

Griffith Asia Institute

Regional Outlook

BURMA WATCHING: A RETROSPECTIVE

Andrew Selth

Griffith Asia Institute

Regional Outlook

Burma Watching: A Retrospective

Andrew Selth

About the Griffith Asia Institute

The Griffith Asia Institute produces innovative, interdisciplinary research on key developments in the politics, economics, societies and cultures of Asia and the South Pacific.

By promoting knowledge of Australia's changing region and its importance to our future, the Griffith Asia Institute seeks to inform and foster academic scholarship, public awareness and considered and responsive policy making.

The Institute's work builds on a 41 year Griffith University tradition of providing cutting-edge research on issues of contemporary significance in the region.

Griffith was the first University in the country to offer Asian Studies to undergraduate students and remains a pioneer in this field. This strong history means that today's Institute can draw on the expertise of some 50 Asia–Pacific focused academics from many disciplines across the university.

The Griffith Asia Institute's 'Regional Outlook' papers publish the institute's cutting edge, policy-relevant research on Australia and its regional environment. They are intended as working papers only. The texts of published papers and the titles of upcoming publications can be found on the Institute's website:
www.griffith.edu.au/asiainstitute

'Burma Watching: A Retrospective', Regional Outlook Paper No. 39, 2012.

About the Author

Andrew Selth

Andrew Selth is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Griffith Asia Institute. He has been studying international security issues and Asian affairs for 40 years, as a diplomat, strategic intelligence analyst and research scholar. He has published four books and more than 50 other peer-reviewed works, most of them about Burma and related subjects. In 2007, he was awarded a PhD by Griffith University and a post-doctoral fellowship by the Australian Research Council. In 2011, he was granted a Harold White Fellowship by the National Library of Australia.

Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Author's Note	2
1. Introduction	3
2. The Story in Statistics.....	4
3. Early Beginnings.....	5
4. The War and After	8
5. Modern Burma Studies	11
6. Issues and Problems	13
7. Other Factors	15
8. The Future	17
Notes and References	18

Executive Summary

Burma (or Myanmar, as it is now officially known) is perhaps the most enigmatic country in Southeast Asia. For centuries, it has been shrouded in myths and misconceptions. Since 1988, when a pro-democracy uprising attracted worldwide attention, official, scholarly and public interest in the country has grown dramatically, but it is still little known and poorly understood. Researchers face major challenges: field work remains difficult and reliable data is scarce. The news media's focus on opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has meant that other important subjects have received relatively little attention. Adding to these problems, over the past 24 years the public debate has been dominated by a number of contentious political and moral issues, polarising observers and making objective, evidence-based analysis more difficult.

Drawing on his 40 years as a Burma watcher, Andrew Selth surveys a wide range of sources to see how popular perceptions of this fascinating but troubled country have changed – and remained the same – over time. He also offers a number of observations about the state of modern Burma studies and ponders the future of the country under the reformist President Thein Sein.

Author's Note

After the Burmese armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, Burma's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original Burmese pronunciation. In 2008, after promulgation of a new national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the 'Republic of the Union of Myanmar'.

The new names have been accepted by most countries, the United Nations and other major international organisations. Some governments and opposition groups, however, have clung to the old forms, largely as a protest against the old military regime's human rights abuses and its refusal to hand over power to the civilian government elected in 1990. In this paper the better-known names, for example 'Burma' instead of 'Myanmar', 'Rangoon' instead of 'Yangon', and 'Irrawaddy' instead of 'Ayeyarwady', have been retained for ease of recognition. Quotations and references, however, have been cited as they were originally published. Also, formal titles introduced after 1989 have been cited in their current form, such as 'Myanmar Army' and 'Myanmar Police Force'.

The armed forces have effectively ruled Burma ever since 1962 but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct control of the country in September 1988, the military leadership abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In 2008, it held a constitutional referendum, which was followed by managed elections in 2010. The resulting national parliament, consisting of both elected officials and non-elected military officers, first met in January 2011. Power was formally transferred from the SPDC to a new government in March that year.

After the UK sent military forces into the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma in December 1885, Rangoon became the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the regime formally designated the newly built town of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 320 kilometres north of Rangoon, as the seat of Burma's government. When they appear in this paper, the terms 'Rangoon regime', or in some cases simply 'Rangoon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1988. After 2005, the government is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or simply 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Burma's armed forces. In recent years this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Burma.

This paper was initially prepared as an illustrated public lecture. It was given first at the National Library of Australia in Canberra on 25 June 2012, as the culmination of the author's Harold White Fellowship. A revised version was presented in Brisbane on 13 September 2012 as a contribution to the 'Perspectives Asia' series of public lectures organised by the Griffith Asia Institute in collaboration with the Australian Centre of Asia-Pacific Art, at the Queensland Art Gallery. This Regional Outlook represents the edited and expanded text of the latter lecture, with supporting notes and references.

1. Introduction

Personally I love the Burman with the blind favouritism born of first impression.

Rudyard Kipling
From Sea to Sea and Other Sketches (1899)

Over the past few years, Burma (or Myanmar, as it is now officially known) has rarely been out of the news. There have been countless stories in the papers and on television about President Thein Sein's ambitious reform program – which seems to hold out the promise of an end to military rule – the new public political role of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the ethnic and religious tensions that continue to divide Burma, and the international community's responses to the latest developments. These are all serious issues, worthy of our attention.

This evening, however, I want to talk about a broader subject, that of public perceptions of Burma – how it has been seen by the outside world over the past two centuries and what factors have helped shape those images.

I have been watching Burma for nearly 40 years, ever since I was posted to the Australian embassy in Rangoon as an impressionable young man in 1974. Looking back over that period, and well beyond, I have been struck by a number of recurring themes. I want to look at three of them tonight.

Firstly, from time to time Burma has captured the public's attention – usually coinciding with major historical events. Generally speaking, however, it has always been at the outer edge of the popular consciousness, not just in Australia but in most other countries as well.

Secondly, descriptions of Burma – particularly in the press and now on the Internet – have tended to be characterised by extremes. Over and over again, strong contrasts have been drawn between soft, romantic pictures of Burma and darker, much less attractive images. Both may have included elements of the truth but, as with all extremes, they are neither complete nor entirely accurate.

As a result – and this is my third theme – for many years Burma has been little known and poorly understood. There have been exceptions, of course, but this knowledge gap has meant that popular perceptions of Burma have often been based on myths, misconceptions and misunderstandings.

All these factors can be found in the public debate which has been conducted about Burma since the 1988 pro-democracy uprising.

Over the past 20 years or so, the country has attracted unprecedented public attention. Yet, it still tends to be portrayed in stark and, dare I say it, rather simplistic terms. Some very bold claims have been made, not always with supporting evidence. In these circumstances, finding and understanding what some have called 'the real Burma' has been quite difficult.

Tonight, I would like to sketch out these broad trends, using a wide range of sources to help illustrate the way in which perceptions of Burma have both changed – and remained the same – over the years. I will close with a few brief observations about the state of Burma studies today and the country's future challenges under the reformist President Thein Sein.

2. The Story in Statistics

Perhaps the easiest way of showing how Burma has attracted attention – or not – over time, is by looking at some statistics. For example, a QueryPic graph taken from the National Library of Australia's Trove database, based on the word 'Burma', shows the number of times that the name of the country has been mentioned in Australian newspapers between 1803 and 1954.¹

As this graph clearly demonstrates, the level is generally very low, but there are a few exceptions to the trend. Small peaks occur at the time of the First Anglo–Burmese War in 1824–26, the Second Anglo–Burmese War in 1852, the Third Anglo–Burmese War and fall of Mandalay in 1885, and the widespread political and civil unrest that wracked Burma during the 1930s. As might be expected, there is a significant increase in the level of public interest during the Second World War and – albeit at a lower level – another in 1948, when Burma regained its independence from the British.

A word of caution: this is not an infallible source. For example, if the word 'Rangoon' is entered into the database the graph shows a dramatic spike in 1870.² I spent some time searching through various history books trying to find out what happened in Burma that year to have caused such a high level of interest in Australia, before discovering that a ship called the 'Rangoon' ran aground at Kiama, south of Sydney, in 1870. This incident was widely reported in the Australian press at the time.³

That said, this graph is still a useful indicator of the generally very low level of interest shown towards Burma by Australians over the past 200 years or so.

A look at global trends reveals much the same pattern. It is possible, for example, to compile a graph from Google's NGram database, a word recognition tool created from 5 million English language books covering five centuries. It also suffers from considerable weaknesses – for example, it covers less than four per cent of all books published – but it has the benefit of going past 1954.⁴ This graph shows increased public interest in Burma in 1962, when General Ne Win seized power, in 1988 when there were nation-wide protests against the military regime, and again in 2007, during the civil unrest dubbed the 'Saffron Revolution' by the international news media.

Obviously, major historical events stand out. We also need to take into account the advances in communications technology that have occurred during this period, increasing the public's awareness of international developments. Even so, these two graphs demonstrate that, as a general rule, Burma attracted little attention in Australia and elsewhere until 1988. So, the question must be asked, who was watching Burma before then, and with what result?

3. Early Beginnings

Modern Burma studies began with the first European contacts during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In their ship's logs and private journals, early explorers described a society and culture – indeed, societies and cultures – that were quite different from any they had encountered before. As foreign contacts grew, and Burma came to be visited more often by traders, officials and missionaries, these accounts grew in range and number. They also became more comprehensive and reflective.⁵

As you would expect, European writings on Burma greatly increased during the nineteenth century, with the three stage annexation of Burma by Great Britain. During the colonial period, intellectuals, scholar-bureaucrats and missionaries published numerous learned works. Figures like Gordon Luce, whose books and other research materials are now held in the Australian National Library in Canberra, described many hitherto unrecorded facets of Burmese history, archeology, geography, anthropology and natural science.⁶ Religious and linguistic subjects also received attention.

It took some years for the British to consolidate their hold over the entire country but, after the effective end of armed resistance in the 1890s, travel upcountry was safer and made easier by developments in rail and river transportation.⁷ Burma began to attract an increasing number of foreign sightseers, adventurers and other travellers, whose accounts of Britain's picturesque new possession found a ready audience back home.⁸ Also, soldiers and officials who served in Burma began to produce a steady trickle of autobiographies and memoirs describing their experiences.

In different ways, these works were pioneering studies of a country that had hitherto been unknown to mainstream Western society. During this period, however, perceptions of Burma – including in Australia – were inevitably influenced by the politics, popular culture and prejudices of the British Empire, which was then at the height of its power. While informative and entertaining, not all the publications produced around this time can be considered entirely accurate or objective. Some have been the focus of revisionist historians keen to reinterpret Burma's past by giving greater weight to indigenous sources.⁹

If we consider works produced since the beginning of the twentieth century, they tend to fall into two broad categories. Each represents quite a different way of looking at Burma.

The first consists of writings, music and art that emphasises Burma's exoticism, and portrays it as a land of mighty rivers, swaying palm trees, golden pagodas and gentle people. Burmese women in particular seem to have made a strong impression on foreign observers. According to one scholar, 'Even that proud conqueror of Ava, Lord Dufferin, although he was received with dark looks by the Burmese during his state visit to Mandalay early in 1886, wrote back to a friend in England, extolling the grace, charm and freedom of Burmese women'.¹⁰

Rudyard Kipling only spent three days in Burma in 1889, but he too was struck by the beauty of the local women – particularly one 'Burma girl' he saw sitting on the steps of a pagoda at Moulmein. She inspired his immensely popular Barrack Room Ballad *Mandalay*.¹¹ Written in 1890, this poem soon came to represent all of Burma's mystery and allure. Turned into a song and popularised in 1929 by the Australian bass baritone Peter Dawson as *The Road to Mandalay*, it was recorded many times.¹² Not all versions had the appeal of the original.¹³

Indeed, more than 20 songs and tunes were composed between 1900 and 1940 with Burma or Mandalay as their central themes. Yet they added little to popular understanding about the country. For example, the illustrated covers of the sheet music published during this period rarely portrayed Burma or the Burmese accurately. Most featured young women attired in bizarre costumes reminiscent of the Arabian Nights, or pictures of minarets and palaces that owed more to Moghul India than to any architecture found in Burma.¹⁴

After a lengthy visit to Burma in 1908–09, the British painter Gerald Kelly cemented this romantic ideal in the popular imagination with his landscapes and pictures of demure young Burmese dancers. He was further inspired by a chance meeting with a Burmese 'princess' in London in 1931. His paintings of this woman – which were much more accurate in their depictions of Burmese dress than the sheet music of the time – were very popular, and still are. Since the 1930s, over 50,000 prints have been sold of just three portraits in this series.¹⁵

Revealingly, the writer Somerset Maugham said of Kelly's Burma paintings that he had 'given us the character of the East as we of our generation see it'.¹⁶

During this period, Burma's colonial capital, Rangoon, was considered by many to be 'a pearl of the Orient', in much the same way that Singapore or Hong Kong might be viewed today.¹⁷ By the turn of the twentieth century, it was rated 'a study of modern urban development'.¹⁸ It attracted other artists and authors like Robert Talbot Kelly, Aldous Huxley and even Maugham himself.¹⁹

This was despite – or perhaps even because of – the fact that the city was dominated by foreigners. More than half of its population was South Asians.²⁰ It was also unashamedly a centre of British commerce and industry. Passing through it in 1916, the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore found little that was recognizably Burmese. He wrote that 'This city has not grown like a tree from the soil of the country ... Well, I have seen Rangoon but it is mere visual acquaintance, there is no recognition of Burma in this seeing ... the city is an abstraction'.²¹

At the same time, Burma developed an unenviable reputation as a remote province of India, and the most violent corner of the British Empire.²² By 1925, with a population of roughly 13 million, the colonial administration was sending about 20,000 Burmese men to prison each year. This was three or four times as many as in any other province of India.²³ Insein Gaol, constructed on the outskirts of Rangoon in 1887, was one of the largest in British India, yet it was soon overcrowded – as it is still.

The writer George Orwell, or Eric Blair as he was then known, spent five years as a police officer in Burma during the 1920s. He was not happy there and developed a rather jaundiced view of the British colonial presence. His 1934 novel *Burmese Days* portrayed the country and its expatriate community in unflattering terms. He famously described Mandalay as a most disagreeable place famous for five products all beginning with 'P', namely pagodas, pariah dogs, priests, pigs and prostitutes.²⁴

In defence of his harsh portrayal of Burma and colonial society, Orwell later wrote: 'I dare say it's unfair in some ways and inaccurate in some details, but much of it is simply reporting of what I have seen'.²⁵

Many British observers were also critical of what they called the 'topsy-turvey' gender relations found in Burma, namely the comparative independence of Burmese women and the reputed weakness and laziness of Burmese men.²⁶ These supposed character flaws were often cited by colonial officials to justify their reluctance to recruit ethnic Burmans into the local civil service, police force and army units, which were dominated by Indians and members of Burma's so-called 'hill tribes'.²⁷ This policy sowed the seeds for later communal tensions.

Negative views of the country were encouraged by a series of political protests, race riots and violent rural uprisings that wracked Burma in the 1930s.

And then came the war.

4. The War and After

Between December 1941 and September 1945, Burma was the setting for the longest campaign of any in the Second World War, arguably fought over the most varied terrain. Yet, it received much less attention at the time than the more familiar and better publicised campaigns that were being waged in Europe and the Pacific. Efforts were made to draw attention to the China–Burma–India (CBI) theatre, including through two documentary films, but not for nothing were General Bill Slim’s forces known as ‘the Forgotten Army on the Forgotten Front’.²⁸

There is a story that, when Admiral Louis Mountbatten toured the Burma front in 1943, soon after taking up his post as Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia, he used to begin an inspirational speech to members of Slim’s 14th Army by saying: ‘Right, now I understand that people think you’re the Forgotten Army on the Forgotten Front. I’ve come here to tell you you’re quite wrong. You’re not the Forgotten Army on the Forgotten Front. No, make no mistake about it. Nobody’s ever *heard* of you’.²⁹ He certainly captured their attention.

There were two documentary films made at the time because the British and American high commands could not agree on what aspects of the CBI campaign to emphasise – just as they could not agree on its strategic aims. Eventually, *Burma Victory* was made by the British to tell the story of the war against the Japanese in Burma itself. *The Stilwell Road*, narrated by an obscure actor named Ronald Reagan, was made by the Americans to highlight the Allied effort to support Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek’s struggle against the Japanese in China.³⁰

Unsurprisingly, official propaganda and the reports of war correspondents in Burma emphasised the bitter struggle between the Allies and the Japanese, under ‘appalling conditions’, in what Selwyn Speight of the *Sydney Morning Herald* characterised in 1943 as a ‘merciless country’ with ‘some of the most terrible mountains in the world’.³¹ Little attention was given in these stories to Burma’s history, politics or culture.

Even then, Western societies were given mixed messages. For example, another Australian war correspondent, George Johnston, was known for his realistic copy, as in one story in *The Argus* dated May 1944 where he describes Burma during the monsoon as ‘a slimy treacherous hell’.³² Yet, after the war he wrote that ‘it is a rueful thing to me, that the only memories I have of Burma are memories of war. I know nothing of the real Burma, this lovely, placid land of charming, beautiful people, the Burma that the Burmese call *Shwe Daw Pyee*, “the Golden Land”’.³³

Once again, Burma is seen – and presented – in terms of stark contrasts, between the good and the bad, the soft and the hard, the light and the dark.

In addition to official news releases and personal accounts by war correspondents, people back home in Australia, Britain and America formed images of Burma from pictorial supplements in newspapers and popular magazines. There were often maps, showing the geography of the CBI theatre. Also, throughout the war these and other publications, like *The War Illustrated*, showed scenes which, if nothing else, confirmed the perception of Burma as a beautiful if rather strange and primitive country. Trained elephants helping to load American transport aircraft and British soldiers marching past gilded pagodas were typical fare.³⁴

Perhaps the most indelible impressions of Burma following the war came from the cinema.

Before 1939, movies set in Burma portrayed it as an unhealthy colonial sinkhole, populated mainly by criminals, 'fallen women' and the outcasts of empire.³⁵ Indeed, so negative were the images conjured up by such films that, in the minds of some contemporary observers, they risked damaging European prestige. 'Since the structure of prestige was precisely designed to mask the frailties of white society from the eyes of the native, it was naturally thought particularly dangerous that Hollywood should give the latter a direct insight into the heart of the white man's world'.³⁶

During the war, films served mainly as vehicles for Allied propaganda. Burma merely provided a backdrop for broader themes. The action usually centred on intrepid truck drivers ferrying supplies to embattled China, as in *Yank on the Burma Road* (1942) and *Bombs Over Burma* (1942). Then there were dashing heroes like Errol Flynn, who in *Objective Burma* (1945) risked winning the war almost single-handedly. In fact, when *Objective Burma* was released in Britain shortly after the war ended, it provoked such an outcry from veterans of the Burma campaign that it was withdrawn from theatres after just one week. It was not shown in the UK again until 1952.³⁷

In both their news dispatches and private letters, war correspondents drew on cinematic images to describe what they saw in Burma, such as 'fantastic Hollywood-like deluges' of rain.³⁸ Selwyn Speight wrote to his wife in 1944 that the jungle he encountered in Burma was 'real honest-to-God Dorothy Lamour stuff ... tall trees shooting up into the sky and blotting out the sun; innumerable creepers hanging about like untidy cobwebs; undergrowth so thick that you have to cut your way through ... The weird collection of animals that wander through Hollywood jungle movies do exist too'.³⁹

The reference to Dorothy Lamour alluded to the movie *Moon Over Burma*, which was released in 1940 starring the Sarong Girl herself.

After 1945, most movies set in Burma were war stories, such as *The Purple Plain* (1954) starring Gregory Peck, *Yesterday's Enemy* (1959) with a young Leo McKern, *Never So Few* (1959) with Frank Sinatra, and *Merrill's Marauders* starring the American matinee idol Jeff Chandler (1962).⁴⁰ There was a Burmese heroine in *The Purple Plain*, but none of these movies gave a very realistic portrayal of Burma or the Burmese people.⁴¹ The studios were still fixed on the idea of a beautiful country cursed with intolerable weather and inhabited by enemy soldiers, unfriendly locals and savage animals.

This was certainly the approach taken in *Escape to Burma*, a 1955 thriller in which Barbara Stanwyck played the manager of a teak plantation in what was described on the movie's posters as 'the hot green hell of the Burma jungle'.⁴² It contains a memorable scene in which the heroine encounters a chimpanzee, which is native to Africa, and an orangutan, which is only found in Indonesia. The locals were played by non-Burmese extras dressed in fanciful costumes dreamed up by the RKO Studio's wardrobe department.

But I should not be too critical. We cannot expect an accurate and balanced picture from commercial studios making films for light entertainment – and a profit. My point is simply that, by presenting Burma in such a dramatic and colourful fashion, movie-makers helped perpetuate distorted images of the country among a public that had few other points of comparison, which could help them get a more balanced and accurate perspective.

Another reason why some outlandish notions about Burma persisted was that entry to the country was difficult and travel around it even more so. After the war, for example, Burma experienced serious political unrest and what Australian newspapers called 'the greatest crime wave in Burma's history'.⁴³ During the 1950s, it had one of the highest homicide rates in the world.⁴⁴ Also, following Independence in 1948, Burma faced insurgencies by several ethnic and ideological groups. For a period, Prime Minister U Nu's

government was known as 'the Rangoon government' as that was the only part of the country it effectively controlled.

Law and order – of a kind – was eventually restored by the Burmese security forces, but after General Ne Win's military coup in 1962 tourist visas were restricted to 24 hours, extended to 72 hours in 1969.⁴⁵ Seven day visas were introduced in 1971, but several powerful insurgent groups were still active. As I can recall from my own time in country between early 1974 and late 1976, a large proportion of Burma was officially declared 'black', and made off-limits to foreigners.⁴⁶

In 1989, after it had regained control of the country, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) introduced two week tourist visas. The permitted length of stay was increased in 1994 to one month, with extensions possible for another 14 days.

Although the new military government worried that 'tourists can instigate trouble and spread misinformation', it was attracted by the prospect of increased foreign exchange and declared 1996 'Visit Myanmar Year'.⁴⁷ However, opposition groups both inside and outside Burma strongly discouraged tourism and the number of visitors to Burma that year barely reached 100,000. The government was aiming for at least half a million.⁴⁸

The practical outcome of all these problems was that Burma remained known to relatively few. Even good books on the country were hard to find.

5. Modern Burma Studies

Before 1988, Burma was largely neglected by the academic community. The difficulty of gaining access to primary sources and reading them in the Burmese language tended to deter all but the most dedicated researchers. Also, after the 1962 military coup, outsiders wishing to study the country were viewed with suspicion, either as potential challengers to the official version of Burmese history or as purveyors of ‘alien cultural influences’.⁴⁹ Even if scholars and students could get visas for more than seven days, field work was very difficult and access to reliable data was almost impossible.

Between the 1950s and late 1980s, relatively few serious studies of Burma were published in the major Western languages. Reflecting trends in Southeast Asian studies at the time, those works that appeared tended to focus on the country’s politics and history, although there were also some notable contributions to the fields of anthropology and religious studies.⁵⁰ Travel books sometimes featured a chapter on Burma, but they usually dealt only fleetingly with the state of the country and its people.

Occasionally, there were stories in the news media about particular developments in Burma, but – with some notable exceptions like the in-depth reports published in the old *Far Eastern Economic Review* – these items tended to be very short, lacking in nuance or simply inaccurate. Indeed, the rather sensationalist nature of many press reports simply added to the myths and misconceptions about Burma that were already firmly lodged in the public mind.

Just as an aside, I recall that, when I was about to leave on my posting to the Australian embassy in Rangoon in 1974, I looked around for a guidebook that could tell me a little more about where I was going. I was both disconcerted and excited to learn from one of the very few works available that I was heading towards an ‘unknown paradise’ – with the emphasis on ‘unknown’.⁵¹

This situation changed dramatically in 1988, however, when the widespread protests in Burma that year became front page news around the world. 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 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, ensured that Burma featured much more often in the international news media.

Also, in the years that followed, there developed a global network of exiles, human rights campaigners and other activists determined to keep Burma alive in the minds of the international community. They lobbied hard for attention to be paid to the situation there, assisted by non-governmental groups such as Human Rights Watch and independent think tanks like the International Crisis Group. Albeit from quite different points of view, these organisations published detailed analyses of Burma-related issues.

As a result of all this effort, over the past 24 years there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in Burma among foreign officials and scholars and a commensurate outpouring of publications on almost all aspects of Burmese life.

The increased official and scholarly interest has been matched by a much greater awareness of Burma among the general population, prompting the release of numerous works designed mainly for the mass market. In addition to magazine articles and opinion pieces, these have included travel guides, collections of photographs and cookery books. Burma is even becoming popular as the setting for novels – of all kinds.

Just to give you an idea of the level of this activity, the Griffith Asia Institute has recently released a select bibliography of Burma that lists 928 books and reports published in English and in hard copy since 1988 – and that number does not include articles in academic journals or more ephemeral works posted on the Internet.⁵²

6. Issues and Problems

The increased attention being given to Burma since 1988 has been welcomed by many, but it has brought with it a number of problems.

Firstly, there is no escaping the fact that, in terms of quality, the publications about Burma produced since 1988 have been a very mixed bag.

In part, this can be put down to a lack of familiarity with the country and the difficulty of finding out what is going on there. The country is gradually opening up, but officials, academics, journalists and others are still heavily reliant on rumours, gossip and fragmented information. Such sources need to be treated very carefully. As the American scholar Donald Emmerson has said, 'the plural of anecdote is not data'.⁵³

Most stories which appear about Burma are difficult to verify. Indeed, there have been some reports which have circulated widely, to the extent of being accepted as established fact, but which on closer inspection simply do not stand up to scrutiny. Let me take one example from the area I know best, namely Burma's security policies and wider strategic environment.

For ten years or more, senior Indian officials – at one stage including the Foreign Minister – accused Burma's military government of hosting a large Chinese signals intelligence collection station on Great Coco Island in the Andaman Sea. This story was picked up by activists and recycled through the international news media. One respected Australian analyst stated in 2004 that the 'base' was 'the most important listening station that China operates outside of China itself'.⁵⁴ Such claims were given greater credibility by being cited in academic journals.

Yet, as the Burmese government had always stated, and as the Indian government now freely acknowledges, there was never anything there.⁵⁵

Also, it needs to be kept in mind that the public debate about Burma has long been dominated by a diverse collection of expatriates, foreign activists, journalists and academics. Many have had strong personal views and specific policy agendas. This has led some to select, distort or even hide certain facts in order to influence public opinion. As you would expect, advocacy groups – of all persuasions – have interpreted the available material to promote their own causes.⁵⁶

Governments are not immune from such considerations. Some states have been quite blatant in twisting the evidence to suit their own national interests. Even in democratic countries, politicians have been sensitive to domestic opinion on issues like the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and other human rights abuses in Burma. This has encouraged some public figures to highlight the manifest failings of the military regime and to ignore, or at least play down, facts deemed harmful to the opposition movement and insurgent groups.

Just to give you one example, in all the criticisms made of the Burmese regime's recruitment of child soldiers, few Western politicians or commentators acknowledged that most of Burma's armed ethnic groups also had children in their ranks.⁵⁷

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, Burma's military regime was an easy target for self-serving criticism.

Also, regime supporters aside, few commentators have dared openly to criticise Aung San Suu Kyi or her policies.⁵⁸ This is slowly changing as she makes the difficult transition from political icon to elected member of parliament, but foreign politicians, academics and journalists have all exercised a fair degree of self-censorship regarding the opposition leader. That may have been out of concern for her vulnerable position, but they probably also feared that, had they not done so, they would have been invited to join Burma's generals and other perceived 'enemies of the revolution' on the tumbrils.⁵⁹

Another ingredient in this volatile mix has been Burmese expatriate news media organisations such as *The Irrawaddy* magazine, Mizzima News and the Democratic Voice of Burma. They were quick to embrace modern technology, particularly the Internet. Together with some independent film-makers, they smuggled news and images out of the country, for example during the 'Saffron Revolution' in 2007. In doing so, they helped shape international perceptions of the military regime on a wide range of issues, from political prisoners, to forced labour, to the plight of the ethnic communities and Burma's possible interest in acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

Movies still play an important role. For example, *Beyond Rangoon* (1995) and *Rambo* (2008) were produced as much to send a political message, as to make money. In both cases, the directors of these movies – John Boorman and Sylvester Stallone – admitted that they wanted to influence popular opinion about the situation in Burma. To do so, they used the tried and tested technique of portraying the country in terms of contrasting extremes. With beautiful scenery serving as a backdrop, the brutality and ineptitude of the military regime was juxtaposed with the courage and stoicism of the Burmese people.

It was George Orwell who wrote that 'all art is propaganda'. Perhaps he was right. Certainly, with *Rambo* in mind I am reminded of the second part of his quip, that 'not all propaganda is art'.⁶⁰

Inevitably, these sorts of political campaigns did not go unchallenged, and not just by the military government and its supporters. A number of respected Burma watchers have felt that anti-regime activists both inside and outside Burma promoted a misleading, one-dimensional view of the country. In a comprehensive history of Burma just released, two Western-trained Burmese scholars have written that 'a quite different and largely imaginary Myanmar exists in the cyberspace of foreign countries with little or no correlation to the "real" Myanmar [seen] ... on the ground'.⁶¹

Modern Burma studies have also been complicated by the highly charged atmosphere that has surrounded the consideration of policy responses by foreign governments and international organisations. In a situation sadly reminiscent of the ideological and academic tensions that blighted Soviet and China studies at the height of the Cold War, Burma studies has become politicised, and highly polarised.

Just to give you an idea of what I mean, after 1988 the Burma watching community split into two broad camps. While their long term goals were very similar, namely democratic government and an end to human rights abuses, one camp argued for the imposition of harsh political and economic sanctions against the military regime — the stick — while the other argued equally strongly for a policy of engagement and dialogue — the carrot.

Some of these arguments have generated more heat than light. Even the choice of 'Burma' or 'Myanmar' for the name of the country has been seen by some to denote a partisan political position. At times, personal invective has replaced reasoned argument. One American academic received death threats for adopting a position that was not deemed to be politically correct.

7. Other Factors

Perhaps the greatest influence on popular perceptions of Burma since 1988 has been Aung San Suu Kyi. As the American scholar David Steinberg has noted, she is viewed as 'an international avatar for democracy', or as *Time* magazine put it last year, 'a beacon of freedom in a country without it'.⁶² She has become an icon for all those – both inside and outside Burma – who wish to see far-reaching political, economic and social change.

For more than 20 years, all around the world, Aung San Suu Kyi's picture has appeared on a wide range of promotional material, from posters and magazines to T-shirts and CDs, even postage stamps – including from some African countries. Since her release from house arrest in 2010 and subsequent election to Burma's national parliament, she has featured even more prominently in the news media. Indeed, such has been the intensity of the international community's focus on Aung San Suu Kyi that other Burmese people and issues have received less attention than perhaps they deserved.

That said, Aung San Suu Kyi's influence cannot be underestimated. Activist groups, multinational corporations and even national governments have consciously adjusted their Burma policies to take account of her perceived views. I say 'perceived' views, as for 15 of the past 21 years she was incarcerated in her Rangoon home and thus unable to make her thinking clearly known. The military regime seemed to have taken literally George Orwell's warning that 'saints should always be judged guilty until they are proven innocent'.⁶³

In response, the US has led the way in imposing harsh political and economic sanctions against Burma's military government, an approach that in no small measure has been due to the efforts of the Burmese opposition leader's admirers in the White House and Congress. As David Steinberg has noted, 'No living foreigner has shaped contemporary US attitudes toward a single country more than Aung San Suu Kyi ... she has effectively determined the parameters of possible US policy choices'.⁶⁴

To date, her political thinking has been expressed mainly in terms of broad democratic principles and Buddhist moral precepts. She has put forward few detailed policies, even on topical issues like the plight of Burma's ethnic and religious minorities. Yet, this very lack of detail has permitted people from all walks of life to project on to her their hopes for the country. It has also encouraged the rather unrealistic belief that, given the opportunity, she can solve all Burma's myriad problems. As Nelson Mandela discovered, such high expectations can be a heavy burden.

Widely seen as courageous, highly educated and attractive, she has been contrasted with Burma's military leaders, who have invariably been portrayed by activists, journalists and even politicians as brutal and superstitious monsters. This is one of the central themes, for example, of *The Lady* (2012), a Luc Besson movie released earlier this year with Michelle Yeoh playing the eponymous heroine. There is no denying that it is a poignant love story, but Aung San Suu Kyi is portrayed almost as a secular saint, while Burma's military rulers are cast as pantomime villains.

If only Burmese politics was that simple.

Just to underline my point about extremes, during Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to Europe in June 2012 she was described in the international press as 'the bravest and most moral person in the world', while Burma's government was described as 'the world's most repressive regime'.⁶⁵ This kind of hyperbole has become so common that it is now rarely deemed worthy of comment.

There is of course another major factor influencing perceptions of Burma and that is the behaviour of the military government itself.

After ruthlessly crushing the 1988 uprising – in which an estimated 3,000 people were killed – the generals seemed to care little for Burma's international reputation.⁶⁶ However, they did make a few gestures. For example, large propaganda billboards were erected around the country, exhorting the Burmese people to guard against 'internal and external destructive elements'. They also extolled the virtues and achievements of the Tatmadaw, or Burmese armed forces. Significantly, most of these billboards were written in English.

At the same time, the regime relentlessly promoted its three national causes – of stability, unity and national sovereignty – in the state-controlled press, books and magazines. These publications also referred to the government's four political, four economic and four social objectives. They ranged from the 'building of a new modern developed nation in accord with the new State Constitution' to the 'proper evolution of the market-oriented economic system', to the 'uplift of dynamism of patriotic spirit'.⁶⁷ The fact that these objectives were often printed in English suggests that, in part, they too were aimed at a foreign audience.

In the 1990s, the generals hired a US public relations firm to help improve their image. However, the only change which seems to have resulted from this initiative was that, in 1997, the State Law and Order Restoration Council changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council.

None of these measures had any appreciable impact on international opinion, which was formed largely on the basis of the regime's actions – or lack of action – not its words, encouraged of course by the international news media and the activist community.

8. The Future

Since March 2011, when Burma's mixed civilian-military government first met in Naypyidaw, the new capital, and President Thein Sein launched his ambitious reform program, many internal controls have been relaxed. Foreign officials, academics and other researchers now enjoy much greater freedom of movement and association – as indeed do the Burmese themselves. Burma is also trying to cope with a tsunami of tourists and businessmen, all wanting to take advantage of the government's new, more open policies and, it must be said, a more welcoming attitude on the part of the opposition movement.

These developments should permit a much greater awareness of Burma, and more accurate perceptions of developments there, but it is still difficult to obtain reliable information about many issues. There is still a tendency in some quarters to speak and write about Burma in terms that – consciously or unconsciously – keep alive some of the old myths and misconceptions. We still need to be cautious about accepting all we read and hear.

Many questions remain unanswered. There are strong differences among Burma watchers over critical issues such as the future of Thein Sein's reform program, the president's motives, the role of the armed forces, official and public attitudes toward the country's ethnic and religious minorities, Aung San Suu Kyi's ability to broker significant political change, her political future, the cohesion of the opposition movement, and the role of the international community – to name just a few.

Also, the next few years will see Burma reach a number of major milestones. In 2013, it will host the Southeast Asian Games and the World Economic Forum on East Asia. In 2014, it will chair the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.⁶⁸ In 2015, President Thein Sein will most likely step down, requiring Burma to hold presidential elections – perhaps the most important poll in Burma's modern history.

After a visit to Burma in 2000, the British public intellectual Timothy Garton Ash referred to Burma's 'fiendishly complex' problems and the difficulty of solving them.⁶⁹ There are now real grounds for optimism but, following recent political developments, many of these problems have become even more difficult – as Aung San Suu Kyi herself has recently acknowledged.⁷⁰ We need to remember that it is early days in the reform process and the political situation remains fluid. Burma still faces enormous challenges.

After more than 50 years of inept, corrupt and ideologically distorted military rule, there is hardly a single sector of the government, economy and civil society that is not begging for reform and desperate for financial, technical and other kinds of assistance. Some steps can be taken quickly and relatively painlessly, but the issues faced by Burma are such that fundamental reforms will take considerable time, effort and resources. The country's capacity to implement and absorb change is very limited.

One important way in which Burma watchers – both professional and amateur – can assist in this process is to provide opinion setters, policy makers and members of the public with objective, balanced and evidence-based analyses, to help dispel all the myths and nurture a much more sophisticated understanding of this fascinating but deeply troubled country. For, only then will we all be able to know the 'real' Burma – whatever that may be!

Notes and References

- 1 'burma' (exact), QueryPic, <http://wraggelabs.com/shed/querypic/>. Adding the old name 'Burmah' does not significantly change the result.
- 2 'rangoon, burma' (exact), QueryPic, <<http://wraggelabs.com/shed/querypic/>>.
- 3 'Wreck of the Rangoon', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 March 1870, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/13202773>>.
- 4 'Burma, 1800–2008', with a smoothing factor of 3, Google Books, *Ngram Viewer*, <http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=burma&year_start=1800&year_end=2010&corpus=0&smoothing=3>.
- 5 Andrew Selth, 'Modern Burma studies: A survey of the field', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (March 2010), pp. 401–40. An earlier version of this article was posted on line by the City University of Hong Kong's Southeast Asia Research Centre as Andrew Selth, *Modern Burma Studies: A view from the edge*, Southeast Asia Research Centre, Working Paper No.96 (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong, 2007), <http://www6.cityu.edu.hk/searc/Data/FileUpload/289/WP96_07_ASelth.pdf>.
- 6 Andrew Gosling, 'Burma and beyond: The Luce Collection at the National Library of Australia', *National Library of Australia News*, vol. 6, no. 13 (October 1996), pp. 3–5, <<http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/nlasp/article/viewArticle/983/1253>>.
- 7 An idea of the duration of resistance to British rule can be gained from the fact that three clasps were issued to the 1854 India General Service medal, one for active service by soldiers and military policemen in Burma between 1885–87, another for 1887–89 and a third to cover the period 1889–92. There were also clasps issued for military operations against the Kachin, Chin and Lushai 'hill tribes' between 1889 and 1893. See Peter Duckers, *British Campaign Medals 1815–1914* (Oxford: Shire, 2012), p. 23.
- 8 See, for example, S.L. Keck, 'Picturesque Burma: British travel writing 1890–1914', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3 (October 2004), pp. 387–414.
- 9 See, for example, Matrii Aung Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King: History, law and rebellion in colonial Burma* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011).
- 10 Maung Htin Aung, 'George Orwell and Burma', *Asian Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1970), p. 21.
- 11 Rudyard Kipling, 'Mandalay', *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive edition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), pp. 418–20.
- 12 Peter Dawson's hit was of the version composed by the American Oley Speaks in 1907. The lyrics were taken from the first, second and last verses of the Kipling ballad, and its chorus.
- 13 Frank Sinatra recorded a version in 1958 that was so offensive to the Kipling family that in later releases of his LP album *Come Fly With Me* it was replaced by another song. He sung the offending version, however, during a tour of Australia in 1959. It referred to Burma 'broads', 'crazy' temple bells and 'cats' raising a thirst.
- 14 See, for example, *On the Road to Mandalay*, music by Oley Speaks and lyrics by Rudyard Kipling (Cincinnati: John Church, 1907); *Burmah Moon*, with music and lyrics by Gitz Price (New York: Henry Burr, 1919); and *Rose of Mandalay*, with words and music by Ted Koehler and Frank Magine (New York: Leo Feist, 1928).
- 15 See, for example, Gerald Kelly, 'Burmese Silk', painting of Sao Ohn Nyunt (grand-daughter of the Sawbwa of Hsibaw and daughter of a Konbaung princess), c.1932; and Ma Theingi, 'Shan princess "returns" to Myanmar', *Myanmar Times*, 13–19 June 2011, <<http://www.mmmtimes.com/2011/timeout/579/timeout57901.html>>.

- 16 Cited in Derek Hudson, *For Love of Painting: The life of Sir Gerald Kelly* (London: Peter Davies, 1975), p. 36.
- 17 'See Burma', travel poster illustrated by Percy Padden and issued by India State Railways, c.1930. Padden was one of the foremost poster designers of the early twentieth century, perhaps best known for his posters advertising British Rail and the Royal Mail.
- 18 E.C. Cangi, *Faded Splendour, Golden Past: Urban images of Burma* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 88.
- 19 See, for example, R.T. Kelly, *Burma Painted and Described* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912); Aldous Huxley, *Jesting Pilate: The diary of a journey* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948); and W.S. Maugham, *The Gentleman in the Parlour: A record of a journey from Rangoon to Haiphong* (London: William Heinemann, 1930). Also of relevance is Josef Silverstein, 'Burma through the prism of Western novels', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1 (March 1985), pp. 129–40.
- 20 By 1911, only 31 per cent of the city's inhabitants were Burmese. Europeans made up 3.9 per cent, while 59.1 per cent were South Asians. D.M. Seekins, *State and Society in Modern Rangoon* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 39.
- 21 Tagore made an exception for the revered Shwedagon Pagoda in central Rangoon. Rabindranath Tagore, *Japane-Parashye: In Japan and Persia* (Calcutta: Granthalay, 1940), pp. 14, 17–25.
- 22 See, for example, the photograph of prisoners in Mandalay Gaol taken around 1897 by Felice Beato, and reproduced in N.F. Singer, *Burmah: A Photographic Journey, 1855–1925* (Gartmore: Kiscadale, 1993), p. 59.
- 23 Ian Brown, 'A Commissioner calls: Alexander Paterson and colonial Burma's prisons', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2 (June 2007), p. 296. See also G.E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma, 1824–1942* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), pp. 38–40.
- 24 George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (London: Folio Society, 2001), p. 296. It is interesting to compare this description with that of Norman Lewis, who visited Mandalay in 1951. It must be said in the city's defence, however, that when Lewis was there it was still suffering from the effects of the war. Norman Lewis, *Golden Earth: Travels in Burma* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), p. 81.
- 25 George Orwell to F. Tennyson Jesse, from London, 4 March 1946, in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Volume 4, In Front of Your Nose, 1945–1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 142. See also Emma Larkin, 'Introduction to "Burmese Days"', in George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. x.
- 26 Lucy Delap, 'Uneven orientalisms: Burmese women and the feminist imagination', *Gender and History*, vol. 24, no. 2 (August 2012), pp. 389–410.
- 27 The claim sometimes made that ethnic Burmans were not allowed to join the Burma Police is inaccurate. While always outnumbered, there were Burmans in the force from its earliest days. Michael Aung-Thwin and Matrii Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times: Traditions and transformations* (London: Reaktion, 2012), p. 238.
- 28 All US forces in China, Burma and India were united in one Command, referred to as the 'CBI Theatre'. This term has since gained popular currency. However, it was not one of the recognised theatres of the war, since it extended geographically across the boundaries of India Command, and of the South-East Asia and China theatres. See Mountbatten of Burma, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, 1943–1945* (New Delhi: The English Book Store, 1960), p. 7.
- 29 Cited in R.A. Hough, *Mountbatten: Hero of our time* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980), p. 178.
- 30 James Chapman and N.J. Cull, *Projecting Empire: Imperialism and popular cinema* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2009), pp. 51–66.
- 31 Selwyn Speight, 'Warfare in wild mountains', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February 1943, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/17838468>>. See also George

- Johnston, 'Appalling conditions in N Burma', *The Argus*, 30 May 1944, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/11825064>>.
- 32 Johnston, 'Appalling conditions in N Burma'.
- 33 George Johnston, *Journey Through Tomorrow* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1947), p. 368.
- 34 Andrew Selth, *Australia's Relations with Colonial Burma, 1886–1947*, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Working Paper No. 89 (Clayton: Monash University, 1994), p. 9.
- 35 Andrew Selth, 'Burma, Hollywood and the politics of entertainment', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3 (June 2009), pp. 321–34.
- 36 C.J. Christie, 'British literary travellers in Southeast Asia in an era of colonial retreat', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 1994), pp. 684–5.
- 37 Contrary to popular myth, the movie was not 'banned' by the British government. Nor does it appear to have been the cause of riots, either inside or outside the theatres in which it was playing. There is no doubt, however, that the movie made many people in the UK very angry, and that it received a drubbing from the British press. I.C. Jarvie, 'Fanning the Flames: Anti-American reaction to "Operation Burma"', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1981), pp. 117–37.
- 38 Johnston, 'Appalling conditions in N Burma'.
- 39 Selwyn Speight to 'My darling Joy', from Calcutta, 3 July 1944. National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection, MS6633, Box 1, Folder 3. The full passage reads: 'What surprised me most about Burma was the Jungle – note the Capital J. Without thinking about it I had always assumed that the movie producers couldn't possibly be right, and it was a real shock to find that they hadn't been so far out after all. "Jungle" covers all kinds of territory, from scrub-covered mountains to open parklands, but the part I saw was the real honest-to-God Dorothy Lamour stuff – tall trees shooting up into the sky and blotting out the sun; innumerable creepers hanging about like untidy cobwebs; undergrowth so thick that you have to cut your way through; ticks and bugs of all kinds, and leeches by the million. The weird collection of animals that wander through Hollywood jungle movies do exist too. The Mogaung Valley used to be one of the greatest game preserves in the world, with elephant, tiger, bear, pythons, monkeys and other Hollywood extras around'.
- 40 This is not to forget the enormously popular film *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), directed by David Lean and starring Alec Guinness. Although based on a fictional story and set in Thailand, this film's association with the so-called 'death railway' helped form popular impressions of the war in Burma.
- 41 Win Min Than (aka Helga Johnston) became something of a pinup for many foreign men, but was considered less highly by Western women after she told interviewers that she could not pursue an acting career because her first duty was to care for her husband. See also 'Win Min Than', International Movie Database, <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0857008/bio>>.
- 42 Copy in the author's possession. See also 'Escape to Burma', International Movie Database, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048044/>>.
- 43 'Burma violence', *The West Australian*, 15 April 1946. See also 'War weapons cause Burmese crime wave', *The Mercury*, 15 April 1946.
- 44 Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times*, p. 34.
- 45 D.M. Seekins, *The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar)* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), pp. 456–7.
- 46 During this period, the country was divided into 'black' (insurgent held), 'brown' (contested) and 'white' (government administered) areas.
- 47 Burma's Minister for Tourism, Kyaw Ba, cited in *Burma: The alternative guide* (London: Burma Action Group, 1996), p. 8.
- 48 Some popular guide books even included a section discussing the question 'Should you go?'. See, for example, Robert Reid and Michael Grosberg, *Myanmar (Burma)* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 2005), pp. 17ff.
- 49 See, for example, Khin Nyunt, 'Address to the 11th Myanmar Traditional Cultural Performing Arts Competitions', *New Light of Myanmar*, 4 November 2003,

- <http://www.myanmar.gov.mm/NLM-2003/enlm/Nov04_h2.html>. See also Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Monograph No. 33 (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999), pp. 126–8.
- 50 D.K. Emmerson, ‘“Southeast Asia”: What’s in a name’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (March 1984), pp. 1–21.
- 51 Ulrich Zagorski, *Burma: Unknown Paradise* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972)
- 52 Andrew Selth, *Burma (Myanmar) Since the 1988 Uprising: A select bibliography* (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2012)
- 53 Don Emmerson’s statement was made at a conference on Burma held in Washington DC in October 2009, attended by the author. It has since entered Burma studies folklore. See, for example, D.I. Steinberg and Fan Hong-Wei, *Modern China–Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of mutual dependence* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012), p. x.
- 54 ‘Desmond Ball Unbound’, *The Irrawaddy*, 1 June 2004, <http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=3763>.
- 55 Andrew Selth, ‘Burma, China and the myth of military bases’, *Asian Security*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2007), pp. 279–307. See also Andrew Selth, *Burma’s Coco Islands: Rumours and Realities in the Indian Ocean*, Southeast Asia Research Centre, Working Paper No. 101 (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong, 2008).
- 56 See, for example, the controversy over the ‘Independent Report for the European Commission’, *Supporting Burma/Myanmar’s National Reconciliation Process: Challenges and responses*, January 2005, <http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs3/Independant_Report-Burma_Day.htm>.
- 57 Human Rights Watch has been unusual in drawing attention to child soldiers in the ranks of both the Burma Army and armed ethnic groups. See, for example, *My Gun Was As Tall As Me: Child soldiers in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002), pp. 110–57.
- 58 Kyaw Yin Hlaing, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar: A review of the lady’s biographies’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 29, no. 2 (August 2007), pp. 359–76. For a rare exception to this rule, see Aung Thwin and Aung Thwin, *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times*, p. 265.
- 59 One expatriate opposition group 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 their ‘traitorous cohorts abroad’. Both lists included the names of well-known academics and journalists. See Yeni, ‘A blacklist goes on sale’, *The Irrawaddy*, 14 June 2006, <<http://www.burmanet.org/news/2006/06/14/irrawaddy-a-blacklist-goes-on-sale-yeni/>>; and *The Conspiracy of Treasonous Minions Within the Myanmar Naing-Ngan and Traitorous Cohorts Abroad* (Yangon: Myanmar Ministry of Information, 1989).
- 60 ‘Charles Dickens’, in George Orwell, *Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 125–6.
- 61 Aung Thwin and Aung Thwin, *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times*, p. 15.
- 62 D.I. Steinberg, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi and US Policy toward Burma/Myanmar’, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2010), pp. 39–59, <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jsaa/article/viewFile/292/292>>; and *Time*, 10 January 2011.
- 63 ‘Reflections on Gandhi’, in Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Volume 4, In front of your nose, 1945–1950*, p. 523.
- 64 Steinberg, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi and US Policy toward Burma/Myanmar’. Between 1989 and 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi’s name was mentioned in the US Congressional Record 1,598 times.
- 65 Richard Lloyd Parry, ‘The West has no simple way to treat the lady’, *The Australian*, 21 June 2012.
- 66 There is no reliable data on the number of casualties. See, for example, Hans-Bernd Zollner, ‘Behind the Smoke of “Myth” and “Counter-Myth”: Contours of what happened in Burma in 1988’, in Volker Grabowsky (ed.), *Southeast Asian*

Historiography: Unravelling the myths (Bangkok: River Books, 2011), pp. 248–57.

- 67 See, for example, the front page of *New Light of Myanmar*, 9 May 1999.
- 68 Burma, which joined ASEAN in 1997, was originally due to take the chair in 2006. In July 2005, however, Naypyidaw announced that it was passing up the opportunity due to the demands of 'national reconciliation', including the need to devise a new constitution and hold national elections. See 'Burma will not take Asean chair', *BBC News*, 26 July 2005, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4715283.stm>>.
- 69 Timothy Garton Ash, 'Beauty and the beast in Burma', *New York Review of Books*, 25 May 2000.
- 70 See, for example, Justin Forsyth, 'Burma: The truth behind the Suu Kyi photocalls', *The Independent*, 19 September 2012, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/burma-the-truth-behind-the-suu-kyi-photocalls-8153552.html>>.