

B u r m a

Edited by NICHOLAS FARRELLY

The military government of the Union of Myanmar long trumpeted its vision of modern Burma with an incessant disregard for alternative perspectives.¹ In newspapers and on television and at countless formal events and occasions, Burma's rulers were in the habit of ostentatiously invoking developmental and nationalistic themes. Their official version of modernity refashioned threads of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial experience to justify the preeminence of a small cohort of senior military officers and their civilian allies. They pointed out that ever since the social and political crises that accompanied British efforts to rule Burma (1824–1948), the country was wracked by civil and political conflict. A brief period of post–World War II parliamentary rule ended in 1962 when a coup brought the military and its strongmen into the heart of the political process. Since then, they refused to relinquish power, and even the 2011 transition to a quasi-civilian system sees former and current military officers in the most important positions. Political transition, let alone democratization, will take time. These men are preoccupied with regime survival, ethnic cohesion, and the fulfillment of what they consider national destiny. National enemies—often stigmatized as “internal and external destructive elements”—are publicly proclaimed targets for elimination. Building a prosperous, united, and modern society is the goal.

What is ignored in this vigilantly censored and almost constantly reinforced vision of “peace” and “development,” “democracy” and “order” are the multitude of ways that sixty million ordinary and not so ordinary Burmese seek out their own expressions of politics and culture. Such expressions so defy neat categorizations that they inevitably confront the dictatorial dichotomies

and arbitrary distinctions that have become fused to the machinery of Burma's government. During the many years it was unprepared to allow most political freedoms, the government condemned the foreign, the aberrant, and the critical. For more than two decades, pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi was regularly singled out for her contrarian views on political participation; of course, she was just one figure among the countless Burmese who hoped for political change. With the April 2012 by-elections seeing Aung San Suu Kyi and others from the National League for Democracy elevated to parliament, that change may now have arrived. The excitement and uncertainty of this transition is palpable. However, even today, the government's distinctions and delineations fail to adequately recognize histories of belonging and exclusion for a country that has always nestled at the intersection of East, South, and Southeast Asian social forms. Appreciation of the flows and interactions that are ordained by this geography have been largely ignored in the official version of Burmese modernity.

To partly compensate for the inadequacy of Burma's officially sanctioned modernity, this chapter seeks to introduce a range of ethnographic figures that stamp their own authorities—and subversive potentials—on personal circumstances that cannot be divorced from Burma's official politics and culture. In each of the following essays, it is their individual aspirations and experiences that together serve not only to undermine the government's story about modernity but to more profoundly challenge our expectations about life in Burma (or beyond it) today. Each essay's author shares a preoccupation with examining modernity in Burma using methods that collectively stretch official narratives about what it means to be Burmese.

The variety of personalities that we meet testifies to the vibrant shape of emerging knowledge about this country. Through nine short profile essays, we are introduced to the Urban *Dumsa* (animist priest) of northern Burma, who contends with the pressures of religious conversion and ethnic pride (Sadan); the idealistic Journalist, *Thadin Htauk*, of Burma's newspapers and magazines (Kean); the former Political Prisoner, who fights for freedom and democracy (Mathieson); the Exile, stoked by activist passions in New Zealand (Gilbert and Cho); the Sex Worker in Thailand, struggling with the nightmarish conditions of low-pay sexual servitude (Okamoto); the Tatmadaw Officer, who hopes for a change of regime (Menager); the Korean Soap Opera Junkie (Aung Si); the Entrepreneur, balancing collaboration with curiosity (Farrelly); and the Yangon (Rangoon) Indie Musician, who embraces an idiosyncratic revolutionary style (Aung Naing Thu). These figures blur together to contextualize, discombobulate, and reinforce the challenges of deeply contested, sometimes transgressive modernity in a country where easy answers to

decades-long social, political, and economic conundrums have proven ineffective in the face of histories, cultures, and resentments that cannot be easily wished away. In Burma, political repression and censorship are met by open resistance but also by more subtle efforts to nudge society and politics in new directions. For ordinary Burmese, the paths around modernity sketched here are never straight. Some choose to stay in Burma and survive, fail, or prosper, while others opt to flee their predicaments in the hope of better futures elsewhere. Sadly, new lives in Thailand—or somewhere else around the world—can become their own kind of modern nightmare for transnational Burmese.

Even though Burma retains a distinguished place in anthropological theory, studying these paths through today's modernity is a persistent challenge. Not only is the country diverse in terms of languages and cultures, its range of landscapes, economic systems, and historical interactions ensures that there are countless ways for ethnographers (or other observers) to *know* Burma. Over the past century, ethnographers of varying professional and social origins have sought to explain changes in the societies of Burma. We all benefit from their efforts. In early generations they were more likely to be colonial officials, military officers, or missionaries than they were to have any “disinterested” social scientific inclinations. And while there have been times when foreign researchers have been able to work relatively freely inside the country—particularly from the 1930s to the early 1960s²—there has remained a reliance on other types of field workers. It is for this reason that the authors of these essays on figures of Burmese modernity are not “mere academics.” In all cases, they have practical involvements that stretch beyond any of their scholarly interests. Among their number are development practitioners, journalists, bloggers, and human rights advocates. Indeed, the blurring of the boundaries between these various roles is one part of the explanation for the vibrancy of their ethnographic insights.

Clearly, a limitation that social scientists studying modern Burma face is that some types of source materials are relatively scarce and access to particular areas has been tightly controlled. This explains why research on modern Burma tends to focus on a set of researchable issues in certain parts of the country or its borderlands. The area that receives the most consistent academic scrutiny is along the border with Thailand, and the majority of authors in this chapter have field experience in that area. After a short drive from the Thai cities of Bangkok or Chiang Mai, foreign researchers can roam border districts where peoples from Burma—whether newly arrived migrants or long-term residents of Thailand—are immediately accessible. Often, such research can be undertaken without undue interference from Thai or Burmese authorities. Thailand's hospitality means that part of Burma's story of modernity is

filtered through the experience of its brash and more convenient neighbor. Some researchers also cross into rebel-held areas of eastern Burma, such as those slices of terrain controlled by the Karen National Liberation Army or the Shan State Army (South), where they can learn about modern resistance, rebellion, and political struggle. In this chapter, the somewhat overlapping essays on the Political Prisoner, the Exile, and the Sex Worker are all partly captured by border politics and the impacts that dislocation can have on transnational livelihoods and opportunities.

Inside Burma, there have been comparatively fewer opportunities for long-term, ethnographically styled research. In recent decades, few ethnographers have undertaken concerted stints of research in Burma, except for those who declare interests in the small range of religious or cultural topics that have not been considered threatening by the military authorities. Scholars compensate in a number of ways. There are a lucky few who can work long term inside Burma, often with a nonscholarly day-to-day occupation. Some, as noted, undertake their research from the Thai side of the border or from Yunnan in China. Others are inclined to travel to Burma for shorter trips than social scientists would usually consider in other Southeast Asian countries. Monthlong research trips are standard for many. This can mean that the exposure of anthropologists and others to the languages and cultures of the country may be less. There are, however, ways that any perceived inadequacies can be avoided. Some scholars have focused their attention on parts of Burma where language skills from China or Thailand can be redeployed. In other cases, efforts are made to focus on groups where romanized missionary scripts provide more immediate linguistic accessibility.

In these different senses, the essays presented here are all part of a social scientific terrain that cannot be divorced from the machinery of government—and repression—that has operated for so long in Burma. In these essays, we learn that there were until recently still over 2,200 political prisoners in the country. We showcase only one of them, but he represents many others who were similarly motivated to directly challenge military rule. We also highlight the attitude and experiences of a serving officer in the armed forces. He is just one man among the hundreds of thousands who wear a Tatmadaw uniform. But his cautious anticipation that political change can come through internal military reform speaks to a wider set of issues. Elections, parliaments, and “democracy” are, at least for the moment, part of a new vocabulary for official politics in Burma. But with so much uncertainty about these concepts, it is hardly surprising that all of the figures introduced in this chapter struggle to find their place in the swirling currents of Burma’s contested and ambiguous modernity. The challenges of facing daily life in contexts where the dominance

of authoritarian government has been almost constantly questioned should give hope to those who are fighting for different futures. It is in the voices and stories of these figures that we may see the best prospects for change.