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I am pleased that we have such a variety of pieces for this issue: we hear from Burma scholars telling us about their individual projects and research, while others tell about their collaborative projects. We also have a the first book review that the Bulletin has seen in a while, a review of a cookbook.

Two thousand fourteen proved to be an eventful year for Burma studies. Perhaps most importantly was the Burma Studies Conference in Singapore in August. For those of us who have been going to the conference regularly over the past years, the change to such an upscale venue was unprecedented – gone was indifferent canteen food, replaced by all manner of fried and steamed Chinese snacks. Attendance was good, despite the costs. The organizers of the conference this year made special efforts to bring in a number of prominent representatives from the Burmese government, civil society, and literary world, who spoke at both the opening and closing sessions. These voices from the inside helped bring a kind of balance to the actual sessions, where it was—depending on the topic—often largely non-Burmese who were speaking.

At the same time, 2014 also saw a number of conferences and workshops inside Burma itself. The Southeast Asian Linguistics Society (SEALS) had their annual meeting at Yangon University in May, and in July, Rutgers held a joint workshop with the History Department, as Chie Ikeya and Tharaphi Than tell us about.

Looking forward to our next issue, I would like repeat that I always welcome submissions, especially from inside Burma. If you or someone you know is doing something that the rest of us should know about, please write us. Our style is meant to be informal – think less “works cited” and footnotes and more how you would talk to your friends and colleagues about what you’ve been up to.

Patrick McCormick
Researcher and Representative
École Française d’Extrême-Orient
(EFEQ, “French School of the Far East”)
Institut Française en Birmanie (former Alliance Française)
340 Pyay Road, Sanchaung Township, Yangon
mramyong@gmail.com
Burma: Rivers of Flavor
Duguid, Naomi (2012), New York: Artisan

By Rosalie Metro

Until recently, Burmese cuisine has been largely inaccessible to outsiders. While Thai restaurants abound worldwide, Burmese restaurants are rare. Few people have had a chance to taste the mixture of flavors of Burmese food. Naomi Duguid’s Burma: Rivers of Flavor may change that by bringing Burmese cooking to an English-speaking audience. This artfully produced cookbook provides a detailed, culturally-informed guide to preparing dishes from many regions.

It is no surprise that Naomi Duguid has been able to create such a valuable book. She has been travelling the world and studying food culture for twenty years, and has been the co-author of six previous books. I’ve enjoyed using several of them, including Mangoes & Curry Leaves: Culinary Travels through the Great Subcontinent, Seductions of Rice, and Hot Sour Salty Sweet, a well-informed Southeast Asian cookbook which won the James Beard Foundation’s Cookbook of the Year award in 2001. Burma: Rivers of Flavor is Duguid’s first solo effort. Her search for unpretentious home cooking, her curiosity about the culures from which food emerges make her cookbooks interesting to read, beautiful to look at, and easy to use.

The recipes in this book are divided into categories such as salads, soups, condiments, meats, and vegetables. “Burma Basics” includes instructions on how to prepare staples to use in the recipes, such as “Shallot Oil,” her version of hstgyet usually made with garlic or onions. Several entries in this section were a revelation: it turns out that roasted chickpea flour (pemhöun) is the secret ingredient that gives Burmese salads their nutty flavor. This flour comes in handy when preparing what Duguid calls “Succulent Grapefruit (or Pomelo) Salad.” It is a classic example of what makes Burmese cuisine so exciting to outsiders: a familiar ingredient is transformed from a boring breakfast food into a savory treat. The pumpkin curry and grilled eggplant salad recipe also stands out.

One challenges of making Burmese food outside of Burma is finding ingredients. Duguid provides many solutions - for instance, she includes instructions on how to make ngapi, fermented shrimp paste, and Shan tofu, which calls again for chickpea flour. Some recipes, however, remain a tease. I crave banana flower salad, but I haven’t succeeded in finding banana flowers in Columbia, Missouri.

Readers familiar with Burma may have small quibbles: a handful of recipes, such as her idiosyncratically named “Punchy-Crunchy Ginger Salad,” are subtitled with romanizations (gy-inthoat), but it’s not clear why the rest are not. For this recipe, she advises using pickled ginger— the pink stuff you get with sushi—which is decidedly not what they use in Burma. She includes a recipe for “pickling” ginger, but in the past I’ve just soaked slivered ginger in lime juice for an hour, and I thought the taste was more like what I’ve been served in Burma.

These deficiencies are small compared to what Duguid has achieved. Impressively, she has gathered recipes from many regions of the country. There are several Shan recipes such as laap pla (a Thai, not Shan name) “Herbed Catfish Laap,” perhaps reflecting her expertise in Thai cooking. “Kachin Pounded Beef with Herbs” sounds tempting, and Indian influence shows in recipes such as “Panir in Tomato Sauce.” Duguid also includes recipes for móunhingà from Rangoon and the western Delta, and notes the criticisms people from each region have about the others: Tavoyans complain that Rangoon mohinga is “thin and watery,” while Rakhaings say it lacks flavor. While she doesn’t include a recipe from each of the eight main ethnic groups, she does seem to have made an effort to be comprehensive. For instance, although she couldn’t travel to Chin State, she gives a general description of the Chin food she had in neighboring Rakhaing State. Apparently, Chin food is fried in goat butter instead of oil, and features millet instead of rice.

Duguid presents a great deal of material to complement the recipes. The glossary includes papayas and hog plums, with entries relevant to culture, such as a brief explanation of Buddhism. Interspersed we find descriptions that have nothing to do with food, as in her account of a dhamma by Thidagu Sayadaw she attended by Thidagu, or in her explanation of thanaka patterns illustrated with photos. These features make Duguid’s cookbook read like a travel journal, and give a window into how Duguid researches food “as an aspect of culture,” as she puts it, with an ethnographic bent. Both the bibliography and the historical overview reveal Duguid’s social and political perspective.

I am an avid cook, and over the years Burmese friends have shown me how to make staples such as móun-hingà and àunnó hka hswè, but when I prepared Burmese dishes at home, they often lacked the right mixture of flavors. The recipes Burmese friends provide tend to lack exact quantities and leave out key ingredients they took for granted that I would add on my own. Cooking techniques proved difficult to describe. I’m happy to have this new cookbook, which, based on the dozen recipes I’ve tried, produces reliably tasty results.
The international conference on “New Approaches to Myanmar History” was held on July 24, 2014 at the University of Yangon in Yangon and was jointly organized by Rutgers University—New Brunswick and University of Yangon. The co-organizers, Chie Ikeya, Associate Professor in the Department of History at Rutgers University and the Chair of the Rutgers Myanmar Studies Initiative, and Margaret Wong, Chair of the Department of History at University of Yangon, envisioned the conference as a small but meaningful step towards reviving strong and deep academic relationships among scholarly communities in Myanmar, the United States, and beyond.

The conference brought together local and international scholars in Burma studies to engage in multi-disciplinary dialogue about recent interventions in the history and historiography of Myanmar. Organized around four themes—Buddhism, art and architecture, transnational and intra-Asian history, and women’s and gender history—twelve researchers from France, Myanmar, Russia, US, and Thailand presented on a wide range of topics, such as Pāli-Rakhaing language Buddhist legal literature (*dhammathat*), the tradition of constructing royal cities, the “century of warfare” (circa 1550-1683), Sino-Burmese and Indo-Burmese marriages and families, and women wage-laborers and strikers in the oil industry in British Burma.

The day after the one-day conference was a workshop for early-career faculty at various universities in Myanmar, which Rutgers University, Northern Illinois University, and the University of Yangon jointly organized. Eleven faculty members in history and related disciplines circulated their papers among the conference participants ahead of time. Each of them prepared a brief presentation of their work and received comments from two designated discussants as well as other conference participants.

While all papers were presented in English, feedback from the participants and audience were often delivered in Burmese. This format facilitated lively translingual and transcultural exchanges during the question-and-answer periods and over tea breaks, lunches, and dinner. The presentations and ensuing discussions illuminated areas for future research and scholarship on the history and historiography of Burma. All of us who organized the conference hope that the connections made among scholars at the conference and workshop will generate fruitful interactions and collaborations that cross generational, national, and disciplinary boundaries.

The conference and workshop were open to the academic community in Burma and attracted over 180 attendees, mostly from Burma but also various parts of the world including China, France, Germany, United Kingdom, and United States.

In the morning, international and local scholars gave presentations in five panels on the history of Buddhism, the history of arts and architecture, transnational histories, and women’s and gender history. In the afternoon, nine local scholars presented and international scholars discussed each paper. Topics of the presentations ranged from the paleolithic culture of Burma, to Pyu religion, to the introduction of the parliamentary system in Burma.

**PRESS COVERAGE:**


An Inside View of the Approaches to Myanmar History Conference

Tharaphi Than, Northern Illinois University

There was a mini-crisis in the Arts room on the main campus of Yangon University a day before the international conference, Approaches to Myanmar History. There were not enough namecard holders for each participant. Then I saw a piece of paper with my name on it in the hands of one of the professors. The head of the history department came up to me and said, “Let’s give priority to the guests. The Bamar will understand.” At that moment I felt validated to remain a bamar, a holder of a Myanmar passport. I am still a legitimate local in my country, and am treated as such. Our hosts did not feel anadė for me.

But that incident also led me ponder many other things. One is how the local academic community sees themselves in their relations to the outsiders. I once had a conversation with the then rector of Yangon University. He wanted to provide free housing for visiting foreign professors. His then international relations liaison officer did not think the visitors deserved free accommodation. To avoid challenging him openly, they arranged a meeting for me with the rector, during which I tactfully narrated my conference experiences emphasizing the fact that even for some basic student dorm rooms, visitors have to pay, and it is the norm.

With the opening of the country, Myanmar universities have started to have more interactions with foreign institutions and individuals. But the latter are received and treated as guests, and overwhelming hospitality is showered upon them. Hosts, including faculty members, do not view themselves as scholars or educators. They put on the role of good, polite, hospitable hosts, often undermining their capability and potential as researchers, scholars, and educators.

It is true that research and teaching still face many challenges, but Myanmar universities could start to think and feel that we can reclaim our place in world academia. The first step towards that goal may well be that locals start treating visitors as colleagues and not as special guests whom the host country must please. We need to reclaim our lost identity as scholars, rather than sustaining an Orientalist perception of Myanmar as the land of smiles. Let the Ministry of Culture take care of that. But there is an irony: the Myanmar Historical Commission is now under the tutelage of the Ministry of Culture, not the Ministry of Education. One can now easily see the danger of letting this continue.

Being a true scholar was the chosen profession of a handful brave souls in the past. To conform is to survive. But I like to think that with the changing circumstances, the intellectual community inside Myanmar is now finding ways to conduct independent research and finding their own voice to communicate with the public within and without the country.

The group formed for the international conference which Chie Ikeya led was sympathetic to Yangon University’s needs, and everyone gave so much of their time to the junior faculty members by reviewing their work and providing feedback. The two-day conference and workshop boosted the confidence of the young faculty and more importantly strengthened the trust between the hosts and the visitors to plan further collaborations.

I was asked to conduct another workshop, and besides hoping to see many more junior faculty taking part in the future, I hope that they will start to feel confident and safe to act, write, and speak like true scholars.
The Kalyāṇī Inscriptions: New Text and Translation Project

By Jason A. Carbine, Whittier College

Going Kalyāṇī

Some time in the later part of the 1990s, during our grad student days, Pat Pranke came to the University of Chicago to give a talk or something of that nature. Pat was already well seasoned in things Burmese, and I was in the process of changing over from a focus on Sri Lanka to one on Myanmar. Some of my professors thought I was crazy for wanting to do this. The thought entered into my mind as well, given that I had already lived in Sri Lanka for two years in different capacities that included a one-year stint as a junior Fulbrighter studying healing rituals related to yakkhas, who are almost akin to nats. Why change over when I’d already invested so much into Sri Lankan culture and history? Being inspired by the research possibilities in Myanmar, my basic thought was that, in addition to finding a workable Ph.D. dissertation concerning Burmese monastic authority, later on I might also tackle a research project related to both South and Southeast Asia, specifically Sri Lanka and Myanmar. All this I told to Pat Pranke in the Divinity School grad student lounge that fateful day.

Pat’s response was something like, “have you ever looked at the Kalyāṇī Inscriptions”? He handed me a copy of Taw Sein Ko’s 1892 seminal translation project has become much longer than anticipated.

As my textual sleuthing continued, with me making comparisons between manuscripts, modern print editions, and original stone fragments of the Inscriptions, and then carefully working through and attempting to address problematic areas of Taw Sein Ko’s translation, the sheer complexity of the material became its own kind of “time zone.” Working late in the evening on my project has on more than one occasion led me to mutter to myself that I was “going Kalyāṇī”. Anyone who has struggled with intense, close textual comparison in the hopes of figuring out matters of complex historical and cultural significance will know what I mean.

Why the Inscriptions Matter

The fifteenth-century Kalyāṇī Inscriptions are among the most important sources for studying Buddhist history, culture, politics, ritual, law, and textual production in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Inscribed on ten stone slabs in Bago in lower Myanmar in the latter part of the fifteenth century under the direction of King Dhammacetī (r. 1472–1492), the Inscriptions have remained a cultural, religious, and political touchstone in a number of ways. In addition to circulating extensively as palm-leaf manuscripts, the Inscriptions were absorbed into later reform movements, incorporated into polemical and historiographic writings, and published in modern printed editions and translations, in both Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka.

From the perspective of Buddhist studies and history of religions perspective, the Inscriptions are a hybrid of several literary genres—for example, vinaya (discipline), katikāvatta (“the observance of an agreement”), and vamsa (history). They detail Dhammacetī’s efforts to secure the help of Sri Lankan monks to found what became known as the sacred Kalyāṇī sīmā, the Kalyāṇī ordination hall, and its resultant lineage. Like the Inscriptions, the ordination hall has persisted as an ongoing site of socio-religious and socio-political expression. For example, the Kalyāṇī sīmā was repaired and rebuilt in pre-colonial Burma by kings and then in later times by lay people, despite being variously ruined by fire, earthquake, the elements, or perhaps people. The most recent rebuilding occurred in the early 1950s, with the blessings of the then prime minister, U Nu.

Although a textual hybrid, the Inscriptions are also basically a sīmā text, that is, a text about sīmā—ritual boundary—regulation and reform. Common in the Buddhist cultures of mainland Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, sīmās are traditionally consecrated physical boundaries for Buddhist monastic ordinations and other ecclesiastical ceremonies. Sīmās legitimate lineages, and can function in many other social, religious, cultural, and political ways. Often, but not always, sīmās have physical structures built on them, and the structures themselves
may be called sīmās, as in the case of the Kalyāṇī sīmā.

There are many types of sīmā texts in Southeast and South Asia. For example, there are many Burmese texts, such as the parabaik with ornate pictures depicting sīmās and rules about them. Unlike many of those sīmā texts, however, it is possible to locate the original Kalyāṇī text in time and place with a high degree of accuracy. The ten stone slabs set up in Bago consist of three in Pāli and seven in Mon. The Mon version also contains three appendices, one of which provides a long list of sīmās all over the region, established by the monks who dedicated the Kalyāṇī sīmā. The partially restored Pali stones, along with the remaining fragments of the Pali and Mon, are as many know now housed in a shed near the Kalyāṇī-sīmā. The focus of a growing body of scholarly literature, a great deal of research and translation work remains to be done on the many different types of sīmā texts and the sacred places related to them.

Publication and Use, and Current Status of the Project

My text and translation project is under agreement with the Pali Text Society. My goal is to produce a new edited Pāli text and a new English translation to replace Taw Sein Ko’s as the standard English-language reference source. These new texts will have multiple uses at undergraduate and graduate levels, from aiding classroom teaching about such topics as Buddhist ritual, law, and sacred places to facilitating scholarly research about Buddhism in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. This project is also intended to complement research other scholars are doing on the spread of Southeast and South Asian Buddhism.

The new Pāli text is close to being ready to send out for external review and comment. I have included an introduction with remarks on the nature and content of the manuscript tradition and how it differs from the stones, the Pāli text with annotations and notes, additional textual material from the manuscript tradition, a manuscript comparison chart, an index, and an annotated bibliography. My new English translation is also well underway, but the speed has been structured by my work on the Pāli text.

1 I have attempted to identify sīmās in use today that are connected to inscriptions, as a way to help contextualize the historical and cultural significance of the inscriptions and the reforms they describe. In addition to the Kalyāṇī Simā in Bago, there are other sīmās currently still in use that are traced to Dhammaceti, including the Nagawun, Neibban Kaling, and Narani sīmās and the Kalyāṇī sīmā in Daik Wun Kwin Yat Kwet. Sorting through the history of these and other sīmās could be illuminating in their own right, but many details remain obscure.

2 I’ve sought to locate any additional cultural data that could be of significance for any further follow-up project after the text and translation project is completed. One of the results in this regard was meeting a weikza master in Bago whose followers claim he is the rebirth of king Dhammaceti.
This year I did a two-week (May 10th-28th, 2014) fieldtrip to Myanmar with twelve of my university students. I thought I would share my experience with the readers of the Bulletin, especially for those who might be planning a similar study abroad trip to Myanmar in the future.

When my university asked me to organize and run this course, I jumped at the opportunity. I had always wanted to bring a group of students to Myanmar and share with them the country that has inspired me to devote the past fifteen years of my life to. When my department head told me that this two-week study trip would count as a semester’s worth of teaching, and that I would therefore be excused from teaching a course the following semester, I was all the more eager.

The course was open only to those students who were enrolled in the Master of Social Sciences in Development Studies program at City University Hong Kong, and was meant to introduce these graduate students to some of the “real world” issues they had spent months reading and theorizing about in the comfort of their classrooms. The course was meant to be three parts study-tour and one part site-seeing, so I had to come up with an academically rigorous program to satisfy the requirements of the university, as well as provide the students with a bit of fun.

As I knew next to nothing about the world of development in Myanmar, I flew over in early February 2014 on a reconnaissance mission seeking out people and organizations that I could make appointments for my students to meet. I called upon friends who had relationships with NGOs and religious organizations, and also upon freelance consultants to help me put together a program.

The first obstacle I encountered was organizing the logistics: hotel bookings, bus reservations, and securing a tour van to transport us around. Luckily, Jason Carbine, who had run a similar program, recommended an agent with he had worked with in the past. She proved to be exceptional. Not only did she put together an itinerary perfect for budget-minded university students, she also dealt patiently with some, in my view, annoying requests from my students, in addition to some equally-annoying last minutes changes I made. Our agent also provided us with two mobile phones for the trip, which proved to be invaluable when one of my students had to read a medical email on the desolate highway between Bagan and Mandalay.

Once our program started, we spent the first week in Yangon visiting members of such organizations as the HIV Positive Sex Workers Group, Muslim Interfaith Network on AIDS, Save the Children, Burnet Institute, and Religions for Peace. On our last day in Yangon, we visited Christophe Muni-er, a PhD student from the Sorbonne studying art history, at his home to learn about mural paintings. Christophe and his wife put together a fun and engaging morning that was, as some of my students remarked, the highlight of their trip to Yangon. We were all grateful to Christophe. The star of the visit, however, was Christophe’s son, Hugo—all the students wanted pictures taken with him.

After putting the students on the overnight bus to Bagan, I went to the airport to take the plane. I’ve taken enough overnight buses over the years to never want to put myself through that again.

The next three days were spent touring the pagodas of Bagan and taking a bus trip to Mount Poppa. By this point, day eight, the students were beginning to show signs of fatigue and a couple of them came down with high fevers. I realized I needed another person to help me with the remaining seven days and called upon my best friend, Ko Toe Win from Sagaing, who runs bike trekking tours for foreigners. He
got on the next bus to Bagan and spent the rest of the trip with us. Before that, I had been the one to answer all the students’ questions and translate between English and Burmese and so had been feeling pretty run down. But Ko Toe Win, who has a lot of experience in guided tours, was able to answer most of the questions, which let me catch my breath. It also gave the students an opportunity to spend time with a local person and make a new friend.

After three days in Bagan, we headed to Mandalay. The students, who were ethnic Chinese, really enjoyed Mandalay and were happily surprised to see so many Chinese businesses in the neighborhood of our hotel. Although the students spoke no Burmese, they were able to get around easily with their Mandarin and Cantonese. We spent the first full day sight-seeing. By lunchtime, the students began to suffer from that inevitable disease that afflicts most visitors to Myanmar: PFS, or “Pagoda Fatigue Syndrome.” After the pagodas of Bagan and Mandalay, the students had had enough. This was something I was not prepared for. I had allotted long stretches of our free time to spend at pagodas and religious complexes, where we could relax and escape the mid-day heat. But my students only wanted to spend as much time at those places as it took to snap pictures of themselves making peace signs in front of Buddha statues before rushing back onto the air-conditioned bus. I had to do a lot of on-the-spot planning to fill up time before our next appointment with various organizations.

In Mandalay, we visited Phaung Daw Oo monastic school, followed doctors from a Japanese NGO which provides free medical care at a monastic hospital, and spent time playing with children at a monastic orphanage where many of the children were HIV positive. After a daytrip to Pyin Oo Lwin for some respite from the relentless Mandalay heat, the students left on an overnight bus to Yangon, from where they would then head back to Hong Kong the following morning. I stayed on for a couple of more days to visit with friends and do some research.

I am still waiting to receive the formal evaluations, but based on some informal student feedback, the course seems to have been a success. One student has already begun applying for jobs at Myanmar-based NGOs, another plans to pursue a PhD in the growing banking system of Myanmar, and a third will return in December to enroll in a Buddhist university. Also, due to increased interest among undergraduates to take study trips to Southeast Asia, my university asked me to lead a similar course in December 2014 specifically for undergraduate students. It looks as if I will be leading study trips to Myanmar twice a year: once in December for undergraduates and again in June for graduate students. I would be open to invite any readers who might want to lead student trips of from your own universities to join us. My students would greatly benefit from cross-cultural exploration with students from other universities from around the world. Please contact me if you are interested.
The Traffic in Hierarchy

By Ward Keeler, University of Texas at Austin

When I arrived as a Fulbright fellow in Rangoon in 1987, I was given a copy of a pamphlet the U.S. Embassy distributed to new members of their staff containing tips about living in the city. One point stood out: it concerned the astonishingly risky behavior of pedestrians on the city’s streets. Although I had lived several years in Indonesia and had stayed on occasion in some of the region’s biggest cities—Bangkok, Jakarta, and Singapore—I had never seen pedestrians engage in such death-defying practices as I did in Rangoon. Jaywalking was the rule; traffic lights counted for nothing; stepping out in front of on-coming traffic, whether on the part of brash young men or matronly ladies or parents grasping the hands of young children, was very much the norm.

The pamphlet’s author suggested that this extremely dangerous behavior could be explained by the fact that few Burmese had any experience driving a motorized vehicle and therefore had no appreciation of how difficult it was to stop a vehicle travelling at speed. By the late 1980s the Burmese economy had been in bad straits for some time and there were very few cars on the road. An American friend, John Badgeley, who had spent time in Burma in the 1950s, told me that there was more traffic on Rangoon’s streets back then than when we met there in 1987. Getting behind the wheel of a car or truck was something very few people ever did. Despite the fact that amount of traffic in the city has increased precipitously, pedestrians continue to engage in behavior that looks little short of suicidal. By then 2012, when I was in Burma most recently, at least a few of those pedestrians must have sometimes also been drivers, and in any case, they had had a fair bit of time to reconceive their relationship with the far greater number of cars on the road.

They had not done so. In a time-honored anthropological tradition, I have gone native enough to take on Burmese street-crossing habits that would horrify people elsewhere. In another time-honored anthropological tradition, I will now explain what motivated the odd, seemingly irrational ways of the natives when crossing the road in Burma. The key to understanding what pedestrians do when they set off across a broad avenue in Rangoon, one in which there might be a number of private cars, taxis, buses, and trucks (but not motorcycles) coming straight at them, is to see the way they enter into an overall system, one in which they occupy the lowest rung, but still do have a place. Like virtually all elements of Burmese society, that system is fundamentally hierarchical: it is characterized by the principle of relative standing, not rights.

Relative standing can incorporate complicated, sometimes cross-cutting, sometimes ambiguous, often contestable features of a person’s identity or role. In the anonymous realm of street traffic, however, things were quite simple. Size mattered. Larger, heavier, faster vehicles take precedence over smaller, lighter, and slower ones. Trucks and buses enjoy a pre-eminence comparable to that of elephants: smaller beasts know better than to defy them and scurry out of the way as they approach. No one is obliged to look back—many drivers have no rear-view mirror—because vehicles in front have precedence, both literally and figuratively, over those behind them. At the same time, since larger vehicles enjoy precedence by virtue of their size, they can always pass lesser vehicles: they can take precedence at whim. As soon as a passing vehicle gets beyond the vehicle being passed, the latter becomes irrelevant.

In Mandalay, where motorcycles and bicycles are ubiquitous, their riders behave in ways that car drivers could not easily emulate. Motorcyclists starting up at the side of the road did not look back before they entered traffic. To do so would undermine the impression of their intention to enter the game. Only once they in motion do they begin to gauge the possibility of moving out into the stream of traffic. That implies glancing to the side rather more than to the rear. Motorcyclists and bicyclists alike, should they wish to move into the lane of traffic on the far side of the road, will, if no break in traffic presents itself, start moving against traffic near the sidewalk, waiting for a chance to cross over. When such cyclists meet others coming toward them, no rule applies to which side either of them will take to pass. It has to be negotiated separately, on the move, as it were, in each case.

In Rangoon, drivers are forbidden to use their horns, a remarkable form of social control. Everywhere else in Burma, horns enable drivers to indicate that they are approaching and lesser vehicles have to yield. Traffic lights are usually observed, but when streets cross in the absence of a light (as is the rule in Mandalay), vehicles do not stop but only slow down, while drivers sound their horns. Drivers slow down less if the size empowers them to assume...
control of the road. Horns are graduated in their sound to indicate the relative size of the vehicles to which they are attached. Some cheating takes place here: a few motorcyclists attach car horns to deceive other drivers ahead of them, and owners of some small vehicles put in horns appropriate for trucks. But for the most part, horns provide accurate indices to the size and therefore standing of the vehicles whose approach they announce.

The order of traffic is, therefore, perfectly clear: trucks and buses take precedence over cars and minivans, which take precedence over motorbikes and scooters (if present), which takes precedence over bicyclists and, finally, pedestrians. At the same time, conditions allow for considerable wiggle room. Smaller vehicles are, after all, capable of getting into spaces larger vehicles cannot enter. This means that when traffic halts at a traffic light, motorbikes and bicycles surge forward to place themselves around, between, and ahead of larger vehicles. When traffic starts up, the smaller vehicles will lose the bit of advantage they momentarily enjoy, but that is no reason not to pursue it when the chance arises.

That includes pedestrians. Anyone who stands by the side of the road waiting to cross may just as well not exist. Only once they start moving—into traffic—do pedestrians enter into the game and so start the delicate dance of daring, negotiation, and assertion that will result in their reaching the other side. One particularly risky ploy is simply to refuse all eye contact and stride across the road: drivers confronted with such behavior have no choice but to cede to the reckless assertiveness of such players. But it is very much the high stakes option and not one that many pedestrians opt for. Much more frequent is a maneuver by which a pedestrian indicates the intention to cross by looking into incoming traffic and gauging the speed and distance of the closest vehicles. They may decide to run for it; they may decide they can simply walk; they may decide to hold out where they are, which can be at any point between the sidewalk they had left behind and the one they are approaching. Drivers do not display the anxious dread of coming close to pedestrians that Western drivers often evince: Burmese drivers show complete equanimity passing extremely close to pedestrians, often at fairly high speed.

Little thought is given, for that matter, to what may make things convenient for pedestrians. Sidewalks are often extremely high. Their height raises them above the water that floods, often to great depth, the roads during monsoon rains (because of the inadequate drainage of the streets), and the height benefits pedestrians at such times. But that height also means that walking is at all times hard work: every driveway that put a break in the sidewalk requires that pedestrians make a big step down and a big step up if they are going to remain on the sidewalk. In Burma (indeed in Southeast Asia generally), making conditions easier for people too poor and insignificant to have access to any vehicle is no one’s remit. The standing of pedestrians is such that they didn’t have to.

No one, as noted above, enters Burmese traffic with any assumptions about fundamental rights. Pedestrians, certainly, enjoy no “right of way.” No one, by the same token, is ever excluded from the game as long as they remain in motion. What everyone does at all times is enter into negotiation with all other players, and do so cognizant of what the characteristics they bring to the specific context imposes upon and affords them. Drivers are not “thoughtless” or “mindless” or even “rude.” Truck drivers, in a kind of noblesse oblige, often use their turn signals to indicate to other large vehicles behind them that they had a chance to pass. What drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists all have in common is a ceaseless alertness to chances, ones that their features (size, weight, speed) allow them to take up or preclude them from doing so.

Burma is undergoing much-anticipated change. Debate as to the appropriate foundations upon which Burmese society should be based has finally been initiated. But we must not be complacent about our own assumptions, or dismissive of Burmese ones, if we are to appreciate how things are now. One type of complacency we should be particularly alert to is an easy Western idealization of egalitarianism’s virtues and its corollary, the denigration of hierarchy’s shortcomings or disadvantages. If we assume that all humans feel the same distaste we have for hierarchy, we risk misapprehending much of what goes on in Burma. Any outsider who neglects to consider what the world looks like from inside Burmese society as it is now constituted should get out of their big white SUV and try making their way across the street.
Fieldwork at the Sri Ksetra Museum: A Research Update

Charlotte Galloway, Australian National University

During the first half of 2014 I was on sabbatical from the Australian National University. At ANU we call this “OSP,” or Outside Studies Program. When I was preparing my application, I knew I wanted to spend time in Burma, but was not quite sure what my research program would be. It was after a discussion with Bob Hudson, who many will know is a Sydney-based archaeologist who has been researching in Burma since the 1990s, that a plan started to form. My own PhD research had focused on the early Buddhist art of Bagan. More recently I’ve started to delve into the first millennium artifacts at Pyu sites, as I am interested in the early spread of Buddhism through Southeast Asia. Bob suggested I look at cataloguing the material in the Sri Ksetra site museum at Hmawza, near Pyay. It was a terrific idea, bringing together my museum and curatorial experience, along with my own research interests. It certainly made for a good OSP application, with the research being directly related to my teaching in Asian art history and curatorial studies.

I was familiar with the Sri Ksetra Museum, having visited a few times before in the 2000s. The museum is about eight kilometers from Pyay in the middle of the Sri Ksetra walled city site. It has been sitting there pretty much unchanged for decades. In the 2000s, visitors were a rare occurrence. Getting permission to take photographs was always uncertain and access to the adjacent Kyaukka Thein store was almost impossible. The “store” is the original museum site, built in the 1920s on the grounds of the local monastery over three large stone steles, but which is now used as the museum storage room. However, things have been changing. Sri Ksetra, along with Beikthano and Halin, have been put forward for UNESCO world heritage listing. U Thein Lwin, whom I had met over the years and is now Deputy Director General of Archaeology, was very supportive of my project. While the UNESCO documentation required the sites to be fully researched, there was no requirement for detailed documentation of the existing excavated material. Resources were limited, and my proposal was very timely, as this was going to be one of the next steps in recording Pyu artifacts.

In September 2013, I visited the site to finalize arrangements. The museum was in the middle of being refurbished before UNESCO was to come to inspect the site. I was a little surprised, as I was not aware this was happening. But my surprise was no more than one of those very frequent “surprise” moments that seem to go with working and researching in Burma. I was shown the existing catalogue, which was essentially a ledger that listed materials as they had come into the collection. It was incomplete, not all objects were clearly listed, and there were no images to help identify objects. We agreed that the scope of my research would be three-fold. First, I would catalogue all of the material in the museum. I would do this with local staff as a capacity-building project. The staff would become familiar with international museum registration practices. As time allowed, we would also catalogue objects in Kyaukka Thein store. Second, I would give some lectures and workshops to the students at the Archaeology Field School as part of their Museology course. Third, I would write a guidebook for the museum. There was a fourth part to the project which was much more ambitious: we hoped to use the catalogue as the base for a much larger project that would bring together all Pyu material into a central database. This last would be a much longer undertaking.

Of course, things didn’t quite go according to plan. I had received email confirmation my project had been approved by the Ministry of Culture, but did not receive my official letter. I was hoping for a longer visa, but had to make do with an initial four week visit. On arrival in February, I was given my official letter, but could not change my visa. However, this and some other minor hiccups aside, I ended up in Pyay, and then moved to the Field School of Archaeology (FSOA). I bought a bicycle, as I wanted to be self-sufficient for transport to and from the museum each day, and settled into a routine. I started work on 21 February when I met with staff. We agreed on a plan to catalogue all objects in the museum, and then move on to objects in storage as time permitted.

When we started, the staff showed me the previous catalogue material. As it turned out, quite a bit of work had been done since the previous year and there were now basic computerized records of the collection. While initially a little taken aback—I wondered what I would then be contributing—it turned out to be very valuable to have this information in place. We were able to check everything, update measure-
ments and discuss cataloguing protocols. In retrospect, this was a better approach than introducing something from scratch. I was working with a system the Burmese had introduced, so it already had approval. The current cataloguing was in Burmese and having an English version would be of help to a wider audience. Checking information against existing data also gave the staff confidence in the accuracy of the information they had, and to be comfortable changing information that was incomplete. I had developed a standard template using Microsoft Word for the cataloguing, which I changed slightly after our first day. Some information was not necessary, and other areas needed expansion. I chose Word, as it is easy to use. Excel is more versatile but not everyone is able to use it. Compatibility with different versions of the software is also an issue.

We worked daily during the opening hours of the museum, from 9:30-12:30 in the morning and then 1:30-4:30 in the afternoon. During this first visit, Daw Myint Myint Thein, Assistant Director, Department of Archaeology and National Museum, Pyay Branch; Daw Mya Mya, Lecturer at FSOA Pyay; and Daw Nyo Nyo Yin Mauk, Tutor of Museology, FSOA Pyay, along with junior staff, took part in our activities. We looked at every object in the museum. We recorded measurements, conditions, any information we had about the location of the find, and any previous publication information. While a time-intensive, this approach proved very effective from an educational perspective. I am very familiar with Western terminology relating to iconography and descriptive terms for the material, but this was not always easily expressed in terms relevant to Burma. I encouraged the staff to tell me what the best terms were for some of the descriptors. We included both Western and Burmese terms where needed to ensure understanding by all parties. The staff members were great to work with and we quickly developed a good working routine.

The cataloguing system for the museum is materials based, broken into six categories: stone, bronze, iron, gold, silver, and terracotta. All objects in the collection have been given the year number 2013, the starting point for the catalogue system, and a sequential number for each group. For example, “2013/1/1” is the first stone object in 2013. New material coming into the collection will be given similar numbers.

There were a number of cataloguing challenges for the staff: how to catalogue a group of more than 300 beads, for example, or fragments of a roof tile. Cataloguing these unusual examples generated good discussions and I am confident the staff are able to follow the principles underpinning sound museology practices in cataloguing. Another issue arose in relation to existing catalogue information. I questioned the titles of some of the works, for example, the upper section of a stone stele that had been named “Vishnu.” I could not see any iconography related to that attribution. Changing titles is never easy, and fortunately U Win Maung (Tampawaddy) visited the museum one afternoon with U Win Kyaing, head of the Field School, and we reviewed a few objects. We all agreed on the proposed changes. It’s not unusual to find that objects first catalogued in the early twentieth century to have been misinterpreted. I was in fact surprised to find so few.

At the end of this first visit, we discussed the teaching plan for my return in April, when the FSOA teaching period began. I only had about seventeen days’ more work—my visit coincided with Thingyan, and the Field School would be closed. This did give me time, however, to spend a week in Bagan for my own research, and I visited many of the early temples, focusing on those that perhaps might link to the Pyu sites. While I had seen most of them before, I was looking at them with different eyes, and it proved very useful.

On my return to Sri Ksetra, I found that a computer had now been installed in the museum. Staff were now entering the data I had left into their cataloguing system. I’m delighted this is happening. I delivered three teaching sessions, including a morning at the museum on practical condition reporting. Students worked in small groups preparing a detailed condition report of an object. At the museum we focused on cataloguing objects in the store. This has been a fantastic opportunity to record material that has either not been looked at for many years, or has not been recorded at all. While mostly fragments of objects, they do add significantly to our knowledge of Pyu culture.
When I had finished the formal part of my Outside Studies Program, together we had completed 404 catalogue records and reviewed 4,664 objects, including groups of votive tablets and beads. We had sixty-three new records of objects that had had no previous catalogue information. We were unable to finish cataloguing the Kyaukka Thein Store—I focused on the figurative material and left the finger-marked bricks and other fragments of imagery that appeared to be post-Pyu period. There were still more objects I wanted to check, but time did not allow.

On my return to Australia, I went straight into teaching. I returned to Burma in September 2014 for nine days during our semester break. Of course everything was different. On June 22nd, the UNESCO listing had been approved. While there is much excitement, we are all aware that while the listing is one thing, what happens next is another. The staff at the Field School and Museum are all inundated: there are carparks to be built for tourist busses, upgrades to the site facilities, tourist management plans to implement and much more. Visitor numbers are increasing, though access to Pyay is still a challenge. There are more visitors from Yangon, while foreign tourists tend to be those who arrive by boat and spend a day in Pyay. Infrastructure is not keeping pace, with the road from Pyay to the site being inadequate for bus coaches and heavy traffic. While focus of the people at the Field School and Museum is by necessity on these grander plans, it was, I think, a very welcome break for them to spend some time continuing the cataloguing. We just about finished the store inventory, though I am avoiding those bricks! I have set up a research database through ANU and am slowly entering the data. The next step is to expand the cataloguing to other objects in the Department of Archaeology at Pyay that are not at the museum. A published catalogue of the museum and store collection is an immediate goal, as so little of this material is available to researchers.

I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with the local staff. It has been a collaborative project, and a very productive one. From a fieldwork perspective, it was rather challenging at times. Working conditions were not easy—it was of course very hot, and my poor Burmese language skills meant we all had to work hard at making sure we understood each other accurately. We had many lively discussions regarding iconographic interpretation of objects. There were also necessary interruptions when tour groups and other visitors arrived and staff had to attend to core business. But these are only minor things. I am looking forward to continuing my work at Sri Ksetra. The cataloguing system is being used across the Pyu sites. I visited the museum at Beikthano in September and there is a great array of material there that also needs extensive documentation, representing a quite different type of Pyu visual cultural material.

Things are changing quickly in Burma. Even three years ago, getting projects like this off the ground would have been almost impossible, as navigating the bureaucracy was just too difficult. When I started to write this piece, I thought about how hard it was to do research in the 2000s, and how many of us nearly gave up. But we didn’t. The potential that we all saw, and our genuine interest in Burma’s history continues, and I for one am looking forward to being part of what I hope will be an exciting period in Burma’s development.

**Shwedagon, 2014**

Charlotte Galloway also took a few pictures at the Shwedagon during her most recent trip to Burma, as she discussed in the preceding piece. Here are just a few of the changes and developments one can see on the platform. For those who have been there, the contrasts with holy sites in Bangkok and India are striking. —ed.
Collections without a curator have a tendency to become disorganized. The Southeast Asian collections at the British Museum are no exception, and as the first curator dedicated to the subject at the institution, I spent a great deal of time during my first year on the job sorting objects out and improving their database entries. I was very keen to produce an exhibition, as the museum has not had a Southeast Asian show since Ralph Isaacs and Richard Blurton’s Visions from the Golden Land: Burma and the Art of Lacquer in 2000. In total only three exhibitions dedicated to mainland Southeast Asia have been mounted in the past 260 years. It was while examining the collection that I catalogued the museum’s substantial body of popular prints from Thailand and Burma (Myanmar). Some were of pretty poor quality, and I asked the Keeper of the Department of Asia, Jan Stuart, the purpose of holding them in the museum’s collection. She explained that the British Museum was not one of art, but rather was a museum of civilization, and therefore their inclusion made sense. At the same time, a number of interactions I had had with the public made it clear that people, in Europe at least, thought of Buddhism as a religion focused on meditation. I began to wonder whether it would be possible to mount an exhibition that brought religious practices and the British Museum’s eclectic collection of mainland Southeast Asian objects together in order to counteract the stereotype of Buddhism as an austere religion. I submitted a proposal, and approval came in April 2013 for a show in Gallery 91 in autumn 2014, a short time frame.

I planned the show to demonstrate the diversity of beliefs and practices that people in the region engage with. The focus was to be Thailand and Burma, because exhibitions in Gallery 91 are shows to present British Museum objects that would not otherwise be seen. The museum has very little material from Laos or Cambodia relevant to the subject of the exhibition, and therefore they had to be excluded. The exhibition draws on the strengths of the Thai and Burma collections. Given the religious variety found in Burma and Thailand, no museum collection could possibly be comprehensive, and certainly, an exhibition cannot. My aim therefore was to try to convey the complexity of the landscape without overwhelming the viewer. However, I did not want the exhibition to look like an art display. Instead, I wanted a crowded feeling to replicate, as far as possible in a museum environment, the busy spaces of Buddhist temples in the two countries. Of course, the ideas about religion are not identical in the two countries, so to ensure that the concepts of the two were not conflated and essentialized, I choose broad themes that can be found in both. Within each section, the objects, ranging in date from the late eighteenth to the twenty-first century, demonstrate some of the ways in which Burmese and Thai people have engaged in religious activities. The juxtapositioning of pieces from both countries shows how similar concepts have been expressed differently.

There are conceptually five spaces in the exhibition: an altar and offerings, biography and cosmology, paying homage, powerful beings, and power and protection. The vestibule to the exhibition space includes some of Gotama Buddha’s history in the form of painting, sculpture, and a poster of the Buddhas of the Past—twenty-eight in Burma and twenty-four in Thailand. On the other side of the space is a case that most visitors to exhibitions in Gallery 91 never notice. The challenge was to get people to pay attention to it. Because it was not possible to include non-museum objects with ones from the museum, I used this space to display some of the many types of ephemeral offerings made to the Buddha, monks, and other powerful beings, including incense, flowers, scent, daily requisites, water, and a money tree, some from Thailand and some from Burma.
Upon entering the main exhibition space, the visitor encounters the museum’s *Buddhapāda* with a *nāga* surround and the 108 marks brought back from Burma during the first Anglo-Burmese war in the 1820s by Captain Frederick Marryat. We positioned the footprint so that the toes point towards a case replicating a Thai altar at the other end of the room. There is sufficient distance between the two that Burmese and Thai ideas are not conflated. The altar itself presents a number of Buddha images, offering vessels, and a large candle, all from Thailand. There is a two-fold reason for this. First, the Thai collection is not as extensive as the Burmese, nor does it contain as many items related to the themes of the exhibition. However, collections without a curator have a tendency to become disorganized.

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Each side of the room contains two parts of the exhibition. On the left are the sections on biography and cosmology and paying homage. The museum’s Burmese cosmology manuscript and a Thai cosmology painting set the scene, showing how similar ideas are expressed differently in visual form. A late 19th-century monk’s robe and a poster of the Thai annual robe-giving ceremony. A handsome black lacquer tiered hsüan-out would have been used to take food to a monastery. A banner from northern Thailand hangs next to a model stupa and shrine from the same region. Manuscripts, votive tablets, and stupa deposits complete the section. While the selection is not in any way comprehensive, it shows how people can offer objects connected with the Buddha and the Dhamma, support to the Sangha, and personal exertions in the form of pilgrimage to sacred sites.

There are many individuals and spirits who are important actors in Thai and Burmese religious practices, including spirits, famous historical and mythological monks, wizards, and alchemists. They are powerful beings, some of whom need to be propitiated and others of whom are sources of merit. For instance, a Thai sculpture of the Buddha and the god Shiva vying for supremacy is on display for the first time since the piece entered the collection in the late 19th century. It shows the Buddha standing on the head of a multi-armed Shiva who rides on his mount Nandi. The base of the figure contains felines and deer, which may indicate the relevance of the piece to those born in the year of the tiger. Burmese nat spirits are represented by modern wood sculptures of Lady Buffalo, her son, and the buffalo herder, as well as by a reverse glass painting of U Min Kyawzwa, the nat associated with alcohol and gambling. There are posters of the Burmese wizard and alchemist Bo Bo Aung and the Thai rice goddess. Mythical monks on display include Shin Thivali and Shin Upagout, and a bronze sculpture of Mahā Kaccāyana, the monk best able to explain the Buddha’s teachings, from Thailand. Famous monks from Thailand and Burma are seeb on posters, in a magazine, and on amulets, the latter providing a reference to further amulets in the final section of the exhibition. A 2013 CD of monks’ sermons demonstrates the up-to-date
Burma Studies Conference 2014: A Modest Critique

By Gwen Robinson,
Institute of Security and International Studies,
Chulalongkorn University, and editor of the Nikkei Asian Review.

The first thing that strikes an outsider at the International Burma Studies Conference are the contradictions in style and form, rather resembling the country’s transition itself. The resolute use in conference communications of the term “Burma Studies,” was in contrast to many of the presentations – and much of the discussion – on a country called “Myanmar.” The official title highlighted this contradiction, no doubt deliberately: “International Burma Studies Conference 2014 – Envisioning Myanmar: Issues, Images, Identities.”

A blurb from the conference guide reflected a tone of transition, acknowledging the huge changes in Myanmar in recent years: “Across the disciplines, Burma studies has been late to initiate a conversation that questions many of the concepts, categories, and frameworks that have informed the scholarship of the past decades. These concepts have informed not only scholarly discussion, but have formed part of the fabric of wider understanding of the politics and society of the country.” As a newcomer, it was hard to gauge, but going by the views of veteran participants, it seemed that this conference reflected that sense of transition.

For me, one of the surprises was the remarkable mix of speakers and themes: their designations and qualifications seemed as varied as their choice of topics, ranging from the academic (archaeological digs, monastic architecture, history of tobacco pipes) to contemporary politics (sectarian violence, constitutional reform, national census); business (plans for a commodity futures exchange, analysis of export diversion through Singapore), and culture (ethnic textiles, contemporary art, Twante ceramics, beauty contests). Intellectually, this variety distinguished the event from comparable conferences I have attended on other regions, for example Middle East and China forums.

Alongside leading Burma experts, junior professors and well-known authors, were any number of “independent scholars,” together with museum curators, lawyers, gallery owners, even Burmese presidential advisors and ministers and a lone businessman. This diversity seemed unusual for an academic conference and reinforced the impression that the main criterion for presenting a paper was enthusiasm and an abiding interest in Myanmar.

I heard mutterings about the quality of presentations. Indeed, they ranged from ramblingly mediocre to top notch. It was a delight to attend a top notch. It was a delight to attend a Myanmar-related event not exclusively focused on investment or contemporary politics, although there was substantive discussion on the constitution, the 2015 elections, economic reform, foreign investment, human rights and ethnic issues. I revelled in the jumble of topics and presentations on archeological excavations, musings on art and in-depth examinations of social and cultural issues. Where else could one catch a presentation on the true significance of the Miss Myanmar beauty pageant or the preservation of old Burmese manuscripts and lithic texts? The attitudes of Myanmar illegal immigrants in Indonesia, perceptions of Mon history, or the role of Chinese merchants in nineteenth-century upper Burma? The more esoteric, obscure or quirky, the better. The presentations on contemporary concerns, from the military’s role in parliament to the development of “Burmese economic thought,” China’s investment misadventures and communal violence in Rakhine State, added significantly to the level of discussion.

So, too, did the two high-profile panels that bracketed the three-day event: the introductory panel on the country’s future, “Myanmar Today,” with Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Zaw Oo, Thant Myint-U, and Ma Thida, and the closing panel on scenario-building, “Vision for Myanmar,” with Than Swe, Kyaw Win, Zeya Thu, and Tin Maung Maung Than. The lively and sharp exchanges were a cut above the usual “wither Myanmar” offerings at run-of-the mill conferences.

Was the bar too low? On a purely academic level, possibly so. But ultimately the cornucopia of topics and speakers sent an overwhelmingly positive message: rather than the rarefied, earnest affairs that academic conferences so often are, the Burma Studies Conference seemed to embrace diversity – a philosophy that the country’s own policymakers should follow more closely.

There was, however, a glaring absence in the throng: the media. At an event entirely about a popular international news theme like Myanmar, one which featured prominent experts and government representatives, the complete lack of media coverage was wholly surprising, and to this (reformed) journalist, a relief. There was one lone writer from The Economist, who presumably had not been allowed in for free as members of the media usually are. There were also some se-
Senior Burmese journalists, Ma Thida and Zeya Thu of The Voice among them, but they were there to speak on panels. For once at a Myanmar-related event, there were no pushy hacks pursuing ministers, no experts or presidential advisers with microphones and cameras. The two main reasons for the absence of the media, I was told, was first, the discrete profile of the Burma Studies Conferences, which are not advertised beyond Myanmar-specialist circles. Western media covering Myanmar did not seem to know - or bother to find out - about the event. More significant was the $300 entrance fee, with no discounts or free passes. In this respect, the conference organizers should be commended for holding their ground on media requests for free entry.

Less favorable were comparisons between the Singapore and previous conferences, and the extent to which the expenses and lack of subsidies had an impact on who could attend the conference and the potential hardships facing those who did. The conference lacked the usual hospitality of receptions and group meals that help break the ice and foster discussion. The 2014 conference took place in one of Singapore’s swankiest venues, the five-star Pan Pacific Hotel, while the immediately preceding conference, in October 2012, was in the rather more modest – and strictly academic - surroundings of Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, far from the bright lights of Chicago.

The choice of a top hotel in Southeast Asia’s most expensive country meant rooms over SGD $280 per night; facilities including a bar selling $15 beers; and a café where the cheapest main course was close to $30. There were no lunches or receptions as at previous conferences, although some of the five-to-a-room attendees could fill up on the snacks offered twice each day. For those who wanted to stay somewhere cheaper, even the cheapest budget hotels within realistic distance began at $140 or so per night.

There is some irony in the fact that the Burma Studies Conferences in affluent Western countries undercut this Southeast Asian location. The conference fee in DeKalb was $220 with a near-60% discount for full or part-time enrolled students with all meals, receptions and entertainment included; accommodation at the university’s hotel tower, while utilitarian, was a flat $65 for single or double occupancy. Going back to the 2010 BSC conference in Marseilles the entry fee was €180 with the offer of arranging hotels from €80.

As a senior academic remarked, “there are always the haves and have nots at such events.” In this case, the “haves” were those whose institutions paid all costs, including conference fees and the near-$1,000 cost of a three-day stay at the venue. Among the “have nots”: a young Burmese postgraduate student, who had flown to Singapore on a $60 ticket and told me he was sharing a single room with four friends in the cheapest hotel they could find, taking turns to sleep on the floor.

There was a larger aspect to the absence of conference dinners, receptions, and group lunches. While no fan of the buffet reception, I have seen how conference networking can encourage more robust debate and create academic relationships. Instead, in Singapore, everyone was left to their own devices, and while most people seemed to know other attendees, some were left looking lost. For them, it was not an easy conference, working against the instant camaraderie that these conferences can generate, and that was a shame.

In the end, shared interests did much to foster some kind of communication. I was impressed with how graduate students and museum curators had equal billing alongside veteran academics. I liked the way senior presidential advisors and even a deputy minister appeared alongside strong critics of government policies and practices, while a top minister sat quietly in the audience, listening to presentations. The non-academic presentations surely provided a valuable way for participants to hear views from researchers, workers in the field, and senior officials helping to shape government policy. Perhaps the challenge—and a place with room for vast improvement—is the actual quality of the research and presentations.

Were the luxurious venue and $20 beers a symbol of the “new Myanmar”? Taking the Burma Studies Group Conference upmarket, even for just a year, perhaps gives Myanmar studies more of the attention it deserves. Yet the conference risked pricing itself beyond the reach of many participants.
nature of religious practices.

The final section of the exhibition provides examples of a few of the activities that practitioners engage in to draw on the power emanating from the Buddha, monks, wizards, spirits, the cosmos, and sacred sites and to protect themselves from the vagaries of existence. Explored here are the uses of tattooing, amulets and charms, powerful diagrams, divination, horoscopes, medicine, and the days of the week and the zodiac in protection against malevolent forces and the generation of good luck. There are posters of paritta in visual form, as well as a large cloth canopy painted with a protective diagram also extant in 18th-century wall paintings and described as diagrams on soldiers’ turbans in the Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States. The imagery draws its potency from the Buddha and his eight main disciples, the Pañcavaggi, Shin Upagout, other powerful beings, including nāgas and chinthés, the guardians of the directions, and the zodiac.

Besides chanting protective formulas, wearing amulets, or hanging potent diagrams in a space, people have also attempted to incorporate power directly into their bodies through tattooing and the insertion of charms under the skin. On display are a tattooing needle and manual, as well as a group of thirty silver charms taken from one Shan man who had been incarcerated in the Port Blair Penal Colony in the Andaman Islands. They are accompanied by a stucco sculpture dating to the early 20th century of a Shan man covered in red and black tattoos and with dots indicating where charms are located under his skin.

The exhibition, originally called “Power and Protection,” a title deemed too politically sensitive, explores a few of the many types of religious practices found in mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Burma and Thailand. It makes evident that religion in Southeast Asia is not primarily about meditation, and it emphasizes the fact that religious practices are combined to suit personal needs, goals, and financial abilities.