

Bulletin of the Burma Studies Group

Southeast Asian Council Association for Asian Studies



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Greetings from Rangoon

By Patrick McCormick

My apologies that this year's issue has been delayed. As many of you will recall, last time I changed our format to something more colorful. More importantly, I had hoped to spur some discussion among our readers with an eye to eliciting more from people inside of Burma. We have some ways to go on both of these points but I have not given up.

Burma is now on everyone's radars. There's been so much coverage in the press of recent developments that I can hardly hope to improve on any of that. A lot of people have asked me about the changes – I've been here for eight years now, and in fact I may have lost perspective. Rosalie Metro's essay in this issue provides a useful counterpoint to my own limitations.

I've spent most of my time in Rangoon, so no doubt I have only a partial sense of the situation. Something that has struck me and other people is that in the countryside, there are few of the striking, visible changes that we have seen here in Rangoon. This year I've gone to Mon State several times for work. Whether in smaller towns and villages or in Mawlamyaing, you don't see the new cars or the construction sites that we see in Rangoon. From what I can see and from what local friends have told me, the pace of life in Mawlamyaing is pretty much the same as it has been – it's still a mid-sized city with few signs of prosperity. A signboard was up in front of one of the main parks near the city center announc-

ing that a large mall would be built there soon. I also heard about the construction of bridges connecting Balugyun (the island across from the city) with the mainland, and rumors that land there had been given or sold to Thai developers, and of impending special economic zones.

On one of my trips, when our driver stopped our car with me, another foreigner, and several Burmese to confirm directions in a small town, it took but a few minutes for someone from the local police station to come over and ask us our business. From what I have seen, at the lower levels of government and administration, there have not been many

changes. At higher levels, however, there does seem to be greater openness and a genuine desire to change how things are done. The media have covered the reforms that President Thein Sein and his government have been attempting to embrace. Earlier this year, a colleague and I did some research having to do with education, and we got to speak with a number of mid- and lower-level officials in the Ministry of Education. Many spoke to us of what they saw as the faults of their system, the government, and of what they would like to improve. They did not, however, always have a clear idea of what exactly, or how, they would change. One district-level official commented to us that the need for change was not just structural or related to policy, but how individuals acted. He said that people were too used to following orders that it may take generations to change that habit.

Another visible change is the explosion of printed media. People talk about politics with less caution than in the past. Much of what has been going on – land and resource confiscation, fighting, the creation of special economic zones – continues as it did in the past. The difference is that now these topics are covered in the press, and the people directly affected have, in theory, some ways to be heard. Through my work with a local Burmese research project I heard some stories that illustrate this situation. In Rakhaing State, for example, there was a story of people who, with the help of local officials, have tried to thwart land confiscation. In another case, farmers negotiated for better terms of compensation for land that was taken from them.

Burma Studies Conference 2014

Last year's issue covered the Burma Studies Conference in DeKalb. It's already time to think about next year's Burma Studies Conference, this time to be held at the National University of Singapore in early August 2014. Having the conference in various locations increases the chances that more people will have the opportunity to participate, although the trade off is that many people who could attend the US conference cannot attend the regional conference, and vice versa.

For more information visit bsc2014@iseas.edu.sg

The religious and communal violence in the country have also received a lot of coverage in the media, although the difference in tone and content of this reporting between inside and outside media are striking. Some have linked this violence to the rise of social media and websites like Facebook. An observation I add is that some of the people of Indian descent I know have expressed unease in recent months about being targets of violence, or of being viewed with suspicion – even those who are not themselves Muslim. (In his essay, Ward Keeler tells us how he has found the opposite among Buddhists of Indian descent.)

People have asked whether there has been an increase in tourism. I've seen many more of those large tour busses around town, but according to some Burmese people involved in the tourist industry, there has not been as dramatic a rise in the number of tourists as was expected. Apparently this has to do with a lack of infrastructure, capacity, and pricing, specifically, the perception that there is not good value for the money in comparison to other nearby countries. I've noticed a rise in the number of business people from Asian countries. In the past year, two Japanese-run restaurants appeared in my old neighborhood, one of which has a menu only in hand-written Japanese with prices running to 30,000-40,000 kyat per dish.

Other visible differences include the number of cars on the road, the heavy increase in traffic, and the amount of time it takes to get around the city. By halving the sidewalks, the municipal government has widened many streets to allow for another lane

of traffic or to create parking spaces. Pessimists point out that the increase in cars and widening of streets is a “quick win” that caters to the middle class, who will then support the government and their policies. The municipal government has made some effort to preserve the tree cover along the roads, offering the kind of shade and green that so many other cities in the region do not have.

For us expats, dealing with doubling and tripling rents has consumed a lot of our time and energy. Many of us are looking forward to a time when the new construction will have caught up with demand for housing and office space. Most businesses and organizations, for example, are in houses, often in upscale or out-of-the way neighborhoods. A recurring hassle is finding these addresses and then figuring out how to get home afterwards. The less said about the anxieties of renting (how much will they raise the rent? will they kick me out? is my building going to be torn down? does my contract mean anything?) the better. We're also looking to being able to apply for permanent residency – I'll be in the front of the line to apply. These are hassles for us expats, who overall are in a privileged position. Rents in general are going up, and costs continue to rise slowly but steadily. For many of the average

Burmese people living in the city, no doubt these are of increasing concern, as are the length of commutes in heavy traffic.

In this Issue

We have a wide variety of contributions in this issue. Tom Parisi gives us an account of the return to Burma of an antiquity that was stolen in the late 1980s, in which the current and former directors of the Center for Burma Studies played key roles. Fanny Potkin, who has worked for a French Research Institute in Bangkok, gives us a summary of her and her colleagues' findings about think tanks in Burma. Following the theme of change, Rosalie Metro writes about her impressions during a recent visit to Rangoon after having been away. Charlotte O'Sullivan, a long-term Rangoon expat, took some photos in her neighborhood that will give readers a sense of what has and has not changed. Sayama San San Hnin Tun, former Burmese instructor at Cornell who has recently finished her second PhD, now teaches in Paris – some of her student have written about their experiences learning Burmese. Finally, Ward Keeler, the previous editor of the Bulletin, recently spent time in the country researching meditation, and gives us an excerpt of his impressions of his most recent stint at a meditation center.



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Bringing a Buddha Back to Burma

By Tom Parisi, Northern Illinois University

It could be the opening scene of a new Indiana Jones blockbuster, complete with a storybook setting rich in both mystery and archaeological treasures.

After all, more than 2,000 temples and shrines dot the landscape of Bagan, the ancient royal capital of Myanmar. It was in 1988, amid the country's political unrest, that a nearly 1,000-year-old statue of a rare standing Buddha went missing, snatched from a remote temple cave. So begins the saga of its return, a story that spans nearly a quarter century.

The priceless sculpture would travel from Burma to Bangkok, then to San Francisco, New York, and Chicago. It would be saved from the auction block, draw the involvement of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and become the subject of a precedent-setting lawsuit.

Thanks to some super sleuthing by a now retired Northern Illinois University professor, the legal expertise of an NIU alumnus, and the persistence of a current NIU professor, the stolen statue finally made its way home late last year.

At its core are Richard Cooler, professor emeritus of art history and founder and former director of the Center for Burma Studies, and Catherine Raymond, the center's current director.

Christopher McCord, dean of NIU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, calls them heroes. "During a period of great tension between

the U.S. and Myanmar governments, NIU faculty members went out of their way to preserve Myanmar's cultural heritage and fight against the trade in stolen antiquities. They then worked to ensure that the statue was cared for and safely returned to the country in a way that would preserve its historic and religious value."

Turning the Wheel of the Law

The sandstone sculpture, with traces of stucco and red paint, stands just 22 inches tall.

"Only 11 images of this iconographic type are known and all were created for the Burmese King Kyanzittha, who reigned from 1084 to 1112," Cooler says. "They depict a Buddha who, while standing, gestures with both hands in front of his chest. This gesture symbolizes the Buddha's first and most important sermon, known as 'Turning the Wheel of the Law,' in which he shared his discovery of the path to Nirvana."

When the historical Buddha, Gautama, is depicted preaching his first sermon, he is always shown seated. Because this image is standing, Cooler says, it could also be a representation of King Kyanzittha himself telling his people that he will "open the gates to heaven and let all enter," as he had stated at his coronation. Or, the image could represent the king delivering his first sermon after his rebirth as a future Buddha.

"I have concluded from an extensive survey of the sculptural program in each of Kyanzittha's temples that

these images are deliberately ambiguous as to whether they depict a Buddha or the king, or both simultaneously," Cooler says. "It is known that ancient kings presented themselves verbally to their people in this ambiguous way as a means of justifying their divine right to rule. These 11 images are the first examples in Myanmar of this political concept being depicted in sculpture."

Cooler himself first encountered the sandstone statue in its original temple location during the mid-1970s, while conducting research in Burma. But it wasn't until the mid-1990s that the iconic image became the focus of his personal quest.

After the statue was stolen from Burma it ended up in Bangkok and was sold to an art dealer in San Francisco. In 1991, it was listed for sale by Sotheby's.

Based on an anonymous tip, however, the FBI impounded the statue prior to the sale to conduct an investigation. After three years of research, authorities were unable to advance the criminal case, and it ended without prosecution. The United States then initiated a civil suit to determine the Buddha's rightful owner.

It was at that time, Cooler recalls, that he was contacted by the U.S. Attorney's Office in New York, requesting help in establishing the sculpture's provenance.

"I recognized this was an extraordinarily important image for understanding the development of Burmese art and kingship, and that it rightfully belonged to the Burmese people," Cooler says.

Cooler checked his library and located several photographs of the

statue, taken when it was displayed in the temple cave. The photographs showed that the sculpture had been reassembled after being broken through at the shins, probably during a 19th-century earthquake. Whoever snatched the statue left its base behind.

Not coincidentally, the statue mounted for sale at Sotheby's was missing its feet.

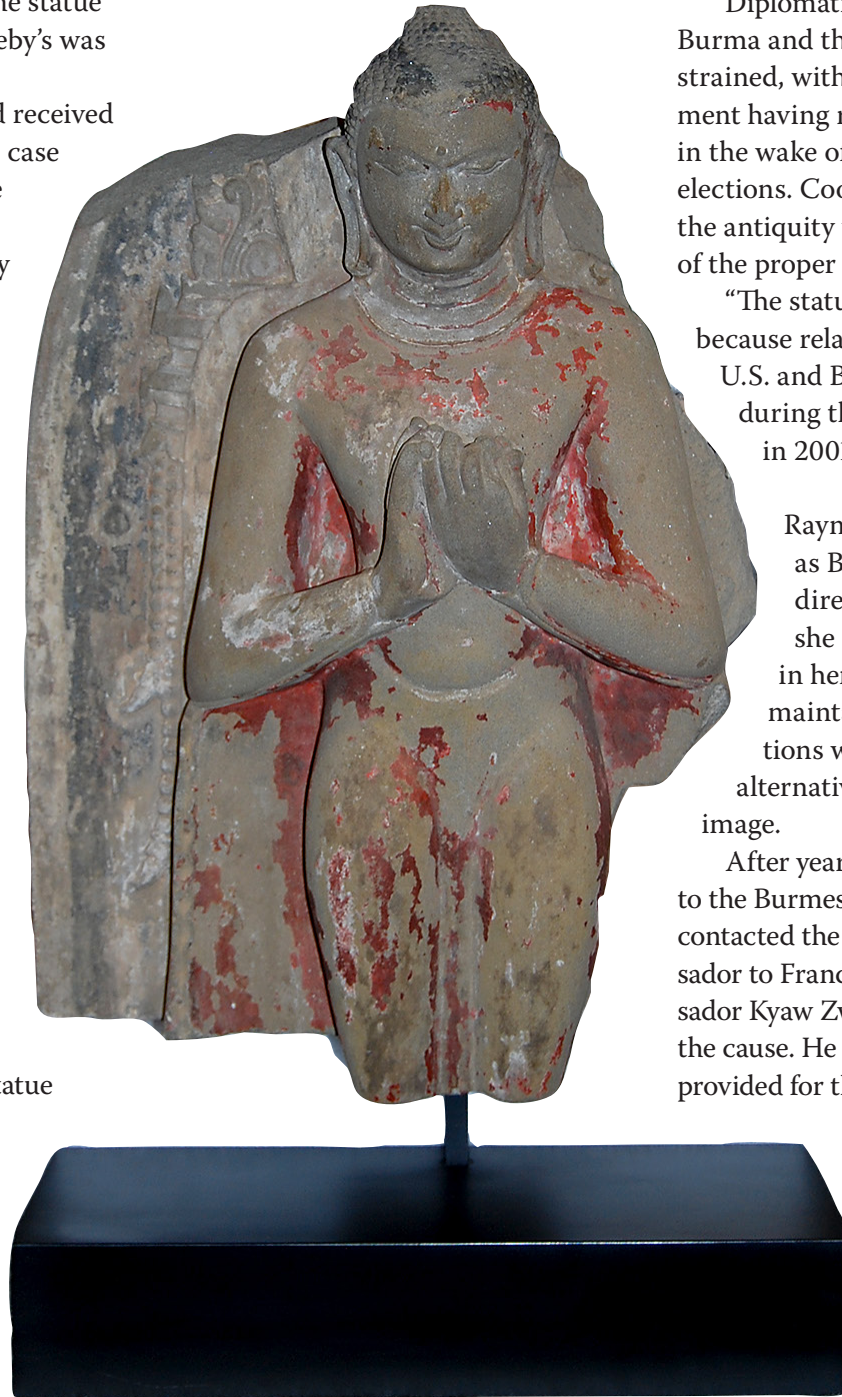
Cooler requested and received permission to pursue the case on behalf of the Burmese government, and was joined in this endeavor by his former NIU graduate student, attorney Jack Daulton, a specialist in art and entertainment law. Daulton pursued the legal case, while Cooler travelled to Burma in search of the lower part of the statue.

Amazingly, he found just that. After the 1988 theft of the sculpture and other images at the temple cave in Bagan, Burmese archaeologists had moved remaining artifacts to a storehouse for safekeeping.

Soon after Cooler's find, the art dealer who had purchased the statue and put it up for auction relinquished any ownership claim. A U.S. District Court judge ruled Burma was the rightful owner.

Daulton wrote at the time that he

believed it was the first case in which Burma had pursued the return of cultural property in U.S. courts. "In fact, I believe this case represents the first instance in which a Southeast Asian nation has litigated a cultural property claim in the United States," he wrote.



Daulton and Cooler covered legal expenses, and as a gesture of appreciation, the Burmese government agreed to allow NIU to exhibit the Buddha statue.

Before his retirement, Cooler made several attempts to return the Buddha image. The task wasn't so easy.

Diplomatic relations between Burma and the United States were strained, with the American government having removed its ambassador in the wake of the controversial 1990 elections. Cooler needed to ensure the antiquity would land in the hands of the proper authorities.

"The statue wasn't returned because relations between the U.S. and Burma were too frayed during that period, and I retired in 2001," Cooler says.

In 2002, Catherine Raymond succeeded Cooler as Burma Studies center director at NIU. In 2006, she initiated discussions in her native France, which maintained diplomatic relations with Burma, concerning alternative ways to return the image.

After years of repeated proposals to the Burmese Embassy in Paris, she contacted the new Myanmar ambassador to France in 2011, and Ambassador Kyaw Zwar Minn championed the cause. He saw to it that funds were provided for the sculpture's return.

"Working with the ambassador and his U.S. emissary, U Padetha Tin, we made arrangements to ship the statue to the Myanmar embassy in Paris and

from there to the National Museum in Yangon, Myanmar,” Raymond says. “It arrived in late 2012.”

A warm reception

As it happens, Raymond and NIU’s McCord were members of an Institute of International Education (IIE) delegation representing 10 U.S. universities that visited Myanmar in February. The delegation sought to learn more about the state of higher education in the country and to explore potential partnerships.

During the visit, Raymond received a “Certificate of Honour” from the Myanmar Ministry of Culture during a ceremony at the National Museum in Rangoon, covered by news media. The top of the statue was finally reunited with its base.

“I obviously was very familiar with the top two-thirds of the statue, but I suddenly became worried over whether the two pieces would be a

perfect match,” Raymond says. “The statue wasn’t reassembled, but we could see the top and base did fit together. I was touched by the ceremony, because it was evident how much the Burmese really care about this antiquity.”

Raymond is working with the National Museum on an exhibit that will tell the story of the statue’s journey and reunion.

“The return of the statue, coinciding with the start of our visit and a thawing of U.S.-Myanmar relations, couldn’t have come at a better moment,” McCord adds.

“Both the U.S. and Myanmar governments were absolutely thrilled, and Catherine Raymond was justly singled out for recognition and thanks at every place the U.S. delegation visited subsequently. Her return of the statue significantly raised the prestige and visibility of NIU in a country that is just beginning to

engage with the United States.”

The effort hasn’t gone unnoticed in international education circles, either.

“Professors who love their field have a way of prevailing,” IIE President and CEO Allan E. Goodman wrote in a column published in *University World News: Global Edition*.

“Dr. Raymond’s university has the only Center for Burma Studies in the U.S., and it has been operating since the 1980s,” Goodman said. “She is one of a handful of scholars who studied Burma during all the difficult years and is now part of opening its educational space. Sometimes, it seems, a career in international education involves as much diplomacy as it does research.”

U Ko Ko Hlaing, chief political adviser to President Thein Sein, joins NIU’s Chris McCord, Catherine Raymond, and Amy Levin at the return ceremony.



Myanmar Think Tanks: an Introduction to Some of the Main Actors

By Fanny Potkin, Nay Yan Oo, and Tim Yu

The following is a contribution from Fanny Potkin and her colleagues, who have done some research for IRASEC (l'Institut de recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine), a French research institute in Bangkok that focuses on contemporary Southeast Asia.

Since the opening of the country, Burmese think tanks have played a major role in helping the government with the country's political transition, and in implementing economic and social reforms. There are now more opportunities for members of the educated Burmese diaspora living abroad, particularly former dissidents, to return to the country and participate in the process of change. The following list provides an overview of some of the most influential think tanks:

Myanmar Development Resources Institute (MDRI) The Myanmar Development Resources Institute (MDRI), established in 2011, is the largest independent think tank in Myanmar. MDRI has been particularly active in helping the government formulate reform policies and provides advice on public policy. The objective of the Institute is to produce research and collect recent, comprehensive data on the country. A principal personality at MDRI is the former political dissident, Zaw Oo, who is also an economic advisor to President Thein Sein and a member of the National Economic and Social Advisory Council (NESAC). The institute has three research

centers: the Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD); the Center for Legal Affairs (CLA), and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). The CESD has received substantial financial support from international organizations and conducts studies on economic and social problems of the country.

Myanmar Egress (ME) Myanmar Egress is an independent non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in 2006 to promote civil society in Myanmar. "Egress," as it is often called, works on several levels: it is responsible for training young Burmese in economics, management, and civil society and democracy. Egress also advises the government on public policy, conducts surveys on public opinion, and promotes environmental issues of the country.

Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC) The Burmese government created the Centre in 2012 with funding from foreign donors, to create a central place for all peace initiatives in the country. The organization functions as a space for dialogue between the government, representatives of ethnic militias, civil society, international organizations, and NGOs. The center is also responsible for developing peace initiatives and coordinating peace talks and cease-fires, humanitarian assistance in areas of conflict, peace-building projects, and dealing with mines. Its president is Tin Maung Maung Than, who is also a part of Myanmar Egress and a member of NESAC.

Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCII) The Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCII) is an NGO founded in 1989 to represent the interests of the private sector and represents over 10,000 Burmese companies. The UMFCII also serves as a bridge between the government and business sector, and takes part in Burma's economic policies. Its current president is businessman Win Aung, founder of Dagon International, and a member of the NESAC.

Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT) The Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT) is an independent organization founded in 2012 to protect and promote the architectural heritage of the city of Yangon. The YHT, working with such government bodies as the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) and the national *Hluttaw* to create action plans and legislation to safeguard the city during this time of transition. The organization is headed by Burmese-American Thant Myint-U, a writer, historian, and consultant who also works as a presidential advisor and also at the MPC. The YHT has created a list of some 180 government-owned buildings in the city to be preserved from destruction.

National Economic and Social Advisory Council (NESAC) The National Economic and Social Advisory Council (NESAC) was formed in 2012 by Myanmar President Thein Sein to bring together businessmen, academics, and businessmen to discuss on-going policy issues. The NESAC is also responsible for providing advice and policy analysis to other officials.

A Taxi Ride in Yangon: What has changed for a visitor between 2009 and 2013?

By Rosalie Metro

“So, what’s changed? How are things different now?” Since my recent trip to Yangon in July 2013, both Burma researchers and curious friends have asked me this question. What they want to know, of course, is where I stand on the spectrum between optimism and cynicism about Burma’s political situation since the 2010 election. I am ill-positioned to answer these questions. Despite studying Burmese history and education since 1999, I have only been to Burma a handful of times, most recently for several days in July 2013. I’ve never left the Yangon area, and before 2013 my last visit was in 2009. Because I did my fieldwork mostly with migrants and refugees in Thailand, my view of Burma has always been distorted by distance, as well as by the mixture of nostalgia and discontent that my informants passed on to me.

However, I would like to share some impressions of the different experiences I had in Yangon in 2009 and 2013. It may be difficult for those who have been living in the city continuously to notice gradual shifts in atmosphere, but for an occasional visitor they were stark. Just as noticeable were the continuities that stretched across my various trips.

Like so many social phenomena,

the changes I’d like to describe can be summed up by narrating a taxi ride. It was a cloudy rainy season morning as I stepped out onto U Wizara Road, bound for an appointment on Theinbyu Road. As a taxi pulled up nearby, I could not help but notice how new it was. It looked similar to many of the taxis in Bangkok, where I’d been the previous day: it had an unsullied gray interior, functioning door handles, even seatbelts! It was luxurious in comparison to the ancient Yangon taxis I’d hired before. I remember one with a hole rusted in the floor through which I had watched the pavement speeding by below. I’d heard about the massive importation of vehicles into Burma since the 2012 trade reforms, and as I looked around, I saw the evidence: at ten a.m., cars clogged the street. This taxi driver must have been one of the lucky ones who could afford one of those new cars. Many of his comrades still drove the beat-up cream-colored sedans I remembered. These new cars looked like little explosions of wealth against the backdrop of familiar, pervasive poverty. Despite the end of EU sanctions, reinvigorated foreign investment, and economic reforms, the material circumstances of most people’s lives seemed not to have changed much.

“*Theinbyu Làn-go thwà me,*” I said, leaning my head through the driver’s side window. He nodded, we settled on a price, and I got in. Right away, I noticed a sticker on his dashboard with a picture of the Secretariat Building and a message commemorating the upcoming 66th anniversary of Martyr’s Day. I asked him about it, and he launched into an analysis of the significance of Bogyoke Aung San’s death and a critique of the current government’s shortcomings. I’ve always found taxi drivers to be more forthcoming than almost anyone else about their political opinions, but nonetheless, his willingness to speak to a stranger about these formerly “sensitive” topics contrasted with the often coded conversations taxi drivers had initiated with me before. Regardless of the fact that political prisoners remain jailed, that protests are often suppressed, and that media are still constrained, during this recent visit most people spoke to me about politics as if they didn’t expect immediate consequences. Whether they truly felt free to speak, or whether they were speaking freely in the hopes that doing so would create freedom, I don’t know. Either way, it was a pleasure to hear them.

It was not until a good ten minutes into our conversation that the

taxi driver commented on the fact that I could speak Burmese. Indeed, he seemed to take it as a matter of course that a foreigner would speak well enough to order a taxi and make small talk. In the past, people would stare and gather round to listen as I stumbled through my little repertoire of phrases, complimenting me effusively. This change points to the large numbers of foreign businesspeople, NGO workers, academics, and travelers who have come to Yangon in the past four years, and who have made it their home enough to study the language. I see Burmese people's growing nonchalance toward foreign language-learners as positive; given the number of Burmese people who speak English fluently, there's no reason that asking "*sà pi bi là?*" should warrant a round of applause. Yet I am curious how this influx of foreigners will change Yangon in the years to come. Will an expatriate culture similar to that in Thailand develop? Will Burmese people begin to wish that they had remained, as the cliché goes, "closed off to the outside world," as foreigners bring along new anxieties, skimpy clothing, and late capitalist consumerism along with capacity-building trainings and business ventures?

Are the new taxis a harbinger of prosperity or sign of growing inequalities? Is this new willingness to speak about politics evidence of the *fait accompli* of democratization, or just enthusiasm brought on by a temporary lull in repression? When I return next year, will I be surrounded by foreigners speaking Shan and Karen as well as Burmese, or will any of us even be able to get visas? Older and middle-aged Yangon residents I spoke with seemed to lean toward the more pessimistic of each of these options. But they have endured years of broken promises from successive regimes; who could blame them for being skeptical? Many young people I spoke with, on the other hand, were refreshingly hopeful and ready to do the work of changing society. I hope the mixture of elders' wisdom and youths' exuberance brings changes that make Yangon more liveable for the residents in coming years.



Many young people I spoke with, on the other hand, were refreshingly hopeful and ready to do the work of changing society.

Around the Block in Myeinigoun: Walking through Changes

Photos by Charlotte O'Sullivan

Text by Patrick McCormick

As Rosalie Metro discusses in her essay and as I alluded to in my introduction, people outside of the country are very curious about what has been changing inside the country. I asked Charlotte O'Sullivan, who has been living in Rangoon for the past several years, for some pictures. On a recent Saturday morning, we walked through Myeinigoun. We started on the corner of the busy intersection of Pye and Bagaya Street are Dagon Centres 1 and 2, two good-sized shopping centers. We walked up Bagaya behind that block, turning left and going up Aungdawmu Street, where the Myeinigoun market begins to sprawl over several back streets. We went a bit further north up to Shan Goun Rd, which ends on U Wizaya Road across from where Blazon used to be.

1. Traffic at the corner of Bagaya and Pye

A shot of light Saturday-morning traffic taken looking south on Pyay road from in front of Dagon Centre 2. In the past year, thousands of new cars have appeared on the roads of Rangoon. Even the old white Toyotas are being steadily replaced with newer models.

2. Dagon Centre

A shot of the plastic signs hung up between Dagon Centres 2 and 1 announcing (in English) some of the new international businesses which are about to open: here, the Pizza Company and Swensen's.

3. LED Display

A picture of the giant LED ad board to the side of Yadanaboun Park directly across from the Dagon Centres. The ad boards have appeared in several places throughout the city. Interestingly, the ad board hanging from the Pansodan bridge (that is, the ad board was visible from Bogyoke Road) has been taken down. These ads for "High Class" whiskey are visible in various forms throughout the country.

4. Empty Lot

Walking up behind the block, a picture of a newly-cleared site on Aungdawmu Road.

5. Behind Myeinigoun Market

A shot of the gutter running in back of the market along Aungdawmu Road.

6. Top of Myeinigoun Market

Another shot of the market at the corner of Aungdawmu and Myeinigoun Zei Road.

7. Construction Site

Walking north from that corner, we reached Shan Goun Rd, where we found a construction site representative of many in the area. Most of the workers around town appear to be young men from the countryside.





The study of Burmese is key to Burma Studies outside of the country



In earlier issues of the Bulletin, we heard from some Burmese language teachers and students outside of the country, primarily in England and the US. We have heard fewer voices from other parts of the world where there are scholars who focus on Burma, such as in France. Many of our readers will know Sayama San San, formerly of Cornell, who has crossed the Atlantic to teach Burmese to students in France. The following is a letter from Julia Nicolet-Levavesseur and Fabien Langeau, two French students learning the Burmese language in Paris at INALCO, the National Institute of Languages and Oriental Civilizations. -editor

When it came to choosing a university in order to study Burmese language and culture, there was no dilemma. No university in France teaches Burmese, which is why we chose to attend INALCO. Also known in French as the “Langues O,” INALCO gives students of different ages and backgrounds the opportunity to learn languages from anywhere in the world. The history of the school dates back to 1669, when Colbert founded the Institute of Languages, l’École de Langues des Jeunes. Today, more than ninety languages are taught in INALCO’s brand-new building, located not far from the shores of the Seine in the southeast of Paris. Recognized in France, and elsewhere, the school allows students to delve into a specific culture while being surrounded by many others, a bit

like the tower of Babel. It is the only institution in France with a Burmese department, so we really treasure and are very thankful to have it.

There are only a few of us studying Burmese. It has been common to have classes with only one or two students, but our numbers have been increased a lot in these past two years. We all come from very different backgrounds and motivations, but all of us have a heart for Burma and the Burmese language. We have three teachers: Marie-Hélène Cardinaud (who has been a pillar of Burmese studies in France), Nicolas Salem (a specialist in Burmese geography who speaks fluent Burmese), and one teacher from Burma, San San Hnin Tun. It is a great privilege for us to have her teach us here in Paris.

Sayama San San talked to Julia and Fabien about how they came to study Burmese and how it has gone for them. The following is from their conversation .

Julia responded, “My first trip to Burma was the trigger. I instantly fell in love with the country: the landscape, the culture, but above all the people. I made long-lasting friendships in Burma and met amazing people who have a genuine love and dedication for their country and their culture. I was deeply moved. I also found the language beautiful. A day or two after coming back from that first trip, I enrolled in INALCO for the coming year. That was three years ago, and I haven’t gotten

tired of learning about Burma and the language, although I still have a long, long way to go! As an English language teacher with a major in literature, I am also very interested in Burmese literature and literature about Burma. I would love to be able to speak Burmese fluently. My other dream would be to find a way to help long-lasting education initiatives in Burma. There are so many Burmese young minds with great potential.”

Fabien said, “That’s a tough question. I started focusing on Burma when I first heard the country was closed to the rest of the world and appeared remote in the emerging region of Southeast Asia. Last year, I chose to start a master’s degree in geography, specializing in the developing world. I had to pick a country to focus on and to get more into. There were at least thirty different choices but I decided on Burma. This led me to make another decision that I had never thought about before: should I try to learn Burmese? Quickly, it was obvious to me that there was no way I could answer ‘no.’ To discover a new culture, new ways of life, to get into people and try to open my mind a little bit, I had to start learning the language. Plus, it would be really helpful for doing research linked to my master’s degree. I managed to interview customers at a shopping-mall about their shopping habits – I wrote all the questions in Burmese and people answered me in Burmese too. It was very interesting to do, but hard to translate into French afterwards.”



From left, Jennifer Wong, Fabien, two Myanmar Embassy staff members, and Julia; cooking class with Fabien, Khae, two great cooks, and Sayama San San; Fanny Garcia, Victor Treol, Sayama San San, and Fabien at INALCO Cultural Day 2013; Burmese pride: Khae in front of the “Wall of love” at Montmartre, Paris. (Photos courtesy of Khwankaew Sangkaphanthanon, aka Khae.)

Some of their difficulties...

Julia told Sayama, “Let alone the difficulties of learning a hard language, sometimes we’re disappointed when looking for resources since very few books on Burma—the language, history or literature—are available or translated into French. When looking for something specific, often we only find one resource: one grammar book or only one small Burmese-French dictionary. For those of us who have not mastered English, it can get stressful during translation exams, diving into two or three dictionaries at once, Burmese-English, English-French and French-Burmese, as fast as possible. That’s a lot of page-turning. We rarely have the opportunity to practice Burmese with Burmese people in France. We’re waiting for more Burmese students to come and study in Paris. Burmese-related events do not happen every day in Paris, so whenever something is on, most of us rush there.

Fabien said, “It’s really tough to learn and practice Burmese. French has deep roots in Latin, whereas Burmese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, which is so far away from what we are used to speaking. We have to learn a new alphabet, new sounds and pronunciation, and also

some new mechanisms in the syntax. But isn’t that why any language is magical? Also, one great advantage we have in our school is that our classes are small, which is why we have more opportunities to practice orally and our teachers can give us individual help.”

Events and activities...

“The Burmese ambassador, U Kyaw Zwar Minn and his wife, kindly organized a special evening for us last June with some other guests. We had an opportunity to attend a cooking class in his own kitchen—*oun-no khauk-hswe* holds no secrets for us anymore – and got to taste many other delicious dishes. We spent a wonderful evening with the Ambassador’s family and the Embassy staff, who were all so welcoming and really patient chatting with us in slow Burmese. The Ambassador also gave each of us students a Burmese name that we now use in class.

Every year, we have the opportunity to promote several departments in INALCO during “Cultural Days.” Last year, the Burmese Department’s display was actually one of the most successful. True to Burmese generosity, we ended up being the display with free food for everyone. We’ve

noticed that more and more French people are showing a genuine interest in Burmese culture. The increasing number of students studying Burmese proves the point.

We’re hopeful that the Burmese Department in Paris will keep on growing, and that we’ll have access to more resources and opportunities. It is such a pleasure for us to get together with our teachers each week for class. It’s our own little Burma in between actual trips to the country, for those who have the chance. We are determined to make our department thrive and to find new ways to expand our knowledge. From this perspective, one of us recently created a Facebook group, *Parlez-vous birman?*, that allows us to share language and cultural resources, and above all to connect with Burmese speakers, learners or specialists in other countries. You are all welcome to join by contacting us.

Dhamma Worker

by Ward Keeler

I have attended two courses in U Goenka's method for meditation. I did the first in Maymyo in April and May of 2012, as a "yogi," and the second in Rangoon as a "Dhamma worker" in September, 2013. My motivation was twofold: to learn what actually happens in these courses, which a great many people talk about; and to learn what participants say they get out of them. I wrote up reflections on the first experience in a white heat—I had been unable to read, write, or speak for ten days, so writing came not just easily but explosively. Since the more recent experience, during which I was able to read, write, and speak to other Dhamma workers (provided none of the yogis saw us), I have been writing in a more catch-as-catch-can fashion. But I would like to give readers of the Bulletin a sense of my experience in this small excerpt from a longer text I am writing about vagaries of being a Dhamma yogi and a Dhamma worker in Burma.

Soon after I got to Rangoon, I set out in search of the Dhamma Joti Meditation Center. The web page said it was on Great Five-Tiered Roof Pagoda Road, and so presumably somewhere near that pagoda, a place I knew from my days living in Rangoon for a few months in 1987, before I got established in Mandalay. From a friend's house, I walked up the hill toward the Shwedagon Pagoda, then found my way to the Great Five-Tiered Roof Pagoda (*Ngadat Kyi Hpaya*) and look about for where the Dhamma Joti Meditation Center might be along the road. I walked a

ways before realizing that there were a lot of pagodas and monasteries and I was going to have to ask for some help. A monk walking along the road sent me back in the direction I had come from, and pointed to a smaller road I should enter. I went along that road and then started up a covered walkway to the pagoda. I asked a man for directions: he sent me further along the walkway but then down toward the main road. I was proceeding that way when a young man coming up the walkway greeted me in English. I responded in Burmese, asking again for the whereabouts of the meditation center. He assured me he knew just where it was and he would lead me there.

We started talking: he was a university student, living in a monastery nearby. He was studying Burmese literature and history. I asked who his favorite Burmese writer was, and he mentioned the name of a man, Mya Than Tint, whose collection of journalist's sketches of "average Burmese" I delightedly pulled out of my shoulder bag to show him. He didn't seem as impressed by this coincidence as I was. His name was Ko Khant. His father was Muslim and his mother Buddhist, but his father had left them when he, Ko Khant, was still small. I asked him about the recent anti-Muslim violence that has flared up in several different parts of the country (although only in Buddhist regions) in the past sixteen months. He said that it was the result of deliberate provocation, orchestrated by conservative military elements who wanted to justify their retaking control

of the government once enough havoc had been wreaked.

We got to a gate and small rotunda: this was the entrance to the meditation center. We crossed a short causeway to the main office. People seemed to recognize Ko Khant. He explained that I spoke Burmese; it took people a few minutes to process that fact. A certain number of Westerners come to the meditation center for courses and several people working in the office knew at least rudimentary English. Still, they were pleased when I said I would like to sign up as a "Dhamma worker" for the ten-day course starting in three days' time. Since there were going to be a number of foreigners attending the course, I would be useful as an intermediary. So it was settled. I was to return two days later.

Ko Khant and I walked back out to the street. I was going to the main road to walk back to my friend's place. He was heading the other direction, back to the monastery where he stayed. We continued to chat for a few minutes. He wrote his phone number and his email address in my book. I assured him I would call him and meant it. I had enjoyed talking with him and thought I would like to know more about his perspective on events, since he was half-Muslim and half-Buddhist. He started talking about buying books for his courses. He was lucky to live at a monastery so he didn't have to pay for his lodging, but still, he had to pay for books and transport to the campus... Could I give him 5,000 kyats for his books? As a professor, surely I could spare him 5,000 kyats? I said, "Another time, not now," and walked away, feeling burned.

Two days later, I took a taxi back to the meditation center and checked

in. I was given the key to a small locker where I could leave any valuables in the front office. A young man, clearly of Indian origin, then guided me through another gate to the porch between the large, rectangular Dhamma Hall, where most of the meditating would take place, and a small chamber housing a Buddha image. A couple of tables were set up with chairs on either side, where a few men sat looking through, sorting, arranging and re-arranging a large sheaf of documents. I was given a form to fill out, providing a few basic details about myself, and then posing a series of questions as to how much experience I had with U Goenka's method of meditation: what courses I had taken, where, and with what teachers. Had I maintained my practice since my last course? (No.) Nobody seemed bothered by the fact that I had only had one course, and indeed, when I read the guidelines for Dhamma workers a few days later, I noted that although it was in principle a rule that only people who had taken three ten-day courses as students could serve as Dhamma workers, the rules "could be relaxed" at the discretion of the center's officials.

A few minutes later, a middle-aged man with a big paunch and a jolly manner came and sat at the table for a little while. He spoke with the other men, very quickly and indistinctly. He was informed that I spoke Burmese and was going to be a Dhamma worker, something he expressed satisfaction about. It dawned on me that he was going to be the "Assistant Teacher" for the course. That is, although U Goenka would be teaching us by means of the taped instructions and lectures we would listen to throughout the course (the same ones I had heard as a *yogi* in Maymyo last year) and would therefore be our

"Teacher," the Assistant Teacher, the man to whom *yogis* could address questions, was to be this man. It was with some concern that I realized I would be translating between the foreigners and this man, whose casual conversation I found tough to follow. How would I fare at translating questions and responses about details of the technique?

The young Indian man picked up my suitcase again and we went down some steps to an area underneath the chamber with the Buddha image. We entered a small, dark, dank hallway in which two beds had been set end-to-end. The beds consisted of light wooden frames with mats set on top of thin boards, and poles over which mosquito nets were hung. I was shown a small room, one of two next to each other, with just space for a bed and a small table. Once I opened the curtains on the windows on the two walls facing the outside, it was fairly light and quite pleasant. I was relieved that I was not going to have a roommate, and there was a bathroom—both a toilet and a shower—just outside the door, so getting up during the night wasn't going to be a problem, even if handling the two treacherous steps down to it in the dark was going to pose some risks.

When I went back out into the hall, other young Indian men were gathering up their belongings. I was introduced to one with a dark complexion and fine features, very slight—he barely cleared five feet in height. I was told both his Indian name, Anil, and his Burmese one, which I didn't catch. There was another, taller, man, probably in his later twenties. All three of them were fellow Dhamma workers. It turned out that the two younger men, Anil and Aung Myo Win, the man who had carried my bag for me, were part of a group of ten Burmese of

Indian descent who had all come down from a small town near Taungu where they lived. They had been *yogis* for the previous ten-day course, had returned briefly to their homes, and now had just returned to Rangoon in order for some of them to serve as Dhamma servers, while others would again be *yogis*.

I went back into my room and took a nap. After I got up, Anil stopped by to talk. I asked him whether he had been a *yogi* previously, before the course they had all just completed. Yes, he and the others had done a course a couple of years back. He had not been all that interested in it at the time. This time he had understood it better and felt he had gotten more out of it. How had he benefited? His mind was more "peaceful": this is the standard response people give when asked what they have gotten out of a meditation course. I went on to ask him about the recent spate of anti-Muslim violence at several different places in Burma over the past year and a half. Much to my surprise, he suggested that in all the incidents, "They started it." In other words, he thought the Muslims had behaved in ways that brought violence down on their heads. He appeared to believe the stories about Muslims harassing or raping Buddhist women that have often ignited riots, or have been used to explain them after the fact. No, he was not scared that, based on his clearly Indian origins, he might suffer an attack at the hands of Burmese Buddhists who would not concern themselves with whether he was Hindu or Muslim. He felt that nothing troubled relations between Hindus and Buddhists where he lived. This complacency on his part struck me as dangerously naive. But then, I'm sure it is true that in a place where there is no history of ethnic violence its outbreak seems unthinkable.

Announcements:

Dear Colleagues,

I write to invite you to join a newly-formed group affiliated with the Association for Asian Studies, the Theravada Studies Group (TSG). It provides a new academic forum dedicated to the thematic, trans-disciplinary, trans-national and comparative study of Theravada Buddhist practices, cultures, histories and texts. Our purpose is to facilitate scholarly exchanges among social scientists and humanists who work on aspects of Theravada Buddhism in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Southwest China and globally through pilgrimage and diaspora networks.

The Theravada Studies Group held an initial planning meeting at the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) meeting in San Diego in March of 2013. The TSG will meet annually in conjunction with the AAS in order to promote comparative work on the religious, cultural and historical aspects and encourage the submission of proposals for AAS panels. Please plan to attend and share this announcement with interested colleagues.

Scholars interested in Theravada Studies may subscribe to a new web-based repository for Theravada Studies at <http://theravadaciv.org>. Your log-in will give you access to

additional information. You can build your own profile and upload your publications which other members will be able to read. Selecting the "RRS" feature will allow you to receive periodic updates on new posts, blogs and features. Membership is free and password protected. You can write to me at J.Schober@asu.edu for further information.

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