

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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<Book Review>

Ward Keeler

Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen, eds. *Burma/Myanmar: Where Now?*  
Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2014, xiv+447pp.

Renaud Egreteau and François Robinne, eds. *Metamorphosis: Studies in  
Social and Political Change in Myanmar*. Singapore: NUS Press in  
association with IRASEC, 2015, xiv+428pp.

*Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, August 2017, pp. 372-377.

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farming as a way of life to farming as a business and the emergence of Thailand as a significant player in the global agro-food system, from frozen prawns to industrial chicken, high-value vegetables, and canned pineapple. This is the “change” element in the subtitle, one where Thailand’s farmers have made the transition from peasants to agrarian entrepreneurs. But Porphant also states, “peasants showed a remarkable capacity to adapt to changing conditions while at the same time conserving their established patterns of behaviour and their particular mode of survival” (p. 23). This is the “continuity” part of the subtitle. The sustaining of the rural economy and village lives has been achieved by rural people embracing non-farm work and (temporary) urban living but without giving up their connections to natal homes. Households have been separated over space, but connections to the village and to land and farming remain surprisingly strong.

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***Burma/Myanmar: Where Now?***

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Political developments in Burma/Myanmar in recent years have been so unexpectedly rapid, if spotty and at times inscrutable, that people both inside and outside the country are often hard pressed to keep track of what is going on. The pace of events explains both the need for the kinds of books under review here, books whose titles indicate the urgency with which the question of change presents itself, and at the same time the reason why they appear dated virtually from the moment they appear, given the unavoidable lag between the time of a book’s preparation and its actual appearance.

The collection of pieces edited by Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen appeared in 2014, whereas Renaud EgretEAU and François Robinne’s collection appeared in 2015. As a result, the former necessarily suffers particularly acutely from a reader’s desire to pose the question “Yes, and then what happened?” To the extent that the book provides timely background accounts with which better to understand recent developments, however, it serves a very useful function. Its many parts, most of them short (even as short as just a couple of pages), catch readers up on a great range of topics that come to mind, or should, when thinking about a country that most of the

world did not think about for decades. So there are brief accounts of Burma's recent political thaw, its transition from colonial rule to independence, the major actors in current politics, the troubled relations between the authorities and the press, the role of monks, the situation of women, the vagaries of ethnic minorities' struggles against the Burman-dominated central government, as well as their struggles among themselves, the consequences of international investment, etc.

If the above list appears disheveled, then it conveys an impression the book itself makes. The editors have clearly had to keep in mind the nature of the series, the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies' *Asia Insights*, in which their volume appears, a series "aimed" (we read on the page facing the frontispiece) "at increasing an understanding of contemporary Asia among policy-makers, NGOs, businesses [sic], journalists and other members of the general public as well as scholars and students." That addressing this combined audience troubled the editors shows up in an odd admission they make on the first page of their preface, when they note that it has not been "easy to draw these diverse contributions together in a completely coherent volume" (Gravers and Ytzen, p. vii). They then provide a list of bullet points as to why someone should read the book.

As an academic, I am allergic to bullet points: they mark the divide between reflection and marketing, analysis and debating points, nuance and executive summaries. (Full disclosure: I also hate PowerPoint slides.) Nevertheless, I admit that in reading through all the pieces, I did indeed fill in many gaps in my knowledge of, say, the long-term and recent twists and turns in Karen history, or the complex (and for that reason particularly vexed) nature of Burma's citizenship laws. All of this information is useful and handy, providing a kind of reference guide to Burma's cascading acronyms, proliferating local conflicts, and apparently irresolvable political quandaries. If there is an overarching message the editors wish to convey above and beyond the book's purpose as a general but extensive background briefing, it appears in the final one of those prefatory bullet points, in which they promise potential readers that reading the book will help them "face up to the discrepancy between the current optimism and the many stumbling blocks" (Gravers and Ytzen, p. vii).

Still, by throwing up their hands, as they seem to have done, at the prospect of pulling the contents together more tightly, the editors have let the problem of repetition, and even occasional incoherence, go unaddressed. This may only bother readers who start at the beginning and read the book through. People who turn to it as needed when wishing to learn about a particular topic—such as prospects for peace in Kachin regions, or Buddhist nationalism, or economic development—may not be put off, and they will find much useful information, no matter whether they are policy makers, journalists, students, or scholars.

Egreteau and Robinne clearly did not need to shorten or package their contributors' articles to appeal to a broader audience. So their collection consists of a more conventionally scholarly, and so more reflective, set of essays, all written by people with fieldwork experience in the region and most of them able to speak Burmese to one degree or another.

Burma was so hard to get into for so long, due in large part to Ne Win's xenophobia, that study of the language languished for decades. Fortunately, John Okell and Anna Allott at SOAS, and Denise Bernot at INALCO in Paris, kept the flame alive for Anglophones and Francophones, respectively, and it is no coincidence that many of the contributors to this collection benefited from study with these distinguished teachers. (I should note that scholars in Germany, Russia, and Japan, among other places, also sustained the study of Burmese language and society during the long years of Burma's isolation. But none of them are represented in this collection—and indeed they are relatively little known in Anglophone circles.)

Because this volume went to press much more recently than Gravers and Ytzen's, it provides some answers to the questions the latter raises as to what happened next. Curiously, not all the answers are as downbeat as Gravers and Ytzen's warnings of "stumbling blocks" might suggest. In his analysis of the way that the military's appointed representatives to Parliament chose to conduct themselves from 2010 through 2015, thus from just before until after the transfer of power from military to civilian hands, Egreteau paints a surprisingly encouraging picture of their behavior. They did not position themselves as a monolithic block; they did not seek to involve themselves in most mundane decision making; and they entered into informal relations with their civilian counterparts. Egreteau thinks all of this might bode well for their eventual acceptance of diminished political authority—although in the final few paragraphs of his essay, he admits that such a development probably remains distant on the horizon. Focused on Parliament rather than the military's role in the country at large, for that matter, Egreteau is spared any obligation to consider how likely the military is to give up its extensive economic interests.

Alexandra de Mersan also points to encouraging signs in the development of real political dialogue in Rakhine, as instantiated in the late-blooming career of an elderly man elected to Parliament in 2010. This man, after an early, unfortunate foray into politics in the early Ne Win years, turned his attention to "Arakanese culture," a symbol of resistance to the junta, for decades, until the moment when doing politics again became permissible. That it then took the form of Buddhist nationalism makes good sense—but opens onto the ethnic violence that has so afflicted Burma's recent political history, since the people Arakanese (aka Rakhine) define themselves against are no longer Burman power holders but rather Muslims in their midst.

Jacques Leider presents a valuable, nuanced discussion of the background to that anti-Muslim violence, demonstrating how thoroughly distorted all accounts of Rakhine history have become in light of the agendas diverse actors bring to their treatment of the past. The much-disputed term "Rohingya" is a relatively recent one, he shows, although Muslim spokespeople have found great advantage in labeling all Muslim residents of the region with that term. Buddhist residents want, on the other hand, simply to write all Muslims out of the region's history, seeing them exclusively as recently arrived from the West. Leider makes clear that imposing categories retroactively and rewriting history *ad libitum* constitute so many incitements to violence. He also implies that

outsiders who take any of the parties' renderings at face value (including those people trying to help the most victimized) fail to carry out due diligence.

Kachin State is the location of still more violence, although in this case between the national army and ethnic rebels, as reported by Carine Jaquet. Her analytic frame focuses on contrasting narratives of Kachin ethnicity, but in the welter of competing parties the contrasting narratives seem to come down to whether leaders are really seeking people's well-being or only their own material interests. The Burmese army, meanwhile, offers very little by way of information, so hardly any narrative, as to what it seeks other than total victory. In the end, it all points to a familiar and depressing tale ("narrative") of greed, distrust, and endless suffering for people caught in ongoing warfare.

Jane Ferguson's essay on "the Shan" shows how complicated all matters concerning ethnicity really are, since residents of Shan State may or may not consider themselves Shan, may or may not speak Shan, and may or may not see advantages in increasing their interaction with Burmans and the Burmese state—although that seems clearly to be taking place. Shan who have taken up residence in Thailand, meanwhile, show a similar range of inclinations. Whether or not they intend to reengage with a country they had at one point given up on depends as much on their class status and the degree of cultural capital they possess (in Burma or Thailand) as any ethnic consciousness they may evince.

Maxime Boutry's essay on "Burman-Moken" identity in southern Burma is perhaps the most surprising one in the collection, since it shows how in recent years intermarriage among Burman men and Moken women has brought about a new hybrid identity, with new connections to markets, new political alliances, and new myths and rituals all following as a result. Boutry suggests that noting those developments clearly might help us see interethnic interactions in other regions of the country as more complex and more dynamic than we are accustomed to assume, as well.

If ethnic labels are more flexible than we used to think—and we are put off by some people's opportunistic insistence on their rigid definition—we can only hope that both Burmans and other citizens of the country will develop a vigorous but also sensible politics, one that promotes the interests of the country's poor. Elliott Prasse-Freeman looks into this question in his essay, examining a number of forms political protest has taken in recent years. Noting how many retrograde elements mix in with what might seem progressive ones in much that he observed, he appears to conclude that the possibility for seeking justice is there but that there is no guarantee it will win out.

Perhaps education reform holds out the best hope for such a development of an effective, democratic politics, dedicated to everyone's welfare. Rosalie Metro believes that critical thinking can indeed replace rote memorization as the heart of educational method in Burma, and that threats of violence, ethnic and racial stereotyping, and a lack of commitment as well as a lack of resources can cease to be the order of the day in Burma's schools. Atypically upbeat about this possibility of

change, she insists that many teachers and students understand what critical thinking looks like and are acting on that understanding to put it into practice. Only toward the end of her essay does she admit that the obstacles are indeed enormous and that one can only hope for incremental change over the long term.

Comparable to the military régime's neglect of the country's educational network was its inattention to public health. Céline Coderey's account of how health care is delivered to people in Rakhine State is as a consequence unsurprisingly grim. Not only is access to biomedicine extremely limited—there are too few facilities and too few trained personnel, and it costs too much for poor people to take advantage of what facilities and personnel there are—but there is also great reluctance on the part of many people to turn to biomedicine in a timely manner, or to do so in the case of certain ailments deemed inappropriate to such treatment. As a result, mortality rates are needlessly high for infants, for mothers, and indeed for everyone except the wealthy few who can go to Rangoon in search of better health-care options.

The four remaining essays all treat various people among Burma's outliers. These include people on and beyond the country's physical and political margins in Susan Banki's report on transnational activists. They also include Burma's Buddhist monks, discussed by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, and nuns, discussed by Hiroko Kawanami. Finally, and most problematically, they include Burmans' others, whether Indian, Chinese, Muslim, Christian, Kachin, or Karen, among others, as Robinne discusses in his closing essay.

Banki's account, based on interviews she conducted with activists in Burma, on its borders, and farther afield, stresses activists' "precarity," both in host communities (where they may well lack all legal protections) and in Burma (where just how much protest will be tolerated remains altogether unclear). As political conditions inside Burma appear to normalize, foreign support for activists is waning—perhaps prematurely. How safe it might be for individuals to return to their places of origin in Burma is rarely clear. Part of the frustration that accompanies Burma's "transition" is that even though things are certainly getting better, uncertainty and so mistrust and disarray remain prevalent.

Ambivalence toward women who wish to pursue a religious vocation, we know from Kawanami's earlier work, runs deep in Burma. At this point, they confront a number of choices: to fight for the reinstatement of their ordination on an equal footing with monks (as nuns have been doing in Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Thailand); to pursue scriptural learning in parallel to some monks and/or to undertake rigorous meditation, augmenting in either case impressions of their otherworldly commitments; to engage to a greater degree in social work, thereby fulfilling a role many people think appropriate for them as women yet one that is likely to compromise their standing as truly otherworldly.

The great value of Brac de la Perrière's contribution is that it goes a long way to resolving a puzzle many outsiders remark upon in Burma's recent history, namely, the apparent contradiction

between the many laudable actions monks have undertaken, such as spearheading relief efforts after Nargis devastated the Delta and defying the military during the “Saffron Revolution,” and the hateful rhetoric and incitements to violence monks have unleashed upon Muslims. Brac de la Perrière notes that there is no contradiction: monks, whose prestigious position was assured during the years of military rule, are uneasy about what the democratic transition may mean for their place in a changing Burma, and all of their actions are so many soundings as to how they may retain or even augment their authority in what she refers to as “the new game.”

In his brief but passionate closing essay, “To Be Burmese Is Not (Only) Being Buddhist,” Robinne bewails the trend toward rigidifying rather than effacing ethnic divisions, and divisions based on religion, that appears to be proceeding apace in Burma. He notes how the hopelessly complex variety of identity cards tangles together ethnicity and religion, such that being Muslim is assumed to mean that someone is Indian, although they might well be of Chinese origin. Christians among ethnic minorities, meanwhile, fracture into competing congregations while finding it hard to amalgamate across ethnic lines. Indeed, “Kachin” consciousness waxes and wanes: the period from the signing of a ceasefire in 1994 until its abrogation by the military in 2011 saw a reversion to less encompassing notions of community, whereas intensified warfare, as continues up to the present, heightens a sense of “Kachin” solidarity. Yet Christians, while subject to military attack, do not suffer the sorts of rhetorical attack, in addition to physical violence, that Muslims suffer so much in today’s Burma. Robinne remarks, sadly, that such attacks are not actually anything new in Burma: Muslims have simply been singled out as the latest target.

The two books under review differ inasmuch as the volume edited by Gravers and Ytzen is intended as a handbook to bring all interested readers up to speed on Burma’s many challenges—their contexts, their origins, their recent vagaries—whereas that edited by EgretEAU and Robinne addresses specific subjects in more scholarly depth. Each book has its uses. Together, they provide a panoramic and clear-eyed, if cautionary, view of a country facing daunting problems, no matter how great the relief we all feel at its recent shift from military to civilian rule.

Ward Keeler

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***Tulong: An Articulation of Politics in the Christian Philippines***

SOON CHUAN YEAN

Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2015, xvii+275pp.

The dominant analytical framework of elite rule in the Philippine local politics has been the patron-client relationship and machine politics in which politicians provide *tulong* (help) to the poor and