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The Last Amateur: Reflecting on 50 years of Engagement with Asia

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It is an honor to be invited here to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Southeast Asia Center. I have been asked to comment on changes as I have seen them in Southeast Asia and beyond in my long involvement in Asian affairs. I have considerable trepidation in doing so for reasons I will discuss below.

But first I want to compliment Northern Illinois University and all of you for your long involvement in Southeast Asia. Your activities have contributed so much to our knowledge. On a trip to Myanmar last month in October, I was reading some of Montaigne's essays on the plane. About 1580, he wrote that "conversation with men and travel into foreign countries" is important not for minor observations, but "to be able chiefly to give an account of the humors, manners, customs and laws of those nations... and that we may whet and sharpen our wits by rubbing them against those of others." He goes on to advocate teaching languages "most differing from our own, and that which, if it not formed betimes, the tongue will grow too stiff to bend." I have been through that myself—several times. And that is what your Center has been doing for 50 years, and I applaud your work and those of your predecessors.

Reflecting on history is a challenge, and one not without the dangers of both memory and mortality for those in one's shortening days. One knows one has reached a high actuarial plateau when the following happened to me at a conference. An historian approached me and asked me if I would discuss with him U.S. cultural policies in various Asian countries in the 1950s and 1960s, and an economist overheard this request and commented, "You know you really must be old when an historian asks you about history." And another person, meaning to be kind, said, "It must be nice to see changes in Myanmar before you die."

The changes in the region have been so vast that comments on them would be jejune unless we had volumes of space in which to write and hours in which to discuss them. For my involvement did not start with Southeast Asia or Burma. I was the last American exchange student, the first and last junior from Dartmouth, to China in 1948-49 in the midst of the Chinese revolution. Of course, my students regard this as in the time of Methuselah, or perhaps in the same era as the Confucian Analects. But if you had asked me then whether the Kuomintang would still survive fifty years later, that Korea could develop, that Burma would not be the richest country in Southeast Asia, and that Thailand would teeter on the edge of social disintegration, I would have been incredulous and thoroughly wrong. So I bring to this talk humility and a sense of one's own limitations.

My life has been an interplay among academia, civil society, and the policy community. One's influence on any of the above has been exceedingly limited, but it has given one the scope to explore. Admittedly, there are large numbers of people in any of those fields who would decry these cross relationships because, by their very nature, involvement in these diverse fields diminishes the depth of concentration in any single one. Thus one's contribution might be considered to be marginal or minimal.

Rather than concentrate on the changes in Asia that I have witnessed in some 65 years, which would be long, tedious, and would be things that all of you know, it might be more interesting to engage in some digressions into some future issues, based, of course, on events of the past. I recognize the dangers—both immediate and longer term—for much of what I anticipate may be proven wrong, and that Dante in the *Divine Comedy* wrote that soothsayers go to a very low circle of hell.

I say some of these things because in the peripatetic movement among career paths, emphases get lost in translation. So, while probably all of you here would agree that history matters, and matters critically in analyzing what happens contemporaneously and in policy formulation, there is a very short historical attention span in U.S. policy circles. One need not go as far as Chou Enlai, who famously replied when asked about the effects of the French Revolution of 1789 said it was too early to tell, to realize that policies are often made without consideration of historical antecedents that strongly influence policy choices. These nuances are critical, but as George Bush is quoted as having said, "We don't do nuances in Texas." And Mark Twain is said to have remarked that history may not repeat itself but it often rhymes.

So when the Chinese Kuomintang troops retreated into Burma from the People's Liberation Army in 1949, did we remember that the Ming troops did exactly the same thing when the Ch'ing took over in 1644? We have seen rural Thailand a half century ago where poverty was considered a result of one's karmic inheritance, not governmental indifference, be transformed into continuing demands for services that Thaksin was able to capture. But will an equally traditional peasantry in Myanmar, when subjected to more information and access, make the same demands on that government and will whatever regime is in power then recognize the changes and be able to meet these requirements? These are serious questions of political stability. How much will various efforts to devolve government to local levels succeed in a wide swath of societies? How will each of the states resolve problems of multiculturalism in heterogeneous social systems? How have some governments, such as Burma/Myanmar, failed so far, and what are the prospects for the future? These are real questions-of policy, of analysis, and of teaching.

Of future importance is the relationship between the academic community and the government, and there are lessons to be learned from that liaison--lessons I hope have been applied to Iraq and Afghanistan, but of which I am dubious. In the late 1960s, related both to the Vietnam War and general insurgencies in the region, USAID sponsored the Academic Advisory Council on Thailand and the Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group (SEADAG), the latter run out of The Asia Society in New York. There were in addition various defense-related think tanks employed professors of various stripes of opinion. These professors were to advise USAID on the problems facing Southeast Asia. Alas, USAID did not know how to ask the right questions

and academicians did not normally think in policy terms. In addition, if there were sound suggestions, the relationship between an experienced academician was with a rather low level, inexperienced USAID officer. Without a peer-level interchange, incorporation of academic ideas into policy was difficult at best. In addition, USAID tried to hire social scientists, and when I had lunch with the deputy administrator of the agency, he asked my why such integration did not work. I replied because the social scientists did not speak a language taught at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute. Academicians also had a tendency to do what they wanted regardless of Asian needs. One agricultural economist from Illinois whom I met in Khon Kaen, who did a dissertation on some aspect of tomatoes in Illinois, decided that the solution to Northeast Thailand's agricultural problems was—guess-- tomatoes.

But in some sense, therefore, as a quasi-academic, I am here under false pretenses. For in universities, I came to it late, and without the normal preparation required for such a career. I am thus an amateur in a field of professionals. In fact, in some sense, at least in Burmese studies, I am the last amateur. Let me explain.

As life becomes more ubiquitously specialized, the role of amateurs is rapidly receding. They have been replaced with professionals who specialize—whether it is in an academic discipline or fifteen years of the T'ang Dynasty. The amateur athlete has effectively been ousted from the Olympics. A liberal arts undergraduate education may be desirable for broadening the students' exposure, but a professional, disciplinary graduate degree will get one the job, if anything will. As we have gained specialized competence and enhanced performance, which is all to the good, we have effectively diminished the broad sweep of inquiry, which also results in limitations.

This phenomenon is true of those seriously concerned with Southeast Asia, but it is especially true of those enmeshed in Burma/Myanmar in a, perhaps, unique manner. In spite of repressive military regimes in Myanmar from 1962 to 2010, the country had increasingly unfastened its borders since 1988 allowing in younger scholars who are providing new waves of information and analyses of Burmese conditions--internal and external. These new interests were perhaps prompted by Burma/Myanmar as the last “exotic” country in the region because its policies had been generally isolationist to the West through a mutually determined set of decisions, the attractions of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her international acclaim, and the dire state of affairs internally that attracts those developmentally focused. Now, however, Myanmar has become a “growth” industry—if not yet economically, than at least academically. We should see a flowering of understanding of that complex country with its diverse societies.

But those in the modern era do not start exploring de novo Burma or Myanmar or other societies in the region; they have had the fortune to study the states of Asia build on past, cumulative knowledge by less well-trained observers. No matter how modern our self-images, and whether we regard ourselves as post-colonial or even post neo-colonial, these intrepid individuals, to whom we owe a considerable debt, have immeasurably increased our understanding of Burma and other countries.

These were the amateurs, my term because they lacked the modern social science or other disciplinary skills that are now the required hallmarks of contemporary academia or even employment in government and the non-governmental sector. Equally important, the disciplinary

tools of the social science trades had generally not been so sophisticatedly developed. This is not to denigrate their accomplishments, intelligence, or often commitment to the peoples of the area, which were often remarkable, but simply to note that they were trained in a different era under different criteria, and with different required skills. They accomplished much, and present scholarship often harkens back to their work, findings, and observations. They may have been professionals as doctors, colonial administrators, or preachers, but they contributed to our understanding of Burma as amateurs-- beyond their vocational skills.

First were the missionaries who greatly enhanced our capacities to study societies by creating many of the critical dictionaries, and sometimes written scripts, that (updated) are still in use. However prejudiced they may have been in examining aspects of the cultures in which they worked, what we know is in part dependent on their dedication and prodigious accomplishments. They may not be our intellectual mentors but they have been part of our intellectual support system.

The second, often contemporaneous group, were the colonial officers and diplomats who were sent to the field to strengthen or expand the imperial flags. Their motivations may today be deplored, but their studies, often used to increase colonial control or income, provided insights into societies that traditional, local records sometimes lacked. Protected by primitive international communications, they often languished in long periods of relative isolation in which they pondered the societies in which they were enmeshed and provided unique glimpses of local civilizations, customs, and mores.

The third group comprised the stalwart Western travelers who wandered the region, commenting on “exotica,” and wrote often fascinating and insightful comments of the societies they encountered. These also provided insights that dynastic histories and official records often lacked.

In a few disciplines on Asia in certain countries professionalism did exist. Nineteenth century efforts to study Buddhist and Hindu scriptures and make them available to Western audiences were unique contributions to our knowledge. Equally, those scholars who studied and translated traditional Chinese and Confucian literature remain today outstanding examples of literary professionalism. These are, however, the exceptions.

Who, seriously involved in Burma/Myanmar today, can forget Judson, or Scott, or Fielding Hall, or the intrepid “bachelor girl in Burma”—later Mrs. Scott? The list is long, and many of the British administrators, from Donnison to Eric Blair (George Orwell) are part of our collective memories and knowledge. The social science amateur list is long and impressive; their professionalism, however, often did not extend to many of the subjects on which they wrote and on which many of us to some degree still rely for portraits of society at certain points in time and space.

In Burma as a British colony, the English-rooted writer was normally a British expatriate, a civil servant but sometimes a teak or other merchant, but the American influence before World War II, with the singular exception of Adoniram Judson, was generally lacking. With independence,

however, all that changed. American, and somewhat later Australian, academicians became interested.

The short period under civilian administration after independence resulted in a small but influential number of academic social science professionals who were able to do field work in country. We all know their names –Mendelson (British but American trained), Spiro, Pye, Nash, Lehman, Silverstein, Trager, and others. All of them who later published their findings, and on which we still rely, can be counted on little more than on one's fingers and toes. They were elite-
-indeed, a unique group. Most are now retired, some only in different incarnations.

For about a generation beginning in 1962, field work was largely prohibited except for a few studies of Buddhism or the arts and archeology and linguistics; it was only since 1988 that a new generation of specialists with modern disciplinary training has begun to focus on Burma/Myanmar. That Burma was ignored for advanced degrees was understandable under General Ne Win. What responsible professor could have advised students in that socialist period to pursue Burmese studies without the possibility of extensive field experience in country? Surrogate studies of those Burmese who fled into Thailand and lived abroad elsewhere were only partial substitutes for in situ research. So Burma is perhaps unique in the region for the gap in professional observers.

We are now witnessing the birth of a new generation of scholarship on Myanmar, with some dozens of scholars doing field studies, publishing, and enriching our understanding of what is now called Myanmar and all its complexities. There are perhaps over two dozen serious students of Burma/Myanmar who are pursuing Ph.D.s in the English-speaking world. Much is expected of them, and our hope is that those institutions that hire will pay proper heed to the regional or area specialist as much as they do to the theoretician who is only peripherally committed to a country's future.

So the early amateurs who contributed so much to our understanding (and in some cases our misunderstanding) of Burmese society or Southeast Asia more generally have, as the saying of old soldiers, faded away, their memories important but now overshadowed by the newer disciplinary regimens.

As one ages, and still retains some of the memories of life over a half-century ago in that country and tries to interpret changes through writing and publishing, I have come to realize that I may be the last of the amateurs, the sole survivor (because of age and not intellectual dexterity) of an earlier breed. True, there are those "amateurs" such as ambassadors or influential people, who write memoirs, but I am musing on writings that attempt to be more interpretive of the society rather than one's own personality or self-seeking justification of one's policies, as has been so often the case.

I came to Burma/Myanmar studies without real disciplinary training, for in those days an "Asian area studies" graduate degree was a respectable field and level that even offered some limited academic opportunities. But then I had no interest in academia as a career, for I was emotionally enmeshed in "action" based on my formative experiences as a student in China during the revolution. But action should also require reflection, and as the medical profession is supposed

to practice “do no harm,” so the administrator and program planner needs to respect and follow that dictum. If one is to try to think coherently and act effectively and prudently, I believed one ought to be able to put those ideas on paper and test them in the intellectual marketplace. And so one began to write: first to clarify one’s own thinking, and then to try to express oneself in the external arena, and then to influence policy.

So now I find myself among the last of the dying breed of amateurs. Replaced by professionals in a broad array of disciplines, these younger scholars bring to their work skills and methodologies that I never learned. They will do a far better job of in-depth analysis. These younger intellectual professionals naturally regard the older amateur writers as working within limited horizons and lacking intellectual rigor. This is, of course, true—inherent in the development of scholarship in any field. We amateurs often operated in an intellectual penumbra—viewing societies and events through hazy, shadowy perspectives and often lacking comparative foci with which to consider events, sometimes equating anecdotal information with data, and prone to dangerous generalities.

We would like to believe that we contributed something to the field; perhaps we plowed only the ground’s surface with archaic instruments that never uncovered the rich fertility of the subsoil. But now, the role of foreigners is augmented by nascent internal Burmese academic capacity. This is a new phenomenon. First, after independence there was the lack of Burmese scholarship using these new social science disciplinary skills, for few were trained in them. Then, when interest accentuated, the internal Burmese government control and censorship prevented intellectual maturation within the country. This now is beginning to change, and the prospects for intellectual interchange between those resident internally and those abroad have vastly improved in the past year or two. So we have a new and promising dynamic among those Burmese who have the professional disciplines in hand, and their foreign counterparts, and we may begin to see collaborative research and publications that will enrich us all.

But the aged amateur may still have one last card to play. Aging, especially in the United States, has only marginal value-added, as the economists might say. It has more utility in Asia, however. I had a cousin by marriage who, when I was much younger, told me that he wanted to be an old curmudgeon. At the time, it did not occur to me that this was sometimes a useful status in spite of the attendant aches and pains and other ills that flesh is heir to, as the poet once wrote.

Growing old in the United States is no fun. As a comedian used to say, “I get no respect.” But there are times when senior status allows liberties that youth cannot share. This is not true in the U.S., I am afraid. Even my cane does not get me any special consideration, except perhaps from some Asian students who occasionally maintain residual trickles of respect from their older, cultural residues.

In Asia, however, the situation is different. I find that stumbling, cane in hand, into a senior official’s office, my gait like some sailing ship swaying in a nor’easter, gives me curmudgeon status. Whatever the real emotional response of such an official might be, he or she is culturally constrained by my curmudgeonly coolness to listen respectfully to whatever suggestion or complaint I might have, even though he or she might harbor a passionate desire to throw me out because my comments may be interpreted to those in power as subversive.

So I am often able to say things that another, younger person could not. Even diplomats, or perhaps especially diplomats, have not been able to complain in the same frank tones that on occasion I have been able to use. While this affords me avoiding landing on my rear when the security guards would no longer tolerate my excesses, does it do any social good, except, of course, to my ego?

One tries to suggest, cajole, insinuate positive ideas into closed systems. On most occasions, this will likely be unsuccessful. But one hopes that the ubiquitous note taker, sitting respectfully on a slightly removed chair, will understand one's perhaps ill-expressed and convoluted ideas and faithfully record one's deathless prose, conveying the sentiments to some appropriate higher-level official who, one hopes, will incorporate one's ideas as his or her own. That would be the ultimate success. At one meeting with a deputy minister in Myanmar, I noticed the note taker, a lesser official whom I knew, quietly smiling to himself. As he walked me to my car, I asked him why. He replied, "It is good to hear the truth, sometimes." Last month President Thein Sein of Myanmar said to me that my homework was to solve the Rohingya problem, and if I did, he would take the credit, and if I failed, he would blame me.

So, intentionally, one uses one's age for what one hopes is the public good. By playing the curmudgeon card in susceptible societies, the prospect of some potential usefulness before departing this scene is, as the poet once wrote, a consummation devoutly to be wished.

The perhaps natural tendency among the aged for nostalgia to be a primary emotion should be avoided. One tried to do one's best with the limited skills available. The limits of such contributions are evident and should not be denied. But the new age will be better, with interplay between and among the Burmese and diverse foreigners all bringing various new perspectives to our understanding of the local scene, and this without question is progress.

As one enters one's November years, one inquires from one's institutional home the mechanics of the transition to retirement—what Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope called "the slipped years." And so with an ironic twist one is informed that, by the simple act of passing from faculty into a new social incarnation—unfaculty, if you will—, one is eligible, after leaving the university, for a significant number of free semesters at the university. So in the twilight, one may at last reach the status of becoming the professional that one had never attained, and with that the usefulness of an extra toe.

But whether as amateur or doddering professional, I used to write about Burma/Myanmar issues in what might be called inverted diplomatic parlance, "guarded pessimism." That era is, one hopes, behind us. We can look forward with some confidence to a new, more intellectually engaged era, of greater understanding, and with it, I would like to believe, greater progress. One would like one's supposed insights to be transmuted into considerations *bama-lo* or *myanma-lo*, in the Burmese manner. It is now up to the professionals to replace curmudgeonly amateurism with professionalism that will engender even greater respect in the new era.

Thank you very much for your invitation and your patience.