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2   From contested histories to ethnic tourism

Cinematic representations of Shans and Shanland on the Burmese silver screen

Jane M. Ferguson

Burma, or the Union of Myanmar, is internationally known for possessing one of the longest-running internal conflicts in modern history. In 1947, on the brink of the country's independence from Britain, ethnic Karen insurgents first took up arms against the soon-to-be-installed Yangon government. The ongoing civil war continues to this day, and it is estimated that since its inception, this conflict has produced approximately 10,000 deaths annually (Smith 1994: 324). While non-Burman ethnic nationality groups are estimated to comprise one-third of the country's population of approximately 59 million people, particularly since the Ne Win military government installed itself in 1962, political domination has been concentrated among the Burman majority, and is often accompanied with rhetorical strategies of ethnic chauvinism while the Burman-dominated military government continues to maintain its authoritarian rule over the country.

Although themes of conflict, economic woes, and political oppression tend to dominate international news stories about Burma, partially due to the country's relatively high rate of literacy from pre-colonial times onward thanks to widespread monastic education, as well as the country's connections with British India, the first half of the twentieth century saw a thriving media scene. This scene is characterised by newspapers in multiple languages, various weekly magazines, as well as electronic broadcast media and multiple motion picture studios. The considerable dearth in international scholarly attention on the subject of Burmese cinema belies the fact that Burma has a nine-decade history of motion picture production, and active cinema production continues to this day. The existence of numerous film studios in Yangon and Mandalay, which have produced thousands of feature films in the Burmese language, the myriad film magazines, as well as the popular affection for Burmese movie stars, in the general public, and even among some members of ethnic separatist armies are testament to the robust influence of this industry.[1] Examination of the motion picture scene of Burma presents a dynamic,

fascinating challenge to the social relationships represented and engendered by the motion picture industry, particularly in light of the political struggles that have long plagued the well-being of the people in the country, the peripheral and minority areas especially. In examining popular representations of ethnic relations in Burma, we can see a culture industry which has some of the most stringent and authoritarian regulations in the world, but at the same time, a highly literate and diverse audience, not to mention potentially irreverent directors and screenwriters who will not necessarily tow the line of the status quo in their production of popular motion pictures.

Tracking film history in Burma

Burmese film production dates back to 1920, and by the time of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, the handful of Burmese motion picture studios, in varying degrees of cooperation with Indian studios, had produced approximately 640 films (Tun Hlaing 2000: 187). Directed political use of the mimetic capacities of the motion picture industry in Burma can be traced back to the nationalist movements of the 1930s, and several of the key figures involved in the Burmese independence movement were actively involved in film production. This enthusiasm among important political players for film production is partially the cause for the generous government funding allotted to the Burmese film industry post-independence, and consequently the film industry in Burma grew rapidly in the initial decades following independence, and reached its productive apex in 1962. Following the Ne Win military coup of 1962 and the re-structuring of the national economy along the lines of his Burmese Socialist Programme Party we can see the ways that the film industry was transformed, both economically and ideologically. In particular, amidst the ongoing insurgencies and battles for autonomy and self-determination among ethnic nationality groups, there is occasional directed use of the motion picture industry to promote a positive, or simply benign, image of non-Burman groups, the Shan in particular. As we will see, the relative success of this endeavour is debatable.

Through examination of the political and social context of Burma, this essay first discusses the historical inter-relationship between the Burmese and the Shan, and the ways in which the vision for the Union of Burma crucially depends upon a notion of ethnic pluralism, yet asserts and privileges the Burman majority. Tracking the history of the Burmese motion picture industry following the Ne Win military coup of 1962, I will discuss how the growing industry was stultified by the nationalization of the economy following the inception of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party government, and then constricted in terms of its content and representation by an increasingly stringent, often arbitrary, Motion Picture Censor Board. I will then discuss notions of ethnic pluralism and how they manifest themselves in Burmese cinematic discourse, particularly regarding how these political and structural

developments affected representation of Shan symbolic elements. Here, I will discuss specific films which involved representation of Shan geographies and/or Shan people. While some of these films were explicitly produced in order to foster inter-ethnic harmony, in one particular case Shan audiences perceived one representation of an eleventh-century Shan princess as an explicit attack on Shan culture and history. Though I predominantly focus on Burmese films from the 1960s, as we will see, this period in national history was tumultuous in that it signified the first decade of Ne Win's 'Burmese Way to Socialism' restructurings amidst an ongoing war, and concurrently, a time in which ethnic minority groups began to take on 'internal Other' status amidst militaristic Burman ethnic chauvinism. It was these decades also, that the Burmese popular culture industries effectively framed cinematic and popular representational discourse regarding ethnic pluralism in the country, so in order to understand popular codes at work today, it is necessary to examine how these codes and genres were constructed during the early decades of national independence, as well as the years immediately following Ne Win's coup. Arguably, it was during these formative years that Burmese cinematic discourse crucially framed the ways in which popular audiences would identify and understand ethnic diversity and ethnic pluralism in the Union of Burma for decades to come.

In theorising the relationship between ideologies of national unity and inter-ethnic relations as presented by films and understood by diverse audiences, I find Purnima Mankekar's (1993; 1999) work on television production and viewing practices in India to be most generative; in her discussion of the ways in which national discourses regulate those of gender (and vice versa), Mankekar argues that television plays a crucial role in communicating those discourses, but that role cannot be merely understood according to 'a clear-cut division between the hegemonic text and the passive viewer' (Mankekar 1993: 557). Similarly, there is a dynamic interplay in discursive constructions of Burmese nationhood and how this relates to ethnicity, and the motion picture industry has been repeatedly mobilized to broadcast this complex message to the masses.

Although it is often the imperative of the ruling classes to use the means of mass communication in order to dominate the means of symbolic reproduction (Scott 1985) we know as well that cultural production is not the exclusive domain of the large-scale culture industries; all peoples produce culture, and experience will inevitably intervene (Roseberry 1989). Theodor Adorno's totalizing assertion that the ultimate goal of the culture industry is to 'remove the thought that there is any alternative to the status quo' (Adorno 1991: 9) is particularly provocative in the context of Burma, where one can see a tightly controlled culture industry on the one hand, and on the other hand, a very different experiential reality for many of the people in Burma. This is no doubt partially informed by the results of the machinations of the pervasive black market as well as the ongoing ethnic insurgencies and various other sources

of news and political information sidestepping the government-scrutinised channels. In the context of the longest-running internal conflict in modern history, it would seem a tall order for the popular entertainment industries effectively to convince the general public of inter-ethnic harmony in Burma. As we can see through examining the many films which speak to notions of ethnicity in Burma, let alone the veritable fractal of myriad interpretations of those texts by various viewers, we can begin to understand the ways in which the goals of government regulation of the motion picture industry are an incomplete attempt to secure national solidarity through varying representations of ethnic 'others' on the silver screen.

Representing 'minorities'

Numerous studies of film have revealed the ways in which filmmakers' representations of cultural 'others' have produced contested reactions among diverse viewers, especially among those who identify with the 'other' being presented on the screen. In her examination of two films produced by white American filmmakers focusing on marginalized African-American people, *Paris is Burning* and *Hoop Dreams*, Davis (1999) presents the compelling argument that while she was able to 'read' an intended irony of representation of the marginalized groups, she recognizes how convoluted and fraught the device of irony can be, and how and why some African-American critics found the films' representations of the minority groups patronizing and/or offensive. Crucially, Davis reminds us that filmmakers aim to manipulate their human subjects on the screen in order to produce their product, but when those people are minorities, or from a different culture, the film will likely carry political ramifications (Davis 1999: 30). In his history of cinematic representation of homosexuals and homosexuality in Hollywood cinema, *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo (1986), in addition to other arguments regarding various historical examples of both subtle and overt representations of gays in motion pictures, details the ways in which some gays who were involved in film production purposely encoded gay 'sub-texts' and double entendres into the plot and character blocking of mainstream Hollywood movies. The compelling point of this kind of minority representation is that the minority subject is one which can and often is occluded or largely overlooked by majority discourses. While *Hoop Dreams* and *Paris is Burning* are films dealing with different populations of marginalized groups, they would not be marketed or explicitly labelled 'minority films'; it would not be politically correct for Hollywood to label or package a film as a 'black film' or a 'gay film' even though implicitly its content might deem it as such. Audience demographics can de facto ascribe such labels later. In China, however, there is such a genre, the 'minority film' (*shaoshu minzu dianying*) which became a part of Chinese cinematic discourse in the 1950s. The purpose of this institutional labelling was to represent ethnic diversity (or in their terms, minorities) in such a light that the films would

instrumentally promote national unity and solidarity (Zhang 1997: 79). In Burma, as well, such an explicit genre of minority film does exist, though the genre classification would translate more closely to 'inter-ethnic harmony' film. But first, it is instructive to understand how and why inter-ethnic relations would be a priority of the Burmese government in this period following independence and the subsequent military coup.

A thumbnail sketch of Burmese-Shan relations over the *longue durée*

The Shan, as they are known in Burmese and English, or Tai, as they call themselves, are one of the largest stateless, ethnic nationality groups in mainland Southeast Asia, in that they number an estimated 10 million people, and can be found in Laos, Thailand, China, as well as the Shan State of Burma, and constitute approximately one tenth of the total population of Burma. Archaeological evidence shows Shan settlements existing in the northeast of what is now Burma for over 1,700 years, and throughout the waxing and waning of Burmese kingdoms in the past millennium, Shan kingdoms and political rulers had their period of rising and declining influence as well. However, following the third and final Anglo–Burmese war in 1886, British colonial authorities annexed Burma as part of British India, ousting the Burmese King Thibaw in Mandalay and replacing the indigenous political apparatus with their colonial system of rule. The Northeastern territories were not fully annexed, though; the Shan rulers were allowed to maintain semi-autonomous rule over the subjects in what would become the colonial 'frontier areas' to 'Burma proper'. As the historian Thant Myint-U has argued, it was during this period immediately following the fall of Mandalay and the inception of colonial ethnic mapping with its territorial grid system that the notion of who is Burmese (and concurrently, who is not) began to have both social and political implications (Thant 2001: 10).

For some members of the Shan ruling classes, they would later look back upon the period of semi-autonomous rule under British Colonialism as a time of peace for the Shan States. The Shan *sao pha* (or princes) no longer had to worry about their former enemies; the Burmese kings were gone and the potential threat of the forces of the Chiang Mai royalty was being subsumed by Bangkok authorities. Even when there were uprisings in the Shan States, the British colonial authorities could dispatch troops to quell them. But one significant disadvantage for the peasantry was that there were no longer the former means of ousting political opponents, as the British method allowed no recourse, thus potentially keeping Shan dictators in their positions of power over the people (Smith 1999:47). However, one dimension of this administration that Shan politicians and members of the elite classes would later lament is the fact that the British dedicated significant resources to neither the integration of the Shan areas with the international economy, nor in the higher

education of students in that area. The former economic integration could be seen as a double-edged sword: dependency on foreign income would make the Burmese lowlanders increasingly dependent on the anarchic whims of the international market, but at the same time, the Shan rulers began to feel that their areas were 'backward' compared with their lowland Burman counterparts. In terms of higher education, the Shan States would lack direct access to higher education in the Western sense until the end of the twentieth century. Rather than send their children to the recently opened Rangoon University, often the Shan royalty would bypass their Burman lowland counterparts and send their wealthy sons and daughters to England or the United States for higher education. This marks a distinct departure from the previous practice of the Shan rulers sending their kin to join Burmese courts and harems. The ousting of the Burmese royal family from their seats in Mandalay ushered in the end of ruling-class kinship alliances between Shan and Burmese elites, though monastic education could very well have still been an important vehicle for inter-ethnic connection, but more for the peasant classes than the elites.

Middle-class nationalism and the nascent motion picture industry

During British colonialism, Burmese middle-class nationalism tended to concentrate itself in the urban areas, Rangoon especially. Although, as we will see, Shan elites did have their own national aspirations; the particularly anti-British angle was one more sharply pursued by the Burmese nationalists. A number of these privileged nationalists took a keen interest in media production, and sought to engage in motion picture production as a means by which they could broadcast their message to the masses. The best-known director of such films is 'Parrot' U Sunny, whose studios produced a total of 92 films in its years of operation between 1931 and 1957 (Arkar Moe 2009). Another studio known for producing nationalist films was A1; a 1938 film of theirs documented workers' protests in downtown Yangon led by the then-president of the All Burma Students' Union, Thakin Ba Hein. Another film produced by A1 actually provoked a social outcry: the 1937 film *Aung Thapyay* (The Triumph of Thapyay) written and directed by U Tin Maung, depicts the final days of the Burman monarch King Thibaw. The film was withdrawn from cinemas by British colonial authorities, following a film-inspired revolt in the town of Monywa (Myanmar Youbshin Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 252). Although the uprising came as a result of the film's depiction of the humiliation of British colonial conquest, as a historical film, there are specific representations of a Shan princess, as well as the presence of Shan actors within the cast and storyline. However, notions of ethnic unity are not prominently featured in the main thrust of the plot. Nevertheless, in the cinema in Monywa, it was clear that viewers were sensitive to the ways in which political power was presented on the silver screen. Although U Sunny has a generally positive

reputation within Burmese nationalist historical discourse, we do know that when he got his start in the film industry, he was initially dissatisfied with the significant Indian involvement in Burmese cinema, from phases of film production to actual cinema owners (Sagaing Hla Shwe 1981: 45).

Following the Second World War, independence conditions imposed by the British colonial authorities stipulated that the Burmese politicians would have to demonstrate unity between themselves and the ethnic nationalities in order to be granted independence. Because of this, General Aung San travelled to the Shan town of Panglong, where he met with Shan, Kachin, and Chin political leaders, and thus drafted the Panglong Agreement, which indicated that the former 'frontier areas' would join in a newly formed Union of Burma, and that the Shan and Karenni states would have the right to secede following ten years' initial membership, and the Chin State being incorporated as a 'special administrative area'. Following its independence in 1948, the newly established Union of Burma would officially contain fourteen administrative territories: seven (predominantly Burman) divisions and seven so-called 'ethnic' states, named for the predominant ethnic group in the area. With the territorial mapping, then, we can see that the Union of Myanmar crucially depends upon the existence of multiple groups. Although the notion of eight 'official' national races belies the on-the-ground ethnic diversity within and between these somewhat arbitrary groups, the point here is that Burma was founded as a plural ethnic nation.

As mentioned earlier, this accord was not sufficient to pacify the growing discontent with the fledgling Yangon government. Prior to independence, ethnic Karen militia formed the Karen National Union, a group that has fought for self-determinism to this day. Furthermore, the Communist Party of Burma was arguably the strongest political force in the country at the close of the Second World War. However, it would be international political events that would have the greatest impact on the political economy of Burma: following the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, straggling Kuomintang (KMT) forces retreated across the border into the Shan State from Yunnan and in the years following, began systematically to build their forces for a counter-insurgency against the Maoists. The newly installed Union of Burma government saw this as an incursion on their sovereignty and initially ordered the Shan *sao pha* to mobilize forces against the KMT. The *sao pha* were hardly united in their political stance, and some of them baulked at the government's proposal, thus provoking the Burmese central government to establish martial law and dispatch their military to the Shan areas, (ostensibly) to fight the Kuomintang. It is this response to the Kuomintang in particular that was the basis for the expansion of the Tatmadaw (the army) and, by the end of the 1950s, its emergence as the strongest political force in the country.

Recalling the caveat for the Shan political authorities, as stipulated by the Panglong Agreement, the Shan State had the right to secede from the Union of Burma following ten years' initial membership. The deadline for this

stipulated – but never realised – secession came along in 1958, the same year in which the Burmese civilian government was replaced by a 'military care-taker' government, which ruled until 1960, when U Nu was re-elected in a landslide victory. During that interim, however, the military government had successfully coerced many of the *sao pha* to relinquish their political control of various parts of the Shan State in exchange for concessions. For those Shan politicians eager for full independence, prospects were increasingly bleak, and in 1958, the first Shan insurgent army, *Num Serk Harn* (Brave Young Warriors), took arms against the Burmese military, and in the decades that have followed various other militias have formed; it is estimated that in the Shan State alone there have been up to 40 anti-government militias in operation at a given time.

Cinema in independent Burma

In spite of the growing political turmoil, these post-Second World War years have since been looked upon as the 'golden age' of Burmese cinema; a more critical analysis might attribute this 'golden age' of cinematic production to government impetus to harness the mimetic capacity of the silver screen in order to foster political consent. We can trace this newly independent govern-ment's enthusiasm for cinema back to the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the film industry in 1946, in which General Aung San himself presided over the celebration. The newly independent Burmese government also allocated 50,000 kyat to support the national film industry, and, in particular, to upgrade its technology (Khin Maung Ni 1980: 19). Every year initially following independence saw a rise in the number of films produced, and the founding of the Burmese Motion Picture Academy Awards in 1952 added to the prom-inence of the industry. It was during this period that a total of four Burmese films were exported to international markets, including those of China and the Soviet Union (Takkatho Ne Win 1973: 36). One film in particular, *Bawa Thanthaya* (Life's Samsara) directed by U Thuka, specifically depicted Burmese culture and customs, and included vignettes featuring Shan geography, that of Inle Lake in particular.

As the post-war Burmese film industry expanded, so did its star system, and within that system we can find specific representations of non-Burman individuals and groups. A particularly well-known female lead who repeatedly appeared as a 'Shan beauty' of sorts on the Burmese silver screen was Mary Myint, born in the Shan town of Nam Kham in March 1929. She got her start in 1948 in the film *Thitsa Pan Hnint Kaing* (Two Faithful Flowers) directed by U Bi Aung (Daraiktaa Ne Don 1970: 8). It was from this cameo appearance as a Shan beauty that Mary Myint became known to mainstream cinemagoers, and would later become *the* Shan girl known to Burmese audiences. Although cancer ended her life prematurely in 1957, before her death she appeared in at least four other feature films, although seldom did these films specifically deal with Shan-related themes.

Post-1962 motion picture production

Following the military coup of 1962 and the subsequent instalment of the Revolutionary Council government, followed by that of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), a new Motion Picture Enterprise (MPE) was estab-lished which maintained strict control over all phases of film production and distribution (Yeni 2006). The partner organization of the MPE was the Motion Picture Organization (MPO) which replaced the previous government's Film Council, and tightened the censorship controls on films. The following Union of Burma Cinematograph Law of 1962 allowed the government to oversee film production, in both form and content (Charney 2009: 114). It was through these bureaucratic organizations that the right to criticize the govern-ment was systematically stripped away (Allott 1993: 3). Increasingly, the culture industries were turned to in order to produce government propa-ganda; as the military continued to expand, the motion picture industry was looked toward as a tool for obtaining the masses' consent. In reference to the mimetic capacity of motion pictures to bolster sentiments of national identity, Slocum (2005) has presented the argument that it was the very pleasures of spectatorship of war films and the violence that they portrayed which contributed to a pacification among American viewers and one which also allowed some of them to seek within the motion pictures a sense of their own national identity (Slocum 2005: 38). We can see how the Burmese motion picture industry would seek to build national solidarity in light of many per-ceived security threats; it was the imperative of the culture industries following the 1962 coup to present the Burmese Army as a liberating force that was also entrusted with safeguarding the nation's independence. This notion that the Tatmadaw is crucial for the maintenance of the political health of the nation continues to this day; government propaganda 'exhorts its citizens to be wary of Western machinations and projects the military as the saviour of the nation and its cultural and religious heritage' (Ganesan and Hlaing 2007: 3). The military government also made it an imperative to downplay the issue of ethnicity, either by ignoring it altogether or using ideas about ethnic harmony for public relations purposes (Steinberg 2001: 54). One Burmese film scholar, Takkatho Ne Win, notes a sharp downturn in the number of historical films produced following the regime change; although Win argues that the govern-ment had not specifically shut out historical films, there were simply fewer produced (Takkatho Ne Win 1972: 28). Tracking film production, we can see, for the most part, that the motion pictures of the Burmese motion picture industry were disproportionately 'Burman' in that any representations of Shan people or Shan symbolic elements are very few and far between.[2] Following the military's tack of using ethnic harmony and pluralism as a form of public relations, we can see some ways in which films about Shanland as a touristic site or as a cool and calm mountain land become part of popular cinematic discourse on the Burmese scene. On the other hand, we can see occasional examples of overt efforts made by Burmese film directors to include 'Shan'

tagged symbolic elements into their films, though changing political circumstances have, at times, precluded such productions altogether.

Shans on the Burmese silver screen

Within the corpus of Burmese feature films, those which involve representations of Shan people and Shan territories can be grouped into four major analytic categories: (1) fictionalized or documentary-style sojourns to the Shan areas;[3] (2) historical dramas, either historical fiction, or historical narratives presented as re-creations of fact; (3) Burmese narratives which include the Shan State as a setting; and finally (4) Burmese features which include a Shan character in the plot, either related to the plot structure, or in the form of a cameo appearance. As we can see from these categories, there can be a varied degree of symbolic presentation of Shan elements, and to the untrained eye, the very fact that some narratives actually would have taken place in the Shan State might pass without notice.[4]

Released in Burma in 1956, the film *Pusa Hnit Kain* (Two Unthwarted Destinies) was a Burmese adaptation of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, which was originally an adventure novel, but then was made into a film in 1937 and later 1952, starring Steward Granger and Deborah Kerr. The Burmese version, produced by British Burma Motion Pictures, and directed by Hla Maung Lay starred Kyaw Swe, Htun Way, and May Thit. The prominently featured song in the soundtrack, sung by Maung Thaung, was *Nga Tha Saw Bwa Pyit Chin Tay* (I want to be a Saopha, or Shan prince) a song written by Saya Shew Pyi Aye (Myanmar Youbshin Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 117). A much later film, but a historical drama set during the Second World War, *Thwe Thauk Nga Yauk* (Five Comrades), based on a novel by Kyaw Myint U and directed by Ant Kyaw features British soldiers as well as people from various 'National Races' of Burma including Myanmar, Shan, Karen, Karenni, and Chin (Sein Khin Maung Yi 1990: 49).

One director in particular who is associated with films representing ethnic nationalities is Myint Maung, who directed a total of twelve feature films, which have included films depicting nature, culture, and customs of Shan, Kayah, and Kayin ethnic nationalities (Myint Maung 1977: 49). In 1960, for example, Myint Maung directed a film entitled *Pantaing Pwint Ba Say* (May the Angel's Trumpet Blossom) which was produced as a promotion for inter-ethnic harmony and as a concerted effort to increase the visibility of ethnic nationality groups (Myanmar Youbshin Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 216). The film itself, written by Seya Tin Maung, contains representations of the Shan countryside, peasant lifestyle, and highlights Shan cultural festivals. This particular film is one method through which popular awareness of these particular dimensions of Shan life was raised. Another example of Myint Maung's work is the film *Ta Moe Ta Myay* (Rain and Earth) released in 1962 and produced by Pyi Thu Met Sway Film Company (Myanmar Youbshin

Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 216). The film starred Maung Thin, May Thit, Khin Than Hnu, and Kyaw Li Sway and features a Tatmadaw platoon engaged in battle deep in the forests of the Kayah (Karenni) State. The film depicts the generosity of local villagers in that some take in wounded Tatmadaw soldiers and give them assistance. Another film which prominently features scenes from Inle Lake, including depictions of the Intha leg-rowers, is the 1983 film, *Nay Kyauk Ke* (Sun Rock), directed by Thin Thin Yu, and starring Kyaw Hein and Tun Tun Hnaing.

One of the best-known and often-referred to films involving Shan symbolic elements is the 1963 film *Shan Pyi Youk Aythay Yay* or *Guests in Shanland*. The film is remembered to this day by members of older generations of Burmese filmgoing audiences. The film was written by Naung Ni, directed by A1 Maung Chit, and stars San Sha Tin as a beautiful Shan woman who attracts the affection of the romantic male lead, a Tatmadaw officer played by Win Nyunt.[5] Film commentators in Yangon claim that this film, upon release, was immensely popular among both Burmese and Shans alike. *Guests in Shanland* is a love story about a soldier, Tin Htun Aung, who is considered a straight, honest simple man of a humble background with no major problems. However, when he gets a promotion within the army, his new status creates obstacles for his love life which cause him to worry. Tin Htun Aung has essentially made a social sacrifice in order to progress in his work (Youbshin Thit 1963: 9).
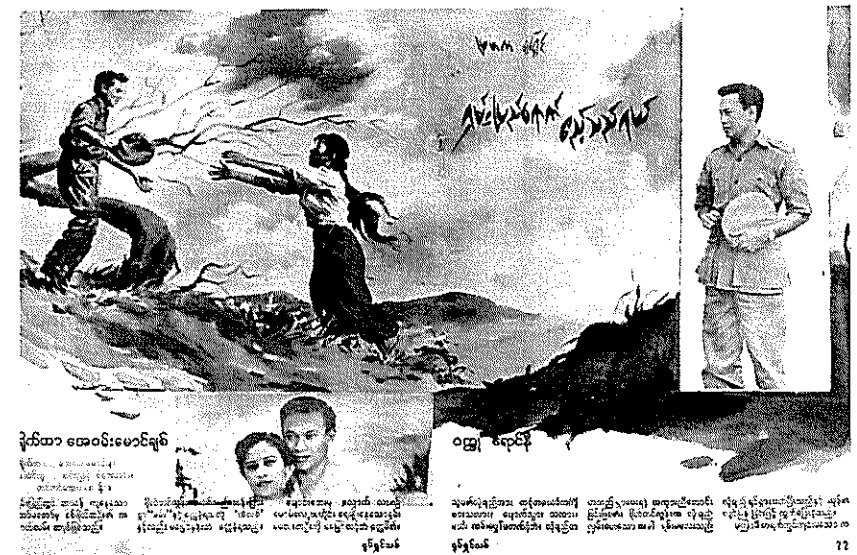

Figure 2.1 Film poster of *Guests in Shanland*.

Source: *Youbshin Thit* (New Film Magazine) August, 1963, pp. 76–77.

This film also featured actors and extras wearing the characteristic Shan-style long pants (Myanmar Youbshin Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 300).[6] It is when Officer Tin Htun Aung is out with his platoon that he meets Kham, a beautiful Shan girl, as she is out bathing in a creek, donning a Shan-style sarong. As they soon fall in love, Kham, because of her expertise regarding the local terrain, serves as a guide for Officer Tin Htun Aung and the rest of his platoon (Youbshin Thit 1963: 9). The plot thus revolves around the Burman officer and his love for the local Shan girl.

Representing Shan and Burmese history on the silver screen

While the above examples of Shan representation in Burmese cinematic discourse did not, as far as I know, produce adverse reactions among audience members, a cinematic example of a controversial historical representation would be the film *Shwezayan*, produced by Aung Mingalar film company, directed by Khin Maung Nyunt and starring Khin Maung Zin as the eleventh-century Burmese King Anawrahta and Kyi Kyi Tay as the Shan princess Saw Mon Hla. On the promotional posters for the film, the story is advertised as portraying 'the first example of Burmese-Shan Love.' The film itself – named after a temple founded by the Shan princess thirteen miles from Mandalay – presents a specific story which took place during the Pagan era: as the Burmese empire was expanding across mainland Southeast Asia, the Shan *sao pha* of Möng Mao agreed to give over his daughter, Saw Mon Hla (in Shan: Sao Mon La) so that she would join King Anawrahta's harem. From there, Saw Mon Hla joined King Anawrahta on his return journey to Pagan. According to the legend, because of the effervescent glow of Saw Mon Hla's earrings (which actually contained a Buddha relic) other women in the harem – perhaps out of jealousy of the possibility that King Anawrahta favoured Saw Mon La – accused the Shan princess of sorcery. The accusation created such unrest and disorder within the palace that King Anawrahta decided to send Saw Mon Hla back to Möng Mao.

Along the journey, just outside of Mandalay, Saw Mon Hla began to fall ill. At one point, she stops at a creek thirteen miles east of Mandalay, and as she is washing, one of her earrings falls into the muddy water. She searches for it but is unable to retrieve it. Soon thereafter, the earring appears in the sky, with a luminescent golden (*shwe*) glow. A flock of sparrows (*sa*) encircles (*yan*) the earring in the sky. Seeing the auspicious event, Saw Mon Hla decides to found a pagoda, and encases her other relic earring in the pagoda, naming it *Shwezayan*. Following the founding of the pagoda, Saw Mon Hla dies soon thereafter; although some Burmese discourses (including that of the film) will say her death was caused by a broken heart, others will argue that she was weakened by the journey and died of malaria.

As for the film *Shwezayan*, its production and cinema release saw considerable controversy. Its production had been complete prior to General Ne Win's

coup, and it received censor approval. Following the coup, and the installation of the Revolutionary Council government, the film was ordered to be re-submitted to the changing censor board, which ordered additional cuts to be made to it. Upon release, however, some Shan audiences were offended by the representation of Saw Mon Hla, particularly involving the scenes in which she was accused of sorcery. According to some interpretations, she was presented as an evil witch, not as an innocent Shan princess. Because of this, some Shan-identified audiences protested, and the uprising compelled the Censor Board to pull the film from public screenings.[7]

Lest we forget, also, that in the decade prior to the release of *Shwezayan* the autonomy of the Shan political authorities had gradually been stripped away and the 1958 promise of self-determination of the Panglong Agreement had been ignored altogether by the Burmese authorities. Furthermore, it was during the 1950s that there had been a concerted effort on the part of the Burmese popular culture industries to foster national unity. This project, however, is fraught, as we can see the ways in which minority representation (especially when a majority group is creating the discourse – as was the case in *Shwezayan*) will inevitably carry political ramifications for that group. Another example of popular culture in Burma which caused outrage among some Shans was a series of novels written by Bo Ni. These novels fictionalized *sao phas* as tyrants, and depicted them entrapping women in their palaces. While the ostensible intention of these representations was to attack the Shan *sao pha* ruling elites in the Shan areas, many Shan farmers conflated the attack on their rulers with an attack on 'Shan State autonomy and culture' (Elliott 2006: 250). While novels such as those by Bo Ni were likely written with the intent to build solidarity within Burma among Burmese people (or rather, those literate in Burmese) by deflating the importance of the role of Shan political leaders, the novels had the adverse affect of splitting its readership along ethnic lines, with Shan people interpreting the attack on the Shan elites as also an attack on Shan people in general. We are left to speculate, as well, whether the Burmese readership of the novels of Bo Ni was enraged by the representation of Shan *sao pha* in such a negative light, or whether they might have created their desired effect among those Burmese consumers of popular fiction.

Although *Guests in Shanland* does contain a Shan female romantic lead actress, the thrust of the plot involves a Burman coming to the Shan areas; it is the Tatmadaw platoon which is dispatched to the Shan State, after all. The film, arguably, could be seen as an exemplar of the 'ethnic harmony' genre of Burmese film in that it promotes the charming and identifiably positive aspects of Shan nature and people, as well as a Burman 'romantic' stance toward these Shan symbolic elements. A more critical reading would argue that the film's representation is overly simplistic, if not patronizing. In addition to the representation, that the Burmese Tatmadaw was arguably an unwelcome occupying force in the Shan States during the 1950s is a moot point entirely.

Again, it is a Burman majority setting the scene, and even though the title would suggest that the dominant context is that of the Shan, the Shan elements are narrated through a Burman lens of sorts. This genre of film, therefore, is not unlike the Chinese 'minority film' (*shaoshu minzu dianying*) in which the minority people seldom occupy the position of the subject, but rather are part of the 'setting' and eventually are 'directed to pay homage to the nation-state' (Zhang 1997: 80). In considering this minority representation, we are reminded of the late film historian Vitto Russo's observation regarding mainstream films about homosexuality not being for gays; for Russo the important point is that the existence of people of various sexualities should not be controversial (Russo 1986: 326). In other words, the Burmese films in which Shan symbolic elements are part of the narrative, but 'othered', in effect is not necessarily done with the purpose of appeasing Shan audiences (who might constitute less than 9 per cent of national film audiences) but rather to show *majority* audiences that the Shan minority is a happy, cool, and peaceful crucial component of the Burmese nation. In other words, like the Chinese 'minority film' in which groups are portrayed as part of the setting in order to 'pay homage to the nation-state', the Burmese film industry makes use of representations of Shans as a minority in order to demonstrate ethnic unity to a country which they perceive (and insist) to be dominated by the Burmese. Films such as *Guests in Shanland* serve to remind audiences that the *Union* of Myanmar (emphasis mine) is intended to be a plural society.

Although Ruby (2000) has rightly pointed out that the general public is increasingly aware of the anger of misrepresented minorities in the popular media (Ruby 2000: 139), the strict censorship guidelines in Burma seem to push only for harmonious representations of the Shans and Shanland. Whether the overly positive representations are interpreted as saccharine by majority audiences demands further ethnographic investigation, as such a reaction would doubtlessly be cut from Burma's strictly censored news media. However, the very fact that 'Burma-Shan Unity' constitutes a named film sub-genre in Burma indicates that the authorities themselves are very sensitive to the ways not only that ethnic tensions are a serious political concern for the regime itself, but also that film representation of ethnic pluralism is a contentious issue. While films that adopt a romantic stance toward a people and a place, such as *Guests in Shanland*, might be well-received among viewers in multiple sectors of Burmese society, this is hardly a foregone conclusion. The extent to which a representation can be read as 'romantic' versus 'patronizing' is the subjective experience of the viewer, as well as the political context of that viewing process. Lest we forget, it was the negative representation of Sao Mon Hla in the film *Shwezayan* which provoked outrage among some Shan viewers, to the point that the Censor Board pulled the film from public viewing. It is this point that reminds us that viewers are not passive; there is always the possibility that they will not take what is presented to them at face value (Platinga 1997: 200, cited in Davis 1999: 45).

We know from the rhetorical strategies of Burmese nationalism that, in spite of ethnic insurgencies, a full vision for a *Union* of Burma (or Myanmar, for that matter) crucially depends upon ethnic pluralism; lest we forget, there are 8 national 'races' and 135 ethnic groups. Although some chauvinistic Burmans might insist on their own ethnic superiority, or simply in terms of numbers alone, relegate the Shan, Kachin, Chin, etc., to the status of 'ethnic minority,' bear in mind that their nation still intrinsically depends upon the presence of Shan people, as well as Shan symbolic elements within the national imaginary. For the production of motion pictures, this political scenario creates a situation in which film can intervene in popular understandings of the Shan, as well as Burmese-Shan relations.

In looking at the adverse reactions incited by productions such as Bo Ni's novels and the film *Shwezayan*, we can see how negative representations of ethnic minorities, while ostensibly intended to garner (ethnic majority) solidarity, had the unintended consequence of inciting angry reactions among the minority. Perhaps the Burmese culture industries underestimated ethnic solidarity among subordinate groups; the fact that Shan people equated an attack on the ancient Shan royalty as an attack on Shan people as a whole implies that asserting a negative Shan icon could be one mode by which Burmese cinema inadvertently cemented oppositional communities. However, this is not to say that 'ethnic unity' films were entirely unsuccessful; often, among some communities of Burmese people today, ethnic Shans are perceived to be simpler, or 'cooler' than their Burmese counterparts. The picturesque cool mountains of Shanland are indeed part of the popular Burmese imagination, and though an ongoing insurgency, grinding poverty, and the fastest-growing HIV infection rate in the world constitute social problems that are part of a sobering reality for people in the Shan State, the popular media have played a significant role in occluding some of these problems in their representations.

Notes

1   For an ethnography of Shan insurgent spectatorship of Burmese popular movies, see Ferguson (2007).
2   This is somewhat different from Win's discussion of the lack of Burmese historical film production. Win laments the fact that many of his contemporary films featured 'modern' times, with people listening to 'modern' music and wearing 'modern' clothing which, he felt, failed thematically to distinguish Burmese films from international films. There is no discussion, as such, in his article, of any of these films being ethnically tagged.
3   Within Burmese cinematic discourse, these types of films are referred to as *Kayi Thwa Youbshin* or 'Travelogue Films' (Myanmar Youbshin Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 197).
4   Furthermore, a number of historical dramas, especially regarding battles between the Burmese Tatmadaw and the Kuomintang, have entirely obliterated the fact that these battles would have taken place in the Shan State. In some cases there is an

anachronistic erasure of Shan symbolic elements altogether, and local villagers are Burman.

5 Incidentally, during the Second World War, Win Nyunt had learned Japanese and collaborated with Japanese film companies during the Japanese occupation of Burma (Nway Sin Oo 2010: 137).

6 Another film which featured actors in these 'Shan pants' was the film *Yin Pwint Lay Thaw Aka*. Whether the extras were actually Shan is not certain, though given the patterns of the Burmese motion picture industry in presenting ethnic nationalities, more likely than not, extras were Burmans, but wearing Shan ethnic costumes.

7 This certainly was hardly the first time that a controversial film was pulled from the cinemas. Recall earlier discussion of the film *Aung Thapyay* which incited Burmese colonial subjects to protest British colonial rule after watching a cinematic representation of the final exile of the Burmese King Thibaw during the fall of Mandalay and the beginning of the full annexation of Burma to British India.

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3   Toward a Laotian independent cinema?

Panivong Norindr

Introduction

Can one speak of a Laotian independent cinema or, for that matter, of Laotian cinema, *tout court*? And if Laotian cinema does exist, how does it figure in the larger context of globalization and regional trade relations, and as an essential part of an undifferentiated Laotian media landscape that is part and parcel of an ideological state apparatus whose primary aim is to create a shared, national realm of experience? What role does television, and more specifically, transnational satellite broadcasting, play in the erosion of national cultural identity and the process of redefining Laotianness. Are diasporic Laotian subjects or Western film directors in the position of reshaping Laotian film and new media culture? These are some of the questions that I would like to address in this chapter. But before I explore these issues, I would like to begin with an incident that I hope will frame and highlight my concerns.

If you doubted that cinema still had the power to stir controversy, let me evoke very briefly a diplomatic incident that occurred in May 2006, between the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand. The Laotian embassy in Bangkok complained to the Thai Foreign Ministry about *Mak Tae* (Lucky Loser; 2006), a comedy about football that pitted the Laotian and Thai national teams in a qualifier's match that was to determine which team would qualify for the World Cup. Laotian officials were concerned that the movie depicted the Laotian national team in a bad light. The Lao ambassador to Thailand complained that the film portrayed his compatriots as 'backwards and comical – with Laos on the receiving end of the film's jokes' (Rithdee 2006).[1]

While keeping the original story intact, the film's producers agreed to remove all references to Laos. Every time the name Laos had been uttered on the original sound track, it was replaced by the word 'Awee,' which now referred to an imaginary nation. The release of the film was postponed until a new version could be re-edited, with all signs and references to the Laotian national team, with its flag, anthem, and even alphabet erased digitally, at a cost of millions of baht.[2] The Laotian government seemed to have been satisfied with these relatively minor changes and the 'unnaming' of Laos, which were of great symbolic importance for the Lao government. Of course,