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***BULLETIN OF THE  
BURMA  
STUDIES GROUP***

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*An afternoon's outing: Buddhism as lived practice  
Photo by Jake Carbine*

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## INTRODUCTION

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With just a few weeks to go before the Burma Studies Conference, we are looking forward to meeting up with familiar colleagues and getting acquainted with new ones in Singapore. At the end of this issue, we include brief accounts of both that conference and the Burma Update, organized by the Australian National University and the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, to be held in Singapore just after the BSG Conference. Nevertheless, most of this issue is devoted to following up on topics raised in earlier issues of the *Bulletin*. Rounding out the survey of contemporary studies of Theravada Buddhism we initiated in the March 2005 issue, a survey that was expanded upon with Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière's account of the field of religion in Burmese studies in the Fall 2005 issue, this issue leads off with Frank Reynolds' and Jake Carbine's overview of developments in Theravada studies over the past thirty years. Then comes the follow-up to my memoir on recording theatre music in Mandalay last June.

In the last issue, I put out a call for contributions for a future issue that will take as its theme the matter of languages and language-learning among people interested in Burma. I am very pleased to report that two of our most distinguished *hsaya*, Anna Allott and John Okell, have agreed to provide us accounts of their experiences learning and teaching the Burmese language. I would like to urge readers to add their own reflections, reminiscences, tips, or thoughts about any topic that relates to the languages of Burma. The purpose of this publication, after all, is to facilitate communication

among all of us who take an interest in Burma. So communicate with us. Contributions do not have to be formal or lengthy: footnote-free is fine.

With any luck, this issue will reach readers in time at least to get tossed into their carry-on bags. See you soon! *The Editor*

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## THE STUDY OF THERAVADA BUDDHISM: THIRTY YEARS AND BEYOND

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*Among the most useful essays to be found in any academic field are those that provide an overview of that field's major themes and trends. So we must be very grateful to Frank Reynolds and Jake Carbine for contributing the following invaluable essay, a "state-of-the-field" account of Theravada studies. I would fault the essay in only one respect: Frank and Jake have been too modest to mention their own edited volume, The Life of Buddhism (University of California Press, 2000), a set of essays that describe Buddhist practices in Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Sri Lanka. Many of the essays are written by very prominent figures in Buddhist studies, and the collection's emphasis on practice rather than doctrine means that it exemplifies many of the exciting developments in Theravada studies that Frank and Jake describe below. The Editor*

In the March 2005 issue of the BBSG devoted to current studies of Buddhism in Burma, Ward Keeler identified the period from the mid 1970s to the present as one in which innovative paths were forged in the study of Theravada Buddhism, leading the way to a contemporary wave of exciting new Theravada scholarship. Ward has asked

us to survey for the benefit of the *Bulletin's* readers the nature of these developments in Theravada Buddhist studies. In responding to that invitation, we will take a long-range developmental approach, dividing our account into two parts. In the first part, we will offer a short overview of the history of modern Theravada studies from its origin in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century through the mid-1970s. In the second part, we will concentrate on the progress that has been made, both methodologically and substantively, during the past three decades. Note that throughout we will provide only a few illustrative bibliographical references, omitting many important books and articles. Our objective is not to provide an extended bibliographic essay, but rather to outline major developments in Theravada studies over the past thirty years.

In our reflections we will follow Ward's example and continue to utilize the terms "Theravada," "Theravada studies," and the like. This we have chosen to do despite the fact that critiques of the use of these terms have recently been raised by some of our most respected colleagues.<sup>1</sup> In certain

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Peter Skilling has recently made a powerful case for the notion that "Theravada" is an over-extended, under-specified category that reduces complex social and historical developments to flat and stable surfaces; that it rides roughshod over ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions; and that it lulls scholars into assuming that questions have been answered when they have not even been formulated. He has also argued (again quite correctly) that in the relevant Buddhist texts and inscriptions from the classical to late pre-modern period the term Theravada is seldom if ever used as category for self-designation; that it is, in fact, often used in a very elusive way; and that this elusiveness should motivate us to probe, much more carefully than we have done in the past, how various local Buddhist traditions and communities have been constituted, especially

research contexts we are very sympathetic to the arguments that these scholars are making. We are also very sympathetic to the possibility of developing new kinds of terminology to refer to and examine "Theravada" phenomena. However, at present, new kinds of terminology that would allow us to replace "Theravada" effectively have yet to emerge. For the purposes of the discussion here we therefore assume a broader, more colloquial understanding of the term that is still used – implicitly or explicitly – by most scholars who are active in Theravada studies. This understanding takes "Theravada" to refer to a range of Buddhist identities and practices that have developed especially but not only in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia – identities and practices that have been associated more or less closely with a tradition of texts in Pali and correlated vernacular languages. Both renunciants and lay people comprise important referents in this use of the term "Theravada," as do the many and diverse approaches to religious life they espouse.

## **PART I: A SHORT HISTORY OF MODERN THERAVADA STUDIES**

In the first century of its existence modern Theravada studies was dominated by philological scholars who focused on the Pali language and the collections of ancient Pali texts that the Theravada tradition recognized as foundational. The interpretive emphasis fell on a historical / critical quest for the most original teachings of the

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with reference to their own categories of representation. (See [http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/docs/abstracts/abs\\_theravada.pdf](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/docs/abstracts/abs_theravada.pdf) for the abstract of Skilling's paper in the program for the conference on "Exploring Theravada Studies: Intellectual trends and the Future of a Field," held at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, August 12 – 14, 2004).

Buddha, on the one hand, and on the other, for the most rationally believable account of the Buddha's life.

Following the Second World War the philological and historical / text critical approaches continued to predominate. However, the appearance on the scene of a significant cohort of anthropologists brought about a major change in Theravada studies. These anthropologists produced, in the late '60s and early '70s, a series of world-class anthropological studies of contemporary Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. Their work presented a very different take on how the Theravada tradition could be studied and understood, obliging Pali-focused textualists and historians to find a way to relate to these new, anthropologically-oriented (and largely vernacular-focused) colleagues.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly the mid-1970s marked the beginning of a significant new phase in Theravada scholarship, one that has lasted up to the present day. Throughout this period the three basic approaches (i.e. the philological / textual, the historical, and the anthropological) that had come to characterize sub-fields in Theravada studies have remained essentially intact. However,

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to recognize that these anthropologists were pursuing, if in a new way and perhaps unbeknownst to themselves, a largely ignored or disparaged tradition of reportage and vernacular scholarship on Theravada topics done during the colonial period by Western travelers, missionaries and civil servants. For an essay highlighting the need to incorporate this early reportage and vernacular scholarship into Theravada studies as they have developed in western academic circles, see Charles Hallisey's "Roads taken and not taken in the study of Theravada Buddhism," in Donald Lopez, ed., *Curators of the Buddha* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

over these thirty years scholars have modified both the materials they study and the methods that they use. In the process, the three sub-fields have come to overlap so much that in many important instances it has become difficult if not impossible to distinguish among them.<sup>3</sup>

## **PART II: PROGRESS DURING THE PAST THREE DECADES**

**Philology/Textual Studies.** The changes that have taken place in the sub-field of Pali philology and textual study in recent years have been fundamental. Much of the most interesting and innovative research has been focused on later texts, including seemingly more folkloric segments of the canonical collection itself. Beyond that, a significant component of more recent Pali-oriented research has focused on the commentaries that provided a venue through which Theravada intellectuals of still later historical periods have thought and taught about a wide variety of important issues (doctrinal, ethical, mythic, ritualistic, etc). The fruits of this development are vividly apparent in Steven Collins' *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). In that brilliant work, Collins develops the thesis that Pali texts collectively portray a relatively stable and coherent "imaginaire" that was central to Theravada teaching and practice for at

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<sup>3</sup> Although we cannot make the case here, we would hold that the discipline of the history of religions (an interdisciplinary field that takes the triad of philology, anthropology, and history very seriously into account) has provided much of the impetus toward conjoining these sub-fields. Over the thirty-year period under consideration here, the history of religions has provided the theoretical and methodological training for a great many of the leading Theravada scholars.

least 1800 years. Collins takes the term *imaginaire* from contemporary French historiography, treating the notion as a mode of perceiving and interpreting reality rather than (as in some English uses) simply deviating from it. In his analysis of the Pali *imaginaire*, Collins draws upon a wide variety of Pali literary works from various genres and various historical periods. He identifies the continuity in the structures and dynamics of the cosmic and social order that these texts recognize; he explores the problems and tensions in these structures and dynamics; and he explains the many different kinds of “felicity” (good things) related to them.<sup>4</sup>

Other equally important advances in the area of textual study include a new focus on texts that use a vernacular language (sometimes but not always in combination with Pali), as well as the use and development of new methods of textual interpretation. To cite what is perhaps the most important example of the latter, many Theravada scholars in recent years have come to recognize (in concert with scholars in other fields in the humanities) that there is a need for a much different kind of critical approach to textual study – one that considers seriously a text’s specific audience(s), author(s), intention(s), and uses(s). An excellent example of the implementation of these new methods in the study of texts can be found in Anne Blackburn’s *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-century Lankan Monastic Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

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<sup>4</sup> For a supportive yet critical view of this very important text, see Frank Reynolds, “The Medieval Imagination: A New Perspective from Southern Asia,” *Journal of Religion* 80 (1):106-112 (January 2000).

**Historical Studies.** The historical component in Theravada scholarship has also made considerable recent advances. Archaeological and art historical research have introduced much new data, and the importance of inscriptions and other forms of material evidence has been granted greater recognition. Some of the most important research in this area is reported in Janice Stargardt’s *Tracing Thought Through Things: The Oldest Pali Texts and the Early Buddhist Archaeology of India and Burma* (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2000). Among other topics, Stargardt discusses Pali materials, believed to date to the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century in south central Burma, that have been retrieved from a relic chamber in Sri Ksetra, an early urban center with a significant Buddhist presence. These materials have raised radical new questions concerning the early history of the Theravada tradition in Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup>

An even more important development in historical studies has been the shift from positivist to post-positivist research methods. Though the long-utilized positivist approach to the study of Theravada history was already waning in the mid 70’s, it still exerted a powerful influence. Thirty years later, however, the positivist perspective has been almost completely jettisoned in favor of a kind of post-positivist critical theory that adapts new ways to approach texts and their relationship to other sources.

While the differences between positivist and post-positivist approaches are at times subtle, or even murky, how they deal with issues of human interest and agency marks a primary difference between them. Positivist

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<sup>5</sup> Although it is addressed to specialists, readers might wish to consult Peter Skilling’s review of Stargardt’s book in *Asian Perspectives* 44 (2):386-390 (Fall 2005).

historical approaches have tended to gloss over the complexities of interest and agency in the generation of texts. Positivist scholars have, for example, sought to construct “true” or “accurate” historical narratives based on the assumption that the textual sources that they studied were written by “authors” who were trying to provide accurate representations of empirically verifiable historical “facts” and “events.” Post-positivist historical approaches have, in contrast, encouraged scholars to draw upon a far broader range of data. And such scholars have taken the data that they examine to be far less transparent than previously assumed. For example, post-positivist scholars have asked about the particular orientations and concerns of the people who produced a text, how that text was preserved and disseminated, and what kinds of impact it made in the lives of the individuals, communities, and / or societies under consideration.

Perhaps the best theoretical / methodological exposition of this method is to be found in Jonathan Walters’ essay “Buddhist History,” in Ronald Inden, Jonathan Walters, and Daud Ali, eds., *Querying the Medieval* (Oxford University Press, 2000). In that essay, Walters mounts a trenchant critique of the positivist historiography of his predecessors in the modern arena of Theravada historical studies. In the process he develops a distinctive post-positivist approach by investigating how certain kinds of Buddhist historiographical materials supplement their predecessors with their own interpretations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a specific historical study in which Walters utilizes his post-positivist approach, see his essay on “Stupa, Story and Empire,” in Juliane Schober, ed., *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia* (University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

Of course the real test of the health and vitality of contemporary Theravada historical studies lies in the quality and interest of the book-length historical narratives its practitioners produce. Here two preeminent authors stand out. In 1979 R.A.L.H. Gunawardana published a groundbreaking work, still relevant today, entitled *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* (University of Arizona Press, 1979).<sup>7</sup> More recently John Holt has provided a remarkable trilogy of historical works on Theravada history in Sri Lanka: *Buddha in the Crown* (Oxford University Press, 1991), which won the American Academy of Religion’s annual award for the best book in the study of religious history; *The Religious World of Kirti Sri* (Oxford University Press, 1996), a pioneering work that focuses on a kingdom-wide presentation of a Theravada liturgy that was an integral element in Kirti Sri’s campaign to assert and consolidate his claims to royal power; and *The Buddhist Visnu* (Columbia University Press, 2004), which deals with the gradual Theravada appropriation, both religious and political, of an important deity in the pantheon of pre-modern and contemporary Hinduism.

**Anthropological Studies.** Turning finally to the anthropological component in the field of Theravada studies, three developments since the 1970s stand out with particular clarity. The first is the increased emphasis and sophistication in the study of charismatic saints and their impact on

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<sup>7</sup> Gunawardana has subsequently published many important articles relevant to Theravada studies. These include, most recently, “The World of Theravada Buddhism: The Relevance of a Territorial Category as a Conceptual Tool in the Study of History,” Asanga Tilakaratne et. al., eds., *Dhamma-Vinaya: Essays in Honour of Venerable Professor Dhammavihari* (Sri Lanka Association of Buddhist Studies, 2005).

contemporary Buddhist life. Two among the several books that have been published in this area are especially important: Stanley Tambiah's *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), and Guillaume Rozenberg's *Renoncement et puissance: La quête de la sainteté dans la Birmanie contemporaine* (Editions Olizane, 2005).

The second development has been a tendency to complement ethnographic research with serious attention to historical and textual materials. This tendency, already evident in the anthropological works on Theravada written in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has been taken up and further developed by a number of more recent scholars, including Martin Southwold (see his *Buddhism in Life* (Manchester University Press, 1983)) and particularly notably, Donald Swearer, a historian of religion who often writes in an anthropological mode. In his recent book, *Becoming the Buddha* (Princeton University Press, 2004), Swearer provides a rich ethnographic account of a very complex present-day ritual performed in northern Thailand – an account that incorporates a significant amount of historical reflection and a plethora of texts and textual analyses.

The third important development in recent anthropological studies of Theravada explores how mythological, ritual and meditational aspects of Theravada practice interact with contemporary political life, particularly political life in crisis. This concern, too, has roots in much earlier scholarship, but recent Theravada-oriented anthropologists have expanded upon those precedents. A significant number of books and articles have been written about Theravada involvement in the national politics and endless civic violence in Sri Lanka. Noteworthy examples include Bruce

Kapferer's *The Feast of the Sorcerer: Practices of Consciousness and Power* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), and H.L. Seneviratne's *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (University of Chicago Press, 1999). Nevertheless, the most original and impressive work that deals with the question of Theravada religion, national politics, and civic conflict is Gustaaf Houtman's *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999).

**Other Important Topics.** Theravada scholars working during the past thirty years have also dramatically expanded research and writing on topics that had previously received little or no attention. Among these, gender is clearly the most prominent, and in the multitude of gender-focused books and articles a wide variety of subtopics has been covered, including the *bhikkhuni* order (the order of nuns), the presence of homosexuality and misogyny in the monastic community, and gender statuses and roles among the laity. One of the most important (and best written) studies is Liz Wilson's *Charming Cadavers* (University of Chicago Press, 1996). Following through on this intriguing title, Wilson explores a genre of classical Pali and Sanskrit literature in which monks use meditations that focus on the disfigured bodies and decaying corpses of women in order to quench their sexual desire and, in so doing, to advance their progress along the path to enlightenment. Writing in a more ethnographic vein Charles Keyes and Thomas Kirsch have presented two contrasting views of the Buddhist-influenced statuses and roles of women in rural Thailand. (See Keyes, "Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand" in *American Ethnologist*



11(2):223-241 (May 1984), and Kirsch, "Text and Context: Buddhist Sex Roles / Cultures of Gender Revisited," *American Ethnologist* 12 (2):302-320 (May 1985).

But there are also other, less prominent topics that are very important for the future of Theravada studies. For example, there has been considerable interest in expanding Theravada studies beyond the borders of Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. Several important studies have been / are being carried out in Cambodia and Laos where Theravada has long been the dominant religious tradition but where, during the period from 1970 to 1990, the political situation made Theravada-oriented research very difficult. Ian Harris's *Cambodian Buddhism* (University of Hawaii Press, 2005) is therefore a major contribution to historical studies. Among the many topics Harris examines, especially interesting is an important discussion of the Tantric (Esoteric) tradition associated with Theravada tradition in Cambodia (and elsewhere in the Theravada world as well). Basing his discussion on a series of publications by Francois Bizot, Harris demonstrates not only the antiquity of this fascinating and distinctive form of "Theravada" belief and practice, but its contemporary presence and influence as well. Harris's work also complements John Marsten and Elizabeth Guthrie's edited collection *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004), which focuses on important post-Khmer Rouge developments, particularly with reference to "Cambodian" identity.

Other studies have been carried out in neighboring areas in Nepal and in Yunnan province in South China. These include Thomas Borchert's recently completed dissertation, entitled "Educating Monks:

Buddhism, Politics, and Freedom of Religion on China's Southwest Border" (University of Chicago, 2006). The past few years have also seen the beginnings of research on Theravada communities in other parts of the world, notably but not exclusively in the United States. See, for example, Paul Numrich's excellent book *Old Wisdom in the New World* (University of Tennessee Press, 1996), which explores processes of Americanization in two immigrant Theravada temples, one in Chicago and one in Los Angeles.

A third newly introduced topic is Theravada Buddhism's relations with secular, non-ecclesiastical law. Over the past two decades Andrew Huxley has carried out, almost single handedly, a wide-ranging investigation of the tradition of Theravada secular law embedded in the *dhammathat* and *rajathat* literature of pre-colonial Burma and neighboring areas. Operating in a very different mode, David Engel has recently published "Globalization and the Decline of Legal Consciousness" (*Law & Social Inquiry* 30(3):469-514 (Summer 2005)), a superb essay on Theravada religion and secular law in which he describes and analyzes a current development in northern Thailand. On the basis of several years of field research, Engel reveals the very surprising fact that in the contemporary northern Thai context – in response to the breakdown of traditional religio-legal means for pressuring parties responsible for causing personal injuries to provide appropriate restitution – modern tort law has proved to be ineffective and unpopular. At the same time, traditional Theravada karmic (self-implicating) explanations of the relevant injuries have risen rapidly.

A fourth topic that has come to the fore in recent Theravada studies concerns how Theravada communities have traditionally

been constituted and nurtured. Those interested in the newest explorations of this topic should consult a collection of essays edited by John Holt, Jacob Kinnard and Jonathan Walters entitled *Constituting Communities* (SUNY Press, 2003). In his lead essay, Walters challenges the adequacy of the highly individualistic interpretation of *karma* that has dominated (and still dominates) modern Theravada scholarship. And he makes a powerful case for his own radically innovative thesis that there are operative, within the Theravada tradition, a whole range of very important notions that he associates with the term “socio-karma.” As he argues, these various socio-karmic notions are deeply embedded in the practices by means of which Theravadins have traditionally constituted and maintained their community life.

Finally, there is a very significant strand in recent Theravada scholarship that deals with issues of ethical life. Tracing back to earlier work (e.g. Winston King’s essay on Theravada ethics, *In the Hope of Nibbana* (Open Court, 1964)), important new contributions have been made by a number of authors in Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer, eds., *Ethics, Wealth and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics* (University of South Carolina Press, 1990). More recently, an essay by Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, “Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life: Some Evidence from Theravada Buddhism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* (24 (2):305-327 (Fall 1996), has initiated an exciting new approach that addresses the morally transformative dimensions of various forms of Theravada literature. There have also been powerful voices and interpretations from within Theravada communities themselves. These include Phra Prayudh Payutto’s classic study of *Buddhadhamma* (tr. Grant Olsen, SUNY Press, 1995) – a work which presents a

highly sophisticated Buddhist understanding of “natural law.”

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Many other theoretical and methodological developments are incubating within the various sub-disciplinary components that comprise Theravada scholarship, and we could identify many other new or newly prominent topics that are being explored. But while a significant number of other contributions could be recognized here, we believe that we have provided enough evidence to demonstrate that the intellectual foundations are in place for the emergence of the new wave of exciting Theravada scholarship that Ward and others are expectantly awaiting. What remains to be seen is the extent to which the necessary institutional and financial support will, in fact, be forthcoming. Just as importantly, it remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, scholars of the new generation will begin the much needed process of constituting a community of Theravada scholars willing to extend their interests and expertise beyond the rather narrow boundaries of their own geographically defined areas of research.

Frank Reynolds, University of Chicago, Emeritus

Jason Carbine, Amherst College

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## RECORDING THEATRE MUSIC IN MANDALAY, JUNE, 2005 – PART 2

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*In the Fall 2005 issue of the Bulletin, I recounted my experiences preparing to record Burmese theatre music in Mandalay in collaboration with U Than Aung (Saya Lei), a retired dance teacher from the State*

*School for the Arts, and the American ethnomusicologist, Philip Yampolsky. Here I take that account up once again, at the point at which we entered the studio and started the actual recording. I should note that the project was made possible by funding from the Asia Cultural Council in New York, with further support from the University of Texas.*  
*The Editor*

Microphones: I learned as we started in at the studio that the art of recording turns ultimately on a few crucial decisions in the selection and placement of microphones. Philip had no sooner gone into the engineer's booth, accompanied by the studio's owner, U Tin Oo, and signaled for the musicians to start playing than he gave the signal for them to stop playing and came striding right back out again. There were about ten men in the room ready to play the *hsain wain* instruments plus a few chamber ensemble instruments, and in addition there were three singers present. Saya Lei, dismissing my concerns about running out of time, had decided that on this first night of recording (the first of five scheduled) we would work on recording several versions of the well-known classical song, *Myá Mán Gírí*. For the first run-through we would give the Burmese harp its customary pride of place: Ma Mung Mung Aung would sing and U Soe Win would play the harp, accompanied by flute, *sì* and *wà*, and drums. But the problem was where to place the microphones so as to enable all of the different "voices" to be heard, and at the same time, to remain faithful to how they combine in actual real-life conditions.

Recording engineers, as Philip explained it to me, have devised a number of solutions to the question of how to capture sound, but they boil down to two: high-tech and low-tech. The high-tech approach is what most people are now used to pretty much

everywhere. It consists of isolating each instrumental and/or human voice in its own acoustic and physical bubble, with one microphone dedicated to recording that single voice on its own "track." An engineer eventually combines all of these tracks in a composite product, but the guiding principle is to keep each sound distinct, and indeed the combination can always be disaggregated into component tracks, because the voices have really been stacked, rather than fused, together. The opposite, low-tech approach, opts for a much more "natural" or life-like recording, one that reproduces the aural experience of someone present at the event more closely. This is because only a few microphones are used, each one intended to capture the sound of several voices at once (and picking up other, ambient sounds as well), with the result that voices blend together in the recording much as they do in normal performance circumstances.

The high-tech method requires a lot of gadgetry—one mic per voice—plus a studio broken up into sonically isolated spaces. When Rick Heizman and I recorded the great harpist Inle Myint Maung and the singer Daw Yi Yi Thant in Rangoon in 2000, we implemented this plan as best we could. The studio where we recorded did have a booth separate from the main recording area. U Myint Maung was persuaded (eventually) to play the harp in the main studio recording space while Daw Yi Yi Thant sat in the booth and sang her part into a microphone so that U Myint Maung could hear her through earphones. But she actually recorded her part afterwards, this time with her wearing headphones listening to the track that U Myint Maung had already recorded. She also recorded the *sì* and *wà* parts separately. Daw Yi Yi Thant, an accomplished recording artist, was familiar with all of

these techniques, and she overcame U Myint Maung's objections by a practiced combination of charm and persistence. Later, though, as I listened to U Myint Maung speak with disappointment of having failed to play at his best because of the highly artificial nature of the circumstances, and hearing Daw Yi Yi Thant explain that for U Myint Maung, great music-making meant sitting face to face and finding inspiration in the mood of the moment, I came to regret the high-tech approach we had adopted in making the recording.

The multi-track model for sound recording has become so much the conventional practice that almost all recording engineers try to approximate it as far as their equipment enables them to do so. U Tin Oo, the owner of the studio in Mandalay where we were making these recordings, had previously tried to conform to the model. He owned something on the order of seventeen microphones, and he would place them near various instruments in the studio when people came to make recordings there. But his studio lacked the many isolated recording booths that would have enabled him to dedicate each track to a separate voice, so that using so many microphones afforded him the chance to raise or lower the prominence of each voice only to a limited degree. In fact, the studio was quite a small space, with only one tiny isolated booth, so there was virtually no way to distinguish tracks.

Philip, I was pleased to find, tries always to take the low road: as few mics, and as little disruption to normal performance practices as possible. That makes it sound easy: just set everything up and let everyone carry on as usual. Of course, it turns out not to be so simple. –Because “normal performance practices” implies the presence of normal human ears, which microphones are not.

Like friends who can't hear the difference between sarcasm, jokes, and straight talk, microphones are unable to listen discriminately: weirdly, they have both perfect pitch and tin ears. To make up for this fact, the art of recording by the “simpler,” low-tech method consists in choosing just which sorts of mic to use, and precisely where to place them. Ending up with a sound that appears “natural” requires very artful planning, and this, it turns out, takes immense patience.

Philip does have such patience. Perhaps sensing (correctly) that I might not, he warned me before we entered the studio that the first evening's recording would proceed very slowly, and that we could not expect to come away with much in the way of keepable tracks. Yes, indeed.

When Philip came back out of the engineer's booth, he moved a microphone a few inches one way, and when he came out a couple of minutes later, after listening to a little more playing, he moved it a few inches another way, and then another microphone a bit this way, and then a bit more that way, and then he moved a singer, and then he moved the flute player, and then he moved the flute player back .... Eventually, he came up with what he felt was a good placement for three mics and the musicians, and we got through a full run-through of the harp-and-vocalist rendering of *Myá Mán Gírí*. After the fourth complete run-through, Philip felt satisfied, as did U Tin Oo. They invited the singer, Saya Lei, the musicians, and Ko Kyaw Kyaw Win and me to come listen to the recording in the recording booth. (We didn't fit, but Philip felt it was important to let the artists decide whether a take met with their approval, and so we did this for each of the pieces we recorded throughout the five nights of recording.) The artists pronounced themselves satisfied.

Then the process started all over again, this time with a different singer and a violinist performing their version of *Myá Mán Giri*.

*Myá Mán Giri* might be compared to Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. A great many people know it, even people who pay little attention to the classical song repertoire in Burma (which is to say, most people in Burma today). And it is relatively brief, which is why Saya Lei thought it would be an appropriate piece with which to illustrate, through a number of renderings, what different singers and instrumentalists made it sound like. Again like Mozart's bagatelle, it barely hints at what riches lie in the larger-scale, more complex works in the repertoire. By the time we had finished making about twelve tracks, in the effort to make recordings of five versions, Philip came over to me and asked me whether I really intended to put so many versions of the one piece out on a single CD. I assured him that it wouldn't seem so grating if it all went by in a matter of a few minutes: each rendering actually only lasts between four and five minutes. But by this point we had spent six or seven hours in the studio, and we were thoroughly sick of this one rather slight piece.

Dealing with the various chamber instruments had not proven too difficult after the initial set-up with the singer and harp. Yes, the violinist had at first sounded too far away, but once Philip positioned him on a chair and seated at exactly the right angle, that was fine. Similarly few adjustments sufficed for the other single instruments, the slide guitar, and the *pa'talâ*. But when it came time to record the song with the *hsain wain*, of course, major rearrangements were required. It would be hard to think of an ensemble more likely to give a recording engineer migraines than the fabulous and improbable array of instruments making up

a *hsain wain*. I have come to think of this ensemble as oddly similar to Burmese grammar: just as the Burmese language constantly stuns me by reversing what I would expect to be expressed by verbs and nouns (e.g., "it is still the beginning of my having finished eating time" for "I just ate"), so a *hsain wain* counters my intuitive sense of what functions different sorts of instruments play. Drums and gongs carrying the melodic line?! That's not what drums and gongs do in most places I can think of. And then there's the *hnè*, the Tasmanian devil of shawms, small but incomparably ferocious.

Philip was particularly preoccupied dealing with two or three component instruments. Drums come in many shapes and sizes in a *hsain wain*. The tuned drums in the drum circle present a challenge in themselves, since about nineteen drums are suspended in a circle and it's important to capture all of them equally. But then there are other drums, providing the rhythmic pulse for the ensemble. Making sure that their voices were present but not overpowering was difficult and required a fair number of tries, moving them forward or back, as well as shifting the placement of microphones. Then there was the matter of the gong rack. The small gong circle, which sounds an endless swirl of soprano notes at dizzying speed, turned out not to pose too many problems. But the larger, flat gongs gave Philip endless headaches. He felt like the deeper, more resonant "gongs" (these are flat sheets of metal suspended by strings to a wooden frame, not the great round gongs we tend to think of in the West) were getting lost in the recordings we were making. Only after dedicating one microphone primarily to picking up the three largest gongs did Philip pronounce himself satisfied. I wasn't sure I could tell what Philip was carrying on about until he had managed to pick them up, and I

had to admit that it did sound much better with their rich, deep sound added to the mix. In the end, Philip managed to come up with an arrangement whereby we used only three mics: two “omnis,” which capture sound from all sides, and one very different sort of mic that catches only the sound from immediately in front of it. This Philip used to make sure he could get the full range of the gong rack.

At the end of the first night’s recording, at just about three in the morning, we came away with five good versions of *Myá Mán Giri*. Driving back to the hotel, Philip said he was pleased with how much we had accomplished. I couldn’t help worrying that we had devoted an entire session to what I thought of as a secondary project. How would the really important project, focusing on theatre music, go? When, for that matter, might we start? Philip reminded me that he had warned that the first session of any recording project has to go slowly in order to get everything right. Patience, I reminded myself, patience: I think of this as the most Buddhist of exhortations. I also think of it as the hardest to implement.

Somewhat superstitious on the subject of sleep—I am as convinced that too little sleep will cause dire damage to one’s health as many Southeast Asians (who can be very casual about sleep) are convinced that exposure to wind puts a person at enormous risk—I got quickly to bed. But it was hard to sleep in the next morning, given that the air conditioning got turned off before nine. Time then to draw upon another superstition: that exercise will help counter the terrible dangers posed by sleep deprivation. So I went for a mild but pleasant swim at Mandalay’s one luxury hotel. Philip and his family and our two other ethnomusicologist companions had agreed to meet up for lunch, and we had a

pleasant Shan meal. But in a pattern we settled into for the duration of our time together, we spent our days doing very little in order to be ready for the enjoyably exhausting activities of our nighttime recording sessions.

The second evening at the studio started out with Saya Lei having the singers record another classical song, one I had spent time learning on a previous stay in Mandalay, *Nàn boun thi ha pwei*. In the case of this song, Saya Lei arranged to have three singers take different sections of the composition, accompanied in turn by various chamber instruments, with the *hsain wain* playing the instrumental interludes that alternate with vocal lines in any classical song. This arrangement does not conform to normal performance practice, but the end result makes for a concise introduction to many of the ways a single Burmese composition can sound. Once everyone was happy with a recording of that piece, we went on to another classical song, this one entitled *Aung Sei Pain Sei*.

It was only late on that second evening that we got started recording theatre music. At last! The first piece was nothing less than thrilling: the “overture,” entitled *Kraun*, with which the *hsain wain* summoned people from far and wide to attend a performance. It consists of two parts. The first is slow and immensely dignified, on the order of the opening to a French baroque opera. The second, longer part is a virtuoso display of musical dexterity, Philip Glass-like in its drive but as melodically inventive as Glass’s music is repetitious. When it was done, I was convinced that those two tracks, if nothing else, would justify the efforts all of us were putting in to make these recordings happen.

In light of the astonishing degree of coordination required to keep the instruments in synch, it was impressive how few takes were needed to record the two sections of *Kraun*, which together totaled more than fifteen minutes of playing. Philip, veteran of countless recording sessions in many locales over the years, remarked on how professional these artists were. At the many points at which he and/or U Tin Oo rang a bell to stop the playing and came charging out of the control room to explain what had gone wrong, no one could be seen to express frustration at the interruption. (I myself did sigh a few times.) In contrast, Philip explained, he had seen musicians in other places try to dissemble the fact that they had made errors in order to get a recording session over faster so they could get home. These musicians seemed, quite the opposite, genuinely invested in making the best recording they could. In this we were all helped by U Tin Oo's considerable knowledge of the repertoire. Listening to headphones in the control room, he could detect a glitch in one of the musical parts that people in the recording space could not hear. Philip has remarkably sensitive ears—and excellent headphones—but of course only someone with intimate knowledge of Burmese music could pick out the fine points in the fabulously richly textured—and loud!—music we were recording.

On the third evening, Wednesday, the musicians rerecorded *Kraun*, to make sure they had a version they all found satisfactory, and then a number of other incidental pieces that would be played at conventional points in a theatrical performance. Sometimes the *hnè*, drum circle, and gong circle played with other instruments providing only a skeletal accompaniment. At other times, the whole ensemble would join in, to raucous and bracing effect. There was music to

accompany scenes featuring the appearance of important personages, scenes in which characters travel on water, and scenes in which someone gets up to something sneaky—this indicated by a hilarious cat-and-mouse introduction on the gong circle and flute. Once again, recording these pieces required remarkably few takes.

A particularly striking display of just how well-trained these musicians were came the following evening, Thursday. The musicians had already recorded two versions of a particular type of theatre piece, called *wei la*, that is played when a character travels on water. But Saya Lei had had an idea: that they retain the identifying rhythmic pattern but substitute a different melodic segment, one taken from a particular classical song. Invoking that particular song, Saya Lei felt, would be appropriate given the content of the storyline of “The Fruits of Evil” that we were about to record. The gong circle player was not familiar with this particular song, however, and would have to learn it. What followed reminded me of stories of how quickly Rossini is said to have composed, although in this case it concerned not composing music but memorizing it. The *hnè* player, U Sein Mya Po, came over to sit in front of the gong circle. He would play fantastically complicated lines of music and the gong circle player, U Eì, would reproduce them exactly. Every now and then U Eì would make a minor slip, U Sein Mya Po would correct him, and they would continue. Hundred of notes—but only about five minutes—later, U Eì said, “Got it” (*Yá pi*), and we were ready to go on! I was all the more astonished when I learned from Saya Lei that these musicians were not an established ensemble, as I had assumed. Saya Lei had simply asked himself who the best players of each of the instruments was and then gone to visit each one in turn, asking them if they would be available on

the dates we had reserved to make the recording. Some of course knew each other and had played together on occasion. But they could play together so effectively because they were so well-versed in a shared tradition.

The authority and prestige of that tradition was also on display in what had occurred just prior to the gong circle player's high-speed tutoring session. When Saya Lei introduced the idea that the musicians would incorporate the melodic line from a particular song into the third version of *lei pei* they recorded, the drum circle (*pa' wain*) player, U Sein Kyaw Din, looked unhappy. The *pa' wain* player is the head of any *hsain wain*. He takes responsibility for what is played and what happens among the musicians in the course of a performance. For a man of U Sein Kyaw Din's age, at least—he was a man in his fifties or sixties, of considerable girth and few words—that meant following the example and expectations of his teachers. After sitting in silence for a while, he finally responded to Saya Lei's direct question as to what he thought about his, Saya Lei's, suggestion, by stating simply that his teachers had never done it. He said it in such a way as to imply that that should be an end to the matter: if his teachers had not performed in a certain way, it was hardly up to him—or anyone else—to tamper with the way things were done. Saya Lei certainly recognized the authority of the argument. He responded in a diplomatic, and I had the impression, probably well-practiced, way. Explaining that we had recorded the standard versions of the piece, he emphasized that we would now try something a bit unusual but not really out of line. To bring to spectators' minds an appropriate song, one whose lyrics resonated fittingly with a particular moment in a play, was very much at the heart of traditional musical practice. Furthermore, he

would make sure that when I wrote liner notes for the CD we eventually released, I would make it clear that this was not the tradition as U Sein Kyaw Din had learned it from his teachers but rather an alternative rendering, a novelty we were trying out. Somewhat mollified, U Sein Kyaw Din declared himself ready to record the music as Saya Lei was recommending. That he was willing to do so, however, did not confuse anyone into thinking that he approved of what was happening.

Later on Thursday evening, it came time for the singers to rejoin the ensemble. Saya Lei was particularly anxious to record several different examples of “weeping songs” (*ngou hcìn*). I worried that too many of these baleful compositions would make for monotony in a recording. Nevertheless, I was curious to hear examples of the genre, since Burmese music enthusiasts always speak of them as the highpoint of the theatre's musical repertoire. As it turned out, I was impressed at how varied they sounded when performed by singers of different ages and temperaments. And I had to laugh, but ruefully, along with the musicians, when one of them said that the reason that people don't perform these songs now—even though so many people hold them in the highest regard—is because there are so many reasons to weep in daily life, people don't want to weep yet again when they go to the theatre.

Two female and two male vocalists had participated in recording the classical songs on our first two nights in the studio. Now that we were recording theatre music, those singers were joined by two more, middle-aged men whose experience in the theatre, Saya Lei thought, made them particularly qualified to represent this repertoire. But I was nervous about one of them, a man whom I had seen rehearsing at Saya Lei's



house. His voice was clearly under strain. A male vocalist in Burma should sing loud; it is often said that a male singer must “shout.” When this singer tried to “shout,” it sounded more desperate than assured. His pitch was poor, and his voice cracked at many points. He explained that he had a cold, but I was concerned that the problems were probably of longer standing than a cold could account for. He sang a “weeping song” (*ngou hcin*), and he was able to disguise some of the difficulties he had sustaining his breath through a line by (appropriately enough) feigning sobs. Still, I was worried. Fortunately, the next recording drove all concerns about him out of mind. A middle-aged woman, Daw Mei Mya’ Kyi, had already impressed me when she recorded *Myá Mán Giri* together with the violinist, U Khin Maung Soe, in our first recording session. But I was hardly prepared for the dramatic intensity and the outpouring of sound she and the *hnè* player, U Sein Mya Po, generated in their rendering of a “long weeping song” (*ngou hcin hyei*). It was another moment of unalloyed excitement, confirming my sense that this classical theatre repertoire deserved dissemination, indeed that it contained real treasures that even those of us unfamiliar with its conventions couldn’t help but find thrilling.

To my astonishment, the following evening Saya Lei told Daw Mei Mya’ Kyi that she should give it another try. He felt that she had not phrased it as well as she could. She made no objection, and her second effort was even more impressive than the first. It is a tribute both to Saya Lei’s judgment, and to the musicians’ professionalism, that they could outdo themselves in this way several times over in the course of the recording sessions.

Astonishingly accomplished, deeply invested in documenting the rich tradition

they see fading away, and endlessly patient as Philip made minor adjustments in the placement of mics, instruments, and the players themselves, these musicians were, nevertheless, incorrigible in one crucial respect: chewing betel. Far be it from me to join the legion of Westerners who have bewailed the Southeast Asian habit of popping a quid of betel into their mouths and then expelling copious amounts of brilliant red spittle. The tobacco and *hsei* (medicine/poison) that get folded into the leaves probably take their toll, but my understanding is that the basic ingredients are good for teeth, bones, and much else, and it’s a far less irksome habit than cigarette smoking. —Except for when silence really, really matters. Now that betel-chewing has been modernized, pre-assembled quids get carried about in little plastic bags, and the consequences get drooled not into spittoons but rather into little plastic bags, as well. The imperceptible scritch-sound of plastic bags being picked up and put down when people are playing instruments at great volume couldn’t possibly interfere with anything else, one would assume. Ah, but those pesky tin-eared mics do pick up the noise, and more than once Philip or U Tin Oo had to come out of the engineer’s booth to look for the offending plastic.

All of us, of course, needed refreshment in the course of these long, enjoyable, but still taxing, late-night recording sessions. So each night, at about midnight or one in the morning, as per Saya Lei’s instructions, people would appear at the studio carrying tea and snacks, delivered from one of Mandalay’s few all-night tea shops—the refreshments all in plastic bags, including the tea that then got poured into whatever cups could be found. We would go sit in the room to the side of the studio itself, or outside on the stoop, and chat. These were

particularly pleasant moments, as the musicians joked and reminisced about their experiences, in the cool evening air. But soon it was time to go back into the studio and get back to work.

Thursday evening's recording session yielded many gems: not only Daw Mei Mya' Kyi's long weeping song, but also another weeping song, this one beautifully (and melodramatically) sung by the retired theatre star, Myo Daw Tin One, whose performance on stage a couple of years before had first suggested to me that recording this repertoire would be a worthwhile project. Another track featured one male and two female singers engaging in banter and song, in the tradition of the "duet" (*hni' pà thwà*) scene that spectators often savored above all others in *za'* performances. There was, though, an awkward moment as the singers prepared to make that recording. In the course of a *hni' pà thwà*, performers give voice to both flowery spoken phrases and snippets of classical songs to represent a couple's flirtatious encounter. In the studio, the two older artists and the lead musicians agreed on what songs they would excerpt. But the younger of the female vocalists, clearly embarrassed, was forced to admit that she didn't know the songs they were naming. It seemed as though some of the musicians had trouble hiding their surprise that she—a well-known and accomplished performer—would turn out not to know some staples of the classical song repertoire. Saya Lei, however, was not surprised: this simply confirmed a point he had made to me many times in conversation, that younger artists were no longer mastering the tradition to which they were heirs. (In this case, "younger" applied to someone not too much under the age of forty.) Eventually, some familiar songs were found that were known to all involved, and the recording proceeded.

A bit past two in the morning, we moved on to what I considered the most problematic of Saya Lei's plans. This was the condensed theatre piece, "The Fruits of Evil," with which he chose to represent an actual performance, rather than individual musical excerpts. But as far as I could tell, it corresponded to nothing actually performed on the stage but rather to a mass mediated form, recordings made by famous troupes in the mid twentieth century in which a story was "performed" on one or a few cassette tapes. In prior discussion with Saya Lei about our plans, I had tried to persuade him that organizing the whole recording project around a representative story would provide a good framework for a CD. But he had explained that doing so would actually constrict things: a story might afford an opportunity to perform one weeping song, but not several; it might include one scene in which a character traveled on water, but then that story line might preclude other types of pieces that had no place in the story but that we would want to record. So Saya Lei had persuaded me to abandon the idea of using one story to lend the tracks on a CD some coherent overall structure.

"The Fruits of Evil," however, did not strike me as a reasonable substitute. In observing Southeast Asian art forms over the past forty years, I have noted with regret an ever greater impulse to cut things short and speed things up. In some cases this means shortening the length of the whole performance. In Java, for example, an all-night shadow play may now end an hour or even several hours earlier than one did when I was attending performances there in the 1970s. However, shortening segments may not really result in shorter performances—just more shenanigans. A Burmese *za'* still lasts till well past sun-up. It just doesn't contain long, classical scenes of dance and singing like it once did—the sorts of scenes I found

so compelling—but rather lots of pop music and soap opera. By the same token, a performance I had seen of the Ramayana as staged by the Mandalay Ministry of Culture dance troupe had both delighted and saddened me: it had delighted me because of the stunning beauty of many moments in the course of their performance, and it had saddened me because they had tried to condense the entire epic into two hours of dance. The moments of breathtakingly graceful movement were hard to enjoy fully, as a result, because no scene lasted more than a moment or two. The consistently frenzied pace of this and many other performances in contemporary Southeast Asia directly counters much that is distinctive and satisfying about the region's aristocratic, originally court-based genres, which often develop the aesthetics of restraint to a dazzling degree. Granted, I have fidgeted and yawned—or slept—through many a *longueur* in Javanese, Balinese, and Burmese performances in my time. I just don't believe that popular culture provides the ideal means to resolving problems with timing, whether in shadow plays, folk drama, dance drama, puppet shows, or any other Southeast Asian form that appears to be losing its audience.

To lend my support, even if only as a producer, to "The Fruits of Evil," in its frenetically-paced dash through melodramatic moments to a melodramatic dénouement, made me very uncomfortable. Hoping to head Saya Lei off, I had pointed out to him that for an audience that didn't speak Burmese, long segments of dialogue would hold little interest. Saya Lei took this point seriously and reduced the script, already extremely concise, still further. In the end, the result of our discussions was that what had already looked to me like a plucked bird seemed to have lost whole swaths of flesh. Toward the end of

Thursday's recording session, with our scheduled recording time running out, it was time to see if this bird could fly.

Amazingly, Myo Daw Tin One and Ma Mung Mung Aung, troupers that they are, got through "The Fruits of Evil" in one flawless take. Twelve minutes and forty-two seconds of super-condensed Burmese musical and theatrical practices: a perfect instance of everything I bemoan in the contemporary arts of Southeast Asia. Philip, noting my dismay, reminded me that making the recording was not the same thing as releasing it on a CD. Riding in the car back to our hotel, Ko Kyaw Kyaw Win, meanwhile, exclaimed at how much he liked it, since so many different songs and conventional elements of a performance got included in its brief span. Of course, that was both the value and the drawback of the whole exercise. A truly knowledgeable listener could appreciate the evocations, however brief, of many traditional elements, and might enjoy it as one enjoys an elaborate Indian miniature. What came to my mind was the records containing "the hundred greatest melodies of classical music" advertised on tv in my youth (and aptly parodied in Mike Nichols' and Elaine May's routine, "the hundred greatest square inches of Western art").

Listening to the track now, with months to recover from my dismay, I find myself coming around. Still both impossibly miniaturized and completely over the top, it fails to fulfill any of my aesthetic preferences. Yet it does illustrate elements of Burmese theatrical style, which was an aim I had in planning this project. Myo Daw Tin One's opening weeping song is appropriately desperate, and both he and Ma Mung Mung Aung provide several examples of the way performers play on the divide between speech and song, an intriguing and

distinctive Burmese theatrical device. Perhaps the track does deserve release on a CD. I will have to reflect on this further. Or perhaps I'll have to test market it, asking sympathetic listeners with no knowledge of the Burmese arts whether they find anything of interest in it.

Our last recording session, Friday evening, started with singers rerecording pieces they felt they could do better. The man whose performance of a weeping song had been marred by a cold was in better voice. His problems in breath control remained, but his performance overall was much more satisfying, to everyone's relief, especially his. Myo Daw Tin One wanted to take another try on a weeping song he had recorded. I remarked casually that Philip and I had found the earlier take already very impressive. By saying this, I unintentionally threw everything into confusion. Ko Tin One hesitated: did I mean that he shouldn't rerecord it? Finally, Saya Lei was able to make it clear that I was only trying to express support, not to put a stop to his effort to do still better. I reminded myself that my responsibility was to get out of the way and let people get on with the business at hand.

Saya Lei had told me in earlier discussions that he hoped to be able to include artists from the marionette (*yu' thei*) tradition in our recordings, if time permitted, since its musical repertoire differs in some respects from that for *za'*. I was enthusiastic about this prospect and mentioned that I had heard quite a wonderful woman singing with Daw Ma Ma Naing's troupe on earlier trips to Mandalay. Saya Lei knew who this was but explained that the woman was no longer performing with that troupe. He knew the woman's husband, however, and would ask him, U Tin Saung, to look into the possibility of her joining us. It turned out

that she had returned to their village, quite far from Mandalay, and since it was unclear whether we would indeed be able to take time to record her, it seemed ill-advised for U Tin Saung to travel all the way there, and for her to make the long trip into the city. However, U Tin Saung knew of another woman living here in Mandalay who was also well-versed in the puppet repertoire. This turned out to be Daw Mei Mya' Kyi, whose performance of a *za'* weeping song had dazzled us all. Now, in our last recording session, we had accomplished everything Saya Lei had planned so efficiently that we had time to fit in some music from the marionette tradition. U Tin Saung was a veteran from the last great puppet troupe in Mandalay, led by the late Shwebo U Tin Maung, and he delivered himself of a long scene as it would have been performed in the old days. This was a nearly twenty-minute long *tour de force*, in which he spoke and then sang heartrending weeping songs, joined at one point by Daw Mei Mya' Kyi. Neither of them is young, but both have powerful voices and they perform with the assurance of truly accomplished artists. They managed to record the whole scene in only three takes. Daw Mei Mya' Kyi then sang one more short song from the puppet repertoire, and shortly after three in the morning, we were done.

The fatigue and excitement we felt heading back to the hotel through Mandalay's quiet streets was mixed with a certain regret that it was now over: there would be no more nights filled with the extravagantly lively music of the Burmese theatre. The next day Philip announced with pleasure that we had come away with close to three hours of good quality tracks, a remarkable accomplishment for just five days of work. And only two weeks later, after we had all scattered to different points on the globe, Philip wrote to

say that he had been in touch with the head of the Archives de la Musique Populaire in Geneva who was interested in putting out at least two CD's of the music we had recorded. This was great news: I had feared that it might take us years to find anyone willing to release CD's of Burmese music, a genre whose market share is no way commensurate with its extraordinary richness.

The irony, of course, is that it seemed important to make the recordings precisely because this unique and beautiful music is no longer popular. Indeed, a moment from the recording sessions stands out in my memory as particularly poignant for just that reason. During one of our late night snack breaks, I talked with U Sein Mya Po, the delightful man who played flute and *hnè*, and asked him how it felt to play this music now. He said that he and the others were enjoying themselves a good deal, because they never got a chance to play this music anymore. Doing so, he said, reminded them of their teachers and of the people of their grandparents' generation who had passed away. It made them aware of their *thi'sa* (devotion and indebtedness) to them, and made them long for them.

Ward Keeler, University of Texas

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## **BURMA STUDIES CONFERENCE 2006**

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*Here is the official overview of the upcoming Burma Studies Conference in Singapore. Further details about the program, and the scale of fees, are to be found at the following web site: <http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/conf2006/bsc2006.htm> The Editor*

The Asia Research Institute and the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences are pleased to announce that the biennial International Burma Studies Conference will convene in Singapore on July 13-15, 2006. This session's theme, "Communities of Interpretation", seeks to recognize and explore the various ways in which the idea of Myanmar/Burma has come to be epistemologically understood in contemporary times. The field of Burma Studies and the knowledge that supports it has been produced through a variety of historical, economic, cultural, and political contexts, each adding important and sometimes competing ways of thinking about what has and what has not come to define Myanmar/Burma. Within these contexts, communities of interpreters have all contributed to its representation by imagining it through key issues, questions, paradigms, agendas, institutions and themes, effectively shaping the way in which we have interpreted and constructed the Myanmar/Burma we know today. We hope to investigate not what constitutes "Burmeseness" but rather how it has come to be known through those who write about, build, lead, criticize, sculpt, resist, perform in and travel to Burma. In doing so, this conference seeks to embrace intellectual and phenomenological diversity by exploring the Communities of Interpretation that have contributed to the conceptualizing of Myanmar/Burma.

Participants have been asked to consider the ways in which Myanmar/Burma has come to be known, produced, and understood through history, anthropology, politics, economics, sociology, art, religion, popular culture, media, and literature. Specifically, we encouraged panels and papers that explore how communities—scholars, colonial administrators, missionaries, politicians, artists, writers, students,

musicians, villages, kings, leaders, ethnic groups and nations—have shaped multiple images of Burma/Myanmar that often reflect particular perceptions of the Burmese past, the present, and its possible futures. The conference organizers have welcomed presentations that rigorously investigate the nature of these communities, the basis for these linkages and their overall role in the fashioning of Burma/Myanmar. The list of functioning panels will hopefully reflect some of the diverse and interesting ways in which Burma has come to be understood by interpretive communities throughout the world.

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## BURMA UPDATE

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*People who feel like three days of conference presentations concerning Burma will only get them started can take one day's rest and then start right in again, when, on July 17, the Burma Update convenes at the Institute for South East Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore. Here is an overview of the event. Further details about the program are available at the following web address: <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/events.htm>*  
*The Editor*

2006 Myanmar/Burma Update Conference  
Co-sponsored by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore and the Australian National University (ANU), Canberra

To be held at ISEAS in Singapore  
(Monday) 17-(Tuesday) 18 July 2006

Since the dramatic October 2004 leadership changes in Myanmar/Burma, there has been little movement in the political situation. How the national reconciliation process

might move forward, how it might produce a new constitution, and the timing and nature of the subsequent referendum, all remain key unresolved issues. Early clarification of these questions does not seem to be a priority for the military government, leading to greater than ever pessimism and skepticism on the part of pro-democracy political groups and the populace at large. But all of this makes conjecture about likely future political developments less rewarding than usual.

The government in Yangon faces serious political challenges on several fronts. Reported attempts by several Shan political parties to proclaim the independence of Shan State led to the arrest and charging of several Shan leaders, most of whom had for many years opted for less confrontational, non-violent tactics, and open splits among Shan militia groups. A resumption or renewal of fighting between government and insurgent forces along the border with Thailand underlines the unresolved nature of this long-standing conflict. Allegations of use of chemical weapons against insurgents on the border with Thailand also remain unverified and un-investigated and allegations of serious human rights abuses by the army continue to be reported. Meanwhile, unprecedented, coordinated bombings in Mandalay and Yangon in April/May 2005, resulting in numerous deaths, have highlighted the government's problems in maintaining security and in apprehending the perpetrators of such incidents. How well the military authorities cope with all these challenges has not yet been the subject of any substantial analysis.

Overall government effectiveness seems to have been compromised across the board. In addition to the serious breaches in internal security, the economy continues to be moribund with investment and tourism

staggering along at lower than optimum levels. Western sanctions and informal campaigns against foreign investment continue to make small inroads, and living standards and disposable incomes decline as prices climb and the value of the domestic currency fell. Cumulatively, the manifestations of economic decline became even more apparent despite government claims of double-digit GDP growth. Evidence of any readiness to embrace economic reforms, even of the kinds adopted successfully by China or Vietnam, is lacking, and the prospects for effective engagement with the government about the options for changes in economic policy seem to be more remote than ever.

New development schemes such as the development of offshore gas deposits via a pipeline across Bangladesh to India, highways linking Myanmar to regional road networks, and proposals for the construction of a major new dam on the Thanlwin (Salween) River, offer prospects for infrastructure development, but are criticized for their inappropriate environmental and social impacts.

Concerns are growing about the cumulative effect of years of neglect of Myanmar's natural resource endowment and its natural environment. The endangerment of Burma's entire mangrove eco-system, the environmental, economic and social effects of logging, natural resource and wildlife depletion, energy and pollution issues, are examples of urgent national problems that will have significant and lasting consequences for Myanmar/Burma in the twenty-first century.

Myanmar/Burma's decision to give up its turn at chairing ASEAN will remain a prominent issue both for ASEAN and for the government in Yangon. The implications of

this for neighboring countries, the impact - if any - on the process of reform and change in Myanmar/Burma deserve considered analysis. To what extent can membership of a growing regional organization be a catalyst for change in any circumstances?

These are the main themes that will be covered in the 2006 Myanmar/Burma Update. In format, the Update Conference differs from an academic studies conference in its explicit focus on contemporary issues, in deliberately limiting itself to trying to provide an analysis of recent developments, and its stronger emphasis on the policy implications of these developments.

Interested persons are welcome to register on-line for attendance and the closing date is 9 June 2006. Registration is free but participants should make their own arrangements for travel, accommodations and meals during the conference as the organizers are unable to extend any logistical support