

theFocus



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Contextualizing language and ethnicity in the study of Burma

Burma and ethnicity tend to be closely associated in people's minds when thinking about the diversity of the country, or when analyzing the conflicts there, many of which have yet to be resolved. Ethnicity forms such a naturalized part of the intellectual landscape dealing with the country that few have stopped to consider its complex relationship with language. The decades-long closure of the country means that the ideas of earlier scholarship still continue to hold powerful sway. With new possibilities for travel and research inside, thanks to the political changes starting in 2010, foreign researchers have recently been able to move around more in the country, to observe patterns of language-use, and to speak with people about their thoughts concerning their own identities. This special issue moves forward a long-stalled reconsideration to argue that the relationship between language, ethnicity, and identity in Burma is not necessarily timeless, a given, or set in stone. Rather, language may be one element informing an ongoing process and negotiation that various groups engage in to define themselves in relation to others.

Patrick McCormick



Burmese youth. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of Thaths on flickr.



Palaung Woman. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of Fabulousfabs on flickr.

Contextualizing language and ethnicity in the study of Burma *continued*

Burma and Burma Studies

Burma is open for business. Recent changes in government have meant positive developments for those doing research in and about the country. While some foreign researchers already found ways to do research inside in the 1990s, it was not until the early 2000s that greater numbers started to arrive. Even if many of the technical difficulties and restrictions, such as obtaining long-term visas or access to areas outside major cities, still remain in place or are only gradually beginning to ease, more people inside the Burmese system may be embracing the idea of openness, change, and possibility. Just in the past few years, an ever-growing number of scholars and researchers have been spending time in the country.

Moving intellectual conversations forward in the study of Burma has been a slow process, and it is worth reviewing how this came to be. For decades, Burma Studies mostly fell off everyone's radars. Before WWII, much of the scholarship related to Burma was the work of scholar-officials of the British colonial administration, including historian D.G.E. Hall, J.S. Furnivall, and archaeologist-art historian-linguist Gordon Luce, and their Burmese protégés, such as Taw Sein Ko, Pe Maung Tin, and Htin Aung. After WWII (followed by independence in 1948), several foreign researchers conducted fieldwork through the early 1960s, and some of the resulting scholarship remains influential even today, such as the work of anthropologist Melford Spiro.

When U Ne Win came to power in 1962, he effectively shut the country off from the outside world, and access for foreigners was tightly restricted. Many scholars who had intended to study Burma chose alternative research sites, although others tried to study the country by proxy by doing research among cross-border communities who either lived on both sides of the Thai-Burma border, or had moved to Thailand to escape conflict inside Burma. Research on Shans, Mons, Akha and some other upland groups falls into this category. Few of those researchers spoke Burmese or had much direct experience with the country, so that it was difficult for them to place their observations in a larger Burmese – as opposed to Thai – context. Finally, there were some scholars, such as historians Victor Lieberman and Michael Aung-Thwin, and the political scientist Robert Taylor, who were either able to negotiate access to the country

or the nature of their work allowed them to make use of documents and other sources available outside of the country.

This decades-long, near-total hiatus in research and scholarship has put Burma Studies in a rather different situation than found in other nearby countries. Scholarship on Thailand or Indonesia, for example, is now in its third or greater generation, meaning that much of the earliest scholarship produced – during the colonial period or contact with the west – has been reexamined, built upon, rethought or discarded. Next door in India, generations of local and international scholars have engaged in lively debates to rethink much of the received wisdom on the Subcontinent. These efforts have included projects of intellectual decolonization.

In Burma Studies, however, the earliest classical scholarship of the colonial era (and just after) is still highly important, simply because there have been so few scholars to revisit it. In many fields, vast amounts of primary sources have yet to be properly processed. In history, for example, primary sources in Burmese, Pāli, and local languages have yet to be read and catalogued, much less annotated or analyzed. Within Burma itself, early colonial work has come to define how Burmese understand themselves, not to mention how they practice academia.

From an institutional perspective, universities throughout the world offer some support to Burma Studies, most importantly the Center for Burma Studies at Northern Illinois University, which opened in the 1980s. While the Center is a huge boon for Burma Studies, throughout the rest of North America, Europe, Australia and Japan, faculty working on Burma-related topics, not to mention actually offering instruction in the Burmese language, have been all too few and far between, especially in comparison with Indonesian, Thai, or Vietnamese. Now, however, Burma Studies are finally moving forward, with new researchers working on Burma-related topics. Within Burma itself, opportunities impossible even just a few years ago are slowly emerging, such as working with local universities and faculty. In 2015, a foreign student studying anthropology was allowed to spend time in a Burmese village, something which, as far as I know, has not happened since the 1950s.

Towards the future

The most recent change of government may bring about many positive changes. Over the next several decades, the economic and political situation may foster much greater prosperity. The brain drain may reverse, or at least be stemmed, and educated people may start to see the possibility of having the kind of life they want inside the country. As has happened in India with the rise of the middleclass, there may be a greater demand for the use of local languages, even in higher education.

Thongchai Winichakul has written of 'home scholars' to talk of Thais educated abroad, but who write or produce in Thai, with local audiences in mind.¹ While home scholars may now be a common feature of the Thai intellectual landscape, they have only recently begun to appear in Burma. One such appearance is in the burgeoning Burmese-language print media, which is thriving after censorship restrictions were eased. The numbers of such home scholars may continue to grow and acquire a greater voice. The possibilities for genuine collaboration and collegiality between foreign and local researchers may also grow. In the Philippines and Singapore, such academic collaboration between colleagues has been possible. These two advances have obvious links with language: the possibility of a genuine Burmese-language intellectual milieu developing, while at the same time, having the self-confidence and English-language skills to engage with international scholars. Or, as in Japan and increasingly in Thailand and elsewhere, providing foreigners with opportunities and incentives for learning the local language.

I would like to end on a final note of caution with regard to what may be a form of narcissism: the assumption that once Burma improves its educational system its intellectual ideas will be similar to those of the West. Today, many Burmese speak of education in the country as having fallen behind or having been cut off from the rest of the world, and as needing to catch up. Outsiders voice similar sentiments, speaking for example of how old-fashioned ideas have lingered in the country, or how academia is in a 'time warp'. It would be dangerous, however, to think that as more Burmese are educated in universities with better resources and teaching methods, that their research interests or perspectives will become 'just like ours'.

Below: Market in Dawei/Tavoy. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of Prachatai on flickr.



To illustrate, we can return to the example of Thailand. Even though Thais have been exposed to western-style education and ideas for decades, many Thai research agendas reflect local perspectives and interests. Research in history, for example, is very much informed by the royalist-nationalist school of historiography taught in schools. History is a good example of differences in what is at stake depending on whether one is embedded in local, national intellectual worlds, or writing as an international scholar. For local scholars, history is deeply imbricated in ideas about the self and identity, which are taught early on. Many are reluctant to allow the interpretation of 'our' past to fall into the hands of outsiders. International scholars, however, tend to see questions of history in abstract ways and engage in conversation more with each other than with local audiences. More importantly, the way they deal with the topic – supposedly in 'objective' or 'scientific' ways – may ride rough over cherished local interpretations and ideologies.

Language does not always equal ethnicity

I am happy to bring together the work of several scholars who have been working on questions of language, script, ethnicity and identity in Burma. This collection comes out of the Language, Power, and Identity in Asia conference, which the IAS held in Leiden in March of this year. If there is one question that unites these papers, it is one of 'origins'. Ethnic names and categories have such a solidity in Burma, and indeed ethnicity and 'difference' have long been both a cause and consequence of conflict and violence. In discussing their research topics, each author teases out strands from the solid-seeming categories of ethnicity and language. Tug on Palaung scripts and language, and we find Shan models and vocabulary. Pull at Kachin, and we find that not all of the groups under the label necessarily think of themselves as belonging there. Yet we find that linguistically some of the core Kachin groups share features among each other, but not with either their neighbours or with their closest linguistic relatives. Aspects of Shan reflect contact with Burmese, while the names for the Burmese dialects have changed and shifted over time. The sounds of some of the Burmese dialects reflect contact with speakers of surrounding languages, as over time they have shifted their own language and identities.

Below: Farmer on Inle Lake. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of Roman Korzh on flickr.

In bringing these contributions together, I hope to bring some nuance to conversations about language, ethnicity, and identity. I would like to foster disciplinary border crossing. As someone who has worked both as a linguist and as a historian, I have seen how historians struggle to understand linguistic concepts, and linguists often use historical writing uncritically to interpret linguistic data. When talking about language-contact or multilingualism, non-specialists often think this results in a language meltdown, with people speaking 'pidgins' and 'creoles'. The contributors to this Focus section provide concrete examples of what actually does happen – how speakers of one language replicate the words and grammar of another – while describing the context of hierarchy in which these replications occur.

Looking at how speech communities stand in relation to each other, how those positions can shift over time, and how the communities themselves change over time, all gives us some insight into how definitions of language and ethnicity are processes with a time depth. In revisiting and rethinking some of these ideas, or looking into the evolution of languages and scripts, we recognize that even if categories of language and identity are in some sense constructed, they still have a reality and a vital importance to the people to whom they belong.

Our contributors are affiliated with institutions in Switzerland and Japan. Jenny, McCormick, Müller and Weymuth are all at the Department of Comparative Linguistics at the University of Zurich, where we have been working on a project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation on the history of language contact in what we call the 'Greater Burma Zone', which we understand as Burma, but in a looser way than the current political boundaries. Cultural and religious networks have also connected peoples in what is now Burma, with parts of Northeast India, Bangladesh, Yunnan, and northern Thailand. Badenoch, Imamura, Kojima and Kurabe are linguists, anthropologists, and geographers doing trans-disciplinary studies at Japanese institutions. Much of the Burma-related work coming out of Japanese universities is not well known in English, which is particularly regrettable in that Japanese scholars place particular emphasis on the importance of long-term fieldwork.

All of us would like to thank the countless number of local people in Burma and elsewhere who have worked with us and given us support in so many ways. The Greater Burma Zone project would also like to gratefully acknowledge the help and participation of the Anthropology Department of Mandalay University.

Names, spellings, classifications

The authors in each of their contributions have followed their own spellings and used terms related to the names of countries, ethnic groups, and languages in their own way. This diversity reflects the fact that knowledge related to the country is still emerging and in process, without any kind of definitive consensus. Badenoch, Kojima and Weymuth each classify varieties of the Palaung languages differently. Some authors have used the term 'Myanmar', while others prefer 'Burma'. The term 'Myanmar' in English merges together language, people, and country, and its spelling reflects an attempt to represent the sounds of British English, hence the spelling with a final -r. The change from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar' affects only English, and no other language (French, Thai, or the indigenous languages of Burma other than Burmese) has been forced to modify their usage.

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References

- 1 See Thongchai Winichakul, 'Writing at the interstices: Southeast Asian historians and post-national histories in Southeast Asia', in Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok (eds.) 2013. *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, Singapore University Press, pp.3-29.

