Introduction
Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

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Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century is the first collection of essays about everyday life in Burma in forty years. The anthropologists and scholars of religion who have contributed to this volume show how everyday negotiations about culture, power, and group and individual identity play out in contemporary Burma. The essays together demonstrate how the state is not one monolithic rational entity and how the Burmese people participate or manufacture some of the conditions of their own subjection. In this way the volume provides a context for, and corrective to, the totalizing discourses of the military state and the necessarily grim portrayals of repression documented by human rights observers. The authors portray the dynamism, activity, and fragile flux in Burmese popular space and imagination through a survey of micro institutions and macro-level connections that have come to exist at least since the military coup of 1962.

The forty-year lacuna since the last edited volume of everyday (village) life in Burma—Manning Nash’s 1965, The Golden Road to Modernity: Village Life in Contemporary Burma—encompasses not only the period of Burmese Independence (from 1948 to the present), but also the period of military rule (from 1962 to the present). The anthropologists who contributed to Nash’s volume conducted fieldwork prior to Gen. Ne Win’s coup of 1962 and since that time access for researchers to this country has been severely limited.

Not only is it almost inconceivable for there to be such a long time between published collections of such work, but it is also extraordinary that this current volume about everyday urban and peri-urban life does not con-
tain the work of any Burmese citizens. All those approached to contribute either quietly ignored the request or pleaded the continued safety of family and friends within Burma or their ability to return to the country. A very limited number of works documenting the lives and literature of the Burmese people have appeared in the past two decades, and there is a small cohort of Burmese expatriates, largely political refugees, who write about conditions within Burma, but without the benefit of contemporary immersion in a rapidly changing nation.2

Before Gen. Ne Win’s military coup in 1962, researchers collaborated on religious, rural, agricultural, political, and culture and personality studies, especially within mainland Southeast Asia. The past few years have seen an easing of some restrictions on scholarship, and a new generation of students is conducting fieldwork over extended periods of time in Burma. Burmese studies thus tends to be represented by researchers at either end of the age spectrum, although a number of midcareer researchers have managed to conduct research about religion, ritual, art, and archaeology.3

The most established field of Burmese studies concerns religion and ritual, and Burma has been included in a number of edited volumes that survey these themes across Southeast Asia. Within Burmese studies proper, the fields of political science and economics are frequently represented in contemporary manuscripts and edited volumes. *Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* brings together most of the anthropologists and scholars of religion who are actively working in contemporary urban and peri-urban central Burma. All of the contributors have conducted extensive field research in Burma, a fact that would be assumed in a book about the other nations of Southeast Asia, but is unusual in a volume about Burma. Together, then, these essays provide the first detailed analysis of the ways in which the Burmese people actively manage and create lives for themselves despite the shadow that military dictatorship throws across Burma’s religious, political, and social life.

**History and Landscape: The Union of Myanmar**

Lying immediately to the south of the Himalayas, Burma has always been a trade and information route between Indian and Chinese civilizations. Surviving architectural forms, medical practices, and Indian weights and measures constitute but a fraction of the evidence of the infusion of Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, and Thai practices and knowledge into the Burman empire. The chapters of this volume are set in the cities and towns of the central riverland plains and surrounding hills, home to the ethnic Burman population, and in the south, home to the Karen and Mon populations. The book thus does not survey the entire social landscape, but only those urban and peri-urban areas
of central Burma. A great deal more scholarly research will, we hope, be permitted in the coming years in the mountains, forests, jungles, and coral atolls where Burma’s more than a hundred minority groups live. This volume, however, focuses on the Burman empire: a Buddhified landscape of green paddy fields and thatched bamboo huts sheltering among tracts of palm trees, dusty plains dominated by the ruins of thousands of pagodas, deserted cities and palaces of now-deposed Burmese kings, and the muddy brown Ayeyarwadi River, flowing through centuries of conquest and submission. From the ascendency of the Buddhist kings (1057–1824), to the period of British colonization (1824–1937), through the growth of nationalism to the brief burst of Independence and democracy (1948–1962), and onwards to more than four decades of military dictatorship, this central landscape has been continually recruited to the tasks of resistance, rebellion, memorialization, and nation-building.

The years 1962–1988 constituted the “Burmese Road to Socialism,” during which time Gen. Ne Win’s Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) managed to bankrupt a country that was, like Asia’s “tiger” economies, set to take advantage of the prosperous latter part of the twentieth century. During this time Burma was dubbed the “hermit nation” as the new military government nationalized the economy and withdrew from the international political and economic spheres. Standards of living, the export economy, and health indicators relative to other nations plummeted during these years and have recovered only slightly under successive military regimes, with Burma being granted Least Developed Country status in 1987. Steinberg (1982:92) notes that per capita income did not reach prewar levels until 1976. For example, GDP per capita in 1900 was $647; it fell to $396 in 1950 and stands now at US$1,700 (Central Intelligence Agency 2003). On the Human Development Index, Burma is ranked 131 of 175 nations (2002 ranking, UNDP 2003). Life expectancy at birth has increased only slightly, from 53 years in 1978 (Steinberg 1982:130) to 55.8 years in 2003 (CIA 2003). Burma’s other health statistics are just as dire, with an estimated 40 percent of the country not covered by basic medical services, and in these areas infant mortality rates are almost 400 percent higher than in areas where basic health services exist (UNICEF 1995).

The demonetization of the Burmese currency, the kyat, in 1987 was for many urban people the factor that drove them to participate in the pro-democracy uprising that began in 1988 when farmers liberated rice trucks in the delta areas. The resignation of Gen. Ne Win, who had ruled the country since 1962, was a further factor in this nationwide uprising against military rule. The pro-democracy protests and their brutal suppression resulted in a group of generals forming a ruling council, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC. From its inception, the SLORC intensified the
project of modernization that has transformed Rangoon and Mandalay into “modern” and “developed” cities. This project was continued under the rule of the State Peace and Development Council, the SPDC, which was constituted in 1997. The SPDC represents a reshuffle in the military council but continues the rule of the president, Gen. Than Shwe, and his quest to modernize the country while keeping the military as the pivotal social, economic, and political institution.

In conjunction with this selective modernization, an ideological program to “unify” the many peoples of Burma as a “Union of Myanmar” has occurred. The name of the country was changed in 1989, as were most other colonial place and street names. Rangoon, for example, became Yangon, and the Burmese language became Myanmarese. Other aspects of the military government’s program have included the adoption of new architectural and spatial relationships with the land and the environment and the production of official histories (Houtman 1999). Most significantly, this agenda has involved four decades of civil war where pacification of all those groups who will not submit to unification of the nation occurs through the might of the armed forces, the Tatmadaw (Fink 2001; Skidmore 2003a; Smith 1991).

As part of the narrowing definition of model persons and appropriate citizens, new universities have been created in which to train Buddhist missionaries, for the state seeks, often coercively, to convert Christians, Muslims, and animists to Buddhism. New rules deny citizenship to Burmese who are not ethnic Burmans and relegate them to the status of “residents.” Model villages have been created in an enormous internal relocation process (Skidmore 2004), a recurring theme in twentieth-century Burmese history (Scott 2002).

Internal relocation has taken place for many reasons in different parts of the country. In the cities it has allowed a project of urban modernization to occur in which large sections of the cities are demolished and then rebuilt in a “huts to highrise” scheme. This undertaking has occurred concomitant with an opening of the country to select foreign companies and capital and an easing of restrictions upon tourism. The last decade and a half (1990–2005) has thus seen enormous changes to everyday urban life and the results of these changes can also be traced in the growth of religious retreats such as monasteries, nunneries, and meditation centers. Theravāda Buddhism, the religion of 89 percent of the population, has become an ambiguous element in daily life. The Burmese people can feel deeply ambivalent about the obvious Buddhist beliefs of the ruling council, and the concrete merit-making opportunities newly afforded to Buddhists by the military regime. While new venues for merit-making are being created by the military junta, Buddhist retreats are also providing refuge for political opponents in the face of authoritarianism (Houtman 1999). The ambivalence with which urban residents view the state-
supported renewal of Buddhist infrastructure is evident in Keiko Tosa’s chapter in this volume, “The Chicken and the Scorpion,” where she documents Burmese suppositions about the possible conflicting motivations for the intensification of the military council’s patronage of Buddhism as they are conveyed through rumor.

One very visible aspect of the urban remodeling endeavor is the Golden Façade project (Skidmore 2004), the repairing of ancient pagodas and monasteries and the building of enormous new pagodas and monasteries in the city suburbs. “Upgrading” of existing pagodas, such as the Shwedagon pagoda has involved new metal work and precious gems, the liberal use of yellow paint as a substitute for gold leaf, and the inclusion of modern conveniences such as elevators (Jordt 2003). The Golden Façade scheme is part of an amplification in the funding of Buddhism and Buddhist infrastructure by which the ruling generals seek to take over the mantle of Buddhist moral authority that was invested, before British colonialism, in the Burmese monarchy.

The Burmese people do not sit idly by while these sweeping forces change their sociopolitical and religious landscapes. This book surveys not just the social topography, but also the moral topography of the contemporary nation state. Many of the chapters here concern the process of creating a moral consensus within particular social, religious, economic, and political domains. This diffuse moral consensus is sometimes at odds with the forms of moral legitimation claimed by the ruling generals. More often, however, the moral consensus is ambivalent, qualified, and complicit. This ambiguous moral understanding is carried through travelers, pilgrims, rumors, and the deliberate voluntary participation in cultural and religious forms deemed worthy of respect by the populace.

**Military Rule**

Any examination of everyday Burmese life over the past four decades is necessarily encompassed by the framework of military rule and the economic consequences and social suffering it has generated. The remarkably stable troika (the president, the head of Military Intelligence, and the military) of the SLORC and, since November 1997, of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) resulted in one of the most enduring military states of the twentieth century. As we go to press, Khin Nyunt, the prime minister and head of Military Intelligence, has been sacked, and it is not yet known what kinds of changes this event presages. The past decade has seen a decrease in violence in areas where the civil war has been commuted to a system of pacification as rebel armies have signed peace agreements with the increasingly strong military state. Torture, disappearances, rape, and extrajudicial killings documented
by human rights observers in the now-pacified regions have also decreased. Suffering has also been slowly reduced in the peri-urban areas where around 1.5 million Rangoon (Yangon) and Mandalay residents were forcibly relocated. Demonstrable decreases in previous rates of mortality in the peri-urban areas can be charted over the past decade. Infrastructure such as roads has slowly been created (largely through forced labor) to link former paddy fields and villages to urban centers, and land speculation has resulted in the voluntary resettlement of many urban residents to these “New Fields” (Allott 1993; Skidmore 2004). In other parts of the country, however, heroin and amphetamine production, the trafficking of women and children to Thailand, China, and India, and the forcible recruitment of children and youth as soldiers in armed combat situations continues unabated.

Within the urban and peri-urban areas of Burma that are the subject of this volume, the military regime seldom needs to send its tanks, riot police, and military intelligence officers into battle. With the exception of demonstrations in late 1996 and early 1997, and a smaller uprising in 1998, the student movement has been largely silenced. Similarly, the continued arrest (largely as house arrest) of Aung San Suu Kyi, the pro-democracy figurehead in Burma and party secretary of the National League for Democracy (NLD), and the jailing of other political opponents of the military junta have meant that almost all political opposition in central Burma has been suppressed.

Mechanisms used to repress the population include fear, propaganda, censorship, surveillance, strategic and symbolic acts of violence, and the inculcation of a permanent state of alert and vulnerability in the populace (Skidmore 1998; 2003a; 2004). The issuance of personal identity cards (that from 1990 have included ethnicity and religion), the creation of the Fundamental Rules of Organization of the Sangha (monastic order), and the 1993 Development of Border Areas and National Races Law, are all methods of regulating and controlling the flow of people as citizens, “residents,” and “official” monastic sects (Liddell 1999:58–67). These are some of the key ways in which the military juridical apparatus has acted to stop freedom of speech, association, and assembly, and to repress all forms of political opposition and mobilization. This, then, is the political climate in which anthropologists and scholars of religion have had to work since 1962.

A significant reason for producing this book, however, is to demonstrate that despite the entrenchment of military rule, there is no all-powerful military state here, no black-and-white understandings, and certainly no monolithic Orwellian entity overseeing all the Burmese people. Instead, as each chapter makes apparent, forms of association, elements of free speech, and collectivities of moral opposition are clearly apparent. The chapters show how the Burmese people have sought to maintain certain key values and beliefs,
while deliberately employing strategies of complicity, collusion, or ambiva-
lence regarding the changes to the urban and peri-urban landscapes. With the
improved transportation infrastructure, for example, came the relaxing of
rules regarding movement, and the Burmese people have used the new infra-
structure to create business opportunities and to engage with peri-urban and
rural religious communities in order to make merit, money, and auspicious-
ness.

Everyday Life in the Popular Domain

The subjects of this book exist within the domain designated as popular, which
came into existence long before the pro-democracy uprising was repressed in
1988. The current regime’s rules of engagement with political and social life,
and the burden or fear, censorship, and surveillance that the Burmese people
shoulder daily, should not blind us to the furtive creativity and industry
invested in making a future for Burmese children.

Where does this work for the future occur? In political science, “civil soci-
ety” is a European concept that has recently begun regaining its currency in
contemporary theorizing. Political scientists have often been concerned with
the elusiveness of civil society in Burma (Kramer and Vervest 1999). It can be
defined narrowly as nongovernmental organizations (ibid.), or more widely
to include any voluntary association, formal or informal, that exists between
the level of the family and the level of the state. In this broader sense, civil soci-
ety is civic life, the ways in which individuals come together in groups larger
than the family for any purpose whatsoever, apart from political affiliations.
Even this is a vague notion, however, as trade unions and business associations,
for example, often have strong political ties. Htun Aung Kyaw, founder of the
activist expatriate Civil Society for Burma organization defines it as

that realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self generating, (largely)
self supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal and or a
set of shared rules. In this context, citizens act collectively in a public sphere
to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve
mutual goals, make demands on the state and hold state offices. . . . Civil
society in the western sense has no equivalent in the Burmese lexicon
(Htun Aung Kyaw n.d.).

Besides being an allochthonous concept, civil society is a term that brings
with it certain assumptions. This view is described by Martin Smith as the
belief that the military regime’s “on-paper” support for “a ‘market-oriented,’
‘open-door,’ ‘multi-party’ system of ‘democratic’ government . . . are elements
that are generally considered essential building blocks in the development of civil society” (Smith 1999:17). Although this implies linear progression from civil society to democracy and pluralism, such has not occurred, for example, in Burma’s northern neighbor, China, where the postsocialist state has engineered the linking of economic openness with more subtle, but equally coercive, forms for the distribution of power through society (Wang 2001). As a consequence, rather than use the term civil society, I have searched for a term that is accurate and applicable to the sphere of interpersonal interaction these authors examine but that does not imply or assume a domain that is an embryonic form of liberty, democracy, or pluralism. I use the term “popular domain” to designate the sense of popular imagination and the forging and reforging of a social moral consensus. This is a domain that is, as Farquhar (2001:107) has written for China, “neither remote nor small nor grounded in a community of people who share a local history and mundane conditions of life.” Nor is it a space impermeable to the state or set apart from it.

The genealogy of the “popular” throughout the modern period is inextricably linked to the state and to the modernization of China, and East Asia more broadly. Burma has a series of “localities,” some of which are defined by the state, others in negotiation or conflict with the state (and other states such as China), and yet others more thoroughly entangled in the state’s introduction of transnational, illegal, and laundered capital into the country, most particularly on the nation’s geographic periphery. There is no isolated subculture to be snitched out and revealed by anthropologists and no unofficial site where nongovernmental organizations flourish. Rather, there is oftentimes a consenting nexus and a circulation of individuals within and outside of bureaucracies, villages, transnational border zones, peri-urban factories and sweatshops, military “tax free” zones, and monastic territories (to name but a few localities), who are tied together through forms of association. In a conversation with me in 2002, Guillaume Rozenberg likened these forms of association to a previously unknown degree of elasticity within reciprocal, hierarchical, patron-client, and kin-based relationships.

Our focus on the popular means that the interpenetration of political life with the social world is not dichotomized. In particular, it affords us an opportunity of scrutinizing the complicitous and imbricated ways that almost all Burmese people have come to participate in sociopolitical life. The encompassing domain of the popular is infused with power and with commodification: the penetration of capitalism and dictatorship into even the most intimate provinces of personal relations is an increasing reality in daily life. It is possible for a Burmese citizen to be a government employee and a member of that particular department’s football team, a member of a religious order during the rainy season, an aficionado of Burmese heavy metal music, and an
occasional smuggler of contraband from Thailand or China. Such a person has multiple positionings within the popular domain and a variety of strategies, rationalities, and logics that justify and guide his or her participation at certain moments, to a greater or lesser degree, in each of these subspheres.

The Acceleration of Modernization

The title of Nash’s 1965 collection, *The Golden Road to Modernity*, is consistent with his interest in modernization, industrialization, and the changing dynamics of rural life as villagers come to be more tightly linked to urban areas. The intervening decades of isolation and economic mismanagement have meant that these issues continue to be pertinent in Burma at the turn of the twenty-first century. It is a central premise of this book that specific modes of contemporary modernity in Burma are channeled through long-standing relations between villages and towns encircling larger polities, and are in part constituted through the connection of polities via intermediary nodes of economic and religious activity.

For tourists to Burma, modernity must appear as the increased circulation of quantity, not quality. In the lurid and cheap plasticware that floods over the Chinese border and spreads along the laminated tables of street vendors in Rangoon and Mandalay, for example, we see the increased circulation of low-quality material goods. But there is a more complex rendering of modernity occurring with the selective liberalization of the economy in the 1990s, the creation of expanded infrastructure for tourism and travel, the development of industrial and manufacturing zones, and the changes that have occurred in living units and family arrangements due to the processes of relocation, urban remodeling, and limited industrialization.

Each of the chapters in this volume necessarily discuss aspects of Burmese modernization, “the measurable material processes of industrialization, technological innovation, expanding capitalist markets, and rapid urbanization” (Kendall 2002: 2). Unlike Western nations, the past fifty years have seen only very limited industrialization in Burma and now the economy is moving directly from, for example, paper filing systems to digital cash registers and electronic visas, and from windup telephones scattered across the country, to cellular phones and satellite and Internet provision through a military hub. In addition, Burmese people now not only watch, but also produce and appear on television which reports state-controlled ceremonies and nation-building activities. Television was introduced by Gen. Ne Win as a conduit for disseminating state ideology, and it is now in at least 320,000 homes (CIA 2003).

The effects of these recently accelerating changes for urban and peri-urban Burmese are significant. Freed from the restraint against traveling within the
country, urban residents now flock to moral and economic centers of activity, and rural men are increasingly becoming ensnared in day laboring, cash cropping, and seasonal work in faraway provinces. Young women migrate to peri-urban factories and sweatshops. In the regular “ferry” boats that ply the Hlaing and Pun Hlaing rivers, in the high-speed buses hurtling along the potholed asphalt roads that connect the cities to one another via newly constructed bridges over the Ayeyarwadi, and in the pickup jeeps that traverse muddy jungle hills linking Mandalay to dusty Thai and Chinese border towns, chickens, ducks, soldiers, men, women, children, and vegetables endlessly move between villages, towns, and cities.

Each author in this collection places a particular node or subdomain of activity under the microscope. One purpose for bringing these experienced Burma scholars and fieldworkers together is to allow readers to examine one segment of Burmese life closely and simultaneously to expand the magnification so they can glimpse the ways that these different centers of activity connect the Burmese people and moral and religious discourses into the particular conformation of contemporary Burmese social life.

The responses of the Burmese people and the active ways in which they manage and create lives for themselves are often described by these authors in terms of discourses of moral legitimation. For more than a decade now, anthropologists and scholars of religion have been engaged in discovering those places and processes within the popular domain from which a sense of moral reality and public consensus emerges. In each essay the answer emerges not from traditional anthropological subjects or civil society organizations, but from nodes of possibility, from the places where the Burmese people find it possible to nourish forms of popular imagination that circulate, like the material accoutrements of modernity, along newly established transportation routes and information conduits.

Organization of the Book

Where, then, are the particular areas in which Burmese people engage with each other, as individual and collectivities, within the popular domain? It is difficult to conduct research in the current political climate so many fieldworkers choose established centers of religious and ritual activity as their focus. This strategy means following Burmese people to the spaces where moral discourses are constructed and economic and religious activities are transacted. The meditation center and monastery, the state bureaucracy, the home, the tea circle, the literary circle, the pwe (or bwe) (festival), the public performance, and the pagoda: these are some of the localities into which the anthropologists and scholars of religion have inserted themselves.
Within these arenas a number of key themes and distinctions are apparent. The book is accordingly divided into four parts: spirituality, pilgrimage, and economics; political and moral legitimation; public performance; and the domestic domain. No one essay fits entirely within its own section. There is enormous overlap, in part because the military gaze penetrates the entire popular domain, but also because no individual has only one role to fill, or one mode of engagement.

Part 1, Spirituality, Pilgrimage, and Economics, consists of four essays. Like the Burmese people themselves, many of the chapters trace journeys that crisscross the country, circumambulate the nation, and follow regional linkages and connections. We travel with Guillaume Rozenberg from Rangoon to cities and towns in search of clues to the winning numbers of the Burmese and Thai lotteries. In his “The Cheaters: Journey to the Land of the Lottery,” dozens of cars and pickup trucks line the winding dirt roads to forest monasteries, and hundreds of Burmese can be found seated in teashops along the route, to listen to the sermons of the “lottery monks.” Hopeful individuals drive between major cities and the forest monasteries and the lottery vendors and bankers move between the major cities, their activities reaching a frenzied climax from the third to the tenth of every month when gambling on the illegal lottery is afoot. Rozenberg notes the enduring values of pilgrimage and reciprocity between monks and laity that is apparent even in the commodified domain of contemporary lottery practices, and the fine line that monks, laity, lottery bankers, and paid policemen walk between legal and religious proscriptions on economic behavior.

The porous nature of analytical constructs, such as institutional versus noninstitutional space, and the location of all Burmese institutions firmly within the public domain are clearly portrayed by Ingrid Jordt in “Women’s Practices of Renunciation in the Age of Sāsana Revival.” Jordt reviews several ways in which women have, over the last century, practiced renunciation. This has included the adoption of institutional, noninstitutional, vocational, and nonvocational roles. The phenomenal growth of the “new laity” of the mass meditation movement not only challenges the traditional idea that religious renunciation occurs in institutions, as opposed, for example, to its taking place in a popular domain that is both religious and secular, but also it challenges the place of women in wider gender hierarchies and Buddhist cosmologies. Many urban Buddhist women are engaged in the struggle for greater institutionalization, and hence spiritual status, through their renunciation practices and their association with meditation centers. They have effectively created shadow institutions in order to approximate the male Sangha, thereby transcending gendered social roles by challenging the spiritual supremacy of the Sangha and the broader gender structure of Burmese Buddhist society.
Only ten kilometers north of Burma’s second city, Mandalay, is the village
of Taungbyon, the epicenter of the cult of the nat (spirits), the possession cult
that is part of the Burmese religious system in the shadow of Buddhism. In
“The Taungbyon Festival: Locality and Nation-Confronting in the Cult of the
‘37 Lords,’” Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière describes the wide-ranging ritual
cycle throughout the “nat belt” of central Burma that involves three festival
periods each year. Taken together, this vast ritual complex unifies central
Burma, tying the rural areas to the precolonial administrative royal center of
Mandalay. Here too a series of identity negotiations occur in the face of mod-
ernizing city centers and the centralization and consolidation of military rule
extending from Rangoon and Mandalay outward towards the nation’s geo-
graphic peripheries.

The infrastructure of this festival waxes and wanes according to the for-
tunes of the Burmese centralized economy. Brac de la Perrière has been study-
ing the festival for more than fifteen years. She charts the growth of the festival
beyond its original boundaries and the economic implications of secondary
dance sites, hereditary guardianship of Nat palaces, and the rapid growth of
the population of urban spirit mediums organized in performing troupes.
Community conflict has followed the growth of the festival among the local
population as there is no central organizing body. Rather, in fulfilling their
customary duties within their designated domains, and in seeking to maintain
control and profit from the cycle of spirit festivals, local communities engage
in power struggles between spirit mediums, palace guardians, and villagers
where eventually a new status quo is reached as local economies adapt to
changing circumstances.

In the final chapter in this section, “Respected Grandfather, Bless This
Nissan: Benevolent and Politically Neutral Bo Bo Gyi,” we travel with Mandy
Sadan to principal pagoda sites in Rangoon, Mandalay, and their environs,
tracing the pilgrimages that urban dwellers take to seek protection, ameliora-
tion, and good fortune in their dealings with such aspects of uneven urban
development and modernization as traffic accidents, limited tertiary educa-
tion, and poverty. Sadan layers three processes in her depictions of Bo Bo Gyi,
a revered spirit common in many parts of the country. The first is the devel-
opment from autochthonous animist spirit to nat and then to legendary Bud-
dhist wizard in the figure of Bo Bo Gyi, a process of Buddhification and cen-
tralization that took place over centuries of Buddhist rule in central Burma.
Overlaid is the pilgrimage of individual Burmese to sites where Bo Bo Gyi is
honored, as they search for culturally valued traits such as wisdom, benevo-
ience, and longevity. Finally, the military regime is also in the process of visit-
ing Bo Bo Gyi statues, but only for the purpose of removing them from
“tourist” sites so that they can be replaced with bronzed images taken from their cult of victorious warrior kings and generals. Sadan analyzes the political appropriateness of veneration of these different kinds of statues, noting the compromises the Burmese make in order to participate in public veneration of Bo Bo Gyi.

Part 2, Political and Moral Legitimation, presents three essays concerning political beliefs and practices by the military regime and moral communities that form in opposition to the linking of Buddhist patronage with political legitimacy. Both Schober and Houtman document this debate through the international media and in particular through Aung San Suu Kyi’s “Letters from Burma.” In “Buddhist Visions of Moral Authority and Modernity in Burma,” Schober describes the different forms of modernity that are encapsulated in the National League for Democracy’s use of Buddhism to secure moral and hence political legitimacy in the absence of secular forms of authority, such as a constitution and a judiciary system. Both institutions draw upon modern Buddhist forms of practice to transform national communities into religious communities through their speeches, rituals, and appeals to rationalist Buddhist visions of moral authority.

And like the new-style writers (see Leehey, this volume), both the NLD’s and SPDC’s forms of “Buddhist modernism intersect in distinct, hybrid ways with Euro-American, post-enlightenment political thought.” Burmese modernization has thus allowed a variety of groups to conduct a dialogue with global society for both national and international agendas, highlighting the fact that the hybrid forms of Buddhist modernities and modernisms do not exist in a hermit nation but instead rapidly propagate through a diversity of media, radiating outwards from individual centers of practice to connect Burmese people to each other and then to elements of Asian and global society.

Gustaaf Houtman documents the pilgrimage made by Burmese Buddhists to various Buddha images believed to have a sudden and magical thickening of the right side of the shoulder, indicative of Aung San Suu Kyi’s spiritual (Buddhist) qualifications to take political office. These pilgrims are searching for evidence of Buddhist moral legitimacy in the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi, and Schober, Sadan, and Tosa similarly note the outrage of Buddhists at the alleged interference by the ruling council with important Buddhist images and pagodas throughout the country, especially the Mandalay Mahamuni Buddha image. In “Sacralizing or Demonizing Democracy? Aung San Suu Kyi’s ‘Personality Cult’,” Houtman notes the circulation of rumors about these Buddha images in addition to rumors of Aung San Suu Kyi’s supernatural nature as being part of a personality cult centered on the democracy figurehead. The cult is not local, nor regional, being also apparent in the international media.
State media vociferously denounce the personality cult and this leads to intense teashop discussions on the forms of religious legitimacy claimed by both the NLD and the ruling council.

The most common sites for the production of narratives about the impacts and meanings of modernity, modernization, and national and global influences upon Burmese society are the “tea circles,” those ubiquitous rings of (often childhood) friends who gather in teashops to discuss everything from philosophy and literature to political forecasts and international events as seen through the micro lens of the local. In “The Chicken and the Scorpion: Rumor, Counternarratives and the Political Uses of Buddhism,” Tosa discusses the continual re-creation of a sense of moral consensus and ongoing assessments of the truth that spread through the political rumors that circulate in Burma’s teashops.

Tosa demonstrates how Burmese people analyze the political uses of Buddhism with reference to an old system of folk knowledge known as lawki pyinnya, or this-worldly discourse. Delicate resistance is promulgated in the forging of a consensus as to the meaning of actions of members of the military council. Tea circles exist also in village communities (Tamura 1997: 122), in markets, and in workplaces. In the last fifteen years, women have become more frequent tea circle participants and a series of unspoken rules guide the discussion of tea circles in towns and cities. These rules relate to what can be said in public, and the way in which discussions must be phrased. Rules denying freedom of assembly and the discussion of political matters, in conjunction with the prevalent fear of political informers, means that the deconstruction of political rumors and the creation of moral consensus occurs cautiously and only among intimates. Like Houtman’s informants, there is no one subculture that conveys these thoughts and reaches consensus. Instead, political rumors move along the modernized transportation and communication networks, connecting key contemporary figures such as Hsayadaw Thamanya, Aung San Suu Kyi, and former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, in new ways.

In Part 3, Public Performance, trust, intimacy, and authenticity are the key themes. Burma’s literary, artistic, and musical communities struggle to express, in politically allowable forms, the difficulties of self-expression and a sense of personal identity within the framework of a militarized public domain. In “Writing in a Crazy Way: Literary Life in Contemporary Urban Burma,” Jennifer Leehey describes the refusal of a particular school of writers to publish work that conforms to the regime’s ideological dictates about what is conveyed by terms such as trust, intimacy, and authenticity. In the “new style” literary circle, itself a subset of the broader Burmese literary world, or sa-pay lawka, Leehey charts the changing value of intellectuals (literary workers) under the Burma Socialist Programme Party and subsequent regimes to their
current small circles of colleagues. The new-style writers have been progressi-
vely isolated as fewer magazines are able to publish their works without cen-
sorship and because these writers were linked with pro-democracy activities
during the December 1996 student demonstrations.

These writers reject the view of reality promulgated by the regime and
refuse to give coherency and unidirectionality to their writings. Drawing inspira-
tion from the postmodern literary movements of the West and from tenets
of poststructuralist theory, these writers challenge the older generation of
writers who believe that realism can exist in the current climate and who feel
a duty to portray it. Congregating in certain teashops, they promulgate magi-
cal realism and fantastic imagery using techniques that defy logic, rhyme, or
meter, and prose that does not make sense. They refuse to write coherently
about nonsensical topics that will pass the Press Scrutiny Board. They refuse
to be complicit in the war on truth. Rather than presenting alternate truths,
they prefer instead to remain outside the truth paradigm where freedom of
expression, and not truth, is at issue.

The key public performance venue in Burma is the *pwe*, or festival. After
the rice paddy has been harvested, villagers gather under tamarind and banyan
trees or in the shade of pagodas to participate in an annual cyclical series of
pagoda, spirit, harvest, comedy, and marionette *pwes*. Two *pwes* are described
in this volume: Keeler describes a *zat*-pwe and Brac de la Perrière describes a
*nat*-pwe. In Keeler’s “‘But Princes Jump!’: Performing Masculinity in Man-
dalay,” the zat-pwe provides a public space for performances of contemporary
masculinity and is set in the center of the former royal capital of Mandalay.
The national image of Mandalay as the epicenter of Burmese “culture” and
tradition is increasingly one of a nostalgic, mythical, simpler, and purer Burma,
contrasted in time and space, with the lights and pace of Rangoon. Keeler’s
chapter reveals the negotiating of a modern male identity that occurs along-
side the dominant “we’ll always have Mandalay” cultural stereotype. Typical of
the “everyday” nature of the subject matter in the volume, the focus within the
zat-pwe is on the urban cultural processes and forces at work in reinvesting
the Burmese masculine world with meaning in the face of rapid social change
in the popular domain.

Consistent with the primacy of Mandalay’s courtly style, the version of
masculinity embodied by the aristocratic prince has until recently been the
central feature of the zat-pwe. Keeler charts the emergence of the rock star, the
angry rapper, and the “romantic lovelorn crooner,” as conscious attempts to
reinvent masculinity in Burma in the model of an imagined Western modern
autonomous manhood. The costumes, songs, and subject matter of Keeler’s
zat-pwe increasingly move away from the officially sanctioned images of per-
forming arts as described in Douglas’s chapter. Like Leehey’s new-style writ-
ers, the artists look outwards from Burma for models by which to express themselves in the public eye.

Gavin Douglas’s “Who’s Performing What? State Patronage and the Transformation of Burmese Music” is set in the newly created state arts institutions and performance halls and describes the workings of the University of Culture and the annual state performing arts competition. Within the state media there is a voluminous discourse regarding the authentic and unique attributes of the Union of Myanmar, and “Culture” and “Tradition” are some of the main areas in which the remaking of the past is occurring. Many of the contributors in this volume chart aspects of this process of reconnecting the past and repackaging it as an authentic, unbroken history carrying into an imagined militarized future.

Even the state employees engaged in creating the official definitions of Burmese culture are scathing in their criticism of the effects of coopting music and performance for ideological purposes. The winners of the performing arts competitions cannot earn a living as musicians because the public refuses to grant them status and credibility. Conversely, on the final day of the annual performing arts competition, a genuine and voluntary audience arrives at the new state performance venues. They come to listen to the one form of musical performance that does not derive from the royal court tradition patronized by the military regime. In their enjoyment of the drumming of the paddy-planting tradition, the audience makes clear their opposition to the usurpation of music, performance, and entertainment as a forum for the regime’s culture-making program.

The final section of the volume, Part 4, The Domestic Domain, contains only one essay, reflecting the difficulty anthropologists have when they work among the general public without the facilitation of an institutional space or recognized activity such as a festival. The domestic domain of Burmese Buddhists is the subject of much Burmese literature. It is often romanticized or idealized, especially the power of the female with regard to running the household and the deference of adult males towards this female domestic expertise and authority. Relatively little has been written about children, but Asian childhoods and forms of socialization have not been immune to transnational marketing and state agendas. We can see this in China’s One Child policy, Singapore’s Family Values campaign, and the growth of the youth leisure industry. In this final section individual Burmese were asked to articulate their fundamental beliefs about value, worth, and a meaningful life. In “The Future of Burma: Children Are Like Jewels,” those Burmese interviewed gave unequivocal answers regarding these issues, and their answers revolved around the inestimable value and worth of children. In contemporary Burma the home remains the domain of children and the locus of family life, even though rep-
resentations of what constitutes the ideal modern family and ideal parental conduct is increasingly depicted in urban locales as conforming to a pan-Asian consumerist ideal. Women are told by the military council to expend more effort “safeguarding” Burmese traditions and morals and the “nation’s youth” are endlessly being exhorted to uphold the good traditions of the nation. Burmese children are educated in “union spirit” and required to become members of parastatal organizations such as the Union Solidarity and Defense Organization (USDA) and to attend innumerable opening ceremonies and other state-sponsored spectacles.

In the privacy of their homes, however, the current generation of Burmese children continue to learn an alternate system of value that is divorced from the modernized urban dream promulgated in the state media and by trans-Asian marketing companies. This is a soft and quiet form of resistance, a deliberate focus upon self-directed values, directly at odds with the incorporation of model families into a modern authoritarian state structure scaled down even to the level of shared rice pots.

In the various activity centers that constitute the province of popular space and popular imagination, and in the information channels between them, the individual authors of this volume portray complex fragments of daily life. In Jing Wang’s (2001:11) words, “only in juxtaposition with these essays can the absent signifier of the people . . . be re-embodied.” We are all acutely aware of the malnutrition that stalks much of Burma, of the rampant inflation that sends basic commodities out of the reach of many families, and of a public health system that is impotent against the spread of infectious diseases such as AIDS and hepatitis and unaffordable for people with serious illnesses such as cancer. Many of us have written about these topics in other places. We do not intend to downplay the suffering occasioned by more than four decades of military rule, economic calamity, and civil war, but rather to focus on active hotspots in the moral terrain and thus understand a little better how accommodation, complicity, collusion, resistance, intimacy, trust, and moral legitimation operate in Burmese everyday life at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. A short volume of social and political assessments was compiled by Josef Silverstein (1989) from papers presented at the fortieth annual meeting of the Asian Studies Association.

2. These students, academics, and activists have used the Internet, sometimes
from within the jungles and mountains that border the country, to wage a public relations war against the junta and to document human rights violations committed by the regime. This activist diaspora has been successful in applying relentless economic and political pressure upon the regime through their demonstrations, human rights lobbying of politicians and the U.N., organization of consumer boycotts, and their effective call for sanctions against organizations doing business with the regime and against tourism to Burma. In addition, they have created an alternative government in exile and developed nongovernmental organizations and societies to discuss issues such as civil society and the environment in a future democratic Burma.

3. A young generation of scholars are moving beyond ethnic Burman culture and locating their studies among the “national races,” as they are designated by the military regime, and in the coming years they will bring forth a corpus of work that will reflect upon the engagement of minority cultural groups with the nation state. In addition, a generation of Burmese peace activists are being trained in public health, peace and conflict studies, international politics, and reconciliation and international development modeling. These Burmese students will be at the forefront of policy formation for a postregime or postaccord society.

4. In contrast, the continued political mobilization of students from 1988 to the present has led to the closure of almost all urban tertiary institutions throughout most of the 1990s.

5. Steinberg (1999, 2–5) qualifies the search for civil society in Burma by noting that it generally did not exist at the village level before Independence.

6. Nash was the first anthropologist to use a factory as a field site.