

Sources for Understanding Myanmar

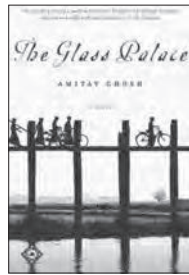
By Guven Witteveen

Considering Myanmar's mineral and cultural wealth, it has not been easy to study nor common to discuss the many societies there. Access to information, stories, and lives in Myanmar has markedly improved since 2010, when the US rekindled official and informal relations in Burma, as they refer to the country. Entrepreneurs, tourists, and scholars also have engaged with people and organizations there more and more. One result has been the need for useful sources of current conditions, as well as ways to understand the cultural context, which includes the texture and rhythm of life for the scores of ethnic nationalities located in the state of Myanmar. The 135 ethnic groups number fewer than Indonesia (300-plus) or Papua New Guinea (over 800 languages), but more than China (56) or Azerbaijan (15). This review divides sources into three categories for understanding the social conditions and governance: observations by outsiders, writings by expatriate authors from Myanmar, and visual sources to explore. Because cultural and geographic context is fundamental to understanding the place and the

people, courses for any grade level and all social sciences gain from this set of sources.

NonNative Writers in Print

Starting with an early account, Helen G. Trager's *Burma through Alien Eyes: Missionary Views of the Burmese in the Nineteenth Century* was published in 1966 while the leaders of the coup d'état reigned. The reader travels back through time to understand early colonial initiatives from Britain and the lives of those dedicating themselves to engaging with the local people and languages in Burma. Patricia Elliott's *The White Umbrella* (2002) presents the life of Sao Hearn Hkam, a Burmese princess and wife to the country's first president, Sao Shwe Thaik. She was a tireless fighter for the freedom of the Burmese people. *The Glass Palace* (2009) is a novel by Amitav Ghosh set in the last generation of the 1800s, when the kingdom of Burma was shattered by British initiatives. The detail and dialogue make those



events come alive again. John Falconer and Luca Invernizzi Tettoni's *Myanmar Style: Art, Architecture, and Design of Burma* (1998) is a visual smorgasbord of material culture and craft traditions, past and present. The 500 photos go beyond surfaces with chapters that explore the presence of religion in daily life and work. Pico Iyer's 1988 collection of essays, *Video Night in Kathmandu*, includes one relating to Myanmar, "The raj is dead! Long live the raj!" Social change and inroads of Western society are prominent in the scenes he presents.

Writing about organizations at the community and nongovernmental level, Brian Heidel documents social change in *The Growth of Civil Society in Myanmar* (2006). Ingrid Jordt wrote *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddha and the Cultural Construction of Power* (2007). Her ten years of fieldwork create vivid discussion of political machinations and individual responses to the authoritarian powers. Christina Fink looked at the lives of ordinary people in her account, *Living Silence in Burma* (2009). Taking a wider view, Trevor Wilson and

MYANMAR

Geography and Population

Area: 261,227 square miles; slightly smaller than Texas

Population: 56 million

Government

Freedom House rating from "Freedom in the World 2015" (ranking of political rights and civil liberties in 195 countries): Not Free

Type: Parliamentary government

Chief of State and Head of Government: President Thein Sein (since February 3, 2011)

Elections: President is chosen by parliament from three vice presidents; Upper House, Lower House, and military each nominate one vice president, who serves a five-year term

Legislative branch: Bicameral; Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities, Upper House, 224 seats) and Pythu Hluttaw (House of Representatives, Lower House, 440 seats); members of both serve five-year terms

Judicial highest courts: Supreme Court of the Union (chief justice and seven to eleven judges)

Judges: Chief justice and judges nominated by president, approved by the Pythu Hluttaw, and serve until mandatory retirement at seventy

Economy

Myanmar is in the process of enacting major economic reforms but continues to rank as one of Asia's poorest countries and experiences vast amounts of economic corruption.

GDP: \$244.3 billion

Per Capita Income: \$4,800

Unemployment Rate: 5.1 percent

Population Below Poverty Line: 32.7 percent

Inflation Rate: 6.6 percent

Agricultural Products: Rice, pulses (legumes), beans, sesame, fish

Industries: Agricultural processing, wood products, copper, tin, iron, cement, oil, natural gas

Society

Religion: 89 percent Buddhist, 4 percent Christian, 4 percent Muslim

Life Expectancy: Almost 66 years

Literacy Rate: 92.7 percent

Major Contemporary Issues

Human trafficking: Myanmar is a source of both labor and sex trafficking. Myanmar is listed as Tier 2 by the US Department of State, meaning that the country does not fully comply with the standards of the department's Trafficking Victims Protection Act but is making efforts to do so. Trafficking is also used in recruiting child soldiers by the military. The UN has helped secure the release of some child soldiers, but the government does not prevent their recruitment.

Political Freedom: Most notably, the military in the last two decades has oppressed the political freedom of the opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Recent changes now allow for the NLD and Suu Kyi to participate in elections, and Suu Kyi is now a member of parliament. The next round of elections will be held this year.

Drugs: Myanmar is the world's third-largest producer of illicit opium.

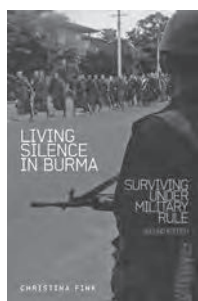
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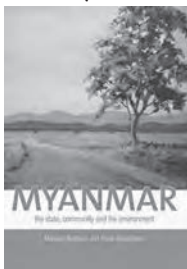
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Special Segment: Teaching Southeast Asia

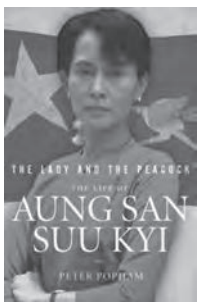


Monique Skidmore wrote *Myanmar: The State, Community, and the Environment* (2011). They recount the absence of cooperation between government and opposition groups in economic development and environmental management. The most narrowly

focused book on governance is Mary P. Callahan's *Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority States: Devolution, Occupation, and Coexistence* (2007). The three approaches in the subtitle are examined in detail. The complement to Callahan is Bertl Lintner's *Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (1990), telling as it does of events leading to the 1988 uprisings. The systematic destruction of villages of ethnic minorities and resulting displaced persons is the subject of Maggie Lemere and Zoë West's *Nowhere to Be Home* (2011), which comprises twenty-two oral histories. Rory MacLean's *Under the Dragon* (2008) is a sort of Studs Terkel, interview-based account of 1990s life in the Golden Triangle around Rangoon, Mandalay, and Bagan.



A much more indirect reflection of the social conditions comes from Heather MacLachlan. She touches on the living hearts of many people in Myanmar, particularly the young people in urban centers, in her book *Burma's Pop Music Industry: Creators, Distributors, Censors* (2011).



Peter Popham presents the life of Aung San Suu Kyi in *The Lady and the Peacock* (2012), which documents the high price she has paid for peaceful revolution in the country.

Not to be overlooked are the standard references, too, such as the *CIA World Factbook*, <http://tinyurl.com/wfb-mm>, or the family of Wikipedia sites (media files at Wikimedia Commons, news stories at Wikinews, quotations at Wikiquote, primary sources at Wikisource, textbooks at Wikibooks, other resources at Wikiversity). It is important to always remember Wikipedia entries can vary dramatically, so check the source carefully before utilizing it. The foot of the Wikipedia article for "Burma," as well as "Outline of Burma," includes scores of references and numerous external links. The recent development of entire

sets of linked Wikipedia articles into "Wikipedia books" found near the end of a main article near "portal" concentrates all the experience, breadth, and depth onto the mobile device, desktop, or laptop. Myanmar's pages have yet to be gathered up in this way. Meanwhile, at Amazon.com, the "readers of this book also bought these titles" service can be used as an expedient way to turn up emerging titles or discover authors. Their "look inside" function allows a quick sense of a book from its table of contents, and from the first few pages, its writing style can be sampled. Older titles or books too specialized for Amazon sometimes can be found at Google Scholar (scholar.google.com) or Google Books (books.google.com).

Insider Authors in Print

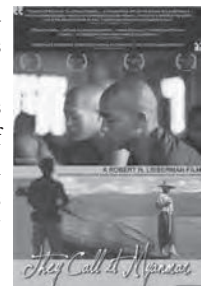
Among the handful of English-language sources that come from the hand of local scholars and writers living outside Myanmar is Khin Myo Chit, who wrote *Colourful Myanmar* (1995) to convey the beauty and essence of Burmese cultural logic. Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi wrote a series of letters for the *Mainichi Shimbun Newspaper* (Japan), *Letters from Burma* (1997, <http://tinyurl.com/pupfhy5l>), to document the rippling effects of state oppression on all levels and facets of social life there. Pascal Khoo Thwe's *From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey* (2002) is a tale of a tribal youth who meets an Englishman in Mandalay and eventually becomes the first of his people to study in the UK, despite great obstacles. In 2006, Thant Myint-U wrote *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma* using his own family's history as a lens to understand the changes across the country generation by generation. Finally, there is Zoya Phan, who tells the true story of persecution of her Karen people in *Little Daughter: A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West* (2009).

Visual Sources

The immediacy of sound makes video selections especially valuable for forming impressions and stirring curiosity among students of Myanmar. The Asian Educational Media Service (aems.uiuc.edu) lists 61 titles at their online catalog for either Burma or Myanmar. Some have reviews; most may be borrowed. Sources online for video include professional documentaries in the Amazon Instant Video section such as *Burma Displaced* (2010, 60 minutes), about diasporic lives after the August 8, 1988, demonstrations and the tragedies that followed. The other one in



the Instant Video catalogue is called *Myanmar* (2006, 75 minutes), which outlines the slide from rich country to poor. The only Myanmar video (apart from travel genre) on Netflix is the 2012 story *They Call it Myanmar: Lifting the Curtain* (82 minutes). Much of the director's talking with poor villagers gives a candid and closeup view of people's lives there.



Amateurs as well as professionals are authors of valuable multimedia, such as the annual prizewinners of the visual essays at <http://tinyurl.com/nju5ujo>, produced since 2008. Subjects of the five- to ten-minute-long stories include riots, boat breakers, Buddhist nuns, a former movie star, poppy production, gay marriage, disability and workplace, and animist exorcism. At Vimeo.com, there are mainly four- to five-minute stories by travelers and video enthusiasts, some with music and others with natural sound only. The ever-changing titles at YouTube may also yield some glimpses to illustrate a place or topic, or practice with the search words "Burma," "Myanmar," or names of the larger ethnic groups there ("Burmese" or "Myanma," "Shan," "Kayin," or "Rakhine"). Popular music is another window to life today. Heather MacLachlan's 2011 book includes links to cover band videos in Myanmar. At <http://tinyurl.com/mm2011pop>, there is a playlist of this popular music from Myanmar to browse. Distributors of Myanmar CD recordings include Smithsonian Folkways, Shanachie, Air Mail Music, Sublime Frequencies, and Ummus.

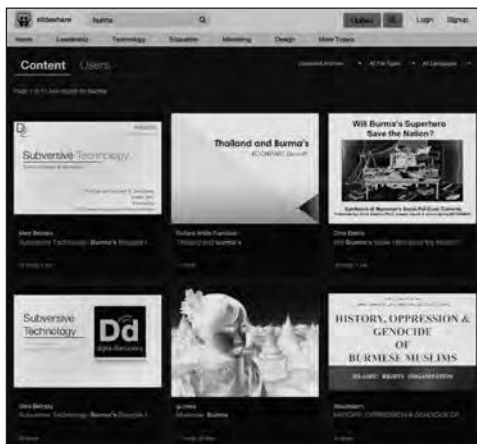
One of the biggest labors of love has been the long-term project by Richard K. Diran, *Vanishing Tribes of Burma* (1997), to portray the diverse peoples of the river plains, the highlands, and mountains of this part of Southeast Asia. His large-format book has 200 illustrations and describes twenty-eight of the 135 ethnicities (grouped into eight major families) who live and work in this part of the world. From start to finish, the project spanned fifteen years. In some ways, it is reminiscent of Edward S. Curtis's continental project 100 years ago to portray American Indians, which combines beauty, respect, and informed writing to reach a wide audience of readers, both generalist and specialist.

Several tools built into the photo sharing site Flickr.com recommend this visual source for educational purposes, as well. Most content



Myanmar Photographic Society photo page at <http://tinyurl.com/klso2vg>.

is pictures, but short videos can also be hosted there. Searching the themed user groups with names like “Myanmar Photographic Society members” or “Burma images” or “Burma-Myanmar land on the map” will turn up streams of images. Alternatively, one can use the search box to find images tagged with keywords of one’s own choosing, whether they reside in or out of the user groups. Finally, there is the geo-tag tool found in the “explore” tab called World Map. On this screen, one can zoom into a spot in Myanmar to view all images that have been pinned to the given location. The search box there at top right takes one directly to the location. Zooming or dragging the map to adjust the view is possible here, too, but this then requires the person to press “refresh” at lower center to repopulate the view with the latest images pinned to the map. At Google Maps, the coverage of “street view” for Myanmar varies in quality despite that company’s attempts in 2013 to reach out to Myanmar personally. Between Flickr, Google Maps, and video sharing sites like Vimeo, one can form a mental picture of the people and livelihoods within Myanmar’s boundaries today.



SlideShare.net Burma page at <http://tinyurl.com/mf37ehw>.

Finally, there is the wide pool of visual materials hosted at SlideShare.net, where PDF, video, documents, and slide presentations are sorted, searchable, and viewable. Examples of presentations tagged Myanmar include topics ranging from history and heritage to economics, military, religion, and politics.

With the incredible growth of the Internet, what was rare or difficult to discover about another language, society, or unfolding events is

now tending to the opposite problem: there is often too much information. Thanks to the social aspect of communication, word of mouth and the experiences of fellow teachers or students become living filters to choose among the many existing and newly emerging sources. The best recommendation to offer readers is perhaps the oldest one: to ask peers about the sources they value. Those spotlighted here span a wide range of Myanmar’s society and academic disciplines. But as a sampling of where to search and the sorts of things there to find, I hope this article serves as a useful tour of the rich sources for becoming better informed for one’s own study of Myanmar. As a wellspring of natural, linguistic, and cultural diversity, Myanmar is a study in contrasts and the unfolding processes of global integration and engagement.

The community of experts for Myanmar is small but dedicated. Specific inquiries to any of these specialists should give rich results. Prominent Southeast Asian Studies centers at Northern Illinois (tinyurl.com/mm2015niu), Hawai’i (tinyurl.com/mm2015uhi), Cornell (tinyurl.com/mm2015cornell), and Harvard (tinyurl.com/mm2015harvard) produce valuable resources, too. This review of print, electronic, and visual sources provides a doorway big enough for most people to enter the subject. Recommend your own sources for the online list at <http://tinyurl.com/mm2015add> so that others may see. The aggregated sources will be at <http://tinyurl.com/mm2015listing>. ■

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