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A View from the Edge**

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MODERN BURMA STUDIES: A VIEW FROM THE EDGE

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ABSTRACT

Burma has never been a popular subject for academic research but, since a massive pro-democracy uprising drew worldwide attention to the country in 1988, the number of scholars and students engaged in the field has grown considerably. However, they still face a number of major challenges. Along with other kinds of area studies, Burma studies have been accused by academics from the more 'scientific' disciplines of being too narrowly focused and lacking theoretical rigour. Also, it has been very difficult to conduct research in Burma's closed society. While the latest military government has relaxed some controls, field work is still constrained and reliable sources are hard to find. Often, the knowledge gap has been filled by myths and misconceptions. Adding to these problems, since 1988 the Burma studies community has become highly polarised, with political and moral factors often featuring more prominently in the public debate than considered arguments based on objective analysis. All these factors have adversely affected modern Burma studies and restricted understanding of this deeply troubled country by both scholars and the wider community.

(16 October 2007)

All that is said here is only an introduction to a subject so vast that, if you became re-incarnate in Burma for twenty lives, you would still be only upon the threshold of greater discoveries. The increasing interest would still lure you irresistably forward to further research.

C.M. Enriquez

A Burmese Enchantment (1916)¹

Introduction

Burma has never been a popular subject for research and analysis among scholars outside the country. Compared to the collections found on many other places, the literature on Burma is relatively small. Publications that do not deal with mainstream subjects are difficult to find. Nor has Burma enjoyed a high profile in broader works devoted to the major academic disciplines, like economics or political science. Yet, over the past century, Burma studies has slowly but firmly established itself as a discreet field of enquiry, mainly in the United States (US), Western and Eastern Europe, Russia and Japan. Since the political turmoil of 1988, it has attracted a new generation of scholars, not only from these countries but also from Australia and Southeast Asia, including from Burma itself. The tragic events of September and October 2007, when the regime brutally crushed another round of pro-democracy demonstrations in Burma's cities, are likely further to encourage this trend.

'Burma studies' is a portmanteau term commonly used in universities and research institutes around the world to describe the work of specialists from a wide range of different academic disciplines, such as history, political science, economics, anthropology, archaeology, religious studies and art history, who are conducting research in these fields focused on the geographical area or political entity currently

¹ Enriquez (1916: vi)

recognised as the state of Burma (or Myanmar).² This work is often based on knowledge of the Burmese language, or a language of one of Burma's main ethnic groups, such as Mon, Karen or Shan. In this sense, Burma studies can be viewed as a sub-division of 'Asian studies', itself a sub-set of the much broader category of academic activity that, since the 1940s, has come to be known as 'area studies'.³

Over the past 50 years, area studies have suffered from a bad press in academic circles. Some commentators — particularly from the more structured and theoretical disciplines, like political science — have tended to view area studies as out-dated, and even discredited. While it is usually acknowledged that they are deeply textured and highly nuanced, area studies have been criticised for lacking 'generalisability' or theoretical rigour within a specific field or discipline. Yet, despite these concerns, in recent years Burma studies have attracted a higher level of academic interest. The term remains a useful way to describe a wide variety of important research programs, by scholars from many different academic backgrounds, who have in common a professional interest in Burma. That said, the origins and development of Burma studies are still poorly understood, even by some practitioners in the field.

This paper aims to provide a brief survey of modern Burma studies, by describing their evolution, their relationship with other academic disciplines, and their current status. It also canvasses the various problems Burma scholars have encountered, and still face, both within and outside Burma.

While it necessarily touches on academic work being conducted inside Burma, this paper is concerned mainly with the interest shown in Burma by foreign scholars, writing in English and the other major languages. Also, it focuses on works that

² In 1989, Burma's new military government changed the country's name to Myanmar. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original Burmese pronunciation, for example Rangoon became Yangon. In this article the older forms are used, for ease of recognition. Citations, however, are given as they were originally published.

³ Area studies are sometimes described as a form of cultural studies, and in some catalogues of academic disciplines are listed under the humanities and the arts, rather than the social sciences. While such divisions are essentially arbitrary, modern Asian (and other area) studies invariably encompass much more than 'the meaning and practices of everyday life among Asian peoples', by 'combining aspects of sociology and cultural anthropology'. See <http://www.answers.com/topic/asian-studies>

belong to the modern international tradition of academic enquiry and only mentions briefly serious reportage of, and comment on, the contemporary Burma scene. While it refers to a wide range of publications, mainly as illustrative examples, this paper makes no claim to be a comprehensive literature review. Nor does it seek to provide an authoritative account of the development of a broad and multi-faceted field of academic activity that invites many different perspectives. Even if such an undertaking were possible, it would require far more space than is available here. To borrow the words of a pioneer in the field of Southeast Asian studies, this survey is necessarily 'a bare outline, perilously compressed and oversimplified in many parts'.⁴

Most scholars studying Burma have adopted the convention of dividing it into historical periods. The three-stage British conquest of the country in the Nineteenth century, for example, has usually been accepted as marking a 'fundamental break in the pattern of Burma's development'.⁵ Major political events after that, such as the Second World War, Burma's Independence in 1948, General Ne Win's coup d'etat in 1962 and the advent of a new military regime in 1988, have all been seen as critical turning points in the country's history. A few scholars have challenged such a linear approach, and emphasised the social, economic and political continuities between various Burmese dynasties, between 'classical' Burma and the colonial period, and even between Burma prior to the British conquest and modern times.⁶ The essentially arbitrary nature of the standard periodisation model and its limitations are recognised, but this structure still has a certain heuristic value and thus has been adopted in the discussion that follows.

Burma Studies Before 1948

⁴ Hall (1970: xx, 'Preface to the First [1955] Edition')

⁵ Lieberman (1987). The UK annexed the coastal areas of Arakan and Tenasserim in the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-26, took Lower Burma by force of arms in 1852, and overthrew the Burmese king in Mandalay after a third military campaign in 1885.

⁶ See, for example, Michael Aung-Thwin (1991: 575-602).

Arguably, there is a long tradition of indigenous Burmese scholarship, dating back to the Eleventh century. Inscriptions found in the ancient capital of Pagan, for example, 'contain the traces of historical writing', although the chronicles of the Fifteenth century are more commonly seen as marking the start of Burmese historiography.⁷ Modern Burma studies, however, began with the first wave of European contacts during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. In their ship's logs and private journals, these early explorers described a society and a culture — indeed, a number of societies and cultures — that were quite different from any encountered before. As foreign contacts grew, and Burma came to be visited more often by traders, officials and missionaries, so these accounts grew in number. They also became more comprehensive and reflective.⁸ European — and particularly British — writings on Burma greatly increased during the Nineteenth century, with the colonisation of the country by the United Kingdom (UK).

During the main period of British rule, from 1852-1942, Burma studies flowered as intellectuals, scholar-bureaucrats and missionaries published learned works on a wide range of topics. Usually employing contemporary research and analytical methodologies, they discovered and described many hitherto unrecorded facets of Burmese archaeology, history, geography, anthropology and natural science. Religious and linguistic subjects also received considerable attention. Most authors lived in Burma for lengthy periods and many learnt the local languages, characteristics that lent their writings greater depth and authenticity. Of particular note in this regard is *The Burman: His Life and Notions* by the British civil servant J.G. Scott ('Shway Yoe'), which remains a classic description of traditional Burmese life and culture.⁹

A number of other important books were published during this period. For example, American Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson published the first Burmese-English

⁷ Tin Ohn (1961: 85-93)

⁸ See, for example, Symes (1800); and Sangermano (1966). Father Sangermano probably lived in Burma from 1783 to 1806. His book was first published in Rome in 1833. Also important is Henry Yule's 1856 report, later published as Yule (1968).

⁹ Scott ['Shway Yoe'] (1982). See also Trager (1966a).

dictionary in 1852.¹⁰ In 1883 Arthur Phayre, Britain's Chief Commissioner in Burma from 1862 to 1867, published the first continuous history of the country in a European language.¹¹ This pioneering work was followed in 1925 by G.E. Harvey's *History of Burma*, which drew on sources not available to Phayre and 'set out to describe the histories, art and literature of the pre-colonial kingdoms in Burma'.¹² With publication in 1938 of his seminal study, *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma*, J.S. Furnivall began what was to become a distinguished career as a scholar of Burma and Britain's colonial administration.¹³ Another figure worth mention here is Gordon Luce. With Pe Maung Tin, he published *Inscriptions of Burma* between 1933 and 1939, and became a major figure in Burma scholarship.¹⁴

In addition, much useful research appeared as official reports and gazetteers. The latter constituted a massive project that resulted, between 1911 and 1935, in the publication of detailed descriptions of all 43 administrative districts in the country, covering such subjects as history, inhabitants, agriculture, minerals, trade, communications, education and administration.¹⁵ Some shorter papers, mainly on historical, geographical and ethnographic issues, appeared in the journal of the Calcutta Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.¹⁶ A few articles relating to Burma could also be found in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, which began in 1904. By far the largest number of scholarly articles, however, was published by the Burma Research Society, which was founded in 1910. Its aims were 'the investigation and encouragement of Art, Science and Literature in relation to Burma and neighbouring

¹⁰ Stevenson and Eveleth (1986)

¹¹ Phayre (1969)

¹² Harvey (1967). See also Phillips (2005).

¹³ Furnivall (1938). See also Furnivall (1939: 3-137); and Taylor (1995: 45-63).

¹⁴ Luce and Pe Maung Tin (1933-1939). See also Luce (1969-1970); and Luce (1985).

¹⁵ So useful were these gazetteers that, during the 1950s and 1960s, many were reprinted by the Burmese government, for the benefit of its own civil servants.

¹⁶ Founded in 1784 as the Asiatic Society of Bengal, it became the Calcutta Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society after the latter was founded in London in 1829.

countries'.¹⁷ The *Journal of the Burma Research Society* was the first peer-reviewed academic publication devoted to Burma studies. Before closing in 1977, the Society published 59 volumes, consisting of 136 journals and more than 1300 articles.

The literature on Burma was swollen by numerous memoirs, and accounts of travel around the picturesque colony by visiting foreigners. These publications were largely personal and descriptive, but sometimes they contained valuable information and helpful insights.¹⁸ Also, in the opinion of one observer:

Almost more valuable than their words are the superb illustrations to be found in many of these books, especially the sketches and watercolour paintings of places, buildings, fashions no longer to be seen [sic].¹⁹

In addition, from the turn of the century Burmese authors began experimenting with European literary forms and produced a number of novels and short stories, many with indigenous themes. These works were influential in shaping popular perceptions of Burma in places like Europe and the United States.

Scholarly attention to Burma was given a major fillip by the Second World War, when the China-Burma-India Theatre assumed considerable strategic importance.²⁰ Following the Japanese invasion of Burma in late 1941 and early 1942, there was a sudden demand among the Allies for detailed information about the country and its people. Geographers, geologists, historians, economists, anthropologists and others with specialised expertise were enlisted to help prepare the vast number of maps, briefing papers and other documents needed for military planning and operations.²¹ There was also an urgent need for background material on Burmese society and

¹⁷ Herbert (1988: 255)

¹⁸ See, for example, Bird (1897); O'Connor (1904); and Collis (1938). Of interest in this regard is Keck (2004: 387-414).

¹⁹ Allott (1994: 17)

²⁰ For an official account of the war in Burma see Mountbatten (1960). Also useful is Allen (1984); and Thompson (2002).

²¹ Balchin (1987: 159-180); and Stone (1979: 89-96).

culture to prepare the returning Allied forces for their expected contacts with the local inhabitants.²²

Much of this activity took place in specialised units dealing with military intelligence, logistics and operations. Related work was also done in agencies such as the British Inter-Services Topographical Department and the US Office of Strategic Services. Some new research, however, was contracted out to scholars at academic institutions, particularly in the US, in an attempt to harness the full intellectual resources of the Allied countries to the war effort. The results of this research were often restricted, but some officially endorsed publications were released to the public, either during or shortly after the war.²³ There was also a major effort, through dedicated 'area studies' and language training programs, to produce, as quickly as possible, linguists and other specialists on Burma who could meet the immediate needs of the armed forces, both in rear echelon positions and the front line.²⁴

After the war ended, many of these area studies programs were not only continued, but were expanded to include a greater emphasis on scholarship and research. Particularly influential in this regard was a report prepared in the US by Robert Hall for the Social Science Research Council, in 1948.²⁵ This effort was initially seen as part of the US post-war liberal democratic project, but was also justified by the growing strategic competition between the West and what was perceived to be a global communist menace. Most funding was channelled into academic programs that focussed on countries and regions of greatest strategic interest, notably the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe. Some, however, was directed towards Southeast Asia, including Burma. The subjects studied under these programs varied

²² See, for example, Government of Burma (1943 and 1944).

²³ See, for example, Deignan (1943); and Gorer (1943). Also of interest is Christian (1942, re-released in 1945).

²⁴ In 1940-41, in anticipation of combat operations, the US Army commissioned practical handbooks, teaching grammars and vocabularies on several 'strategic languages'. Despite the difficulty of finding any native Burmese speakers in the US at the time, W.S. Cornyn produced *Spoken Burmese* for the US War Department, later published by Henry Holt as Holk (1945). See also 'The Burmese Story'. The British could draw on Burmese language texts produced for colonial officers before the war, but they also printed some new guides for the armed forces, such as War Office (1945).

²⁵ Hall (1948)

widely, but usually included the political, historical, economic and social problems of specific countries and regions.²⁶

Burma Studies After Independence

After Burma regained its independence from the UK in January 1948, the fledgling government of Prime Minister U Nu was immediately preoccupied with internal security and a wide-ranging economic recovery program. It also adopted a strictly neutral foreign policy and eschewed any involvement in the developing Cold War between the superpowers. Burma thus did not demand the same kind of official attention or funding as did other, potentially hostile, Asian states, like China or North Korea. However, there was a strong perception in Washington, shared after 1954 by the Bangkok-based South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), that Burma was a key regional 'domino' threatened by communist subversion and insurgency. If Burma fell to the communists, so the argument went at the time, Thailand and Indochina would soon follow.²⁷ During and after the Korean War, Burma was also seen as a 'back door' to China, through which clandestine military operations could be mounted against the People's Republic.²⁸

Burma studies also benefited from the interest shown in the country by US veterans of the Second World War and Korean War, many of whom took advantage of the 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act (more commonly known as the GI Bill) to undertake tertiary studies. Some, like David Steinberg, later achieved eminence in the field. After 1961, the creation of the US Peace Corps also gave area studies a major boost, as the demand increased for country-specific training, particularly in the local languages. Burma was initially seen as a possible target for US assistance and was visited by the Director of the Peace Corps in 1961. General Ne Win's coup d'état the following year prevented that initiative from being taken any further, but

²⁶ Morton (1963: 142-147)

²⁷ '1952 Policy Statement' (1971: 28). The eight SEATO members were the US, UK, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines and Pakistan.

²⁸ Taylor (1973); and Kaufman (2001: 440-456).

Burma studies still benefited from the increased attention being given to Southeast Asian programs at US universities, largely to meet the Peace Corps' requirements.

During this period, a number of important studies of Burma appeared. The 1950s and 1960s saw the publication of a comprehensive survey of the new Union by Hugh Tinker, and major histories of Burma by John Cady, Dorothy Woodman and Frank Trager. All four books soon became standard reference works.²⁹ Notwithstanding the internal security problems caused by the country's continuing ethnic and ideological insurgencies, anthropologists like Manning Nash and Melford Spiro were able to conduct extensive field work in Burma, which ultimately led to the publication of several socio-cultural studies of Burmese life.³⁰ There was also a small but vibrant academic community in post-war Burma, which saw the publication of a number of works by local figures. Some were published in English, or by foreign publishing houses, including works by Maung Maung Pye, Maung Maung and Ba U.³¹

This high level of activity was assisted by the creation of the Rangoon-Hopkins Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, which opened in 1954 to serve the teaching and research needs of Rangoon University and other universities in the region. This was a joint undertaking of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and Rangoon University. SAIS provided a number of fellowships each year for graduates to study at the Centre. Funding from various US foundations supported other research programs in Burma. A Foreign Area Training Fellowship in 1961-62, for example, made it possible for John Badgley to study Burma's intellectual elite and a Fulbright Fellowship helped Richard Butwell research a biography of Prime Minister U Nu.³²

²⁹ Tinker (1957); Cady (1958); Woodman (1962); and Trager (1966).

³⁰ Nash (1965); and Spiro (1967).

³¹ Maung Maung Pye (1951); Dr Maung Maung (1957); and Ba U (1959).

³² See, for example, Badgley (1969: 598-613); and Butwell (1963). Also of interest in this regard is Badgley (1970).

After 1962, however, the climate for academic research changed dramatically. On seizing power, Ne Win and his Revolutionary Council immediately set about implementing 'The Burmese Way to Socialism'. In addition to closing parliament and banning all political parties (other than its own), the regime severely curtailed freedom of speech and association. All newspapers, magazines and books were subject to severe censorship. Burmese academics, and academic institutions, were placed under a range of restrictions. Historical studies which re-evaluated colonial approaches to Burma were usually deemed acceptable, but few other works escaped scrutiny.³³ Through various means, ranging from reduced funding allocations to open intimidation, local scholars were encouraged to confine themselves to politically 'safe' subjects like Buddhist metaphysics and the Burmese language. Some chose instead to leave Burma and take up positions at Western universities.

The problems encountered by local academics were compounded by the regime's deep suspicion of foreigners and the consequent restrictions placed on the conduct of field work in Burma. The SAIS centre at Rangoon University was closed in 1962 and foreign institutions promoting independent research, like the US-based Asia Foundation, were expelled. Entry visas for foreign academics (and tourists) were initially granted for 24 hours, but even after a relaxation of these controls they were still only given for seven days. Exceptions were made from time to time, usually thanks to the personal intervention of a sympathetic local official, but once again these concessions tended to be in subject areas considered 'safe' by the regime, like archaeology.³⁴ As David Steinberg observed in 1981, for many years 'contemporary Burma has been considered terra incognita by many scholars, journalists, and development specialists'.³⁵

³³ See, for example, Ni Ni Myint (1983). Also relevant is Maung Htin Aung (1967); and Than Tun (1970: 53-66).

³⁴ One notable work produced during this period was Gutman (1977).

³⁵ Steinberg (1981: 1)

Even so, during the 1970s and 1980s foreign scholars made a number of major contributions to modern Burma studies. These included multiple works by Josef Silverstein, Robert Taylor and Steinberg himself.³⁶ Of note too was the publication in 1983 of Hugh Tinker's monumental two-volume collection of official documents on constitutional relations between the UK and Burma, from 1944 to 1948.³⁷ This period also saw the publication, outside Burma, of autobiographies by two former Burmese leaders and the son of Burma's first President, who was an ethnic Shan.³⁸ These and other works were important for the light they shed on a country that, after Ne Win's takeover, had retreated into political isolation and economic irrelevancy.

Around the same time, Burma studies began to encounter other problems. It was largely under the rubric of 'area studies' that relatively minor actors on the world stage, like Burma, had been given continuing, albeit modest, attention by officials and academics. While the funds provided were welcome, this was a mixed blessing. As described by one leading proponent in the field:

During and after the war, most area studies were contemporary in orientation and, given the circumstances of their origin, extremely vulnerable to the charge of serving "non-scholarly" political or military interests.³⁹

As time passed, the range of subjects studied under these programs had expanded beyond any direct, practical utility to governments or armed forces, and become more genuinely 'academic' in their orientation. However, the connection between the Cold War and area studies came to be seen as a liability by many scholars in the West. The unease felt by academic institutions increased after it became known that some support for area studies (possibly including a proportion of the funds

³⁶ See, for example, Silverstein (1977); Silverstein (1980); Taylor ((1984); and Steinberg (1981).

³⁷ Tinker (1983)

³⁸ Ba Maw (1968); Nu (1975); and Chao Tzang Yawngghwe (1987).

³⁹ Schwartz (1980: 15)

channelled through private foundations) was sourced from US intelligence agencies.⁴⁰

In any case, as the fear of global communism faded, so too did official interest in sponsoring geographically-defined research. There were also challenges from those — in both academia and the large private foundations — who favoured ‘cross-boundary’ research programs which emphasised the connections between countries, and transnational themes like democratisation and the impact of globalisation, rather than the study of single states or regions. Particularly after the end of the Vietnam War, funding for the study of specific countries, including Burma, declined significantly. The US Defence Department, for example, withdrew support for the regular publication of its foreign area handbooks, which in Burma’s case dated back to 1956.⁴¹

Starved of funding, and unable to conduct original research in Burma during the 26 years that Ne Win ruled the country, many academics turned elsewhere for subjects to study. Burma studies languished. Between 1965 and 1985, for example, only 143 doctoral dissertations were written with Burma as their primary focus.⁴² According to a survey conducted by the Wilson Centre in 1986, there were then only 67 Burma specialists (ie those claiming fluency in a Burmese language) known to be working in the US, Europe, Russia and Japan.⁴³ There were clearly others who did not have that level of linguistic expertise, but the total number of scholars working on Burma was still small. Academic conferences specifically devoted to Burma-related issues were almost unknown. Such was the depth of the problem that, after the 1988 meeting of the US-based Association for Asian Studies (AAS), one observer felt

⁴⁰ See, for example, Watson and Dunn (1984).

⁴¹ A major study by Trager was published by the Human Relations Area Files in 1956. Revised and updated versions were published in 1968 and 1971. The latest was Bunge (1983). Work was begun on a new edition in the early 1990s, but the project was abandoned due to a lack of funds.

⁴² Between 1898 and 1985, there were 285 dissertations written with Burma as the main focus - 96 in the US, 67 in the Soviet Union, 40 in the UK, 26 in Germany, 14 in India and 12 in France. Shulman (1986).

⁴³ ‘Introduction’ in Morse and Loerke (1988).

compelled to comment on the 'small band of Burma scholars which gathers every year to lament the state of Burma and Burma studies'.⁴⁴

Burma Studies After 1988

The climate changed once again in 1988, however, when widespread pro-democracy demonstrations were crushed by the armed forces and Burma was thrust into the world's headlines. The advent of a new military government, with more open economic and foreign policies, and the rise of an indigenous opposition movement led by charismatic Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, have seen much greater attention paid to Burma by governments and international organisations. There has been a resurgence of interest in Burma among foreign scholars, commentators and journalists. There has also been a significant increase in the number of postgraduate students working on Burma in the US and, to a lesser extent, Western Europe and Australia.⁴⁵ In addition, there has emerged an extensive network of expatriates, exiles and activists determined to keep Burma alive in the minds of the international community.

In some respects, the new military government is even more repressive than the Ne Win regime. Yet, ironically, it has permitted more foreign researchers into the country, and for longer periods. Censorship is still pervasive, and the regime is particularly sensitive about any research focusing on opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.⁴⁶ It also remains suspicious of journalists, but the military authorities have granted some academics long term visas and turned a blind eye to researchers posing as tourists, while conducting surveys of local opinion. A number of new and important studies have appeared since 1988, some based on extensive field work.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Taylor (1990a: 708)

⁴⁵ A recent survey revealed that more than 25 students in these countries were writing doctoral theses (in English) on Burma-related issues. Interview, Professor D.I. Steinberg, Washington DC, October 2006.

⁴⁶ The regime did, however, allow one of Aung San Suu Kyi's biographers to conduct research in Burma, in the hope that she would write a book that was favourable to the military government. See Victor (1998). A more recent biography is Wintle (2007). Aung San Suu Kyi's own writings and thoughts have been published in several books, notably Aris (1991); and Aris and Clements (1997).

⁴⁷ See, for example, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung (2004).

Also, due largely to the increased international attention being paid to Burma, there is now more information available about developments in the country that can be used, with appropriate care, in scholarly analyses.⁴⁸

Within Burma itself, the regime has occasionally made attempts to promote an image of academic freedom. This has resulted in the publication of some questionable material, but a number of worthwhile studies (including a few in English) have also emerged.⁴⁹ Since 1995, the Universities Historical Research Centre in Rangoon has held a number of international conferences on social science and humanities issues, at which foreign academics have given papers.⁵⁰ The effective collapse of the higher education system in Burma since 1988, however, and the easing of restrictions against leaving Burma, have encouraged many young Burmese intellectuals to seek their fortunes elsewhere.⁵¹ This is a major loss to Burma, and will have a long term impact on educational standards in the country. It has meant, however, that there is now a new generation of Burmese students and academics in universities around the world, undertaking Burma studies.⁵²

For a long time, there were no academic centres outside the country dedicated to Burma studies, although in 1955 the Burma Research Project (BRP) was launched at New York University with the help of the US Army, through the Human Relations Area Files initiative. (The BRP continued for another 20 years, with funding mainly from the RAND Corporation and private foundations). The situation changed in 1986, however, when the AAS's Burma Studies Group selected Northern Illinois University

⁴⁸ Censorship extends to literary works and even cartoons. See Allott (1993).

⁴⁹ See, for example, *The 1947 Constitution and The Nationalities*, 2 vols. (Universities Historical Research Centre and Innwa Publishing House, Yangon, 1999).

⁵⁰ For example, *Traditions in Current Perspective: Proceedings of the Conference on Myanmar and Southeast Asian Studies, 15-17 November 1995, Yangon* (Universities Historical Research Centre, Yangon, 1996).

⁵¹ The number of educational institutions in Burma has increased greatly since 1988, largely to disperse the politically active student population, but most institutions of higher learning have been closed for lengthy periods and the country's academic standards have fallen dramatically. Members of the armed forces, however, have access to several well-resourced military schools and training opportunities overseas, eg. in Russia.

⁵² See, for example, Matrii Aung Thwin (2003: 393-419). See also 'Session 36: Burma Studies' (2000).

(NIU) to be the home of a national (and, indeed, the world's first) Centre for Burma Studies. In addition, in 1996 a Myanmar Studies Centre was opened at Naresuan University in Thailand. In 1999, following a workshop held by the Centre for East and Southeast Asian Studies at Goteborg University in Sweden, a Nordic Burma Studies Group was formed. In 2005 a Centre for Myanmar Studies was established at Manipur University in India.

A number of universities in the US, Western Europe, Russia, Japan and Australia also maintain an interest in Burma, usually as part of broader Southeast Asia programs.⁵³

The NIU's Centre for Burma Studies organises biennial conferences, alternately in the US and in regional centres like Singapore, and in most years the Australian National University organises 'Burma Update' conferences, usually in Canberra. The latter tend to eschew more 'academic' analyses in favour of papers that accord with the 'update' theme, but they usually look at a wide range of contemporary issues and help fill gaps in the literature. Also, occasional meetings sponsored by centres of Burma expertise like Georgetown University in Washington DC, and the Singapore-based Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS), have provided valuable opportunities for students of Burma to exchange information and insights. Some of these conferences have resulted in edited volumes of papers.⁵⁴

There are currently three peer-reviewed journals devoted to Burma studies outside the country. These are *The Journal of Burma Studies*, published annually by the Burma Studies Centre at NIU, the *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* published twice a year by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, and *Burma Economic Watch* (BEW), which is published periodically on the internet by the Economics Department of Macquarie University in Australia.⁵⁵ Inside Burma, the Myanmar Historical Commission (MHC) regularly publishes the mixed-language

⁵³ A useful catalogue of these centres can be found in Legge (1992: 16). See also Morse and Loerke, *passim*; and Sarkisyanz (1994: 205-218).

⁵⁴ See, for example, Wilson (2006); and Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Taylor and Tin Maung Maung Than (2005).

⁵⁵ The BEW can be found at < http://www.econ.mq.edu.au/burma_economic_watch>

Myanmar Historical Research Journal. It occasionally accepts articles by foreign scholars but, like all other publications in Burma, it is subject to censorship by the regime.⁵⁶

It is also important to note the contributions made to Burma studies by observers outside the formal confines of the Academy. Journalists and freelance authors like Bertil Lintner and Martin Smith have not only provided valuable information and analyses about Burma, particularly since 1988, but they have also written major works based on extensive field work and direct personal experience.⁵⁷ Without their efforts, a number of more academic studies would have been difficult to write. In addition, over the years Burma studies have benefited from the knowledge and views of numerous officials, aid workers, activists and volunteers. While their research has rarely appeared in recognised academic journals, and their publications are not usually included in lists of the academic literature, many of these works are of a high standard and provide helpful accounts of current conditions in Burma.⁵⁸

Since Independence, numerous journalists, travel writers and tourists have visited Burma and left accounts of their experiences. As did various itinerants during the colonial period, some have provided useful information and perceptive observations about developments in the country and around its borders.⁵⁹ Also, a few adventurers have travelled to parts of Burma where foreigners were usually not permitted to go, or where they had not been seen for many years.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ See, for example, Selth (2000: 44-55). The MHC was established in 1955. In 1993, it absorbed the Committee for the Compilation of Authentic Data on Myanmar History, which was formed by the new military government in 1989.

⁵⁷ Lintner (1989); Lintner (1990); Lintner (1999); and Smith (1999).

⁵⁸ While they have their own agendas, independent NGOs such as the Karen Human Rights Group, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Global Witness have all published useful works on recent developments in Burma, particularly in the areas dominated by the country's ethnic minorities.

⁵⁹ A selection might include Lewis (1952); Marshall (2002); and Larkin (2004).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Lintner (1996); Tucker (2000); and Mirante (2005).

As a discreet field of scholarly endeavour, Burma studies has experienced something of a revival since 1988, but it still occupies only a small part in the wider field of Asian studies. Also, like other area studies programs, it suffers from a range of criticisms levelled against it by practitioners in the more established and 'scientific' disciplines. In some respects, this has not been a serious problem, but it has probably had an adverse impact on levels of funding and the acceptability of Burma as a legitimate subject for academic research at universities and other tertiary institutions.

Disciplinary Emphases in Burma Studies

Academic publications on Burma produced since the Second World War can be roughly divided into four social science disciplines: history, political science, economics and anthropology. As always with such arbitrary divisions, there is some overlap between these categories, which are themselves open to challenge, but these have been the disciplinary approaches through which most scholars have attempted to understand and explain modern Burma.

Not surprisingly, the largest proportion of scholarly books and articles on Burma that have appeared since 1945 can be broadly classed as history. In various guises, be it prehistory, cultural history, intellectual history, military history or modern history, these works cover a range of subjects from the fall of the ancient Pyu civilisation and the rise of the early Burmese kingdoms, through Burma's 'golden period' of consolidation and expansion in the Seventeenth century, to the British colonial period that formally began in 1826.⁶¹ As might be expected, given the dominant role of Europeans in Burma during the Second World War, numerous histories and memoirs have been published covering the 1939-1945 period.⁶² In recent years, there has been a number of important works in English produced by Western-

⁶¹ Notable works in this category include Lieberman (1984); Michael Aung Thwin (1985); and Charney (2006).

⁶² Obvious examples include Slim (1956); and Fraser ((1992).

trained Burmese scholars, looking at their country's history from an indigenous perspective.⁶³

Closely related to these historical studies is a relatively large body of work on Burma's political development since Independence in 1948. These include exercises in political biography, political economy and political culture. Some articles and books have analysed Burma's brief experiment with democracy from 1948-1962, and the role of Buddhism in Burmese political life.⁶⁴ Most works in this category, however, look at politics in Burma since the 1962 military coup. This research has itself evolved over the past 45 years. Broadly speaking, there was an initial focus on the role of the Burmese armed forces in politics, and the Ne Win regime's idiosyncratic socialist ideology.⁶⁵ Over the years, attention has also been paid to Burma's political identity and political culture.⁶⁶ Since 1988, there has been a greater emphasis on comparative politics, with studies of local political institutions and the implications of a possible transition from a military dictatorship to a 'guided democracy'.⁶⁷

Due perhaps to Burma's political isolation before 1988, its autarkic economic ideology, strictly neutral foreign policies and relative insignificance in world affairs, there have only been three in-depth academic studies of Burma's foreign relations and its place in the wider international community.⁶⁸ There have been even fewer works in English, by Burmese scholars.⁶⁹ The dramatic policy shift under the new military regime, which saw Burma join the Association of South East Asian Nations

⁶³ These works include Thant Myint-U (2001); and Michael Aung Thwin (2005). For a survey of historical works (in both Burmese and English) published since 1945, see Ni Ni Myint ((2003: 123-140).

⁶⁴ See, for example, Sarkisyanz (1965); and Smith (1965). Also of interest in this regard is Schober (2005: 113-132).

⁶⁵ For a useful survey of this period see Taylor (1988: 33-47).

⁶⁶ See, for example, Pye (1962a); and Maung Maung Gyi (1983).

⁶⁷ Three books by David Steinberg illustrate this trend: Steinberg (1987, 2001, 2006). See also Tin Maung Maung Than (2007).

⁶⁸ Johnstone (1963); Chi-shad Liang (1990); and Haacke (2006).

⁶⁹ See, however, Than Han (1988).

(ASEAN) in 1997, and develop much closer relations with its neighbours, has sparked greater scholarly interest. The number of articles and books dealing with Burma's bilateral relations with individual countries is steadily growing, although there is still a pressing need for a detailed study of Burma's relations with China.⁷⁰ Since 1997, Burma has also been included (albeit often nominally) in broad studies of ASEAN. Generally speaking, however, international relations has not been a field in which Burma has figured prominently.

Nor, despite its important geo-strategic position and numerous long-running insurgencies, has Burma been a serious factor in contemporary security studies. Over the past 20 years, only a small number of scholars outside the country have attempted to examine Burma's threat perceptions, defence policies and military security. Robert Taylor, Tin Maung Maung Than, Desmond Ball and Maung Aung Myoe have published on these and related subjects.⁷¹ Mary Callahan has written about the early days of the armed forces, focusing on their role in state building.⁷² This author has published two books examining Burma's armed forces as a military institution, and a number of works that examine Burma's place in the contemporary strategic environment.⁷³ As transnational issues have become more important, and the accepted definition of security has expanded, greater attention has been devoted to human security problems in Burma.⁷⁴ Even so, the total body of work in the field of security studies remains small.

Despite the difficulty of obtaining reliable data, there have been a number of major publications that examine Burma's economy and its wider impact, both before and after the 1962 military coup.⁷⁵ Burma is rich in natural resources, and before the

⁷⁰ See, for example, Maung Aung Myoe (2002); Egretreau (2003); and Seekins (2007).

⁷¹ See, for example, the chapters by Tin Maung Maung Than in Alagappa (1998); and Alagappa (2001). See also Ball (1998).

⁷² Callahan (2003)

⁷³ Selth (1996, 2002, 2004)

⁷⁴ Tin Maung Maung Than (2007a: 172-218).

⁷⁵ An early work was Andrus (1948). An early study of Burma's economic geography was Adas (1974).

Second World War was both an oil producer and the largest rice exporter in the world. Yet, Burma's economy suffered greatly during the war and was not helped to recover by the failure of Ne Win's socialist policies. In 1987, the United Nations officially designated Burma as one of the least developed countries in the world. This decline in Burma's fortunes, and the impact of the 'open door' economic policies introduced by the new military regime in 1989, have attracted considerable scholarly interest.⁷⁶ The discovery of rich natural gas reserves off Burma's coast has important implications for the country's long term prosperity, political stability and foreign relations, and this development too is likely to receive increased attention.⁷⁷

There have also been numerous works that are broadly sociological and anthropological in nature, focusing on Burma's rich and diverse societies, religions, languages and cultures. Such studies have long been popular among Burma scholars, keeping alive a tradition begun by colonial administrators and building on major works by scholars like Edmund Leach.⁷⁸ A number of scholars have examined the critical role of Buddhism in Burmese society.⁷⁹ Burma's art, crafts and, to a lesser extent, its modern literature have also received some attention. The number of translations of modern Burmese novels and short stories is slowly growing.⁸⁰ Since 1988, there has been an increased demand for publications in some of these fields, ranging from scholarly works to large format 'coffee table' books. While usually designed for the more popular market, some of the latter works have made important contributions to the wider understanding of Burmese society and culture.⁸¹

A related theme, particularly since 1988, has been the plight of Burma's ethnic and religious minorities. Numerous publications have documented the brutality of the

⁷⁶ See, for example, Mya Than and Tan (1990); Mya Maung (1991); and Myat Thein (2004).

⁷⁷ Tin Maung Maung Than (2005: 257-289); and Lall (2006: 424-446).

⁷⁸ Leach (1954)

⁷⁹ Notable in this regard is the work of Schober. See for example, Schober (2001: 111-140; 1997: 218-143).

⁸⁰ See, for example, Milne (tr) (1973); and Margaret Aung-Thwin (tr) (1991).

⁸¹ These include Sylvia Fraser-Lu (1994); and Stadtner (1999).

regime's military campaigns from 1962 through to the present day, and the consequent problems of internally displaced people and refugees.⁸² Other works have covered the regime's attempts to impose the dominant ethnic Burman Buddhist culture on the smaller ethnic groups, usually under the guise of 'economic development', and in the name of national unity and social stability.⁸³ Over the past 15 years, many of the publications covering these issues have been produced by independent non-government organisations and activist groups. In strict academic terms, these 'grassroots' reports are of mixed quality, but they are often quite informative. A number of scholarly studies of Burma's ethnic and religious communities, both inside and outside the country, have also appeared, offering an important corrective to the heavy focus on Burman-dominated aspects of the country.⁸⁴

Burma Studies and the Academy

In surveying all these publications over the years, it is possible to discern a number of broad characteristics. Firstly, most Burma scholars, particularly since 1988, seem to have approached their work with the aim of applying their academic training and skills to Burma itself, or at least to a set of intellectual problems specifically related to Burma, rather than seeing their research as an exercise in a particular academic discipline. In Katzenstein and Okawara's words, it is 'problem-driven research' rather than 'approach-driven analysis'.⁸⁵ Largely as a consequence, even when focusing on quite specific issues modern Burma scholars have tended to take an inter-disciplinary view, rather than approach them through the traditional departments into which academic institutions are usually organised.

⁸² South (2007a); and Lang (2002).

⁸³ Callahan (2007). For another view, see Karen Human Rights Group (2007). 'Burman' is used to refer to the dominant ethno-linguistic group in Burma.

⁸⁴ See, for example, South (2003, 2007: 55-76); and Lambrecht (2006). Two recent contributions to this field are Gravers (2007); and Smith (2007).

⁸⁵ Katzenstein and Okawara (2001: 183)

To an extent, this approach reflects a broad trend in the study of Southeast Asia since the Second World War. For example, modern historians of Burma have gone well beyond the largely descriptive, factually-based accounts of earlier years, and drawn on other social science disciplines to produce balanced and comprehensive analyses. The boundaries between history and political science, in particular, have become blurred, in what one historiographer has dubbed 'the Cornell tradition'.⁸⁶ Other disciplines have been affected too. Few descriptions of modern Burma, for example, do not include some coverage of economic and sociological factors. This multi-disciplinary approach stems in part from a wish to reflect the totality of developments taking place in Burma, but it also springs from the inter-related nature of many of the problems the country currently faces.

It is not possible, for example, for a political scientist to examine the development of Burma's political institutions or its gradual progress towards a new, ostensibly 'democratic', government, without also considering the country's modern history, its political culture, its economic problems, the collapse of its civil society or its ethnic and religious diversity.⁸⁷ Similarly, if looking at Burma's international relations, a specialist would need to consider a range of diverse factors beyond Burma's contacts with other countries and multilateral organisations. Its colonial experience, past economic problems, social structure and military indoctrination programs are also important. To a greater or lesser degree, all are inter-connected and need to be taken into account in any research on Burma, regardless of any formal divisions that may exist between academic disciplines.

This phenomenon illustrates another trend. Following from the intrinsic fascination with Burma as a subject for research and analysis, and reflecting the complexity of the challenges the country faces, is the relatively large number of scholarly works that aim to describe and, in many cases, help solve Burma's seemingly intractable problems.

⁸⁶ Legge (1992: 20). This theme is explored at greater length in Legge (1976: 388-404).

⁸⁷ Kyi May Kaung (1995: 1030-1041)

After Independence, the U Nu Government actively sought foreign expertise and advice.⁸⁸ Since 1962, the military regime has consistently and vigorously resisted such interventions — well meaning or otherwise — but this seems only to have encouraged the production of articles and books that examine the tragedy that is Burma's continuing military dictatorship, with its lack of political freedoms, dire economic and social problems, and pariah status in the international arena. The creation of a new military government in 1988, in particular, has resulted in an outpouring of publications — both scholarly and otherwise — that seek to offer advice of different kinds to the regime.⁸⁹ There is also a substantial literature aimed at other governments, arguing the benefits — or otherwise — of various policy approaches towards Burma's military government.⁹⁰

These characteristics have not always found favour with mainstream academics, amongst whom area studies, including Burma studies, are still viewed with suspicion. As the editors of one learned journal noted in 2005:

The last decade has seen intensifying debates about whether area studies constitutes a legitimate field of study in the social sciences. As rational choice, game theoretic, and quantitative methods become more commonplace, scholars who spend years studying the politics of one region in great detail have a harder time justifying their research.⁹¹

One major problem seems to be simply that area studies lack their own distinctive methodologies or theories, something decried by 'disciplinary based, "scientific" critics who value nomothetic approaches more than contextualisation'.⁹² There are also cultural critiques developed from the perspective of the humanities. Other

⁸⁸ See, for example, Walinsky (1962). Walinsky was Chief Economic Advisor to the U Nu Government and helped to implement the economic development plan described in his book.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Len and Alvin (2007).

⁹⁰ The reports produced by the International Crisis Group (ICG), for example, cover many different aspects of contemporary Burma and are unashamedly policy prescriptive. See, for example, ICG (2002, 2004).

⁹¹ 'Editors' Introduction', pp1-2.

⁹² Katzenstein (2001: 789)

academics have expressed concern that area studies, including Burma studies, privilege the contemporary nation state as the elementary unit of analysis, and conceive of artificially (usually politically) defined 'areas' as if they were 'the natural — or at least historically necessary — formations for the containment of differences within and between cultures'.⁹³

Scholars like Edward Said have taken this view even further, calling for 'disciplines defined intellectually' over fields that are 'defined canonically, imperially and geographically'.⁹⁴ He has condemned any approach that sets aside specific parts of the world as distinct entities for study (by implication, by Westerners and those trained in the Western tradition), on the grounds that modern area studies are the linear descendent of discredited 'Orientalist' schools. In the field of Burma studies there have also been accusations that modern academics have — knowingly or unknowingly — perpetuated the prejudices and analytical errors of some colonial era scholars.⁹⁵ Another charge occasionally heard is that, by imposing on Burma a modern, liberal, pluralist paradigm, and writing as if a democracy was always the preferred form of government, Western academics are denying the Burmese their own indigenous cultural norms.⁹⁶

Another rather uncharitable view of area studies, including Burma studies, is that they are useful only because they furnish empirical data to practitioners of more 'scientific' academic disciplines. There is a notion that area specialists are too narrowly focused and thus incapable of engaging in comparative analysis, which is best conducted within a framework of general and widely applicable categorisations. In response to this sort of criticism, Burma has increasingly been included (albeit from a low base) as a case study in comparative works dealing with such broad themes as ethnic conflict, political legitimacy, strategic culture and the role of

⁹³ Rafael ((1994: 91). One study accused of reifying the state is Taylor (1987).

⁹⁴ Said (2003: 326)

⁹⁵ Sarkisyanz (1972). See also Michael Aung Thwin (1998); and Adas (1972: 175-192).

⁹⁶ Michael Aung-Thwin (2001: 483-505). See also Taylor (1990: 62-72).

religion in regional politics.⁹⁷ In addition, there has been a greater emphasis in recent years on cross-regional studies that 'seek to blend and incorporate elements from both scientific and humanistic perspectives'.⁹⁸

Indeed, a criticism of many broad regional or cross-boundary studies has been that they do not sufficiently draw on the specialist Burma expertise that is available. For example, a number of recent works have examined transnational problems in Southeast Asia, such as international terrorism, narcotics trafficking and people smuggling. Some have included case studies of Burma, written by recognised specialists or professionals with direct experience working in Burma.⁹⁹ Other works, however, have been written by subject experts who, not surprisingly, lack a detailed knowledge or nuanced understanding of Burma. This has had mixed results. Burma's varied history and complex problems are not well understood by non-Burma specialists.¹⁰⁰ Ironically, given the long decline of area studies, this problem seems to have been belatedly recognised by the US government, whose military adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan have reawakened an interest in specific country expertise.¹⁰¹

In any case, Burma has not been completely ignored in studies of broad conceptual issues, such as imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, communism, and militarism. To take just a few examples, Michael Adas included a Burma case study in his 1979 book on protests against the European colonial order, a 2003 reader on decolonisation included a chapter on race and resistance in Burma, and Benedict Anderson cited Burma on numerous occasions in *Imagined Communities*, his important book on nationalism.¹⁰² Burma was also included in a number of early

⁹⁷ See, for example, Brown (1994); Alagappa (1995); Booth and Trood (1999); and Harris (1999).

⁹⁸ Katzenstein (2001: 789)

⁹⁹ See, for example, Jelsma, Kramer and Vervest (2005).

¹⁰⁰ For example, Burma-related issues are managed well in Dupont (2001). Less impressive, however, is Abuza (2003), which contains a number of factual errors about Burma.

¹⁰¹ In a move reminiscent of the counter-insurgency schools of the 1960s, US Army Training and Doctrine (TRADOC) now includes a cultural awareness campaign to 'enhance soldiers' abilities to understand and leverage cultural factors' in unconventional conflicts. Hajjar (2006: 89-91).

¹⁰² Adas (1979); Selth (2003); and Anderson (1996).

studies of the strategic uses of political violence.¹⁰³ Lucien Pye contributed a chapter on Burma to a study of the role of the armed forces in ‘underdeveloped’ countries and Moshe Lissak used Burma as a critical case study in his examination of military roles in modernisation.¹⁰⁴ More recently, Martin Smith discussed Burma at length in a comprehensive survey of ‘political armies’ around the world.¹⁰⁵ In all cases, Burma offered useful illustrative examples of wider issues.

Burma has not often been examined closely in publications exploring more theoretical themes, but there are some notable exceptions. For example, Samuel Huntington used Burma as an example in his early book *Political Order in Changing Societies*, in which he argued that order was an important goal for developing societies, whether or not that order was democratic.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Burma figured prominently in Lucian Pye’s 1985 study of the cultural dimensions of politics in Asia, John Kane included a chapter about Aung San Suu Kyi in his study of *The Politics of Moral Capital*, and more recently Stephen McCarthy used Burma as a critical case study in his book on the political theory of tyranny.¹⁰⁷ Burma’s case is in many respects *sui generis*, but because of its unusual path of political, economic and social development it can offer useful examples to theorists wishing to illustrate broad concepts — including as an exception to a general rule.¹⁰⁸

More to the point, perhaps, the criticisms levelled at area studies by some academic theorists ignore the fact that every scholar who approaches the study of a country like Burma brings with him or herself — consciously or not — an array of theoretical concepts derived from their own academic training and professional experience. Harking back to Robert Hall’s seminal paper on this subject, they are ‘dual citizens’ with competencies in both an area studies field and in a recognised academic

¹⁰³ One early work was McVey (1964). See also the chapters by Steinberg and Wiant in Lim Joo-Jock and Vani (1984).

¹⁰⁴ Pye (1962); and Lissak (1976).

¹⁰⁵ Smith (2002)

¹⁰⁶ Huntington (1968)

¹⁰⁷ Pye (1985); Kane (2001); and McCarthy (2006).

¹⁰⁸ For example, Fukuyama (1992: 85).

discipline. Also, as Chalmers Johnson has persuasively argued, the examination of particular countries can, by providing detailed case studies, itself add significantly to the conceptual literature.¹⁰⁹ The fact that they do not reveal universally valid laws, or lend themselves to conceptual generalisation, does not render them invalid as scholarly exercises.

The obvious answer, as envisaged by Hall in 1947, is a reciprocal, if asymmetrical, relationship between area studies and the disciplines that encourages collaboration rather than competition across academic boundaries. As one scholar has noted, perhaps a little tartly, area studies can nourish the disciplines 'so as to bring them in better touch with the "real world"'.¹¹⁰ Similarly, a familiarity with the arguments of the theoretical schools can bring additional rigour and focus to less structured area studies. Even if this ideal was achieved, however, there would remain the persistent belief in many official and academic circles that developments in Burma are not important in themselves, and cannot offer meaningful insights into events elsewhere. These misconceptions seem to derive, in large part, from a lack of knowledge about Burma, a problem itself stemming from the difficulty of conducting serious research in the country and obtaining reliable data for analysis and comparison.

Contemporary Problems

Burma has been a closed society since the 1962 military coup, and over the years academic researchers have experienced all the problems associated with that status. Conditions changed noticeably after 1988, but documentary analysis and field work remain very difficult.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Johnson (1974: 560-575)

¹¹⁰ Rafael (1994: 95)

¹¹¹ Swaffield (2006: 41). The collapse of the feared Military Intelligence Service in 2004, due to a power struggle within the armed forces, probably contributed to a slightly freer atmosphere in Burma for a period, but since then the regime has introduced a number of additional control measures. See, for example, 'International Red Cross denounces Myanmar government abuses', *International Herald Tribune*, 28 June 2007; and US Government Accountability Office (2007).

As noted above, the new military government has relaxed visa controls and now permits foreigners to live in Burma for extended periods. It has also eased restrictions on contacts between Burmese citizens and foreigners, particularly in the ethnic Burman-dominated central parts of the country. However, freedom of speech and association in Burma are still severely curtailed. The government is believed to have spies everywhere. Teachers, civil servants and even members of the public are required to report any 'disloyal' or 'subversive' behaviour. Criticism of the government can result in long terms of imprisonment. As a consequence, most Burmese are usually too frightened to speak frankly to outsiders about public issues, let alone sensitive matters such as the political role of the armed forces or the country's national security.¹¹² Access to modern means of communication — including the internet — is restricted.¹¹³ Even the possession of an unauthorised fax machine or satellite telephone can result in a lengthy term of imprisonment.

As in all such societies, attempts are made to present a particular image of the country, both to a domestic audience and to the outside world. Government statements thus need careful interpretation, and published statistics can rarely be relied upon. Also, there is an official culture of secrecy and obfuscation in Burma, exacerbated by low bureaucratic standards and widespread corruption.¹¹⁴ Few officials — civilian or military — are prepared to grant interviews to foreign scholars and, even if they do, they tend to stick closely to the government line. Access to the government or military archives is sometimes granted to selected researchers, but permission is not easy to obtain, even if one can read Burmese — which most foreign academics cannot.¹¹⁵ Even Burmese scholars have difficulty gaining access to information that most foreigners would deem to be harmless.

¹¹² This is a central theme in Skidmore (2004).

¹¹³ See, for example, '*Internet Filtering in Burma*'.

¹¹⁴ According to Transparency International, Burma has consistently ranked among the world's most corrupt countries. In 2007 it was listed with Somalia as the world's most corrupt. See, 'Burma hits new low'.

¹¹⁵ Callahan (1994: 2-4)

This situation is exacerbated by the opaqueness of the military government itself. Despite occasional claims by informants to ‘inside knowledge’, the inner workings of the regime are largely unknown to outsiders, and even to many inside official circles. Government statements and stories in the state-run news media (including, since 1980, national television) can offer useful clues, but there is little real understanding of how major decisions are reached, and what factors are relevant to particular policy outcomes. This opaqueness extends to the highest levels of government, where many important issues seem to be decided by individuals, notably regime leader Senior General Than Shwe. Yet the personal views and perceptions of the armed forces leadership are little known by outsiders, and poorly understood.¹¹⁶

There is thus a serious dearth of hard data, little verifiable documentary evidence and relatively few well-informed sources of information about current developments. Since 1988 in particular, Burma-watchers have been repeatedly reminded of the limits of their knowledge about a wide range of issues.

For example, at the last count, there have been 13 different reasons put forward by officials, academics and journalists to explain why the seat of government was moved from Rangoon to Naypyidaw in late 2005. None, however, can be viewed as authoritative. Indeed, no-one seems to have a clear idea of precisely what prompted the regime to build an expensive new capital, or why it suddenly forced so many public servants to pack up their offices and transfer to Naypyidaw when they did.¹¹⁷ To take a more important example, thanks to the drawn-out machinations of the national constitutional convention, most observers acquired a rough idea of how the regime planned to engineer a formal transfer of power from the armed forces to a new, ostensibly elected civilian, government. There is still little understanding, however, of what Than Shwe is thinking about the country’s — and his own — future, yet that is crucial to any outcome.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, Selth (2003a: 15-21); and ICG (2001). Also relevant is Taylor (1989).

¹¹⁷ Maung Aung Myoe (2006); and Parker (2006).

There are other gaps in our knowledge. It is still not known, for example, who was responsible for the three terrorist bombs that exploded in Rangoon in May 2005, killing several people. This incident was clearly different in nature from the other terrorist attacks that have troubled the military government since the 1962 coup. Numerous accusations have been made, both by the regime and foreign commentators, but the culprits have yet to be found. Nor does the Burma studies community yet fully understand the many complex factors that led to Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt's extraordinary fall from grace in October 2004 and the collapse of the powerful Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI) — this, despite the fact that Khin Nyunt was widely seen as the third most powerful man in the country at the time, and the DDSI was (inaccurately) considered by some to be Burma's de facto government.

Indeed, some aspects of Burma studies have come to resemble what was known during the Cold War as Kremlinology — trying to discern the inner workings of the Soviet leadership from such intangible signs as the removal of official portraits, and the placement of officials on the Kremlin balcony during May Day parades in Moscow.¹¹⁸ Intelligence agencies, academics and journalists used to play similar games with China, trying to determine which Communist Party official was in the ascendant, and whose influence was waning, from the lists of Central Committee members published each year in Beijing, and the photographs of Party figures which appeared in state-run newspapers. A great deal of time and energy was expended on such exercises but, as with the shifts in power frequently reported among Burma's senior military leadership, observers rarely knew for certain whether they had managed to read the runes correctly.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Some parallels with Burma are close. After the 1962 coup, for example, all government offices were required to display portraits of General Ne Win and assassinated nationalist leader Aung San, the founder of Burma's armed forces. When Ne Win fell out with the new military government in 1992, he asked for his portraits to be taken down. In a process dubbed 'Aung San amnesia', Aung San's portrait has also been progressively removed, from both office walls and the national currency, mainly to delegitimise his daughter, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Government offices now display portraits of Senior General Than Shwe and other military officials. See Houtman (1999: 26-27).

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Jagan (2007).

Faced with a state-run news media in Burma, and in the absence of reliable information and documentary collateral, the knowledge gaps are usually filled by rumour and gossip. This tends to be the daily fare of diplomats, academics, journalists and others in Burma, who are obliged to try and winnow the few grains of truth from the mass of misleading chaff constantly floating around Rangoon and other population centres.¹²⁰ Outside Burma, the large Burmese community and interested activist groups have become adept at using the internet to pass on the latest news and exchange views. Since 1988, a number of expatriate news services have developed, assisted by external funding.¹²¹ After making allowances for their particular agendas, some websites can be useful sources of information. However, many of the stories about Burma found on the web or in the foreign news media, even when obtained from 'usually reliable sources', cannot be verified and are often speculative — at times even highly imaginative.

Despite having much greater resources to draw upon, the officials of foreign governments can be as much in the dark about developments in Burma as independent researchers. The much vaunted 'technical means' of gathering intelligence, possessed by the great powers, are still unlikely to be able to reveal what is in the heads and hearts of Burma's leaders.

Ironically, developments in areas nearer to Burma's frontiers are sometimes better illuminated. Researchers based in neighbouring countries can freely interview refugees, army deserters, emigrants and traders leaving Burma. They also have access to insurgents and aid workers who regularly operate inside the border. Some foreign journalists and academics have even crossed illegally into Burma to observe conditions at first hand.¹²² Reports based on these interviews and personal experiences tend to be dismissed by some academics as politically biased, or in

¹²⁰ While the Burmese elite and Western business communities in the cities can provide foreign researchers with useful information on a wide range of issues, different perspectives can be gained from the 80% of Burmese who live in rural villages, or have fled across the country's borders.

¹²¹ The three best known expatriate news services are *The Irrawaddy* (based in Chiang Mai), *Mizzima News* (based in New Delhi) and the *Democratic Voice of Burma* (based in Oslo). There are also some smaller groups, like the Shan Herald Agency for News.

¹²² For one view of this issue, see Thornton (2006).

other ways unreliable. Indeed, some reports suffer from these failings, to a greater or lesser degree. Others, however, still provide valuable information on, and unique insights into, specific developments and trends. Some of these reports have had a major impact on international perceptions of the challenges faced by the Burmese people, and have prompted greater official and public interest in the country.¹²³

As a result of these and other problems, there has been a considerable volume of material published about Burma since 1988 that needs to be treated with caution. In the absence of hard, verifiable facts, the continuing high demand for news about Burma has led to many unsubstantiated and tendentious reports. In some cases, the propositions put forward are easily dismissed as incredible or at least politically biased. Other suspect stories, however, seem plausible to a public largely ignorant of the complexities of modern Burma, yet willing to believe the worst of the military regime. As a result, a number of myths and misconceptions have taken root in the popular consciousness. Some of these myths have even found their way into scholarly articles and books, giving them a credibility they do not deserve. Once they have achieved that status, they are then recycled in other publications, confusing the issue even further.

To take just a few examples in the security field, there have been repeated claims that Burma possesses chemical and biological weapons, and is now pursuing a nuclear weapons option. The latter belief seems to spring in large part from an assumption that Burma's renewal of diplomatic ties with North Korea in April 2007 is directly connected to the announcement in May 2007 that Burma still planned to acquire a Russian nuclear reactor. According to the same thesis, the chosen delivery vehicle will be North Korean ballistic missiles that, it has been claimed by some activists, have already been delivered to Burma.¹²⁴ There have also been numerous reports that China has established a string of military bases in Burma,

¹²³ A representative sample of such publications might include Shan Human Rights Foundation (1998); Shan Women's Action Network (2002); Shan Herald Agency for News (2006); Palaung Women's Association (2006); Karen Women's Organisation (2007); Kachin Development Networking Group (2007); and Earth Rights International (2007).

¹²⁴ This subject is examined in Selth (2007).

which some scholars believe has already become a Chinese client state.¹²⁵ There is no firm evidence to support any of these claims. Until researchers are granted greater access to Burma, however, or the regime becomes more open about its security policies, the actual situation will be difficult to determine.

Divisions Within the Community

All the problems identified above are compounded by the highly charged atmosphere that, since 1988, has surrounded consideration of Burma-related issues. In a situation reminiscent of the ideological and academic tensions that blighted Soviet and China studies at the height of the Cold War, Burma studies have become politicised, and highly polarised. Seventeen years after the military government changed the country's name, even the choice of 'Burma' or 'Myanmar' is seen by some observers to denote a partisan political position.

At present, the public debate tends to be dominated by expatriates, foreign activists, specialist academics and regime supporters, many of whom have strong personal views and specific policy agendas. There are those, both inside Burma and outside it, who have an interest in hiding the facts or distorting them to present a particular point of view. Individuals and groups critical of the military government, for example, invariably seek to portray it in the harshest light. For their part, those favouring different interpretations of events or different policy approaches can be quite selective in arguing their case. Both sides are quick to point out the inaccuracies, misperceptions and, in some cases, double standards of their critics. As might be expected, advocacy groups — of all persuasions — interpret the available material to promote their own causes, even in academic publications.¹²⁶

Nor are governments immune from such considerations. Administrations in democratic countries like the US and UK are sensitive to domestic opinion on issues such as the continuing incarceration of Aung San Suu Kyi, the mistreatment of

¹²⁵ See, for example, Selth (2007a: 279-307).

¹²⁶ See, for example, the controversy over the 'Independent Report'.

political prisoners, forced labour and human rights abuses against members of the pro-democracy movement and ethnic minorities. This has led some public figures to highlight the failings of the regime and to ignore, or at least play down, facts deemed harmful to the opposition movement and armed insurgent groups.¹²⁷ Indeed, some politicians appear to have been quite cynical about using the Burma issue to muffle their critics and improve their human rights credentials. Given its very poor record on most issues, and its isolated position internationally, the Burmese regime is an easy target for self-serving criticism.

By the same token, there are other governments, notably those in China, India and Russia, which have been prepared to overlook Burma's long record of human rights abuses to further their own strategic and commercial interests.¹²⁸ Other governments, including a number in the Asia-Pacific region, have responded to such imperatives by being highly selective. Singapore and Thailand, for example, have very mixed records on Burma, and since 1988 Australia's policy towards the military regime has fluctuated considerably.¹²⁹ The regime's harsh response to widespread pro-democracy demonstrations in September 2007 prompted numerous expressions of concern by foreign governments and multilateral institutions, and threats of additional sanctions, but it also highlighted differences in the international community over ways to respond to the situation in Burma.

These policy differences highlight another phenomenon, namely the gap found between Burma-watchers at different levels of commentary. Diplomats and scholars operating at the more elevated levels of international institutions and the Academy tend to offer broad strategic and philosophical analyses that, in some cases, seem far removed from the harsh realities of life on the ground.¹³⁰ At another level, aid workers, dissidents, activists and other observers closer to daily events in Burma

¹²⁷ In a major report, Human Rights Watch was unusual in drawing attention to child soldiers in the ranks of both the Burma Army and armed ethnic groups. Human Rights Watch (2002: 110-157).

¹²⁸ See, for example, Selth (2000a).

¹²⁹ Steinberg (2007a: 219-237)

¹³⁰ This accusation was at the core of the controversy which erupted after publication of ICG (2006). See, for example, Yeni and Blair (2007); and Neier (2007).

tend to focus on more immediate issues that directly affect its citizens. Both groups have valuable contributions to make but, in the interests of a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the country and its problems, greater efforts need to be made to bridge the gap between 'elite' and 'subaltern' Burma studies.¹³¹ This would help ensure that official and academic analyses are grounded in reality, and more focused reports of specific problems take into account wider perspectives.

On a few particularly controversial issues, the international Burma studies community is bitterly divided. Foremost in this category is the question of the best policy approach to be adopted by governments and international organisations. In broad terms, one side favours the imposition of sanctions against the military government, as a way of forcing it to accept the result of the 1990 elections (which were resoundingly won by the opposition parties) and return to the barracks. The other side sees greater value in 'constructively engaging' with the armed forces leadership, in an effort to encourage more liberal policies and, it is hoped, bring about the eventual amelioration of current problems through economic growth and increased space for the development of civil society.¹³² To date, neither approach seems to have been particularly successful in persuading the regime to abandon its core beliefs and adopt different policies on major issues.

On the basis of their views on this issue — correctly interpreted or not — some Burma scholars have been branded by Burmese and foreign activists alike with crude and misleading labels such as 'naive romantic', 'pro-regime apologist', or worse. This kind of language has even begun to creep into academic discourse.¹³³ One expatriate opposition group has posted a long list of perceived 'enemies of the revolution' on the internet, apparently unaware of the similarities between such blacklists and the regime's own published catalogues of 'treasonous minions' and

¹³¹ Mathieson (2006: 57-61)

¹³² For two contrasting views on the sanctions debate see Badgley (2004); and Burma Campaign UK (2004).

¹³³ See, for example, Skidmore (2007: 95-96).

their 'traitorous cohorts abroad'.¹³⁴ Both lists include the names of well-known academics and journalists. Some experienced and respected Burma scholars have been publicly abused for expressing their considered views on this subject, and at least one has received a death threat for taking a line deemed to be politically incorrect.

It would be expecting too much for exiled Burmese who have suffered at the hands of the military regime to be completely emotionally detached, but freedom of speech needs to be respected on both sides of the Burmese border.

The range of opinions expressed about Burma's problems has also exposed certain cultural differences, and possibly also a misunderstanding of accepted practices in the international academic world. These have added to the tensions felt within the Burma studies community. For example, most Burmese welcome the interest of foreign scholars in their country, but some do not. The regime has made its views about 'alien cultural influences' known ever since the days of Ne Win's rule.¹³⁵ However, even expatriate commentators and journalists seeking the overthrow of the current military government have lashed out at 'hook nose *farangs* (posing as a Burma expert and meddling in Burmese affairs)' who 'take to the podium and talk in academic absurdities on Burma'.¹³⁶ Not all are racist, but some expatriates still seem to feel that only 'native' Burmese (or even only ethnic Burmans) can really understand the complex situation in Burma, or have a right to express a view on the country's future.

In the same vein, foreign scholars writing about Burma have been condemned by some Burmese exiles for treating their country as 'some theoretical model ... learned in graduate school'.¹³⁷ Western-trained Burmese scholars striving for balance and accuracy in their writings have been accused by fellow expatriates of

¹³⁴ Yeni (2006); and Myanmar Ministry of Information (1989).

¹³⁵ See, for example, Prime Minister Khin Nyunt's address (2003).

¹³⁶ Kanbawza Win (2003, 2002)

¹³⁷ *The Irrawaddy* (2006)

being members of a privileged elite that is perpetuating a form of intellectual imperialism. Similar pressures have been felt by expatriate journalists reporting developments inside Burma and around its borders.¹³⁸ One Burmese journal has stated that ‘Commentators who can’t share this sympathy with a suffering people don’t deserve to be called “experts on Burma”’.¹³⁹ Even one or two foreign scholars have argued that, for ethical reasons, it is incumbent on all those studying Burma to become directly ‘engaged’ with the fear and suffering of the Burmese people.¹⁴⁰ While perhaps understandable in the current sensitive political climate, such an approach would seem to run counter to the long and well-established Western tradition of objective academic enquiry.

Inevitably, the authoritarian nature of the military government, the high levels of emotion flowing from the regime’s harsh policies, different interpretations of developments in the country and the polarisation of views about the best approach to take toward the armed forces leadership, have all had an impact on modern Burma studies.

When Ne Win ruled Burma, some foreign academics consciously self-censored their public remarks, for fear of offending the regime.¹⁴¹ This was not necessarily out of sympathy for the socialist government, but mainly to ensure that they were still allowed access to the reclusive country for research, even for very limited periods. This phenomenon can also be seen under the new military government, which has already banned some of its more vocal critics, including scholars who have painted an unfavourable picture of military rule and foreigners believed to be sympathetic towards ‘rebel’ ethnic communities around Burma’s borders.¹⁴² Expatriates who have family and friends still living in Burma — and are thus vulnerable to retribution from the regime — are in a particularly difficult position. Of concern to some

¹³⁸ Brooten (2006: 354-373)

¹³⁹ Yeni (2007).

¹⁴⁰ Skidmore (2006: 42-59)

¹⁴¹ Morse and Loerke (1988: ‘Introduction’)

¹⁴² One book of note in this regard is by the anthropologist Christina Fink (2001). See also Selth (1991: 265-271).

scholars, however, is that they will be publicly denounced on the internet, by Burma-watchers outside the country, for having unfashionable views.

A few academics seem to welcome the notoriety that their more controversial views attract. Others have reacted strongly to such pressures, hitting out for example at the 'democracy jihad' that seeks to impose a new orthodoxy on Burma studies.¹⁴³ Most have patiently attempted to explain their views, often in the face of continued and unwarranted criticism.¹⁴⁴ Some academics, however, appear to have deliberately avoided publishing critical assessments on contentious topics, such as the the Bush Administration's uncompromising approach to Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi's strong leadership style, the often contradictory policies of the opposition political groups, or the practices of some ethnic insurgent groups.¹⁴⁵ This seems to be out of a fear that, no matter how carefully worded and closely argued their comments may be, they will not be engaged in a civilised intellectual debate. Faced with such a prospect, they have chosen simply to focus on historical and thematic issues that are less controversial.¹⁴⁶

Academics who choose to become active participants in the policy debate on Burma, or who openly support one political group against another, must expect responses from those who do not agree with their views. Similarly, there must always be room for different academic interpretations of Burma-related issues and developments. Indeed, this should be welcomed, and in many cases the debate, while lively, has been conducted in a balanced and courteous fashion. Yet, all too often, scholars and journalists offering unpopular interpretations of Burmese history, reporting unpalatable facts, or suggesting alternative policy approaches, have been subject to harsh and often personal criticism. The most virulent attacks seem to be made not

¹⁴³ See in particular Michael Aung-Thwin (2001: 483-505).

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, Steinberg, 'Minimising the Miasma' (2007).

¹⁴⁵ See, however, Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007: 359-76).

¹⁴⁶ Relevant here is Mathieson (2005).

on the basis of careful research or intellectual differences, but on political and 'moral' grounds. In such wars of words, the truth usually becomes the first victim.¹⁴⁷

Conclusion

Since 1988, Burma has been accorded a higher priority in discussions of political, economic and strategic developments in the Asia-Pacific region. It has also attracted increased attention from the major powers — albeit in different ways. For various self-interested reasons, China, India and Russia are seeking to develop closer links with Burma. By contrast, the US, UK and most European governments have sought to apply pressure against Burma in the hope that it will force the armed forces to cease its human rights violations and transfer power to an elected civilian government. Concerns have also been expressed over Burma's failure to manage a range of transnational issues, which are seen by some as having the potential to destabilise the region. Indeed, there have been several attempts since 2005 to list Burma on the agenda of the UN Security Council as a threat to regional stability. In May 2007, the Bush Administration even described Burma as 'a continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States'.¹⁴⁸

As Burma has attracted greater international attention, so it has also assumed a higher profile in the Academy. After decades of neglect, the number of scholarly publications on Burma has grown dramatically, both in number and range. This high level of academic interest promised to continue for some years, even before the tragic events of September and October 2007 once again saw Burma feature in the world's headlines. Not only are established scholars looking more closely at Burma and related issues but, over the past 18 years, the number of postgraduate students choosing to specialise in Burma has increased significantly. It is expected that they will make a notable contribution to Burma studies in the future, as researchers, authors and teachers. Also, the international Burma-watching community has been

¹⁴⁷ *The Irrawaddy* (2002). Also relevant to this theme is Hadar (2001: 411-426).

¹⁴⁸ The White House (2007)

swollen by numerous private organisations and interested individuals, many of whom are gathering research material and contributing to the literature outside the formal confines of the Academy. The Burma studies scene is more active than ever.

Yet much remains to be done. There are aspects of Burmese society and culture that have been barely touched upon by scholars, and even in some well-trodden areas of study, like the country's history, politics and economics, there is wide scope for additional research and analysis. Burma is still poorly understood, compared to most other countries in the region. The brief survey above reveals numerous gaps in the literature that would benefit from attention. Not only could such works shed light on hitherto unexplored aspects of the country but, by adding empirical data to the public record, they would have the added benefit of encouraging the inclusion of Burma in broader thematic and theoretical works. In such circumstances, comparative studies would be easier to conduct.

Yet, until the military government in Burma falls, or the current regime changes its attitude to academic research — neither of which are in prospect — field work in Burma will remain difficult. Changes will also need to occur outside the country. Burma studies demands greater recognition as a legitimate and worthwhile field of academic activity, and deserves more support from universities and funding institutions. Also, despite the current highly charged political climate, there must be a greater emphasis on the rigorous analysis and frank discussion of contemporary developments. It is to be hoped that Burma-watchers of all kinds, both within the Academy and outside it, can pursue their shared interests in a collegiate and civilised manner, and in an atmosphere that tolerates — indeed encourages — intellectual differences. For failure to do this will inevitably be at the cost of original research, and fresh insights into Burma, a country that has for too long remained hidden behind walls of ignorance and misunderstanding.

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