

# Burma-Myanma(r) Research and Its Future

## Implications for Scholars and Policymakers

Report >  
Southeast Asia

21–25 September  
2002  
Gothenburg, Sweden

By Donald M. Seekins

The end of Ne Win socialism and the emergence of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as the leader of the democratic movement in 1988 attracted a younger generation of researchers. However, an atmosphere of crisis and uncertainty continues to afflict Burma today. Among scholars, controversies over whether or not to engage academically with the military regime (now known as the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC) have become intense and often bitter. Thus, Burma Studies faces serious obstacles compared with other country-specific fields, such as Thai or Indonesian Studies.

Its non-mainstream and highly contested nature is not without advantages. Old and young, Burma scholars tend to be hardy survivors who have a strong personal commitment to their subject area. Many are ‘renaissance people’ and independent scholars whose interests are strongly interdisciplinary. Outside of major academic or metropolitan cen-

Within Asian Studies, Burma/Myanmar Studies has occupied a somewhat marginal position since 1962, when General Ne Win established his ‘Burmese Road to Socialism’. Fearful of foreign influences, the government denied overseas-based scholars opportunities to conduct fieldwork, or in-country archival research. With few exceptions, indigenous scholarship was neglected, or even systematically repressed. Once a flourishing field, Burma Studies languished, despite the efforts of an older generation of specialists who had worked in the country before 1962 and continued to make important contributions.

tres, however, they are usually isolated, with few opportunities (apart from online communications) to exchange ideas or collaborate on research projects. Burma scholars in Europe or the United States often have little idea of the work done by their counterparts in Southeast Asia, Japan, or China. Also, the contributions of a post-1988 generation of overseas Burmese scholars are often unappreciated.

Given this background, the conference on ‘Burma-Myanma(r) research and its future: implications for scholars and policymakers’ represents an important turning point. Held at the Great Hall of Gothenburg University in Gothenburg, Sweden over a period of four days, it drew some 200 participants, representing both older and younger generations of Burma experts. There were twenty subject-specific panels, dealing with a wide range of areas: librarians and library resources, education, human resource management, sustainable development, law and the constitution, state and society, Burmese migrants abroad, ethnic

diversity, health and HIV, economic transitions, Buddhism, *nat* cults, pictorial art, nineteenth- and twentieth-century history, and Burma-China relations, among others. There were also ‘open panels’ for papers that were high quality, but not easily categorized. Some papers were given in a confidential context, with most papers accessible online to participants.

Among the many highlights were: a discussion panel led by representatives of the pre-1962 generation of scholars; a keynote discussion panel featuring Chao-Tzang Yawnghwe and F.K. Lehman on the connection between scholarship and activism; the screening of a recent Burmese film on the Anglo-Burmese Wars, *Never we shall be enslaved*, and excerpts of two Thai films, *Bang Rajan* and *Suriyothai*, showing popular Thai perceptions of Thai-Burma relations; and an address by Thet Tun, former Burmese ambassador to France and a United Nations’ official, on ‘economic lessons from the past’. James C. Scott spoke on the formation of highland communities as ‘non-state spaces’ in South-

east Asia. And finally at the close of the conference, a discussion panel on ‘Diplomacy: The nature of dialogue and reconciliation’, chaired by David Steinberg, was especially interesting in light of the May 2002 release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and hopes that she and the SPDC can begin negotiations to achieve political transition.

The Gothenburg conference brought together a larger and more diverse group of people than had attended previous Burma Studies events. They included not only academics and independent scholars but also non-government organization representatives, many with extensive experience on the ground in Burma, journalists, and researchers based at governmental and non-governmental think tanks. Attendees represented practically every region of Asia, Europe, and North America. Asian participants presented sixty-two papers, almost half the total, and the younger generation of overseas Burmese scholars was particularly well represented.

The conference organizers, based at Gothenburg University, worked hard to promote an atmosphere of inclusiveness and political neutrality, where all kinds of opinions could be represented. The lively and sometimes contentious atmosphere provided ample evidence that they succeeded. The 2002 meeting should serve as a model for future

Burma Studies events in at least four ways. Firstly, rather than being centred at a single location, different venues should be sought for the biannual Burma Studies Group meetings, chosen on the basis of their overall attractiveness and accessibility to the widest range of participants. Secondly, people with diverse Burma-related interests and experiences should be proactively included, not only academics. Thirdly, the four-day format should be maintained, so that participants can get to know each other and their viewpoints. Finally, political neutrality should be preserved and financial support thus accepted from reputable sources only. Gothenburg was an excellent venue, a city with a pleasant physical environment and a truly ‘civil’ society. <

*Dr Donald M. Seekins is Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at Mejo University, Okinawa, Japan. Last year he published a book on Burma's recent history, The Disorder in Order: The Army-State in Burma Since 1962. kenchan@ii-okinawa.ne.jp*

Info >

Full details of the conference are available at: [www.therai.org.uk/anthcal/myanmarburma2002.html](http://www.therai.org.uk/anthcal/myanmarburma2002.html)