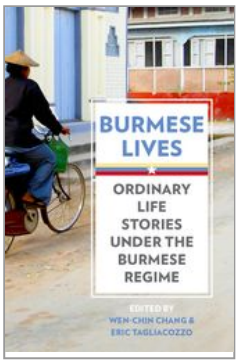

Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime
Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo

Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199335039
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.001.0001

Title Pages

(p.i) Burmese Lives

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

(p.iv) OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the
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Oxford New York
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With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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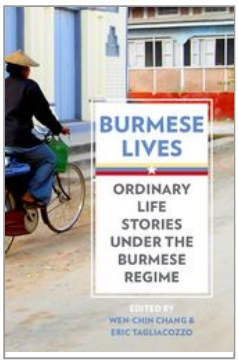
Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and certain other countries.
Published in the United States of America by

Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Burmese lives : ordinary life stories under the Burmese regime / edited by Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: “This volume explores the life stories of ordinary Burmese by drawing on the
narratives of individual subjects and using an array of interdisciplinary approaches.
The constituted stories highlight the protagonists’ survival strategies in everyday life
that demonstrate their constant courage and frustration in dealing with numerous
social injustices and adversities”—Provided by publisher.
ISBN 978-0-19-933503-9 (hardback : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-19-933504-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Burma—Biography. 2. Burma—Social conditions—20th century. I. Tagliacozzo, Eric, editor of compilation. II. Chang, Wen-Chin, 1964- editor of
compilation. III. Sadan, Mandy. Extra-ordinariness of ordinary lives.
Contains (work):
DS530.67.B87 2014
920.0591—dc23
[B]2013032156

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
A portion of the royalties from the sale of this book will be donated to the Thabyay Education Foundation, an NGO that provides higher and adult education services with a particular focus on Burma.



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Introduction

Burmese Lives in a Divided State[1]

Wen-Chin Chang
Eric Tagliacozzo

ask most people about Burma (or Myanmar) and the platitudes come thick and fast. On the one hand, there is the vision of Burma as a more or less timeless place—the classical temples of Pagan and Pegu; women and men walking dusty streets in dignified, faded *longyis* (sarongs); shrouded tropical mountains draped in fog. If any place has been left behind by modernity in Southeast Asia, the argument goes, this place is surely it. On the other hand, Burma has also been recognized worldwide as the stepchild of one of the world's most notorious authoritarian regimes, one which took power almost exactly fifty years ago (in 1962), and which only recently—in the past two years—has been loosening its grip on control of the country. An idyllic past and a straightjacketed near present; this is the standard narrative of this place. Remarkably absent from both visions are actual conceptions of living and breathing people—the denizens of the country who number some fifty million souls by last count, wedged in between the foothills of the Himalayas and the warm waters of the Andaman Sea. Yet it is not an accident that Burmese people are so difficult to insert into the narrative of their own country.

Characterizing Burma, a young nation which gained political independence in 1948 in the wake of British colonization, is in fact not an easy task. It is one of the most diverse societies in Southeast Asia, if not the world, in terms of its ethnic composition. The SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) government classified "135 national races" in 1988, including eight major **(p.4)** groups: the Burman, the Mon, the Shan, the Karen, the Kayah (Karenni), the Kachin, the Chin, and the Rakhine (Arakanese).[2] In addition, coexistence of

multiple political entities inside of Burmese territory has been a social reality since ancient times. Even during the colonial period, a time of territorial consolidation, those located in remote highland areas were able to retain a large measure of political autonomy (Smith 1993: 27–39). However, this multiethnic landscape also has a long history of popular resistance against colonial rule, and against post-independence regimes. Since independence, Burma has been ruled by a short-lived parliamentary government (1948 to 1962), a repressive military junta based on a socialist ideology (1962 to 1988), another military regime that adopted a more market-orientated policy (1988 to 2010), and then a quasi-parliamentary government (still dominated by the state military) starting in 2011, which resulted from a national election in November 2010. These changes have intersected with incessant ethnic conflicts and at times civilian protests (especially since 1988). Despite the government's initiation of ceasefires with more than twenty armed ethnic groups since 1989 (Gravers 2007 13–21; Smith 2001: 34), Burma has remained divided. The resettling of Burmans in areas of ethnic minorities, the destruction of historical ethnic sites and buildings, and the enforcement of Burmanization in education have especially incited local resentments.

Unfortunately, up until the past two years, whenever Burma becomes the focus of the international media, news reports are essentially negative. Political entanglements, human rights violations, drug trafficking, widespread corruption and poverty, and natural disasters are usually on the docket. While these reports project multiple problems, a more nuanced picture of the sociocultural dimension of Burma's ethnic diversity, of the people's everyday lives, of their agency and limitations is, however, sorely lacking. Even in academia, publications have largely concentrated on the ruling regime or general studies of Burmese society, which tend to center on social structure, usually derived from macrodata and statistics. Almost all Burmese in these works are essentially faceless abstractions. Therefore, research into the life stories of Burmese of many different ethnicities, who engage in different occupations and who are of different ages and genders, has particular significance that would help reveal the multiplicities of Burma's contemporary social history. There is an **(p.5)** urgent need to see modern Burma through its people, in other words, not just through the country's problems or political suffering.

A Personal Narrative Approach

Based on the aforesaid considerations, this edited volume aims to explore the lives of ordinary Burmese from several ethnic groups with an individual-centered approach, grounded on personal narrative accounts. Personal narratives are the firsthand data for social scientists to investigate the lives of their research subjects. By their nature, narrated stories reflect the subject, and enhance useful data with unique self-reflection, commentary, and cultural context (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 54, 58). However, as Waterson has pointed out, publications based on this research practice are relatively few (2007: 4). With

regard to the study of Burma, adoption of this methodology is even rarer. One possible reason for this may relate to difficulties in conducting fieldwork and building up long-term relationships with local people in Burma. Without a solid basis of mutual trust, it is not easy to collect in-depth personal accounts. Despite this scarcity of academic publications, there have been a number of nonacademic works that integrate personal narratives in various genres, including autobiographies (e.g., Elliott 1999; Khoo Thwe 2002; Nang Zing La 2006; Sao Sanda 2008; Sargent 1994; Zoya Phan 2009), biographies (e.g., Kyaw Ma Ma Lay 2008), and short stories and reports (e.g., Lemere and West, comp. and eds. 2011; Mya Than Tint 1996; Thornton 2006). These writings not only delineate concrete lives of protagonists, but also serve as testimonies to the social injustices and adversities these protagonists have experienced, as well as to their constant courage, pain, and frustration in dealing with them.

To obtain a penetrating life story that reflects the narrator's existential connections with the external world, one needs to look beyond mere description of events, and dig into the narrator's subjectivity and revelation of intersubjectivity. This requires examining the narrator's lived experiences and probing the intricate interactions between the narrator and the different social contexts and situations in which the narrator finds his- or herself. Many social scientists have explored the themes of subject, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity and have proposed a range of theoretical interpretations of these processes (e.g., Belsey 1991; Biehl, Good and Kleinman, eds. 2007; Butler 1990; 1991, 1997; Foucault 1990, 1998, 2000; Hall 2004; Weedon 1987). It is beyond our scope to give a thorough analysis of this dialectic here, but suffice it to say, one's subject is never in a static state. In contrast it is "the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, **(p.6)** capable of change" (Belsey 1991: 597). Subjectivity is characterized by paradoxical and sometimes bewildering complexities, and simultaneously embodies agency and liminality (Ellis and Flaherty 1992: 5). Only by grasping this subtle and intricate realm of subjectivity can one obtain insight into a narrator's inner self, and also avoid a superficial understanding of the narrator's society by characterizing it as a coherent and timeless culture (Abu-Lughod 1993: 14).

Several scholars have pointed out that personal narratives project the narrator's positionality in relation to diverse situations, and embrace a subjective truthfulness voiced by the narrator (Hart 1992: 634; Marcus and Fischer 1986: 54, 58; Sewell 1992: 482; Steinmetz 1992: 496). On the one hand, narratives disclose an epistemological concern: how the narrator knows about him/herself in relation to others and the society he/she is affiliated with. On the other hand, narratives illustrate an ontological interest: what the nature of the narrator's existence may be in and of itself. "[O]ne's subjectivity is the intersection of [these] two lines of philosophical inquiries," Hall advocates (2004: 4); a good narrative account that endeavors to take on these two aspects therefore sheds

light on the narrator's subjectivity. Though focusing on a range of issues, the authors in this volume commonly touch upon their informants' survival strategies in everyday life, their inner feelings, ethnic identities, multiple positions, traditional roots, their faith and fate, and how these different threads of interest cut across (or interplay) with one another. Through these stories, we see movement of lives as well as that of Burmese society.

Alongside this movement, the authors also unveil the temporal consciousness of their protagonists—how they comprehend their shifting positionality, and the ongoing shaping and reshaping of their subjectivities in interaction with external contexts. Ochs and Capps (1996) maintain that in autobiographical narration, the speaker presents life experiences meaningfully through sequentially connecting past, present, and imagined worlds. Similarly, Rapport and Dawson see narrative as mediating the teller's journey through time, giving human beings agency to present their own stories according to their own experiences (1998: 28, 29). Waterson, too, remarks on the intersection of history with personal experience and the value of storytelling in the building of historical consciousness. Accordingly, while relating one's lived experiences, one also comments on one's participation in the continuing flow of history-making. This sense of historical consciousness among ethnic minorities deserves attention, especially for the sake of obtaining alternative voices. By including stories of different ethnic groups (Figure I.1), we intend to counter a state-centric, essentially Burman history of Burma. **(p.7)**

(p.8) Given widespread ethnic diversity in Burma, it is, however, impossible to include stories of all ethnic groups in one edited volume. Even those selected ethnic groups only comprise one or two stories each. By presenting in-depth life stories on different topics from different ethnic communities, we hope to make a link from the particular to the general even if these narratives are not all-inclusive of Burma's ethnic spectrum. The oral historian Alessandro Portelli has explicated this link, when he says:

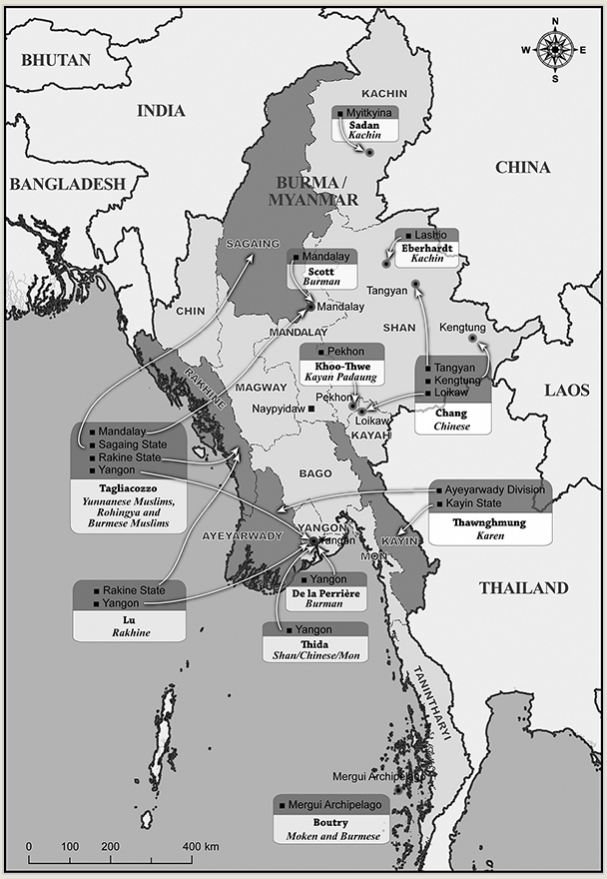

FIGURE I.1 Map of Geography/Ethnicity of Essays.

> The task and theme of oral history—an art dealing with the individual in social and historical context—is to explore this distance and this bond [between the personal experience and history], to search out the memories in the private, enclosed space of houses and kitchens and—without violating that space, without cracking the uniqueness of each spore with an arrogant need to scrutinize, to know, and to classify—to connect them with "history" and in turn force history to listen to them. (1997: viii)

In line with Portelli, Sadan in Chapter 1 of this volume states: "[T]he individual stories of people who form the social bedrock of Burma can lead us toward more subtle and more nuanced understandings of Burma's social and political environment." As human networking extends to different domains of relationships that interweave with sociocultural norms and values as well as frictions, by looking into individual stories in a serious way we hope to grasp the functioning of a specific society.

The authors of this volume write about stories of their long-term informants, close friends, family members, or even themselves to bring out a wide range of issues that address personal ambitions and despair, familial support and tensions, ethnic roots and conflict, gender politics, religious beliefs and practice, and more. These issues highlight the complexities of Burmese society, the

country’s oppression under the military regime until very recently, and especially the rapid changes and sociopolitical problems of the last twenty to thirty years. The authors take us into the inner worlds of their protagonists and the different routes they chose to pursue their goals—engagements in trade, politics, agriculture, religious faith, medical careers, and so on—and their struggles during the process. Human beings forever live in relationships. None of these protagonists’ pursuits are undertaken purely as a matter of self-interest; rather they are based on familial, communal/ethnic, and even national considerations, as well as the predelictions of the self.

(p.9) Telling Stories of the Self in the Burmese Context

The authors of this volume are primarily academics, from different parts of the world (Asia, Europe, and the United States) and working in different fields and disciplines. Three of the participants are from Burma: Ardeth Thawnghmung is an academic, and Ma Thida and Pascal Khoo-Thwe are writers, who are also involved in Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) work. All of the authors either have had long-term research experience or remarkable life experiences in Burma. The examination of the stories makes use of multidisciplinary interpretations that draw on anthropology, history, literature, ethnomusicology, and political science. While relating their stories, the informants also articulate or question their identity(ies) against the backdrop of the processes and changes they have undergone under the repressive Burmese state. Each essay concentrates on one single person or a few people from a specific ethnic group on the themes of migration, gender, economy, and politics or through sociocultural issues. The stories that follow move across a range of Burmese who have lived through different circumstances under contemporary Burmese regimes from the Second World War up to the present. They deal with members of several of the major ethnic communities, as well as with a much marginalized group—the Moken (or sea people). By recording voices of the ordinary and peripheral people, these stories project the many multiple realities of contemporary Burma.

The first subsection of the book looks into “the specter of hardship.” Mandy Sadan of the School of Oriental and African Studies, the University of London, begins the volume with an essay entitled “The Extra-ordinariness of Burmese Lives.” Sadan is an expert on upland Burma, and particularly on the Kachin of Kachin State (Sadan 2007, 2013). She argues that while models of how Kachin society and history “should” be understood are relatively numerous (and in fact predate even the seminal work of Edmund Leach, who made these models famous), the voices of local women are entirely absent from these constructions. Women only appear, if they appear at all, as subordinate or objectified figures in static representations of male-focused Jinghpaw kinship systems. The historical agency of the female gender, she argues, is made nearly invisible. Her paper focuses on the life story of Maran Ja Bang, a Kachin woman born in Shan State (and also Sadan’s mother-in-law) who later lived in Myitkyina, the capital of

Kachin State. The author's narrative attempts to outline the twists and turns of her family's fortunes over four decades in order to raise questions about the invisibility of women in the history of the Kachin region of Burma, and the implications of this for our understanding **(p.10)** of recent history. This life story also discusses in parallel the life of the protagonist's husband, Sadan Awng Tu—pointing to the ways in which gendered economies have influenced the everyday lives of those caught up in one of Burma's longest conflicts.

The second essay in the volume is by Pascal Khoo-Thwe, a former senior producer at the Democratic Voice of Burma in Oslo, Norway. Khoo-Thwe is perhaps best known for his novel, *From The Land of Green Ghosts* (2002), which became an international sensation after its publication, with write-ups in the *New York Times* and other prestigious literary periodicals. The author writes about his hometown of Pekhon, in southern Shan State, which is inhabited by the majority members of his ethnic tribe, the Kayan Padaung, mainly known for their "giraffe-necked" women. After 1988, the Burmese army confiscated lands and jungles that his ethnic group had relied on for centuries for survival, and they also built a major army base there. Khoo-Thwe examines the impact of "foreign" invasion and tyranny, combined with globalization on a small group and their environment. He does this through life stories of a few people that he knew well from his childhood. He pays particular attention to their mental conditions as well as their survival techniques, and their ultimate fates. The author also examines how they have tried to maintain tribal identity and traditions, and how the Catholic Church has also been trying to impose a sense of discipline on the group. Most important of all, he assesses the chance for survival of the traditions and the environment of the Padaung people in the long run, set against intense economic and political pressures.

The third essay, by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, a Research Fellow of the Centre Asie du Sud-Est, CNRS/EHESS, Paris, begins a subsection of the book where "negotiating with the state" is the issue at hand. De La Perrière is a specialist on spirit possession in Burma, and the role of gender in Burmese religion (De la Perrière 2007 and 2009). In this contribution de la Perrière reflects on the life of her main informant and friend in the country, a Burmese woman who accompanied her during her field research for thirty-plus years, since 1981. During all of that time the author witnessed the cycle of hardship that was her friend's life. De la Perrière says that her interlocutor was particularly gifted for social work, as she had come to make a livelihood of such work by becoming a go-between (or *pweza*) between officialdom and Burmese people in the interface of "formal procedures." The author is especially interested in the ways that her friend developed her talent as a mediator in different settings, all culturally relevant, from Burmese administration to becoming the go-between for spirit-mediums and the ethnographer herself. De la Perrière examines the ways that her subject has established her position as a **(p.11)** broker in these different contexts, and used these skills to make a living

in Burma where the state, ordinary people, and the world of the "unseen" all came into daily collision.

The fourth essay is by Eric Tagliacozzo of Cornell University, and is called "Burmese and Muslim: Islam and the Hajj in the Sangha State." Tagliacozzo is a historian, but one who has often worked ethnographically, and in the vein of transnational connection in the past (Tagliacozzo 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2013). He states that Burma is often represented as one of the most Buddhist societies on earth—and indeed there is much truth to this assertion, as the levels of Buddhist piety and representations of the *sangha* (monastic community) are visible almost everywhere in the country. When Burmese minorities are written about it is usually in the form of the Christian populations of the hills surrounding the Irrawaddy rice plain, where significant numbers of Shan, Karen, and other peoples live in an uneasy truce with the mainstream Buddhist-Burman majority. Yet Burma also has an interesting and often-overlooked Muslim population as well, which is normally referenced only with regards to refugees and the discriminatory practices of recent government regimes. Tagliacozzo's contribution looks at some of the lived histories of Muslims in three locales in Burma: among Chinese Muslims in and around Mandalay and Sagaing in central Burma; among Rohingya Muslims in Arakan State in the far west of the country, bordering Bangladesh; and among Burmese Muslims (many of them of Indian origin) in Yangon, the former capital. The author looks at "Burmese lives" in these three locales as part of a larger picture of what it means to be Muslim and Burmese in contemporary society, but with significant glances backwards at history as well. Tagliacozzo is particularly interested in how these Burmese Muslims have conceptualized the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca which is one of the five pillars of Islam as a faith. The author's source base for the essay was two consecutive years of fieldwork visits to all three of the above-mentioned areas, alongside documentary materials that have been published both inside and outside of the country.

Remaining in the locale of Arakan, Hsin-chun Tasaw Lu, of the Institute of Ethnology, at the Academia Sinica, Taiwan, focuses on music in the life of one individual originally from this part of Burma, as this person's "way of escape." Lu is an ethnomusicologist who has published on music and identity politics in Burma (Lu 2008, 2012). U Thein Aung (a pseudonym) is an ethnic Rakhine reared in Taung-goat, a village in Arakan State, who now lives in Yangon as a professional gemologist. In yet another aspect of his life, he is a sophisticated musician of *thachìn gyì*, a centuries-long Burmese court tradition **(p.12)** now held in high national regard. Despite his lack of fame on a national scale, he is nevertheless an exceptional thachìn gyì practitioner, and also a renowned local intellectual to many foreign musicologists who specialize in Burmese music. Lu argues that while certain economic, political, and cultural forces have maintained a hegemonic hold over much of post-1988 Yangon's life, some thachìn gyì musicians have sought their own solutions to retain control of their

musical lives and identities. Her contribution draws from U Thein Aung's self-narratives during 1999 and 2013, when she studied musical practice with him. He chose to detach himself from any public performance and state-supported programs of his professional counterparts, and Lu argues that his self-narrative illuminates how he maintained a self-identity as a thachìn gyì musician, and in turn created a self-contained musical world. On the one hand, his profound aesthetic, (a)political, and anticommercial views reflect his notions of isolationism and simplicity, and these notions can be read as resistance to the current Burmese regime. Such a unique lifestyle and a way of thinking lays overt claim to his subjectivity, and to his agency. On the other hand, locally rooted life notwithstanding, his artistic achievements and scholarly education are enhanced through contacts with transnational Western knowledge, and with foreign ethnographers. U Thein Aung thus gained growing fame both in local and in international musical circles.

The sixth essay in the collection is called "Dr. U Tin Win, Escape Artist," and is written by James Scott, Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale University. Scott is one of the most famous social scientists in contemporary academia; he has written extensively about Southeast Asia, both historically and in the modern world (Scott 1979, 1998, 2009). Scott notes that U Tin Win is a well-known, much admired, and well-connected doctor in Mandalay. Scott thought he would be a good subject for a brief "life" because he spent two years in the Wa headquarters area from 1990 to 1992. As a physician, he volunteered to be "seconded" there as a medical officer of the central government, both to set up clinics and (Scott suspects), to report on conditions there. Scott's interest was further piqued by the fact that while in Medical School in Yangon he was politically active in opposition politics in 1988. As things turned out, U Tin Win proved to be, when Scott met him, profoundly apolitical, not so much out of caution but out of disinterest. He more or less wrested control of Scott's interview to address the subjects he most wanted to talk about. U Tin Win is a poet and songwriter and composed lyrics for popular bands in the 1970s and '80s; he is also a comprehensive encyclopedia of American film and popular music. Scott came to realize that popular culture was his informant's "way out," his form of "internal migration" (a similar **(p.13)** choice to that of Lu's protagonist). Through his headlong and lifelong plunge into popular culture and its apolitical themes, Scott explores the implications of this home remedy for political and cultural claustrophobia in general.

Maxime Boutry, Affiliated Research Fellow of the Centre Asie du Sud-East, CNRS/EHESS, Paris weighs in next in the far south of the country, where he works among the seagoing Moken people of the coasts. His essay is the first of two situated "At Burma's Margins." Boutry has published on the effects of the environment on these coastal regions of Burma, one of the least accessible and least studied parts of the country (Boutry 2009, Boutry 2009; 2013). He posits that there, in the distant south of Myanmar, a new Burmese society is in the

making. He asks how a “paddy state” society, maybe one of the last real examples of this in Southeast Asia, could become a “littoral society,” and so well-accustomed to the sea. Boutry argues that this radical social transformation of one of the real fringes of Burmese culture has been happening for three decades in the Mergui Archipelago, thanks to pioneers who “sacrificed” their identities in marrying “wild” Moken sea gypsies. To understand the deep social changes happening from the encounter between Burmese and Moken, the “normality” in this “extra-ordinary” process, he draws on the life narrative of one Burmese pioneer, U Maung Aye, a central figure in the making of La Ngann village’s interethnic society (situated in the middle of the Mergui Archipelago). Though this protagonist passed away more than 30 years ago, many snippets of his life appear in village narratives. Gathered around U Maung Aye, the perfect image of the “civilizing hero,” Boutry examines the life narratives of some of the La Ngann’s key figures and personalities. From piracy to military rule, from an “Eldorado” to a civilized place, individual subjectivities from Burmese and Moken perspectives help reveal, he argues, the dynamism of Burmese society in this part of the country through the political transitions of the 1990s. Yet, in contrast, Boutry also queries how, within the larger “Burmanization” process, ideologies of nomadic life found a way to survive in an interethnic construction of local society.

“By Sea and by Land: Stories of Two Chinese Traders” is an essay contributed by Wen-Chin Chang, an anthropologist at the Center for Asia-Pacific Studies, Academia Sincia. Chang has published a range of articles on Chinese migrants and merchants in mainland Southeast Asia (e.g., Chang 2009, 2011, 2013). Chang notes that Chinese contacts with Burma have been undertaken both by sea and land throughout history. Various Chinese historical sources mark these interactions in the forms of commerce, diplomacy, pilgrimage, war, and flight. In her paper, the author explores the migration history of two Chinese traders and their economic activities in Burma from the late 1940s to **(p.14)** the 1990s. The initial movement of the two protagonists highlights two migration patterns—one by sea commonly taken by the maritime Chinese from southeastern provinces of China, and the other by land that was pursued by the Yunnanese. Their economic engagement also illustrates two representative types: sedentary shopkeepers (most of the maritime Chinese fell into this category) and mobile traders (epitomized by a great number of overland Yunnanese). During the socialist period, Grandpa Xu (from Guangdong) struggled to survive by selling smuggled goods from Thailand on the *hmaung-kho* market. By contrast, Uncle Zhao, (from Yunnan), thrived on the cross-border trade between Burma and Thailand. Their stories not only illuminate two contrasting yet also complementary migration and economic patterns among the overseas and overland Chinese in upper Burma, against the backdrop of politicoeconomic turmoil. Chang argues that they also provide a window into history at the interstices of Burma itself.

The last subsection of the book focuses on “Ethnicity and the Self.” Ma Thida’s essay begins with her own experiences in Burma; as a medical doctor and as a visiting fellow at Harvard (2009–2010), hers is a most extraordinary life. Thida is the author of two well-known novels, *A Yong Sis Nay Kyar* (The Sunflower) (1999) and *Mhar Tam Let Sint Cam* (Message to Teen) (2011); her work has been translated into Catalan, English, Japanese, and Macedonian, and she is the recipient of a PEN/Freedom to Write award. While she was young, Thida recognized herself as a Shan who lived far away from the Shan State. However, her Shan-Chinese father raised her and her brothers to be “Burmese citizens.” He had two reasons to do so. First, he wanted them to be free of the feeling they were “minorities.” Second, he wanted to hide his Chinese identity, especially in the late 1960s, because of the anti-Chinese riots. Thida’s mother had an even more complicated identity—Chinese, Mon and Peranakan (from Malaysia). Thida says that she didn’t notice these complications until she had grown up. Though she couldn’t choose her ethnic identity, she did have the opportunity to choose her occupation. Thida ended up having two careers. While she started medical school, she also started writing short stories. These two careers grew together throughout the rest of her life. When she was arrested in 1993 and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment, both of her careers stopped. However, as soon as she was released, she rejoined her hospital. In this article, she writes about her medical career under the aegis of an authoritarian regime.

The tenth essay in the book is by Karin Eberhardt, an international development specialist living in Yangon, and is called “A Life in Service of Change.” Eberhardt has focused on ethnicity and conservation issues in **(p.15)** mainland Southeast Asia in her work (Eberhardt 2003, 2009); her essay discusses the life of a single man in the Shan State of Burma. The son of a *duwa* (village area chief), shaman, and opium cultivator, Sara Brang Awng (a pseudonym) grew up to become an educated civil servant, a Christian, and a champion of sustainable agricultural technologies. His life spans the transformation of the northern Shan State world through collisions of cultures, and also through the random chronology of local human events. Eberhardt’s narrative explores how Sara Brang Awng both helped shape and was in turn shaped by seven decades of change in the culturally diverse and economically and politically complex context of northern Shan State. This story of his life is organized around the diverse identities through which Sara Brang Awng operates, including his identity as an agriculturist; as a government servant; as a church-builder; as a “Kachin,” Jinghpaw, or Maran; and as a family man. Above all, Eberhardt argues, Sara Brang Awng is a man of service: whether through the church, the government, or NGOs (non-governmental organizations), his work as an agriculturist and organizer of change is always in the service of the northern Shan State “community.” His narrative illustrates how he deliberately draws from his traditional roots to explore and embrace the possibilities of modernity, turning this apparent temporal rift into his greatest source of strength.

Finally, Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts who has written extensively on politics of ethnicity and everyday life (e.g., Thawnghmung 2008, 2012), weighs in last with an essay about the Karen, an ethnic group of which she herself is a member. Thaunghmung describes the life and experience of Mahn Nyunt Maung or Maung Sin Kyei, a Karen national, who has personally witnessed the emergence and evolution of the Karen armed struggle and survived an incredible span of personal and professional experiences. This delta-born Karen briefly joined the armed resistance led by the Karen National Union (KNU) against the newly independent Burmese government in the early 1950s, but later found himself working within the system by representing a pro-Burmese government Karen political party, which advocated for a more “accommodating” stance toward the Burman-dominated government. He unsuccessfully ran as a candidate for an opposition party during the military-held multiparty elections in 1990, eventually fled to the KNU-controlled areas, and became a refugee after the KNU headquarters was taken over by the government in 1995. Now in his late seventies, he has been granted political asylum in Australia and continues to write, as well as advocating for nonviolent approaches to resolving Burma’s political issues. Thaunghmung argues **(p.16)** that Mahn’s life offers a rare insight and firsthand account/perspective about Burmese history, the evolution of the Karen-Burman relationship, and the Karen armed revolt. Most importantly, his story sheds light on the presence of diverse segments of Karen population in Burma who have experienced the policies and practices of successive Burmese military governments quite differently. These groups hold varying degrees of political awareness and different positions toward the Burmese government, toward Karen armed resistance groups, and toward issues of national integration.

Knowing Burma Locally

As stated earlier, the present volume weaves interdisciplinary interpretations freely; in telling the story of people’s lives, we have found that approaching the notion of a “life” can have different meanings, depending on the portal one looks through in order to see the subject. The ethnographers in this book have a deep and sustained access to their informants, and the lives that they have been able to present are a function of this intimate contact. The historians “know” their subjects over longer periods of time, perhaps, and the political scientists are able to weave their subjects in and out of the politics of Burma that they know so well—certainly no easy task in such a convoluted place. The writers whom we asked to speak into the record here also bear disciplinary baggage of a sort, in that they are less beholden to theories and structures of knowledge, perhaps, and they are freer in some ways to situate lives in parameters and in idioms of their own choosing. Theirs might be the least bounded accounts in the volume. Regardless of the locus of the chapter authors, however, it became clear in the assembling of this book that “getting at a life” was difficult, for social scientists,

for humanists, and even for those in the group who were Burmese, or who called Burma their home. There was no simple remedy for carrying out this kind of research, and the book as a finished product shows this eclecticism in the warp and weft of its pages. We see this collectively as a strength of the volume.

Burma conditioned this project from the very start; this book would have looked very different—even with a similar research regime, and analogous aims—had it been attempted in nearly any other place on earth. To get to information of the sort described above requires a great deal of patience in Burma, and maybe more so here than in most other field sites in the world. Informants are understandably cautious, and there are very good reasons not to spill one's life story to a researcher in this place, whether the listener is known to the subject, or is someone comparatively unfamiliar to the raconteur of a **(p.17)** "life." Burma's recent history has constructed this caution, and has made it a structure that everyone lives in across the width and breadth of the country—a kind of communal roof that everyone understands sits over their heads. History has this function; it instructs and at the same time narrates on its own "caution" as a necessary part of interviews in this place. It is for this reason that it is simply amazing, if we can say this ourselves as editors of the volume, that these Burmese lives came out so clearly in the book—the patience and skill of the questioners was matched only by the quiet dignity of many of the "ordinary" Burmese being interviewed from one end of the country to the other. Working under conditions such as this was assuredly far from easy. The chapters that have emerged from this process are social texts unto themselves that are worth archiving and keeping, in that they tell stories that can be found almost nowhere else in the world under such difficult conditions for collecting.

It is too early to say whether or not the "Burmese lives" explicated in this volume will have to continue to live under the shadow of an authoritarian state. As we stated at the start of our Introduction, it has now been fifty years since the 1962 coup that brought the present regime to power; a half a century is a long time to live under some of the conditions discussed here. But in many ways, there may be an end in sight to this situation, despite false dawns and brief springs. In the wake of the 2010 national election, the quasi-civilian government has launched a series of positive changes that affect the exchange rate and foreign investment rules and give more leeway to the press. They have further opened discussion with the main opposition party—the National League for Democracy—as well as some ethnic armed groups, and hundreds of political prisoners have been released. Just a couple of years ago, the name of the Nobel laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, was still taboo in Burmese media and domestic publications, but following her release soon after the national election, she has been allowed to tour not only inside Burma, but also around Europe, the United States, Thailand, India, South Korea, and Japan. Moreover, many former dissidents abroad have gone back to Burma for visits. The well-known writer and also one of this volume's contributors, Pascal Khoo Thwe, is one of them (The

Irrawaddy 2013). While these encouraging changes are bringing brighter prospects for Burma's future, decades of social, political, and economic problems will not simply disappear. In fact, we continue to read reports about ethnic clashes, sectarian violence, corruption, land grabbing, environmental degradation, unlawful detention, lack of adequate health care and education, and so forth. To explore ordinary lives against the backdrop of decades of repressive rule as well as recent developments is our aim in this volume. We hope to give some of the Burmese who have been "faceless" **(p.18)** to the outside world visages that we can all read, even if we have often had to alter or entirely leave out actual names in order to preserve the privacy of our informants. At the fifty-year anniversary of the coup that brought the present regime to power, we can only hope that this book stands as a small contribution to knowing the people of Burma in ways that are possible under rapidly changing contemporary conditions. In a less Orwellian future, which hopefully is starting to appear as we speak, Burmese authors inside of Burma will write their own follow-up to this volume, describing their own lives and thoughts for all the world to read.

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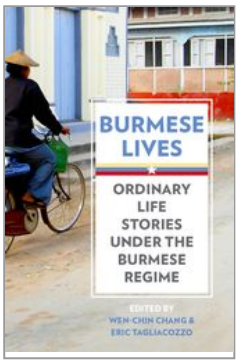
Notes:

(1.) We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Li Yu-Ting (李玉亭), digital cartography specialist at the Center for Geographic Information Science, RCHSS, Academia Sinica, for her help with producing a map for this essay.

(2.) Ethnic categorization in Burma is a difficult matter as the country was isolated for several decades, and many rural areas are still inaccessible for research. There is no agreed number of ethnic groups. Gravers (2007) and South (2008) have explored ethnic politics in Burma from the precolonial period up to now.



Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime
Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo

Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199335039
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.001.0001

The Kayan Padaung Community in Phekhon

Pascal Koo-Thwe

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.003.0003

Abstract and Keywords

Pascal Khoo-Thwe writes about his hometown of Pekhon, in southern Shan state, which is inhabited by the majority members of his ethnic tribe, the Kayan Padaung, mainly known for their “giraffe-necked” women. After 1988, the Burmese army confiscated lands and jungles that his ethnic group had relied on for centuries for survival, and they also built a major army base there. Khoo-Thwe examines the impact of “foreign” invasion and tyranny, combined with globalization on a small group and their environment. He does this through life stories of a few people that he knew well from his childhood. He pays particular attention to their mental conditions as well as their survival techniques, and their ultimate fates.

Keywords: Kayan Padaung, land confiscation, survival techniques

Familial and Communal Disintegration

MY MOTHER and I had been separated from each other for nearly two decades when we were reunited. Despite losing her husband, children, parents, relatives, and ancestral lands, as well as enduring illnesses and harassments and bullying from the military authorities of Burma, she gave me the impression that nothing special had happened in her life. She avoided talking about her life when asked directly.

The trick to making her talk was to let her have an aimless chitchat with her friends first. A mere whisper of certain words could trigger her to launch an impromptu narration on whatever the topic happened to be at the time. Over the

ensuing days and months, she told me what happened to our hometown, our family, our relatives and community since I left it in 1988.

“When I learnt that you had fled, I went to the hut where you were hiding to give you food, clothing, and medicines,” she said with a tone of relieved sorrow. She was referring to the time I fled from Phekhon in southeast Burma after the military coup in September 1988. My involvement in the prodemocracy protests meant that I had to go into hiding to avoid arrest. She came to my hiding place but I had already moved on and headed towards Thailand by the time she got there. “The hut was empty and the floor was littered with blankets, rice grains, and other stuff. I cried and cried. I didn’t know if you had moved on or been captured.”

She found it hard to stay grounded, repeatedly walking around the farm, looking for clues and calling my name. She lingered there until late afternoon, and then trudged towards home in despair. It seemed that the world was falling apart and swallowed up by the dark, cruel Burmese night.

(p.54) On the following day, she visited Aunt Mu Ra, a daughter of Grandpa Nauk, the only younger brother of my paternal grandpa, the old chief La Pen. Mu Ra offered Mother homemade rice wine and listened to her litany of woes while busying herself with household chores. “Where could he be?” my mother asked Mu Ra. Mu Ra told her not to worry, as I would know how to survive, but mother was still worried.

Mu Ra was mother’s housemaid when I was a baby and her best friend. Mother comes from a sub-Karen tribe called the Geba and had a difficult time when she moved into my father’s Padaung household after marrying him (Figure 2.1).

My paternal grandma Mu Wye was not very happy with her, and neither were her daughters Mu Kher and Bibiana. Having said that, it doesn’t mean that my aunts don’t love my mother, just that they do not know how to show their affection to her, as they were not taught or encouraged to show affection at all. Mu Ra, who didn’t have to follow the rules and etiquettes, was more sympathetic to my mother’s predicament and came to help her on her own accord. As a result, my mother always goes to her when she needs comfort and assurance.

The death of my father in 1995 marked the beginning of the disintegration of our family life. Misery and loneliness hit mother hard. To make matters worse, the authorities confiscated our main paddy fields for “development projects,” without compensation. She protested, but it was to no avail. The lands were sold to former soldiers of the opium warlord Khun Sa, who signed ceasefire agreements with the army. There is no better way to destroy a tribal community than confiscating its ancestral land, as we depend on these farms for rice as our staple food.

The arrival of new settlers was also to have disastrous impacts on the environment. Trees and shrubs which had been preserved for at least hundreds of years were cut down and cleared to make room for new farmlands and homes. Wild plants and vegetables which grew annually didn't have the chance to grow to maturity, as they were devoured to extinction.

Without a fatherly figure, our family became vulnerable to doubt from within and temptation from without, but mother did her best to fend for the family with help from our relatives. Had I been at home, I would have taken the responsibilities of my father. As I was not, number two child, Peter, was to take my place, but he decided to start his own family. Then the responsibility fell on the third child, Patrick. He was only interested in socializing and drinking, and he also decided to get married.

Without their older brothers at home, the five daughters in the middle acutely felt the need for male protection. The two oldest girls who had entered **(p.55)** puberty started to spend most of their time with their friends and flirted with boys. Pia, educationally the most promising and the oldest girl, was sent away to a town in far-off eastern Shan State where her uncle Fr. Anthony was a parish priest. Pia studied hard and she passed her matriculation examinations with flying colors. Her uncle wanted her to attend university for further **(p.56)** studies. But she had other ideas. She told her uncle that she was going home to be with her sweetheart and marry him. Her uncle scolded her and cajoled her, but failed to convince her all the same. Padaung women hate pressure put on them by the society and they will do anything to oppose it and do the opposite of what they are told. The sister below her, Piarina, was also sent away with the same result. Sometimes the brothers and sisters quarreled among themselves. The younger girls didn't like their sisters-in-law, and they felt they were robbed of their brothers, who should be looking after them. I received several letters of complaints from

FIGURE 2.1 My father, Louis Hlabo, and my mother, Ester Than; a photo taken around 1965 when they were engaged.

my sisters, expressing their anger and the sorrow of losing our father. If possible they wanted me to come home and look after the family. The best thing I could do was to assure them that none of them had been ignored or forgotten by me. But the reality of living so close to each other in a community based on tyranny and poverty was too much for them to bear. They were feeling confused and frightened by not only the threats from without but also the loosening family ties from within.

Although father's death left mother with a great void emotionally, it offered her a chance to rebuild a new life for herself and her family. First, she wanted to revisit her birthplace Leiktho. But it was to take her more than ten years before she could do it. For one thing, she had no time to travel, not to mention the difficulties in getting enough money to travel there, although it is less than a hundred miles from Phekhon. Vehicles traveling on the road to Leiktho were often attacked by both the Karen rebels and the Burmese army. There would be nothing she could look forward to once she got there, as most of her brothers and sisters are now living in other places. But she still remembered the village, the day she left for Loikaw for the first time to study at a secondary school run by Italian nuns, the day she met her future husband, and so forth. Most of all, she remembered the deep jungles around her village teeming with animals and plants, a sort of Shangri-la between the hot central Burma plain and the plateaus of Shan States.

By the mid-1990s, weddings as well as funerals in Phekhon lost much of their traditional significance, partly because of the influences from outside and partly because of the collapsing social structure. People still went to the church to get married or bury their dead. But the traditional processes which gel the community together disintegrated gradually or were omitted in an effort to cut corners. For example, guests were not invited with cheroots and candles anymore, but with cheap paper cards to save money. Brides to be were no longer ceremonially invited to the groom's house on the eve of the wedding feast because of restrictions on the movements of guests. Citing security **(p.57)** reasons, the authorities decreed that anyone wanting to spend the night at his or her relatives' or friends' houses must ask permission from the local authorities, on the pain of imprisonment or fines. Wakes tended to last only a day or two to save money, and corpses deteriorate faster now due to the rising temperature over the years. Traditional clothing including the tunics were still worn, mostly on important occasions with their design and colors revamped to a more popular mode, but not necessary pleasing to the eyes. The authorities also tried to eradicate the ethnic languages by making native speakers feel ashamed when they uttered their mother tongues.

Meanwhile, illegal gambling continued to flourish with the blessing of local authorities. People were accumulating more and more debts and losing their properties to gambling syndicates owned by friends of the authorities and opium

warlords. When the people had nothing to bet with, they begged, robbed and killed to get money. The police and the army who are supposed to keep law and order and protect the lives of people became unofficial agents of big criminal activities. To the people of Phekhon, the police station and the army bases symbolize the colonization of their homeland by the Burman majority.

The rise of crime also affected innocent people who gained nothing from the process. By the mid-1990s, murder rates soared to unimaginable levels; there were many unreported cases of rape, mostly committed by Burmese soldiers, and there was even a “hit-and-run” incident committed by the wife of an army commander killing a toddler that was hastily and effectively hushed up. The Burmese authorities are very good at capturing and punishing criminals and political activists alike, but they are never keen on or good at preventing crimes. In Phekhon, people believe that the authorities and police deliberately let criminals loose to commit crime and kill people as a way of frightening and intimidating the local population. One policeman with whom I attended school told me that policemen were promoted in accordance with the numbers of cases they handled, and they deliberately “bred” criminals to create crimes in quiet places like Phekhon.

Luckily, the Church was still a place of comfort and guidance for the believers, despite its many weaknesses. My old teacher Fr. Augustine Tan was still in charge of looking after the spiritual and physical needs of his flock. He took the young children of our family, especially Nana after the death of our father, under his wing. He visited our house and shared meals with the family. As a humane priest, Tan believed that giving spiritual comfort to his flock in time of trouble and sorrow is more important than bombarding them with dogmas, half-baked ideas, guilt, and shame, and that understanding human weaknesses and forgiving sinners with loving kindness is the most important law.

(p.58) The number of parishioners in our Taunggyi Diocese, especially in Phekhon Parish, increased through rapid birth rate and conversions of some peripheral tribesmen, and Phekhon was promoted to a diocese status. But the remaining connection with the Mother Church in Rome in the form of the Italian priests’ presence was also decreasing as one after another died of old age and no new priests were allowed to be sent to Burma after 1962. First, Fr. Carbosera, a scholar priest who taught us Latin in the seminary died in the early 1980s, and our parish’s love of Latin died with him. He was followed by Brother Felice Tantardini, who built most of our churches, boarding schools, clinics, parish houses, hospitals, seminaries, orphanages, convents, and much more.

The Catholic Church in Burma as a whole went through an imperceptible turbulent period beneath its placid appearance. Nepotism was rife within the Church. Due to lack of opportunities elsewhere in the country, the seminaries attracted all sort of bright young Catholic boys, many of whose parents regarded

the institutions as merely excellent unnationalized missionary schools. There were reports of priests and bishops favoring their relatives when it came to allocating materials and finance, but most people dared not point this out for fear of being branded blasphemers and ostracized. Nevertheless, as is the case with other organizations in Burma, criticism of the Church was also tinged with jealousy and self-interest, and it was difficult to gauge the truth from the rumors. But what was harder for the Church to deny was the lack of discipline among its young priests, who were unable to resist the temptations of the flesh due to their lack of worldly experiences and overprotection. Whatever the truth, embarrassing incidents woke the Church up and gradually forced its rank and file to adopt new measures to tackle the problems.

The climate became more and more inconsistent and extreme, just as my paternal grandma Mu Wye had predicted before I left Burma. Annual monsoon rains used to come to Phekhon in a gradual process. By the mid-1990s, the arrival of rains could not be predicted or even guessed. They came too early or never arrived during the season. But when they did come, it was at a time when they were not needed, such as when crops were ready to be harvested. Global warming was also having some disastrous impacts on Burma. The matter was made worse by mindless destruction of jungles that allowed the torrential rains to eat away the topsoil at a rate never seen before.

The unholy alliance of globalization and tyranny was also to play a crucial part in the swift erosion and deterioration of Burmese social structure. More young people fled to Thailand, working as housemaids, prostitutes, **(p.59)** construction workers, and other jobs the Thais don’t like to do. Even in “remote” Phekhon, young and old people alike started to leave the town for places as far and alien as Malaysia, Dubai, and Kuwait, and some of them fell into the hands of human traffickers. Those who didn’t want to leave the country or had no money to do so had to face the prospect of living under tyranny and deprivation on a daily basis. Having imposed themselves physically, the Burmese army commanders kept on stoking the fire of violence among the tribesmen by supplying them with promises of power and wealth.

The people who suffered most from the changing world, without even having the skills to describe their condition, were those with no education and no knowledge to take care of themselves, such as my Aunt Bibiana’s family. Her children had been “ungovernable,” and to make matters worse, her farmland near ours was confiscated by the army also. Bibiana herself never managed to shake off her childish behavior and mentality. Her mental capacity is no better than that of a precocious child who only knows what she wants, thinking that people would look after her forever as the daughter of a chief. Sometimes she tried to behave responsibly, but by then it was too late to mend her ways. Her

life floated between grinding poverty and the inability to control her childish emotions.

The main difference between mother and Bibiana is the former's determination to face the world as much as she could, while her sister-in-law's lack of skills in dealing with her emotions and daily activities caught her up in a time warp. In fact, the two of them are not very different on the surface—very good-hearted, although judgmental sometimes, truculent, fiery, and proud always. But my mother, being in the disadvantaged position of a stranger among her cousins, came to learn to control her emotions and manage her situation. Aunt Bibiana didn't have to and never did.

Bibiana was unable to learn lessons from the past and was incapable of understanding the seriousness of life and death, despite repeated tragedies, warnings, and assistance from relatives and neighbors. But her family was never abandoned by our family or the community—one of the most admirable qualities they have despite their less than humble existence. Bibiana is too proud to let other people adopt her children and there is no law to protect children. One of her sons Bartholomew fled his home to join the Burmese army and nothing was ever heard from him again.

Bibiana's older sister, Mu Kher, is everything her sister is not. Her husband is a handsome, hardworking man by the name of U Nu who was a weight-lifting champion. Before he married his wife he built a big house, as big as ours, in order to secure her hand. They had lovely children, mostly daughters, **(p.60)** who were very industrious although not very bright. Strangely, they all had marital problems after they married.

The lack of sympathy and understanding from the Church and the community, which were becoming more and more judgmental towards the misfortunes and social problems of the faithful, was making life harder for women who had to pick up the pieces. The traditional role for tribal women as the keepers of the soul of the household became more and more crucial, and without it our community would have been in deeper danger of losing our identity all together. While their men and sons were increasingly disempowered by the political system and economical situation, Padaung women kept the community together with their endless toils and unconditional love for their families. But some women became thoroughly disillusioned and sought their way out of the tribal world any way they could.

My youngest paternal aunt, Santee, married a Danu tribesman by the name of Maung Kyaw from the nearby town of Kalaw. He was loud mouthed and arrogant. The couple eloped and no one made a fuss or talked about it. The subject was not only painful to the grandparents but also an embarrassment. Santee talked to me in Padaung when she was in a good mood and in Burmese

when she was angry. Somehow, she found the Burmese language very useful to express her anger and frustration. As my grandparents suspected he would, Maung Kyaw abandoned Santee and eloped with a younger woman from his own race and religion some years later, leaving Santee penniless and helpless with a bunch of grown-up children. She returned to the Church and her children followed, but they never took up her language again as they could feel neither Padaung nor Danu, just an identity called Burmese, meaningless as they do not believe themselves to be citizens of Burma.

Mother's brothers and sisters fared slightly better. Auntie Clara, who tried to commit suicide when she found out about her husband's infidelity, led a much more stable life. Her children succeeded in their studies and became fairly successful professionals. But none of them bothered to learn their parents' mother tongue and they all became Burmese speakers. For them and their parents, being successful in life is more important than keeping the traditions of their ancestors. They do not feel particularly happy with their lots as they are not accepted as real Burmese and their tribal cousins regard them as Burmanized tribesmen. For one thing, my Geba relatives have fewer social and political problems due to their quiet nature and their chronic desire to avoid problems at all costs. Geographically, the majority of Geba people live closer to central Burma and it is necessary to be flexible mentally if they are to survive as a tribe.

(p.61) The fortunes of our immediate neighbors also varied. Margarita, the daughter of Mu Tha, the ex-copper angel who came to England as a freak with the Bertram Mills Circus in the 1930s, was also left high and dry by her second husband, who left her for his former wife and children. She took to drink and eventually died from it, as had her first husband, Alesio. The money and possessions her mother accumulated from a business she set up with the fees she earned from the circus were almost gone and their big house was devoid of life and material wealth, except for some old photographs from happier days when Mu Tha went to England with her friends.

Margarita was not a particularly religious person but a very sociable one. Alesio, a trained veterinarian like my father, was a tall, handsome, gentle, and funny man. He loved Margarita with all his heart and soul, and even gave up his career as a veterinarian in Loikaw to live with her in Phekhon. After the birth of their second child, her love for him cooled to the point of indifference. She just let him drink himself to death.

When her second husband came to seduce her in the 1970s, Alesio was still alive. Margarita thought that she had found her true love. He openly taunted Alesio and courted his wife in his presence. The stranger gave her excitement that she could not get from her Catholic husband. She stopped attending the church when the "new" man wooed her. He told her that he had a wife and

children but she didn’t care. He told her that he would divorce his wife. She didn’t worry. But when she bore him a couple of children, she started to notice his coldness towards her. He told her that he was going back to his old wife and continued to ask her for more and more money, and she gave it to him with the hope that he would stay with her. She herself started to believe that her suffering was due to her being nasty to her first husband, but she was too proud to repent or confess to the priests. When her second husband told her that he was indeed going to leave her, she just gave him a sneering look.

The family of catechist Patrick fared far better than any other in our neighborhood. His children were well behaved, studious, and pious. But Patrick could not feed his family on his church stipend and so he went to work in Malaysia and died from exhaustion. Nevertheless, he left a legacy of normality after his death; his children are leading harmonious lives with their modest incomes even though their ancestral farmland was confiscated alongside ours. Their neighbor the gambler became richer, but his children faced severe social problems and often had brushes with the law.

Year after year, the people of Phekhon continued to feel the deterioration of life imperceptibly. It could be felt in the rising crime rates, domestic disturbances, the increasing number of illnesses and deaths and the flooding of the **(p.62)** local market with fake “western” medicines and cheap synthetic goods from China. More and more people were dying young from illnesses never heard of before, including HIV/AIDS, although no one dared to admit it for fear of social ostracism.

Those who dared restarted opium poppy cultivation with the consent of the army in order to survive. As usual, the profits went to big dealers, and army officers also brought in more cheap goods, chainsaws, pesticides, and diseases from mainland Burma and neighboring countries. The increasing consumption of cheap Chinese chemical beer undermined the tradition of rice wine as the social drink. People started to drink to get drunk quickly, rather than to enjoy alcohol. The introduction of new drinks and drugs was to have a very disastrous impact on youth who were used to only traditional entertainments. Those hardworking and intelligent enough were encouraged to leave their community and work for drug barons on the Sino-Burmese border or for other employers of ill repute.

In the late 1990s, the army confiscated more lands to build a new base for the protection of the new capital Naypyidaw. A railway line was constructed using forced labor. The soldiers brought along their wives and children, who were forced to live on a meager army salary in a place where they neither felt comfortable nor welcomed. From their political and military vantage point, they demanded, stole, and robbed from local people for their meals, and they had no desire to work. The arrival of hardworking immigrants and daylight robberies by authorities left the people with no chance to survive in the traditional way. Their

ancestral farms and homes were bought on the cheap by the migrants with ill-gotten money, and by and by they were pushed out of the town. One Chinese managed to buy almost half of the land and he only grew roses as a front for his illicit activities. There was no law to stop aggressive newcomers who had all the money, guns, and support from government officials. The conditions in some parts of Burma were even worse than they were in Phekhon.

The impacts of the destruction of forests and jungles combined with global warming could be seen by the continuing increase in the number of insects and pests each year. The situation was made worse by the introduction of powerful, cheap Chinese air guns with which people could decimate the indigenous animal and bird populations which had always kept the number of pests to a minimum. At the same time, the government-affiliated companies supplied farmers with powerful pesticides which are outlawed in other countries, killing more animals and fish and causing more health problems for the local population.

(p.63) Children found it more difficult to find natural playgrounds in the jungles, as most of these places had been mined by the army. The hills to the west of the town where I used to play as a child were cordoned off. Trees and bamboo groves around the army base were cut down so as to give no cover for the attacking forces. In the end, it became a habit for young people to congregate around teashops and bars in the town center, looking for fights and trouble.

Not only were native plants and animals hunted to the point of extinction, domestic animals such as cows and buffaloes lost traditional pasturelands and their owners were forced to sell them. Mother sold most of our family’s cattle. “First, my children and husband left home. And the animals were also forced out,” she told me. “When I came home, I felt this emptiness and sorrow when I saw the unoccupied rooms and pens. And when I went into the farms and the jungles, the sounds of animals and birds could not be heard anymore.” The lake, which was always a source of freshwater, became polluted, resulting in a greater decrease in fish population each year. In order to increase fish production, some fish farmers introduced new species of carnivorous carp to their farms situated along the shore of the lake. Some of these carp escaped into the lake and dominated and threatened the survival of the indigenous species.

People were so desperate that witchcraft and astrology became popular again, reviving the careers of traditional shamans in various forms. Their main skills were predicting the results of illegal lottery numbers, recommending auspicious moments to carry out activities, and making amulets to protect against diseases and enemies. A childhood friend of mine who could not pay his debts and committed various crimes, fled from his debtors and enemies who wanted to kill him and took refuge in a cave as a hermit. Then it turned out that he has a knack for predicting winning lottery numbers, and people, including his enemies, came

to him for advice and winning formulas. But they told him not to leave monkhood or they would have to kill him. He accepted their advice. Overall, the Catholic faithful continued to keep their faith and built a bigger shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary. First, only the faithful came to the shrine. Sometimes, they held processions carrying the statue of the Virgin, singing hymns, reciting rosaries, while their Buddhist neighbors watched with curiosity. Then apparitions and miracles were reported and pilgrims from other towns, including Buddhists, flocked to the shrine. It is still hard to say whether the Madonna did really appear there or not, but the desperate situation the people were in must have made them pray so fervently that their sufferings were relieved by the power of prayer. Today, a major feast is held every year in December, attracting pilgrims from far and wide.

(p.64) The Fight Back Begins

In recent years there were some rebuilding efforts in Phekhon, though they were small and never publicized. They resulted from people’s own instinct to survive rather than conscientious political rallying. These activities were mostly on social and educational levels, which the local authorities find difficult to interfere with as these projects also benefit their families and children, since the central military government did nothing to help them. Instead of demanding political rights and democracy, people quietly rebuilt their strength in order to help themselves. They concentrated their efforts on education and social activities.

My uncle Francis who is a son of Grandpa Nauk set up a private class where he gave tuition-free classes to the orphans and disadvantaged children, using the proceeds he earned from teaching the children of well-to-do families. His sister Mu Ra was the main supporter of his enterprise, knowing how painful it is not to have a proper education, although she became quite rich through her industry and diligence. She also built up her reputation as a reliable and no-nonsense businesswoman. She always helped mother whenever the latter was in trouble. She lent her money but always expected her to pay it back in full. She never lent money to anyone who could not pay her back.

Even when people did not get involved in politics, the authorities would not let them alone. They were dragged out of their daily struggles into many more unnecessary struggles in the form of unpaid work for projects such as the beautification of the town and other chores which should have been done by civil servants. They were forced to clean areas around the government offices and army bases while the people who were paid to do these jobs watched them with folded hands. People were also told to build concrete walls around their houses for no apparent reason except to make them buy sand from quarries which were seized and monopolized by the army. Sometimes, the cost of building the walls

was greater than the value of the houses they surrounded. The walls made the town look like a big cemetery.

When the authorities confiscated our second ancestral farmland, it was more than mother could tolerate. It eventually became clear that only the lands belonging to widows were being grabbed. My mother joined forces with other widows and demanded the return of their lands. But the authorities were not impressed by their pleas. The lands were split into small plots and sold to the highest bidders and the profits were shared between authority members and army commanders.

(p.65) The widows went to the office of the township chairman. First, he allowed the women to talk to him as if he was doing them a favor and warned them not to demand anything as he was “doing his best” for them. “He behaved as if we should kowtow to him for stabbing us in the back,” mother commented. The women pointed out to him that far from doing anything for them, he was deliberately avoiding the subject. A heated argument followed. The man straightened his back to emphasize his military authority and told the women to get out of his office at once.

“No,” said one woman firmly, which surprised the man a bit. “It is you who should get out of this town. You don’t belong here. You came to our place, killed our children and husbands, rape our daughters, and now want to take our lands away from us.”

“I came here as a military commander by the order from the top,” the man asserted. “I am doing my national duty. I am upholding the Union of Myanmar and stopping it from disintegrating. I have my work to do. You get out of my office at once!”

“What is upholding the Union of Myanmar to do with land grabbing?” asked another woman. “You are just robbing us in the name of the Union of Myanmar. You are just doing it for yourself. There are many unclaimed lands in Phekhon and you came to take only the lands of the widows. You think that you can do anything with us, isn’t it?”

“Yes! I can bloody do what I like here. I am the chairman of this township. What can you do? Go and tell anyone you like. Tell the UN, tell the fucking ILO. I don’t care!”

“We will. We will go to Taunggyi and report your practices to your regional commander. And if he doesn’t sort the problem out for us we will go all the way to the top.”

“You do that. I don’t care,” said the man as he stormed out of the office. The women secretly consulted a sympathetic civil servant who gave them directions

on how to go about lodging their complaints. They decided to go to Taunggyi, to the office of the Eastern Command's commander. They scrimped and saved to afford the bus fares and expenses for the duration of their stay in Taunggyi. Most people in Phekhon thought they were mad to confront the omnipresent power of the military authorities. But the women did not care. They were ready to go to prison or give up their lives for their children. Pro-government officials and other people jeered at them, intimidated them, and spread false rumors about them.

It took them many days to reach the army commander to lodge their complaints and as it turned out, the man was quite a reasonable officer who **(p.66)** listened to their complaints with sharp ears and keen eyes. He knew that the women had all the advantages under the changing political climate at a time when the ILO was discussing the possibility of taking actions against the junta for forced labor and land seizures. Without sounding harsh he gave them the assurance that he would do his best to address their concerns.

The women returned to Phekhon with pride and more determination. But the lands were not returned to them as promised by the commander. They wrote to the commander again to explain their predicaments. Now the local authority chairman changed his tone and told them that it was too late to recover their lands as they were sold to private owners in order to raise funds for public buildings. The man in the end negotiated an agreement with the women to the effect that he would return the lands to them with the proviso that they would buy them back at the going rate. Mother and her friends reluctantly accepted his offer and bought their own lands back with the money they borrowed from friends. He was politely told by his superior to submit his resignation letter and be transferred back to central Burma.

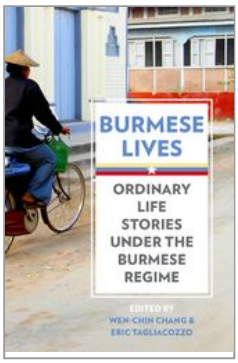
The whole episode made the authorities realize that although they could occupy the lands of ethnic nationalities with the help of their military might and divide-and-rule tactics, they would not be able to win support to build a truly inclusive Burma. The generals know that they are regarded as aliens in their own country because they treat their people like slaves and enemies.

The death of her husband and becoming a grandmother seemed to help Mother take control of her life and maintain the expanding family. She seemed to adopt the attitude that Burmese politics can go to hell or anywhere it wants to, as long as it leaves her family alone. This attitude is common among Burmese women who are fed up with the male-dominated politics and it serves as an emotional barrier against the onslaughts of political impacts on their families. At the same time, some women actively seek power and wealth through their men by controlling them behind the scenes. They also make every effort to undermine and eliminate other women who try to help humanity at every turn. In Burma, oppressions are carried out by powerful men, but many cruel decisions are

prompted by the women behind them. Mother said she came under the attack of wives of the officials more often than she did of their husbands. Her allegations against the women sound very simple and one sided, but I always find them very complicated as some of the women are her “friends.”

Hearing her accounts is like listening to traditional blues—they bring out different nuances every time she tells me something. In fact, she had a beautiful singing voice as a young woman and used to sing to us when we were young. **(p. 67)** She gradually sang less and less as she started to have more and more children and woes. Like a tired old mother scarlet minivet, she sang less as she grew older, but she never lost her musicality.

Mother also reminded me not to forget my “aunties,” who were in a less fortunate position than she was—which I was very happy to hear more than anything else, as her words indicated that there is still a strong bond between her and other women, a bond which gels our community, as it has from time immemorial.



Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime
Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo

Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199335039
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.001.0001

Introduction

Burmese Lives in a Divided State[1]

Wen-Chin Chang
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ask most people about Burma (or Myanmar) and the platitudes come thick and fast. On the one hand, there is the vision of Burma as a more or less timeless place—the classical temples of Pagan and Pegu; women and men walking dusty streets in dignified, faded *longyis* (sarongs); shrouded tropical mountains draped in fog. If any place has been left behind by modernity in Southeast Asia, the argument goes, this place is surely it. On the other hand, Burma has also been recognized worldwide as the stepchild of one of the world's most notorious authoritarian regimes, one which took power almost exactly fifty years ago (in 1962), and which only recently—in the past two years—has been loosening its grip on control of the country. An idyllic past and a straightjacketed near present; this is the standard narrative of this place. Remarkably absent from both visions are actual conceptions of living and breathing people—the denizens of the country who number some fifty million souls by last count, wedged in between the foothills of the Himalayas and the warm waters of the Andaman Sea. Yet it is not an accident that Burmese people are so difficult to insert into the narrative of their own country.

Characterizing Burma, a young nation which gained political independence in 1948 in the wake of British colonization, is in fact not an easy task. It is one of the most diverse societies in Southeast Asia, if not the world, in terms of its ethnic composition. The SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) government classified "135 national races" in 1988, including eight major **(p.4)** groups: the Burman, the Mon, the Shan, the Karen, the Kayah (Karenni), the Kachin, the Chin, and the Rakhine (Arakanese).[2] In addition, coexistence of

multiple political entities inside of Burmese territory has been a social reality since ancient times. Even during the colonial period, a time of territorial consolidation, those located in remote highland areas were able to retain a large measure of political autonomy (Smith 1993: 27–39). However, this multiethnic landscape also has a long history of popular resistance against colonial rule, and against post-independence regimes. Since independence, Burma has been ruled by a short-lived parliamentary government (1948 to 1962), a repressive military junta based on a socialist ideology (1962 to 1988), another military regime that adopted a more market-orientated policy (1988 to 2010), and then a quasi-parliamentary government (still dominated by the state military) starting in 2011, which resulted from a national election in November 2010. These changes have intersected with incessant ethnic conflicts and at times civilian protests (especially since 1988). Despite the government's initiation of ceasefires with more than twenty armed ethnic groups since 1989 (Gravers 2007 13–21; Smith 2001: 34), Burma has remained divided. The resettling of Burmans in areas of ethnic minorities, the destruction of historical ethnic sites and buildings, and the enforcement of Burmanization in education have especially incited local resentments.

Unfortunately, up until the past two years, whenever Burma becomes the focus of the international media, news reports are essentially negative. Political entanglements, human rights violations, drug trafficking, widespread corruption and poverty, and natural disasters are usually on the docket. While these reports project multiple problems, a more nuanced picture of the sociocultural dimension of Burma's ethnic diversity, of the people's everyday lives, of their agency and limitations is, however, sorely lacking. Even in academia, publications have largely concentrated on the ruling regime or general studies of Burmese society, which tend to center on social structure, usually derived from macrodata and statistics. Almost all Burmese in these works are essentially faceless abstractions. Therefore, research into the life stories of Burmese of many different ethnicities, who engage in different occupations and who are of different ages and genders, has particular significance that would help reveal the multiplicities of Burma's contemporary social history. There is an **(p.5)** urgent need to see modern Burma through its people, in other words, not just through the country's problems or political suffering.

A Personal Narrative Approach

Based on the aforesaid considerations, this edited volume aims to explore the lives of ordinary Burmese from several ethnic groups with an individual-centered approach, grounded on personal narrative accounts. Personal narratives are the firsthand data for social scientists to investigate the lives of their research subjects. By their nature, narrated stories reflect the subject, and enhance useful data with unique self-reflection, commentary, and cultural context (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 54, 58). However, as Waterson has pointed out, publications based on this research practice are relatively few (2007: 4). With

regard to the study of Burma, adoption of this methodology is even rarer. One possible reason for this may relate to difficulties in conducting fieldwork and building up long-term relationships with local people in Burma. Without a solid basis of mutual trust, it is not easy to collect in-depth personal accounts. Despite this scarcity of academic publications, there have been a number of nonacademic works that integrate personal narratives in various genres, including autobiographies (e.g., Elliott 1999; Khoo Thwe 2002; Nang Zing La 2006; Sao Sanda 2008; Sargent 1994; Zoya Phan 2009), biographies (e.g., Kyaw Ma Ma Lay 2008), and short stories and reports (e.g., Lemere and West, comp. and eds. 2011; Mya Than Tint 1996; Thornton 2006). These writings not only delineate concrete lives of protagonists, but also serve as testimonies to the social injustices and adversities these protagonists have experienced, as well as to their constant courage, pain, and frustration in dealing with them.

To obtain a penetrating life story that reflects the narrator's existential connections with the external world, one needs to look beyond mere description of events, and dig into the narrator's subjectivity and revelation of intersubjectivity. This requires examining the narrator's lived experiences and probing the intricate interactions between the narrator and the different social contexts and situations in which the narrator finds his- or herself. Many social scientists have explored the themes of subject, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity and have proposed a range of theoretical interpretations of these processes (e.g., Belsey 1991; Biehl, Good and Kleinman, eds. 2007; Butler 1990; 1991, 1997; Foucault 1990, 1998, 2000; Hall 2004; Weedon 1987). It is beyond our scope to give a thorough analysis of this dialectic here, but suffice it to say, one's subject is never in a static state. In contrast it is "the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, **(p.6)** capable of change" (Belsey 1991: 597). Subjectivity is characterized by paradoxical and sometimes bewildering complexities, and simultaneously embodies agency and liminality (Ellis and Flaherty 1992: 5). Only by grasping this subtle and intricate realm of subjectivity can one obtain insight into a narrator's inner self, and also avoid a superficial understanding of the narrator's society by characterizing it as a coherent and timeless culture (Abu-Lughod 1993: 14).

Several scholars have pointed out that personal narratives project the narrator's positionality in relation to diverse situations, and embrace a subjective truthfulness voiced by the narrator (Hart 1992: 634; Marcus and Fischer 1986: 54, 58; Sewell 1992: 482; Steinmetz 1992: 496). On the one hand, narratives disclose an epistemological concern: how the narrator knows about him/herself in relation to others and the society he/she is affiliated with. On the other hand, narratives illustrate an ontological interest: what the nature of the narrator's existence may be in and of itself. "[O]ne's subjectivity is the intersection of [these] two lines of philosophical inquiries," Hall advocates (2004: 4); a good narrative account that endeavors to take on these two aspects therefore sheds

light on the narrator's subjectivity. Though focusing on a range of issues, the authors in this volume commonly touch upon their informants' survival strategies in everyday life, their inner feelings, ethnic identities, multiple positions, traditional roots, their faith and fate, and how these different threads of interest cut across (or interplay) with one another. Through these stories, we see movement of lives as well as that of Burmese society.

Alongside this movement, the authors also unveil the temporal consciousness of their protagonists—how they comprehend their shifting positionality, and the ongoing shaping and reshaping of their subjectivities in interaction with external contexts. Ochs and Capps (1996) maintain that in autobiographical narration, the speaker presents life experiences meaningfully through sequentially connecting past, present, and imagined worlds. Similarly, Rapport and Dawson see narrative as mediating the teller's journey through time, giving human beings agency to present their own stories according to their own experiences (1998: 28, 29). Waterson, too, remarks on the intersection of history with personal experience and the value of storytelling in the building of historical consciousness. Accordingly, while relating one's lived experiences, one also comments on one's participation in the continuing flow of history-making. This sense of historical consciousness among ethnic minorities deserves attention, especially for the sake of obtaining alternative voices. By including stories of different ethnic groups (Figure I.1), we intend to counter a state-centric, essentially Burman history of Burma. **(p.7)**

(p.8) Given widespread ethnic diversity in Burma, it is, however, impossible to include stories of all ethnic groups in one edited volume. Even those selected ethnic groups only comprise one or two stories each. By presenting in-depth life stories on different topics from different ethnic communities, we hope to make a link from the particular to the general even if these narratives are not all-inclusive of Burma's ethnic spectrum. The oral historian Alessandro Portelli has explicated this link, when he says:

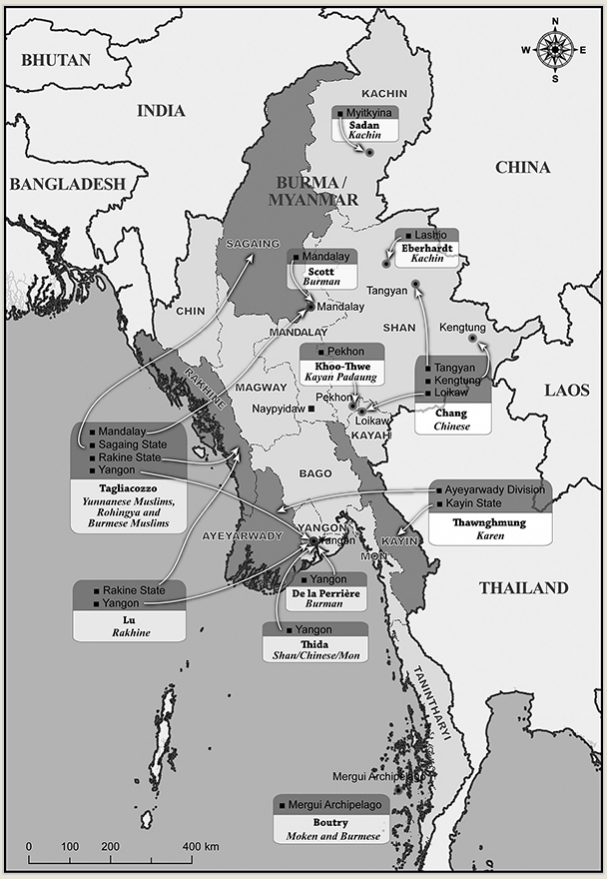

FIGURE I.1 Map of Geography/Ethnicity of Essays.

> The task and theme of oral history—an art dealing with the individual in social and historical context—is to explore this distance and this bond [between the personal experience and history], to search out the memories in the private, enclosed space of houses and kitchens and—without violating that space, without cracking the uniqueness of each spore with an arrogant need to scrutinize, to know, and to classify—to connect them with "history" and in turn force history to listen to them. (1997: viii)

In line with Portelli, Sadan in Chapter 1 of this volume states: "[T]he individual stories of people who form the social bedrock of Burma can lead us toward more subtle and more nuanced understandings of Burma's social and political environment." As human networking extends to different domains of relationships that interweave with sociocultural norms and values as well as frictions, by looking into individual stories in a serious way we hope to grasp the functioning of a specific society.

The authors of this volume write about stories of their long-term informants, close friends, family members, or even themselves to bring out a wide range of issues that address personal ambitions and despair, familial support and tensions, ethnic roots and conflict, gender politics, religious beliefs and practice, and more. These issues highlight the complexities of Burmese society, the

country’s oppression under the military regime until very recently, and especially the rapid changes and sociopolitical problems of the last twenty to thirty years. The authors take us into the inner worlds of their protagonists and the different routes they chose to pursue their goals—engagements in trade, politics, agriculture, religious faith, medical careers, and so on—and their struggles during the process. Human beings forever live in relationships. None of these protagonists’ pursuits are undertaken purely as a matter of self-interest; rather they are based on familial, communal/ethnic, and even national considerations, as well as the predelictions of the self.

(p.9) Telling Stories of the Self in the Burmese Context

The authors of this volume are primarily academics, from different parts of the world (Asia, Europe, and the United States) and working in different fields and disciplines. Three of the participants are from Burma: Ardeth Thawnghmung is an academic, and Ma Thida and Pascal Khoo-Thwe are writers, who are also involved in Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) work. All of the authors either have had long-term research experience or remarkable life experiences in Burma. The examination of the stories makes use of multidisciplinary interpretations that draw on anthropology, history, literature, ethnomusicology, and political science. While relating their stories, the informants also articulate or question their identity(ies) against the backdrop of the processes and changes they have undergone under the repressive Burmese state. Each essay concentrates on one single person or a few people from a specific ethnic group on the themes of migration, gender, economy, and politics or through sociocultural issues. The stories that follow move across a range of Burmese who have lived through different circumstances under contemporary Burmese regimes from the Second World War up to the present. They deal with members of several of the major ethnic communities, as well as with a much marginalized group—the Moken (or sea people). By recording voices of the ordinary and peripheral people, these stories project the many multiple realities of contemporary Burma.

The first subsection of the book looks into “the specter of hardship.” Mandy Sadan of the School of Oriental and African Studies, the University of London, begins the volume with an essay entitled “The Extra-ordinariness of Burmese Lives.” Sadan is an expert on upland Burma, and particularly on the Kachin of Kachin State (Sadan 2007, 2013). She argues that while models of how Kachin society and history “should” be understood are relatively numerous (and in fact predate even the seminal work of Edmund Leach, who made these models famous), the voices of local women are entirely absent from these constructions. Women only appear, if they appear at all, as subordinate or objectified figures in static representations of male-focused Jinghpaw kinship systems. The historical agency of the female gender, she argues, is made nearly invisible. Her paper focuses on the life story of Maran Ja Bang, a Kachin woman born in Shan State (and also Sadan’s mother-in-law) who later lived in Myitkyina, the capital of

Kachin State. The author's narrative attempts to outline the twists and turns of her family's fortunes over four decades in order to raise questions about the invisibility of women in the history of the Kachin region of Burma, and the implications of this for our understanding **(p.10)** of recent history. This life story also discusses in parallel the life of the protagonist's husband, Sadan Awng Tu—pointing to the ways in which gendered economies have influenced the everyday lives of those caught up in one of Burma's longest conflicts.

The second essay in the volume is by Pascal Khoo-Thwe, a former senior producer at the Democratic Voice of Burma in Oslo, Norway. Khoo-Thwe is perhaps best known for his novel, *From The Land of Green Ghosts* (2002), which became an international sensation after its publication, with write-ups in the *New York Times* and other prestigious literary periodicals. The author writes about his hometown of Pekhon, in southern Shan State, which is inhabited by the majority members of his ethnic tribe, the Kayan Padaung, mainly known for their "giraffe-necked" women. After 1988, the Burmese army confiscated lands and jungles that his ethnic group had relied on for centuries for survival, and they also built a major army base there. Khoo-Thwe examines the impact of "foreign" invasion and tyranny, combined with globalization on a small group and their environment. He does this through life stories of a few people that he knew well from his childhood. He pays particular attention to their mental conditions as well as their survival techniques, and their ultimate fates. The author also examines how they have tried to maintain tribal identity and traditions, and how the Catholic Church has also been trying to impose a sense of discipline on the group. Most important of all, he assesses the chance for survival of the traditions and the environment of the Padaung people in the long run, set against intense economic and political pressures.

The third essay, by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, a Research Fellow of the Centre Asie du Sud-Est, CNRS/EHESS, Paris, begins a subsection of the book where "negotiating with the state" is the issue at hand. De La Perrière is a specialist on spirit possession in Burma, and the role of gender in Burmese religion (De la Perrière 2007 and 2009). In this contribution de la Perrière reflects on the life of her main informant and friend in the country, a Burmese woman who accompanied her during her field research for thirty-plus years, since 1981. During all of that time the author witnessed the cycle of hardship that was her friend's life. De la Perrière says that her interlocutor was particularly gifted for social work, as she had come to make a livelihood of such work by becoming a go-between (or *pweza*) between officialdom and Burmese people in the interface of "formal procedures." The author is especially interested in the ways that her friend developed her talent as a mediator in different settings, all culturally relevant, from Burmese administration to becoming the go-between for spirit-mediums and the ethnographer herself. De la Perrière examines the ways that her subject has established her position as a **(p.11)** broker in these different contexts, and used these skills to make a living

in Burma where the state, ordinary people, and the world of the "unseen" all came into daily collision.

The fourth essay is by Eric Tagliacozzo of Cornell University, and is called "Burmese and Muslim: Islam and the Hajj in the Sangha State." Tagliacozzo is a historian, but one who has often worked ethnographically, and in the vein of transnational connection in the past (Tagliacozzo 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2013). He states that Burma is often represented as one of the most Buddhist societies on earth—and indeed there is much truth to this assertion, as the levels of Buddhist piety and representations of the *sangha* (monastic community) are visible almost everywhere in the country. When Burmese minorities are written about it is usually in the form of the Christian populations of the hills surrounding the Irrawaddy rice plain, where significant numbers of Shan, Karen, and other peoples live in an uneasy truce with the mainstream Buddhist-Burman majority. Yet Burma also has an interesting and often-overlooked Muslim population as well, which is normally referenced only with regards to refugees and the discriminatory practices of recent government regimes. Tagliacozzo's contribution looks at some of the lived histories of Muslims in three locales in Burma: among Chinese Muslims in and around Mandalay and Sagaing in central Burma; among Rohingya Muslims in Arakan State in the far west of the country, bordering Bangladesh; and among Burmese Muslims (many of them of Indian origin) in Yangon, the former capital. The author looks at "Burmese lives" in these three locales as part of a larger picture of what it means to be Muslim and Burmese in contemporary society, but with significant glances backwards at history as well. Tagliacozzo is particularly interested in how these Burmese Muslims have conceptualized the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca which is one of the five pillars of Islam as a faith. The author's source base for the essay was two consecutive years of fieldwork visits to all three of the above-mentioned areas, alongside documentary materials that have been published both inside and outside of the country.

Remaining in the locale of Arakan, Hsin-chun Tasaw Lu, of the Institute of Ethnology, at the Academia Sinica, Taiwan, focuses on music in the life of one individual originally from this part of Burma, as this person's "way of escape." Lu is an ethnomusicologist who has published on music and identity politics in Burma (Lu 2008, 2012). U Thein Aung (a pseudonym) is an ethnic Rakhine reared in Taung-goat, a village in Arakan State, who now lives in Yangon as a professional gemologist. In yet another aspect of his life, he is a sophisticated musician of *thachìn gyì*, a centuries-long Burmese court tradition **(p.12)** now held in high national regard. Despite his lack of fame on a national scale, he is nevertheless an exceptional thachìn gyì practitioner, and also a renowned local intellectual to many foreign musicologists who specialize in Burmese music. Lu argues that while certain economic, political, and cultural forces have maintained a hegemonic hold over much of post-1988 Yangon's life, some thachìn gyì musicians have sought their own solutions to retain control of their

musical lives and identities. Her contribution draws from U Thein Aung's self-narratives during 1999 and 2013, when she studied musical practice with him. He chose to detach himself from any public performance and state-supported programs of his professional counterparts, and Lu argues that his self-narrative illuminates how he maintained a self-identity as a thachìn gyì musician, and in turn created a self-contained musical world. On the one hand, his profound aesthetic, (a)political, and anticommercial views reflect his notions of isolationism and simplicity, and these notions can be read as resistance to the current Burmese regime. Such a unique lifestyle and a way of thinking lays overt claim to his subjectivity, and to his agency. On the other hand, locally rooted life notwithstanding, his artistic achievements and scholarly education are enhanced through contacts with transnational Western knowledge, and with foreign ethnographers. U Thein Aung thus gained growing fame both in local and in international musical circles.

The sixth essay in the collection is called "Dr. U Tin Win, Escape Artist," and is written by James Scott, Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale University. Scott is one of the most famous social scientists in contemporary academia; he has written extensively about Southeast Asia, both historically and in the modern world (Scott 1979, 1998, 2009). Scott notes that U Tin Win is a well-known, much admired, and well-connected doctor in Mandalay. Scott thought he would be a good subject for a brief "life" because he spent two years in the Wa headquarters area from 1990 to 1992. As a physician, he volunteered to be "seconded" there as a medical officer of the central government, both to set up clinics and (Scott suspects), to report on conditions there. Scott's interest was further piqued by the fact that while in Medical School in Yangon he was politically active in opposition politics in 1988. As things turned out, U Tin Win proved to be, when Scott met him, profoundly apolitical, not so much out of caution but out of disinterest. He more or less wrested control of Scott's interview to address the subjects he most wanted to talk about. U Tin Win is a poet and songwriter and composed lyrics for popular bands in the 1970s and '80s; he is also a comprehensive encyclopedia of American film and popular music. Scott came to realize that popular culture was his informant's "way out," his form of "internal migration" (a similar **(p.13)** choice to that of Lu's protagonist). Through his headlong and lifelong plunge into popular culture and its apolitical themes, Scott explores the implications of this home remedy for political and cultural claustrophobia in general.

Maxime Boutry, Affiliated Research Fellow of the Centre Asie du Sud-East, CNRS/EHESS, Paris weighs in next in the far south of the country, where he works among the seagoing Moken people of the coasts. His essay is the first of two situated "At Burma's Margins." Boutry has published on the effects of the environment on these coastal regions of Burma, one of the least accessible and least studied parts of the country (Boutry 2009, Boutry 2009; 2013). He posits that there, in the distant south of Myanmar, a new Burmese society is in the

making. He asks how a “paddy state” society, maybe one of the last real examples of this in Southeast Asia, could become a “littoral society,” and so well-accustomed to the sea. Boutry argues that this radical social transformation of one of the real fringes of Burmese culture has been happening for three decades in the Mergui Archipelago, thanks to pioneers who “sacrificed” their identities in marrying “wild” Moken sea gypsies. To understand the deep social changes happening from the encounter between Burmese and Moken, the “normality” in this “extra-ordinary” process, he draws on the life narrative of one Burmese pioneer, U Maung Aye, a central figure in the making of La Ngann village’s interethnic society (situated in the middle of the Mergui Archipelago). Though this protagonist passed away more than 30 years ago, many snippets of his life appear in village narratives. Gathered around U Maung Aye, the perfect image of the “civilizing hero,” Boutry examines the life narratives of some of the La Ngann’s key figures and personalities. From piracy to military rule, from an “Eldorado” to a civilized place, individual subjectivities from Burmese and Moken perspectives help reveal, he argues, the dynamism of Burmese society in this part of the country through the political transitions of the 1990s. Yet, in contrast, Boutry also queries how, within the larger “Burmanization” process, ideologies of nomadic life found a way to survive in an interethnic construction of local society.

“By Sea and by Land: Stories of Two Chinese Traders” is an essay contributed by Wen-Chin Chang, an anthropologist at the Center for Asia-Pacific Studies, Academia Sincia. Chang has published a range of articles on Chinese migrants and merchants in mainland Southeast Asia (e.g., Chang 2009, 2011, 2013). Chang notes that Chinese contacts with Burma have been undertaken both by sea and land throughout history. Various Chinese historical sources mark these interactions in the forms of commerce, diplomacy, pilgrimage, war, and flight. In her paper, the author explores the migration history of two Chinese traders and their economic activities in Burma from the late 1940s to **(p.14)** the 1990s. The initial movement of the two protagonists highlights two migration patterns—one by sea commonly taken by the maritime Chinese from southeastern provinces of China, and the other by land that was pursued by the Yunnanese. Their economic engagement also illustrates two representative types: sedentary shopkeepers (most of the maritime Chinese fell into this category) and mobile traders (epitomized by a great number of overland Yunnanese). During the socialist period, Grandpa Xu (from Guangdong) struggled to survive by selling smuggled goods from Thailand on the *hmaung-kho* market. By contrast, Uncle Zhao, (from Yunnan), thrived on the cross-border trade between Burma and Thailand. Their stories not only illuminate two contrasting yet also complementary migration and economic patterns among the overseas and overland Chinese in upper Burma, against the backdrop of politicoeconomic turmoil. Chang argues that they also provide a window into history at the interstices of Burma itself.

The last subsection of the book focuses on “Ethnicity and the Self.” Ma Thida’s essay begins with her own experiences in Burma; as a medical doctor and as a visiting fellow at Harvard (2009–2010), hers is a most extraordinary life. Thida is the author of two well-known novels, *A Yong Sis Nay Kyar* (The Sunflower) (1999) and *Mhar Tam Let Sint Cam* (Message to Teen) (2011); her work has been translated into Catalan, English, Japanese, and Macedonian, and she is the recipient of a PEN/Freedom to Write award. While she was young, Thida recognized herself as a Shan who lived far away from the Shan State. However, her Shan-Chinese father raised her and her brothers to be “Burmese citizens.” He had two reasons to do so. First, he wanted them to be free of the feeling they were “minorities.” Second, he wanted to hide his Chinese identity, especially in the late 1960s, because of the anti-Chinese riots. Thida’s mother had an even more complicated identity—Chinese, Mon and Peranakan (from Malaysia). Thida says that she didn’t notice these complications until she had grown up. Though she couldn’t choose her ethnic identity, she did have the opportunity to choose her occupation. Thida ended up having two careers. While she started medical school, she also started writing short stories. These two careers grew together throughout the rest of her life. When she was arrested in 1993 and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment, both of her careers stopped. However, as soon as she was released, she rejoined her hospital. In this article, she writes about her medical career under the aegis of an authoritarian regime.

The tenth essay in the book is by Karin Eberhardt, an international development specialist living in Yangon, and is called “A Life in Service of Change.” Eberhardt has focused on ethnicity and conservation issues in **(p.15)** mainland Southeast Asia in her work (Eberhardt 2003, 2009); her essay discusses the life of a single man in the Shan State of Burma. The son of a *duwa* (village area chief), shaman, and opium cultivator, Sara Brang Awng (a pseudonym) grew up to become an educated civil servant, a Christian, and a champion of sustainable agricultural technologies. His life spans the transformation of the northern Shan State world through collisions of cultures, and also through the random chronology of local human events. Eberhardt’s narrative explores how Sara Brang Awng both helped shape and was in turn shaped by seven decades of change in the culturally diverse and economically and politically complex context of northern Shan State. This story of his life is organized around the diverse identities through which Sara Brang Awng operates, including his identity as an agriculturist; as a government servant; as a church-builder; as a “Kachin,” Jinghpaw, or Maran; and as a family man. Above all, Eberhardt argues, Sara Brang Awng is a man of service: whether through the church, the government, or NGOs (non-governmental organizations), his work as an agriculturist and organizer of change is always in the service of the northern Shan State “community.” His narrative illustrates how he deliberately draws from his traditional roots to explore and embrace the possibilities of modernity, turning this apparent temporal rift into his greatest source of strength.

Finally, Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts who has written extensively on politics of ethnicity and everyday life (e.g., Thawnghmung 2008, 2012), weighs in last with an essay about the Karen, an ethnic group of which she herself is a member. Thaunghmung describes the life and experience of Mahn Nyunt Maung or Maung Sin Kyei, a Karen national, who has personally witnessed the emergence and evolution of the Karen armed struggle and survived an incredible span of personal and professional experiences. This delta-born Karen briefly joined the armed resistance led by the Karen National Union (KNU) against the newly independent Burmese government in the early 1950s, but later found himself working within the system by representing a pro-Burmese government Karen political party, which advocated for a more “accommodating” stance toward the Burman-dominated government. He unsuccessfully ran as a candidate for an opposition party during the military-held multiparty elections in 1990, eventually fled to the KNU-controlled areas, and became a refugee after the KNU headquarters was taken over by the government in 1995. Now in his late seventies, he has been granted political asylum in Australia and continues to write, as well as advocating for nonviolent approaches to resolving Burma’s political issues. Thaunghmung argues **(p.16)** that Mahn’s life offers a rare insight and firsthand account/perspective about Burmese history, the evolution of the Karen-Burman relationship, and the Karen armed revolt. Most importantly, his story sheds light on the presence of diverse segments of Karen population in Burma who have experienced the policies and practices of successive Burmese military governments quite differently. These groups hold varying degrees of political awareness and different positions toward the Burmese government, toward Karen armed resistance groups, and toward issues of national integration.

Knowing Burma Locally

As stated earlier, the present volume weaves interdisciplinary interpretations freely; in telling the story of people’s lives, we have found that approaching the notion of a “life” can have different meanings, depending on the portal one looks through in order to see the subject. The ethnographers in this book have a deep and sustained access to their informants, and the lives that they have been able to present are a function of this intimate contact. The historians “know” their subjects over longer periods of time, perhaps, and the political scientists are able to weave their subjects in and out of the politics of Burma that they know so well—certainly no easy task in such a convoluted place. The writers whom we asked to speak into the record here also bear disciplinary baggage of a sort, in that they are less beholden to theories and structures of knowledge, perhaps, and they are freer in some ways to situate lives in parameters and in idioms of their own choosing. Theirs might be the least bounded accounts in the volume. Regardless of the locus of the chapter authors, however, it became clear in the assembling of this book that “getting at a life” was difficult, for social scientists,

for humanists, and even for those in the group who were Burmese, or who called Burma their home. There was no simple remedy for carrying out this kind of research, and the book as a finished product shows this eclecticism in the warp and weft of its pages. We see this collectively as a strength of the volume.

Burma conditioned this project from the very start; this book would have looked very different—even with a similar research regime, and analogous aims—had it been attempted in nearly any other place on earth. To get to information of the sort described above requires a great deal of patience in Burma, and maybe more so here than in most other field sites in the world. Informants are understandably cautious, and there are very good reasons not to spill one's life story to a researcher in this place, whether the listener is known to the subject, or is someone comparatively unfamiliar to the raconteur of a **(p.17)** "life." Burma's recent history has constructed this caution, and has made it a structure that everyone lives in across the width and breadth of the country—a kind of communal roof that everyone understands sits over their heads. History has this function; it instructs and at the same time narrates on its own "caution" as a necessary part of interviews in this place. It is for this reason that it is simply amazing, if we can say this ourselves as editors of the volume, that these Burmese lives came out so clearly in the book—the patience and skill of the questioners was matched only by the quiet dignity of many of the "ordinary" Burmese being interviewed from one end of the country to the other. Working under conditions such as this was assuredly far from easy. The chapters that have emerged from this process are social texts unto themselves that are worth archiving and keeping, in that they tell stories that can be found almost nowhere else in the world under such difficult conditions for collecting.

It is too early to say whether or not the "Burmese lives" explicated in this volume will have to continue to live under the shadow of an authoritarian state. As we stated at the start of our Introduction, it has now been fifty years since the 1962 coup that brought the present regime to power; a half a century is a long time to live under some of the conditions discussed here. But in many ways, there may be an end in sight to this situation, despite false dawns and brief springs. In the wake of the 2010 national election, the quasi-civilian government has launched a series of positive changes that affect the exchange rate and foreign investment rules and give more leeway to the press. They have further opened discussion with the main opposition party—the National League for Democracy—as well as some ethnic armed groups, and hundreds of political prisoners have been released. Just a couple of years ago, the name of the Nobel laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, was still taboo in Burmese media and domestic publications, but following her release soon after the national election, she has been allowed to tour not only inside Burma, but also around Europe, the United States, Thailand, India, South Korea, and Japan. Moreover, many former dissidents abroad have gone back to Burma for visits. The well-known writer and also one of this volume's contributors, Pascal Khoo Thwe, is one of them (The

Irrawaddy 2013). While these encouraging changes are bringing brighter prospects for Burma's future, decades of social, political, and economic problems will not simply disappear. In fact, we continue to read reports about ethnic clashes, sectarian violence, corruption, land grabbing, environmental degradation, unlawful detention, lack of adequate health care and education, and so forth. To explore ordinary lives against the backdrop of decades of repressive rule as well as recent developments is our aim in this volume. We hope to give some of the Burmese who have been "faceless" **(p.18)** to the outside world visages that we can all read, even if we have often had to alter or entirely leave out actual names in order to preserve the privacy of our informants. At the fifty-year anniversary of the coup that brought the present regime to power, we can only hope that this book stands as a small contribution to knowing the people of Burma in ways that are possible under rapidly changing contemporary conditions. In a less Orwellian future, which hopefully is starting to appear as we speak, Burmese authors inside of Burma will write their own follow-up to this volume, describing their own lives and thoughts for all the world to read.

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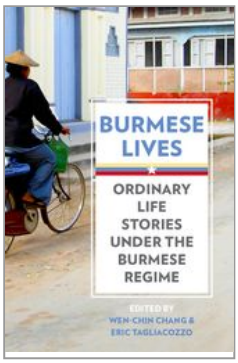
Notes:

(1.) We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Li Yu-Ting (李玉亭), digital cartography specialist at the Center for Geographic Information Science, RCHSS, Academia Sinica, for her help with producing a map for this essay.

(2.) Ethnic categorization in Burma is a difficult matter as the country was isolated for several decades, and many rural areas are still inaccessible for research. There is no agreed number of ethnic groups. Gravers (2007) and South (2008) have explored ethnic politics in Burma from the precolonial period up to now.



Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime
Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo

Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199335039
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.001.0001

Burmese and Muslim

islam and the hajj in the sangha state

Eric Tagliacozzo

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.003.0005

Abstract and Keywords

Eric Tagliacozzo's contribution looks at some of the lived histories of Muslims in three locales in Burma: among Chinese Muslims in and around Mandalay and Sagaing in central Burma; among Rohingya Muslims in Arakan State in the far west of the country, bordering Bangladesh; and among Burmese Muslims (many of them of Indian origin) in Yangon, the former capital. The author looks at these "Burmese lives" in these three locales as part of a larger picture of what it means to be Muslim and Burmese in contemporary society, but with significant glances backwards at history as well. Tagliacozzo is particularly interested in how these Burmese Muslims have conceptualized the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca which is one of the five pillars of Islam as a faith.

Keywords: Chinese Muslims, Rohingya, Burmese Muslims, Hajj

Introduction

BURMA IS NOT the first place that springs to mind when we think of Islam; Myanmar is one of the most Buddhist countries on the face of the planet.[1] Yet Burma has a significant population of Muslims, certainly numbering at least several million souls (though the exact numbers are very much in dispute), and these Muslims have diverse origins, spanning Chinese, Indian, and local (Arakanese) provenances. Islam has been almost completely unstudied in the Burmese context except vis-à-vis the recent displacement of Arakan's Muslims (Rohingya) into neighboring Bangladesh, and even more recently by boat to Thailand. This is a shame because the Muslim presence in Burma is actually

quite old, with some scholars suggesting it reaches back almost to the time of Muhammad himself. Islam has been localized in Burma in particular ways, yet it also maintains interesting transnational connections with other parts of the Muslim (and non-Muslim) world, so that it is in continual conversation with the rest of the *dar al-Islam* as well as with its own, local self. Islam has also become a flashpoint issue in Burma both because of the aforementioned Rohingya refugees (putting it high on a global human rights agenda), as well as landing on the "war on global terror" agenda, where Burmese Islam has been seen—both by the West, and by the present Burmese regime—as marking out potential fertile ground for extremism. Burmese Muslims are caught between these paradoxes—local and trans-local, persecuted and under suspicion—as part of their daily lives in one of the world's least-understood societies.

(p.84) The present essay aims to flesh out more of this history and contemporary reality of Muslims in Burma, with a special eye toward one aspect of "lived experience"—the theme of this collective—that being the Burmese pilgrimage to Mecca. The Hajj is undertaken every year from Burma to the Arabian Peninsula, and has been for several centuries. This is one of several important strands of Islamic transnationalism that affects the Burmese Muslim community, regardless of their origins in local soil (in Arakan), via Yunnan, or from the Indian subcontinent. The first third of this chapter describes something of the history of these communities, stretching from the time of the Prophet, to the medieval kingdoms of Burma, to the colonial age when the Hajj became somewhat routinized, first under King Mindon and later under the British overlords themselves. The second third of the essay focuses down on the contemporary lived realities of Muslims in Burma, and shows how the Burmese regime has made the country's Muslims an "out-group" through a raft of policies and actions, despite spinning a normative narrative that flows very much against this assertion. Finally, the last third of the essay is a record of oral history interviewing I did in various parts of Burma over the course of 2006 and 2007, when I was able to speak to a good number of Burmese Muslims in several locales (Arakan; Yangon; Sagaing; and Mandalay) about their experiences on Hajj. I argue in these pages that "Burmese lives" in the Muslim arena have almost always been caught up with the restrictions placed on them by the ruling regime, which have until very recently sanctioned and restricted these people's ways of being across a broad spectrum of daily life.

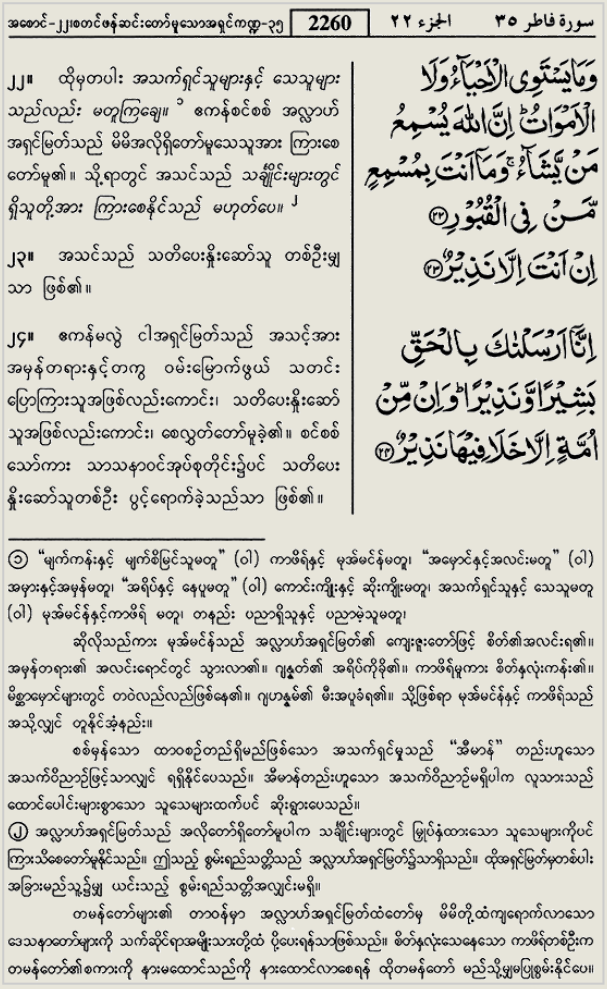
The Hajj and History "Outside" the Arc

Burma is a good place to start examining the history of the Hajj from outside the "core" areas of Islam in the region, partially because it is the physically closest Southeast Asian landscape to the Middle East. We know that Arab ships were touching down in Burma as early as the eighth century CE, though we do not know how much Islamization followed these voyages (Berlie 2008: xvii). We also know that in the Mongol conquests of Asia that Muslims were among the conquering Yuan troops which overran Burmese Bagan in the late thirteenth

century, including the Yunnan governor and general Sai-Tien-Chi'ih Shan-sau-ting Wu-ma-erh (Sayyid Ajal Shams-al-Din-Umar), and his son Nasruddin (Nasir ad-Din) (Shin 1961: 2). Eventually Panthays (or Chinese Muslims from Yunnan) became very important to the economic life of Upper Burma as well, connecting as they did caravan routes that stretched from the **(p.85)** provinces of southwest China to Vietnam, Laos, Siam, Burma, Tibet and eastern India, across the hills of this vast inland region (Lay 1999: 93).[2] The British became aware of these caravans quite early, and by the nineteenth century saw that Islam was crucial to the landscape delineating the frontier between Burma and China, the latter a primary economic target for the expanding British empire.[3] By this time there were several Muslim communities in Burma, not just the Chinese Muslims of the north and the Muslims of Arakan on the western coasts that we have previously mentioned. Muslims of Indian origin had also come to Burma in significant numbers, as had much smaller numbers of Burmese Muslims claming Persian origin known as "Zerbadee" in the British census of 1891 (Berlie 2008: 7). King Mindon tried to facilitate the Hajj for this mixed Muslim population by sponsoring a *waqf* house in Arabia to service Burmese Muslim needs while his subjects were on pilgrimage[4] (Figure 4.1). After British rule ended in the mid-twentieth century, the independent Burmese state sent some four to five hundred Muslims per year on Hajj, assisting them in obtaining passports, foreign currency, and other documents that they would need for their journeys. With the coup of 1962 however, which brought the present regime to power, Burmese Muslims and the Hajj in particular was regarded with the utmost suspicion by the ruling authorities, and the Hajj was cracked down upon in concert with other broad discriminatory practices against Burma's Muslim population (Yegar 1972: 91).

The history of the Hajj and Islam generally in neighboring Thailand has certain affinities with the Burmese case, and is interwoven with it. Anne Maxwell Hill has pointed out that the Panthays of Burma and the Haw of northern Thailand have similar roots in the historical communities of **(p.86)**

(p.87) Yunnanese Muslims who have been trading down to mainland Southeast Asia for centuries, with a particularly important event in this history being the failed Muslim Rebellion in Yunnan (1855–1873) against the Ch’ing state, which drove many Chinese Muslims south to upland Southeast Asia (Hill 1998: 13, 15). Several recent researchers have shown a continuity between these Burmese communities and present-day Muslim Chinese in the northern parts of Thailand, one predicated on travel and merchant activity which has been a part of this landscape for a very long time (Soonthornpasuch 1977: 15; Forbes and Henley 1997). Yet just as in the Burmese case there has been a strong coastal dimension too in attracting Islam to Thai landscapes, and also in keeping it connected with the Muslim Middle East via the wings of the Hajj and religious education, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The Patani Sultanate has been pre-eminent in this regard in the Thai south, acting as a fulcrum of sorts in dispensing religious students and scholars to Cairo and Mecca, as well as disseminating new Muslim learning to the rest of the Malay Peninsula over the course of several centuries (Bradley 2009: 267–294). Muslims also came in and out of Burma’s lower coastal regions too, of course. In the nineteenth century, the British had long deliberations about what to do with the Muslim populations of the “Golden Peninsula”; these areas were situated dangerously close to Britain’s own growing dominion on the lower Malay Peninsula, as well as to Lower Burma proper.[5] Indigenous Southeast Asian aristocrats and indeed the mainland courts seem to have held similar deliberations at the same time (Loos 2006: chapter 3). Yet just as in the Burmese case, the heterogeneity of Thai Muslims—Chinese Muslims in the north, Malay-Thai subject/citizens in the south, and a Perso-Indian Muslim minority scattered elsewhere in the kingdom—made for a diffuse experience of “being Muslim” in Siam, and later in Thailand. The Hajj acted as a vehicle here too to unite Thai Muslims not only with the rest of the Muslim *umma*, but also with each other, as often these communities had more chance of meeting one another in Mecca than they did back in Southeast Asia itself. This appears to have been largely true in Burma as well.



سورة فاطر ٣٥ الجزء ٢٢ 2260 အစောင်-၂၂၊စတင်ဖန်ဆင်းတော်မူသောအရှင်ကဏ္ဍ-၃၅

وَمَا يَسْتَوِي الْأَحْيَاءُ وَلَا الْأَمْوَاتُ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُسْمِعُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ ۖ وَمَا أَنْتَ بِمُسْمِعٍ مَنْ فِي الْقُبُورِ ﴿٢٢﴾ إِنْ أَنْتَ إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ ﴿٢٣﴾ إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا ۚ وَإِنْ مِنْ أُمَّةٍ إِلَّا خَلَا فِيهَا نَذِيرٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

၂၂။ ထိုမှတပါး၊ အသက်ရှင်သူများနှင့် သေသူများသည်လည်း မတူကြချေ။ ③ ဧကန်စင်စစ် အလ္လာဟ်အရှင်မြတ်သည် မိမိအလိုရှိတော်မူသေသူအား ကြားစေတော်မူ၏။ သို့ရာတွင် အသင်သည် သင်္ချိုင်းများတွင်ရှိသူတို့အား ကြားစေနိုင်သည် မဟုတ်ပေ။ ④

၂၃။ အသင်သည် သတိပေးနှိုးဆော်သူ တစ်ဦးမျှသာ ဖြစ်၏။

၂၄။ ဧကန်မလွဲ ငါအရှင်မြတ်သည် အသင့်အား အမှန်တရားနှင့်တကွ ဝမ်းမြောက်ဖွယ် သတင်းပြောကြားသူအဖြစ်လည်းကောင်း၊ သတိပေးနှိုးဆော်သူအဖြစ်လည်းကောင်း၊ စေလွှတ်တော်မူခဲ့၏။ စင်စစ်သော်ကား သာသနာဝင်အုပ်စုတိုင်း၌ပင် သတိပေးနှိုးဆော်သူတစ်ဦး ပွင့်ရောက်ခဲ့သည်သာ ဖြစ်၏။

① “မျက်ကန်းနှင့် မျက်စိမြင်သူမတူ” (ဝါ) ကာဖိရ်နှင့် မုအ်မင်နှ်မတူ၊ “အမှောင်နှင့်အလင်းမတူ” (ဝါ) အမှားနှင့်အမှန်မတူ၊ “အရိပ်နှင့် နေပူမတူ” (ဝါ) ကောင်းကျိုးနှင့် ဆိုးကျိုးမတူ၊ အသက်ရှင်သူနှင့် သေသူမတူ (ဝါ) မုအ်မင်နှ်နှင့်ကာဖိရ် မတူ၊ တနည်း ပညာရှိသူနှင့် ပညာမဲ့သူမတူ၊

ဆိုလိုသည်ကား မုအ်မင်နှ်သည် အလ္လာဟ်အရှင်မြတ်၏ ကျေးဇူးတော်ဖြင့် စိတ်၏အလင်းရ၏။ အမှန်တရား၏ အလင်းရောင်တွင် သွားလာ၏။ ဂျန္နတ်၏ အရိပ်ကိုခို၏။ ကာဖိရ်မူကား စိတ်နလုံးကန်း၏။ မိစ္ဆာမှောင်များတွင် တဝဲလည်လည်ဖြစ်နေ၏။ ဂျဟန္နမ်၏ မီးအပူခံရ၏။ သို့ဖြစ်ရာ မုအ်မင်နှ်နှင့် ကာဖိရ်သည် အသို့လျှင် တူနိုင်အံ့နည်း။

စစ်မှန်သော ထာဝစဉ်တည်ရှိမည်ဖြစ်သော အသက်ရှင်မူသည် “အီမာန်” တည်းဟူသော အသက်ဝိညာဉ်ဖြင့်သာလျှင် ရရှိနိုင်ပေသည်။ အီမာန်တည်းဟူသော အသက်ဝိညာဉ်မရှိပါက လူသားသည် ထောင်ပေါင်းများစွာသော သူသေများထက်ပင် ဆိုးရွားပေသည်။

② အလ္လာဟ်အရှင်မြတ်သည် အလိုတော်ရှိတော်မူပါက သင်္ချိုင်းများတွင် မြှုပ်နှံထားသော သူသေများကိုပင် ကြားသိစေတော်မူနိုင်သည်။ ဤသည့် စွမ်းရည်သတ္တိသည် အလ္လာဟ်အရှင်မြတ်၌သာရှိသည်။ ထိုဏှင့်မြတ်မှတစ်ပါး အခြားမည်သူ၌မျှ ယင်းသည့် စွမ်းရည်သတ္တိအလျှင်းမရှိ။

တမန်တော်များ၏ တာဝန်မှာ အလ္လာဟ်အရှင်မြတ်ထံတော်မှ မိမိတို့ထံကျရောက်လာသော ဒေသနာတော်များကို သက်ဆိုင်ရာအမျိုးသားတို့ထံ ပို့ပေးရန်သာဖြစ်သည်။ စိတ်နလုံးသေနေသော ကာဖိရ်တစ်ဦးက တမန်တော်၏စကားကို နားမထောင်သည်ကို နားထောင်လာစေရန် ထိုတမန်တော် မည်သို့မျှမပြုစွမ်းနိုင်ပေ။

FIGURE 4.1 Image of Burmese/Arabic Qur’an.

If Islam took hold on the coasts of southern Siam, then it also proved to have durable maritime roots in Arakan, on the Burmese border of what is today Bangladesh. Arakan is one of the oldest sites for Islam in all of **(p.88)** Southeast Asia, as previously stated; at least one source posits this provenance to the years right around the time of the Prophet himself, when Muslims (we know for certain) sailed all the way to Canton in South China (Meer 1935 quoted in Berlie 2008: 9). This time period is too early to give any evidence of local Muslims making their way all the way to Mecca, as the first hard data for Southeast Asians doing this from any part of the "lands beneath the winds" would not come until approximately five hundred years later. Yet it seems certain that Islam came by ship to this part of far western coastal Burma, as the Arakan coast was already well-integrated into Indian ocean trade networks by this time. Berlie notes that Arakanese Muslims were famed archers in the Early Modern period, and formed elite units in the (religiously mixed) Arakan court before that kingdom was subsumed by Burma in the eighteenth century (Berlie 2008: 9). The term "Rohingya" itself was likely a localization of "Rohang" or "Ram" which is what the medieval Arab geographers and sailors called this stretch of Burma's coast in their logs (Jilani 1999).

We have seen something now of the eclectic origins of Muslims in Burma, and focused briefly on both the overland mule caravans and the coastal shipping routes which both brought variants of Islam to this corner of Southeast Asia. It remains to quickly bring this narrative up closer toward independence, when the centuries of Islamization had already managed to leave a discernible footprint on Burma in the north, on the coasts, and in the major cities of the kingdom. As early as 1929 cracks appeared in emerging nationalist platforms about what to do with the colony's Muslim minority; some Burmese were in favor of different degrees of assimilation, while others argued for cultural specificity to be maintained, so that the majority Urdu-speaking Muslim population of Burma would not lose its identity. Several riots in the late 1930s exacerbated these fissures, and Muslims were often attacked by Burmese Buddhist mobs as part of larger campaigns against Indian "others." Yet these attacks obscured the fact that the Burmese Muslim community itself was fractured, adhering to certain rules and institutions on a colony-wide basis but splintering into divergent communities—Pathan, Indian, and Rohingya, mostly—on many other issues. The Hajj may have provided a beacon of unity for Burmese Muslims during this time, but very, very few of the colony's Muslims were ever allowed to make the trip. A fractured existence was therefore a hallmark of the late colonial era for Muslims in Burma, as they tried to hang on to visions of community that were increasingly under question, and even open to attack, both from without and from within (Chakravarti 1971).

(p.89) The Contemporary Situation

This was the state of affairs vis-à-vis Muslims and the pilgrimage to Mecca in Burma up until the age of independence. How does the Hajj look now in Burma and other places that are outside the lands of the “Muslim arc” of the region? The picture is a complex one, with the pilgrimage easy or very difficult to accomplish depending on the landscape under scrutiny. In Burma, Muslims of the various heritages mentioned above officially make up some 4 percent of the population, but may in fact represent a significantly larger segment of Burmese society (Priestly 2006:18). While the majority of Burma’s Muslims today are poor, and are represented as such in the global media (and indeed in Myanmar itself), there have been a number of exceptions to this rule going back all the way in the independence era to Tun Razak, a revolutionary hero who was murdered alongside Aung San in 1947 (Yeni 2006a: 19). Poor or not, it has been quite difficult for Burmese Muslims to get permission to go on Hajj, as indeed the act of procuring a passport has been forbidden until very recently to most members of Burmese society, whether they are Muslim, Christian, or Buddhist. The numbers of Hajjis have gone up recently to several hundred per year, but this has to be strictly in accordance with the government’s rules, as Muslims have been particularly targeted as a “problem community” by the ruling junta since the 1962 coup (Berlie 2008: 31, 90, 107). In 2007, for example, the regime expressly warned pilgrims not to get involved in politics in the Hejaz, and by this “Burmese politics” were meant (protests, exchanging information about the plight of local Muslims under Yangon’s rule, etc.), not the jihadist politics of the Middle East.[6] The watershed issue has been the displacement of Muslims in Arakan province abutting Bangladesh, where tens of thousands of dirt-poor Muslims have become refugees streaming into that latter country by the land border, and also (more recently) to Thailand in the west via boats (Lambrecht 2006: 22–29; “Rohingya Solidarity Question” 2006: 266–271; Yeni 2006: 22–23). A number of parties have been formed to represent the interests of Arakan Muslims, stretching from the Northern Arakan Muslim League (founded in 1946) to the Arakan Rohingya National Organization founded more than forty years later, but all have had in common very little success in moving the Yangon regime to help along Burmese Muslims who wish to complete the Hajj (Table 4.1).

(p.90)

Table 4.1 Important Dates for the Muslim Communities of Burma

1785	Kingdom of Burma annexes Arakan
1885	British complete conquest of Burma
1942	Buddhist-Muslim riots break out in Arakan
1945	British reconquer Arakan

1946	North Arakan Muslim League is founded
1948	Mujahideen Rebellion in Arakan begins
1949	Burmese government appoints a peace committee for North Arakan
1962	Military coup takes over Burma
1978	Beginning of Operation Naga Min in Arakan; Rohingya flee to Bangladesh
1978	Six months later, 200,000 refugees repatriate to Burma
1983	Anti-Muslim riots in Burma
1984	Kawthoolei Muslim Liberation Force is established in Burma
1991	New wave of Rohingya refugees cross from Arakan to Bangladesh
1992	Burma and Bangladesh sing a repatriation agreement

Source: Abstracted from Yegar 2002: 399–409.

Part of the problem here has to do with the official Burmese government stance on the Muslims of Arakan: they are seen to be non-Burmese in nearly all respects. A 1992 press release from the Burmese Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the Rohingya as illegal immigrants who came across the border from India after the initial British occupation of Arakan in 1824. “Historically,” the statement read, “there has never been a Rohingya race in Myanmar.” (Yeni 2006: 22). On February 11, 1978, the *Tatmadaw* pushed this long-term ideology into action, expelling or encouraging the flight of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims across the border into Bangladesh. Random killings, rape, forced labor, and the razing of hundreds of mosques pushed many across who did not get the initial message (see Callahan 2007 , and South 2008).[7] Although later that year some 200 thousand of these refugees came back across the frontier after an agreement was signed between Burma and Bangladesh, the message of the junta was loud and clear to Muslims living on these coasts, as their forefathers had lived for centuries before them (Yegar **(p.91)** 2002: 406). Civic organizations of non-Muslim Yakain were encouraged to tout the government’s viewpoint, and a number did so quite willingly. One publication simply called *The Rakhaing* and published in New York through émigrés is a particularly virulent example of such views. It contains chapters with titles such as “The Illegal Muslim Immigration and Islamic Politics”; “Is Islam a Threat to Buddhist Culture?,” and “The Bogus Rakhaing” (Maung 2004). Since Arakan is the most densely populated Muslim state in Burma, Yangon had figured out a way to essentially tie off the province as a cancerous extremity, and then has tried to excise the “cancer” with a heavy-handed swipe of the proverbial knife. It did not matter at all that Muslims had been living on these coasts for at least a thousand years: the *Tatmadaw* fashioned an alternate narrative, and one that managed to wield considerable power inside the boundaries of the country.

Muslims have been forced into exile on Burma’s border with Thailand as well. Some thirty thousand Burmese Muslims live in exile on this frontier, too—many of them clustered in and around the border city of Mae Sot. Twenty years ago,

when I was doing fieldwork in Mae Sot on the dynamics of the border there, Burmese Muslims there were a noticeable presence; the numbers have grown significantly in the past decade, however.[8] Much of this community lives around the Bangalawalay Mosque, one of three major mosques in the city. A Bangladeshi businessman recently bought some extra land around the building to give to the mosque, and many of these Burmese Muslims have domiciled there now, with the whole complex now called the "Bangladeshi Barracks." Ekachai Nitibhumikun, a Thai Muslim lawyer and executive committee member of another mosque in Ma Sot, has said that the Thai Muslim community is essentially split, with some feeling that these Burmese Muslim refugees are a thorn in the community's collective side, and others feeling that they need to be helped. Some members of the local Thai Muslim community pitched in and built a school for the Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot, and the students in that school are given a religious education, with Arabic and "morality lessons" based on the life story of Muhammad part of the curriculum (they also study Burmese, Thai, English, science, geography, and math). Yet despite their precarious economic circumstances, Thai military intelligence officers make regular visits to Mae Sot, to keep tabs on the Burmese Muslim community and to make sure that the cross-border ties do **(p.92)** not include anything with even a whiff of "Islamic extremism." The lessons of history have not been lost on the Thai state, and they realize that many of the Muslims from these parts of upland Southeast Asia have similar roots going back to Yunnan in the nineteenth century, and even prior to this (Blair and Aung Zaw 2006:20–23).

These transnational dimensions to Muslims living in and around Burma are important to understanding the nature of Islam generally and the Hajj specifically in the country. It used to be the case that a fair number of South Asian Muslims would be invited to come to Burma to work as imams in local mosques, as they were seen to be far more integrated into the larger currents of Islam than the small Muslim minority in Burma itself (Yegar 1972: 91). While there are Sunni and non-Sunni extensions both into and out of Burma still, these kinds of contacts have gotten harder and harder to manage, except for the very recent attempts by Gulf countries to practice a kind of Islamic charity in the heavily-regulated building of schools, mosques, and in the subsidized passage of some Hajjis (Maung Maung Tan 2003). The government's line on its treatment of Burmese Muslims has been until recently one of tolerance and benevolence: in one pamphlet prepared for staff of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the year 2000, the objective of the ministry is listed as "allowing the freedom of faith . . . encouragement and assistance are being given to different faiths. Native Islamists are sent to Mecca for the Haj." (Anonymous, 2000: 54, 57). While Burmese Muslims are indeed allowed to go on the Hajj if they are able to fulfill a wide range of conditions, the chance for most will not come during their own lifetimes. Despite the official declarations to the contrary, the structural conditions of being a Muslim in Burma have been such that a religious

pilgrimage to the Middle East was nothing but a dream for the majority of the Muslim population. These conditions are only beginning to change right now.

Writing at the turn of the millennium a decade ago, the noted Burma-watcher Martin Smith estimated that over one million Burmese were living in displacement or as refugees—most of them internally in Burma, in neighboring Thailand, or in adjacent Bangladesh. Burmese Muslims make up one of the most important of these many groups "on the run" (Smith 1999: 451). With so many Burmese in motion in and around the country's borders, and most of them moving "illegally," at least according to the Burmese regime, it makes sense that a huge trans-national phenomenon such as the Hajj would make Yangon nervous. To counter some of this actuality of flight, the Burmese government had set up a counternarrative of patronage: the military as the savior of the nation from corrupt Western designs, in the form of huge infrastructural **(p.93)** programs such as dams, roads, bridges, and power plants, all constructed to serve the people. The small flow of Hajjis allowed to make the trip to Mecca can also be seen in this way, to some degree—a tightly controlled exercise with a strong public relations tinge to it (Ganesan and Hlaing 2007: 3). Thant Myint-U has argued that the military has become what it is because they were the only institution to step into a power vacuum after the colonial/postcolonial divide in the country: almost all other institutions were fragile and did not really survive this transition, he writes. As a result of this, when the army stepped in it was able to dominate Burmese society in a way that armies have not been able to do elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Thant 2001: 254). Yet in the same way that the *Tatmadaw* tried to show its sense of patriotic paternalism to the Burmese Buddhist majority by building huge public projects, it encouraged this same sense of an "in-group"—we, the Burmese—by excluding Muslims for the most part from being true Burmese citizens, with equal rights (Gravers, 2007: 3). Ethnicity, in this case—or in all cases, some theorists might argue—functions just as much on a notion of exclusion as it does on one of inclusion (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).[9] The very fact that the Hajj has been made so difficult in Burma until now attests to the fact that Muslims are seen to be a "problem community" by the ruling elite, and one with its outlook and potentially its allegiances to be found outside of the country.

Oral Histories beyond the "Muslim Arc"

In addition to the documentary materials used as sources for this essay, I also felt it was important to speak myself to Muslims in Burma, to see how they explained the importance of the Hajj in their lives as well. Over the course of a number of months spread between early 2006 and 2007, therefore, I started to go to various places in-country to ask questions about pilgrimage, and its role vis-à-vis Muslim minorities in Burma. The interviews took place in four principal places: in western Arakan state, in and around Thandwe; in Yangon, the capital, among Muslims of a number of different ethnic groups, including Burmese Indians; in Sagaing, north-central Burma; and in Mandalay, primarily among

Chinese (Panthay) Muslims. In western Burma (Arakan) and in Yangon these interviews were mostly in English; in north-central Burma **(p.94)** (in Sagaing and Mandalay) the interviews were mostly in Chinese. Wherever these conversations took place, I have changed respondents' names in the footnotes to protect their identities, as Muslims are still persecuted in some of these landscapes, though certainly less in some parts of Burma than in others (Arakan was particularly tough in this respect, for example, while Yangon and Mandalay/Sagaing were somewhat easier places to work). It should be kept in mind that conditions have changed (for the better) since that time.

Conversations with Muslims in Arakan Province, a site designated by the Burmese government as "recalcitrant" and even occasionally as "rebellious," were difficult. I spoke only to people indoors, as ordinary Muslims were (justifiably) afraid to be seen with a foreigner, though several indicated to me through intermediaries when I made discrete inquiries that they did indeed want to speak. A man in Thandwe told me that he had been on Hajj in 2004; he had been allowed to go with his wife, and they stayed three married couples to a room in a cheap place to be able to make do financially. It was very difficult for him to get a passport to go, and he had to stay in Yangon and then in Bangkok for nearly three weeks (paying for a hotel the whole time) before all of the necessary permissions came through. His son now lives in Yangon, but he was not allowed to go see him, when we spoke, as all Muslims in Arakan were forbidden to travel more than two miles outside of their domicile, by order of the government.[10] He was outraged at this, and made sure that I understood that he and all Rohingyas like him had been in Burma for hundreds of years, and that it was scandalous that they should be treated this way in their own country (Anonymous Hajij, Thandwe town, January 13, 2007). An Indian Muslim man I shared a long meal with in Yangon echoed some of these sentiments: it was easier for him to go than for Muslims in Arakan, but this did not mean that it was easy. He too had to wait in a long queue to be able to go, and he also had to eventually go through Bangkok, with many hundreds of other Burmese Muslims who were able to go the year that he went. He traveled on Qatar Air, and the Rohingya man I mentioned previously traveled via Bahrain, and both underscored how important the largess of the Gulf States has been in recently getting more Burmese Muslims to the Hejaz (Anonymous Hajji, Yangon, January 6, 2006). A third pilgrim I spoke with in Yangon, a woman whose mother and sister had both recently been on Hajj too, described the Burmese lottery system for the pilgrimage as very difficult: it could be manipulated by the government to reward and/or punish the **(p.95)** behaviors of certain Muslim citizens, she said (Anonymous Hajja, Yangon, January 6, 2006).

Chinese Muslims I spoke with in Mandalay and Sagaing echoed many of these sentiments, though they had different perspectives on some of these issues as well. Panthay Muslims, whom I mostly spoke with in Chinese, were not considered to be as "troublesome" or rebellious as Rohingyas by the state. This

part of Burma is also more prosperous, as trade links with China have been booming, and Panthay Burmese with language abilities and often kin ties which cross the border have been able to help these commercial contacts along. A professor I spoke with in Mandalay showed me a government report (in Burmese and in English) of how many Muslims actually live in these north-central districts of Burma, and the numbers are substantial: in the year 2000, Sagaing had nearly sixty thousand Muslims, and Mandalay over 200 thousand Muslims, with over 100 and 200 mosques in each place, respectively (Anonymous Hajji, Mandalay, January 6, 2007) (Table 4.2). Another Panthay man told me that when he finally made it to Mecca on his Hajj, one of the principal things he prayed for was deliverance from the Burmese government: “free us from oppression; free us from suppression; free us from dictatorship,” were his exact words (Anonymous Hajji, Mandalay, January 7, 2007). Two men I met, one in front of the “Bo Ho” (or “Central” Mosque) and one in front of the “Joon Mosque,” both in Mandalay, were more working class than these earlier interviews with intellectuals, and though only the former had been on Hajj, both told me that it was getting easier to go from this part of Burma, at least (Two Anonymous Hajjis, Mandalay, January 7, 2007). Yet in the temple city of Sagaing, a Hajji whom I spoke with all afternoon on the steps of his sandy, palm-shaded mosque said that performing the pilgrimage from a place like Burma was never easy. He and his wife were able to afford public transport for the first week that they were in the Holy Cities, but then they had to walk many, many miles to the religious sites. In the first week they ate curry, but after that their money started to dwindle so they ate anything they could get their hands on for the remainder of their journey (Anonymous Hajji, Sagaing, January 8, 2007).[11] A few other Chinese Muslims I spoke with were better off than this but also felt rather marooned in the Hejaz, they said—they were very consciously aware that they came from countries where they were minorities. This showed in the arrangements that had been made **(p.96)**

Table 4.2 Muslim Population and Mosques in Burma for the Year 2000

Administrative District	Muslim Population	Mosques
Kachin	20,910	13
Kayah	3,435	2
Karen	80,086	16
Chin	296	3
Sagaing	58,278	106
Tennasarim	84,850	50
Pegu	60,685	83

Administrative District	Muslim Population	Mosques
East Pegu	60,685	41
West Pegu	27,206	43
Mergui	14,971	30
Mandalay	210,786	225
Mon	156,369	79
Arakan	818,061	649
Rangoon	288,077	164
Shan	58,091	??
East Shan	808	4
South Shan	2,016	30
North Shan	2,354	31
Delta	86,322	147

Source: Confidential Government Report in Burmese and English, 2000.

for them, they said, as opposed to Muslim-majority populations who were better cared for by the relevant authorities (Anonymous Hajji, Outside Sagaing, January 8, 2007). At least two Hajjis whom I interviewed realized that their relative poverty was a potential ticket to getting other people to pay for their pilgrimage, however, especially foundations based on the Middle East. Yet one of these Hajjis told me that this would not have been right; it went against the *spirit* of the Hajji, and therefore—and with some reluctance—he and his wife used up their entire life savings to make the journey. This was the *correct* way to go, he said. “All of us are sinners,” he whispered to me, “but once we have been to Mecca, we are absolved. We will be as clean as newborn babies” (Anonymous Hajj, Mandalay, January 7, 2007). Despite their relative poverty, many Burmese Muslims were very proud that they were performing the Hajj, therefore, and some also were keen to show me their own connections within the *dar-al Islam,* despite Burma’s closure to most of the world since 1962. A Hajji from Sagaing told me that his education (and his parentage) put him in touch **(p.97)** with powerful people inside the Ministry of Religion. He was the #2 leader of the government sponsored pilgrim group of 200 people that year (the #1 leader, perhaps unsurprisingly, was from Yangon), and because of his position he was able to meet the #2 leaders of the Hajj delegations from England, Pakistan, and India when was in Mecca (Anonymous Hajji, Sagaing, January 8, 2007). Another Hajji from Mandalay told me that he had a female cousin living in Jeddah; her husband was a professor of geology at King Abdulazziz University there, teaching earth sciences (Anonymous Hajji, Mandalay, January 7, 2007). This kind

of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” was not out of the reach even of the Burmese, he seemed to be telling me, and such links were ultimately stronger and more pervasive than the then restricting practices of the Burmese regime.[12]

I was left in little doubt how difficult the lives of many Muslims have been in contemporary Burma, a place where the ruling junta has made periodic, public overtures to its Islamic population, but where fear quite clearly has ruled the roost. A Hajji I interviewed in Arakan, outside of Thandwe, nearly fell out of his chair when I asked if I could write down what we were saying (I didn’t, upon seeing his reaction); his wife also spoke softly but quickly to him in what clearly was a plea to be careful in what he said. But after we spoke for a good long time, his caution started to leave him and some of his bitterness at the mistreatment that had been meted out to him, his family, and his community boiled over. I never brought up the government, but he did again and again in the last two hours of the interview, saying he didn’t know how they could live under such a regime forever (Anonymous Hajji, Thandwe/Arakan, January 13, 2007). His pain —and his wife’s fear—were both clear. But I want to end this substance of this section with a nod to lighter moments too, because it was also very clear that Burmese pilgrims had memories of the Hajj that made them smile as well. A Yangon Hajji told me that he and his wife worked out a system whereby each held up a shocking leopard-print slipper (bought in Bangkok) if they lost each other while on the trail to Mina (Anonymous Hajji, Yangon, January 6, 2006). A pilgrim from Mandalay told me that she saw a beautiful woman from Morocco and that she came up to her and told her that she was prettier than Brooke Shields, a by-now already faded movie star from the West (Anonymous Hajja, Mandalay, January 7, 2007). Still another Hajji from Sagaing told me that he wanted to find eggs to **(p.98)** eat while he was in Mecca, so that he came up to a group of Indonesians and asked them, but none of them could speak English. He therefore pantomimed flapping his wings, made clucking noises, and mimed an egg appearing from his bottom (Anonymous Hajji, Sagaing, January 8, 2007). It feels more sanguine to end this section with this image than the bitterness, perhaps, or the fear. The Hajj after all is about hope, as well as being about forgiveness.

Two Hajjis: North and South

I want to end my discussion of these Burmese Muslim lives by focusing on two lives in particular, each very briefly—one in the north of Burma (in Mandalay), and one in Yangon in the south. Both of these lives can tell us some interesting things about Islam in contemporary Burma, as well as about the life arc of local Muslims there who hope to go on Hajj as an integral part of their faith. Hajji “A,” who lives in Mandalay, traces his roots (like many northern Burmese Muslims) to Yunnan. His great grandfather came to Mandalay in 1868 to help build the Panthay Mosque; when the Yunnan Revolt made returning to China impossible for a long while, he eventually settled down in Burma and took a new (second) wife (see Figures 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 on Burmese mosques). This woman turned out

to be the daughter of a Manipuri princess brought to Mandalay as a slave during the Burmese wars with eastern India, and this Hajji's mixed provenance was not unusual among many of the Muslims with whom I spoke. Hajji "A" told me that Mandalay now acted as something of a Hajj depot for much of northern Burma—people came through here to get to even bigger cities where they could eventually take flights to the Middle East. A certain amount of luck was involved to be able to get one of the coveted places to Jeddah—luck and also fate, as all of this "had already been written," he told me. Some fifty people in his neighborhood alone had already been on Hajj, but the numbers were high in this part of town because not a few locals had made deals with the Ministry of Religion, and had (he suggested) corrupt contacts there who could help influence their position in the waiting lines. He thought the annual numbers of Burmese Hajjis being able to go were in the neighborhood of two to three thousand, all told—the government-sponsored group was only two hundred or so (and for them it was nearly free), though no children were allowed to be part of this group. He compared this to the numbers of Indonesians going, whom he counted in "lacs" as per the old British-Indian counting system, and commented that the Burmese numbers were very low.

(p.99)

Hajji "A" had been able to spend forty days in the Middle East—thirty of these were in Mecca, with a further ten in Medina. Yet the experience of circumambulating the Ka'ba would stay with him for the rest of his life, he told me. He had never seen so many people before: white, black, brown, and every shade in between—it was truly an incredible sight, he said. The pushing was also incredible. He remembered that people were so involved in intoning their prayers as they walked that numerous times he was almost knocked off his feet, but no one apologized as they were in the middle of their recitations. Because he was an older man he eventually left the precinct of the Ka'ba itself and went to the roof of the mosque surrounding it, so that he could do his circumambulations there in less of a press. This maelstrom of diversity, difference, and frenzied activity was not entirely disagreeable, though—he loved trying to speak to Muslims from so many countries, even though he was never sure which of them might be able to speak a bit of English to answer his questions. He remembered meeting Indonesians, Arabs, and South Asians—the latter group spoke the best English, he told me. But in truth, though he remembered these aspects of his Hajj, he

FIGURE 4.2 A mosque in Yangon. Photo by the author.

too was very concentrated during the prayers, though he hoped he had not disturbed others with his **(p.100)** own single-mindedness during these times. He remembered that he was crying while he walked, often —crying because he was so desperately asking God to protect his family, and to look after those loved ones of his who had already departed this earth. He started to mist over as he spoke of this, and I could see from his eyes and from the expression on his face that he was already far away when he told me these things.

FIGURE 4.3 A mosque in Mandalay. Photo by the author.

I met Hajji “B” in Yangon, through a common contact of both of ours who made introductions and then left us to talk over a meal in a local restaurant. Hajji “B” also happened to be of Yunnanese extraction; his father had been a textile merchant, who later also got involved with the dying of cloth in Burma as well. He told me that his family was stretched across a number of area **(p. 101)**

FIGURE 4.4 A mosque in Thandwe. Photo by the author.

borders: they had relatives in Shan State, in Yangon, back in Yunnan, and in neighboring Thailand, which he called “Eastern Shan State” (denoting the trans-national existence of many ethnic Chinese across these mainland divisions). Hajji “B” also had a brother who was in the gem business; this man moved back and forth between Taunggyi and Taiwan with his stones, showing that such Chinese-Muslim connections could extend even further afield. This was not lost on him—he told me that when he had finally been able to **(p.102)** make his Hajj that one of the things that touched him most was other pilgrims’ attitudes toward Chinese and Burmese Muslims. “We are both living under hardship,” he said, denoting that in this, Xinjiang and Burma suffered similar sets of circumstances in some ways. People in the wider Muslim world knew of these sufferings, and made sure to ask how their lives were going when they were often known to be treated as second-class citizens. Hajji “B” felt that this concern for one’s fellow man was indeed part and parcel of the Hajj, a time to think of larger issues other than one’s self and one’s own problems. He felt his pilgrimage connected him to other human beings, in other words. The Saudis had only very recently—within the last year or two—opened an office in Yangon to help out with the Burmese Hajj, he told me. Before this most Burmese pilgrims had to go through a Saudi office located in Bangkok, which involved a lot of time and trouble and also the purchasing of visas just to get into Thailand, with no assured result. The Saudi pilgrim office there had a separate quota system for dealing with the Burmese, but the procedures were very variable year to year and the entire process was far more complicated and burdensome than it needed to be. Until only very recently, the only choice for almost all Burmese Muslims was to take flights from neighboring countries, usually on airlines such as Thai Airways, Pakistan Air, Royal Jordanian, and Emirates. Now there were occasional flights going directly from Yangon to Jeddah, as Qatar Air had done this past year. No one knew if this would stick or not—the Burmese regime was fickle, he said, in allowing or not allowing patterns to develop vis-à-vis the Hajj. He mentioned that Burmese Hajjis often eventually joined with the Lankan delegation, the Indians, the Bangladeshis, or the Pakistanis because the Burmese numbers were so few. This afforded them better access to certain services. It also gave Burmese Muslims a chance,

however, to ask other Muslims how they practiced Islam in their own countries. He told me this with great enthusiasm; he was endlessly fascinated by the “varieties” of possibility in practicing Islam, he said. “How do you do this? How do you do that? But we do it this way here,” he intoned. It was not hard to see how the Hajj had become more than the achievement of the fifth pillar of his religion, in other words—an inward journey. It was also an outward one at the same time, a voyage into the world to see how a Burmese Muslim could be connected to the rest of the global umma. And in this, one could see how the Hajj might be even more sacred, or more special, to Burmese Muslims than to many other people within the embrace of Islam on earth.

(p.103) Conclusion

It would be difficult to argue, as the present Burmese regime certainly has done until very recently, that the Muslim community of Burma is treated as just one of many different “ethnic groups” in the country under Burmese policies and Burmese law. While Muslims may enjoy the same protections and the same rights as other communities do on paper, the lived experience of many if not most Burmese Muslims has been wholly different than the official picture presented by Yangon up until the last two years. They have often been second-class citizens in their own country, if they have been considered to be citizens at all. Historically, the roots of many Burmese Muslims—especially those of the Yakain ethnic group in Arakan—are as ancient as those of many Burmese Buddhists; Muslims and Theravada Buddhists have existed side by side in parts of coastal Burmese for well over a thousand years, it seems. More recently, in the last two centuries for the most part, other Muslims of Chinese (Yunnanese) and South Asian (Bengali) origin have also “become Burmese” and have fit into local worlds with varying degrees of success both before and during the period of colonial dominion. The British protected Muslims in Burma by law, not out of philanthropy, but because they were seen to be useful to the colony’s interests, particularly in the economic sphere. Independence after World War II did not fundamentally change this outlook, though the 1962 coup presaged a new watershed in the history of Muslim/non-Muslim relations in Burma, with the country’s Muslim community being seen as outcasts by the ruling regime until recently, in deed if not in name.

The Burmese Hajj fits into this narrative in several ways. Though the specific details of these Indian Ocean voyages from Burma to the Hejaz are lost in time, we do know that by the mid-nineteenth century it was a normal, possibly even annual occurrence for Burmese Muslims to visit the sites of their Prophet. These sojourns are probably far older considering the ancient nature of Islam on Arakan’s coasts and the prevalence of the maritime trade routes. Commercial channels, this time of the overland, mule-caravan variety, also brought hundreds of thousands of Chinese Muslims from Yunnan into Burma over the centuries, diversifying these older Islamic communities. Indian merchants followed later in the late colonial age. Though the Hajj is open to any Burmese Muslim regardless

of which of these communities they hail from, in the post-independence age the realities of rule in the country have made it extremely difficult for Muslims to depart on this sojourn, the fifth pillar of their faith. Surveillance, discriminatory policies, corruption, poverty, and displacement have all ensured until recently that the numbers are **(p.104)** a trickle, rather than a flood. Though philanthropic organizations based in the Persian Gulf emirates and occasional (highly publicized) programs of the Burmese regime itself allow for some Burmese Muslims to make the trip, the lived experience of the Hajj is still only that of a tiny minority in this troubled country. One hopes that these channels may one day open again more fully, so that more of Burma's Muslims may perform this, the longest journey of a Muslim life well lived.

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Notes:

(1.) For the purposes of this paper I use Burma and Myanmar interchangeably.

(2.) This landscape has recently been christened as “Zomia” by Willem van Schendel, James Scott, and others who have taken a broad, comparative interest in this high-altitude terrain. The most recent expression of scholarship on Zomia is Scott (2009). For the cross-border caravan trades of this era, see Tagliacozzo (2004).

(3.) Public Records Office, Foreign Office/Confidential Print (hereafter, PRO/FO/CP): Gov. Gen India to Marquis of Salisbury, May 11, 1876, [reprinted in Kenneth Bourne, et al., eds. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, vol. 26, part I, series E (Lanham, MD: University Publications of America, 1995), 122.

(4.) I am grateful to William Clarence Gervaise Smith of SOAS/London for alerting me to this information, which I have since reconfirmed elsewhere; personal communication, March 12, 2007. The British were sporadically good about getting Burmese Muslims to Mecca too, and sometimes less good at this, as period reports from the British Library suggest. See P/2184: British Burma Home Proceedings, January to June, 1884, and P/2662: British Burma, Mil. and For. Proceedings, 1886. Also see Singha (2009) on the larger picture of the transport of indigent Hajjis from throughout Britain’s Asian possessions.

(5.) Public Records Office, Foreign Office/Confidential Print (hereafter, PRO/FO/CP): “Affairs of China, Corea, Japan, and Siam: In Continuation of Memorandum of January 1, 1899, Confidential Paper #7197,” [reprinted in Kenneth Bourne, et al., eds. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, vol. 26, part I, series E, (Lanham, MD: University Publications of America, 1995), 268.

(6.) “Myanmar Warns Hajj Pilgrims to Steer Clear of Politics in Mecca,” http://www.monstersandcritics.com , (December 10, 2007).

(7.) Also see the Asia Watch report “Burma: Forced Labor,” (1992).

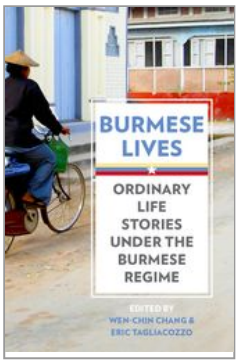
(8.) Muslim migrants were wading across the Moei River in 1990, usually a few kilometers north or south of the combined Thai/Burmese checkpoint; many of these refugees were already fleeing the crackdowns of 1988/89.

(9.) There is a long literature on ethnicity being used to “exclude” as much as it is used to “include.” Gupta and Ferguson’s volume summarizes many of these arguments.

(10.) This fact was particularly painful to this man; had he known that the *Tatmadaw* would institute such a rule, he said, he never would have allowed his son to leave for Yangon.

(11.) Charity toward poor and hungry pilgrims (usually from less wealthy countries of the Muslim world) is commonly practiced during the Hajj. This does not make it any easier, though, not knowing where your next meal may come from while you are on the pilgrimage.

(12.) It was quite amazing to hear of some of the contacts possessed by Muslim in Burma, some from even (apparently) the most straightened circumstances. Family members from many of these clans got out of Burma before 1962. Such contacts are still very important.



Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime
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Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199335039
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.001.0001

Recounting, Resistance, and Reflection

an analysis of a burmese classical musician's narrative

Hsin-chun Tasaw Lu

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.003.0006

Abstract and Keywords

Hsin-chun Tasaw Lu focuses on music in the life of one individual, U Thein Aung (a pseudonym), who is an ethnic Rakhine now living in Yangon as a professional gemologist. In another aspect of his life, he is a sophisticated musician of *thachìn gyì*, a centuries-long Burmese court tradition now held in high national regard. Lu argues that while certain economic, political, and cultural forces have maintained a hegemonic hold over much of post-1988 Yangon's life, some thachìn gyì musicians have sought their own solutions to retain control of their musical lives and identities. Though choosing to detach himself from any public performance and state-supported programs of his professional counterparts, U Thein Aung maintained a self-identity as a thachìn gyì musician through contacts with transnational Western knowledge, and with foreign ethnographers. The protagonist thus created a self-contained musical world.

Keywords: thachìn gyì, detach, self-contained musical world

Introduction: Writing Musical Lives, Focusing Self-narratives

EARLY ANTHROPOLOGICAL and ethnomusicological literature on non-Western traditions showed little academic interest in individual musicians. Musical phenomena were then often regarded as "typical products of the larger social organism" (Rees 2009), and their makers were considered voiceless norm fabricators. Since the early 1990s, ethnomusicology has witnessed vibrant discussions about the approach and contested it. The response signals a growing awareness among Western ethnomusicologists of the issues related to

ethnographical representation and individual agency. As a result, many ethnomusicologists have begun to view individual-centered ethnography as an inspiration, and shifted their approach from a top-down, norm-oriented, and structural functionalistic perspective to a bottom-up, experience-based, and interpretive perspective. Today, writing about individual musicians finds expression in wide-ranging discourses for constructing musical knowledge. The life stories, biographies, and even utterances of both renowned and unknown musicians are used to develop a musical genre, a musical culture, and a musico-social history. Some are used to shed light on the emotions and social agency of the individuals, as well as their positions in society or in the global system at large (e.g., Stock 1996, 2009; Danielson 1997; Rice 2003; Wong 2004; Rees ed. 2009).

This intellectual shift has also benefited the study of Burmese music. Stemming from the ethnomusicologists' common ethnographic experiences **(p.110)** gained through long-term studies of remarkable musical carriers in the field, specialists in Burmese music have found that many maestros have lived extraordinary lives. The ethnomusicologist Ward Keeler's essay "But Princes Jump: Performing Masculinity in Mandalay" (2005) emphasizes the significance of individuality, agency, and subjectivity in his research. He primarily takes on gender issues by showcasing the embodiment of machismo exemplified by Ko Naw Wei, a versatile male star of a Burmese classical melodramatic (*zat*) troupe. As Keeler observes, stars like Ko Naw Wei represent an autonomous agency that is markedly unfulfilled in real life under the current Burmese regime. These artists have developed an increasingly aggressive, modern, pop/rap style, which serves as an enactment of their autonomy in countering the socially constructed performativity of gender.[1]

Following the current intellectual trend, this chapter presents the life story of U Thein Aung, an exponent of a Burmese court-derived musical heritage known as *thachìn gyì*. Despite his lack of fame on a national scale, he is an exceptional thachìn gyì practitioner. Given the fact that this tradition is now held in high national regard because of intense politicization, I illuminate how U Thein Aung has managed to develop ways of securing an apolitical space for self-expression over the last two decades. The focus of this study might be somewhat different from the approaches in other chapters in this volume. Rather than using a biographical format as a way to construct knowledge, I analyze U Thein Aung's self-narrative and description of his life experiences, and weave the accounts into a broader understanding of this tradition as well as a thachìn gyì identity.

My first encounters with U Thein Aung were purely musical. His thachìn gyì music, played on the *pattala* (the Burmese xylophone), *tayàw* (the Burmese three-stringed fiddle), and the *saùng* (the Burmese harp), provided the everyday aural backdrop in the building where I stayed during my visits to Yangon from 1999 to 2002. I began conducting in-depth interviews and studying Burmese

musical theory and harp with him on a daily basis in late 1999, continuing until now (2010). Since the beginning, he has always impressed me as an excellent self-narrator with a wide musical knowledge and cosmopolitan worldview. Yet, in contrast to contemporary Burmese thachìn gyì exponents, he lives a peculiarly isolated musical life. U Thein Aung's unique position has kept me wondering: How does a somewhat antisocial musician link his self-concept to an imagined musical community? This is particularly salient in the thachìn gyì **(p.111)** context, where the community of musicians defines the individual performer both musically and socially. I speculate that, under socially, economically, and politically adverse circumstances like the current situation in Burma, many non-Western intellectuals have chosen to withdraw from the public realm. They have developed a defensive "independent mode"[2] of self-construction, which is characterized as individualistic and autonomous. To a certain extent, those who embrace this "independent mode" can identify themselves subjectively "within" the self, without referring the self to any social relationships or seeking the recognition of others. Antisocial musicians can therefore identify themselves and master their music by withdrawing from unwanted social and political influences. Some might even reinforce an awareness of this self-driven power in order to bolster the notion of being one's own master—a form of empowering oneself in a largely powerless situation. U Thein Aung's musical identity exemplifies this concept of personal autonomy well. In fact, he applies the words of the renowned cellist Pablo Casals to himself: "Music must be my slave; I am not its slave."[3]

I am aware of a narrative politics. Despite an apparently self-contained musical identity, U Thein Aung's narrative provides a platform for him to construct his self in relation to society at large. As noted by Elinor Oches and Lisa Capps: "Narrative interfaces self and society, constituting a crucial resource for socializing emotions, attitudes, and identities, developing interpersonal relationships, and constituting membership in a community" (1996: 19). Narratives of the self also refer to an ideological process by which certain social powers influence how the "plot" is structured. "Narrative 'plots,' then, are not only imagined and created in light of the disposition of social power, but also form a means of discourse through which the ideological basis of that power may be recalled or redefined" (Stock 1996: 36). A conscious narrator of his selfhood, U Thein Aung keeps a diary, tells stories and relates historical events, writes articles, plays music, and pursues a variety of other creative **(p.112)** outlets, such as painting. Through an analysis of his various narrative genres,[4] I unfold the social power and ideologies behind his "organized" plots. While certain politico-economic forces have maintained a hegemonic hold over much of life in post-1988 Yangon, U Thein Aung's self-narratives demonstrate how he has created a self-contained musical world. In this article, music, a sequence of organized sounds, is also regarded as a genre of narrative because it uncovers stories of oppressed emotions that language refuses to, or is unable to,

articulate. This is especially true of musicians whose modes of self-expression are somewhat compromised by hegemonic norms. Thus, it is crucial that we examine various genres of musicians' narratives to gain a better understanding of their thoughts and behavior.

Thachìn Gyì: The Musician and the Music

U Thein Aung, an ethnic Rakhine, grew up in Taung-goat, a village in Arakan State on Burma's west coast. He now lives in Yangon, Burma's former capital, and has been a professional gemologist for nearly two decades. Every afternoon, one can find him sitting on the sidewalk of Shwe Bon Thar Street for a few hours amongst crowds of gem brokers and gold traders. While waiting for business, the merchants chat, play chess, and drink Burmese tea. In this public context, he hardly seems a rarity. Indeed, few people outside his family, neighbors, and friends in the musical circle know that, in another aspect of his life, he is a sophisticated intellectual "in search of wisdom" (his words) and a remarkable musician of the thachìn gyì tradition.

U Thein Aung has never pursued music as a profession, even though he resolutely decided at the early age of nineteen to devote his leisure time to thachìn gyì music. He had to give up pencil drawing, which he also enjoyed. He learned to play the *balwei* (the end-blown flute), followed by the mandolin, pattala, and tayàw. Subsequently, he concentrated on playing the tayàw. In the past, rather than engage extensively in typical thachìn gyì social practices that would gain public renown, he often delighted in playing with peers and taking lessons from teachers in a more private setting. As a bibliophile, he also devoted a great deal of effort to the scholarly study of thachìn gyì. To obtain a well-rounded comprehension of this musical form, he learned a multitude of thachìn gyì songs of all types, and thereby gained an understanding of both the musical and extra-musical aspects (i.e., literary, historical, artistic, **(p.113)** and aesthetic aspects) of the songs. In the late 1970s, he was known in a small local musical circle as a "song collector," and was later recognized as one of the very few Yangon musicians who knew the entire thachìn gyì song repertoire in the authoritative songbook Mahagita.

In the 1980s, he attained extraordinary achievements in his professional life, including an MA in philosophy and practical training in law. He then served as an advocate lawyer for Burma's Supreme Court. At that time, his approach to music was philosophical, scientific, and apolitical. However, during the political turmoil that followed the massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in 1988, he stopped working as a lawyer. The disastrous political events caused him to despair. He became an alcoholic, fell ill, and felt suicidal. Eventually, his sense of family responsibility motivated him to seek treatment and quit alcohol. He was prescribed anti-depressants and his health began to improve. Then, his professional life also moved in a starkly different direction because, in 1993, he decided to work as a gemologist. Being self-employed helped him gain a sense of

freedom. By only working a few hours a day, he was able to hold control over his time and cultivate his musical artistry to a very high level of “serious leisure.”[5]

Since the late 1980s, U Thein Aung has shunned public performances and the state-supported programs of his professional counterparts, challenging their popular aesthetic ideologies of a modern performance. A popular sophisticated thachìn gyì performance demands an ideal musical norm of heterophonic playing, in which the performers collectively narrate a theme, that is, more than one musician articulates the same melody, but each musician gives an individual interpretation of the music.[6] To cater to a highly commercialized market influenced by European art music, thachìn gyì has become a genre that demands a high degree of virtuosity. While performing thachìn gyì, each musician must excel himself/herself. However, being a “refined-style thachìn gyì”[7] **(p.114)** master, U Thein Aung counters these musical ideals of collectivism and virtuosity. His deeply held aesthetic, apolitical, and anticommercial views are framed in his narratives. The views reflect his notions of isolationism and simplicity that can be read as resistance to the repressive politico-economic vicissitudes of postsocialist Burma. That is, in recounting his autobiographical stories and explaining his self-view, he has sought his own solutions to the ideological push of those with politico-economic power in order to retain control of his life and musical identity. This unique lifestyle and way of thinking lay overt claim to his subjectivity. As “silent resistance” to the political and economic shifts, his embrace of these notions has given him the relative freedom to create new ways of understanding, interrogating, and reconstructing the thachìn gyì musical tradition without the oversight of nationalistic and economic powers.

Isolationism as Resistance: Challenging the Norms of Awards and Appellations, Pride and Prestige

U Thein Aung’s notion of isolationism has strengthened his sense of self empowerment. For such instigation the year 1988 was unquestionably a turning point. The socialist leader General Ne Win (r. 1962–1988) then just stepped down, followed in 1990 by the refusal of the successive new military cadre to hand over power after the landslide victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi in multiparty legislative elections. Those years had witnessed social unrest and uprisings over political oppression by the military government, leaving U Thein Aung and other citizens with substantial mental distress. While many people used verbal form for emotional expression, musicians like U Thein Aung initiated musical projects to emancipate themselves from anguish. As Heather Laing suggests, music (and musical behaviors, I might add), “in the dynamic and melodramatic relationship between expression and repression, occupies a potentially quasi-independent position. It constitutes a narrative-thematic element, a non-denotative but highly meaningful langugage in itself” (2007: 14). U Thein Aung’s unique behaviors and first-person musical narration, indeed, offer ideal ways to examine such position, and

observe his self empowerment in resisting to the politicization of everyday musical life.

To legitimize the illicit action, the ruling junta that then ruled the country has aggressively implemented nation-building projects. These have resulted in dramatic changes to the previous musico-ecological system. Since the early **(p. 115)** 1990s, the government has funded the arts in order to shape a national profile of Burmese "traditional" arts. The stated objective is to improve the nation's prestige and preserve Myanmar's cultural heritage. Aided by tourism projects (e.g., "Visit Myanmar Year" in 1996) and the selective opening up of businesses to foreign investment, this ideology promotes a different nationalistic scheme from that of the former regime: one attuned to the global environment. This rationale has permeated the state-controlled media and led to the foundation of the University of Culture and the Hso-ká-yeì-tì[8] Competition (The Music and Dance Competition), both of which were established in 1993.

The University of Culture and the Hso-ká-yeì-tì Music and Dance Competition are oriented toward fostering national unity with a patriotic Myanmar identity. Scholars observe that, since their founding, "Burma's literary, artistic, and musical communities struggle to express, in politically allowable forms, the difficulties of self-expression and a sense of personal identity within the framework of a militarized public domain" (Skidmore 2005: 14). Many professional classical musicians have thus had to change their lifestyles by either conforming with state policies to earn a living under government patronage, or by becoming semi-professionals and having two careers simultaneously.

Most musicians are now associated with the Hso-ká-yeì-tì Competition. Winning awards in the competition or being appointed as a judge typically engenders a great deal of pride. Musicians usually place the competition's certificates and medals in the most prominent places at home or display them on album covers as symbols of musical excellence in order to boost their reputations and record sales. It seems that they are not bothered by the overt nationalism played out in the competition's agenda and ideology. In addition, the history of the competition reveals that a growing number of Burmese musicians are pursuing recognition at the national level. When the competition was launched in 1993, there were only 284 contestants nationwide. A decade later, the competition became a compulsory intra-school activity starting at the township level among all state schools, and a fine was imposed on schools that did not participate. As a result, 2,445 contestants performed at the state level in 2003 (May Thandar Win 2003). State news coverage of the event showcased these statistics to glorify the national cultural identity.

(p.116) This overwhelming nationalistic representation of music does not go unchallenged, but such challenges must be made silently in public due to Burma's sensitive political climate. As an amateur musician, U Thein Aung has chosen another path, that is, isolationism, as an act of defiance. In making this lifestyle choice, he has removed himself from current professional practices described above, which are tightly linked to the military regime's agenda. His self-narrative illuminates his isolationistic ideology, which questions the current thoughts surrounding awards and appellations, as well as national pride and prestige. Previously, such symbols were governed by customs, so U Thein Aung views the current system of patronage as a "distortion" of the nation's values. He said:

> I want to do things based on my own choice by being an outsider to this "playground." Prizes, reputations, titles, being a competition judge, and so forth do not attract me, as I know this game: being anti-government will be punished, whereas obeying the government will be rewarded. (Interview with the author, June 2006)

U Thein Aung also manages to exploit the political symbols while still expressing his resistance. He keeps a statue of Socrates, the Greek sage, in a private place to "silently" voice his repugnance with the national Hso-ká-yeì-tì Competition. Making a pun on the competition's name and that of the Greek philosopher, he said, "I have a *Socrates* \'sä-krə-ˌtēz\ at home; no need to participate in *Hso-ká-yeì-tì*" (2002).

In addition to earning reputations in Hso-ká-yeì-tì, his deep sense of isolationism also led him to counteract to other forms of social recognition. When thachìn gyì musicians attain a reputation for high virtuosity, their names are transformed to reflect this mastery. In honor of their exalted artistry, the masters' names are prefixed with certain titles as a mark of their particular musical styles or status. This custom can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. At the end of a presentation, excellent performers received rewards from the royal family or dignitaries (Singer 1995: 33). These "official" titles were usually metaphors. For example, U Maung Maung Gyi (1855–1933), the last court harpist, was given the title Deiwa-Einda ("Heavenly Musician") as an honor (Williamson 2000: 21); he was then known as Deiwa-Einda U Maung Maung Gyi. In the first half of the twentieth century, the highest appellation given to a musician in recognition of his/her artistry was *a-linga-kyaw-swa* ("excellent prosodist"), an official title whose holder was honored by the government's acknowledgement. This official mark of recognition no longer exists, **(p.117)** but certain court customs still remain (e.g., the use of the honorific, *sein*[9]), and new credentials are created regularly. Now sundry socially constructed appellations have come into being and are interwoven with the relationships between the musicians and the wider social context in which they are known. These range from a prefix used generally for certain types of musicians to a

specific title that refers to a particular maestro. Common identifiers denote the genre of music they have mastered, the musical instrument they play, a famous technique they have developed, or the place where they were born or reared.[10] Some appellations are created or employed for manipulative purposes to gain commercial or national recognition. For example, one young professional drum-circle player highlights his overwhelmingly nationalistic sentiments by adopting the name “Myanma Pyi Kyauk Sein” (Myanmar national jade).

U Thein Aung, in the face of such a musical arena, responds by saying, “I have no titles, so I am powerless, but I have nothing to lose.” and “I am neither a harpist nor a violinist. I am nothing, but remember—nothing is everything.” By referring to himself as “nothing,” he is actually identifying with the idea of “zeroism” in Zen Buddhism, implying his probable maximum achievements with minimum means. Since he isolated himself from the public, performance-centered domain and the politicized musical arena—the so-called “playground”—he has been able to gain control of his time and space. He has also become autonomous with a certain freedom for self-expression. Because he eschews the playground, where appellations and national prizes are commercially and nationally encoded, his music is not restrained by any profit-based industrial control or national ideology. To U Thein Aung, being without titles means that “nothing is everything.”

Simplicity as Resistance: Toward an Authentic and Anticommercial Outlook

In modern Burma, new musico-cultural phenomena have shaped musicians’ and audiences’ experiences, perceptions, lifestyles, and worldviews toward a **(p. 118)** more Western-oriented, commercialized, and modern outlook. Against this background, classical performing artists often have to compromise their aesthetic standards and their integrity in order to embrace audiences’ evolving tastes. As an intellectual, U Thein Aung has attempted to interrogate the thachìn gyì tradition that has been affected by this process.

The Zen Buddhist philosophy that he embraces in his self-narratives also exemplifies his intellectual position. This makes his music sound “simple,” or less ornamented, to his musical peers. The internationally renowned thachìn gyì singer Daw Yi Yi Thant and other skilled instrumentalists have commented on this characteristic. Their criticism stems from the value placed on virtuosity in thachìn gyì performances that began in the late 1930s.[11] Catering to the demand for high virtuosity among thachìn gyì musicians, “masters” are now expected to exhibit competitive qualities and showmanship in their playing. As a result, the nature of U Thein Aung’s music, which is thematically centered and straightforward, seems “simple” to most virtuosos. Having worked with the best instrumental virtuosos,[12] Daw Yi Yi Thant thus finds U Thein Aung’s violin accompaniment to her vocals less melismatic and therefore too plain for her.

In response to his peers' criticism of his "simplicity," U Thein Aung defends his plainer style of playing by advocating a historical authenticity that can be traced back to composers in the eighteenth century. He says,

> There is a revolutionary history in relation to Burmese music and musicians' playing techniques. Modern Burmese instrumentalists only focus on virtuosic displays, but highly embellished music is not what U Sá [the great thachìn gyì composer of the Konbaung Dynasty 1752–1885] wanted to hear. An ideal Burmese music performance should articulate both rests and themes clearly. So what I play usually omits the non-essential notes. When people's living standard goes high, they become restless.[13]

These words convey his desire to seek "authentic" sounds and his resistance to modernity in music. By espousing U Sá's authority as a composer, U Thein **(p. 119)** Aung emphasizes the "uncontaminated" and the "primitive" quality of his playing, in stark contrast to his contemporaries' complex sounds. Although he often expresses this idea of "simplicity" to his thachìn gyì peers and students at the University of Culture, U Thein Aung respects other musicians' decisions to strive for virtuosity. However, he argues that such displays have a limited place in the music: "Musicians should show off their virtuosity in solo parts, not when the work requires collaboration with singers."[14] This statement also highlights the norm whereby the leading role in a Burmese ensemble is taken by the singer, not the instrumentalists.

Apart from the search for authenticity, U Thein Aung also elaborates on his notion of anticommercialism. He narrated an experience he had in 2005 to convey his thoughts on this issue to his students, close friends, family, and me:

> I played like a beggar. Once, when I was at home playing the violin alone in the evening, two Western girls stopped in front of my house at 11:45 pm and listened to my music. They danced to the music for five minutes. When I finished playing, they clapped. Unlike Burmese people, they didn't feel self-conscious or embarrassed. Eventually they said "Bravo!" [He lifted his eyebrows and continued.] But they didn't give me any money. I felt sad. One of the girls came back the next day and asked to hear my "performance" again. I simply told her, "Please excuse me; it's my time to read."[15]

This anecdote unfolds the layers of various ideologies and the irony of work. It entangles U Thein Aung's views of the commercialized "performance," autonomy, and cultural discrepancies. To begin with, his self remained purely his own until the two "intruders" arrived. The fact that he could recall the exact time shows that he was well aware of the dynamics shifting suddenly from an isolated individual to "being-in-the-world." The phrases "I played like a beggar"

and “They didn’t give me any money. I felt sad” are used sarcastically to reflect the values of the commercialized world of his professional counterparts. By linking himself to Burma’s current musical domain, he then delivered his idea of a commercialized “performance,” which is playing music with the expectation of payment and applause. In his assessment of such performances, he ascribes the resulting lack of artistic commitment to the overwhelming amount of **(p.120)** technology and new ideas that are now part of thachìn gyì performances. “Today, less than 20 percent of Burmese classical musicians are qualified because synthesized music has diminished the importance of skills and aesthetics.”[16] Indeed, synthesized thachìn gyì music is much preferred by patrons nowadays. Replacing an entire ensemble with a single keyboard player or a musical recording can help reduce costs, an important consideration when economic conditions are difficult.

U Thein Aung viewed the two Westerners’ perception of Burmese music as danceable and worthy of applause as unique and not entirely welcome. Many Western travelers in foreign countries view the local music they encounter as a “performance” or “commercial entertainment,” but the music might be contextualized in a nontouristic setting. U Thein Aung thus found the two Westerners’ touristic reaction intrusive because it commercialized his private moment and transformed an instance of personal expression into public entertainment. This was demonstrated by his refusal to give another “performance” the following day.

Interestingly, the sentence “Unlike Burmese people, they didn’t feel self-conscious or embarrassed” underlines the cultural differences between Burmese and Western music. At the time, U Thein Aung was playing variations of a passage from the song Pwe Kyeik Khin. His instrumental rendition of the song ranged between high pitch and low pitch, as well as faster and slower, according to his mood. Such music practice sessions are self-centered and secluded. For thachìn gyì musicians, playing alone allows free rhythm, which reflects flexible temporal values without a basic unit punctuated by the finger cymbal and the wooden block. It is certainly not regarded as dance music by the Burmese, but it was perceived differently by the Western tourists because, according to U Thein Aung, they danced without self-consciousness or hesitation. Because of the multilayered politics he perceived in the situation, when the foreign traveler requested another “performance” the next day, U Thein Aung chose to disengage himself and reclaim his autonomy by saying, “Please excuse me; it’s my time to read.”

Despite choosing to isolate himself from commercial musical circles, U Thein Aung evinces a desire to collaborate with other musicians. To achieve this, mediated thachìn gyì music has become a vehicle for him to retain collaborative creativity and connect with the thachìn gyì community at large. He plays the violin “alongside” a tape recording of a production performed by **(p.121)**

respected players, who are also his musical peers. Then, he records such music playing and sends copies to the players on the original recording. Playing with the tape recording allows him to improvise, and sending his recordings to other players allows him to convey his musical interpretation to his peers. When improvising, U Thein Aung normally adopts a technique called *yaw tì* ("playing complementary notes"). This conveys a sense of freedom and spontaneity when making music collaboratively. Yaw tì refers to a master musician's "playful" embellishments, which occur when the melodic theme is expressed by other musical instruments or the human voice, and when the musician is "in the mood." The performer plays notes that complement the theme, instead of playing the theme straight. The objective is to strengthen the effect of the resulting melodic and rhythmic contrast. U Thein Aung's simile vividly explains this skill: "It is like '*hnàn-pyù*' ('sprinkling sesame'), indicating the addition of small and superfluous touches to someone else's work just to show off one's knowledge or skill."[17] His usage of such artistic touches is also intended to challenge the current aesthetic preference for heavily loaded musical ornamentation in virtuoso displays.

Through his music and narratives, U Thein Aung has challenged the modern commercial reconstruction of the thachìn gyì tradition. Imbued with the ideas of historical authenticity and anti-commercialism, his narratives of self and his music express a strong sense of simplicity. Through such constant questioning of the reconstructed tradition, U Thein Aung maintains his identity as a thachìn gyì musician, regardless of his detachment from current thachìn gyì practices. By emphasizing his autonomy and escape from central control, his narratives and music have become vehicles for artistic expression, as well as acts of defiance.

Locally Rooted, Transnationally Routed

U Thein Aung's thachìn gyì identity was not only constituted at lower (individual and local) levels. Next, I attempt to explain how this antisocial musician has nonetheless participated in and helped promote the thachìn gyì tradition at the transnational level in recent years. Despite his locally rooted life, his artistic achievements and scholarly education have been enhanced through contacts with foreign ethnographers and Western knowledge. He has thus gained recognition in both local and international musical circles.

(p.122) U Thein Aung's musical sphere, though personal and deliberately distant from government influence, nonetheless involves connections with larger sociocultural flows. His musical knowledge base has been enriched through contact with colonial remnants, the influx of Western publications, the press (both local and international), and encounters with foreign ethnographers. He is unquestionably a cosmopolitan "without literal travel," to quote anthropologist James Clifford (1997: 28). The surviving British colonial educational system in Burma cultivated U Thein Aung's general knowledge of the outside world and, more significantly, his proficiency in English. This education laid the foundation

for him to develop a cosmopolitan worldview and adopt a scholarly approach that is influenced by two intellectual worlds. He has sought knowledge by reading all available publications (in English or Burmese), most of which he obtains from libraries and street stalls, as well as friends' gifts brought from abroad. Socrates' approach can be found in U Thein Aung's words, "I seek answers through a process of questioning."[18] This process underscores the ways in which he intellectually constructs his understanding of the thachìn gyì tradition. His scholarly pursuits are grounded in his experiences of music making.

His intellectual prestige was not acknowledged in scholarly or musical circles until relatively late in his life. Beginning in the late 1990s, his growing reputation brought him into constant contact with foreign ethnographers. Foreign researchers in a wide range of disciplines have visited U Thein Aung, including many Western scholars (e.g., Burmese literature specialist John Okell, ethnomusicologist Robert Garfias, and the French musicologist Ludivine Issafo). He has also assisted several foreign graduate students with their research projects by offering intensive instruction. Among them, a Japanese scholar of Burmese literature and I have both established deep teacher-student relationships with him through intensive study. In exchange, along with other scholars, we have given him a wealth of Western ethno/musicological literature (both theories and applications of the study of Burmese music) in appreciation of his teaching. Reading this literature has helped shape his identity as a self-labeled "Burmese ethno/musicologist."

Moving beyond personal encounters with foreign visitors U Thein Aung has embarked on a forward-looking project at the national level, namely, to establish ethno/musicological scholarship in Burma. In 2004, he published his first monograph on the subject, possibly the first for the nation, entitled "Introduction to Musicology." In the article, rather than dwell on "what musicology is," he **(p.123)** focuses on defining thachìn gyì by incorporating Western musicological perspectives into the theorization of thachìn gyì. In the latter part of the article, his encounters with different foreign ethnographers are discussed. He details the research projects, the researchers, and the challenges in those encounters. His narratives—beginning with labels such as "French lady," "Japanese girl," "Taiwanese… ."—map out a geocultural trajectory that he has enacted as a result of ongoing contacts between ethnographers and informants concerning Burmese music and its knowledge. Certain scholarly discourses on Burmese music have drawn on his "voice." The reinscription of U Thein Aung's "authority" and presentation at the global level thus helped form his identity as a musicologist. Such self-identification also triggered his passion for education. It led to his acceptance of an invitation to teach a course at the University of Culture (beginning in November 2005), when the launch of a postgraduate program in the music department required knowledgeable

teaching fellows as guest lecturers, or *pin-bat pyinya-shin* (“external specialist”).[19]

Rather than contradicting his long-term resistance to nationalistic projects, the post-graduate teaching position actually forged another facet of his musical identity. In a discussion about the term pin-bat pyinya-shin, U Thein Aung illustrated the importance of being “external” to the center of the state’s ruling power. This term situates him firmly in a position “outside” the political playground. For U Thein Aung, this is an unpaid, contract-free position that only requires him to teach one or two classes per month. This allows him a substantial amount of freedom to design the class without any institutional interference, so it is, to a great extent, free from administrative work and politicization. To help Burma’s new generation of musicians attain a more comprehensive understanding of the thachìn gyì tradition, he felt he had to compromise in order to be involved. By introducing Western-derived ethno/musicological approaches as well as new interpretations of thachìn gyì theories and appreciation, U Thein Aung has had an impact on the common understanding of the thachìn gyì tradition that has long been institutionally standardized. In other words, instead of educating the new generation of Burmese musicians about the musical skills needed to be thachìn gyì virtuosos, he has inspired them to develop scholarly thinking, intelligence, and a sense of freedom.

U Thein Aung has indeed forged a self-contained musical world around the authoritative center—his musical self. His extraordinary knowledge of Burmese music has come to signify the very essence of his power and dignity, **(p.124)** which is used to forcefully counter different forms of authority. Such resistance is also embodied in his storytelling of others’ lives. Through wide reading, he has woven the life stories of internationally famed musicians into the telling of his own life experience. For hours on a monsoon day in 2006, U Thein Aung told me the life stories of three world-class European classical musicians. Pablo Casals (1876–1973), whom he described as an anti-Nazi and pro-democracy Spanish cellist, tops his list of “great musicians.” U Thein Aung explained how Casals refused to play in countries that recognized the regime of the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. The second musician is Luwig van Beethoven (1770–1827). He had a great disdain for aristocratic authority and the social hierarchy which regarded court musicians as entertainers for royalty. Beethoven maintained his dignity as a musician and, unlike “obedient” musicians, he would stop playing if the audience did not pay full attention to his music at soirées. The last musician is the musical prodigy Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791). U Thein Aung admires him less than Casals and Beethoven because throughout his life Mozart, who was a touring entertainer under royalty’s patronage, appeared obligated and “unfree” to U Thein Aung. Clearly, the life stories of these renowned musicians inspire U Thein Aung. In the face of various forms of authority in his local life, he affirms his views by saying, “In this neighborhood, I like to be

isolated. I do not belong to any Rakhine-related associations, or any professional bodies, such as legal organizations and musical associations. Nor am I a member of any groups.” Through references to the lives of these significant musicians, he silently indicates his overlapping life experiences and views about authority.

A Reflective Self: The Negotiable Practice after the Calamity of the Nargis Cyclone

U Thein Aung’s recent musical practices might seem odd given his previous isolated lifestyle. When I returned to Burma during the dry season of 2009, to my surprise, U Thein Aung had begun to slip into alcoholism again after he stopped drinking in the late 1980s. During my stay, his musical practices posed an absurdity. He became an occasional patron of the modern musical shows staged at local beer bars where thachìn gyì musicians are hired to perform Burmese-style songs.[20] Commercial symbols in the shows, such as Burmese **(p. 125)** pop, girls pretending to be models on a catwalk, loud synthesized music, and disco lighting that were previously all intolerable for him suddenly seemed less unbearable. Furthermore, his behavior resembled that of the affluent Burmese patrons. He began to participate in applause and presenting garlands to the vocalists to acknowledge their singing. On one visit to the bar, he spent nearly $100 USD by treating his friends whose monthly salaries as government officers then were only amount to about 20,000 Burmese kyats (about $20 USD). He also spent several nights wandering the neighborhood, contemplating, and giving money to child prostitutes. His behavior seemed even more ironic as his livelihood had suffered greatly from Burma’s economic depression and his gem business had come to a standstill. To sustain his family, he had to sell gold and jewelry that his wife brought from her family as a dowry. Such extravagant spending raised questions among his friends and even sparked disputes in his family, but he remained silent.

His eccentric behavior, as he later explained to me, was a response to the social issues that arose in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. After seeing so many cyclone survivors who had lost their jobs, property, and even families and had to relocate from the delta to central Yangon to look for work, he suffered severe mental distress. He then chose alcohol as a solution. In his words,

> “My lifestyle is so meaningless. My surroundings have come to a very modern stage, but very foolish. . . . Today the surroundings are all to do with money and business. If you don’t have money you lose all social dignity. Human beings became slaves of money. . . . Yet, the only way the cyclone survivors and some *thachìn gyì* tradition carriers can make a living is to perform in such places. They don’t look happy performing there, but they have dignity in their eyes. Knowing that the bar owners were

exploiting the musicians, I went there to support the musicians directly, not to promote such businesses."[21]

U Thein Aung's choice of lifestyle is self-reflective. He is well aware that his long-term isolationism as a resistance to the "foolish social surroundings" is less **(p.126)** meaningful in post-Nargis Burma. In the face of sizeable forced human migration, homelessness, and unemployment, as well as the great disparity between the wealthy patrons and the exploited musicians, he also sees the dignity of these musicians who perform for survival. He then turned his isolationist manner into a more humanitarian stance under the guise of a patron in order to support these financially unprivileged musicians. In this process, he had to negotiate between his isolated self, or the inner self, and being part of the commercial community.

The cyclone also affected U Thein Aung's teaching work at the University of Culture. This did not result from disastrous politico-economic antecedents, but rather from a disingenuous arts-promotion project under the national institutionalization program. After Nargis, the number of enrollees in the postgraduate music course declined dramatically. When the one-year program was launched in 2005, there were eighteen students; however, in 2010, there were only five. As of the year 2013, the number became four. This critical drop was due to the realization among young thachìn gyì musicians that earning a certificate from the program did not enhance one's financial security. Many were still unemployed and living in poverty. Only a few outstanding graduates had been recruited by the teaching faculty at the University of Culture, or found jobs at the radio and television stations. Some were oftentimes hired to perform in villages for traditional festivals such as *zat pwe, shin-byu* (Boy's novice to a monkhood), and other Buddhist ceremonies. Most eventually became civil servants doing work that was completely unrelated to the arts. Since government salaries are normally not sufficient to support a family, musicians take second jobs, such as performing in tourism-centered restaurants and hotels, or bars.[22] In the post-Nargis era, other than the lack of vocational support with a secure salary, the severe economic depression at the regional level has discouraged musicians from pursuing a higher education in music. The decreasing number of students, as well as the state's alleged economic difficulty in supporting arts education has thus compromised U Thein Aung's teaching work. His class was originally scheduled once a week. It later became biweekly, and now it is once a month. In spite of the difficulties, U Thein Aung's passion for teaching is undiminished. He still goes to teach whenever he receives a request from the school.

Despite the frustration with the deteriorating situation at the state-run music schools, U Thein Aung is optimistic about thachìn gyì's future. As he **(p.127)** observes, the musical heritage is not maintained by state-sponsored projects. Instead, it is the musicians who have revitalized thachìn gyì music with spirit,

passion, and creativity; and a large number of them have never been involved in the state's music education system. He says:

> "The *thachìn gyì* tradition will not disappear soon! In the Konbaung era, there was no state-sponsored musical education. Neither U Sá nor Pyinsi Mintha [the princess] attended performing arts schools like the University of Culture, but they still became renowned composers. Clearly, without state support, the *thachìn gyì* tradition will still be sustained through other ways. Remember, it is an oral tradition.[23]

U Thein Aung's words reaffirm that his ideal model of musical education is analogous to the situation in the Konbaung court. Although our understanding of the court's musical education is hampered by the scarcity of historical evidence, U Thein Aung's viewpoint tends to portray it as a quintessential pedagogy.

U Thein Aung has resolutely incorporated court-derived ideas into modern thachìn gyì teaching practice. For example, learning to sing the song is one of the foundational ideas of U Thein Aung's teaching. He notes that, traditionally, learning any instrumental thachìn gyì piece should start with learning to sing the song. The resulting systematization of thachìn gyì learning emphasizes five basics: lyrics (*sa thà*), theme (*kyàw-yò*, the "backbone"), metric patterns (*sì* and *wà*), the location of the final note of a stanza (*than kya*), and style and gestures (*han tà*). This approach draws on his extensive learning experiences on the harp, the xylophone, the violin, and mandolin with at least fifteen teachers in Yangon, as well as from playing a wide range of musical styles and forms. Even though these five concepts lie within thachìn gyì practitioners' common practices, musicians do not usually attach any pedagogical significance to them.

Indeed, U Thein Aung's approach resolves the centuries-long mystery of how the thachìn gyì legacy can be passed down through text-only songbooks. He believes it is also the way that thachìn gyì can be sustained, even if the number of students in the state school is decreasing in the post-Nargis era. Today, thachìn gyì pupils outside the state music school system still follow the conventional learning method based on these basic concepts as well as oral transmission, which the state school has neglected, or abandoned. The fact is **(p.128)** that, among these basics, students can only learn the lyrics from thachìn gyì songbooks; the rest of the fundamentals have to be passed down by teachers through oral transmission. According to U Thein Aung, an ideal performance of a particular thachìn gyì song entails full comprehension of its five basics. By understanding the meaning of the poetic lyrics, musicians project meaning and expression through their instrument playing. In addition, being familiar with the theme and the metric pattern provides knowledge of the skeletal structure, which instrumentalists can embellish and improvise. A teacher also insists on the right place where the final note (*than*) of a stanza should fall (*kya*). This is especially important given the current emphasis on virtuosic display, which often

obscures the metric pulse within a stanza, and because the tempi of thachìn gyì performances are flexible. Learning *than kya* thus helps the vocalist and instrumentalists achieve identical placement of the last note in a stanza.[24] As well as the basics mentioned above, teachers convey various expressive techniques and idioms to their pupils through *pazat-hsaing* (mouth music), a mnemonic system passed down for generations. As indigenous oral notation systems do not exist in Burmese musical traditions, Burmese musicians in the past developed a system for pedagogy. Called the *pazat-hsaing* system, it involves vocables that usually represent certain musical traits. Finally, it is necessary to generate the style and gestures (*han tà*) essential for different moments in a piece of music. I was taught two kinds of han tà: musical style and bodily style. Instrumental han tà either mimics or counters the Burmese singing style, depending on the dynamics required by particular phrases. Different musical instruments also have different musical han tà norms. For example, fleeting accents and grace notes, abrupt entrances and exists, and percussive striking sounds are common musical idioms for the drum-circle, harp, and piano. Meanwhile, bodily han tà is used to strengthen the visual collaboration that unfolds in different instruments' kinesthetic grooves.

Today, students in state music schools are not taught to play instruments by this process of gaining "five basics" knowledge because it is considered too time consuming. Although rote memorization is still essential to thachìn gyì learning, under the music standardization plan promoted by the university, music instructors have adopted a revolutionary idea that thachìn gyì should be written down using international staff notations because students can learn more efficiently by reading scores. U Thein Aung strongly objects to this idea **(p.129)** and has not followed the state-sponsored revolutionary ideology. Instead, he has attempted to convey the pedagogical "accuracy" and "ideal" of the five basics while talking with his students and musical peers.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored multiple ways that a serious amateur thachìn gyì musician has responded to the social, political, and economic changes in Burma. It explains how one artist has chosen to preserve his autonomous self by becoming—and identifying himself as—an isolated thachìn gyì practitioner, an engaged musicologist, a rebel, and a patron, all at the same time. My analysis of his self-narratives has demonstrated that, as an autodidactic intellectual, U Thein Aung strives to find a balance between being a master of his inner self and seeking ways that are deeply meaningful and significant to him as a thachìn gyì musician being-in-the-world. It is a constant negotiation since his social surroundings have changed drastically in recent decades.

At an individual level, despite his Rakhine ethnicity, he has nurtured a strong sense of musical identity as a thachìn gyì musician in this ethnically Burman tradition. His long-term focus on intellectual development and disengagement

from the publicly encouraged musico-cultural ideas has made his understanding of thachìn gyì diverge from that of his contemporaries. As a result, a new version of the thachìn gyì tradition has been constructed to promote apolitical, anti-commercial, and scholarly ideas. The model stands in stark contrast to its monolithic counterpart, that is, the standardized and performance-centered version controlled by the military regime at the national level. U Thein Aung's unique lifestyle of being "cosmopolitan,"[25] notwithstanding circumstanced and very different from the one of privileged classes,[26] has exposed him to sundry foreign music-related scholarly practices, **(p.130)** and helped him forge a sense of being a musicologist. By intervening in the representation of the thachìn gyì tradition, at the local level and the transnational level, he reaffirms and maintains his self-identity vis-à-vis thachìn gyì.

As of now, despite the fact that in early 2011 the military junta was dissolved due to the political reforms towards democracy, U Thein Aung's distress and alcoholic problem still continues. It owes to his witness to the helpless situations: the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The situation in Yangon's musical circles seems to him even deteriorating in despair. Although the University of Culture and the Hso-ká-yeì-tì Competition continue to annually produce new professional musicians, the number has decreased in a good deal due to people's understanding that there is barely enough jobs to go around. While the career of renowned thachìn gyì celebrities is still prosperous with high financial income, most new professionals and young prize-winners have struggled to make ends meet. Yet, he never gives up hope of perpetuating the thachìn gyì tradition. Through self-reflection, he has become engaged with the commercial activities in support of underprivileged post-Nargis musicians. He is also more aware of his unique position as an "external scholar," which gives him the freedom and agency to constantly interrogate the national construction of the thachìn gyì tradition. It is through such practices that U Thein Aung helps maintain and revitalize this centuries-old art form.

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Notes:

(1.) An in-depth discussion of gender performativity can be found in Judith Butler's work (1997).

(2.) Some psychologists have suggested that most non-Westerners, or researched "others," mold their self-consciousness into an interdependent mode, defining themselves through a certain social relationship with people around them. Their self-construal is thus interpreted as collective-, sociocentric-, contextual-, and relation-determined. This contrasts with the Western independent mode, which is seen as individualistic-, egocentric-, and autonomous-dominated (Marcus and Kitayama 1991: 226–230). U Thein Aung's case in my study has just negated this point. Notwithstanding his non-Western ethnic nature, he has molded himself towards an independent and autonomous selfhood with a reflexive mode, which enables him to shun the overpoweringly disturbing politicosocial environment in modern Burma.

(3.) Field notes: June 10, 2006.

(4.) Comprising a multitude of modes, such as stories and diaries, narratives are defined as "verbalized, visualized, and/or embodied framings of a sequence of actual or possible life events" (Ochs and Capps 1996: 19).

(5.) According to a leading psychologist's notion of amateurism, "serious leisure" refers to "a systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is substantial enough for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills or knowledge or both" (Stebbins 1992: 3).

(6.) The vocalist is typically accompanied by one, sometimes two, instrumentalists, such as a harpist or/and a violinist. This kind of small ensemble is essentially a contemporary form, since it did not become the state-standardized ideal until the mid-twentieth century. Previously, a larger ensemble of four or five musicians was the norm. It was actually a derivative of an ensemble form called "*anyeint waìng*" that was popular during the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885).

(7.) The performance of what I call "refined-style *thachìn gyì*" often involves a duet or trio. Such a small ensemble centers on the vocalist, who sings poetic lyrics while punctuating the rhythm with finger cymbals (*sì*) and a wooden block (*wà*).

(8.) In Burmese, *hso ká, yeì,* and *tì* mean "sing," "dance," "songwriting," and "instrumental playing" respectively.

(9.) The word *sein* (“diamond”) is a typical prefix attached specifically to the names of Burmese orchesetra *hsaìng* maestros. They bear some similarity to *Ustad* in Hindustani music (Neuman 1980: 32). The usage of *sein* carries courtly connotations: like titles, the kings also gave skilled instrumentalists gifts of jewels, arabesque patterns, or layers of gold-leaf as ornaments for their musical instruments. Certain ornaments were strictly regulated in accord with the court hierarchy. Diamonds were mostly given to the *hsaìng* to indicate their high ranking.

(10.) Examples include T*a*yàw U Tin Yi (“Violinist U Tin Yi”), the renowned mandolinist B*a*lat U Myint Soe (“U Myint Soe who is skilled in playing the *b**a**lat* style”), and the renowned harpist Inlay Myint Maung (“Myint Maung born in the Inlay area”).

(11.) Robert Garfias noted that virtuosity “has increasingly defined the performance of Burmese music since the late 1930s” in his online article *Tonal Structure in Burmese Music as Exemplified in the Piano Music of U Ko Ko*, http://www.research.umbc.edu/efhm/garfias/burma1.html , accessed June 23, 2007.

(12.) Such as legendary harpist U Myint Maung and pianist U Yee Nwe.

(13.) Interview with the author, July 17, 2006.

(14.) Field notes, June 17, 2006.

(15.) Interview with the author, November 20, 2005.

(16.) His diary, dated June 26, 2006.

(17.) Field notes, July 5, 2008.

(18.) Field notes, December 16, 2005.

(19.) *Pin-bat* means “external, foreign.” *Pinya-shin* is a general term used as an honorific to refer to specialists who have high-level skills, knowledge, or artistry.

(20.) During the late 1990s, Burma’s tourism campaign helped package th*a*chìn gyì to cater to the interests of cosmopolitans who consume commodified “national heritage.” At many tourist-oriented restaurants, new Yangon capitalists came to celebrate their contracts with their foreign investors, as documented by the French mainstream media in June 1997, http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199706/msg00362.html, accessed July 12, 2007. These businessmen were eager to display the grandeur and potential of “their” culture to their foreign friends (as exotic and unknown). However, such a celebration did not last long. The shuttering of these restaurants at the turn of the twentieth-first century marked the point when Burmese tourism came to a standstill. Since

then, thachìn gyì musicians have turned to local bars to find venues for their performances.

(21.) Field notes, June 29, 2009.

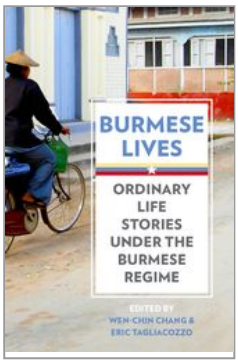
(22.) However, in 2005, Burma's capital was moved to Naypyidaw, about 200 miles north of Yangon. Most administrative employees have to leave their homes and second jobs to work in Naypyidaw.

(23.) Field notes, December 19, 2009.

(24.) U Thein Aung's explication of the five basics is retrieved from my field notes (November 17, 2005; July 13 and 14, 2006).

(25.) I have adopted James Clifford's concept of "travel" to denote this cosmopolitan experience (1997: 28). This "cosmopolitan" sense is particularly experienced by the people in the "Third World," who have a local/global sense without having actually traveled. This suggests an experience through social forces such as the mass media and local tourism that have brought intercultural people, things, and ideas to them.

(26.) "Beneath and spreading out beyond the imprimatur of military and political dominance, Rangoon remains to this day a rigidly stratified society where hierarchical social relations slice through the topography of modern nationhood to reveal deep scars of social inequality" (Skidmore 2004: 1). The politico-economic developments have selectively benefited many "upper-class" Yangon residents (businessmen, the military, and their families) over the past decade, further stratifying Burmese society.



Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime
Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo

Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199335039
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.001.0001

Dr. U Tin Win, Escape Artist 1

James C. Scott

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.003.0007

Abstract and Keywords

James Scott explores the life story of a physician who spent two years in the Wa headquarters area in the early 1990s. Apart from his medical profession, the protagonist, U Tin Win, is also a poet and songwriter, composing lyrics for popular bands in the 1970s and ’80s. Moreover, he is a comprehensive encyclopedia of American film and popular music. While politically active in Yangon during the 1980s, U Tin Win turned out to be profoundly apolitical when Scott met him. After having long conversations with U Tin Win, Scott came to realize that popular culture was his informant’s “way out,” his form of “internal migration.” Through his headlong and lifelong plunge into popular culture and its apolitical themes, the author explores the implications of this home remedy for political and cultural claustrophobia in general.

Keywords: Physician, poet, songwriter, escape artist, internal migration

I BEGIN WITH the lyrics from three of U Tin Win’s songs, composed largely in the 1970s and ’80s. Like the writings of Aung San, himself, they were written by the composer first in English and then translated into Burmese.

> **Look Before You Leap**
> Don’t try to cheat on those balance scales while selling your produce.
> Don’t try to nibble someone’s gold before you become a goldsmith.
> Don’t ever go to frightening heights while learning to fly.
> Don’t try to ignore the guiding Northern Star (Doo Wun)
> When you’re lost in the darkest night.
> You still have a duty in the society, even in places made up of people wearing masks and cheating one another.

No rights or wrongs, just sing the same old songs.
Pride comes before you fall, you know,
because if you fall no one will help you.
This I swore.

An Honest Smile

I was smiling lately, looking at things we've done
Winding up achievements here and there, sums of money earned and well spent?
Failures and successes come in most unexpected ways.
(p.133)
Winding up things, I can still manage an honest smile.
Battered and battle worn though I may be, I try to make things livelier when I'm down,
Watching the steps carefully when I'm up,
Let me just whisper to you that I can still manage an honest smile.

1001 Nights' Tales Recap

If you think this heap of haystacks is your golden bed, so be it.
If you think your humble hut is a shimmering palace, so be it.
I am not waiting for that genie in a crazy green dress to grant my wishes.
I've seen Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves.
Want to ride a magic carpet?

U Tin Win has written hundreds of songs. The lyrics above are, I believe, fairly representative of his oeuvre when he was churning out popular hits in the 1970s and '80s. They are personal, both abstract and modest, disabused and quietly affirming at the same time. To this English ear, they fall somewhere between the attention to concrete detail that marks poetry on the one hand and the slang and bravado that marks most successful pop music on the other. Above all, perhaps, they disavow large ambitions and wishful thinking.

Dr. U Tin Win is a doctor, a songwriter, a father, and husband, and, above all, an escape artist. Why escape artist? Let me begin an answer to that question with an account of another group of "escape artists" I once met and of whom U Tin Win reminded me.

The year after the Berlin Wall came down I found myself working on a remote ex-East German collective farm as a way of improving my German without sitting in Goethe Institute classes. I was a boring companion given my weak language skills and the farm boss was vaguely suspicious of my presence. Outside of the farm work, I was desperate to find opportunities for conversation. I finally fell in with a group of young high-school teachers who were happy to include me in their evening circle, especially since I paid for most of the alcohol. They were leading a summer program in a small park. But they weren't just *any* teachers. They taught Russian language and literature. As you might imagine,

they were in something of a panic to reinvent themselves, as the demand for "Russian studies" plummeted to zero the day after the wall fell.

Inclined initially to see them as ambitious would be apparatchiki now overtaken by events, I gradually realized that something far more interesting **(p.134)** was at play. They had all grown up in an isolated, claustrophobic shard of a much larger, contemporary German culture from which they were literally walled off. In this context, they seized on the one available cosmopolitan door remaining open to them: Russian literature. You could sense it in the passion with which they discussed Turgenev, Pushkin, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky. It was their way *out*, the richest plate on their intellectual menu, and they eagerly seized it. They *lived* in this world, a form of what some students of the Socialist Bloc called "internal migration," and now it was disintegrating.

Dr. U Tin Win is also an internal migrant, an "escape artist" of formidable talent. I originally thought of him for "Burmese Lives" because he had spent two years in the early 1990s as a public health doctor in the Wa-Burma Communist Party area. I imagined he would be a treasure trove of information about the Wa and the BCP. Instead he only wanted to talk about Western, specifically American, music, film, and popular culture. Much as I tried to direct our conversations back to Burma, medicine, and politics, he wrenched it back to songs and movies. As I pondered my loss of control over my interviews with him, I realized how fully he lives and breathes the world of film and music, how fully he "thinks" both ethically and aesthetically through those media, and just how much of his waking life he spends wholly absorbed in them. In the "ready-room" of the hospital, between seeing patients and operating, he sees films—many of them for the second and third time. On days off and in the evening when he isn't working, he's lost in music and film.

Any conversation we began would find him, in a minute or two, bringing up a movie scene or song lyric that seemed to him to illuminate the topic. He imagined at first, I suspect, that he had found a companion who would know and appreciate all his references, most of which were lost on his Burmese friends. I surely failed him because he far outdistanced me in his knowledge of popular music and Western films. His knowledge, I should add, was encyclopedic; he had a near photographic memory of the films he has seen and could minutely chronicle the succession of camera shots and dialog. It's the world in which he "lives" in both the literal and metaphorical sense of the word and he led me back into it, recalling for me lyrics and film scenes that I had either never known or else totally forgotten. The massive stream of pirated music and film available on every street corner helps keep him up-to-date.

He lives more, it seems, in this rich imaginary world than he lives in Burma. It is his cosmopolitan escape, his "way out," though he would not put it that way, his refuge, his connection with "what is going on" in the greater world outside his

life as a doctor in Mandalay, Burma. It goes without saying that **(p.135)** anyone might want to block out the steady privations and pressure of a plodding military dictatorship now in place for nearly half a century. He has done a very thorough job of it.

Provisions for Escape

Some of Win Tin's earliest memories are of Western film and song. During WWII Tin Win's father worked as an orderly and then a laboratory technician in a remote hospital staffed in part by Westerners and missionaries who had a projector and a few films. His father doted on these films, and presaging his son, later said that the song "Que sera sera" ("Whatever Will Be Will Be") (from the Doris Day film *The Man Who Knew too Much*, 1956) had become his personal philosophy. As a young boy (first standard student at Saint Peter's School in Mandalay)—his first present was a little cowboy outfit he treasured wearing while singing Gene Autry and Roy Rogers songs. Saint Peter's School itself was, one might say, something of an English-speaking, European, cultural and religious island of difference. It was run, he remembers, largely by the Silesian Order of Catholics, although a good many of the priests and nuns were Irish and Scottish. The boys (Burman, Indian, Sino-Burman, Eurasian, and Chinese) wore school uniforms: white shirts, khaki pants, and a green necktie with red stripes. Tin Win recalls the *Little Messenger* book he carried filled with questions and answers about the Creation, about the Great Flood and Noah's Ark, about the age of the earth, Joshua's conquests, the miracles of the saints, designed, no doubt, after the catechism classes. He remembers with some pride a pin he was awarded for reciting the correct answers.

The school itself was an institution of great colonial privilege. His father, working as a lab technician at Mandalay Hospital, and his mother, who also had little formal education, were nevertheless ambitious for their four children (three sons, of whom Tin Win is the eldest, and a daughter) and made enormous sacrifices to pay the fees to keep their sons in St. Peter's School.

As a top student at Saint Peter's with stellar examination results, Tin Win enrolled in medical school in Rangoon, the destination of many of the best students throughout the nation. His younger brothers also became doctors. In addition to training in surgery and anesthesiology, he became something of a specialist in waterborne diseases such as cholera and in public health administration, skills that would be important in his work along the border and in the highland minority areas. He met his wife, who is an ethnic Shan, when she was a second year junior in medical school in 1978 and he had just finished his internship and was serving as an assistant medical officer. His **(p.136)** permanent residence today is in Lashio, in Shan State, where his wife is politically prominent and maintains a medical practice.

Tin Win managed somehow to combine his medical education with an unabated interest in music composition and performance. He composed songs, sang, and played in bands as a guitarist at night and on weekends around Rangoon. He counts it as his great good fortune that, while in medical school, he was befriended by the Shan composer and musician Sai Kham Laik, along with his vocalist, Sai Saithe Seng. Sai Kham Laik, also a doctor as well as a guitarist, composer, and singer wrote mostly love songs and died tragically at a young age of a heroin overdose. So important was Sai Kham Laik to his musical development that he acknowledges, with a twinkle in his eye, that meeting him may have been at least as important as meeting his wife. He says it ironically but conveys, with the irony, a gauge of how vital music has been to his sense of self and achievement. If it were possible to have made a decent living solely from music, Tin Win believes he would have chosen to do so, but his anxieties over financial security in Ne Win's "socialist" Burma prevailed. He, nevertheless, steals as much time as possible from medicine, without neglecting his responsibilities, to devote to his first love(s): poetry, music and film.

Escape from What?

It is worth noticing that the world that fueled Tin Win's professional ascent and cultural imaginings as a young man has all but disappeared. Between 1962, when the New Win government took over for good, and 1964, the missionary and English medium schools were abolished, most private businesses were nationalized, and a system of press and cultural censorship was put, albeit erratically, in place. He notices ruefully that the standard of education plummeted immediately after the nationalization of the schools and that about half of his secondary school classmates, who were Indians, left the country altogether as their family's shops were seized. In his view, one shared by many older, educated Burmese, the entire school system, including university training and medical education, as well as the level of English language competence, have been irreparably damaged by short-sighted military rule.

Tin Win and I did not talk much directly about politics. He is politically aware but resolutely apolitical as much by temperament as by an abundance of caution. And yet, he has lived through some momentous moments in Burmese political life. In speaking of his life and interests, he could not avoid those occasions when they intersected with milestones of Burmese politics. **(p.137)** What comes to his mind in this respect, however, are not the rare headline-grabbing occasions when events in Burma burst into the world news: that is, the democratic uprising of 1988, the elections of 1990, the Nobel Prize awarded to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the crushing of the "Saffron Revolution" of 2007. Instead, what he talks about are those moments when he, as a civilian, as a doctor, and as a head of household, felt personally threatened. As a democrat, he shares a general distaste for the military regime and its manifold failures, and would prefer an open and freer society; he implies as much by his voracious

cosmopolitan imaginings. But his political memories are decidedly not the memories of what might be called the political class.

This is a salutary reminder, I believe, of two political realities: first, that most citizens and subjects have a political biography that is more likely to reflect their homely concerns, their life chances, and their security than, say, national political events per se such as a new constitution, a coup, or even an insurrection, and second, that the most politically explosive moments are typically when those homely concerns and national political events converge.

Thus, in describing the Burma Socialist Programme Party era beginning in 1964, and though lamenting the loss of freedom, Tin Win chose to focus instead on Ne Win's "super-tax" on profits designed to confiscate the wealth of the wealthiest Burmese citizens. In particular, he dwelt on how this tax was used against prominent doctors. The renowned surgeon Dr. Kyi Paw, owner, then, of the Thameda Cinema and other properties was, as Tin Win sees it, envied for his Mercedes, while Ne Win, as head of state, had a lesser car. As a result, Dr. Kyi Paw's assets were seized and he was ruined. The same thing happened, it appears, to Dr. Ba Than, Ne Win's own father-in-law at the time, whose exceptional wealth attracted the general's envy. The confiscations of wealth, of course, were much more general than this and put thousands of merchants out of business and ruined many of the wealthiest families. It is, however, not surprising that Tin Win should concentrate on how it affected the best-known members of his own profession.

There have been at least three memorable and punishing currency devaluations under military rule from 1962 to 1988: the last, in September 1987, being a powerful incitement to the nationwide democratic insurrection of 1988. They are deeply embedded in popular memory as they confiscated the savings, large and small, of much of the population. As a young boy nearly a half century ago, Tin Win recalls discovering his father sobbing in his room. His father had just learned of the 1964 devaluation and, as a result, had lost most of his savings. Tin Win remembers the December 1985 devaluation vividly. He was in the Lashio Hospital Emergency Room treating patients when **(p.138)** a mother brought her severely dehydrated infant to the hospital. The child needed drip rehydration, which cost 30 kyats if the child was to be saved. The mother had no money and broke down in tears. Tin Win, in a gesture that I believe is rather typical of him, fished in his own pockets for the 30 kyats and paid for the treatment. Immediately afterwards the devaluation was announced. All notes of 100 kyats and above were declared worthless. He rushed home to find out how much money he and his wife had in the small denominations that were still allowed to circulate. Between them, they had only 150 kyats, 30 less than he had had an hour earlier before his charitable gesture.

The outcry at the devaluation was such that each citizen was allowed to redeem, for smaller denominations, a maximum of 500 kyats on presentation of their identity card and five 100 kyat notes. Taking advantage of this concession, Tin Win and his wife, like many others, were able to retain some of their savings by paying poor people, who themselves had no savings, to redeem 500 kyats in large notes on their behalf in return for a commission. They dared not do it often, however, lest they be denounced and arrested for breaking the law. The 1987 devaluation, by contrast, allowed no such redemption although, unlike 1985, savings deposited in banks were exempt from confiscation. After 1985, when wealthy depositors had lost their bank savings, however, it was rare for individuals to keep anything substantial in a bank account.

The failures of the Burmese Road to Socialism, a stagnant economy, a crumbling infrastructure, and the manifest seizure of savings represented by the devaluations of 1964, 1985, and, especially of 1987, played a role in the smoldering anger that erupted in 1988. For Tin Win, however, the effect was less to politicize him than to turn his attention forcibly to his financial security and that of his family. He admits openly and with no little regret that he has become more cautious as he has grown older, worried about the security of his son trained in the law whom he worries is not as resilient and tough as himself. He lives frugally, moving around Mandalay on a small Chinese motorcycle rather than an automobile. As a government physician, his pay was far less than private doctors and the pension awaiting him was laughable (in the last year it has been raised substantially but is still very modest). It is largely for this reason that he retired in 2008 and took the much better paying job he now holds as deputy medical superintendent at a private hospital in Mandalay. He is a dedicated doctor, proud enough of his services to his Burmese patients to remain in the country while his brothers and sisters have solved their economic problems by emigrating to the United States and Australia. The net effect of a broken economy, derisory public sector wages **(p.139)** for professionals, family concerns, and advancing age has been to diminish Tin Win’s expectations and amplify his caution. This is a matter of some regret. He says he admires the “craziness” and courage of youth and gives, as an example, the bravery of William Wallace (his alter-ego?) as portrayed in one of his favorite movies, *Brave Heart*, a patriot who sacrificed his family and children, as well as his own life, for his love of country. “William Wallace was braver than I,” he says, contrasting Wallace’s love of “freedom” with his own recognition of “the ties that bind.” Tin Win is simultaneously conscious of having put aside his first love, music, for medicine and family and of the mortal dangers of politics in Burma. Perhaps realizing that he has chosen to duck virtually all the opportunities our conversation has afforded to express his political opinions, he says, half apologetically, “You may have chosen the wrong man to interview. I’m not very angry or political.”

He sees himself, as anyone well might, who has lived the last half century in Burma, as a victim of circumstances. He is, he explains, like the tail of the dragon in a Chinese New Year Dragon dance; when the person operating the head of the dragon moves slightly the people in the tail are lashed a much greater distance, as the movement amplifies the further it travels from the dragon's head. Each ruler, from the earlier Burmese kings building new capitals to the ruling generals today building Naypyidaw, insists on a new style and the people must adjust accordingly.

In a real sense his "political act" is to have remained in the country treating patients as a skilled, dedicated, incorruptible physician working in difficult conditions in minority areas near the border. This is, if you will, his bravery and patriotism, as compared with so many of his colleagues and siblings who have left.

And yet, his sense of political and personal disillusionment is palpable. He has noticed the spiral of economic deterioration in Mandalay, especially after the devastating fire of 1984, but beginning much earlier. Friends and acquaintances were forced by debts to sell their homes near the center of Mandalay and move to cheaper accommodations farther from the center. Then in debt once again, they had to sell up and move even farther to the outskirts of the city in quite undesirable locations such as Myo Thit (new town). This spiral of impoverishment tracks the deterioration of the economy and is above and beyond the immediate effects of fire and the forced removals from the city for political and speculative reasons. As a young man, it had seemed to him and others that a new era was dawning and people were full of hope. Now the reproduction of subsistence is front and center and, as he says, "no economic system will feed you, not even Marxism." Although he describes himself as **(p. 140)** cool and contented and something of an optimist, he sees only a 20 percent chance that things will improve in the next decade.

He has acted on his pessimism. Eight or ten times (he has stopped counting) he has filled out applications for the United States worldwide visa lottery. He has never won.

Dream Machines

Tin Win devotes a great deal of his waking life to music and film. As a guitarist, composer, and singer, he is a sophisticated consumer of music and would, he claims, have liked to write and direct films had it not required so much time and financial backing. So pervasive was his obsession that I began to think that it trumped, in passion if not time, his professional and family life. Just as it has been said that the *orang asli* (so-called aboriginals) of Malaysia think so highly of their dream life with the spirits that much of their waking life is devoted to reflecting on their "real" life in the spirit domain, I began to think that Tin Win "lived for" music and film. I was hesitant in reaching such a conclusion inasmuch

as I, as a Westerner from the land of the dream machines, offered him a rare chance to indulge one of his passions with a presumably knowledgeable companion. But when I realized how deep and extensive his grasp of film and music was and how much of his time was devoted to pursuing it, my hesitations seemed idle.

As a musician Tin Win listens intently to other musicians he admires for what they can teach him: tunes, lyrics, rhythms, orchestration, voice, and so forth. He has borrowed freely and, when he was performing more often, he would of course “cover” songs he liked. He once gave a concert of Bob Dylan songs in a Wa Baptist church to an audience of worshippers, soldiers, and members of the Burma Communist Party. He knows (as nearly as I can tell) the entire oeuvre of Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Fleetwood Mac, Janice Joplin, The Eagles, Chuck Berry, Tony Bennett (!), and Eric Clapton, among others. Even in the dark economic days of the Burma Socialist Programme Party in the 1970s and early ’80s there was never any shortage of cheap pirated CDs coming in from China and Thailand. The borrowing and adaptation was uninterrupted inasmuch as music, perhaps the most speedy and frictionless commodity in international circulation, offered a cheap cosmopolitan escape. The inventive borrowing continues today as popular rock bands and hip-hop groups organized benefit concerts on the model of Live Aid and Farm Aid to fund relief efforts for the victims of cyclone Nargis.

(p.141) Most of Tin Win’s lyrics are apolitical. They are mostly love songs, often whimsical, about loneliness and longing and occasionally about what he calls “dead-end” kids living a dangerous and self-destructive life. One song, about the measles, makes a connection between his medicine and love. It recommends falling in love and getting your heart broken as a youngster when, like measles, you recover quickly as opposed to later in life when it is—for the spinster in his song—potentially fatal. He could, potentially, have taken a more daring musical path. He was, in the mid-’80s a good friend of Mun Aung, a Kachin student at Rangoon University, guitarist and singer-songwriter who could well be called “the bard of the democracy movement in 1988.” Mun Aung was to the democracy movement roughly what Bob Dylan was to the anti-war movement in the late ’60s in the United States. Tin Win also knew Maung Maung, a pianist and composer of a song about a poor flower seller in Myitkyina that made Mun Aung famous. Tin Win and Mun Aung played together in several café-bars in 1985.

It is entirely conceivable, that though older than Mun Aung, he might have taken a more dangerous path and written and performed songs of the same genre. Deterred above all by temperament and perhaps also by family ties and professional responsibility, he remained apolitical and safe while Mun Aung was forced to flee to exile and in the late 1990s was working as a social worker in

Norway and performing in benefit concerts throughout Europe for 1988 hero, Min Ko Naing.

In his fascination with film, Tin Win operates at a greater distance, as he is not a film director or a cameraman. Nevertheless, his knowledge of films, scene-by-scene, shot-by-shot, dialog-by-dialog is nothing short of astonishing. He has seen hundreds and hundreds of films, many of them several times. His recall of film plots, actors, scenes left his interviewer, who considers himself moderately knowledgeable in film history, far behind. This was true even for two of my favorite films that one would have thought would be relatively obscure to a Burmese audience: the classic *Bicycle Thief* and *The Night Porter*, both of which he had seen and thought carefully about. The effect of being so overmatched in knowledge about film and film history meant that I often felt inadequately informed to be a good interviewer.

I asked him for a list of favorite films and he obliged. They were, in no particular order: *Swept Away, Shane, Leaving Las Vegas, The Piano*, and *We're No Angels*. Four films, however, came up spontaneously and often in his effort to explain himself and to reason ethically: *Brave Heart, The Mission, Forrest Gump*, and *Patriot Games*. Aside from being rip-roaring action dramas, they **(p.142)** all deal with the duty owed, in difficult circumstances, to one's nation, people, and family.

At the time of the interviews I had not seen a single one of these four films! Now that I have seen them I can perhaps speculate about why they captured his imagination. It would be a mistake, however, to focus exclusively on the manifest plot and moral content of these films inasmuch as U Tin Win is just as attentive to the camera work, the production values, and the music as he is to the plot. *Patriot Games*, surely the thinnest of these films in terms of ethical heft is nonetheless blessed with a magnificent score as is *The Mission*, where much of the music is an integral part of the performance.

With the exception of *Forrest Gump*, three of the films depict heroes who "go for broke" in their effort to protect and defend their congregation, their people, or their family from evil forces. It is not too much, I think to suggest, that they represent something of U Tin Win's alter ego, the "road" (admired) but not taken. U Tin Win goes out of his way to explain that his own path has been one of caution and professional devotion and not the path of bravado and public dissent. And yet his early songs of "dead-end" youth and "devil-may-care" risk-taking represent a path he openly admires but has chosen consciously, in his abundance of prudence not to pursue himself. In the case of *Brave Heart* and *The Mission*, it is worth noting that the heroes, though they represent justice against oppression, are defeated and die a noble, but quite definitive, death. In the Burma of the past fifty years those figures who chose to stand openly against the military regime have met prison or death and, all too frequently, death in

prison. The lesson is not lost on U Tin Win; he shares the values and aims of these heroes but is no so foolhardy as to risk his life and that of his family in what has been a losing cause.

The Mission, by far the best film of the four, has many resonances for the life of U Tin Win. It depicts a Jesuit priest and a repentant "slaver" who establish a mission to the Guarani (in what is now upland Paraguay) in order to bring them to Christianity and to protect them against colonial servitude. This is a religious world familiar to Tin Win from his days with the nuns and fathers at St. Peter's School in Mandalay. Nor is the Jesuit Mission to the pagans entirely unfamiliar to him. In a sense, his time as a medical officer among the Wa was a secular mission designed to bring the Wa into the light of public health, vaccination, and sanitation. As the Jesuits taught the Guarani the Christian Mass and church music, so U Tin Win and his friends played popular music in tea shops and churches in Wa country. He regarded the Wa as a simple, guileless, innocent people who, if they were not living in a primeval Eden, were nonetheless less corrupted than their lowland overlords. Up **(p.143)** until the point where the Jesuit heroes of *The Mission* face the guns of the Spanish forces and die a heroic death, U Tin Win can perhaps recognize something of himself in this mission to the heathen.

Again with the exception of *Forrest Gump*, all three films depict a deeply corrupt world that conspires to bring down good people. In *Brave Heart*, the treachery of the Scottish nobles, particularly Robert the Bruce, vying for English lands and titles, lead to the defection of allies and the eventual betrayal and death of William Wallace. In *Patriot Games* there is a top aide to the British prime minister who is, in fact, a "mole" working for the Irish Republican Army (IRA), who nearly manages to kill Harrison Ford and his family. And in *The Mission*, the ex-Jesuit cardinal sent to adjudicate the fate of the mission and of the Guarani, chooses, admittedly with a heavy heart, to betray them both in the interest of the Jesuit Order as a whole. Things are not what they seem; politics is deeply corrupt and treachery lurks around every corner. This dangerous filmic world is not very different from the treacherous world in which ordinary Burmese, including U Tin Win, have been living for the past half century. Most of the brave dissidents who have stuck out their neck for democracy and freedom from tyranny have paid with their lives, their freedom, and their livelihoods. The films teach a lesson most Burmese have absorbed with their mothers' milk.

Forrest Gump has many obvious pleasures for U Tin Win. Above all, as the film takes the innocent and slow-witted Forrest through the 1960s and early '70s, its sound track is a musical tour of U Tin Win's youth as a musician and composer. He has sung half the songs in the film and the other half are part and parcel of his cultural capital as a songwriter and performer. And, of course, he knows the political history of wars, assassinations, and protests that provide the background for Forrest's story. It is a salutary reminder that, despite Burma's

relative isolation, the cultural and political history of a hegemonic power like the United States are, to a culturally attuned and informed observer like U Tin Win, very much a part of their own worldview as well. Burmese history is, for him, refracted thorough a lens of the world history as he has experienced it first- and secondhand.

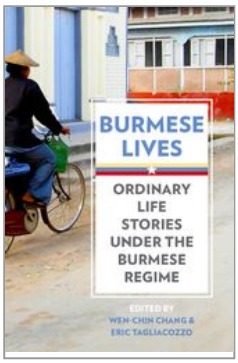
Forrest has a deeper resonance for U Tin Win. As a kind of limiting case of someone whose simple honesty, good will, and loyalty allow him to navigate a treacherous world without ever losing his bearings and, indeed, become an unlikely hero again and again, I believe U Tin Win may regard himself as a more sophisticated and knowing version of Forrest. He is someone who has remained true to his destiny as a doctor, has avoided any number of temptations to leave or to become rich, and who has, as a result, a strong sense of **(p.144)** having lived an ethical life. That sense of having kept the faith is reflected in many of his lyrics:

> You still have a duty to society even in places made of people
> Wearing masks and cheating one another

He can in this treacherous world, his lyrics tell us, “still manage an honest smile.”

Notes:

(1.) I originally planned to present the life of an Irrawaddy river-boat captain with whom I talked during a long trip between Mandalay and Bamaw, but he too took control of the interview to address what mattered most to him: i.e., family quarrels and obligations, rather than the theme I wanted to pursue: “Life on the Irrawaddy.” A brief attempt to wrest back control with the aid of whiskey resulted in mere incoherence (on his part!).



Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime
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Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199335039
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.001.0001

By Sea and by Land stories of two chinese traders 1

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DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.003.0009

Abstract and Keywords

Wen-Chin Chang explores the migration history of two Chinese traders and their economic activities in Burma from the late 1940s to the 1990s. The initial movement of the two protagonists highlights two migration patterns—one by sea commonly taken by the maritime Chinese from southeastern provinces of China, and the other by land that was pursued by the Yunnanese. Their economic engagement also illustrates two representative types: sedentary shopkeepers (most of the maritime Chinese fell into this category), and mobile traders (epitomized by a great number of overland Yunnanese). Their stories illuminate two contrasting yet also complementary migration and economic patterns among the overseas and overland Chinese in upper Burma, against the backdrop of politico-economic turmoil. Chang argues that they also provide a window into history at the interstices of Burma itself.

Keywords: Chinese traders, overseas, overland, sedentary, mobile

IN THIS ESSAY I explore the migration history of two Chinese traders and their economic activities in Burma spanning the late 1930s to the 1990s. The first protagonist, Grandpa Xu, born in 1921 in Shantou of Guangdong Province, migrated to Bangkok, Thailand, by sea in 1938. He then traveled upward to Mae Sai, a northern border entrepot in Chiang Rai Province, to help in his uncle's general merchandise store. Three years later, he crossed the border to Kengtung to work as an accountant clerk at the shop of one of his uncle's friends. The second protagonist, Uncle Zhao, born in 1942 in Tengchong of Yunnan Province,

escaped in 1957 to Nam Kham, a border town in northern Shan State, Burma. He then made his way to Tangyan (or Tangyang) to look for a maternal uncle. He assisted this uncle with trade in the highland region for several years. The initial movement of these two protagonists highlights two migration patterns—the one by sea commonly taken by the maritime Chinese from southeastern provinces of China and the other by land that the Yunnanese pursued. Their economic engagement also illustrates two representative types: sedentary as were shopkeepers who characterized most of the maritime Chinese, and mobile traders as were a great number of overland Yunnanese. During the Burmese socialist period (1962–1988), while Grandpa Xu (from Guangdong) struggled to survive by selling smuggled goods from Thailand on the black market, Uncle Zhao, in contrast, thrived on the cross-border trade between Burma and Thailand.

The narrative accounts of Grandpa Xu and of Uncle Zhao disclose their personal migration history and economic endeavors against the backdrop of **(p.175)** politico-economic turmoil. While illustrating two contrasting but complementary migration and economic patterns undertaken by a great number of overseas and overland Chinese in upper Burma, their stories also provide a window into "history at the interstices" (Thongchai 2003) of Burma during this period. Before looking into their accounts, I will first give a historical background on Chinese contacts with Burma.

Historical Background

Chinese contacts with Burma have been undertaken both by sea and land throughout history. Various Chinese historical sources mark these interactions taken in the forms of commerce, diplomacy, pilgrimage, war, and flight. The earliest written document appears in *Shiji* (史記 records of the grand historian, Han Dynasty II) which records a trip made by a Han envoy, Zhang Qian, to Daxia (present-day Afghanistan) in 128 BCE. It says Zhang Qian unexpectedly saw some Chinese commodities—textiles and bamboo canes from Sichuan—sold at a local market and learned about the existence of commercial movement between Southwestern China and India, possibly via Burma, prior to official knowledge. In terms of maritime connection, *Hanshu dilizhi* (漢書地理志) marks the earliest official visits of the Han court to several kingdoms in Southeast Asia and India by sea during the reign of Emperor Wu (157–87 BCE). Apart from diplomatic engagement, these visits also aimed to exchange precious goods.[2] After the Han period (206 BCE–206 CE), official and unofficial interplay between China and neighboring states and societies continued through the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) periods and was further enhanced by the Yuan under the Mongol rule (1277–1367).

Comprehending its strategic significance, the Yuan incorporated Yunnan into their territory as a province and established many courier stations from there to Bagan (in Burma), Annan (in northern Vietnam), Zhancheng (in southern

Vietnam), Laowo (in Laos) and Babai Xifu, (Lan Na in northern Thailand) for diplomatic relations as well as for military actions. One route leading to Lan Na Kingdom possibly passed through Jinghong (previously known as Cheli), Kengtung, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Mai (Huaqiaozhi bianzhuan weiyuanhui 1967, 64–102; Fang 1987; Grabowsky 2004). **(p.176)** Furthermore, the Yuan court began to resettle both Central Asian Muslims and Han Chinese in this ethnically diverse province. This policy continued throughout the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) periods, and by the late Ming period, the Han Chinese population had dominated the region in numbers and political power (Lu 2001; Yang 2008). These migratory inflows consequently pushed a portion of the indigenous peoples southwards as well as stimulated economic exchanges between Yunnan and its neighboring countries (Wiens 1954; FitzGerald 1972; Wu 2002). Yunnanese Han and Yunnanese Muslims[3] were particularly active in economic exploration in Burma, Thailand and Laos for long-distance trade and mining. A network of trading routes functionally linked these places (Forbes and Henley 1997; Hill 1998). Many people from Yunnan married local women, settled in these host societies and gradually transformed their status from “sojourners” to “settlers,” and even took up the roles of cultural, economic and/or political mediators, as recorded in a Ming document—*Siyi guan kao* (四夷館考) (NA 1972). Regarding the settlement of Yunnanese Chinese in Burma, the number had become significant in the north of the country by the end of the sixteenth century (Chen 1966:87; Sun 2000: 207). About two centuries later, the number of maritime Chinese in Yangon also grew to a noticeable level (Huaqiaozhi bianzhuan weiyuanhui 1967, 101, 103).

Large-scale Chinese immigration to Burma, however, did not take place until the nineteenth century, when enormous economic opportunities were generated by the British ambitions for the country. The maritime Chinese either came directly from Guangdong and Fujian or indirectly from neighboring countries, especially Penang and Singapore of Malaya. Most of them were concentrated in Yangon and other cities of lower Burma (ibid., 102, 104). While most of the Cantonese (the people from Guangdong) were carpenters and laborers engaging in military and official construction for the British, most of the Hokkien (Fujianese) were shopkeepers trading in produce and imported goods.[4] Being laborers, the Cantonese mostly wore clothes with short sleeves and were referred to as *letou* by the Burmese, and the Hokkien merchants who wore clothes with long sleeves were addressed as *leshei* (Mya **(p.177)** Than 1997). Meanwhile, the overland Yunnanese Chinese (thereafter overland Yunnanese) were economically active in upper Burma.[5]

Grandpa Xu

Initial Settlement in Burma

In the early twentieth century, while some maritime Chinese began to move from lower Burma to upper Burma, following construction of public roads and the extension of the railway,[6] a small number of Cantonese and Hokkien in central

Thailand also started to go northwards. Some of them even crossed the border and entered northeastern Burma. Grandpa Xu is such a case in point. He related his story.

> I was born in China, in Chaozhou [Teochiu] of Guangdong Province in 1921. At seventeen [1938], I went to Thailand by boat. China was fighting against the Japanese at that time. Many people from my home region went to Thailand to make a living [*taoshenghuo* 討生活]. Soon after I arrived in Bangkok, I made my way to Mae Sai where a maternal uncle (*jiujiu* 舅舅) had lived for several years. I went to help at his general store. Three years later, a friend of his also opened a general store in Kengtung and needed a hand for the accounting. He requested my uncle for my assistance. I was then sent to Kengtung to work for that friend. . . .
>
> Many mule-driven caravans came from Yunnan to Kengtung, Tachilek and Mae Sai each year. They transported Yunnanese goods to these places, such as tea and lead bars [*qianba* 鉛巴], in exchange for Burmese, Thai, and Western manufactured goods which were carried back to Yunnan for sale. We [shopkeepers of maritime Chinese] bought tea from these Yunnanese caravan traders and then sold it to Thailand. In turn, they purchased local and imported products from us. Unlike **(p.178)** today, there was no registration or border check. Caravans moved back and forth between Yunnan and its adjacent countries easily. I learned Yunnanese while staying in Mae Sai. . . .
>
> The large caravans were composed of over a hundred mules; some were over five hundred. Even small caravans had at least about 50 mules. Most shopkeepers in Mae Sai and Kengtung were Chaozhou from Guangdong, very few Hokkien at that time. They sold daily consumption goods, such as rice, cooking oil, dried fish, fish paste, soaps, textile, clothes, shoes, farming tools, many, many things. There were a lot of Japanese goods which were imported to Bangkok and then transported to the north. They were cheap and beautiful. You also found merchandise from Great Britain and other European countries. But they were more expensive than the Japanese stuff.
>
> At that time, China was under Japanese invasion and was not able to import foreign goods through coastal ports. Shipment via Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma to Yunnan became significant for access. Many *laoban* [shop owners 老闆][7] from central Thailand came to Kentung to open shops. However, I didn't stay long in Kengtung, only about one year. The Japanese demons [*ribengui* 日本鬼][8] thrust southwards [*nanjin* 南進] to Thailand and quickly pushed towards Kengtung. We Chinese had to run. Many people in Kengtung followed Yunnanese caravans and retreated to Menghai and Jinghong. If it wasn't for the war, I would not have been to

> Yunnan, such a remote and unimaginable province to coastal Chinese. We and several other families from the same home region walked together with a caravan to Menghai. Those big caravans which transported opium were armed. Before departure, my boss purchased a few mules to carry luggage and food. We stopped in Menghai for a couple of months; then joined another caravan composed of over five hundred mules to Yuxi. This part of journey took fifty-nine days. I remember it very well even today. From Yuxi, we were able to reach Kunming by car. Those who could make their way back to Guangdong did. I was single and young, only twenty-one or twenty-two. I had no money and had to stay in Kunming to make a living.

(p.179) Since the 1880s, massive numbers of Chinese immigrants from Guangdong and Fujian moved into Thailand for tin mining, plantations, railway construction, pig breeding, and businesses of the rice mills and sawmills (Skinner 1957, 109–117). They settled primarily in Bangkok, its adjacent areas and southern Thailand. The situation paralleled the settlement of the maritime Chinese in Yangon and other cities of lower Burma at the same time. In the early twentieth century, some maritime Chinese who had settled in these two countries started to move northwards. Most of them were shopkeepers or clerks engaging in the business of sundries. In collaboration with the Yunnanese caravan trade, they facilitated the circulation of a wide range of commodities between Yunnan and Burma, Thailand and Laos. The narration of Grandpa Xu given above discloses such a reciprocal interaction between the maritime Chinese and overland Yunnanese in Mae Sai and Kengtung.

Because of its geographical location, Kengtung has been an important trade center connecting Yunnan to its north, Laos to its east and Thailand to the south. Historically, the long-distance Yunnanese caravans moved back and forth within these trading networks, and the Yunnanese Muslims were a distinctive group of caravaneers in this area before World War II (Forbes 1987; Ma Zheru 1993). Each year after harvest by the ninth or tenth month of the lunar calendar (around October or November), Yunnanese caravans would set off to Burma, Thailand, and Laos and return in the third or fourth months (around April or May) prior to the advent of the rainy season the following year. One day’s travel was termed a stage (*zhan* 站), which covers about twenty-five to thirty kilometers (Ma Zhenxiang 1993, 280; Hill 1998, 46). A popular route from Yunnan to northern Thailand started from Hexi (in Tonghai), then reached Simao (fifteen stages), Menghai (previously known as Fohai) (eight stages, via Jinghong), Kengtung (seven stages), and then Chiang Mai (fifteen stages, via Mae Sai, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Rai). Some caravans moved further from Chiang Mai to Mawlamyaing (or Moulmein) in Burma (seventeen stages, via Mae Sariang) (Forbes 1987, 45; Ma Zhenxiang 1993, 280; Hill 1998, 39). Caravan traders purchased goods from one place and sold them in another. During the journey they were sometimes contracted to transport goods with their mules; the

engagement was called *tuojiao*（駄腳）in Yunnanese. Wherever vehicles, boats and trains were not available, mule caravans took up the shipment. Main commodities traded from Yunnan include tea, opium, silk, lead bars, salt, wool blankets, wax, straw hats, copper and brass pots, and musk. And major items purchased from neighboring countries back to Yunnan comprised cotton, deer **(p.180)** horn, ivory, indigo, bear galls, skins and bones of tigers and leopards, and European medicine, textiles, and tools (Ma Zheru 1993; Ma Zhenxiang 1993; Forbes 1987). In addition, as Grandpa Xu pointed out, Japanese goods also constituted a large part of their cargo.

While most of the Chinese seaports were occupied by the Japanese in 1938, Yunnan became the key access point for imported goods from neighboring and western countries (Li and Mei 1993). These commodities were transported through networks linked by caravan tracks, rivers, railway, and roads. The Yunnan-Vietnam railway and the Yunnan-Burma Road were two cardinal traffic lines until the Japanese cut off the link of the former in 1940 and of the latter in 1942. In effect, the province played a significant role for the supply of goods during the World War II, despite its geographic periphery.

Apart from economic interaction, many maritime Chinese in upper Burma depended on overland Yunnanese for migratory movement, as in the case of Grandpa Xu when the Japanese were pushing into the country. Traveling with the Yunnanese caravans was considered the safest way, as Yunnanese caravaneers were familiar with the routes connecting to Yunnan and knowledgeable about potential dangers on the way. Moreover, large-sized caravans were armed, as mentioned by Grandpa Xu. Having left China by sea earlier, many maritime Chinese now returned to the country by land.

While in Kunming, Grandpa Xu picked up whatever jobs were available. He had been a postman, shop clerk, vegetable peddler and charcoal burner. After the war, he finally made his way back to his hometown via Guizhou and Guangxi, after having been away for eight years. He was grateful that his parents were still alive. At their urging, he married in 1948. Unfortunately, he was compelled to leave again less than one month after his wedding due to the civil war between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Communists. He said the KMT were conscripting civilians and he had to run. He went alone to Bangkok on a big ship, and then travelled to Kengtung where many Chaozou *laoban* had returned to run businesses after the war. He worked in a general store as a clerk. A year later, having saved some money, he wrote to his wife and asked her to come to Kengtung. After she arrived he opened his own general store. Every five days, he also sold goods at an open market. In 1954, he and his wife obtained Foreign Resident Cards (FRC). Life went on peacefully until Ne Win seized power in Burma through a military coup in 1962 and subsequently implemented a series

of measures to nationalize industry and trade under the ideological guidance of the “Burmese Way to Socialism.”

(p.181) Uncle Zhao

Flight from Yunnan and the Initial Years in Burma

As a “back door” to Yunnan, Burma had traditionally provided a sanctuary for the province’s political refugees and economic opportunists. In 1949 the Chinese Communists took over mainland China and launched a series of political movements from the 1950s to 1970s. This resulted in an unprecedented scale of Yunnanese exodus to Burma, mostly staying in rural Shan and Kachin States. The refugees from Yunnan by and large resorted to caravan tracks and transnational networks of kith and kin for their movement. Uncle Zhao related his flight experience.

> I escaped to Burma at the age of 15 [in 1957]. It was one year prior to the Great Leap Forward (*dayuejin* 大躍進). I was still a student. Wearing my uniform, I set off with an uncle (*biaoshu* 表叔) who was a school teacher from my hometown, Puchuan township of Tengchong. It took one day to reach Lianghe on foot. We stayed in Lianghe for one week, and then walked another day southwestward to Longchuan. My uncle stopped in Longchuan and did not move further. He was assigned by his unit to receive further training in teaching there. He found an old man to take me to a nearby town, Zhangfeng. From there, I walked southward alone for three days to a village named Shanhudan, in which another uncle (*tangshu* 堂叔) lived. That uncle’s father was my grandfather’s brother. I stayed at his house for one week. He then entrusted me to five or six Baiyi. Do you know the Baiyi? They are called Tai in China and Shan in Burma. These Baiyi were going to the marketplace (*gankai/ganjie* 趕街) of a border village named Longdao, which was very close to Ruili. I stayed with these Baiyi at another Baiyi’s house for nearly a week. Baiyi people were very hospitable. They provided food and lodging to any travelers without charge.
>
> While staying in Longdao, I sent a message to a relative who lived in an I-Kuan-Tao temple in Namkham, a Burmese town opposite Longdao. The two places were divided by a river. But after staying one week in Longdao, that relative still didn’t come to pick me up. I decided to cross the border myself to look for him. That Baiyi hostess helped me disguise myself as a peddler and arranged for me to follow another peddler. She even gave me the money for the boat fare. At that time villagers could sell goods across the border and return in the afternoon. **(p.182)** We left very early. The Burmese guard hadn’t arrived at the post yet. I passed through the check point without incurring any notice. The border control wasn’t tightened up until 1958 when an intensive wave of flight occurred following the Great Leap Movement.

I went to the temple that that relative stayed but only to find him away. The master of that temple, also a Yunnanese, was very unfriendly. He chided me, saying I was too reckless, and asked me to leave immediately, not even giving me any food. He was afraid that the Burmese police would come to check. While wondering where I should go, I met a man from my hometown, who ran a teashop in Namkham. He had escaped to Burma several years earlier. He offered me tea and lunch and told me that I had an uncle (*guzhang* 姑丈) who owned a tea factory nearby. The wife of that uncle was a sister of the uncle in Shanhudan. I had heard about this uncle living in a mountain around Namkham prior to my escape, but I didn't know the exact place. The teashop owner told me how to reach the place and what villages I would pass by on the way. They were all Jinghpaw villages. Do you know the Jinghpaw, also called Shantou or Kachin?

I went to this uncle's place and worked at his tea factory for two months. . . . He gave me food and lodging and also paid me twenty kyat a month. A tea-making master was paid fifty kyat a month at that time. At the factory, there were KMT military men who worked with covered identity. Their main purpose was to recruit fellow refugees to their troops. . . .

I knew I had a maternal uncle who lived in Tangyan, a valley town in a mountainous region in which many Yunnanese resided. I told the uncle of that tea factory my intention of going to Tangyan. He agreed and wrote a letter to that uncle. At that time you gave mail to drivers for delivery. Most automobiles were British-made jeeps, used for the transportation of passengers and goods as well as mail. On receiving the letter, my uncle came with two other men to pick me up. It took them two days to arrive by car, one day from Tangyan to Lashio and another day from Lashio to Namkham. But on our way back to Tangyan, it took about one month on foot. This uncle was a trader. He went from village to village to buy mules, which he and the other two men herded back to Tangyan for sale.

After arriving in Tangyan, I followed my uncle to trade in a highland Kawa village, which was seven or eight days from Tangyan on foot. You know the Kawa, also called Wa? My uncle ran a sleep-in shop **(p.183)** (wopu 窩舖) that sold miscellaneous items. A KMT barrack was set up nearby. My uncle lived in that Kawa village. I and a couple of chaps moved back and forth between Tangyan and the Kawa village for replenishment. . . .

My uncle only opened this shop during the dry season. Each year prior to the advent of the rainy season by the fourth month [of the lunar calendar], he returned to Tangyan, for it was too difficult to move around the mountain areas when it rained. His shop sold oil, salt, rice, clothes, textiles, shoes, needles, threads, and other types of consumption goods. He

had eight mules for conveyance. [I and the other two chaps] used to transport our goods with another trader's caravan, in total composed of about twenty mules. On the way, all the muleteers ate from the same pot of rice and shared tasks by division of labor. I was younger and assigned to wash dishes and help tend the mules with a few other muleteers. . . .

We used Baiyi language for communication with the Kawa. It was the lingua franca of the area. The Kawa were very poor. Their major income was derived from the opium harvest. Many traders in the Wa region purchased opium for big traders from local farmers. The big traders paid some down payment to the smaller traders in advance. And the smaller traders in turn also provided some advance credit to the farmers. This is called *maiqiuyan* (買秋煙 purchasing autumn-opium). After the harvest, the farmers had to sell their produce to these smaller traders at a lower price than the market price. My uncle did not conduct maiqiuyan because he was not long-established in the region and could be cheated by Wa farmers who sold their produce twice. In addition, traders also bought silver coins from the Kawa. At that time, the Kawa people still used old silver coins from China[9] and of Indian rupees in trade. Four Yunnanese silver coins were exchanged for one Indian rupee, and one Indian rupee for three Burmese kyat. The Burmese kyat, issued by the U Nu government, had good value, but it was not widely circulated in the mountainous regions. Some places used Burmese kyat; other places still used silver coins. The silver coins brought to Thailand were melted for reproduction of silverware. . . .

[In 1958], my mother and a younger brother escaped from Yunnan to Burma. I went to Namkham to take them to Tangyan. On our way **(p.184)** back, we passed a Han Baiyi village. You know Han Baiyi, the Baiyi from China (*zhongguo laide baiyi* 中國來的百夷). That village had been established since the British period, and its villagers were classified as indigenous in Burma. The Burmese government was issuing ID to the villagers. The mother of that village head was also surnamed Zhao. We were therefore affiliated, although not really by blood. The village head registered us as members of his village. We thus obtained Burmese citizenship. The registration fee was only ten kyat for each.

In contrast to Grandpa Xu's simple mention of his travel by sea from Guangdong to Thailand, Uncle Zhao elaborated upon his strenuous overland flight stop by stop. In order to avoid attracting too much attention from the authorities, most families were compelled to flee separately as shown in the case of Uncle Zhao's family. While highlighting the difficulties of his journey, the accounts also illustrate the Yunnanese lifestyle, their mobility, widespread social connections,

and socioeconomic interactions with indigenous minorities. Furthermore, they reveal in part the politico-economic configuration of the region.

In his account, Uncle Zhao mentioned the KMT armies, which played a significant role in facilitating the migration and economic activities of fellow Yunnanese. After losing the civil war to the Communists, several hundred KMT stragglers fled from Yunnan to the Shan State of Burma. With support from Taiwan and the United States, they organized themselves into guerrilla forces and quickly expanded their troops by recruiting civilian refugees. A large number of Yunnanese refugees stayed around these bases in order to seek protection. According to Chao Tzang Yawnghwe, their bases sprawled over an area of some 20,000 square miles, covering nearly one-third of Shan State (1990, 102–3). Although a major part of the army was disbanded in 1961, the rest remained active escorting mule caravans carrying contraband goods between northern Thailand and the Shan State of Burma from the 1960s to the early 1980s (Chang 2002, 2009). Apart from the KMT, many other armed ethnic groups were also involved in this risky but lucrative business. Zhang Qifu, alias Khun Sa, and Lo Xianghan were two other infamous warlords who thrived by imposing taxes on the contraband. For the sake of trading interests, these ethnic militias sometimes collaborated and other times were mired in conflicting relations (see Lintner 1994).

While some Yunnanese merchants traded locally, the others worked between Burma and Thailand. But whether in local or transnational engagement, Yunnanese merchants were very mobile. Differing from the maritime Chinese **(p.185)** who were mostly concentrated in urban lowland areas and ran locally based stores, the overland Yunnanese were distinctive in exploring economic opportunities in highland areas and in long-distance trade beyond borders. The traders who purchased opium and silver coins in the Kawa region, referred to by Uncle Zhao, were primarily Yunnanese, either Han or Muslims. Some were based in Burma and the others in northern Thailand. The movement of large mule-driven caravans required military escort in case of conflict with other ethnic armed groups or the Burmese army. This military-cum-economic practice had been a long tradition in highland Southeast Asia, historically a stateless space with diverse ethnic groups (Scott 2009).

In terms of conducting business among ethnic minorities in the highland, the engagement of Uncle Zhao’s maternal uncle illustrates one type of the practice. This uncle operated a sleep-in shop in a Wa village. This kind of shop is mostly very simple, built with grass, tree leaves, mud, and/or bamboo. As its name implies, it is composed of two sections—the front part for selling goods and the back part for storage and sleep. Apart from the operation of sleep-in shops, there is another type of local trade among many Yunnanese petty merchants which requires a smaller amount of capital—that is the trade in rotating markets (*zhuan gai/jie* 轉街). Traditionally, the markets of different villages within a

region were held every five days by taking turns. The market day was always bustling, as sellers and buyers converged from nearby places. It was the most intensive arena for economic exchange among different ethnic groups. While satisfying the demand and supply among different locations, it also provided a pleasurable occasion that broke up the monotonous life of the villagers (Zhao 1959, 176–178). Uncle Zhao also repeatedly made use of the occasion of market days to cover his flight from Yunnan. Such a rotating market system still exists in many rural areas of Burma today.

Grandpa Xu

Economic Life during the Socialist Period

The implementation of a nationalized economy by the Ne Win government quickly brought the country into serious economic recession and resulted in drastic shortages of essential everyday goods. Both foreign and domestic enterprises were taken over by the state: in total, about fifteen thousand businesses of different sizes (Steinberg 1982: 77). For the private sector, only petty trade on streets and markets was allowed. The seizure was a complete shock to **(p.186)** the public. Gross mismanagement, lack of infrastructure, and policy mistakes quickly contributed to a drastic economic recession and shortages of essential everyday goods. Some three hundred thousand Indians and one hundred thousand Chinese—the two dominant ethnic groups in the Burmese economy since the colonial period—were consequently pushed out of Burma (Aung Lwin Oo 2004).

To cope with consumption demands, the black market (*hmaung-kho*) economy flourished and served as the society's engine to meet its consumption demands (Steinberg 1982; Mya Than 1996; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2001). Not only did it incorporate a range of ethnic groups and classes of people as participants, but it also absorbed the state authorities in under-the-table engagement. By the early 1970s, it had become the dominant sector of Burma's economy and in the early 1980s it accounted for 80 percent of the country's total consumption (Mya Than 1996: 3; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2001, 205). Thailand was the major partner in this illegal trade, and according to informants' estimations, around 70 percent of Thai products were smuggled into Burma through Shan State before the early 1980s. Grandpa Xu told of his economic life during this period.

> The state authorities were like bandits (*tufei* 土匪). They took away everything from the people, everything. They ordered businessmen to hand over their shops within three days. They didn't care if they had a place to stay. They confiscated my shop without giving any compensation. . . .
>
> Being a businessman, it's natural that I owed some traders money and some other traders also owed me money. When the government took away my shop, they demanded me to collect what other people had owed me and to hand it to them. Nevertheless, they didn't care about the debt I had to

return to my creditors. I had no money and no place to go. Luckily, a Chaozhou fellowman moved to Thailand and left this house. I [and my family] thus moved here to start from scratch. At that time, those who had resources found ways to leave the country. Most of them went to Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Macao. Some went back to China. I had no money and no relatives in these places.

Soon after the confiscation, the government suddenly demonetized the one hundred and fifty kyat banknotes. They announced the news at night, and the next day our money became a pile of useless paper. The authorities were bandits. They carried out demonetization not **(p.187)** only once but several times.[10] Not able to cope with these drastic changes, many people died. What could you do?

The government seized my shop but not my stall in the market. Although the nationalized economy hit everyone, some people were a bit better off than the others. They had gold and silver which was hidden well and not found. I borrowed some money from friends and started to sell a few things on the market. People had to live. Petty business continued. The officials turned one eye blind (*zheng yizhi yan bi yishi yan* 睜一隻眼閉一隻眼) and allowed the operation of the black market trade.

Whatever was good for sale, we sold. The merchandise on the market was nearly all from Thailand. There were very few things produced in Burma. I didn’t have much capital and couldn’t go to Tachilek or Mae Sai for replenishment. I purchased goods that had been brought to Kengtung. I bought a little bit and sold a little bit; bought a little bit more and sold a little bit more. The Yunnanese were very daring. Many of them were caravaneers (*paomabang* 跑馬幫) and travelled to Thailand or mountains to do business. . . .

On the market, we dared not exhibit many things. For example, if I sell this kind of cup. I only put two or three of them on the market. If customers want more, I will secretly deliver to them from home later. If I see unfamiliar customers asking for certain goods, I tell them I don’t have them. That’s it. The police carried out searches on the market and at home from time to time. I lost my goods a few times that way. Life was difficult. You couldn’t satiate your stomach, but you didn’t starve either (*chibubao ebusi* 吃不飽餓不死). We lived from one day to another. We Chinese are tough. We survive any difficulties in any environment. When we left our hometown, we had nothing but the boat fare and a few pieces of clothes. We established ourselves with our bare hands in Burma. Nevertheless, we are foreigners forever and are treated as second-class subjects. My ID

indicates my foreign born status. My children were thus not allowed to attend medical college.

Grandpa Xu's narration concretely reveals his response to the nationalized economy under Burmese socialist rule. While the immigrant population confronted the brunt of this reformation, the indigenous soon also suffered from **(p.188)** the impoverished economy. At the beginning, only big industries and enterprises were taken over, but before long the implementation covered all kinds of small-scale businesses. Even small general stores were not spared (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2001, 149). All the people had to look for means to cope with the grim situation. Grandpa Xu supported his four children with his petty sundry business. Following the ban on Chinese education in 1965, he sent his eldest daughter to Kunming for her education. However, she was kept in China because of the subsequent Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976). (She eventually married and still lives in China.) His three other children all grew up in Kengtung. The eldest son later inherited his shop business.

To alleviate the bleak situation caused by this state-run economy and to curb potential riots by the public, the authorities tacitly tolerated the hmaung-kho trade (ibid., 195). Moreover, the officials resorted to it for extra income in order to supplement their meager salaries. Many informants who worked the route between Burma and Thailand pointed out that the military trucks were involved in delivering contraband and the officials at checkpoints extorted bribes from smugglers (Chang 2013). Although from time to time confiscation was carried out, the seized goods were mostly resold to the black market.

In his narration, Grandpa Xu mentioned different types of undertakings engaged by maritime Chinese merchants and overland Yunnanese smugglers in the black market economy. While the former focused on the trade in general goods on the market or in shops in urban lowlands, the latter were conspicuous in traveling trade among ethnic minorities in the highland and the Thai-Burmese cross-border trade. Furthermore, Grandpa Xu referred to Yunnanese economic practices as founded on their adventurous disposition. This comment is widely repeated by other maritime Chinese as well as by Yunnanese themselves. Common descriptions of this characteristic include "a daring spirit" (*yongmeng jingshen* 勇猛精神), "a wild temper" (*shanba piqi* 山巴脾氣), "a risk-taking nature" (*maoxian gexing* 冒險個性), and "a tough personality" (*qianghan de xingge* 強悍的性格). In contrast, the Yunnanese perceive the maritime Chinese as more conservative. By and large, economic engagements among the maritime Chinese were confined within Burma. Apart from the trade in general goods, other main businesses included carpentry, transportation, trade in produce, tea shops and butchery, as pointed out by Hokkien and Cantonese informants in Kengtung, Mandalay, Taunggyi, and Myitkyina. They ran their businesses whenever the situation allowed during the socialist period.

Although Yunnanese audacity is a distinctive factor in their economic pursuits, in practice the engagement of the long-distance caravan trade **(p.189)** required strict observance of discipline, division of labor and compliance with taboos which I have analyzed elsewhere (Chang 2009). These prerequisites point to Yunnanese local knowledge of the geographical terrain and of its sociopolitical configuration. Their observance ensured the efficiency of a caravan's movement and the ability to cope with different kinds of perils on the long journey. The following accounts given by Uncle Zhao further illustrate his experience in this regard.

Uncle Zhao

Long Distance Trade since the 1960s

After a couple of years' experience in transporting goods back and forth between that Kawa village and Tangyan, Uncle Zhao's maternal uncle started to assign him to drive loaded mules to Burmese-Thai border areas. As a muleteer during these initial years, he learned about the organization of the long-distance trade and expanded his social connections with other traders and ethnic armed groups, which was significant for his later engagement in transborder trade. Uncle Zhao related his experience.

> In 1960, Zhang Qifu was entrusted to escort a shipment and sought mules to transport the goods from Tangyan to Kengtung. It was during the rainy season. The trip took nearly one month.[11] My uncle let three mules to Zhang Qifu and assigned me to herd them.[12] The whole caravan was composed of five hundred to six hundred mules. The rent for one mule was seven hundred to eight hundred kyat. One mule-load weighed forty zuai, equal to sixty kilos. The three loads I was in charge of contained respectively silver coins, food, and cooking utensils, and opium.[13] The caravan was guarded by Zhang Qifu's troops and a Luohei troop, totaling about two hundred soldiers. Do you know the Luohei? **(p.190)** They are also called Lahu. We needed a Luohei troop because the trafficking route covered some Luohei areas.
>
> Opium was the main commodity in the shipment which belonged to a group of merchants based in Kengtung and Chiang Mai. . . . They ran an opium company named Hong-Luo (紅樓) in Kengtung and sent subordinates to Tangyan, Kokang and nearby Kawa areas to purchase opium. It was legal to trade opium [in Burma] at that time. Merchants bid annually for an opium quota from the government. With the quota license they were allowed to ship the commodity within the country, which was transported to border points and then smuggled to Thailand or Laos. Merchants always shipped a much larger quantity than the allotted quota. As the shipment went through mountainous region, it was difficult for the authorities to

trace. If any checking occurred on the way or at the company, negotiation and bribery would be involved. . . .

My second long-distance trip took place a year after the Kengtung trip. It was during the dry season. The whole caravan consisted of more than six hundred mules, which was again escorted by Zhang Qi-fu's troops and a Luohei troop. The destination was Lailang,[14] adjacent to Mae Ai [Chiang Rai Province, Thailand]. The starting point was Zhang Qi-fu's base in Mount Laimaw, north of Tangyan. The group departed with about fifty mules and reached Mount Laijie two days later. More than two hundred mules joined the group here. The rest joined later on. From Mount Laijie, we walked [southwards] for one day to Mong Kaung. We crossed the Salween River the next day, and then walked [southeastwards] to Pangyan where the Luohei troop was waiting for us. They accompanied the caravan from this stop onwards. Part of Zhang Qifu's troops returned to Mount Laimo. We stayed in Pangyan for more than a week, then moved [eastwards] to Panghsang, southwards to Mong Pin, Mon Puon, Mong Nin, Mong Hsat, Mong Ton, and finally Lailang, a border village divided in two parts, one part located in Burma and the other part in Thailand.

During the journey, we entered the New Year of the Luohei. As the caravan was partly escorted by a Luohei troop belonging to a Luohei official family (guanjia 官家), we were well received in several Luohei villages. The troops of that Luohei family, which had helped the **(p.191)** Burmese government fight against the KMT earlier, were officially recognized. On the journey we stopped three or four times in different Luohei villages for their New Year's celebrations. The villagers were very hospitable. They welcomed us by organizing dances and local music performances with gongs, cymbals, gourd mouth organs, and elephant-foot drums,[15] and also offering us sticky rice cake (*baba* 粑粑). . . .

In Mong Nin, the caravan had to stop for about a week. The opium we transported exceeded much more than the allotted quota. Zhang Qifu's representatives had to negotiate with the Burmese officials until an agreement was reached. Because of staying for the celebrations and the negotiation, the whole journey took over a month. . . .[16]

In this trip, I still drove three mules. In addition, I was in charge of the food budget for a group of fifteen people and more than forty mules. Among the muleteers, there were some Muslims. Their religion was different from the Han. They didn't drink alcohol or eat pork. They recited prayers before killing chickens. They didn't eat the chicken we killed. Despite differences in some habits, we got along well. Among the Yunnanese engaging in the caravan trade, the Muslims constituted about 30 percent and the Han about 70 percent.[17] Although the Muslims were

> the minority, they were very strong in trade. Several big traders were Muslims located in Chiang Mai. . . .

Uncle Zhao's narration provides significant information on the operation of the caravan trade and its close connection with ethnic troops. The major income of ethnic forces was derived from escort fees and the taxes imposed on contraband goods passing their spheres of influence (Chang 2009). Big traders entrusted their shipment to ethnic armed groups. The latter then contracted with mule owners for transportation. In terms of long-distance conveyance, there were two types of caravans. One was transport for traders, which was called *tuo shangjiao* (馱商腳). Uncle Zhao's two trips in 1960 and 1961 belonged to this category. The other was to transport **(p.192)** supplies for the Burmese army to their bases in mountainous areas. It was called *tuo yangjiao* (馱洋腳), which was originally a term referring to a caravan for transporting westerners' goods, especially the caravans of the British authorities during the colonial period. After Burmese independence, Yunnanese still used it to refer to the conveyance for the officials. Yunnanese were experts in mule conveyance and had a monopoly in the business. Uncle Zhao further explained the system of contracting with the Burmese government after independence.

> Every year the government contracted with one major merchant who undertook all the shipment of supplies to the armies in remote area. This merchant was the first contractor (*diyibao* 第一包), who then divided the business to several sub-contractors (*dierbao* 第二包) in different regions. Each subcontractor had a group of mules. When necessary, he also rented other people's mules. . . . The mules used for official caravans usually were not as good as the ones used for traders' caravans. [Sub]contractors often added their own goods in shipment, if the quantity of the official caravan was not much. They were paid by month, whereas the main contractor was paid by year. . . .

In 1963, Uncle Zhao decided to go to Thailand to look for alternative opportunities. He set off from Tangyan, but was stopped in Pinlong (also known as Panglong, five hours from Taunggyi by jeep at that time) because of nearby fighting between Shan insurgents and the Burmese army. Three months later, the Burmese authorities called the mule subcontractor in Pinlong to transport supplies from a military base near Mong Tong to other bases. Uncle Zhao joined the mission and drove a group of 30 mules with other muleteers. The journey passed Namsang, Mong Nai, Linke, and Mong Pan. What is special about this trip is that the group walked with an opium caravan escorted by Luo Xinghan's troops. In this shipment, the subcontractor had a share of two hundred *zuai* (three hundred kilos). However, after reaching Mong Tong, Luo and his group were detained by the Burmese army and the shipment was also confiscated. (At the same time, the government announced it would ban the opium trade in the region.) The subcontractor's mules and muleteers were spared because of their

official mission. Uncle Zhao said that the government took the opportunity of implementing a nationalized economy to suppress Luo's power. Luo and several opium traders were put in jail for half a year. Later on, Luo was integrated into the officially recognized *Ka Kwe Ye* (KKY) forces to combat the forces of the Yang family in Kokang and the Burmese Communists (Chen 1996, 185–186; **(p.193)** Yang 1997, 129).[18] Like many other KKY units, Luo used this official title to facilitate his involvement in the contraband trade.

After the trip to Mong Tong, Uncle Zhao entered Thailand. "Being a muleteer had not much future and the work was very hard," he said. He had relatives in Thailand and in the KMT troops. He travelled to different border points to explore the best opportunities for transborder trade. He said that although Mae Sai was a bustling border entrepot, the business was controlled by many big traders, and without a large sum of capital, it was too difficult to compete with them. Through connections of kith and kin, he sought the patronage of a KMT officer who was entrenched in Doi Ankang (Chiang Mai Province). He then undertook border trade in that area. However, a year later that officer was killed in an accident. Without strong patronage, Uncle Zhao was unable to obtain good profits from the trade. "The Third KMT Army in the region not only demanded taxes from traders, they also wanted to monopolize the trade. The situation was complicated. A man working for me was murdered. I no longer felt safe to trade there," Uncle Zhao said. He then went to southern Thailand but only to find the maritime trafficking too dangerous because of overwhelming piracy. He moved back to the north, conducted several expeditions and finally chose a trading route via Mae Hongson which was seldom used by other traders.

While making a business survey in several border areas from 1964 to 1969, Uncle Zhao also picked up different jobs to make a living. He worked as a farmer, itinerary peddler, shop clerk, and trader. Moreover, he purchased a Thai identity through brokerage. From 1970, he started to engage in the Thai-Burmese transborder trade via Mae Hongson. He began with the trade in monosodium, soap and zinc plates, and gradually expanded to textiles, fishing nets, and many other commodities. He purchased merchandise in Chiang Mai, and transported it to Loikaw via Mae Hongson. He opened a wholesale shop in Loikaw, which was managed by a nephew.[19] From Loikaw, he further sold his goods to Hpazawng, Mandalay, Taunggyi, and Lashio. He was well connected with the authorities of Kayah State, a Karenni ethnic insurgent group located along the border and the Border Police of Thailand in Mae Hongson. Meanwhile, he also collaborated with friends in the jade trade. **(p.194)** They purchased uncut jade stones in Mandalay and Mogaung and smuggled them to Chiang Mai via Mae Hongson for sale. While his gain from the business in sundries was steady and profitable, his engagement in the jade trade that involved gambling on the quality of uncut stones fluctuated (see also Chang 2004).

In 1972, Uncle Zhao married a Yunnanese woman in Mandalay. After the wedding he moved his bride to Chiang Mai and established their home there. In 1980, he moved his family again from Chiang Mai to Taiwan for the sake of their children's education. However, he himself remained most of the time in Burma and Thailand for the transborder trade until the early 1990s, when it was more and more affected by the military conflicts between the Burmese army and the Karenni insurgents. Subsequently, Uncle Zhao ended the business in Loikaw but continued to gamble on the jade trade. In the last ten years, he has spent most of his time in Taiwan, but occasionally still travels to Burma, Yunnan, and Guangzhou for the jade trade.[20]

Concluding Remarks

The personal accounts given by Grandpa Xu and Uncle Zhao illustrate their migration history and economic endeavors in the face of repeated unstable circumstances, and also outline two contrasting-cum-complementary patterns among a large number of overseas and overland Chinese in upper Burma. Their patterns of movement and undertakings contrast, firstly, as Grandpa Xu took up his initial migration by sea and Uncle Zhao by land; and secondly, as Grandpa Xu was more sedentary in running a general store, and Uncle Zhao more mobile in exploring long-distance trade in the upland and beyond borders. On the other hand, their patterns are also complementary, as the black market economy depended both on long-distance smuggling (taken up by Uncle Zhao and many other migrant Yunnanese) and local redistribution (in markets and shops run by Grandpa Xu and many other maritime Chinese). Although many Yunnanese also took up the latter engagement, they usually did not stick with it. Like Uncle Zhao who tried different occupations—factory worker, muleteer, peddler, farmer, shop clerk, caravan trader, and jade trader—migrant Yunnanese in Burma tended to explore various opportunities throughout their lifetime. Other main economic pursuits among the Yunnanese **(p.195)** include transportation, restaurant businesses and trade in produce. Comparatively, maritime Chinese are less changeable in their career pursuits. Nevertheless, this is not to say that overland Yunnanese are generally more prosperous than maritime Chinese. As I have discussed in other places (Chang 2004, 2005, 2006), Yunnanese men often suffer economic loss in investments. Many caravan traders had the experience of being robbed on their journey and losing all of their commodities, and many jade traders went bankrupt not just once but several times. In the case of Uncle Zhao, he confided that he gained several millions of Taiwanese dollars from the jade trade, but has also lost similar amounts of money in the same engagement. His wife complained that their economy was tight when the children were studying and she had to work in a factory in Taiwan in order to cover the family's spending. The wonder is the tenacity of Yunnanese traders in trying again and again.

Furthermore, the two protagonists later undertake a different mode of traveling than their initial ones and consequently make their movement across both sea and land. Specifically, Grandpa Xu first left Guangdong by boat, but later on had to flee Burma to Yunnan by land, while Uncle Zhao fled Yunnan to Burma by land and conducted transnational trade between Burma and Thailand also overland, but later moved his family to Taiwan and went to Guangzhou for jade trade across the ocean by air. In their narration, both Grandpa Xu and Uncle Zhao elaborated upon each of their overland trips and stressed the strenuous effort required and special experiences they encountered during these journeys.[21] However, with regard to their traveling across the ocean by boat or by air, they only made simple references. The detailed accounts underline the significance they attribute to these trips and also their agency in handling unexpected challenges. In comparison, overland traveling is much more arduous than overseas traveling as the former demands good knowledge for preparation, takes longer and confronts more dangerous situations along the way.

Another noteworthy point in both Grandpa Xu's and Uncle Zhao's stories is the intriguing intertwining among different parties involved in the underground economy, including ethnic rebel groups, the Burmese authorities, officially recognized KKY forces and also the Thai authorities. Viewed from the perspective of commodity flows, there is no clear demarcation between legal and illegal engagement. Under the circumstances of impoverished economy and political turmoil, all people and groups, be they civilians, the officials, or **(p. 196)** ethnic insurgents, try to maximize any resources available to them. Consequently Burma, as a young state constituted by multiethnic groups and multipolitical entities, is characterized by constant power struggle and shifting of political alliance. Its independence drove some people to submit to the central state and others to go against it. In the face of this complex environment, the caravan trade, a military-cum-economic practice, carried on its historical role to sustain the demands and supply of a large part of the country. Its operation, in effect, witnessed an interstitial history that deviates from the ideology of state-building based on absolute sovereignty and jurisdiction.

Following the penetration of road construction and vehicle conveyance in upper Burma, long-distance trade by means of large-sized mule caravans gradually disappeared since the mid-1980s. However, the region's geographical terrain remains difficult, and its ethnic and political structure complex. In 1988 the military-controlled State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)[22] adopted a market-oriented economy and partially opened Burma for foreign investment. Following the national election in November 2010, the quasi-civilian government has gone further to initiate a series of political and economic reforms. While many encouraging changes are taking places, decades of ethnic conflicts cannot be solved in a short time. (Fighting between the Burmese Army and the Kachin Independence Army has been going on since June 2011.) Moreover, crony capitalism, controlled by high ranking officers and big entrepreneurs, dominates

the country's economy, predicated on an enrooted culture of patron-client relations (see Chapter 3; also Chang 2013). Underground trade prevails on account of arbitrary policies and inefficient politico-economic infrastructures. A great majority of the common people still struggle to make ends meet. While state-centered historiography tends to simplify or distort such complexity, inspection into ordinary people's lives leads us to the insights of their subjective dynamism in response to the external world. The stories of Grandpa Xu and Uncle Zhao have provided us such a window into the social history of the ethnic Chinese in Burma from the 1940s to the 1990s.

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Notes:

(1.) I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Grandpa Xu and Uncle Zhao Jia-Tong (趙家統), the two protagonists in this paper, for their generous sharing of their life stories to me.

(2.) However, one should note that the movement of men, animals, and goods between Yunnan and neighboring countries has existed since prehistoric times (Stargardt 1971, 40). Yu Dingbang and Huang Chongyan have compiled historical sources on China-Burma communication into three volumes (2002); see also Yu (2000).

(3.) Yunnanese Han and Yunnanese Muslims are normally referred to as Yunnanese Chinese (Hill 1998, 106–107).

(4.) The businesses engaged in by the Hokkien included "general shops, rice mills, rice products, textile shops, Western and Chinese medicine, tea shops, shops selling cloths, tailors, barber shops, and so forth," whereas the Cantonese were concentrated in "timber, construction, pawnshop, restaurant, bar and wine shop, tea or coffee shop businesses, and so forth" (Daw Win 2007, 127).

(5.) During the period of the Muslim rebellion in Yunnan (1856–1873), caravan trade was partially interrupted between Bhamo (in northern Burma) and Tengyue (present-day Tengchong in western Yunnan). But the overall trade between the two countries continued to flourish, especially of cotton and opium (Chiranan 1990). For a history of the Muslim rebellion, see Huang (1976), Yang et al., eds. (1994), and Atwill (2006).

(6.) The extension of the railway from Mandalay to Shwebo was completed in 1891 and from Mandalay to Myitkyina in 1898 (Wikipedia, History of rail transport in Burma, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_rail_transport_in_Burma, 2013/2/18).

(7.) *Laoban* refers to maritime Chinese traders here.

(8.) Chinese commonly use “Japanese ghosts” to refer to the Japanese invaders.

(9.) The silver coins from China were Yuan Shikai dollars (*Yuan-da-tou* 袁大頭), issued by Yuan Shikai from 1914 to 1921.

(10.) The regime demonetized banknotes respectively in 1964, 1985 and 1987.

(11.) Actually the caravan set off from Mount Laijie/Loijie which was half an hour by car from Tangyan. But very often informants referred to Tangyan, as it is better known. The trip from Mount Laijie to Kengtung took at least 15 days during the dry season.

(12.) One person takes care of three mules at most on a long-distance journey.

(13.) The mule carrying food and utensils is called “empty carrier” (*kongdou/kongtou* 空馱), meaning not carrying commodities. The food and utensils were for use during the journey. For the organization of mule caravans, see Wang and Zhang (1993); Hill (1998, 45–53) and Chang (2009).

(14.) Whereas Yunnanese call Lailang, Laijie and Laimaw, the Shan call Loilang, Loijie and Loimaw.

(15.) The elephant-foot drum (*xiangjiaogu* 象腳鼓) is made of wood and looks like an elephant’s foot. Its musicological term is “goblet-shape drum.” The Burmese call it *ozi*.

(16.) Without overstay during the journey, it takes about 18 days.

(17.) Some informants reported that the Han constituted about 90 percent and the Muslims about 10 percent after the 1960s owning to the increase number of Han refugees from China.

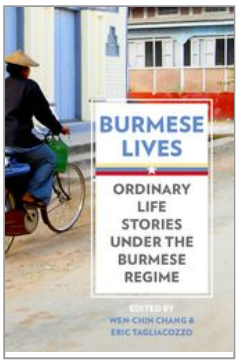
(18.) KKY forces were auxiliary local defense guards officially recognized by the Burmese government between 1963 and 1973.

(19.) Uncle Zhao was the pioneer in trading to Loikaw. He narrated in detail the organization of the trade, trading routes, means of transportation and social connections with Thai authorities, Karenni militias and Burmese officials. Due to space limitation, I will discuss this elsewhere.

(20.) After the Burmese government opened the gem trade in 1992, the trading market of jade stones gradually shifted from Chiang Mai to Mandalay and then Yangon. By 2005, Guangzhou became another important market for dealings in jade stones from Burma.

(21.) Grandpa Xu gave detailed information about his trip back to Chaozhou from Kunming, but due to space limitation, I only made a brief reference to it.

(22.) The council was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997.



Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime
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Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199335039
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.001.0001

A Mixed Identity, a Mixed Career

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DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.003.0010

Abstract and Keywords

Ma Thida’s essay deals with her own experiences in Burma; as a medical doctor and also a political activist. While she was young, Thida recognized herself as a Shan who lived far away from the Shan State. However, her Shan-Chinese father raised her and her brothers to be “Burmese citizens.” Though she couldn’t choose her ethnic identity, she did have the opportunity to choose her occupation. Thida ended up having two careers. While she started medical school, she also started writing short stories. Those two careers grew together throughout the rest of her life. When she was arrested in 1993 and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment, both of her careers stopped. However as soon as she was released, she rejoined her hospital. In this article, she writes about her medical career under the aegis of an authoritarian regime.

Keywords: Shan-Chinese, Burmese, writer, physician, imprisonment

“MY FATHER IS Shan, my mom is Mon, my sister is Karen, and my brother is Burmese. I am Shan.” With these words, my younger brother started kindergarten. All the teachers laughed because he didn’t seem to know that ethnic identity is inherited. This is because our parents raised us without a sense of “minority” as part of ethnicity, and we were happy and even proud of being ethnic, valuing all ethnic groups as our family members. In our childhood we thought of ourselves as Shan-Chinese-Burman, though we were told since we were young not to admit that we were Chinese in public. I remember my mother and her parents would sometimes use Chinese words in their Burmese conversation, and so my mother knows only some words, but not full sentences in Chinese. My father too can understand some Chinese, but speaks Shan well

when with his Shan friends. In turn we children came to understand some Chinese and Shan words by listening to adult conversations. But we kids never learned any of these languages, apart from Burmese and English. This was the sum of my childhood ethnic language experience.

Mixed Blood but Simple Identity

As I grew up, I came to understand why my parents forbade us to speak about our Chinese heritage. There were two important reasons for this. The first was the Chinese-Burman conflict in 1967 when I was only a year old. At that time, we lived in a first-floor apartment over a small noodle-making enterprise owned by a Chinese businessman. During the riots, that shop on the ground floor and his house nearby were destroyed, and his property sent up in flames. My parents were terrified. My father, who looks Chinese, stayed hidden inside the bedroom while my mother, who has more Chinese blood than he does but looks Karen-Mon, stood on the veranda with me, her one-year-old baby in her arms, to show the crowd that we were non-Chinese and thus save our lives and property. The second reason was my **(p.204)** father's employment with the socialist government. Under the ruling Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), government employees with Chinese or non-Buddhist background faced difficulty obtaining a promotion and easily stagnated in low-level positions.

My father's father was Chinese but he died when my father was a child. My father's mother is Shan but she passed away before my father married. My father never knew his father well, but was marked by his mother's Shan cultural and religious perspectives. He would tell us about her and her values, and we were so proud to hear of our grandmother's honesty and generosity as a traditional Shan Buddhist. After learning about our Shan heritage, my brothers and I considered putting *Sai* (Mr.) and *Nan* (Ms.) in front of our names, but my father and my maternal grandfather didn't want us to do this. I don't remember their reasons, but whatever they were, we accepted it. So our names remained unidentifiable as any specific non-Burman ethnicity. Since we lived in the center of Rangoon, our neighbors were mixed—Burman, Chinese, Indian, Karen, and Mon. Over time we came to identify ourselves as citizens of Burma rather than as members of any ethnic group.

My mother's ethnic heritage is quite mixed. My mother's mother was born in Rangoon in 1907 to Chinese-Peranakan immigrants from Penang, Malaysia. My mother's father's mother (my maternal great-grandmother) was sent from China to Balugyun to marry a Chinese-Mon, and the couple moved to Mawlamyaing in the late nineteenth century. Thus my mother's father is more Chinese than Mon, and is from Mon State. When we were young, we would visit our maternal grandparents every summer for a month, enjoying the good food that Mawlamyaing is famous for and being spoiled by our grandparents. We loved to play in their huge three-story house with a small garden, which was far grander than our twelve-by-fifty-five foot Rangoon apartment. Because my grandparents

lived in Mawlamyaing until my early teenage years, we didn't learn much about their Chinese cultural attributes when we were young kids. This also helped us identify more with our citizenship rather than our ethnicity.

Grandparents and Different Exposure

Our grandparents' move from Mawlamyaing to Rangoon in the late 1970s had a huge impact on us. Though my parents struggled financially to maintain the whole household, we grew closer to our grandparents. My grandfather had been expelled from high school for his involvement in the first Students' Strike against the British colonial government in 1920. His Chinese parents were so worried about his enthusiasm for politics that they sent him to **(p.205)** Formosa (Taiwan) for a year. After coming back from Taiwan, he changed his focus of interest to become a Buddhist Samahta meditation practitioner. Again, his Chinese parents were worried and this time forced him to marry. After marriage he threw himself into business, with ventures including farming, a rice mill, cinema, theater, trishaw, and horse-cart, among others. He became a well-known and successful businessman in Mawlamyaing, but he always found ways to disobey or resist the British, and later the Japanese, as much as he could. My grandfather was also a bookworm, reading both Burmese and English. He turned me into a bookworm, too. He, my father, and I used to compete to be the first to read the newspapers in the morning. He was also a loyal listener of the BBC World Service and both the BBC and VOA Burmese programs, and because of him, listening to the BBC and VOA became a familiar habit even in my youth.

My grandfather favored me over my brothers. He spent much time with me, telling me how he had resisted the unjust rules of local British authorities in Mawlamyaing. All his stories about peaceful protest against colonial rule encouraged and inspired me. I began to wonder how I too could practice that kind of resistance game when I grew up. All the books I was reading with him, or by myself from his bookshelf, or from libraries of family friends or book-rental shops, also inspired me with the independence movement. However, I was also deeply drawn by Buddhist religious books, which my grandfather rarely read. My Buddhist belief was mainly due to my mother's devotion to the Buddhist faith and to a number of books on Buddhism, many of which I read several times in my early teenage years. For all these reasons, the resistance movement to oppose unjust rule and a genuine interest in Buddhism have always been the key passions in my life.

Own Choice of Study

I was lucky to have a father who was liberal, farsighted, and thoughtful. He encouraged me to become not a medical student but rather to learn pure science like physics or mathematics, explaining that "our country now has quite a number of medical doctors but we need more scientists for a modern and progressive future for the country. So think about studying science." Still, I chose to study medicine because I wanted to work with people. I also decided

that if my grades were not good enough for medical school, I would study languages like English or Burmese for my undergraduate degree. He respected and accepted my decision, and I was always grateful to him for this. Choosing a profession on the basis of one's personal interest and free choice was key for the success of one's professional study. In our day, many medical students had **(p. 206)** been pushed into medicine by their parents, and struggled hard to learn subjects in which they had no interest. Though they attained their degree, some of them never practiced, and I felt this was such a big waste not only for them and their family but also for our country.

During my medical school days, I struggled to buy used textbooks since new textbooks were expensive or not available. At that time there were only three medical schools in Burma and my school was in the center of Rangoon. Many of its students were children of high-ranking government officials and famous medical doctors. But most of the medical students were clever and serious Chinese-Burmese. As medical students in that period, though we faced a shortage of textbooks and teaching material, most of our faculty and professors were enthusiastic and took teaching seriously. Though I was very interested in writing short stories, I was also good at studying medicine and I truly loved to deal with patients.

Own Choice of Writing Career and Undefined Ethnic Identity

As soon as I became a freshman at medical school, my reading hobby pushed me to write short stories. Then only in my late teens, I became a well-known short story writer. At that time, I wrote all my short stories as a citizen of Burma, not as any ethnic nationality. Living in Rangoon made me and my brothers take ethnic diversity as a given without a sense of ethnic bias.

During my final year of high school, one of my father's old friends had moved to Rangoon and hosted many religious events at home. Though these events did not exactly reflect the Theravada Buddhism that I had learned so thoroughly from books, I enjoyed visiting his home to meet Shan youth from all over Shan State. Though I never became close to any of them, I enjoyed listening to the Shan language, and was able to pick up some words. I still didn't know the language, and though I wanted to learn systematically, I couldn't find an appropriate course.

My grandfather passed away in 1986. His funeral was held according to Burmese Theravada Buddhist tradition as he had requested. We did not conduct any Chinese death rituals such as burying him in a tomb, or burning things for his afterlife, and my grandmother did not seem to mind. After my grandfather's death, we rarely heard my grandmother use Chinese words. Since she was a quiet person, I had no idea how she coped with his absence. But I was sure she was content with whatever happened to her.

Because of my father’s active relationship with his Shan friends, an editor of a Shan magazine asked me to write short stories for his journal. That was **(p.207)** the very first time I felt part of a larger Shan community, rather than merely being recognized by friends and relatives as a Shan. But as I did not know much about Shan culture and Shan Shate, I wrote one not-very-brilliant short story for the magazine and was left dissatisfied with myself.

1988 and Beyond

When the 1988 uprising started, I was in my final year of medical study. Though many of my classmates took part in the student union, I joined the movement mainly as a writer, not as a medical student. Some of my classmates left for the Thai-Burma border after the military took power in September 1988. Our class was lucky to be permitted to continue studying in late 1989 to finish our degree, as most universities were closed then for several years, and students were left without a degree. At that time, some of my short stories were banned. But I became an anonymous editor of a famous literary magazine in late 1989, under the supervision of an experienced editor who had led the NLD information section until he left the NLD soon after Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest. He was arrested in 1990 and I had to shoulder the full responsibility of running the magazine, just as I was finishing medical school.

After I finished my internship as a house surgeon in the state-owned hospitals, I was sure I didn’t want to work for those hospitals in the future. I was considering working at a nonprofit clinic or hospital, and would volunteer my medical services at a meditation center’s clinic. Finally I came to volunteer as a doctor at the Muslim Free Hospital. As soon as I began, I knew that I loved the diverse ethnic and religious working environment, where the entire Board of Trustees are Muslim, most doctors in the surgical department are Chinese Buddhist, other doctors are both Muslim and non-Muslim, most nurses are Muslim or Christian, and most importantly, there is no discrimination between patients.

Own Choice of Work and New Environment

Volunteering at the Muslim Free Hospital, I felt fulfilled to be able to assist all the poor and needy there. Working there helped expose me to lives at the grassroots of all kinds of communities. Every year the hospital provided a training course for nurse’s aides. Most of the seventy-plus participants were Muslim but at least twenty-five were Christian, and some were Hindu or Buddhist. There were Indian, Rakhine, Chin, Pa-O, Shan, Karen, Palaung, Mon, Kachin, Kayah, Lisu, Lahu, and other ethnic groups, all represented in **(p.208)** the hospital halls. And nearly all of the trainees were from remote areas of the country. I took the responsibility to teach them basic surgical knowledge. Sometimes I could not pronounce their names correctly since they were in different languages. They came from so far away to gain knowledge and skills to bring back to help their own community, and for this reason I highly valued the

task of teaching them. They would bring their relatives and friends to me for surgical and medical treatment, which is why I would meet such a wide range of ethnic people in the surgical outpatient department, and sometimes even needed to ask someone to help translate.

The doctors at the charity hospital were both Muslim and non-Muslim, while most nurses were Muslim or Christian, as well as some Hindu and Buddhist. Although there might be some interpersonal or professional conflicts between them, they were never about religion. Most nurses were from outside of Rangoon. Some were from Rakhine State and had been studying in Rangoon for years without ever having had a national identification card. They just made it with their student ID. They had no problem working at the hospital but they could not return home to visit their parents in remote areas of Rakhine State without a national ID card. Nor could their parents come to see them in Rangoon since—though they were born in Rakhine State—they were also unable to receive an ID card. For that reason, some of those dear colleagues spoke often about how hard their life in Rangoon was. They told me that they could not have a promising future because of this lack of recognition from their motherland. I felt disturbed and sad. My feeling of remoteness from my Shan identity was easier to bear than their mixed feelings about their identity. They were born and raised inside Burma but had no particular future there. I felt so humble among these kinds of colleagues at the hospital. They were doing good for patients with no discrimination but they themselves were discriminated against.

But I was happy to learn that some of the Christian nurse’s aides left our hospital after their training to work at church clinics in other states. Sometimes when I traveled to other states, I would unexpectedly meet some of them again and was so pleased to see what they were achieving. Most of them were quite happy to work for their local ethnic communities.

Imprisonment and another World

In 1993 I was arrested and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment for my political activities. My first novel was banned even as it was being printed with permission from the Press Scrutiny Board. After nearly eighteen months **(p. 209)** in Insein prison I came down with pulmonary tuberculosis. The medic-in-charge of the female ward did not cooperate with me at all to enable proper treatment. Because of her poor treatment regime and ignorance, my condition became quite serious. I already had had a gynecological problem before my arrest. The hormonal therapy for the endometriosis combined with the anti-TB treatment made my liver shut down. I was feverish for six months and my weight dropped to only eighty pounds. At that time, I could not even walk the five minutes that it took from my cell to the interview room to meet my parents. I had to take a ten-month course of anti-TB treatment because of reactivation of the TB on top of the liver problem. I felt it was such a wasteful pity to be a prisoner-patient who could have treated myself well, but was not permitted to

and had no cooperation from someone with the same professional background. My gynecological problem became more intense and serious after terminating the hormonal therapy to save my liver. I suffered the deep-seated intense pain of endometriosis for months, and only after long-term intensive hormonal therapy did it come under control again. My health condition was so serious that I barely survived, and that I did survive was only because of my Vipassana meditation practice.[1] This experience gave me more empathy for my future patients.

During my time in prison, I was very sure of my love for working as a surgeon. I replayed in my mind all my memories of the surgical procedures in order to not forget them. Depending on the good will of the staff on duty, I was able to treat people in the building with extra medicine that I asked my parents to bring. Especially hard were the lives of those on cleaning duty, who were jailed for prostitution and theft and had no family members to visit them. They had nothing to eat except prison food and some of the young women would not even take bath, as they had no extra clothes to change into. In that case, we had to share our food and clothes. I was able to gain extra Buddhist merit by providing medical treatment for them. There were no protective gloves and so I would use plastic bags instead when I carefully and thoroughly cleaned their sores and other problems with spirit and eusol before smearing ointment. With tears in their eyes, they thanked me, who had given them not only food and clothes but had also provided medical treatment. One of the women cried with happiness and gratitude, as she had never been cared for by anyone before. Other women who looked on while I gave treatment to these young women could not believe the sight of me caring **(p.210)** for these girls, and would say they had never seen a medical doctor like me before. It made me wonder, what has happened to the role and reputation of medical doctors and health care experts? I felt sad and choked at the thought that there could be many people who died without ever receiving any medical attention and treatment.

In Insein prison, I also heard many stories of wrong medical treatment. The woman assigned as medic in the female detention ward was a former schoolteacher who was jailed for fraud. She had paid money to be put into the medic position. She alone was responsible to solve any problems that anyone had during the night. One night, a pregnant woman had labor pain. So the medic tried to take her blood pressure. She diagnosed that the pregnant woman’s pulse was too fast, and decided to administer four Propranolol 40 mg to reduce her heart rate. Within minutes, the pregnant woman was dead. But since the pregnant woman was just an anonymous person, her death passed quietly without any investigation. I heard about this much later and felt sad at the thought of how many people had probably died unnecessarily from improper treatment. This kind of case has nothing to do with the authorities. It has everything to do with each and every person, who should be accountable for their actions and be good at what they do. There was nothing I could do about

this problem. But I decided that after I was released I would do as much as I could to take care of and responsibility for the poor and sick of our population.

After I was released in 1999 (an early release on humanitarian grounds), I rejoined the Muslim Free Hospital within three months. But I could not write again for two years. Because of the intense meditation practice, which for months was twenty hours per day, I rarely had extreme emotion and that made it hard for me to write fiction as soon as I was released. A year after my release, by early 2000, I started writing nonfiction pieces, and after 2001 I wrote more. I took the position of editor of a youth magazine in 2005 after having helped promote and distribute it for three years. The magazine aims to reflect the voices of unheard youth. It does not follow the format of popular magazines, in which well-known writers own most of the pages. At least 30 percent of the magazine's pages belong to the voices of its readership, who are youth from all over the country.

Back to the Old World of the Hospital

Though I could not make a decent living from this nonprofit hospital, I was so happy to work there for several reasons, one of which was being able to **(p.211)** work with and for people of diverse ethnicities. Among other things, the working environment helped me forget my own mixed ethnic identity. I always simply felt like a citizen of Burma, and that feeling stayed true no matter where I went. I rarely said I was Shan, or of mixed ethnicity, not because I was shy, but because I was proud just to be a citizen. Moreover, for me, hearing different languages and dialects in public places in the former capital of Rangoon was so enjoyable. Though Rangoon has been demoted from the country's capital, I felt Rangoon became livelier because of those conversations of people of diverse ethnicities. On top of that I was so pleased to see our people support and applaud the talents of ethnic minority people, especially in the art fields of music and film.

I took advantage of living in Rangoon to continue my medical education at the Myanmar Medical Association (MMA) and completed a family medicine certification course soon after my release. At that time, I struggled to obtain a passport to study advanced surgery abroad, but failed, for years. With enthusiasm and well-focused concentration, my surgical skills improved remarkably even within six months of my release. I was fully confident in my surgical skill. This made my operations more successful in both the major operation theater and minor outpatient theater. Within a year, I was confident enough to join MMA medical conferences, where I was happily welcomed by former classmates and teachers. But no matter what, six days in each week, then as now, I worked at my hospital and was very happy among my impoverished and needy patients.

Most of my patients live in the peri-urban area of Rangoon and some live in far away towns in the Delta or Pegu Division. They are both Muslim and non-Muslim and ethnically they are also very diverse—Burman, Indian, Karen, Shan, Mon, and so on. Most of them are simple and have never learned their rights as patient. Their rights as patients are easily abused. I not only treat them but also teach them about their rights, and they sometimes think I am crazy. I want them to be fully capable of defending their rights on their own, so that no medical professional or others can easily abuse them. But they are often just ready to follow all the instructions of medical personnel and never question their treatment options. Most Burmese patients greatly respect medical doctors and believe their doctor is their "lifesaver" (*athetthakhin*); in other words, they owe the doctor their lives. Most doctors in return believe that they should be highly respected and that patients should simply obey whatever they instruct or decide. In this way, some Burmese doctors behave like dictators with their patients—they tell patients what to do, expect to be obeyed, and do not explain to the patient what is going on with their health **(p.212)** problem. But I believe in telling the patient everything and giving them treatment options, with a clear explanation of risks and benefits of each treatment option, and letting them make an informed decision.

I tell my clinic staff that we are the same as our patients: the only difference is that they have an illness and we have medical knowledge, and our job is thus to share that knowledge with them. I practice this concept mostly at our surgical outpatient department, where we must obtain patient consent for both minor and major operations. Therefore I first explain all treatment options and respective possible consequences to my patients and then ask them to choose the most suitable option. But most of the patients simply say, "Please just treat as you think the best." Some of them think I pressure them unnecessarily to think beyond their ability. Though I can understand their lack of confidence in making decisions, I feel so sorry for them. I have always wanted my people and patients to be well informed, and to make decisions based on their knowledge in order to save their own lives and rights. I want to create a democratic culture in my work. However most of the patients are not yet ready for that culture. Still, some patients really appreciate my approach, feeling that they were respected in turn by their doctor, and happy for this rare opportunity to make well-informed decisions that affect their health and lives.

Against Professional Hierarchy

A senior doctor at our hospital once told me, "I am fighting for democracy. But here in my profession, I practice as a dictator." Hierarchy is practiced in all professional fields, including the medical fields, and already in medical school we junior doctors experienced professional jealousy and dictatorial behavior. At that time we had hoped that it was only a layover from the socialist days or occurred only in government-run hospitals. Unfortunately, I experienced a great deal of professional jealousy and dictatorship in the charity hospital even today,

which like-minded colleagues and I aim to change. Some senior health care professionals in both the public and private systems neglect patients' rights even more than lower positioned personnel, in order to keep their professional territory untouched, preserve financial profit and maintain a social monopoly. I note that those kinds of health care professionals use their professional skills mostly to gain a luxurious material life, and they show only a limited sense of professional ethics and value of the essence of their profession. To promote the health status of our country is not only the responsibility of policymakers but also the responsibility of medical professionals.

(p.213) One problem I face as a medical doctor is the unregulated pharmaceutical market. In Myanmar the fact that people are able to buy any drug they want over the counter is a big problem. Even though the law states that drugs must be obtained with a prescription, people go to the drugstore directly instead of paying to see a doctor, particularly in the rural areas, or they go to a traditional healer. This makes drug resistance one of the worst medical problems in the country. Because of poverty, many of my tuberculosis patients default on their treatment. They receive antituberculosis medicine from our hospital every two weeks. From our hospital, they just walk to a drugstore and sell some of the medication for money for the commute or for food, and take only the medicine that remains. This makes them resistant to multiple drugs, and very difficult to treat. Therefore our hospital pharmacy asks TB patients to show their empty medication packets as proof that they are taking them regularly and as prescribed. Some patients cannot even afford bus fare and they never show up again. Just because of that, I lose them.

Another problem I face is that there is no systematic referral system, and the role of the General Practitioner (GP) is neglected. In the cities, patients go straight to a specialist instead of going first to a general practitioner for referral because they want to avoid paying doctor fees twice. But then the specialists end up treating simple problems that the GP could treat. Patients are not well-informed about the benefits of a good referral system and would not think of consulting with a GP first. GPs have never been encouraged by our health care system to properly promote the health status of our country, and most specialists look down on GPs. Patients simply choose a specialist depending on their prominent symptoms, going to a chest specialist for a cough, or a neurophysicians for a headache. Though their underlying problems may be unrelated, specialists never refuse to treat a patient, even when that particular health problem is not within their field of expertise. This kind of behavior is quite irresponsible. In the end, most patients spend unnecessary time and money to recover.

Some GPs treat only the symptoms and not the cause of an illness because their medical treatment knowledge is not up to date. Then, recurrent symptoms make patients tired of regular long visits to the GP and cause them to lose faith in

medical professionals, especially GPs. In reality, GPs are key to our country's health care management. Very few people appreciate their role and it has rarely been promoted by any organization.

I would work six days per week at the charity hospital and on Sunday I would work at another free clinic for two or three hours. I noticed something really interesting. Some of the doctors who work at our charity hospital also **(p.214)** work at that free clinic on Sunday. Some of the volunteer doctors at free clinics are retired doctors or doctors whose practice at their own clinics is not successful. Almost none of the famous specialists are ever seen at any charity or free clinic. Their time is very precious and they earn high hourly fees. They work so hard just to earn more patients and money, and they never consider consulting at least an hour per week at a free clinic. They also behave like kings or dictators towards their patients. Patients rarely have the chance to ask for more information about their own health problems and nearly never are given the opportunity to choose among treatment options. They must just follow all unilateral instruction without having been informed about the depth and nature of their problems. I was so amazed to learn about these professional dictatorships. Why don't we professionals change our own professional practice in order to build a foundation for a democratic culture? We have to consider our patients as neither our "cases" nor our "clients" but as our "coordinators" to together contribute our respective experience for a healthy society. Our health care infrastructure is still poor and so health care coverage is never enough for both rich and poor. If we medical professionals had great enthusiasm for our professional responsibility, we could make even a small difference to expand health care coverage for the poor and needy.

Among Patients and People of My Beloved Country

During my days at the charity hospital, I experienced many tragic stories about my patients. Once, a diabetic patient needed blood for the amputation of his gangrenous foot. The patient was from a very remote area of Karen State and his family was obviously poor. We could not get a blood donation from his family and they also had no idea how to find a blood bottle. The hospital board gave the family money to obtain blood from a private blood bank. Since the patient's family knew nothing about Rangoon and were afraid of getting lost, they asked someone who was assisting another patient at our surgical ward to pick up the blood. On the day of the operation we waited for the blood. Not until late afternoon, when the person had still not come back with the blood, did we all finally realize that he had taken the money and would not return. We had to postpone the amputation operation and the hospital had to reissue money for new blood. We were amazed and appalled to see how desperate people are that they go to such great lengths for money. As time goes on, I feel increasingly saddened about people's lack of morals and ethical responsibility, brought on by an ever deepening state of poverty. We never experienced these kinds of problems before the late 1980s. Another **(p.215)** story is about two old

spinsters, sisters who lived in a small bamboo hut annexed to a wooden house in peri-urban Rangoon. The elder sister was already eighty when the younger one sustained a third-degree burn on her bottom from a hot oil spill while she was frying vegetable tempura. Because the sisters had no other relatives, the hospital provided food for them. (In Burma, even at state-owned hospitals, daily food is usually provided by family or friends of patients.) Our hospital has no kitchen and so the hospital board had a restaurant send every meal for the elderly patient. She shared her food ration with her sister, and they also managed to earn some pocket money and secondhand clothing from other patients whom the elder sister helped in small ways such as by washing dishes or clothes. After three weeks, these two sisters had become happy and comfortable at the hospital, were well-fed and had collected what seemed to them to be a large amount of money and goods from both other patients and sympathetic hospital staff. The younger sister recovered well and all of her burn wounds healed. When I decided to discharge her, both sisters were in tears and begged me not to. They told me they wanted to stay in the ward as long as possible. But since other patients needed to be treated, I could not allow them to stay any longer. I felt so sad and could not imagine how hard their lives must be in their tiny bamboo hut, selling vegetable tempura for a living in their old age.

I often lose tuberculosis patients who cannot even afford the bus fare to come to hospital regularly for TB treatment. Though I have full confidence in my medical knowledge, surgical skills, and communication skills, I cannot help those of my patients who, more than they need my knowledge and skills, need money. Though I always try to defend patients' rights, I sometimes fail to defend their lives. What a pity! I can treat their disease symptoms but I cannot treat their chronic problems. I can only cut off that part of their stomach which has cancer, but I cannot fill their stomach daily with healthy food. How can I smile and be proud of my limited ability to help them?

One time, around 10 a.m. in the morning he was to be operated on, a three-year old boy was running and playing all over our surgical ward. Normally patients must fast from 10 p.m. the night before and the operation requiring general anesthesia. Most young boys are screaming and crying with hunger and thirst by around 9 a.m. Moreover, on that day, the consultant surgeon and anesthetist were late and as all the patients had to wait, we were concerned about this little boy. But he seemed fine and even happy to run and walk all over the ward, and I wondered how he could cope. His mother told me the story. The boy was the youngest of eight siblings, and their father recently passed away. His mother was pregnant and she could barely feed **(p.216)** them enough. None of the eight children had ever had any kind of footwear before. Since he had to be admitted to the hospital, she thought he might need slippers to wear, and bought him a pair. With that he became the only child in the family to own a pair of slippers. He was so happy and proud to show off how smart he looked in his new slippers that he didn't care about fasting. He was also very used to being hungry

and knew that crying would not bring him any food. After hearing this story, I remembered how I used to say to the staff that we should treat each patient as human being, not as a “case.” How about this little human being? He was teaching us a lot about what we can do, what we should expect, and what we can appreciate in our lives.

There are so many more stories of my patients who teach me so much about what goes on in my neighbors’ lives. I have always felt that there is mutual benefit between patients and us medical professionals. We the doctors provide medical knowledge, skills, and treatment to solve their health problems, and they the patients provide us their trust and life experiences to help us learn about our society’s needs and problems.

Patients Who Take Responsibility

Since I conduct both of my careers at the same time, someone who knows me as a medical doctor may not easily guess about my life in literature. Few medical professionals write fiction, though some of them write nonfiction medical articles. But some from the literature world learn about my medical career when they become my patients at the charity hospital. In fact, since 2000, I give priority to my medical work. I spend less time at the magazine office and try to spend more time at the hospital, usually writing only at nighttime.

At the hospital, I act as a responsible medical professional. I do not just examine and operate on patients. I am concerned not only about treatment of disease but also about management of patients’ lives, about maintaining a good working environment for all staff, and about long-term hospital management. Most of our patients aim to alleviate their symptoms simply by taking medicine or undergoing an operation. I explain to them that neither medication nor operation is enough in many cases, and that we need their cooperation to change their attitudes and behaviors, which are usually the cause of health problems. Patients are often disappointed by this suggestion, which does not meet their expectations. They often nod and say “yes” to our instructions on how to change their behavior to improve their health, but in fact many do not change their behavior and yet continue to complain that **(p.217)** their symptoms are still not relieved by our treatment. This happens frequently, especially at the charity hospital. Some patients believe that since it is a charity hospital, we do not provide quality medication and that is why their symptoms are still not alleviated by our treatment. This is really a difficult problem at a charity hospital or clinic. The level of health education among the majority of our people is very low and most of them expect a dramatic cure of all symptoms after only a short treatment.

For this reason, I strive to educate my patients about how they can cooperate with us to rid themselves of their illness. Once I received a phone call from one of my friends. She told me that her elder sister had not been able to walk for

eleven months since she gave birth to her youngest child. I asked her several questions to guess the underlying cause and there seemed nothing wrong with her sister's neurocerebral system, but I did find that she was under mental stress and experiencing fear because of marital difficulties. I accepted to see the patient, and she was brought to me carried in people's arms. I found no motor or sensory deficiency involving either of her legs though there was some muscular atrophy because of long-term lack of movement. I took time examining both legs to show her and her family and friends that her both legs were normal. I explained what signs I found regarding her legs while I examined them. Then I told her, "You see, I have conducted all the necessary tests and there is nothing wrong with either of your legs. I did my task well. Do you accept this as correct? Then I can guarantee you that you can walk away right now. I will take all responsibility if you fail to walk. I want you to walk now, here in front of me. If something goes wrong, I am here to help you. I will give you some vitamins and medicine, but they cannot cure your illness, only help give you strength to face your illness. Only you yourself can cure your illness. Please don't worry. I guarantee you can walk from now on. Come on! Let's try walking. I will accompany you. You have to take responsibility, too. I know your problem is your fear and worry. Tell me please what is your fear or worry. But you don't have to worry about falling since I gave you my guarantee." I encouraged and explained to her for nearly half an hour, reminding her repeatedly that my responsibility to examine her was completed and that now I wanted her to take her responsibility by cooperating with me and trying to walk. Finally she seemed reassured, expressed all her worries and fears, and told me she was truly relieved by my words. Then she was willing to try walking. In a minute, she slipped from the examination table and walked by herself around the examination room. After five minutes, she bade us goodbye and walked away from our clinic with a big smile. All the people who had accompanied her, and the rest of my staff, were so amazed to see her change. **(p.218)** After eleven months in bed, within an hour, without even one tablet of medication, she had regained her normal walk. I explained to my staff how important patient's compliance and cooperation are for us to gain successful treatment. That was a wonderful experience and I was so pleased to learn that from that moment on she never relapsed to her old symptom again. I also learned from that case that we have to make patients aware of their own responsibility for care of their illness.

I once had a responsible patient, who was in his late thirties when I met him. He had been a political prisoner, and because of malignant high blood pressure suffered right-sided paralysis, and then was released. He lives in the suburbs of Pegu, a town forty-seven miles from Rangoon. His family could not afford the expense for treatment at for-profit or state-owned hospitals, and so he became my patient at the charity hospital. His condition was very critical when I first saw him, and it was very difficult for him and his family to come to our hospital regularly. I arranged for him to consult with a physician and myself for nearly

two years. When his condition became stable I asked the hospital Board of Trustees to provide him two weeks' worth of medicine. At our hospital we provide patients free medicine for only a week, and then they must come weekly for their chronic illness. But for him, our hospital made an exception and provided medicine for a two-week period. He was a regular and punctual patient. With his responsible cooperation as a good patient, his condition improved. Within two years he was able to function normally again, though he still had controlled hypertension. When he was well enough to work and earn some income, he came to tell me that he could now afford to pay for his treatment and would not come to our hospital for free medicine anymore. I was so happy to learn what a responsible and cooperative patient he was. Sadly, I meet very few patients like him. Most patients do not place great value on free treatment and medication from a charity hospital and do not visit regularly. Patients often have a number of excuses for not visiting, but in fact they do not know how and why they should cooperate with us. For this reason I continue to educate my patients about their responsibility to cooperate.

I enjoy surgical work since it is teamwork, not individual work. Taking care of a patient is not as simple as taking a disease history, and examining and operating on patients' bodies. We medical personnel have to consider all aspects of a patients' illness and life experience in order to provide the most effective treatment. I believe we have to take care of our patients in all three aspects—physical, mental, and social well-being. That is why I make an effort to consider many factors regarding a patient's illness as well as their living **(p.219)** condition. For me, considering where a patient lives is as important as understanding his or her illness. Patients who live in remote areas have to be managed differently from those who live in town. At the same time, I care about the working environment for our medical staff. If the working environment is not favorable, staff efficiency will decrease, and then, the success rate of our treatment will definitely decrease. I constantly think about how to upgrade the working environment at our charity hospital. Hospital medical equipment and instruments are often not used with care by most medical staff including some doctors. Since the hospital is not rich, maintenance of equipment is essential. Working at the charity hospital, I constantly and carefully consider many aspects of the health care system: the patients' illness and life situation, staff and working environment, maintenance of the hospital facility, obtaining funds, and so on.

My Belief in Professional Democracy

I strongly believe that democracy cannot be given by any group or organization—since no one owns democracy—but that it can be practiced in each professional realm. I want my people to learn more about democratic rights and responsibilities in their daily lives. We, as intellectuals and professionals, are responsible for implementing a democratic conscience in our own environment not only socially but also professionally. If we want freedom, diversity, and

democracy, we must implement a democratic conscience in our own family, our professional environment, and our community.

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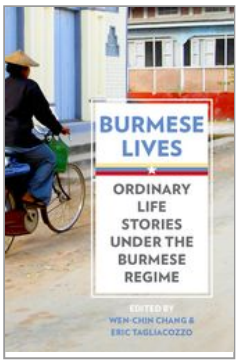
Notes:

(1.) I described this process in detail in a book-length memoir (Ma Thida-Sanchaung 2012).



Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime
Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo

Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199335039
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.001.0001

A Life in Service of Change

Karin Eberhardt

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.003.0011

Abstract and Keywords

Karin Eberhardt discusses the life of a Kachin man in the Shan State of Burma. The son of a *duwa* (village area chief), shaman, and opium cultivator, Sara Brang Awng (a pseudonym) grew up to become an educated civil servant, a Christian, and a champion of sustainable agricultural technologies. His life spans the transformation of the northern Shan State world through collisions of cultures, and also through the random chronology of local human events. Eberhardt's narrative explores how Sara Brang Awng both helped shape and was in turn shaped by seven decades of change in the culturally diverse and economically and politically complex context of northern Shan State. The story illustrates how the protagonist deliberately draws from his traditional roots to explore and embrace the possibilities of modernity, turning this apparent temporal rift into his greatest source of strength.

Keywords: Kachin, civil servant, Christian, agriculturalist, traditional roots, modernity

Northern Shan State: Context of Transformation

NORTHERN SHAN STATE is one of the areas of greatest ethnic diversity in Myanmar, and perhaps in the world. It also exhibits great geographic diversity. The region's steep mountains and broad, fertile valleys and plains support speakers of Tibeto-Burman, Han Chinese, Tai-Kadai, and Mon-Khmer languages who converged over time to settle into today's mix of Shan, Kachin, Palaung, Wa, and Kokang—each with their own subgroups—as well as a large number of other ethnic and linguistic groups.

In remote parts of the hills marginal subsistence farmers still live much as they did eighty years ago. But most of northern Shan State's highland inhabitants, including the subject of this chapter, have been marked by significant cultural, political, and economic change. From his father's generation to his own, Sara Yaw Htung (a pseudonym) has lived the transition from an oral tradition to formal education, and from animism to Christianity. He has experienced colonial rule, independence and the abdication of the *sawbwa* traditional Shan rulers. He has survived chronic armed conflict as first the Kuomintang, then the Burma Communist Party, added to a number of ethnic-based non-state armed forces, militias, and the *tatmadaw* (Burma or Myanmar Army), vied for control of people and production (especially of opium). From 1960 to about 1995 northern Shan State was a hotly contested region where protracted warfare displaced and disinherited a large proportion of the upland population.

The twenty-year period from the 1994 ceasefires to today has witnessed the most rapid and perhaps disturbing changes. The end of most armed conflict, legalization of the border trade, and shift from a socialist to a market economy converged to enable the large-scale flow of natural resources, including timber, nontimber forest products, and gems and minerals to China and other neighbors. Agribusiness companies, often financed by foreign **(p.221)** investors, are clearing hundreds of thousands of acres of land to establish plantations of rubber and other crops, damaging the environment and causing large-scale loss of land to smallholder farmers (see Pascal Khoo-Thwe in this volume for description of a similar dynamic in southern Shan State). In northern Shan State alone, a total of twenty thousand hectares of land were allocated to agribusiness by 2012, with an unknown but significant additional amount that was never recorded.[1] Landless or land-poor households try to cope by moving onto increasingly marginal lands, or by exploiting "common property" resources such as artisanal gold-panning or collecting rattan, bamboo, and valuable orchids. With no wage labor opportunities locally, young men and women migrate to China, Thailand, or beyond (or to gem mines inside the country) with estimates indicating that about 10 percent of Myanmar's total workforce is abroad. The movement of youth to work in mines and forests is associated with drug abuse, including intravenous injections of the readily-available heroin, which is one of the main causes of the serious HIV-AIDS epidemic in Myanmar (Buchanan et al. 2013). The already-fraught social networks are further damaged by high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse in villages.

Even after the truces of the mid-1990s, various armed groups, government-backed militias and other interests continue to vie for control in the region.[2] In 2008 I heard local villagers comment that their situation was worse than during the civil war, saying that at least in those days one could flee into the forest to wait for the soldiers to pass, whereas now villagers are settled and

administered, and vulnerable to a number of armed groups, who each claim rights over extraction of village labor or resources.

Two major new trends now affect Shan State, and the rest of the country: the rudimentary transition out of military rule and into parliamentary democracy that was marked by elections in 2010; and the breakdown of the truce between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the tatmadaw in June 2011. Though the KIA base is on the border with Kachin State, its area of influence extends into northern Shan State, where the situation is exacerbated by skirmishes between the tatmadaw and Shan State Army. The first eighteen **(p.222)** months of renewed hostilities have created at least seventy thousand refugees, many from northern Shan State. The elections of 2010, which were immediately branded as not free and fair, resulted in an overwhelming majority of seats to the government proxy party, with only 25 percent of seats occupied by ethnic parties in the most states that are dominated by ethnic minority populations (Buchanan et al. 2013). It is hoped that the next round of elections in 2015 will be more representative.

This chapter places the life of Sara Yaw Htung in this rapidly changing context and shows how he both worked to transform others and was transformed himself.

An Ordinary Life in Northern Shan State

Yaw Htung was born in 1933 in the mountainous country in the far north of Shan State, not far from Mungku[3] at the China border and just west of the Salween River. Under the British colonial administration his village area fell within the Hill Tracts of northern Hsenwi, an ethnically diverse area where Kachin were numerous, and where his father was *duwa*, chief of a set of villages, under the Frontier Areas Administration which left indigenous administrative systems somewhat intact but under supervision of a British Commissioner of the Federated Shan States (Sai Aung Tun 2009). In addition to his role of duwa as mediator of problems, tax collector, administrator and protector of his people, his father was also a *dumsa*, or animist priest, able to communicate with the spirits, understand supernatural causes of illness, prescribe offerings to heal the sick, and lead sacrificial rites to promote a good harvest.

In his childhood Sara Yaw Htung was driven by a great curiosity as well as great willfulness—in other words, he always had to have his way. One summer day when he was twelve years old, Yaw Htung grabbed hold of his father’s long shirtsleeves and refused to let go until he was given permission to attend the newly opened missionary school down in the valley. To Yaw Htung, who would be the first in his family to attend, school seemed a way to feed his burning desire to learn how the world worked and experience new things. To his father, school seemed like an utter waste of time. “If you are so eager for an education, then tear up and eat your paper and pencil. Don’t bother to eat rice anymore,” his

father would scold, expressing his view that Yaw Htung's youthful energy would be better spent in the fields helping feed the family.

(p.223) Lacking parental support the young Yaw Htung worked his way through school by doing any odd job he could find—weeding fields, tending cows, slaughtering pigs, and later, teaching others. After high school he went on to agricultural technical college, before joining the agricultural extension service of the newly independent Burmese government. A coveted government salary being the culmination of his years of formal schooling, he finally succeeded at "eating his education." A career path opened for him that would have been unimaginable to his parent's generation.

Yaw Htung served the government for thirty-six years, and after his retirement in 1996, he continued to promote agricultural development through the NGOs that were emerging on the scene. We became friends when I was assigned by the NGO we worked for to be his technical advisor in 1999. This chapter is based on conversations and interviews held from about 2007 to 2011. The narrative is organized around the diverse identities through which Sara Yaw Htung serves his community: as an agriculturist, a government staff person, a Christian, a "Kachin," and a family man.

The Agriculturist

The first time I met Sara Yaw Htung I was still a graduate student and he was still in the government extension service, five years before we would work together. By chance, I was invited to see his agricultural demonstration plot in Kokang near the China border. Here, set off from the wildness of the surrounding hills with a white-painted fence, rows of long-leafed *Flemingia* imported from the Philippines created a constant source of nutrients for neighboring annual and perennial crops. The roots and stalks of the *Flemingia*, arranged in hedges across the hill's contour, held the soil to the steep slope and protected stands of rice and corn and clusters of beans from erosion. Rooted at regular intervals in deep, composted holes, mango, dogfruit, and orange seedlings reached for the sky. The neat rows of this ordered plot demonstrated the possibility of permanent farming as a modern alternative to the traditional rotating fallow systems—perhaps even as an alternative to opium cultivation. At the time, it seemed to me a carefully orchestrated outpost of the Burmese government, lost and out of place in these vast mountains of patchy forest, skinny wandering cows, and burnt tumbling fields. Only later, when I got to know Sara Yaw Htung, did I realize that this hopeful patch of ordered green, this cry in the wilderness, demonstrated not only contour hedgerow technologies but the unyielding hope of one man for a better future for the people of the hills.

(p.224) Sara Yaw Htung first learned agriculture, as most farmers do, from his father and mother and extended family. His family was among the lucky ones who had valley land on which they could grow wet rice, using water buffalo to

till the wet earth and planting seedlings into a field calf-deep with the water which controls weeds and provides nutrients. Their food supply was supplemented by “early varieties” of rice grown in the upland fields, which were ready to harvest and consume by August, before the paddy which ripened in November. But for most families, upland rotating fallow land[4] was all they had. Upland rotating fallow fields were cleared with machetes on forested or scrub-covered slopes, the slash left to dry before burning it in the hot season, and the soil cultivated by hand with a hoe.

Rotating fallow systems are in transition. In the days of Yaw Htung’s grandfather, upland fields were cultivated for a year and then left fallow for fifteen or twenty years, even up to thirty, before being cultivated again. Today, land shortage caused by increased populations, displacement, encroachment of land, and other factors means that in some places upland fields are only fallowed for three or four years, after two or three years cultivation. In these systems, short fallow periods inhibit restoration of soil fertility, which translates to lower yields of rice and corn, a high concentration of weeds outcompeting the sown grains, and soil erosion.

The downward spiral of increasing human population densities and smallholder farmers being crowded out by agribusiness and economic concessions is the main agricultural challenge in the uplands of mainland Southeast Asia. Solutions must make land more productive over a shorter amount of time, a process called intensification of rotating fallow systems. Yaw Htung’s plot aimed to showcase one of these technologies.

In his thirty-six-year career with the government, over fourteen years with NGOs, and continuous agricultural promotion through the church, Sara Yaw Htung has supported improvements in all possible agricultural ecosystems of Shan State: from wet rice in irrigated valley paddy fields to rotating fallow fields on the hillsides, vegetable gardens in home compounds, orchards and plantations, even poppy grown high and tucked up under the ridge. In the paddy fields he introduced improved seed varieties such as MY2, which can yield up to two hundred baskets per acre—a tripling of yields from traditional methods. In sloping lands of the surrounding hills, he has demonstrated how to turn rotating fallow farms into permanently yielding plots. He has taught **(p.225)** how to cultivate coffee, walnut, chestnut, and any number of perennial cash crops, and how to make nurseries for forest tree species and valuable nontimber forest species such as bamboo and rattan. The only crop he refused to work with was tea—despite its importance in Shan State—because as a child on school breaks he had to help his mother pick tea day and night until exhausted, and he swore that when he grew up he would never touch the stuff again.

And just as he has worked with the full range of agricultural systems, so he has worked with the gamut of social, political, economic, and military groups that in northern Shan State are as diverse as its mountain and valley ecology. He has worked with the government of the Union of Myanmar, with government-backed militias, with ethnic-based non-state armies, and with commercial companies. He has worked through the church and with NGOs. But mostly he has worked with villagers. He has worked with an uncountable number of ethnic groups, including Kokang, Wa, Palaung, Shan, Kachin, Hmong, and Lahu, with farmers high in the hills living on opium and upland rice and low in the valleys making paddy fields. He has worked with villagers eager to enrich their forests with valuable species like rattan, bamboo, and hardwoods; he has worked with villages who are ready to cut down their forests because they are being taken from them anyway. He has worked with villages that have been relocated many times; those who have suffered civil war, flight, and forced relocation, those who have been recombined for administrative purposes in times of peace, and those who have suffered opium eradication campaigns. He once said:

> There is no place in northern Shan State that does not bear my footprint. And while going about my work, I have made so many friends with so many kinds of people. . . . My contribution is that I extended crop plantations, and new technologies, for example improved varieties of seeds and crop management, all over the region. Whether on my own land or other farmers land there is nowhere in northern Shan State that I have not done some work. Now, in this region, everyone trusts me regarding the agricultural sector and respect my advice. My method is to test the technology first and then show the person I am trying to teach. “If you don’t believe me then come and see my farm” I tell them, and they come and see and then they believe.

But he also recognizes the limits of technology. Although rice yields have greatly increased with improved systems, farmers are not necessarily able to **(p.226)** hold onto their family paddy land. Opium production continues to rise and fall depending on the relative strength of the market and eradication efforts, and eradication efforts have caused much hardship for poor farm families. To intensify production in rotating fallow fields requires much labor, agricultural inputs, sustained vision and confidence in the future—all commodities that local hill farmers lack in the chaotic context of northern Shan State. And in the last ten years the commercial plantations are taking over the land and making his promoted technologies obsolete. “The loss of land is the biggest threat facing our farmers in northern Shan State now,” says Sara Yaw Htung.

In Government Service

As an agricultural extension officer in the Myanmar Agriculture Service from 1960 to 1996, Yaw Htung lived the installation of the Burmese Way to Socialism and the subsequent failure of socialist planning. In northern Shan State, this

period was marked by large-scale armed conflict and upheaval in rural life as families endured the ravages of war until the ceasefires in the mid-1990s. His postings as an agricultural extension officer would ebb and flow higher or lower into the hills with the fluctuating front of the war with the Burma Communist Party, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and other ethnic-based armies and militias.

He was posted first to Kutkai in 1960, where he grew so many potatoes he had to persuade his wife to become a vegetable marketer. Then the postings rotated every two or three years, first to Muse and Namkham to promote groundnuts, but as the KIA grew strong in that area and travel difficult, he transferred to Mongyai and Tangyan. In 1967 Kokang leader and opium warlord Lo Hsing Han sided with the government as militia leader in one of a series of alliance shifts that would occur over the next few decades, and Yaw Htung was posted there as a sign of cooperation and government presence. He recounted part of this experience:

> In Kokang I demonstrated improved yields on sixty-four acres of upland rice cultivation, with funds from the BSPP government. The Kunlong District Commander had already started a poppy eradication program, and said we had to plant wheat. Lo Hsing Han disagreed, he said it would not work, but I had to do my duty. I was issued a tractor, seeds, and fertilizer to prepare the land with the farmers. I was afraid the farmers might boil the seeds to ruin them. I thought they might want to have reason to say that the seeds I had given them were no **(p.227)** good, because they were not happy about this project. So I kept the seeds in hand until the land was prepared, and then gave them to the farmers and watched them broadcast the seed in front of me. Finally that wheat grew up to be taller than me; it was very successful. Then in May 1969 the BCP invaded and all the government staff had to run. I ran, ran, ran, leaving all my things, all my books. I came out with only the clothes on my back.

In 1974 he transferred to Lashio. One of his achievements there was the conversion of Khun Mahawan to use of improved paddy rice cultivation methods. Khun Mahawan was the former chief-of-police of the Theinni sawbwa, a big, strong, and powerful Shan, with the most fertile land in the area. Khun Mahawan was initially resistant to Yaw Htung’s suggestions, even aggressive, and did not take care of the high-yield variety seeds that Yaw Htung gave him to plant a test plot with. The test failed. The next season Yaw Htung chose the worst paddy land in the area for his own demonstration. He amended the soil, developed bunds, and used improved methods for every step of cultivation, finally harvesting 174 baskets of paddy per acre—when the local average was forty–fifty baskets. It was the highest yield of any field in northern Shan State that year, and was showcased by a government-sponsored competition.

Khun Mahawun was suitably impressed and from then on sought Yaw Htung's advice and applied his methods carefully, and every year thereafter, it was Khun Mahawan who won the government prize for highest yield. Moreover, Khun Mahawan began to teach the methods he was using to all those who came to mill their rice at his mill. Through demonstration on their fields, and Khun Mahawan's informal trainings, these methods spread all the way into the next township of Hsipaw.

Because Khun Mahawan had been a security officer of the sawbwa, who had only recently handed their power over to the government, he was often in conflict with local government authorities. But as he began to win the harvest prize in the government competition each year, the local authorities came to treat him with respect, and vice versa. Finally, the government appointed Khun Mahawan as headman-for-life of his ward in Lashio. Through the humble tool of agricultural extension, Yaw Htung was able to help promote unity among ethnic and political groups in northern Shan State.

After his retirement from government service in 1996 Yaw Htung began a career with NGOs, working first with a regional international research center, then a series of three international development organizations that were just **(p.228)** beginning work in Shan State. He also supported the development of local organizations, and has been a member of the board and agricultural trainer of what is now one of the largest and most reputed local NGOs in the country since its formation in 1998.

I once asked him what he viewed as the difference in the way that government and the NGOs approach agricultural extension. He replied that the government system is top-down and people operate only out of fear to follow the instructions they have been given. This makes agricultural extension work difficult and results are not sustained. With NGOs, in contrast, farmers first become aware of how a new approach or technology might benefit them, and then plan and implement activities together with the NGO on a voluntary basis.

Sara Yaw Htung's method was not to argue when people did not believe what he was telling them, but rather to prove by demonstration to win their trust. But if he was asked by his superiors to undertake a responsibility that he considered impossible to deliver on, he would decline to do it. He said: "I was not afraid of the authorities, just saying 'yes, yes' like many others did. I knew that in the end, the outcome would be my responsibility." He tells the following story about a target which was issued him to plant seven thousand tons of sugarcane in Laokai. Implementing this plan would have required planting a crop that was not suitable for the soil conditions, at the wrong time of year, without available plant propagation material, and in an impossible quantity. The narrative gives an

inside glimpse of what it was like to operate in government service under a central command authority:

> Once I was in Kutkai and called to a meeting with a [high-ranking military official] in Lashio for a discussion on planting sugarcane in Laokai (Kokang). Transport was difficult and unsafe in those days because of the insurgents. A convoy would leave Kutkai at 6 a.m. and after that there would be no transport at all. I didn't receive the message to attend the meeting until 7:30 a.m. I had no car, just my bicycle. I started to pedal. Just after Theinni I got a car. I arrived at the meeting as it was about to end and the high-ranking officer asked me to answer his questions right then and there. I didn't even have a chance to sit down. And I answered with the truth, with the real situation. That is why to every proposal he made, I had to reply that it was impossible, unworkable. All the army and police officers sitting at the front of the room were looking at me with round eyes. Why does this man refuse the [high-ranking official's] assignment? They looked as if they wanted to throttle me. But I knew what I was saying. . . .

(p.229) Sara Yaw Htung's government service tenure oversaw the slow transition from a government position as well-paid and highly coveted, to a low-paying position requiring subsidization by other means of income. He said:

> When I registered for seventh standard I changed my age to be younger by two years. That was so I could work for government a little longer because in those days only the government staff could live well. In those days, even the night watchman for a government position earned 80 kyats per month, which was enough to support a whole family.

Later, throughout the 1980s and until government raised civil servants' salary in 2011, most mid-level government staff did not earn nearly enough for one person, let alone a family. This has resulted in routine rent-seeking behaviors on the part of government staff, which together with the severe underresourcing of government departments, has completely undermined people's confidence in and quality of government staff and services.

When asked to look back on his time in the government service, Sara Yaw Htung says he is disappointed that the socialist government was not able to achieve more. He views that at the time the farmers and workers needed a good plan for their development, and the government staff wanted to achieve this kind of plan. But the reports that reached the top were not always based on reality, and some important information never made it to the planners. He feels that if they had had all the relevant information then the decision makers would have done more for the people's welfare. At that time, northern Shan State was very rich in natural resources and sustainable development could have succeeded. But now,

the situation is completely opposite, he says, implying that northern Shan State has become resource poor and the government inept.

In Service of the Church

The story of Sara Yaw Htung and the Baptist church starts with the story of his education. Starting from the day he gripped his father's shirtsleeves, Yaw Htung attended mission schools from primary through tenth standard, ending on scholarship at the Kachin Baptist High School in Myitkyina. Run in cooperation between the missionaries and the government education system, in addition to the standard government curriculum, the schools offered Sunday school, Bible study and prayer. As Yaw Htung struggled to **(p.230)** work for his tuition and board, he was helped by Kachin Christian elders, some of whom became like fathers to him.

The first in his family to be formally educated, Yaw Htung was also the first to convert to Christianity, baptized while in the seventh standard in 1952. While in school he was very active in the church, taking responsibilities such as youth leader, choir leader, student leader, and in charge of church collections. As an adult, he helped found the Kachin Baptist Church of northern Shan State in Lashio, where he is still one of its most respected elders. He talks about his conversion:

> I never really believed in animist *nats*,[5] even though my father did that work. To me it was something we did, like a habit, we had to sacrifice animals to save the life of a sick person, or to worship the nats. But when I came to consider it deeply, I didn't believe in it. The animist worshipper has too many burdens. They must spend a lot of time and money to sacrifice animals and propitiate the nats and they are always afraid of their nats. This is why I converted to Christianity. Christianity has helped the Kachin people to develop. Before the Christians came the Kachin had no literature [written script]. Now the Kachin people are 99 percent Christian and have spread throughout the world.

He maintains that the Baptists believe in practical holistic development, not only in spiritual aspects but also in health, education, and agriculture. They have promoted holistic development by establishing social service facilities such as a training hospital in Namkham and the agricultural training center in Pyinmina (nationalized in 1962 to become the government Agricultural Technical College that Yaw Htung later attended).

Conversion was not difficult because Christian concepts resonate with Kachin animist beliefs. Yaw Htung explains that the concept of blood sacrifice is the same: in Christianity, Jesus died on the cross to save humankind, while in animist tradition the life or blood of an animal is traded for that of a person. Furthermore, Bible stories resonate with Kachin myths and cultural practices,

such as the story of the flood, the patriarchal families, and close clan and kinship duties and obligations.

He once described for me a traditional animist wedding, in which the bride crosses a bamboo “bridge” to her groom’s house while her legs are **(p.231)** brushed with the blood of pigs sacrificed to the groom’s clan spirits. In this way she leaves her father’s clan and is brought into her husband’s clan, entering the protection of its spirits.[6] He compares this ceremony to a Christian wedding:

> This is why the marriage ceremony is so important—it represents the great responsibility given to the *dama* (groom’s clan) for the care of their new daughter. The blood of the pig must be given for the nats of her husband’s family to take her in; and so the blood of Christ is given to forgive us our sins so that we may one day rise to heaven and enter the protection of God. Many parts of the [Christian] marriage ceremony are familiar to us Kachin, it is easy for us to understand.

Another time Sara Yaw Htung took me on a tour of the Lashio Kachin Baptist Church. He had first come to this compound in 1957, when he was newly married, and assigned by the church to be headmaster of the mission school and its new hostel (for village children to attend school in town). Sara Yaw Htung was one of the early supporters of this church, helping build the compound with his own labor, funds and organizational skills. He has served as head of the Church Council and continues to act as a close advisor.

The compound also houses the offices of the Northern Shan State Kachin Baptist Association, one of three associations in northern Shan State which together administer sixty-eight churches with a combined congregation of about 15,500 families.[7] Sara Yaw Htung has done many agricultural trainings through the association. The association works at the village level through pastors and peer groups to, in partnership with NGOs and donors, facilitate development projects of all kinds, from using food aid to build small infrastructure and create paddy land, to establishing village rice banks, livestock revolving funds, and savings and loan groups, to upland agriculture demonstration plots and farmer field schools, and establishment of community nurseries for forestry plantations. The church is one strong hub of the key relationships through which Sara Yaw Htung works for the holistic development of the people.

(p.232) The compound also features a large water reservoir, two hostels, an early childhood education center, a wedding reception hall and huge kitchen, and a small water filtration business just behind the baptism pool, in addition to several houses for the staff and a four-story office. A “memorial lane” curves around one of the most reliable springs in Lashio, where 23 memorial stones chronicle the history of the Baptist church in Myanmar and Lashio.[8] As he pointed out the memorial stones of near-legendary early missionaries, as well as

others who were his elders, teachers and colleagues, and the markers of churches and missions he helped establish, it struck me that Sara Yaw Htung has been part of this chronicle from the day he first entered the mission primary school.

The buildings are significant, as they not only mark the growing wealth, organization and commitment of the Kachin to Christianity, but also because the act of church construction itself is a struggle, requiring extended and not always successful negotiation with local authorities. A Buddhist pagoda sits at the top of the hill above the compound, a symbol of the competition between Buddhist pagodas and Christian crosses for hilltop property.

I once asked him what the church had brought to the Kachin people. His response was immediate and clear: “The best thing that the church has done for the Kachin people is to help them become organized. Now we are able to organize for development, to improve education and agriculture, to develop in all aspects, not only spiritual but also practical.”

A Kachin, Jinghpaw, and Maran: Celebration of Family and Clan

“I killed two cows and a buffalo, several pigs and all the chickens. We ate sixty-three *viss* of rice and so many vegetables. With food grown only by the family, I fed six hundred people.” Sara Yaw Htung greeted me with a wide smile and these words as he prepared to tell of the feast he gave on the occasion of his fifieth “family anniversary.” On that day in early 2007 he celebrated with his kinship network, his church community, family, friends, and neighbors not only the wedding which had united two families and clans lines five decades before, but also his family’s achievements, which add to the clan’s reputation.

Though he recounted the anniversary event in Christian terms, and told of prayers and talks by five different pastors and songs offered by three **(p.233)** different choirs, I could not help but perceive of this celebration as a traditional Kachin *manao* festival. In the old days, a manao could have been held for many reasons, including by a man who affirms his status and strengthens clan relations by offering a feast.

At the anniversary celebration, Sara Yaw Htung reviewed fifty years of the life of his family in a two-hour speech. Sounding much like Genesis, he began by recounting the clan and family lineage, starting with the legendary ancestor of all those Kachin clan lines—including the Maran—that claim right to chieftainship: “Wakhyet Wa Sing Gawng begot La N Tang. La N Tang begot Maran Gum Shu Lum. Maran Gum Shu Lum begot Maran Gum Shu Hkum, whose wife is Mary Kum Gu Nang. They begot Kum Shu Gam. . . . ”

The narrative then tracks the migrations that are fundamental to Kachin history and identity: “They migrated to N’mwi Hill and from there received the name N’mwi Ran. Our ancestors, the N’mwi Ran, started their migration from China

into Burma via Bhamo. . . . Our branch crossed over N'mwi Hill, Maji Hill, then to Bhamo, Hka Wai, Hka Pra, then to Mung Baw area, Nam Hkawng, Nam Hkyek. . . ."

And finally Sara Yaw Htung pulls a trident from a corner of the room, a long wooden stick with three curved metal prongs tipped in arrowhead shapes. He explains how it was that his branch settled where they did, and took responsibility for chieftainship that was later handed down to Yaw Htung's father:

> This trident was given to my great-grandfather, Hkun Ai, by the Shan sawbwa. The sawbwa wanted the Kachin to come to be like a bodyguard [his personal security unit]. And he asked my great-grandfather Hkun Ai to be the chief of all the Kachin in his principality, to organize them and take care of them. In exchange, the sawbwa would give the Kachin land to live on and to farm. The sawbwa gave this trident to my great-grandfather to show his great responsibility.

The term "Kachin" is exogenous (and contested),[9] and refers to an ethnic family of six main groups[10] which are allied by shared clan lineages, cultural practices, and oral traditions of being related, but are separated by language. Within the category "Kachin," Sara Yaw Htung's language or subgroup is Jinghpaw, and his clan is Maran.

(p.234) The central characteristic of Kachin kinship networks is the categorization of clans (*mayu, dama,* and *kahpu kanau)* and the relationship between them (see also Sadan in this volume). The *mayu* clan is the category which provides wives, the *dama* clan is the category which "takes" wives, while the *kahpu kanau* clan is one with which there is no marriage relationship. Simply put, the *mayu-dama* clans are considered "in-laws," while the *kahpu kanau* clans are considered as brothers. The clan categories determine a degree of obligations and responsibility, and form a tripartite relationship which Yaw Htung compares to the three stones, or iron tripod, that hold a cooking pot over the flames.

Two years after the family anniversary, U Yaw Htung and his brothers organized another clan event, this time to renovate the tomb of the great-grandmother who had come down from the north with five sons to settle in this area. Her tomb, dated circa 1925, lies in the forest between two villages, a fact explained in family lore as due to a compromise between her oldest and youngest son who each wanted the honor of burying her in their separate villages. Yaw Htung stressed that the nature of the event was not so much a ceremony or celebration as a "family forum," a "renovation seminar" in which every evening the participants worked together to trace the lineage of each of the five sons,

starting with the eldest, down through about seven generations. The lineages were recorded in writing.

I asked him why these events and lineages are so important, and his response reflected several concerns: about retaining Kachin identity in a multiethnic world; about marriage in proper relationship; and about legitimization of ethnic identity. He said:

> Especially these days, your history is the most important thing to know. If you come into the house and you don't know who you are, then you have to sit outside. If you know who you are, how you are related, then you can be invited in, hey, come in, come sit here. A person must know his place, his clan, his forefathers. If he does not know his history, he is not Kachin. If he does not come from the marriage family [one of the three in the triangular relationship] then he is from outside, and outcast. And, you must know your mayu-dama. If you do not know who you are then you might marry the wrong relation.
>
> Now we need this more than ever before. Our children speak only Myanmar, they don't speak Kachin. When they are asked: "what is your nationality, your clan?" They know only "Kachin." The children must learn their history! We have to remember the problem of the Rohingya, who are not even considered to be one of the national **(p.235)** races. . . . Now to get the household registration and national registration card you must be able to show your family tree three generations back. If you cannot, then they might say you are not Kachin. How else can we prove that we are Kachin?

In Service of the Family

Like all families, Sara Yaw Htung's family has generation gaps. But the gap between him and his father, because it fell at a time of rapid and far-reaching change, was like a chasm between two worlds. His father, whose world could find no value in a formal education, could never understand his son's attraction to school. Similarly, the Christianity that came to be such an important part of his son's life, was something the father, a dedicated shaman, could never fully accept. Yet by the time his father died of tuberculosis in 1960, about half of the people or villages around him had converted to Christianity.

One of Yaw Htung's greatest regrets is that because he had to sit for the final exams of his last year at agricultural college he was not able to attend his father's death and funeral. His father had been so respected that his funeral celebration lasted altogether a month, with the slaughter of ten cow or buffalo, as well as many pigs, and manao dance. Yaw Htung's mother had died years before, at a little over age forty, of a miscarriage and hemorrhage, after having given birth to fourteen children (only eight of whom survived childhood).

Sara Yaw Htung's own wife was a schoolteacher, who helped put him through agricultural college shortly after they were married. Family life was not always easy. In thirty-six years of government service, Yaw Htung took only one month leave, and had to travel often for his work with NGOs. He considers that as a result of constant absence he was unable to fulfill his duties as husband and father well. And tragically, in a story similar to that of many families in Kachin and Shan State, his fourth and sixth sons both died in the jade mine of Hpakan. Increasing economic migration, difficult working conditions in the mines, widespread infectious disease such as malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS combined with easy availability of addictive drugs, results in the fact that in northern Myanmar, parents often bear the terrible burden of outliving their adult children. Today, with greater awareness due to government and NGO education campaigns, this trend is now decreasing.

Despite his frequent absence, his family was shaped by his agricultural vocation. Three of his sons now work with NGOs as agricultural extensionists, and his wife long ago left her job as a schoolteacher to grow and market **(p.236)** vegetables. Up to today the family sells vegetables from an extensive garden in the home compound, which put his seven children through school. "My children graduated from school by mustard leaf," he says.

All of his children graduated from university, and one of his daughters became a university teacher, and the other wife of a pastor. Sara Yaw Htung has altogether fifteen grandchildren, seven of whom live in the family compound with two sons and their wives. Yaw Htung is teaching his grandsons to grow sweet corn in a corner of the garden, from seed they sow themselves and fruit they themselves will enjoy. One day in his seventy-fifth year, when he had nearly completely retired from all NGOs to stay close to home, he said to me, "Now I finally know what it feels like to enjoy a family life; now my family life is just beginning."

Conclusion

As an agriculturist, Sara Yaw Htung was able to understand which new technologies would be locally useful and how to adapt them because he grew up farming in the diverse agriculture systems of the area. The combination of his village roots, the Baptist holistic development concept in practice, formal education, and continued learning through government service and NGO work (which included study tours abroad), and above all his curiosity and constant experimentation, helped him become a champion of sustainable agricultural technologies in this region where lives depend on good harvests.

As a Kachin and family man—two concepts which to him are one and the same—he organizes events like his family anniversary and the tomb renovation to record in writing what has always been an oral tradition, and to ensure the younger generations are taught "their history." He considers this knowledge of "their history," defined as ancestry, lineages, migrations, and proper relationship

within the triad of clan categories, as critical to help the youth maintain their Kachin identity.

Sara Yaw Htung remains deeply committed to the concept of a union of Myanmar. He is proud of the role of the Kachin in upholding the nation, citing for example that it was Kachin armed forces who held and recovered Yangon when a Karen army overran it in the late 1950s. Yet he is disturbed by the rise of ethnic tensions which he views as being exacerbated by political allegiances along ethnic lines.

Despite advancing age and retirement, in the run-up to Myanmar's transition to a parliamentary system, Yaw Htung was not finished working. He is determined to help tackle the issue of loss of land to upland farmers. He thought about how he **(p.237)** could bring his extensive social capital to bear on this situation, and felt compelled to engage in the constitutional process, despite what everyone knew were its imperfections. Invited to work with three political parties, he chose the National Unity Party, composed of former Burma Socialist Program Party colleagues. Yaw Htung's hope was to redesign the socialist "Peasant Association" as a modern "farmer's forum," and instill in it bottom-up and participatory communication and management to work from the village level to township and regional assemblies, with the hope of helping farmers retain their land while decreasing ethnic tension. He ran in 2011 for the regional assembly in his home jurisdiction, and despite significant support from his constituents, lost to the candidate of the government-proxy Union of Solidarity and Development Party—amid reports of nationwide ballot stuffing. "They won the election, but they lost face," he said. "I lost the election, but my reputation is intact."

Sara Yaw Htung's leadership runs through the spectrum of his identities, allowing him to serve as a node across social networks. In the melting pot of northern Shan State his wide social web includes, and to an extent binds, his Kachin kinship system, church organization, government staff, local authorities, ceasefire groups, and militia leaders, as well as "unaffiliated" friends and neighbors, and people he has met on the way. In his role as a clan elder he might negotiate on behalf of a village with government staff; in his role as a government staff he might help solve problems or conflicts within a village. His role as a church leader has helped spread respect for the technologies he promotes, and vice versa. Drawing as he does on ties across the gamut of his identities to include a wide range of ethnic groups and political allegiances, Yaw Htung is a true natural citizen—and leader—of northern Shan State.

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Notes:

(1.) The nationwide recorded figure is nearly eight hundred thousand ha, mostly in Kachin State and Tanintharyi Region (Buchanan et al. 2013).

(2.) Mary Callahan points out: "Across all of the territory claimed by the SPDC, rebel groups, and ceasefire groups, emerging political complexes rely on the networks of transborder trade, ad hoc alliances among state and non-state actors, and external agencies to execute political power, extract resources, dictate conduct, and provide some degree of order" (2007: 14).

(3.) This paper uses Kachin romanization or spelling for most person and place names.

(4.) Also known as shifting or swidden cultivation.

(5.) Burmese word for animist spirit.

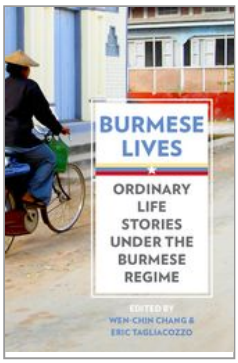
(6.) See Mandy Sadan's chapter in this volume (Chapter 1) for a discussion on the socially liminal space women inhabit by virtue of originating in one clan and "moving" to another.

(7.) Personal communication, a secretary of the Lashio Baptist Church, May 19, 2010.

(8.) See Tegenfeldt (1974) for a full history of the Baptist church in Myanmar.

(9.) See Sadan (2007) for a full treatment of this term and the manipulations it has been exposed to.

(10.) Jinghpaw, Zaiwa (Atsi), Maru (Lawngwaw), Rawang (Nung, Hkunung), Lashi, and Lisu.



Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime
Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo

Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199335039
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.001.0001

From the “Loyal” to the “Revolutionary” Karen 1

Looking at Burma’spost-independent Eras

Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335039.003.0012

Abstract and Keywords

Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung investigates the life of Mahn Nyunt Maung, a Karen national, who has personally witnessed the emergence and evolution of the Karen armed struggle and survived an incredible span of personal and professional experiences. This delta-born Karen joined the armed resistance led by the Karen National Union (KNU) against the newly independent Burmese government in the 1950s and then worked in a pro-Burmese government Karen political party. He unsuccessfully ran as a candidate for an opposition party in the national election of 1990, subsequently leading to his flight into the KNU-controlled areas as a refugee. Thaunghmung argues that Mahn’s life offers a rare insight about Burmese history, the evolution of the Karen-Burman relationship, and the Karen armed revolt. Most importantly, his story sheds light on the presence of diverse segments of Karen population in Burma who have experienced the policies and practices of successive Burmese military governments differently.

Keywords: Karen, armed resistance, opposition party, refugee

Introduction

The Karen National Union (KNU) is one of the strongest and oldest ethnic armed resistance organizations in Burma. It claims to represent the Karen populations, which collectively constitute the second largest minority group in Burma, but come from diverse religious, language, socioeconomic, and geographical

backgrounds. While some Karen joined the KNU out of deep ideological conviction, or/and out of pragmatic or/and instrumental reasons, many Karen civilians have remained “quiet” and have attempted to promote their individual and collective interests using conventional means available within the country’s authoritarian framework.[2] Quite a few Karen civilians (particularly those who live in the contested areas) have suffered from abuse, **(p.239)** torture, and exploitation by the Burmese government army as well as by the Karen armed groups, and hundreds of thousands of them have been forcedly displaced by the ongoing civil war and commercial activities. Approximately fewer than 100 thousand Karen are living in the refugee camps along the Thailand Burma border areas, while more than eighty thousand of them have resettled in North America, Europe, and Australia since 2001. Thus, individual members of the Karen ethnic group in Burma have experienced the policies and practices of successive Burmese governments and the consequences of civil war differently at various periods of time.

This article describes the life and experience of a seventy-seven-year-old Karen national, Mahn Nyunt Maung or Maung Sin Kyei, who has personally witnessed the emergence and evolution of the Karen armed struggle and endured an incredible span of personal and professional challenges. Maung Sin Kye briefly joined the KNU, a Karen armed resistance organization, in the early 1950s as an “inexperienced” and “immature” youngster, but later found himself working within the system by representing a pro-Burmese government Karen political party, which advocated for a more “accommodating” stance toward the Burman-dominated government. He later became a member of what was then the only legal party, the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), from 1972–1988 after all other political parties were banned by a military dictatorship in 1962. He supplemented his meager income as a civil servant to feed his family of eight by moonlighting as a writer. After the new military regime announced its plan to hold a multiparty election in 1990, Mahn represented his Burmese ally party from the pre-BSPP period and unsuccessfully competed for a seat in the Delta. He fled to the KNU-controlled areas in the early 1990s, but became a refugee after the fall of the KNU’s headquarters in 1995. He was later granted refugee status in Australia, where he now lives with his wife and daughter. I have never met him in person. I came across his works on Karen culture, literature, and politics when I did my research on the “other” Karen of Burma in 2005, and began an effort to track him down (Thawnghmung 2012). Since then he and I have had occasional phone calls and email communications to exchange pleasantries and to talk about Karen-related issues.

Maung Sin Kye’s life obviously by no means represents those of the estimated three to seven million Karen people who are currently living inside and outside of Burma. However, his rich personal experiences offer a rare insight and firsthand account and perspective about Burmese history, the evolution **(p.240)**

of the Karen-Burman relationship, the Karen armed revolt, and the diverse policies and practices of successive Burmese governments.

The Origin of the Karen Armed Revolution: Burma a Few Years after Independence

When Mahn Nyunt Maung was born in 1934, Burma was already a British colony, and had gone through a series of significant social, political, and economic changes. One of the major transformations occurred at his birthplace in the Delta, known in Burmese as *Myit Wa Kyun Paw*, which is located in the Southern end of western Burma. The Delta covers areas of what are now collectively referred to as the Irrawaddy Region (and parts of the Rangoon Region), where Burma’s largest river, the Irrawaddy, branches out into hundreds of streams wandering through silt and mangrove forests down to the Bay of Bengal. A large tract of the land, particularly the lower seaward part of the Delta, is completely flat and deeply flooded during the monsoons and retains water even during the dry season. The British transformed this malaria infested, muddy swampy frontier land into a booming center of the world’s rice production by providing various incentives and infrastructure to settlers from Upper Burma (Adas 1974). The Delta, which is made up of rich alluvial soil and is host to thousands of rivers and streams, has since thrived on farming, fishing (including prawn) industries and harvesting of sea turtle eggs.

Mahn’s village was a typical delta community, which relied on farming and fishing, and was particularly well-known for its one-of-a-kind grilled hilsa (known in Burmese as *Nga Tha Lauk*), which according to Mahn, can be caught everywhere, from remote saltwater sea, to freshwater rivers and streams that run across the village, to small backyard ponds. Quite a few residents in the Delta became wealthy landlords during the British eras, thanks to the opening of export markets for the cash crops, but life always had its twists and turns. Mahn said that his grandfather was a trader/landlord/money lender who owned hundreds of acres of land, but lost much of his property as he mortgaged portions of it for friends and relatives who never repaid him. His daughter (Mahn’s mother) was raised as a child of a wealthy landowner. She married Mahn’s father who was an ordinary farmer, and they both struggled to make ends meet on a daily basis to raise Mahn and his siblings.

The delta is currently one of the most densely populated regions in the country with a total 3.5 million mixed populations of Mon, Burman, Pwo Karen, and Muslims. Mahn was born in Shwe laung-Ye Kyaw village in Wa Kei Ma township in the lower part of the delta area. It is nowadays possible to **(p.241)** travel to Wa Kei Ma by car in a few hours, thanks to newly constructed bridges crossing major rivers and streams, but the main source of transportation throughout the delta is still boat and steamer. Although the area was accessible from Rangoon, then the capital of Burma, only by ferry, it was still considered a relatively short

distance between Rangoon and Wa Kei Ma during the British era. The ferry which left Rangoon at around 5 p.m. would dock at Wa Kei Ma town by 2 a.m.

Mahn grew up during the period when Karen nationalist sentiment was at its peak, thanks to the British colonial authorities, foreign missionaries, and a small segment of mostly educated Karen Christian elite who attempted to craft a homogenous Karen identity out of seventeen to twenty subgroups of the Karen language family. Pwo and Sgaw are the two most commonly spoken of these, and they alone constitute 80–85 percent of Karen language speakers. The majority of them are Buddhist, and the rest either Christian, animist, or Muslim. Their estimated population of three million people (according to the British census of 1923) is dispersed across the country—from the Irrawaddy Delta region in Lower Burma to the central Pegu Yoma mountain range and the eastern hills along the Thai border with the current Karen state and the Tenassarim Region of Burma. Like many Pwo Karen Buddhists in the Irrawaddy Delta, Mahn was more comfortable using the Burmese language in his daily conversation with his family members and other Karen friends. He said he understood Karen, but would use it only occasionally.

Karen became the favored citizens of the British government mainly because of their past antagonistic relationship with the majority Burman populations, and partly because of their support for British successive wars against the Burmese king, which eventually subjugated the whole Burmese kingdom under British in 1885. A few Karen began accepting Christianity (this is in contrary to the Christian missionary’s lack of success among the Burmese and Mons), and went to American missionary-established Karen language schools in Karen populated areas. As growing and disproportionate numbers of Karen entered university, civil service, military, and legislature, politically active Karen leaders began to toy with the idea of an independent state for Karen, which would be drawn upon their shared culture, language, and historical origins. Many of these leading Karen nationalists, in fact, come from Mahn’s birthplace, the delta in Burma.

The rising tide of Karen nationalism had adverse consequences for the relationship between the Karen and the Burman, who felt marginalized as the majority population of the country. Mutual suspicion and distrust between **(p. 242)** these two communities persisted, particularly in the delta areas, where Karen intermixed with Burman populations. Although many Karen in the delta adopted various aspects of Burmese culture (e.g., language and Buddhism), they have attempted to maintain their groups’ identity and solidarity by living separately from Burman settlements. Generally speaking, Karen tend to live in the inland areas, or on tracts of land far away from the towns and larger villages, while Burman tend to settle in relatively crowded and busier intersections along the major rivers. Even in the villages, these two communities are physically separated. Mahn’s village, which had about one thousand households, was divided between the Shwe Laung side where Burman reside

and Ye Kyaw where Karen residents cluster. These two communities are further distinguished by the nature of their occupations. Mahn recalled that the majority of the Karen in his village (most of them are Pwo Karen) relied on farming and fishing as their main sources of income, whereas the majority of Burman engaged in small-scale trading and operated family owned grocery shops. The more “advanced” side of the Burman settlement was also host to a couple of government offices, including a primary school that Mahn and his relatives attended.

Mahn said that the numbers of Karen students who attended the Shwe Laung primary school (most of whom were his relatives) were so few that you could even count them with your fingers. He remembered feeling isolated and marginalized among the Burman students, and recounted being verbally harassed by his Burman classmates, often resulting in physical fighting. Mahn said, “They called me ‘*Kayin lay*’” (or “little Karen” in English). Mahn’s unpleasant childhood experience was also reinforced by a constant reminder by his grandmother that echoed the ordinary Karen’s perception of the aggressive nature of Burmans: “They will even ask for damage fees when you step on their feces!” (This of course is one of the common stereotypical images about Burman populations that is handed down from generation to generation among Karen families.)

Despite the prevailing distrust between these two communities, intermarriage was not uncommon and intercommunal relationships remained relatively peaceful. U Nu, Burma’s former prime minister and a resident of Wa Kei Ma township in the delta, recalled Karen-Burman relationships during the British era as cordial and friendly: He reminisced “Thakin Nu himself had played among Karen children since he was in the infant standard in school” (Nu 1975, 164). This position is shared by a Karen woman who recalled her childhood experience in Myaung Mya in the delta during the same period: “I went to study at a Buddhist monastery school in Salu Chaung, Myaung Mya. **(p.243)** Half of the students were Burman and half were Karen. We got along very well with the Burman” (author’s interview, 2005). Mahn Nyunt Maung also acknowledged that “there are always exceptions to the rule. There was a Burman classmate by the name of Ko Than Aung who was kind to me and understanding of my situation. He remains one of my good friends to this day.”

However, in 1942 the Karen Burman relationship took a turn for the worse in the delta when a group of Burman nationalists (referred to as the BIA or Burma Independence Army), who went to Japan and China to receive secret military training for a campaign against the British, returned to Burma. Some of them would soon clash with the Karen, who remained loyal and fiercely defended the British. It has been estimated that almost two thousand Karen in Myaung Mya (in addition to many Burman civilians) in the Irrawaddy Delta and the Salween District in the east perished during several months of violence between the

Burman and Karen communities in 1942 (Guyot 1978). Mahn and his family fled Shwe Laung to escape the communal turmoil. They were sheltered in Wa Kai Ma town by a Burmese Buddhist monk, while the BIA detained his brother for several months at Wa Kai Ma’s police station.

Early Years of Independence in Burma

Although the Karen-Burman communal tension was eventually brought to a manageable level by intervention from Aung San (a leading Burmese nationalist who was assassinated in 1947) and U Nu, the massacre in Myaung Mya and Karen state left an indelible imprint on the minds of many Karen leaders and community members. They believed that an independent state was the only alternative to Karen-Burman communal violence.

Confident that they would be rewarded for their loyalty to the British government and for the sacrifices they had made in fighting the Japanese invaders, Karen leaders began lobbying for the creation of a Karen state after the British returned in 1945. They preferred to remain autonomous under British rule when the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL or Aung San-led anti-Japanese and pro-allies coalition force predominantly composed of Burman nationalists) called for simultaneous independence of both Burma Proper and the Frontier Areas. The latter included areas inhabited by the many Karen. However, the British acceded to the wish of the Burman nationalists to hold immediate elections for a Constituent Assembly that would draw up a new constitution and pave the way for Burma to become fully self-governing within a year. Because of disagreement among Karen leaders and the Burman nationalists over the territories and status of the new Karen **(p.244)** state, a provision in the 1947 constitution left its precise boundaries and rights unspecified and denied the right of secession to any future Karen state. However, it created three new states from the former Frontier Areas—the Kachin, Shan, and Kayah states—which had remained relatively autonomous under traditional rulers in precolonial times, and gave the right to secession after ten years to the Shan and Kayah states (Silverstein 1980, 22–25). Before questions of the status and borders of a Karen state could be resolved, the Karens were guaranteed “minority rights,” with twenty-two reserved legislative seats in the Chamber of Deputies, a Karen Affairs Council, and a Karen minister who would have control of all administrative, educational, and cultural affairs relating to Karen (Smith 1999, 82).

Two prominent Karen political organizations, the Karen Youth Organization (KYO) and the Karen National Union (KNU), were divided over the degree of political, economic, and cultural autonomy that would be enjoyed by the Karen state, as well as its territorial boundaries. The KYO, which Mahn later joined in the 1950s and became its leading member, advocated for accommodation with the Burmese state and expressed willingness to compromise on issues related to the status and extent of any Karen state. The KNU, however, wanted to include

all the areas populated by a Karen majority. Before the issue of the status and territories of the Karen state could be discussed, however, the KNU boycotted elections for the Constituent Assembly. All eighteen of the KYO candidates who participated in the elections ran unopposed for the Karen constituencies.

Immediately after gaining independence in 1948, Burma fell into a series of major political crises, beginning with the ideological division within the left-leaning faction of the Burmese AFPFL and the unwillingness and inability of the ruling elite to accommodate the demands of various ethnic groups. Soon thereafter a series of incidents, which were reportedly provoked by the government forces’ demands that Karen veterans and militia groups surrender their arms, eventually led to communal killings and Karen armed insurrection. Communal hostility was felt everywhere, particularly in areas where Karen and Burman coexisted. Karen homes in Mahn’s village were burnt down twice by the Burman in revenge against Karen who had burnt down a Burman local market. Initially, the KNU was relatively well equipped and enjoyed a higher level of support from the community and participation of Karen military veterans and young volunteers, and had the upper hand vis-à-vis government troops. The KNU first overtook Insein, nine miles from Rangoon; however, many of the Karen-held territories eventually fell to government forces due to lack of coordination among the Karen leaders. The main Karen forces were **(p.245)** driven back into the hills east of Salween River, while others in the Delta retreated into the foothills north of Bassein and continued to control the areas until the early 1970s.

It seemed natural that the delta became KNU’s recruiting ground for many young men who lived in the area. Among them was Mahn Nyunt Maung, who joined the Karen revolution in his teens in early 1951. Mahn said, “Across the river from our village was a village called Nyaung Bin Tha, where a local Karen resistance leader by the name of Bo Maung led the armed revolution. We were immature and did not really understand anything. We were allowed to carry guns to protect the areas but we did not get any systematic and proper military and educational training.” Mahn was in armed rebellion for approximately five or six months and left the organization after Bo Maung surrendered to the government troops.

In the mid-1950s, Mahn moved to Toungoo in Pegu Region, central Burma, to live with his sister, who was then a public education officer in Toungoo, and to pursue better educational opportunities. Mahn attended a convent school and completed pre-college courses (equivalent of tenth grade in a Burmese contemporary educational context). Toungoo is another Karen populated area located in the foothills of the Pegu mountains. Mahn said “Toungoo did not have flooded plains or hundreds of streams as we did in the delta. But it was a beautiful, quiet, forested place surrounded by mountains and rivers that were meandering from the mountains through the creeks and magnificent boulders. I

really don’t feel out of place because Toungoo was still a Karen majority populated area. And it is in Toungoo where I met my wife who is half Sgaw Karen and half Shan.” Here in Toungoo is where Mahn made his debut as a writer by publishing a poem with the pen name of Myat Saya in a Mandalay-based journal.

U Nu Government (1948–1962)

In hindsight, Mahn felt that U Nu’s civilian government was most sympathetic and accommodating toward the concerns of the minority ethnic populations. Mahn’s first taste of politics within “legal bounds” occurred after he moved to Rangoon for better employment opportunities. While he was living in Rangoon and working as a clerk at a gas station, he made a regular visit to his relative, Mahn Htun Yone who was an elected member of United Karen League (a new name for Karen Youth Organization/KYO) and who persuaded him to join the UKL. Mahn saw the UKL as a better option and appropriate venue to promote Karen welfare and interest, since he no longer **(p.246)** had contact with the KNU troops, which by then had gradually withdrawn from major cities in the delta. Mahn also added, “I could not stand some of the local KNU leaders in the delta. Their actions and behavior were as despicable as some Burman soldiers.” Mahn eventually became General Secretary of UKL in 1960 and helped campaigned for UKL from Wa Kei Ma District in the 1960 national elections.

All UKL members who allied themselves with U Nu’s Clean party were rewarded handsomely with important cabinet positions. When Mahn Htun Yone became Minister of Education and Justice, Mahn Nyunt Maung turned down the government’s offer to become a personal assistant to Mahn Htun Yone because of a shortage of UKL personnel who would run the daily operation of the party headquarters. Mahn continued to serve as general secretary of UKL, a position which gave him some spare time to put his talent as a writer to the test. He worked as a part-time editor for *Botataung* and National newspapers and befriended a number of prominent Burmese writers, such as journalist U Nyo Myat (O’wei Nyo Mya), U Tun Hla Pyu, and U Thein Pe Myint. He also worked with some renowned Karen political activists, such as Mahn Dawit, Mahn Ngwe Aung (who plotted a failed attempt to take over the official broadcasting station during the socialist period in 1962–1988), and Saw Than Lwin and founded and ran a Karen youth politics and literature journal called *Kayin Shit Saung* (Forward Karen).

When U Nu held the now widely known Federal Seminar in Shan state in June of 1961 to address demands by various national groups for greater autonomy and independent states, Mahn (along with Mahn Tun Yone, Saw Naw Tin Bwa, and Mahn Tin Aung Than) attended as representatives of UKL. Mahn was the only UKL delegate who attended the follow-up meeting, a federal seminar on March 1, 1962, at Burma’s broadcasting station in Rangoon. The meeting was to include delegates from all over the country. The next day, on March 2nd, 1962, a

Revolutionary Council led by General Ne Win staged a military coup and took over power from U Nu’s civilian government.

Burma Socialist Program Party (1962–1988)

The UKL was abolished in 1962 along with all other political parties, after the military government took over power to reunite the country, which was falling apart on the verge of multiple ethnic and communist armed rebellions. General Ne Win later established the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), and invited both left- and right-wing politicians to join. Simultaneously, the country’s economic practices were now based on socialist economic principles, **(p.247)** manifested through nationalization of major industries and prohibition of foreign direct investment in the country. Mahn said he did not have any faith in the new one-party system, but he joined the BSPP “like everyone else” and because he had no other means or alternatives to engage in politics. He was a pragmatic man, who strongly believed in making “the most out of the situation;” Mahn said, “We will not be trusted by the government nor by the majority population as long as we are Karen; however, we should do our best to become someone of significant importance even within that system that lacks faith in us.” With this, Mahn attended and graduated from the first national cadre training for the BSPP. In 1963, he also joined the excursion led by a group of Burmese writers to visit Kachin State and the Burma-China border. While attending socialist cadre training, Mahn was appointed by the government to become a film censorship committee member. From 1964 through 1966 Mahn could be seen wearing a thick sweater in an air conditioned room during the hot and humid tropical monsoon season, watching old and new domestic and foreign films along with three or four of his colleagues. They looked for and censored the parts that contained supernatural forces (such as Hindu gods, spirits, nat) and other features that were not appropriate in a traditional Burmese context.

Mahn’s association with the BSPP came with a few perks, including the opportunity to attend a World Youth Conference in Finland, to visit Russia and China, and to host Communist Chinese and Russian delegates who visited Burma. Overseas travel was a rare privilege under the Ne Win government, which basically closed off all contacts with western countries. Membership in BSPP may have helped Mahn gain employment as a civil servant in the Ministry of Trade Corporation. Mahn was first posted as an officer based in Rangoon. His job responsibilities mainly included administering and supervising staff under his control, and pricing, ordering, distributing, and selling food, consumer goods, and pharmaceuticals, all which were heavily regulated by the government. He would later be transferred to Myaung Mya as a district manager, where he was responsible for implementing policies that were formulated by the central authorities and serving as a liaison between the headquarters and local offices.

By the time Mahn was working as a manager for the Ministry of Trade Corporation, he was already married with six children. He started to spend disproportionate amounts of time earning extra income as a writer to make up for his insufficient government salary. Mahn used the pen name of Maung Sin Kye and wrote a total of seventy-eight articles and four books during the BSPP period. In 1967, his book titled *Karen Life and Culture* won a national **(p.248)** literary award. Mahn was modest about being the recipient of a highly prestigious literary award:

> I think I got the government’s recognition for my work on Karen culture and literature because there was not much work on national ethnic groups in Burma, which the Burmese government was trying to make a showcase for national unity and harmony. Plus I got endorsement from U Thein Pe Myint who wrote a flattering preface for me to introduce me to the audience . . . In retrospect, I do not like the book that much because it was heavily censored to make it acceptable to the BSPP government. For instance, two prominent KNU leaders, Saw Ba U Gyi and Manh Ba Zan did not get as much attention as they should deserve in my book.

Mahn said that the most important enabling environment for any writer is to be given the opportunity to think and write freely. Mahn began to feel the rigid control imposed by the military government on his writings and struggled to use various mechanisms to get past the censorship. He wrote in a subtle way using imagery and illusions to criticize the official policies. Sometimes he was able to get away with his writings, but other times, his works could not make it through the censorship board. Mahn was particularly disappointed that he could not get the government’s permission to publish the biography of Hunter Tha Mwe, a KNU leader who surrendered to the government in the 1970s. He lamented, “The only time Hunter’s biography was allowed to make public display was at his funeral, where his family laid it outside of his coffin.” He then attempted to write a book titled *Karen Leaders Who Loved Burma*, but failed to get permission to publish it. (He was able to publish the book when he got to Bangkok.)

Mahn retired early from civil service in 1978 to concentrate on writing. He got tired of the frequent transfers he was subject to as a civil servant, and thought he was hitting the ceiling, with no chance of upward mobility for him in civil service. Maung Sin Kye by then became widely recognized among the Burmese audience, which enabled him to become a full-time writer. He also founded his own publishing house and edited a journal named *Kathit Pan*.

The End of BSPP

The BSPP, which Mahn describes as “laudable in ideas and visions but disaster in practice,” was brought down in 1988 following a nationwide popular **(p.249)** demonstration against the government. The public protest began with a brawl between university students and local residents, but the riot police’s

mishandling of the situation led to wider-scale anti-government protests across the country, fueled by pent-up frustration against the country’s failing centralized economic and political practices. Burma, hailed in post-1945 as one of the most promising Southeast Asian countries, plunged to the status of “developing country” by the end of the BSPP period. University students initiated the popular protest, but the movement was soon joined by the general public including journalists, writers, and civil servants. Mahn joined the seventeen-member Burmese artist association called “Literature and Culture” Committee, and traveled to Rangoon and other up-country areas to give speeches and mobilize the public for anti-government activities. Included in the committee were famous writers such as Maung Thaw Ka, journalist Win Tin, and film director and actors such as Zin Yaw Maung Maung and Aung Lwin. Mahn recalled that most of the members of Literature and Culture Committee, including Mahn, were interrogated by the intelligence officers after the military staged another coup on September 18, 1989. He was released but he said that half of the members were arrested and jailed for their political activities.

The military government soon announced its intention to hold multiparty elections in response to mounting international pressure over its violent repression of popular demonstration. When political parties were officially allowed to register, most of the former members of the Literature and Culture Committee joined the NLD, the National League for Democracy, a major opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San. Mahn became a working committee member of U Nu’s Democracy and Peace (his close personal and party ally in the pre-BSPP period) and resumed his position as General Secretary of United Karen League. Mahn contested a seat for Wa Kei Ma township in Irrawaddy Division as a candidate for Democracy and Peace. Mahn also thought that since his old Karen political party would not be able to garner much support among the Karen populations, it would be an expedient move to spread out Karen candidates among the other nonethnic-based parties to represent Karen interests. Mahn however recalled, “I did not have much time and opportunity to tour for political campaign. I just went to Myaung Mya and registered for my candidacy and met with people in Pegu, Irrawaddy, and Rangoon. I was defeated by a NLD candidate.”

In 1991, the KNU sent a secret mission group to lower Bogalay in the Delta to recruit local Karen young people in an attempt to launch a major military attack against the government. This badly planned and poorly coordinated scheme was soon discovered, and it resulted in the government’s **(p.250)** bombing of the villages, killing of those suspected of supporting the KNU, and arrest of many villagers. Local residents recounted that they were summoned to sit in an open field under the sweltering sun and eventually ordered to march down to the river to board a steamer that would transport them to prisons in various locations: “Our hands were tied behind our back and we were connected to each other with a long rope ‘like slaves.’ This awful scene even enraged Burman

residents who came to hand out food and water to us. There was no proper court hearing for us. The judges basically said we were guilty no matter how hard we try to prove that we were innocent” (author’s conversation with local residents, Rangoon, Burma, 2008). Mahn commented that the Bogalay incident was not the first failed attempt by the Karen resistance fighters to infiltrate the delta. However, he refrained from making any public statement about whether this was an appropriate measure that justified the KNU putting Karen civilians’ lives in harm’s way.

Worrying that this could lead to another outbreak of communal violence such as they once experienced during the Japanese era, Mahn approached a local intelligence officer and offered his assistance to be mediator so that the lives of innocent people might be spared. Mahn was arrested the following evening and was put in jail in Insein for almost one year. The living conditions were poor and the food was horrible. However, he said he did not suffer torture or beating, most probably because of his status as a respectable retired civil servant and partly because of his age. He was never allowed to see his family while he was in jail. Three months after his release, a KNU’s intelligence officer sent an informant to him, who eventually helped him escape to KNU-controlled areas. Mahn left his wife and most of his children, except his twenty- and seventeen-year-old sons, who accompanied him. Once he arrived at Manerplaw, the then KNU headquarters, he was given a grand welcoming ceremony and splendid feast by top KNU leaders.

The KNU before the Fall of Headquarters

The KNU remained one of the strongest and well-equipped ethnic armed insurgencies until the early 1990s, thanks to taxes on goods crossing the Thai-Burma border and abundant natural resources in the areas under its control. By the early 1990s, the geopolitical situation was no longer favorable to armed resistance groups. The Thai government, which had in the past adopted favorable policies toward Burma’s rebel groups, adopted a “constructive engagement” policy toward Burma to take advantage of lucrative logging, fisheries, and gas pipeline deals offered by the Burmese junta. Funds from this **(p.251)** “emergency sell-off” of natural resources to Thailand enabled the Burmese government to buy much-needed arms, ammunition, and aircraft from neighboring countries, particularly China (Smith 1999, 100). In 1989 the military government, under its new name, State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), signed bilateral ceasefire agreements with various ethnic armed forces opposed to the Communist Party of Burma. Between 1989 and 1997, twenty-three resistance groups reached a settlement with the junta including the Kayan army and their Karenni ethnic cousins (Smith 1999, 440). Non-ceasefire armed organizations, including the KNU, were weakened and marginalized by these changes.

When Mahn arrived at the KNU headquarters in 1993, the organization was still thriving. Mahn was quite impressed by the amenities and infrastructure that were available in the remote jungle. He described Manerplaw as a miniature metropolitan town; “for Karen who never had a kingdom of their own in the past, Manerplaw represented the peak of Karen power and glory.” He was appointed secretary general of the Information/Intelligence Department and invited to attend important events, meetings, and ceremonies where he met with prominent Karen resistance leaders. Mahn soon felt the tension within the leadership and was taken aback by some leaders whom he considered to be “arrogant and out of touch with reality.” Added to this tension was a common distrust and jealousy toward newcomers who were given new titles, positions, and privileges. The late president of KNU once told the author, “We believe educated Karen who fled the government-controlled areas should pay their due first by living alongside ordinary soldiers. They must prove themselves first. We cannot give them important roles and positions immediately after they get here. How would people who have sacrificed everything they have to fight against the government for all their lives feel when they are bossed around by educated people who just arrived a few days ago?” Mahn decided to move cautiously, keep a low profile, avoid making public criticism against the leadership and the policies, and stay away from politics. After all, he said:

> I had no desire to do politics. I did politics since I was twenty and it was because of my involvement in politics that brought me to the KNU-controlled areas. If I get promoted over someone else people will get jealous of me. I have seen people committing extrajudicial killings and taking harsh actions against each other. My artist background trained me to be very perceptive, and allowed me to understand the complex nature of human behavior. I can gauge the intensity of the **(p.252)** situation right away. . . . Plus KNU was the only political organization in Manerplaw, and I did not want to form a rival political organization. My other option is to cooperate with Burmese students to promote democracy, but I think the promotion of democracy should be initiated and carried out by Burmans whereas emphasis on ethnic rights should be Karen’s primary objectives.

Mahn said he turned down both offers to become advisor of General Bo Mya (then president of KNU) and to do business in the KNU-controlled areas in order to focus on writing. With the help of a few prominent KNU leaders, he worked with a numbers of Burman writers to publish and edit two exile journals. The first journal was called *Khit Pyaing*; it had a circulation of five thousand, and covered news about armed revolution and anti-government activities. He also edited a Burmese language Karen issues journal called *Tot Mei Pa*. Despite his cautious move not to appear to be the favorite of some Karen leaders, he felt a growing sense of jealousy among some segments of KNU leadership with regard to the way he was treated.

In 1995 the KNU headquarters was captured by the government troops, thanks to the defection of members of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). Many of them were rank and file (mainly Buddhist) soldiers who shared frustration with the corruption, abuse, and religious discrimination they experienced under the Christian-dominated KNU leadership. Many KNU personnel from all sectors of the organization soon fled into refugee camps and eventually resettled in North America, Europe, and Australia. This was soon followed by the defections of a series of smaller KNU factions, which signed ceasefire agreements with the military regime. Mahn and his family fled to the Manilwine refugee camp in the Thailand-Burma border area. He met with Maurine Aung-Thwin who was a key person behind Mahn’s winning of the Press Freedom Award in 1994. In 1996 he was given a refugee status to resettle in Australia.

Karen in the Post-1990s

By the end of 1990, the KNU lost most of its areas to the Burmese military and other breakaway Karen factions that signed ceasefire with the military regime. It moved its central administrative operations to border towns such as Mae Sot and increasingly relied on hit and run guerrilla tactics against the Burmese army. Many of its revenue-generating activities, such as resource extraction, customs duties on goods crossing Burma-Thailand borders and **(p.253)** taxes on Karen residents, virtually ceased to function. In the meantime, less than half a million Karen villagers have forcibly been dislocated by civil war, military campaigns, and land grabbing for commercial purposes, while one hundred thousands have made their way to refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, and the majority of them resettled in Europe, Australia, and North America (South 2007a, 2008; TBBC 2012 Karen Refugee Committee 2013). The majority of those who left the refugee camps have resettled in the United States.[3] The Karen Refugee Committee’s monthly report in August 2013 shows that there are 62,253 registered and 55,035 unregistered Karen still living in seven refugee camps in Thai-Burma border areas.[4] The majority of the Karen populations, however, are still living “quietly” in the government-controlled areas in Burma.

On November 7, 2010, the Burmese military government held a multiparty election. It came under severe criticism from various sectors of the opposition movement and international communities due to the many restrictions it imposed on opposition parties and favorable treatment toward the military-backed political party, which won a landslide victory. Nevertheless, quite a few citizens living inside Burma hold the position that elections may be the only alternative means to ending the current deadlock and that they should use whatever means available within the system to help improve the dire situations, no matter how unfree and unfair the elections are. Mahn shares the latter position. Mahn echoes this sentiment by saying, “KNU should reevaluate its outdated objectives in 1947 and implement new strategies in light of the changing situations. The KNU boycotted the constitutional election held in 1947

and refused yet again to participate in the 2010 **(p.254)** election held by the Burmese military regime. They should take examples from other armed groups that have expressed desire to ‘play politics’ within the boundaries established by the government.”

Mahn Nyunt Maung offers his perspectives about the UKL, a Karen political party of which he was once a leading member and one of the two longest surviving Karen political organizations in the history of Burma’s independent era: “The KYO or UKL was not popular compared to KNU in the mid-1940s, and was unable to carry out political campaign to mobilize public support due to civil war in the early 1950s. However, it reached its peak during the mid-1950s when Mahn Win Maung, the then president of UKL, became the president of the union of Burma. We have passed beyond the period that was characterized by the KNU/UKL splits. Like the KNU, the UKL is moribund. Its leaders are in their old age, declining health, and lack financial and organizational resources to compete in the elections.” (The UKL was deregistered for failing to meet the requirements imposed by the 2010 electoral rules).

Three Karen political parties competed in the 2010 elections: Kayin’s People’s Party, Phalon-Sagaw [Pwo- Sgaw] Democratic Party, and Kayin State Democracy and Development. Mahn does not have high expectations for these Karen parties to generate much support or make sweeping changes, but he adds that “the elections—which were expected to be rigged and manipulated and which favored the progovernment party—may not have any genuine meaning, but we should still participate so that we can be legally recognized as parties.” He continued, saying that “the pro-government party may claim a landslide victory but the rest of us could get a few seats, which is better than nothing. Plus, it will take years for democracy to flourish. In the meantime, we must constantly search for legal spaces to legitimately present our voices. There may be more opening spaces for the Karen because the current constitution will give us one regional minister for Karen affairs in each of Irrawaddy, Pegu, Tenassarim, and Rangoon Regions.”[5]

To many surprises, the new Burmese government has begun launching a series of progressive reforms, including the release of political prisoners, allowing Suu Kyi’s party to register, compete, and win the midterm election, relaxation of control over media and freedom of speech, and signing ceasefire **(p.255)** agreements with armed resistance organizations. The KNU itself has signed a ceasefire agreement with the new government on January 12, 2012, and has since worked to secure more sustainable and detailed agreements with the military. Karen people from across different parts of the country and the world and from different political, civil society, and religious organizations are allowed to meet officially and to have discussion about issues related to Karen people. These positive developments, coupled with the new Burmese president’s open

invitation to exile opposition members to return to the country, have influenced Mahn’s decision to make a short trip to Burma on September 5, 2012.

Conclusion

After spending twenty years out of the country, the seventy-seven-year-old Karen writer/activist is seriously contemplating returning to Burma to join Burma’s new political chapter. He has expressed the desire to return to his country to revitalize his old party UKL and to launch a Karen journal/newspaper. Mahn has survived his three sons (one of whom died of malaria in a refugee camp in the Thai-Burma border area), witnessed the ups and downs of the two longest surviving Karen political parties, lived under the rule and governance of Burmese military regimes as well as the Karen armed organization, changed a number of careers, and taken different actions and positions either out of deeply held conviction, or/and out of necessity and for pragmatic reasons. Mahn’s love for literature, his desire to write, and his deep interests in politics, however, have remained unchanged. He has continued to advocate for nonviolent means to promote Karen interests within the system and closely followed news from Burma. He formed the Overseas Burmese Writers’ Organization and spends most of his time writing and traveling all over Australia and Asia to study arts, religion, and culture and to give literary speeches. Mahn has just completed a memoir, entitled A *Manerplaw Visitor,* about his experiences while living at the KNU headquarters, and a biography of Saw Ba U Gyi.

Mahn’s views, beliefs, and positions do not represent the voices of Karen living inside and outside Burma, let alone those in the armed resistance groups. They, however, shed light on the tenacity and ingenuity possessed by individuals who were caught in a conflict situation, and their attempt to respond, adapt, and adjust themselves to their changing circumstances. The positions Mahn has taken, which include making the most out of what one has, using nonviolent ways to address one’s needs and to uplift the situations **(p.256)** of the Karen people, and cooperating with the opposite groups to strike for mutually beneficial gains, are shared by quite a few Karen living inside and outside Burma (Thawnghmung 2008, 2012; South 2007b, 2011). We may never know the number of Karen who share this position, but a closer look at Mahn’s life story dispels conventional descriptions of Karen people as a homogenous group, and sheds light on the many diverse segments of the population that experienced the Burmese military rule differently.

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Notes:

(1.) The title was taken after a book by Donald Smeaton on the *Loyal Karens of Burma* (1887). Here he referred to Karen who displayed loyalty to the then government, the British. I use the term to refer to armed and unarmed Karen

populations who worked for the Burmese governments in post-independence eras as civil servants and government employees (in both civilian and military capacities). This term however by no means indicates their positions toward the KNU or the government. The Burmese military regime in 1989 officially referred to the Karen as “Kayin” as part of its policy to indigenize the names of the country, majority cities, and language groups.

(2.) They are “quiet” partly because they do not attract attention from the outside world and partly because many of them have resorted to a low-key, non-adversarial approach to addressing their personal and collective needs. This does not however imply that they are passive, silent, or apolitical**.** Their levels of support for the various armed resistance movements and their degree of assimilation into the majority populations vary considerably among these “quiet” Karen.

(3.) In 2006, 4,789 people left the Tham Hin camp for resettlement in the United States (Programme Report July–December 2006). In 2007, twenty thousand additional Karen refugees entered the United States, following the initial prohibition of their entry for their alleged connections with “terrorist organizations.” It is estimated that forty thousand Karen are now living in the United States (http://www.karenkonnection.org).

(4.) Displaced Karen populations are dispersed across several regions under different and competing authorities. Some villagers are still in hiding, while others have been resettled into areas controlled by ceasefire groups or the government. In the Karen state alone, there were reportedly 49,100 people in hiding, 4,300 people in relocation areas and 45,900 living in ceasefire areas in 2006 (TBBC November 2006). Also see TBBC’s report on camp populations figure in December 2013. During 2009, displacement was most prevalent in the Shan and Kayin/Karen States, where the IDP populations were reportedly 135,000 and 125,000 respectively. Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, “Myanmar: Increasing Displacement as Fighting Resumes in the East,” http://www.internal-displacement.org. Refugee camps were originally established in 1984, and in July 2007 the Karen Refugee Committee reported that 134,043 Karen refugees were living in seven camps along the border http://www.tbbc.org/camps/2010-06-jun-map-tbbc-unhcr.pdf.

(5.) Under the new constitution there will be ministers in each region to represent minority groups, constituting as little as 0.01 percent of the region’s population. Thus the Karen are expected to have one regional minister for Karen affairs in each of Irrawaddy, Pegu, Tenessarim, and Rangoon regions, with a status equivalent to the deputy prime minister of the union.