3 Pearl Tears on the Silver Screen

War Movies and Expanding Burmese¹ Militarism in the Early Independence Years

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Abstract

The early years of Burmese postcolonial independence (1948) saw a tremendous expansion of the Tatmadaw (Burmese Armed Forces) predicated on an ongoing civil war and the Kuomintang 'incursion' in the northeastern Shan State. The same years comprised the beginning of the so-called 'golden age' of Burmese cinema. Amidst films of various genres, historical fiction war films glorifying Burmese soldiers and peasants as heroes, and constructing archetypes of enemies to the country's independence marked an important shift from earlier colonial-era nationalist films which had sought to reclaim Burmese sovereignty by harking back to the grandeur of prior Burmese dynasties. Instead, while war experiences are homogenized and enemies are stereotyped, national heroes were now created as part of a post-independence political milieu.

Keywords: Burma, war films, nation-building, Cold War

'When the war is over, I will come back to you,' Seya Kyaw assures his village sweetheart, Ama. The young woman, in tears, responds to her soldier lover, 'I promise, we will be together.' And with these sad, but hopeful words the final scene of the 1962 Burmese war drama, *PULE MYIT YEE* (Pearl Tears, Kyaw Swe), henceforth referred to as *PEARL TEARS*, is brought to a close. Loosely based on the plot of the Ernest Hemingway novel set during the Spanish Civil War, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), *PEARL TEARS* depicts

1 The government officially changed the country's international name to Myanmar in 1989; consistent with this, it will be referred to as 'Burma' prior to that year and as 'Myanmar' after.

the travails of platoons of the Burmese Army, the Tatmadaw, as they are despatched into territory held by the invading Kuomintang or *tayoukpyu* 'white Chinese' during the 1950s.

Although the political role of the Tatmadaw is explicit following General Ne Win's coup and subsequent Revolutionary Council, later Burmese Socialist Programme Party, regimes, the fourteen years between independence in 1948 and Ne Win's coup in 1962 comprised the period in which the Tatmadaw expanded and consolidated its power. The very same period coincided with significant government investment in and a major flourishing of the Burmese motion picture industry.

With postcolonial independence in the aftermath of World War II came new ideological directives, stressing national unity in the context of the country's ongoing internal conflict. As such, the Burmese culture industries were selectively tasked with two related ideological projects: to laud the Tatmadaw as the key to the establishment (and protection) of an ethnically united, newly independent nation; and to characterize the enemies of that national project, presenting those enemies in the form of threatening foreigners, be they soldiers or capitalists.

Therefore, this chapter will first present an overview of the motion picture industry in Burma/Myanmar, its political agendas and thematic patterning of films, up to and after independence. Then, discussion will move to the state of the Burmese motion picture industry in the historical context of the country's civil war and expanding military during the parliamentary democracy period. Next, it will focus on two well-known and popularly received Burmese historical fiction war films, PEARL TEARS² and NGA BA³ (The Peasant Nga Ba, Chit Khin) released in 1962 and 1961, respectively. Reflecting on the films' thematic and social relevance in this newly independent Southeast Asian nation at the brink of a military coup, this chapter will consider what these war films might have meant to Burmese cinemagoers, their country caught in the crossfire of Cold War geopolitics and civil war.

Through historical discussion, this chapter will describe the ways in which cinema production has been an important mass communication strategy which Burmese politicians and claims-makers have used to bolster nationalist sentiments in the face of perceived outside threats. Because

2 This essay follows the official Okell system of transliteration from Burmese into English. In Burmese: ပုလဲမျက်ရည်.

3 In Burmese: ငဘ. Nga Ba is the name of the protagonist. The English title of the novel was 'The Peasant Nga Ba.'

key political players in the early independence years (including U Nu and Aung San) were involved in the film industry during the colonial period, it is invaluable to draw upon cinematic history from the colonial period to examine how filmmakers might have framed their craft to advocate for national unity in the postcolonial years.

Burma's strategic position of neutrality amidst other geopolitical alignments offers a compelling case study of the machinations of culture industries within a national context during the height of some of the Cold War's political tensions in the region.⁴ Although Burma did not explicitly take one side, its neutrality came as a result of a political and economic strategic logic, and as the Burmese military sought increased domination, they turned to the 'hearts and minds' psychological potential of the culture industries.⁵

While the motion picture industry in Burma was not always a direct apparatus of the state, we can trace the ways in which political actors and politicians, some long-connected with politically inclined filmmakers from the colonial period, sought to make use of mass communication to further their own political agendas, and later, how the state directly sponsored the industry. Filmmaking is first and foremost a capitalist industry designed to make profit. But there are multiple historical examples of film production putting profit secondary to output and ideological dissemination (Soviet film quotas being a prime example). In Burma, even before the thorough nationalization of the economy – which came as a result of the inception of the Revolutionary Council in the early 1960s – the newly independent government was keen to promote certain kinds of ideological films, and gave hefty grants and incentives to filmmakers to create works geared to promote national unity.

Burmese Filmmaking: A Brief Overview

Despite the presence of bricks-and-mortar cinemas in the country for over a century, and indigenous film production dating back to the early decades of the twentieth century, there are few international scholarly works about

4 This is not intended to suggest, however, that all works on the cultural ramifications of the Cold War necessarily accept this ideological binary 'block' representation.

5 Diffrient has argued that 'no country other than South Korea (and possibly Taiwan) went so far as to institutionalize anticommunism as a categorical imperative through the implementation of (motion picture) industry-wide standards and protection policies' (2005, p. 22).

the Burmese motion picture industry. In addition to historical issues around access for international researchers (to both the country as well as the films), there is no systematic film archive such as those present in other Southeast Asian nations. Likewise, many older films are considered to be lost films (due to deterioration or misplacement) and some classic films were simply sold to be stripped for their silver content. Hundreds of surviving films from the 1950s, 1960s and onwards have been adapted for broadcast on MRTV (Myanmar Radio and Television) and therefore saved on Betamax in the early 1980s. Later, they were digitized, making at least some more easily accessible. Personal interviews with industry insiders and movie fans can offer invaluable insight and context, while private collections of old Burmese film magazines and other purchased Burmese secondary sources can fill in some wider details about otherwise lost films.

The motion picture industry in Burma/Myanmar can be periodized according to five eras: the colonial era (1920-1947); the early independence/parliamentary democracy era (1948-1961); the Ne Win era (1962-1988); the State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council (SLORC/SPDC) era (1989-2010) (Ferguson 2012, p. 15); and, finally, the post-elections 'transition' era (2011-present). These periods in film history coincide with the political regimes in power, as governments framed the political economy of the film industry. The regimes operated censor boards to control content, and mediated the country's relationship with the global economy, affecting whether foreigners were allowed to participate in the film industry (let alone the broader economy).

Film production in Burma started before 1920 and due to Burma's historic cultural and bureaucratic ties with India (Burma was ruled as a province of British India until 1937), the two countries' cinema industries were intertwined during their early decades. Burmese films were subject to colonial censorship laws drafted in Calcutta, while cinemas in colonial Rangoon were also largely owned by Indian entrepreneurs. Rangoon cinemas screened Indian films, and many films were made in collaboration with studios in India. Burmese studios (including those that collaborated with their Indian counterparts) produced a total of 640 films of various lengths by 1939 (ဆန်းလွင် 2000, p. 187).

Early Burmese films dealt with stories of love or fairy tales, often with thinly veiled lessons regarding Buddhist notions of morality. Members of the burgeoning local middle-class intelligentsia and student activist movement became involved in what was seen as an exciting new medium in the 1920s and 1930s. Some overtly political films were produced, including those with nationalist, anti-colonial and anti-foreign agendas. Prominent student

activists from the Dobama Asiayone (We Burmans Association), who would later go on to have key roles in the movement for Burmese independence, dabbled in political filmmaking during the 1930s. For instance: U Nu (who would later become the first prime minister of the Union of Burma) co-directed a documentary, *BOYCOTTA*⁶ (Boycott, U Ba Zin and U Nu, 1937) on the topic of the students' involvement in the independence struggle. The film featured appearances by other prominent student radicals, namely Aung San, Hla Maung Kyi and Htun Ohn (မြန်မာ့ရုပ်ရှင်စိန်ရတနာသဘင်ကျင်ရုပ်ရှင် စာတမ်းငယ်တစ်ဆယ် [hereafter 'မ.ရ.စ.'] 1996, p. 254).

The studio most associated with anti-colonial resistance was U Sunny's Parrot Film Productions, which produced a total of 92 films during its years of operation between 1931 and 1957 (Arkar Moe 2009). Some films were more political than others, and examples of anti-colonial films produced during the colonial period include: *DO DAUNG LAN* (Our Peacock Flag, U Sunny, 1936), *BO AUNG KYAW* (Leader Aung Kyaw, U Sunny, 1938), and *DAUNG DANKA* (Peacock Coin, U Sunny, 1931)⁷ (မြန်မာ့ရုပ်ရှင်အစည်းအရုံး 2004, 140). Filmmakers' use of peacock symbolism is a direct reference to the flag of the Konbaung dynasty, the regime overthrown by the British in the previous century. It became the symbol of resistance to colonial rule.

Such explicit political content did not go unnoticed. The colonial censor board had the power both to cut scenes (and to block entire films) prior to cinema release if they deemed them politically objectionable. Further to this, should a previously approved film stir controversy after release, the censor board retained the right to pull the film from further public screening. One example of the latter was A1 Film Company's 1937 production, *AUNG THAPYAY*⁸ (The Triumph at Thapyay/Victory Flower, U Nyi Pu, 1937). Written by U Tin Maung, the film dramatizes the final days of the reign of King Thibaw of the Konbaung dynasty, his violent ousting by the British and ultimate exile in Ratanagiri, India. Although the film was released to the cinemas, it provoked unrest in Monywa, whereupon the police ordered the cinema to close showings of the film. Upon secondary review of the entire film, the censor board decided to pull the film from all of the cinemas throughout the country (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, pp. 251-252).

In their politically themed films, Burmese nationalists invoked Burman history, Buddhist morality (and the perils of its transgression) and notions of the Burman right to the throne as part of their anti-colonial rhetoric. Some of

6 In Burmese: ဘိုလ်ကောတာ.

7 In Burmese: ဒို့ဒေါင်းလံ၊ ဗိုလ်အောင်ကျော်၊ ဒေါင်းဒင်ဂါး.

8 In Burmese: အောင်သပြေ.

these films took a harsh stance towards foreign capitalists, particularly Indians. Although many members of these anti-colonial organizations were actively embracing Marxist ideologies as part of a struggle against British imperialism, there is little mention of the cross-ethnic pluralism we see in later films as a means to a politically independent end. In *AUNG THAPYAY*, for example, there is mention of a Shan princess, but this is treated as more of an instance of the statecraft of the age than an actual thematic push for cross-ethnic solidarity. In other words, the use of intermarriage between monarchs in pre-modern mainland Southeast Asia was not based on ethnic mixing for the purposes of national unity, but rather, was a way of keeping potentially opposing monarchs at bay,⁹ and this in particular film did not specifically advocate cross-ethnic solidarity as some Burmese films would in decades to come.

World War II, Fledgling Independence and New Ideological Challenges

The aerial attacks on Rangoon in December 1941, followed by the land invasion of the Burma Independence Army (BIA), reinforced – and ultimately controlled – by the Japanese Imperial Army, would bring the cinema industry to an abrupt halt. Many cinema halls were Indian-owned during the colonial period, and with the British retreat in 1942, resident Indians were forced to leave Burma. For hundreds of thousands of people, it was a brutal and harrowing exodus. A cohort of Burmese filmmakers supported the BIA, but during the occupation, most of them got involved in other aspects of wartime commerce instead of filmmaking. One interesting exception, however, was that local filmmakers with ties to the BIA made documentary newsreels of the taking of Rangoon (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 256).

In the years of the Japanese occupation, the once bustling Burmese film industry saw little action. In addition to the disruption of the former economic networks for acquisition of film stock and processing chemicals, the war left many studios bereft of production equipment. It had been seized by the Japanese. A few cinemas kept active by continuing to show older films. There had been Japanese involvement in Burmese cinema prior to World War II,¹⁰ but the war years saw a change in what was shown on the screens in Burma. Yadanarphone Cinema in Sanchaung was taken

9 For more detail about this kind of historical statecraft, see Tun Aung Chain (1999).

10 For example: the 1935 A1 film *JAPAN YIN THWE ဂျပန်ရင်သွေး* (Japanese Darling, Nyi Pu, 1935), was shot in Japan and co-produced by PCL (Ferguson 2018).

over and renamed 'Sakura.' As such, it was dedicated to showing Japanese samurai films and political propaganda reels. While most film companies ceased production altogether, the largest film company, A1 – with family connections to the Burma Independence Army – managed to produce PAMA LOUT LAB YAY MAW GON TIN¹¹ (Vision for an Independent Burma, U Kyin Sein, 1944) in 1943-1944. Directed by U Kyin Sein, and largely considered to be a propaganda film, it was released at the Orient Film Hall during the Japanese occupation period (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, pp. 236, 263-266, 268).

Following the end of the war, and the return of (temporary) colonial rule, on 8 March 1946 a group of key industry players got together to establish the Burma Motion Picture Organization. Their meeting also commemorated 25 years of film production in the country, celebrating what they called its silver anniversary. One year later, General Aung San presided over the commemorative ceremony for the film industry near Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon. In his speech, he urged the filmmakers to consider national goals in their approach to the craft:

It is only recently that Burma gained independence. It is the people's responsibility to work for the establishment and development of the nation. The filmmaking community has a responsibility as well; the film artists have the responsibility to work for the benefit of the people. (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 257)

Soon after independence in 1948, the new Burmese government established a Public Relation Film Service and allotted the then-hefty sum of four million kyat for the organization of a new motion picture group to purchase filmmaking equipment. One of their first productions was the black-and-white documentary, OUR UNION¹² (Public Relation Film Service, 1948). In addition to their investment in filmmaking equipment, this organization sought the skills of international filmmakers to share their expertise with participants in the burgeoning Burmese film industry (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 155). In the years immediately following the war, five new film companies were founded: Swe Burma, Hlit Sit (Electric), Aung Zeya, Thit Hsan and New Burma (တက္ကသိုလ်ခင်မောင်ဇော် 2012, 11).

At independence, Burma is noted for having one of the most vibrant public media scenes in Southeast Asia (Allott 1993, p. 4), with numerous independent newspapers, magazines and radio stations in operation. Similar

11 In Burmese: မဟာလွှပ်လပ်ရုံးမောက္ခန်းတင်.

12 In Burmese: ဒို့ပြည်ထောင်စု.

to other Southeast Asian nations, film production gradually increased in the post-war years: Burmese studios produced thirteen films in 1946, 48 in 1947, 56 in 1948 and 41 in 1949. Also of note is the increased use of recorded 'talkie' pictures in this period. Although sound-on-film technology was used in film production Burma beginning in 1935, silent films as well as sound-on-disc persisted due to their lower production costs and existing popularity of in-house cinema music ensembles.

By the end of the 1940s, a total of twelve stylistic genres of Burmese films were recognized and in production, with genre names such as: 'Love and Marriage Stories,' 'Love and Fanciful Dress,' and 'History and Biography' (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 62). In addition to love dramas, there were films regarding Buddhist biography stories as well as genres of Burmese socialist realism which could be interpreted as propaganda reels for the newly independent nation. Writing in 1972, one Burmese film scholar, Myat Swe, critiqued the film industry during the parliamentary democracy period as one which was made for the economic benefit of those involved, while producing 'poisonous entertainment' for the workers and farmers (the involvement of foreign capitalists in the industry also meant that much of this revenue went overseas). The scholar points out that of the 53 films produced in 1951, 32 of them had ghosts, fairy tales, *nats*¹³ and superstition. For Myat Swe, such content evidently represented a movement away from 'real film,' so reflecting a disdain for popular entertainment from the intelligentsia and social elites that is also seen in other Southeast Asian nations at this time (မြတ်ဆွေ 1972, pp. 11-12).

During the 1950s, rather than leave the film industry entirely to the whims of the market, including ever-present Hollywood and Bollywood features, the Burmese government began in earnest to systematize the industry, and connect it more closely with its political goals. And as for the structure of the local industry, as was pointed out in 1950, in nine cases out of ten, within a Burmese studio, the director, scriptwriter and producer were the same person (Thoung Sein 1950, p. 7). Part of the government's goals were to expand, yet at the same time, consolidate the industry. Prime Minister U Nu appointed U Thant to chair the Burma Film Board (Charney 2009). One major step was to bring everyone together in a ritual celebration of filmic achievements: the year 1952 saw the establishment of the Burmese Academy Awards¹⁴ with 13 October celebrated as Burma's National Film Day.

13 *Nats* are the lingering ghosts of people who died a violent or untimely death.

14 In its first year of operation, the Academy Awards regaled an A1 Film Company production, CHIT THET WAY (Dear Thet Way, 1952), directed by U Tin Maung as 'Best Film.' Its lead actress, long-time film star, Kyi Kyi Tay, won the year's 'Best Female Star' for her role in the film (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 63).

Five years later, on 18 October 1957, Minister of Information Thakhin Chit Maung held a meeting with members of the Motion Picture Organization. The ministry was concerned with the state of the industry in general and the importation of film equipment, in particular. By that time, ‘talkies’ had entirely replaced silent and sound-on-disc productions. But, there was the constant worry amongst Burmese filmmakers – then as now – that their productions would not be able to compete with the technical sophistication of their Hollywood counterparts.

To give space for Burmese films, government intervention mandated that cinemas in the country show national productions for at least 60 days out of the year (Lent 1990, p. 222). Furthermore, and in consultation with the Ministry of Trade, it was decided that there should be a reduction in the taxation of film equipment imports, with the intention that this would continue to stimulate film production domestically (ရှင်ရှင်ဗဒသာ 1957). The film industry would then finally reach its productive apex in 1962, with 92 films produced that year, a success largely due to government investment and assistance in this private industry. Such support upgraded the country’s filmmaking technologies in the form of better sound-recording equipment and visual techniques, including background projection (ရွှေဝေဝေရုပ်စုံ 1957).

Political Challenges in the Early Independence Years

Because several key nationalist political leaders took an active interest in film production in the pre-World War II age, it is hardly a surprise that their enthusiasm carried over to the post-war independence period. However, with the assassination of General Aung San and members of his cabinet on the brink of independence, combined with the ethnic separatist movements already forming, and an armed Communist Party of Burma, prospects for a peaceful, united Union of Burma were looking dubious. Burma’s newly independent government, rooted in anti-imperial politics, largely adopted a socialist rhetoric. Although Burma was the only former British colony to repudiate Commonwealth links at independence, it was still initially linked economically and militarily to Britain (Adeleke 2003). However, it was military and political change in Burma’s biggest neighbour, China, which would call for even more diplomatic finesse, especially as commerce in the country was still largely in the hands of foreign capitalists.

Compounding previous threats to political integrity, as a direct result of Mao’s victory in 1949, about 2000 Kuomintang (KMT) troops retreated across the Yunnanese border and into Shan State, in Burma’s northeast. From there,

the KMT, backed by Taiwan, later the CIA and the Thai government, began more systematically to build their forces, preparing for a counter-insurgency against the Maoists. Between 1950 and 1953, the number of Kuomintang troops in the Shan State swelled from 1700 to 12,000 (Ministry of Information 1953, p. i). The vast numbers of various anti-Yangon forces in the country caused quite a concern for the newly independent government (Callahan 1996, p. 414).

During these increasing challenges for national unity and integration in the country, the Burmese film industry continued to expand. Although correlation does not always suggest causation, the expansion of popular entertainment during periods of political crisis is worth considering. These military threats, political challenges and incursions could be seen both as a crisis of national identity and as a basis for which the national military forces could expand. Thinking about these as a political backdrop to the support for the growing national motion picture industry helps to animate not only what these films might have meant in their contemporary social milieu, but also the reasons behind the timing of certain narratives.

Ideology and Filmic Co-production in Burma

While the Burmese motion picture industry continued to expand in the 1950s, this did not preclude international collaborations. Perhaps the best-known war movie of the period is the 1954 British production *THE PURPLE PLAIN* (Robert Parrish) starring Gregory Peck and Win Min Than, the wife of Burmese politician Thakin Aung Than. As far as period films specifically seeking to influence local political ideologies, the most significant of the surviving films is *LUDU AUNG THAN* (The People Win Through, George Seitz Jr, 1954), originally penned as a play by Prime Minister U Nu (နိဗ္ဗာန် 1955 [1950]), and also broadcast on Burmese radio in the early 1950s (Charney 2009, p. 340).

A former member of the Naga Ni book club, U Nu dedicates the play 'To Those Who Believe in Democracy.' U Nu's devout Buddhist stance placed religious morality as a way to solve the country's political problems. He even said, 'If we go to the root causes of the present disorders in this country, we will find that not less than eighty per cent of them are due to apathy to religion' (quoted in Von Der Mehden 1961, p. 170). For U Nu, one strategy to restore Buddhist devotion was to lessen the corrupting influences of capitalism and inequality; in other words, rather than taking a 'pull one's self up by one's bootstraps' approach to what he saw as a moral

crisis, the problems stemmed from capitalist ideologies and experiences of inequalities. Only when social welfare was restored could people focus on their escape from the suffering of the endless cycle of rebirth (Sarkisyanz 1965, p. 171).

An affiliate of the US embassy in Rangoon also took an interest in the play and had it translated into English, an initiative that resulted in its later staging in California. Because of these adaptations the story would be spun to emphasize the dangers of communism (Charney 2010, p. 51). The Asia Foundation picked up on this development and sponsored a film version of the play; the total budget was the then-princely sum of \$203,039, and the film was shot entirely in Burmese, although directed by American George Seitz Jr, starring Maung Maung Ta, who became a well-known Muslim actor who would later be an employee at the Burmese embassy in Washington, DC. The focus of the plot is on a young man who initially joins the Communist Party, but who is later horrified by some of their authoritarian practices, and ultimately decides that democracy is the best system for the people. The main figure representing the Communist Party in the movie is General Tauk Tun, portrayed as a bully.

The distribution plans for the film were principally aimed at Buddhist majority countries: Burma, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Taiwan and Thailand. In Burma, it was first released at the Excelsior Cinema in Rangoon on 26 December 1953 (တက္ကသိုလ်ခင်းမောင်ဇော် 2012, p. 67). While some reviews of the reception of the film suggest that some Burmese audiences liked it and saw it as one of the 'best films ever made in Burma,' other reports suggest that it flopped, or was downright insulting to some (Lee 2017, p. 117). In one account, angry viewers even torched the cinema (Charney 2010, p. 54).

The war drama mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, PEARL TEARS, directed by and starring Kyaw Swe, is an adaptation of the plot from the Ernest Hemingway novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; yet whereas the Hemingway novel is set during the Spanish Civil War and features a main character in the International Brigades of the Republican forces, the Burmese rendition depicts soldiers of the Tatmadaw battling against the Kuomintang enemy during the early 1950s.¹⁵ The film was made in 1960, a particularly politically contentious time, as it was just at the end of the country's two-year initial rule by the military caretaker government.

Kyaw Swe is one of the industry's handsome action stars of the independence era. Originally named Maw Ni, in the late 1940s, Kyaw Swe was a

15 A Burmese film history book mentions that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was one of General Aung San's favourite novels (ဖု.ရ.စု. 1996, p. 76).

student in a military school in Mandalay. He had been rubbing elbows with some members of the film community but was first noticed by British Burma Film Company director U Ba Shin, who cast him to co-star in their feature *SAW YA SAN SHA* (San Sha the Thief, U Ba Shin, 1946). It was here that U Ba Shin assigned him the stage name Kyaw Swe, and he was soon cast by Parrot Films director Pe Kyaing in the film *BOKYOKE* (General, Pe Kyaing, 1946). By then, he had established himself as an action hero, and the A1 Film Company soon put him on the regular payroll. Following five successful films with A1, Kyaw Swe left to direct thirteen feature films on his own (တက္ကသိုလ်ခင်မောင်ဇော် 2012, pp. 62-63). *PEARL TEARS* was one such film, produced by Kyaw Swe's own production company, Moe.

The plot centres on Seya Kyaw, the Captain of a platoon of Tatmadaw soldiers. Another platoon is led by General Myit Maung. They are located in the patchwork of territory in the Shan hills held by the Kuomintang armies. General Myit Maung's platoon enters a village recently abandoned by retreating KMT forces. They find many of the homes burned and discover a young woman in hiding. Her name is Ama (played by Khin Yu May, who not only co-starred with Kyaw Swe in several movies but also married him) and she tells of the horrors committed by the KMT to her village, the people needlessly abused and killed.

Ama joins with General Myint Maung's platoon, and later they meet with Seya Kyaw and his platoon. Seya Kyaw and Ama soon fall in love, at which point the narrative includes the ongoing romance between the two leads. The plot includes guerrilla warfare and skirmishing with the KMT enemy. For the close of the film, Seya Kyaw makes overtures that once the war is finished, he will return to Ama's village with her so that they might settle down together one day.

Whereas *PEARL TEARS* is important in presenting a contemporary enemy of the state to 1960s Burmese audiences, historical fiction war films were powerful ideological tools as well. As such, because Burmese patriotic ideologies present the Tatmadaw as both having brought the country to independence, as well as its caretaker, World War II provides an ideal setting for dozens – if not hundreds – of military films produced in Burma.

Burmese Peasants and Japanese Soldiers

Based on the 1947 Maung Htin novel by the same name, the story of *NGA BA* takes place during the Japanese occupation during World War II. Directed by U Chit Khin, and starring Nyunt Maung, May Nway and Bago May Myint, the

film version of *NGA BA* was produced by the British Burma Film Company.¹⁶ Released in 1961, it is considered a film which promotes cross-ethnic unity (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 216) and is a socialist realist-style depiction of a simple Burmese peasant and his suffering as a result of Japanese imperialism. Its socialist theme resonated internationally. Because of this, the film was exported to both China and the USSR (တက္ကသိုလ်နေ့စဉ်: 1973, p. 36). The fact that a film dealing with themes of Burmese patriotism would attract international audiences is noted as a point of national pride (မ.ရ.စ. 1996, p. 257).

The protagonist of the film is a peasant farmer named Nga Ba (played by Nyunt Maung) whose life becomes indelibly transformed by the atrocities committed by the Japanese occupying forces. Nga Ba must contend with increasing economic hardship, being taken from his land to toil for the Japanese Army as forced labour, as well as traumatic incidents such as Japanese officials raping his sixteen-year-old daughter, soldiers beheading a Burmese independence fighter with a long sword, and Nga Ba's own arbitrary imprisonment and torture by the Japanese. As part of the movie's plot and eventual resolution of this imposition, there are strategic gestures made towards unifying the Myanmar and the Karen peoples (Maung Htin 1998 [1947], p. 122).

Given Burma's neutrality objectives by the end of the 1950s, we can see how *NGA BA* exemplifies the country's careful balance of Buddhist ideology and nationalism within a cinematic style of Burmese socialist realism. Theravada Buddhist notions of material life as human suffering are repeatedly emphasized as a way to make sense of the atrocities and hardships instigated by the Japanese presence, and in one compelling scene, Nga Ba prays at the Shwedagon Pagoda, 'May I never be born again as a farmer; may I be born a capitalist.' However, as the plot progresses, we see Nga Ba increasingly disillusioned with capitalism and capitalists, and he later rescinds that prayer at the Shwedagon Pagoda. In this sense, we can see evidence of the plot using Theravada Buddhist concepts of both suffering (*tukka* or *doga* in Burmese) and cycles of rebirth (*samsara* or *thanthaya* in Burmese) to make sense of the changing conditions as a result of Japanese imperialism. We can see a pull away from capitalist dependency being legitimated by, and made sense of according to, a Buddhist logic.

In addition to the suffering of Nga Ba and his family as a result of the foreign occupation, there is a vignette which features the beheading of a Thakin (Burmese anti-colonial nationalist) with a Japanese samurai sword. Prior to receiving the fatal blow, the Thakin shouts '*Do Bama!*' or 'Our Burma!' In tandem with Burmese nationalism came the representation of cross-ethnic

16 This film company later changed its name to Nyunt Myanmar.

unity as a strategy for wrestling the country from foreign imperialism; lest we forget, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) was an army largely united across national and ideological lines in order to defeat the Japanese, and would likely not have succeeded without the assistance of the Communist Party (a moot point in *LUDU AUNG THAN*). On the other hand, in the film *PEARL TEARS*, we see a situation in which Burma's border integrity has been transgressed by a foreign enemy and local women require rescue and protection by the Tatmadaw, thus reaffirming the soldiers' masculinity. In *NGA BA*, however, cross-ethnic unity becomes the means by which the international enemy will be defeated.

In these films, we are presented with a monolithically 'evil' enemy, although Burma's historical experience is much more complex. During the Japanese occupation in World War II, for example, some accounts show that the Japanese soldiers in Lawksawk, in the Shan State, generally treated the local villagers well (Adams 2000, p. 74). Chang (1999) has shown that while some Kuomintang troops had good relations with the local villagers and respected them, there were others who behaved like bandits and wreaked havoc on the Shan villages (Chang 1999, p. 31). The political situation was further complicated by the complex patchwork of other insurgent militias, such as the Karen, Kachin, Mon and Shan separatists as well as the Communist Party of Burma. The number of various militias in the Shan State alone, at one point, totalled more than 40. To address this kind of complexity in the space of a single feature film would be quite a feat. Screenplays aside, for the purposes of building national solidarity during a period in which the national military is expanding, representing such nuance on the silver screen might interfere with the ideological goals of the films' sponsors.

On the one hand, we can see during the first two decades of Burma's independence from Britain, that the national image crucially depended upon a notion of ethnic unity and pluralism; after all, the country was named the *Union* of Burma. On the other hand, ethnic chauvinism on the part of some Burman groups mean that members of non-Burman groups are not always given the same place at the table as their Burman counterparts. It would not be accurate to assert that the Cold War-era culture industries in Burma, including the motion picture industry, always put forward the idea that the people of Burma needed to unite across ethnic divisions. While films such as *PEARL TEARS* and *NGA BA* certainly do advocate national unity over ethnic factionalism, there are other Burmese Cold War era films which (arguably) contain blatant misrepresentation of ethnic minorities.

Shan historical monarchs, in particular, have been subjected to contentious representation both in the film *SHWEZAYAN* (Shwezayan Temple, Khin

Maung Nyunt, 1962) where an eleventh-century Shan princess is presented as a sorceress, *SHAN PYI YAUK AYETHAY* (Guests in Shanland, A1 Maung Chit, 1962), where a Burmese soldier falls in love with a Shan woman (Ferguson 2007, 2012), or the novels of Bo Ni, in which Shan monarchs are presented as tyrants (Elliott 2006, p. 250). Other representations of ethnic nationalities draw criticism for their perceived oversimplification of non-Burman cultures, or patronizing presentation of an unchanging, or even primitive, way of life in ethnic minority areas. Although certain examples of Burmese popular culture productions would explicitly strive for cross-class, cross-ethnic unity in their ideological message through positive representations of ethnic diversity *within* the union in the face of an international aggressor, we can see that this was not always the case; for some, it was the imperative to push for negative representations of powers which could potentially detract from national solidarity, namely the historical epistemological draw of the Shan rulers in the Shan State. In any case, the nation-building project, particularly in the Burmese context, is one which is ideologically fraught, and, as we have seen from the decades of on-going struggle, political suppression, and militarism, one which has not achieved the kind of unity or consent which its advocates sought.

Conclusion

In her book *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, Mary Callahan details the history of the growth of the Tatmadaw into what has become 'the most durable incarnation of military rule in history' (Callahan 2003, p. 3). The expansion of Burma's military came through war: the Kuomintang incursion and the ongoing civil war brought to the fore problems and enemies which created the basis for the expansion of the military, as well as state-building. With the gathering power of the army and this ongoing war, one can examine the ways in which the country's popular culture industries might have connected audiences with these political issues, the extent to which films might have ideologically aligned themselves with the army's political projects.

In discussing popular discourse within the country, it is important not to underestimate the ways in which the culture industries, and films such as *PEARL TEARS* and *NGA BA* effectively communicated these ideas to the broader population. As we can see from the examination of Burma's motion picture industry, from the early days of independence through the early years of the country's parliamentary democracy, Burmese nationalists have

consistently shown interest in, and enthusiasm for, the mimetic powers of the silver screen. It is through these channels that we can see the recurring thematic pattern that the Burmese nation depends on a strong army as a liberating force from an outside enemy, and from the independence years, an increasing notion of cross-ethnic solidarity, whether real or imagined. Although the political behaviour of people in Burma has repeatedly and defiantly demonstrated that it is not directly shaped by the ideas promoted by the government media or propaganda, examination of films such as *PEARL TEARS* and *NGA BA* can reveal important ideological underpinnings to a growing nationalist project at a critical juncture in Burmese history.

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