

The Online Burma-Myanmar Library

www.burmalibrary.org

Internet >
Burma

The Online Burma/Myanmar Library is actually a database which functions as an annotated, classified, and hyperlinked index to full texts of individual Burma documents on the Internet. It also houses a growing collection of articles, conference papers, theses, books, reports, archives, and directories on-site (e.g. the 17MB archive of the Burma Press Summary). Its librarian presently requests help from specialists to refine the structure and add to the content.

By David Arnott

The Internet currently holds in excess of 100,000 Burma-related documents, from short news items to complete books, scattered over more than 400 websites (not all of which have internal search functions) run by the UN, state governments, academic institutions, media, listserv archives, human rights organizations and other NGOs, activist groups, and so forth. The volume of information is growing rapidly as more and more organizations choose to publish on the Internet. Even using modern search engines, it is difficult and time-consuming to research this widely scattered material.

There is clearly a need for a central index, which is exactly what the Online Burma Library seeks to provide. Launched in October 2001, it is organized on a database (using MySQL software, in combination with PHP) into fifty top-level categories based on traditional library classifications, with a hierarchy of some 350 subcategories. These hold approximately 2,300 links (mostly annotated with keywords and descriptions) to individual documents, and links to the approximate 400 websites, giving access to roughly another 100,000 documents. The database allows rapid searching in all or specific fields – description or keyword, date, language, title, author, source or publisher, and so on. It is also possible to browse through the subject hierarchies or to use the simple alphabetical list of all categories and subcategories to find specific material. We are using the Greenstone digital library software

to build the collection of documents housed on-site. This software allows full-text searching, though at present only the Burma Press Summary fully uses this feature (we would like to hear from people who have experience with this software).

Building the Library

Historically, the Library's starting point was the Burma Peace Foundation's documentation of the human rights situation in Burma, and this material still comprises about half of the total number of items. This ratio is falling as the other sections are built up: Bibliographies/research, Economy, Geography, Health, History, Military, Politics and Government, Society and Culture, and so forth. Specialists in such areas are invited to provide various levels of input, from giving the librarian comments on the structure, sending him the web addresses (URLs) of online items that should be added, e-mailing documents to be placed directly on the site, to editing whole sections or subsections. Editing can be done online from any computer with web access. Several scholars have already agreed to work on particular sections. We trust that more will offer their assistance and that these will include people from Burma so that the Library can develop sections in the different languages of Burma.

With regard to Burma-related documents in electronic form which are not on the Internet, the Library encourages owners (individuals, organizations, or academic institutions) to place them on their own websites and send the URLs to the librar-

ian, or send them to be placed directly on the Library site. Important documents which do not exist in electronic form, and which are not listed for digitization by any library, will eventually be typed or scanned in and housed on the Library.

We would like to hear from librarians who are digitizing collections which contain texts relating to Burma, especially if these will be on open access. Not only do we hope to hear which documents have been digitized, with URLs, but also which are in line for digitizing. If necessary, the Library could maintain a page listing the latter, as a means of reducing duplication, and providing suggestions for setting priorities. We urge digital librarians and the producers of online periodicals with mixed content to give each document an individual URL wherever possible, for direct access, as a public resource is enhanced if users can link directly to individual documents without having to go through the process of searching or browsing.

Since its launch in the beginning of October 2001, the Online Burma/Myanmar Library has received an enthusiastic welcome from a wide range of users, from senior Burma experts to student activists. The Asian Studies WWW Monitor gave the Library the highest possible rating (five stars and 'Scholarly usefulness: Essential'). The librarian hopes that those involved in Burma research will welcome and use this new resource and help to develop its structure and content. <



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