Inge Sargent, author of Twilight over Burma, holds a picture of her first husband, Saa Kyu Seng '53, who served as Prince of the Shan state of Hsipaw. She is sitting next to a table with some of her prized Shan artifacts, including a Buddha figure, figurines of traditional Shan women and a ceremonial sword.

At opposite ends of the globe stand two Lookout Mountains — one above Golden and the other overlooking the green teak forests of the Shan state of Hsipaw in Burma.

The Burmese Lookout Mountain was named for the place near Golden where Saa Kya Seng, E.M. '53 and his Austrian-born wife, Inge, shared some of their happiest times together before their marriage in 1953.

At the time, Saa was a mining engineering student at Colorado School of Mines. Secretly, he was also the ruling Prince of the Shan state of Hsipaw, a territory the size of Connecticut.

The mountain in Burma was in the kingdom where Saa and his wife ruled as prince and princess. Shortly after arriving in her adopted country, Inge went to the mountain. Standing on top, overlooking the beautiful valley below, she was suddenly crippled by a terrible premonition that her fairy-tale life with her husband would shortly end in tragedy.

Her terrifying premonition became real eight years later when Saa vanished following a military coup in 1962. The princess and her two daughters were placed under house arrest and held captive for two years. The military regime responsible for Saa's disappearance, and for the abolishment of the democracy he cherished, remain in power today.

Their love story, their struggle to improve the quality of life for their people, and the chilling tale of imprisonment and death are the subjects of Inge Sargent's 1994 book, Twilight over Burma: My Life as a Shan Princess (published by University of Hawaii Press). The book is focusing international attention on Burma's oppressive regime.

"The main reason I wrote this book was a memorial to Saa," said Sargent, who is remarried and living in Boulder. "He deserves to be remembered for what he did and what he stood for. He was extremely brave and believed that it was his calling to help his people connect with the 20th Century economically and politically."

The story begins in Denver in 1951 when Inge was a Colorado Women's College exchange student and Saa was a junior at Mines. "As an exchange student, I gravitated towards other foreign students," Sargent remembered.

She met her husband-to-be at a foreign student party and thought he was an ordinary Burmese exchange student. The two shared common interests and childhood experiences of World War II. They would take picnics in the mountains and explored Denver's museums and theaters.

Saa was most interested in history and political science, but knew that his people needed help developing their agricultural and mineral resources. He chose to study at CSM because of its excellent reputation in mining engineering and because it provided an opportunity to observe the political system in the United States.

"It was his experience at the Colorado School of Mines where he learned to treasure freedom of speech, freedom of association and the idea that everyone was equal, and that no task was below anyone's dignity," said Sargent. "Saa really..."
Sao and Inge were married in Denver in 1953.

believed that, although no system was perfect, the United States was the best.”

Sao came to Mines after he had been chosen ruling prince of Hsipaw over his elder brother in 1947.

At Mines, only the school’s president, John W Vanderwilt, had been informed of Sao’s princely status. The president had been requested to keep this information strictly confidential. As a result, Sao was able to lead the life he wanted as an ordinary foreign student at CSM.

Sao’s days at Mines were among the happiest and “the most carefree years of his life,” Sargent added. “He was just another student.” Nobody knew of his true identity, not even his future wife.

She still did not know the truth when the two were married in Denver one year later. After graduation and a short trip to Austria, the couple boarded a freighter ship to Rangoon, Burma. It was not until the ship entered Rangoon harbor that Inge learned about Sao’s secret.

Hundreds of Shan citizens in small, brightly-colored boats held welcome signs for someone important onboard. Looking uncomfortable at his curious newlywed, Sao said, “There is something I have to tell you, my dear.” He then told her that the welcome was for them and that she would be a princess. Although shocked and hurt, she put her feelings aside and participated in the welcome. “He did not want me to marry him for the wrong reasons,” she said.

The couple traveled 800 miles north to their home in Hsipaw, where they lived in a two-story manor house. For the next nine years, the couple would enjoy the privileges and bear the responsibilities for leading their people.

Burma was in state of political and economic chaos when the couple arrived in January 1954. The country is comprised of many nationalities, and Shans were commonly seen by Burmese as citizens of a foreign land with a different language.

Burma proper and its surrounding Shan states had agreed to unite in 1948 to create a Union of Burma following the withdrawal of the British. Under the terms of a new constitution, the autonomous states had the right to succeed in 1958 if they were not satisfied with the union. This was the country’s first attempt at democratic rule.

Unfortunately, Burmese leader Gen. Aung San, whom the Shan people trusted and admired, was assassinated. The result was a politically weak union. The Chinese KMT Army then invaded Shan territory, resulting in a military intervention by the Burmese Army.

Though Hsipaw was not directly affected, the unrest in the surrounding states threatened their traditional way of life with the increasing anxiety caused by the buildup of Burmese troops nearby.

Sao wasted no time taking charge. He implemented a series of social, agricultural and economic reforms. According to Sargent, he felt the heavy burden of responsibility to lead his people to a better life and to govern under democratic, rather than feudal, principals. “We wanted the people to believe in themselves, giving them independence and self worth,” Sargent added.

She learned the Shan culture and language, and devoted herself to improving child welfare and health, nutrition and education. She opened a tri-lingual school, attracting many Shan, Burmese, Chinese, and Indian children who wanted to learn Burmese, Shan and English languages.

As a mining engineer, Sao recognized that mining practices were inefficient and wasteful in his state. He committed himself to helping his countrymen explore and develop their rich deposits of lead, silver, antimony, zinc and gold, as well as precious gems like rubies and sapphires.

He established the Tai Mining Company and hired an Australian geologist to uncover promising ore deposits and purchased modern mining equipment to extract their mineral finds. Sao also developed a salt plant to provide the compound so desperately needed by his people.
Recognizing the need to produce better crops with less harm to the land, Sao taught the nearby hill people to replace their traditional slash-and-burn agriculture with new methods of planting and rotating crops. He also imported cows from India and Rhode Island Red chickens to improve the country's stock. Orange, tangerine, pineapple and coffee plantations were also established, according to Sargent's book.

He gave away his rice paddies to farmers and refused to accept feudal payment of the land. These reforms helped the people of Hsipaw achieve self-sufficiency. It also infuriated his neighboring rulers and was met with distrust on the part of the Burmese government, Sargent wrote.

A serious concern to Sao were the annual gambling festivals, called *pwe*, which had been held in the Shan states for centuries. The gambling deprived people of their wealth, which usually ended up in the hands of princes. Sao created a charitable trust with income to assist his people.

Sao refused to permit the Burmese Army to hold a special gambling festival in Hsipaw to raise money for the military. When his chief minister told him that the army was not used to having requests turned down, Sao replied: “Don’t forget we have our Constitution, and I am willing to die defending it.” As his minister left, he muttered that his country was not the United States.

“He was incorruptible and very ethical,” responded Sargent proudly. “At the time, the Burmese military was getting a stronghold in Rangoon and they could not stand a feudal prince like Sao who believed in democracy. He was the only one in the country who told them what he thought.”

So highly regarded were the young couple that it was common to see their official wedding picture beside Buddha images in family homes. Some people still display their picture, but hide them when the military is near.

As the years passed, the army became a greater threat to the Shan people. “Hardly a day passed without someone from the state coming to Sao with a complaint against the Burmese army,” Sargent wrote in her book. “Villagers were intimidated and forced to provide free labor, women were harassed and sometimes raped, and elders who tried to protect their people were arrested and taken away.”

According to Sargent, Burma’s central government was also taking revenue from trade with the Shan states and diverting funds to Burma proper—leaving the minority states impoverished. Students, local leaders and villagers urged Sao to consider leaving the Union of Burma at the end of the 10-year trial in 1958.

Military visibility in the Shan states increased as the time for the decision to secede or stay in the Union of Burma approached. Despite his frustrations, Sao wanted to stay in the union because he believed in the democratic process they had built.

General Ne Win of the Burmese Army did not believe in the constitution which assured the Shan states their right of autonomy, according to Sargent.

While Sao was away at parliament in Rangoon in early March 1962, General Ne Win staged an overnight coup. He placed most of the rulers and the entire government of Burma in jail.

Sao had left parliament in Rangoon a day earlier upon news that his sister, who lived in Taunggyi in the Shan state, was dying. He planned to visit her on his way home but was unaware of the coup taking place in Rangoon. The army arrested him at a roadblock.

“They suspected that he knew something, they thought he was going over to the rebels,” Sargent said.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Burmese soldiers surrounded the residence of the princess, where she was unaware of events unfolding. She was questioned by military officers as to the whereabouts of Sao, who she thought was in Rangoon.

The princess made numerous attempts to get news about her husband, and at one point even risking gunfire as she drove out of her compound seeking answers from the commanding colonel who was 24 miles away. “The military was not expecting me to be so defiant,” replied Sargent. “I was contemptuous of them.”

Finally, a message came to the princess in the form of a note from Sao: “I am writing this secretly. I am being locked up in the army lockup at Ba Htoo Myo at Lawksawk... Miss you all. Conditions here are not clean. Hope to see you soon. Cheer up yourself! I am still OK. Love, Sao Kya Seng.” This message was his last.

The Burmese Army never accepted responsibility for his arrest, imprisonment

“Sao died because he stuck to his principles. I want people to remember what he did.”

Sao Kya Seng, a Colorado School of Mines graduate in mining engineering, was captured during a Burmese military coup in 1962 and later vanished, presumed killed.
or his disappearance. Hoping to get closer to the truth, the princess requested and was permitted to move to Rangoon after 11 months of house arrest at her manor house.

She spent one remaining year with her two daughters, Mayari and Kennari, in the Burmese capital under house arrest, having to tolerate constant surveillance by the military. As time passed and as evidence of his death mounted, she became convinced she needed to move on.

"After two years, I decided to leave the country," Sargent said, remembering the request of her husband if something happened to him. "I accepted his death intellectually, but not emotionally."

She managed to get her daughters illegally entered on her Austrian passport and quickly boarded a plane out of the country. Once she arrived penniless in her native Austria, Inge continued her unsuccessful search for Sao. She said she remained convinced that General Ne Win was responsible for her husband's death.

Sargent finally settled in the United States, completing teaching degrees from the University of Denver and a masters degree from the University of Colorado.

Encouraged by her second husband, Howard Sargent, she spent two years writing *Twilight over Burma*. Today, she speaks out about the continued human rights abuses of the Burmese military regime, who have renamed the country Myanmar.

Among the most shocking of abuses occurred in 1988, when Burmese soldiers massacred as many as 10,000 people protesting for democracy.

"Sao died because he stuck to his principles," concluded Sargent. "I want people to remember what he did."

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