

## Visit to Mandalay and cultural sites in Shan State, Myanmar

In the following article, **Nyunt Han** reports on a visit by SPAFA researchers to Mandalay and southern Shan State.

**B**etween the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2009, SEAMEO-SPAFA – with the support of the ASEAN Foundation – organised a Workshop entitled 'Youth, Culture and Development' in Mandalay, Myanmar.

SPAFA Centre Director Dr Pisit Charoenwongsa and three independent researchers joined the organising team on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April.

A study trip in Mandalay (one and a half day) and Shan State (four days) was arranged for the director and the team to help them gather information and learn more about Shan culture by meeting Shan people, and visiting cultural sites.



*Thai researchers at  
Mya Nan San Kyaw Golden Palace  
(photo by Nyunt Han)*

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of April, the team visited the Mya Nan San Kyaw Golden Palace, the last royal palace of the last Burmese monarchy, constructed inside the old Mandalay walled city that is surrounded by moats.

The palace buildings, built by King Mindon in 1859 as part of the founding of the new royal capital city of Mandalay, were destroyed by Allied Forces bombardment during the Second World War, and rebuilt in 1989 by the Myanmar government. In the past, there were 114 palace buildings, out of which 89 have been reconstructed.

Old photos, the statues of the king and queen, and the replica of the royal throne are displayed inside the main



*Shwe Kyaung wooden monastery, constructed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (photo by Nyunt Han)*

palace buildings, which were decorated with wooden carvings that could be seen on the high brick platform of the traditional palatial architecture.

After visiting Mya Nan San Kyaw Golden Palace, a trip was made to 'Shwe Kyaung' (golden palace) monastery built by King Thibaw in 1880. After the death of King Mindon, his palace was dismantled and reconstructed as this monastery outside the walled city.

Inside the monastery, wooden carvings depicting the Jataka stories (Buddha's life) decorate the partition walls. Old wooden carvings are also found on the multiple-roof pavilions of the monastery.

From Shwe Kyaung monastery, the team visited a 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial-style brick monastery also built by King Mindon.

The brick monastery, which was destroyed during the Second World War, and rebuilt in 1992, is known as 'Atu ma shi' monastery ("unique among monasteries").



*A view of U Pein old wooden bridge in Amarapura (photo courtesy of Ms Orawan Sapploy)*

In the afternoon, the 'U Pein old wooden bridge' was next on the itinerary. Built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by U Pein, the mayor of Amarapura, the wooden bridge crosses the Taung Tha Man Lake.

The 1208-metre-long bridge is propped up by large teak logs as supporting posts, many of which suffered from severe weather. From time to time, the Department of Archaeology conducted restoration works on it.

On the other side of the lake, they visited the Taung Tha Man-Kyauk Taw Gyi Temple, a prominent monument in the area named after a huge seated Buddha image called 'Kyauk Taw Gyi'.

This temple was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by King Bagyitaw, and contains old mural paintings, some of which have faded under the white lime layers.

The following day, the team of researchers went to Maha Myat Muni Pagoda where a huge bronze Buddha statue had been relocated from Rakhine (Kyauktaw) in 1784 during the reign of King Bodaw Phaya.



*Taung Tha Man-Kyauk Taw Gyi Temple  
(photo by Nyunt Han)*



*Mural paintings at  
Kyauk Taw Gyi Pagoda  
(photo courtesy of Ms Orawan Sapploy)*

Khmer bronze statues brought from Rakhine are housed inside a shed near the Maha Myat Muni shrine hall. At this most revered pagoda in Mandalay, a mass of followers attend the daily early-morning ritual of washing the face of the Buddha's image.

U Sein Win, the Deputy Director-General, and U Thoung Win, Director of Upper Myanmar Archaeology Department, hosted a luncheon of typical Myanmar food.

Later, they visited a stone-carving workshop in Mandalay where the stone carvers warmly welcomed the guests, and demonstrated their stone-carving skills.

This was followed by the group visiting the U Sein Myint embroidery workshop where U Sein Myint's daughter showed the visitors the process of embroidery work and U Sein Myint's collection of folk arts objects as well.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, the group left Mandalay for Kalaw, a hill station town in southern Shan State. During the British colonial period, the British administrative officers used Kalaw as a recreation area to escape from the hot summer weather.

Next day, the group toured the attractive tourist site of Pindaya Shwe Umin Cave, about one and a half hour drive from Kalaw. Evidenced by the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Buddha images, the cave is believed to have been created by Shan Buddhists as a shrine hall during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The Pindaya Shwe Umin is a natural cave where pious Buddhist believers built small stupas in which they placed various sizes of Buddha images made of stone, wood, lacquer and masonry. Old Buddha images dating to the 18<sup>th</sup> century could still be found inside the cave.

A



B



D



C



E



G



F



A : Maha Myat Muni Buddha statue (photo by Nyunt Han)

B : Khmer bronze statues near Mana Myat Muni shrine (photo by Nyunt Han)

C : A visit to U Sein Myint embroidery workshop (photo courtesy of Ms Orawan Sapploy)

D : A visit to stone carving workshop in Mandalay (photo courtesy of Ms Orawan Sapploy)

E : A view of Kalaw main road (photo courtesy of Ms Orawan Sapploy)

F - G : Ethnic shan woman selling flowers in the market (photo courtesy of Ms Orawan Sapploy)

Pindaya town and the large lake in the middle of the town, viewed from the cave, is a picturesque scenery.

Later during the day, the tour proceeded to Taung Gyi, arriving first at the Shan State Cultural Museum. U Nay Kyin, an Assistant Director, welcomed the team, and guided the visitors around the museum.

The exhibits include old photos of Shan cultural events, traditional garments of Shan tribes, musical instruments, *Shan Ozi*, many cultural objects, and the 1947 historic Pin Lon Conference held in the town of Pin Lon in Shan State where all ethnic leaders agreed to form the Union of Burma, after independence.



*Small stupa and Buddha images inside Pindaya Shwe Umin cave (photo by Nyunt Han)*

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, the group visited the Shan Literary and Cultural Association, and met the president and association members for discussions and exchange of information.

The Association is a non-governmental organisation formed by Shan scholars and others with the aim of preserving Shan culture and traditions, as well as teaching Shan language and literature to the younger generation.



*The view of Pindaya town as seen from Shwe Umin cave (photo by Nyunt Han)*



*SPAFA Centre Director and Thai researchers meeting with Shan Literary and Culture Association Committee in Taung Gyi (photo by Nyunt Han)*



*Inn-thar people fishing  
(photo courtesy of Ms Orawan Sapploy)*



*The group on a motor boat*



*Inn-Lay Lake*

In the afternoon, the visit continued to the town of Nyaung Shwe, where the way of life of the Inn Thar people living around Inlay Lake could be observed. Here, the Shan chief (*sao-bwar*) used to reside in a grand building (*haw-nan*) which is now turned into a cultural museum.

Switching to travel by boat, the first stop was Phaung-Taw-U Pagoda, whose long history was connected to the Bagan period. Within the pagoda, five Buddha images, now deformed by thick layers of gold-leaf coatings, were brought to Inlay Lake by King Anawrahtar of Bagan Kingdom in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century.

The group visited Inn Thar villages where silversmith and hand-loom workshops were situated.

They also interviewed Inn Thar villagers who engage in the cultivation of vegetables and seasonal plants on man-made islands.



*Phaung Taw U Pagoda, Inn lay lake*



*Myat saw nyi naun Pagoda  
in Taung-U (photo courtesy of  
Ms Orawan Sapploy)*

The Inn Thar people also make their living from fishing and weaving with hand looms. Among the Shan textile products, the Inlay handmade textiles are very popular.

The following day, the group headed to Taung-U, an old capital of King Tabin Shwe Hti.





*Taung-U city walls and ancient moat  
(photos by Nyunt Han)*

It was a long journey of about ten hours' drive from Nyaung Shwe to Taung-U; the scenery of green paddy fields, peanut fields and villages along the way, however, lightened the tediousness.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, the next destination was the 16<sup>th</sup> century Myat Saw Nyi Naung Pagoda, located about ten miles to the east of Taung-U. The group also visited the 16<sup>th</sup> century Taung-U ancient city walls and the moats built by King Tabin Shwe Hti.

The SEAMEO-SPAFA Centre Director and the team of researchers concluded their visit to Shan State in Taung-U, having achieved the aim of deepening their understanding of Shan culture and tradition through meeting and communicating with Shan people and scholars, and visiting Shan cultural sites.

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