother told me to continue my education, so I went to Taunggyi at the end of the month. I wasn't feeling

very well and I went to check my health at the clinic. The doctor said I got malaria disease. I thought that all I got was malaria from Hpakan. But I got the experience of life, and the escape from the blood jade industry. Everybody knows that the life of workers in Burma is bad. They can see it in their eyes, they can imagine. When you read this story, you know about how terrible it is to be a laborer in Burma. We should have protection and compensation and safety. Foreign countries can pressure the Burmese military to protect workers' rights. Jade mining is still going on, so we should save the people's lives while we still can, by campaigning for their rights in Burma.

## my life between battles



### kya leh

I was born in 1985 in May during the fighting between the Burmese Army and the Wa Army not far from my home in a village between high mountains in Shan State. When I was born, my father was away in the town. Just my

mother and my grandfather were at home. If my father stayed at home, he would have been tortured and killed by the soldiers.

By the time I was ten years old, I had faced a lot of problems. Soldiers came to my village at midnight and arrested villagers to be their soldiers. My parents slept in a tent in the jungle at night to stay safe from the Wa and Burmese soldier violence. If we didn't agree with their plan to be their porter and soldier, they threatened us by gun.

After the Wa made a ceasefire with the Burmese Army, I thought that the war might be finished. A few years later, while I was staying with my parents for the summer, the Burmese soldiers came to my village again to fight with the Shan State Army. In the daytime, I saw the Burmese Army and the Shan Army shooting each other near my village. At night the Burmese soldiers stole our chicken and rice. They killed our pig for their meal without getting permission from us.

My parents sent me to the town for education and safety. I went back to the village for the summer school holidays. One day, I heard that Burmese colonel announce that in every house, one man had to register in the village to be soldiers for the Burmese Army. All of the villagers argued about registering, including my family. No one wanted to be in the Burmese Army. But they had no choice to refuse these orders.

I went to the jungle to look after our cows and buffaloes with my grandfather. I saw a lot of opium fields and I knew that the villagers grew opium by paying bribes to the local Burmese officials. Also, many young people had become addicted to opium. I saw that one villager stole rice and chicken from his neighbor and sold the rice and chicken to get opium. His opium was gone, but he couldn't stop using it. In my neighbor's house, the husband was often violent toward his wife and children after he used the drug. So in the family, they suffered human rights abuse. I thought, why doesn't the local government solve this kind of problem? I realized that by accepting bribes, they allowed villagers to grow opium and use the drug. When I saw this kind of problem and abuse, I really wanted to give education to them to change their idea and their life.

Time passed year by year and I continued studying in Burmese school. In the classroom, I didn't get the right education. The teacher didn't teach us well in the school. The teacher only taught carefully in the extra class. Only students with money could study in the extra class. The teacher treated students differently. They treated very well the students who came from rich families and officials' families. When these students broke the school laws, the teachers said nothing and didn't give punishment to them. Most teachers couldn't survive only on their salary, without corruption. I had to help pay for cleaning tools, books, chalk, and erasers in the school. When I often told my parents I needed money for my schoolbooks, cleaning tools, everything—they argued about money. Because people,

including my parents, were trying to survive in a situation of economic crisis under the bad system of military government.

After I passed tenth grade, I applied for a job in a government bank with my friend. They rejected our applications and they only chose Burmese people for the job. Our ethnic people didn't have an opportunity to get a job. We were discriminated against by the military government. I couldn't continue my education, so I had to move to another town. I went to Tachilek, at the Thai-Burma border. I worked in the market. While I worked there, the owner treated me very badly. I had to work more than eight hours a day, but I didn't get fair wages.

At that time, I always thought, 'I have to do something for my people and my country, not just for myself. I have to change the bad system.' After that, I joined a political organization and have been working there until now. I got a chance to study at SSSNY. I got a real education and I see the light. Now I have my future.

# the truth of farmers and forests



## thum ai

Hsipaw is a town in Northern Shan State, Burma. The city and villages are surrounded by mountains. In the winter, the trees' leaves are green and the mountains wealthy with several colors by the decoration of the trees' flowers. There is a river called "Doktawaddy" in Burmese and "Nam Tu" in Shan flowing across the city and through many villages. Hsipaw is one of the places that produces oranges and lemons the most in Burma. Most of the farms are owned by wealthy families and landowners. The villagers work in agriculture. They grow sugar cane, bean, corn, rice and onion. They worked like this since a long time ago.

In 1995, the businessmen who bought teak wood started their business in my hometown. All of the businessmen were local people. They trade with China. Teak is one of the most famous and expensive kinds of trees in the world. Many people abandoned their agriculture to cut the trees to sell, because the profits from this business is obviously better than their agriculture. Sometimes the businessmen were

arrested on the way between Hsipaw and China but they were released. They said they paid a lot of bribes to the military for their crime. Trading teak is a crime...sometimes. It depended on the local government.

In 1996 and 1998 the crime of trading teak happened often. We heard about it happening again and again. One of the villages called Baw Gyo sold teak to the businessmen directly. My family became loggers. We did not grow our crops anymore. We had a very good life compared with the past in that area. We could get the basic needs of our daily life or houses and we were able to go to school.

In 2002, I left my school to help my family to work, but the teak trees became rare. We had to go deeper and deeper in the forest to get them. By this time, the villagers could not survive only by the teak business anymore. As an adult I had to work very hard with my brother to support our family. We grew sugarcane, bean and rice and while we waited for our crops to grow, we cut trees to support our family. After the harvest of the crops, the money left after the payments for the workers were still not enough for us to get a cheap Chinese motorbike. Because in the early monsoon it did not rain enough and caused all of the crops to not grow well that year. The farmers were very unhappy with the weather.

In 2004, there was a big flood. It was caused by heavy rain for many days. In the past, there was heavy rain too in some years, but the river did not get as big as this

year. The old people said it was caused by the dragon playing with her son in the river. The local people believe this idea. But the local people didn't understand that we don't have big trees to absorb the rain anymore. The flood destroyed a large number of farms and houses. The situation was very difficult. Many people lost their crops.

After the flood I left my hometown to come to Thailand to support my family. This year, the logging business started to disappear in Hsipaw because the teak is gone. The people turned to agriculture again, but their farms do not work as they did in the past. The farmers complain that "this year the rain is not enough" or "this year there is too much rain for our plants." They know that they suffered from changing weather but they do not know what caused the weather to change. Hsipaw is one of the hottest towns in Shan State. A lot of trees were cut and we don't have shade from the sun. And global warming is growing around the world, but the local people don't know anything about it yet.

In early 2009, my family asked me to come back home. The trees business started again but not for teak. They started to cut other hardwood trees. The forests are getting smaller and smaller. This action also affects the changing weather in that place. The crops do not grow well with unstable weather. In the next few years, the trees will be gone and the crops will also suffer. We need other businesses to help people so they won't cut the trees. Now they don't have a choice. It is more benefit and easier to

make money. For me, I won't cut any trees. I will give knowledge to my community as much as I can. It is for our future to keep the environment stable and alive.

# buying education



## thiri naing

The education system in Burma makes the citizens afraid and they stop learning because of corruption. Most of the citizens are farmers. Especially, farmers who live in rural areas are quite poor. My family is also one of these poor farmers. So, my parents had to face many problems to support my siblings, to continue their education. The school where I studied is one of the corrupt schools in Burma. I spent my life there from when I studied primary school to high school level.

When I was studying from Grade 5 to Grade 10 (1998-2005), I had to pay for education fee because the government did not support enough teachers at school. There were around two thousand students in the school but we only got 35 teachers. That's an average of almost 60 students in each class. So school principal had to find private teachers to teach us. Anyone who passed tenth standard could teach at the school. So every student had to pay private teachers 75 kyat per month. It was not so much money, but there were three members of my siblings attending that school. Thus, my parents had to give 225 kyats per month. 225 kyats was the same amount as the cost of rice for 30 meals.

When a big UN agency supported us by donating notebooks, teachers asked for money and said we had to pay money for these books because it is for transportation. When I heard that, it was very strange, because this agency donated for the poor students in the poor countries. So they should be free. But the teachers said it was the order from the township. In addition, we had to pay money more than we used to buy normal notebooks at the shop. I had no idea where our money was used.

When I studied in Grade 8, every student in Grade 8 had to buy a book that was printed by the government. That book wasn't used in the class. But if we did not buy this book, we would fail the exam. When they sold the book in the class, it was almost the end of the year. In the book, they wrote about Burmese kings who killed many people in 18<sup>th</sup> century. It said our Burmese king was a very good fighter to

protect Burma in the past. He could control Burma not to be under the control of others' hierarchy. But when I studied at SSSNY in history class, I learned that this king killed 3,000 monks and he changed his name to make him seem like a god. All of the stories in the government book were propaganda. It was also about Thai government's aggression. "Thai government exports *aji-no-moto* (MSG) into our country, it is not good for our health. They want to kill Burmans in an indirect way. So we ban it to prevent disease," it said. But they are still distributing MSG all around Burma.

The propaganda was not only in the book, but from my teacher. He said, "Thai military wanted to invade Burma so much but when they looked across the border, there were thousands of Burmese soldiers guarding their country. So one of the Thai soldiers said, 'if we invade Burma, Burmese militaries will take Thailand as their home.'" He meant that Burma had enough military to protect their country and Thailand only had a small military, not enough to invade Burma. At that time, I couldn't decide what was right or wrong. I just believed that our military really protected our country. I thought that this teacher might tell us the truth, because he was from the military family. So he would know more than us about our country.

After I had passed tenth standard, I applied to a distance learning program at university. In the application form, we had to choose three subjects that we liked the most. For the first one, I chose English major. The second one was

economics, and the last one was law. My favorite subject was English but I didn't know why I got the law major. I felt disappointed about that because we don't have impartiality and justice in the court. For a law student, we should know details about our constitution. So we would know what job or which article is protecting us. But we never saw the constitution of our country. I did not understand what I had learnt at the university because we copied every assignment from the books. Before we sat the exam, teachers told us to memorize all of the pages that they taught.

The education system is upside down in Burma. For the distance students, we had a chance to study ten days per year. But the worst thing was paying bribes to the teachers who taught us. We had to send assignments two times per year. We had to buy the answer book from the teachers. Some students did not have to copy because they paid off professors for that. Some of my friends did pay the professors, but I could not pay because of poverty. So I had to do by myself.

In reality, money can change people's minds. For example, when we buy something at the shop, we just pay money. We don't need to think a lot for buying it. When we pay professors to do for us, they don't want to teach clearly in the class. Bribes make people not want to actually do work. It can become a habit for the professors and students. There will be injustice by paying money to pass. They will not think good things about the students who finished

university, because they know the students didn't get a real education.

On the other hand, the government doesn't give enough salary. It is the only way that the teachers can get extra money for their families. Thus, we can guess that nobody can get the real education at the university. Even university students who study for three years can't find jobs easily in Burma. When our society hears about that, they don't want to support their children to go to school because education is frustrating for them. It doesn't give their children insurance to get a job.

The result of this education system is that it makes citizens poorer and poorer. We spend a lot of time at the school and university, but we get nothing from the time that we spend. We need to change the education system to improve students' participation in the class. If they have an opportunity to participate in the class, they will dare to speak among the people. They will know what is right and wrong. If teachers practice thinking skill in the class, they can think not only for the lessons but also for their community and the problems that happen every day. They can be patient to talk with their neighbors and solve the problems more easily. As we know, Burma has many problems. If the students become educated people, these problems will be smaller and smaller, so when today's students become adults, our country will be a peaceful country.

**i was the plant that grew  
in the fire**



**jai moon on**

I was born on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February in 1989. When I was seven years old, I had my first opportunity to learn Shan, my mother language. There was no Shan school in my village, but I went to one villager's house every evening to study Shan there. I was very happy with my studies. I went to learn at 6:00 pm and came back at 8:00 every day.

I just had a chance to learn for only two months. I left the school before I could read and write. At this time the security situation was not so good. There was a lot of fighting between the Shan Army and Burma military at night and sometimes the bombs dropped in my village. We had to have dinner early and hide in a bunker. We did that for many months. That's why I had to leave the school. But sometimes I went to the temple and learned from the monks during the day.

While the soldiers from the two sides were fighting more and more, they wanted to recruit new soldiers. My parents did not want me to be a soldier. My house was in the rural area outside the village. It would be easy for the military to take me. So at night, I went to sleep at my cousin's house in the middle of the village. In the morning, I came back to my house and went to government school.

When there was no fighting, my father stayed in the farm almost every day. He also slept there. But after there was fighting, he could not sleep at the farm. He was afraid he would be killed when he was coming back from the farm. Our cows disappeared in the jungle. We knew that the Burmese soldiers killed them for their food. Sometimes when they could not eat all of it, they dried the meat and sold it to the villagers. The villagers were happy to buy it because they sold it very cheap.

The next year, when I was eight years old, the situation in my village was still very tense. One day, as I sat next to the fireplace in my home, one monk came from the

city of Panglong to visit my grandmother. He had lived in Panglong for many years and improved his education.

“Do you want your grandchildren to improve their education?” he asked my grandmother.

My grandmother did not answer immediately. She called to me and asked me the question. I thought for a few minutes. Then I answered, “Yes! I want to go!”

“When will you go back?” my grandmother asked the monk.

“After Poi Sang Long,” he replied. Poi Sang Long is the Shan traditional festival when we believe it’s lucky to change to be a monk. The festival was starting in one week.

That year at Poi Sang Long I became a monk. The “big monk” from the temple in my village gave me my new name, “Mor Ne Ya.” This means “the one who has knowledge the right way.” Most of my friends became monks like me, because the monks don’t have to be afraid of the soldiers very much. Me and three of my friends went to Panglong that year. I studied Shan and Pali, the Buddhist language. I learned how to read and write in Shan. But we could not learn the true story of Shan State or about any political systems. When I stayed there, they allowed me to visit my home twice each year. When I returned to Panglong, my mother had to sell a cow each time to pay for my transportation because my mother did not have enough

money in her pocket. I lived in Panglong for two years then moved to Rangoon.

In Rangoon, I continued to be a monk and I studied Pali and Burmese. I had many friends of different ethnic groups, like Karen, Pa-O, and Burmese. In Shan State, I believed stereotypes about Burmese people. I thought most of them were bad and shot people and were not honest. But in Rangoon, it was clear not all Burmese were bad. I had some Burmese friends. They were friendly and helpful to me. They also said that they don't like the government. They wanted to change the system in Burma.

After two months, I had an exam. I received a letter from my sister who lived near my hometown. In the letter she said that half of my village was burned, including my house. When I knew this, I was very worried and had no energy to prepare for my exam. She did not tell me how it even happened. After I finished my exam, I went back to my village. I didn't see my house. I just saw a hut instead of my old house. It felt like it was a dream, not real.

I did not go back to Rangoon. I "changed my clothes" to become a regular person, not a monk anymore. I worked with my father. I stayed in my village only six months. The situation was still not good for teenagers. We still had to be afraid of the Burma Army soldiers. So I went to Thailand. I had two goals: to save my life and to collect money and go back to build my new house someday. I did not have any ideas about improving my education. But when I met my friend who worked in an organization, I saw them

helping the children and they could speak English. I wanted to be like them. I tried to learn Thai and English. During the day, I worked in a small clothing factory. At night I went to school. I did that for many years until I was selected to study at SSSNY.

At SSSNY, I found out that the monk who gave me my name was killed. I already knew he had disappeared, but I didn't know if he was dead or alive. Here, I saw in the Shan newspaper that he was killed by the SPDC. When this monk named me "Mor Ne Ya" he didn't tell me the meaning. I found out later. Now, I have knowledge that I can take with me all the time—no one can take it away or steal it. I know the real story of Shan State and what I need to do for our country. I'm going to use this knowledge to help the people who don't have a chance to study. I want to be a teacher and teach Shan and English to migrant children from Shan State. Even though they are in Thailand, it is not their country. I want to maintain our language. I believe that one day we will go back, and I don't want our traditions and culture to disappear.

# saffron struggle for peace



hsai khur

It was the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2007 in Mandalay. It was about 1 p.m. I was having a short nap under the tamarind tree, sleeping soundly. Suddenly silence was broken by people screaming and gunshots. I woke up and asked my friend about the noises but none of them could answer. I immediately got up and ran forward to the forefront of our wooden monastery. I saw many novice monks peeping at the main avenue. I joined these novices. On the street, I saw men and women were holding hands and standing like fences on both sides of the road.

Three thousand Buddhist monks were holding Buddhist flags and standing in three lines in the middle of men and women. These monks were preaching and marching peacefully all the way through the city. They were holding upside-down alm bowls, meaning they did not want the government food anymore. The monks headed to where there were soldiers. The military stood blocking the road, everyone was holding AK-47 guns, some of them held tear gas mortars. They were wearing dark green uniforms with helmets and red handkerchiefs on their necks.

The peaceful marching was broken into conflict, chaotic marching. They suddenly crushed into each other. Soldiers were not allowed to use their guns at first. Very quickly in a few seconds, there were chaotic flocks of people—all the monks and ordinary people mixed disorderly. They were running to escape in many different directions, because soldiers tried to arrest them. About 15 minutes later, there was quiet again.

This was the first time I ever saw such a horror thing. I did not know what I really felt. I was standing at the gate, then our abbot called me to get into the monastery. Several times, I heard the gunshot and tear gas explosion in the distance. Many monks and men ran into our monastery area, because they were safe in this place. They had no shoes, the tears were flooding in their eyes, because they had faced tear gas explosion. This explosion made a lot of tears, sometimes they could not even see. At the time I saw these monks, I was shaking because I was afraid to be involved with the protest. Other times, I was excited because I wanted to see what was going to happen after the demonstration.

I was a young Shan monk. I stayed in the monastery in the town. I had just been there for a few months when the demonstration occurred. I had planned to stay there for a few years. But my plans failed. I went to Mandalay in order to study Burmese, English and computer, but I could learn none of them. Some monks told me that since I could not speak Burmese very well, it would be very hard for me to learn everything using Burmese. It was a fact to me.

One night, at about 10:00 p.m., Burmese soldiers announced that on the next day, monks could not go to collect alms because they would be arrested. But on the next morning, many monks were still collecting alms. I also did, but I was a little afraid to walk through the crowd in front of soldiers. There were soldiers all around the road, but there

were also hundreds of monks collecting alms chaotically, not in a line like normal.

One of the soldiers stopped one of the monks. The soldier told the monk not to collect alms, according to the announcement of the day before. The monk was tough and aggressive. He was not afraid of the soldier. This monk hit the soldier with his alm bowl lid and walked away. The soldier could do nothing unless he got the authority from the regional commander. I wondered why this monk was so brave to do that.

On the same day in the afternoon, there were eight thousand monks marching along the street. They recruited a lot and very quickly. The numbers of the monks were rapidly increased to nearly nine thousand. In Mandalay, soldiers were not allowed to shoot at the monks. However, they used horrible method to stop the demonstration. Thousands of soldiers were sent into the city and many fire engines were driven into the town. The fire engines were not used to stop fire but to stop the people protesting. Some monks later said there was poisonous water in the tank. The soldier sprayed the water at the people. This made the people faint, so they would be arrested easily. This made the group of demonstrators get very weak because everyone was running to escape. I did not participate with them, but I was secretly looking at them.

Meanwhile, there was a 9:00 p.m. curfew everyday. On the next new day, I went to Mandalay Mountain to visit my friends who had come to Mandalay together with me.

The driver kept us inside the car to be safe. Sometimes they drove away to avoid the military, to save the monks. I went to Mandalay Mountain to discuss with my friends about my journey back home.

For many days, my parents tried to contact me by phone from Shan State, but they could not, because soldiers cut all the phone signals. However, one day they were able to contact me. My mother was crying and speaking to me on the phone. She was really concerned about me, because of what she saw in Thai reports was so terrible. She worried that I would be one of the demonstrators. She called me back to my hometown, Kengtung, at once.

I and two of my friends were trying to go back to Kengtung. We had a hard decision about who to go with. Many Burmese monks said to go by car was too risky, perhaps we could never get to our homes. To go by public airplane was too slow, it took very long to get a ticket. Eventually, we decided to fly back by private airline. It was expensive, the same as the amount money my parents would spend on food for two months. When the plane landed in the Kengtung airport, I felt incredibly happy because I felt really safe in my hometown with my family. I saw my parents were waiting to pick me up at the airport. When I got to my house, many people asked me about the protest. I told them what I knew.

I was afraid at the time of the demonstration. It was a little risky to be there as a monk. I came back to Kengtung to console my parents' anxiety. And now I realize that not

only me and outsiders want to change the system of Burma, but also thousands of people inside the country, especially the monks. While peaceful marching and protesting brought no change to the military junta, there are many means of nonviolence that we can still practice, things like boycotting and going on strike. We have never practiced these before, so perhaps these methods will be our next hopes.

People and monks are inspiring others around the world, especially students on Quadrupled 8s Day (8-8-88), over two decades ago. The monks' action in 2007 has inspired a lot of people on earth. I know and I hope you know too that many people want Burma to become a peaceful democratic country. The horrible dictatorship country is too tight to live under, and we will never be able to open pure, hopeful eyes to worldwide communication unless we are out of this terrible system's cage. We live in Burma with fear and difficulties.

Currently, monks are some of the leaders of political change in Burma. If there were no monks, who will lead the people? I cannot change the rules of Burma alone, but really hope for the unity and cooperation among our people.

When will that day come to us?



## about the school

The School for Shan State Nationalities Youth (SSSNY) was founded in 2001 by a group of youth from Shan State. Unlike other displaced ethnic nationalities who have access to established refugee camps, refugees from Shan State are not recognized as refugees by UNHCR and therefore have difficulty accessing basic support such as food, shelter, health and education.

SSSNY offers a Social Justice Education Program for displaced Shan State youth to provide them with the basic skills and education necessary to take an active role in the struggle for human rights and democracy in Burma. Together with other community-based organizations, SSSNY works with the Border Teacher Support Program to assist with teacher training, curriculum development, and the strengthening of the educational systems of displaced communities.

Since 2001, nearly 300 youth from Shan State, Burma, have graduated from SSSNY. They are now actively participating in social and political change in Burma in the fields of education, environmental protection, healthcare, human rights and independent media.

*For more information about SSSNY, please visit our website at [www.sssny.org](http://www.sssny.org)*



**education is a right**



*“My parents had no money to send me to study in the school. So later, I became a teacher who has learned from nature and listened to the songs from the animals in green field.”*

*“I was born in 1990. While I was still in my mother’s stomach, together I and my mother voted for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD in the election in Burma. We went by ox-cart to vote. That year, the NLD won that election, but the military junta took power from us.”*

*“Now I have knowledge that I can take with me all the time—no one can take it away or steal it. I know the real story of Shan State and what I need to do for our country.”*

*“I will help children at the border that don’t have a chance to study or a place to live...when I see them, I think about my past. I want to give them energy to help them to survive. Fight for your life for the future. Don’t give up.”*

**plants that grew in the fire is a collection of photographic and written self-portraits created by the students from the School for Shan State Nationalities Youth. It is the culmination of a process of self discovery and an expression of their commitment to promote and defend human rights in their homeland.**

All proceeds from this book will go towards the academic programs run by the School for Shan State Nationalities Youth.