

*Myanmar and the Dream of the Golden Land*

*"The Earth will not Swallow a Race to Extinction, but another [Race] will." ---*  
Motto, Myanmar Ministry of Immigration and Population<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Abstract

Burma/Myanmar has moved from stagnation to dynamic reform. Much attention has focused explaining the timing, shape and key personalities of the reform process. What this approach neglects is an examination of the ideological frameworks that shape political culture and action in Burma/Myanmar. The democratic opposition and the military leadership, the two major political forces in the majority Burman population, are actually united by an underlying ideological framework derived from understandings of the colonial era. According to this framework Burma's rich natural resources and strategic location were the reason for its colonization by the British, and mean that Burma is perpetually in danger of neocolonial interference from covetous foreigners, be they Western or Chinese. The former military government argued that the democratic opposition would sell the nation out to neocolonial interests in the West. The democratic opposition and popular sentiment, in contrast, have seen the post-1988 military governments as neocolonial and deeply complicit in selling the nation out to the Chinese. These surface differences mask underlying structural similarities that derive from a shared ideational framework.

## 2 Biographical Note

Josh Gordon (semuren@gmail.com) is a PhD candidate in anthropology at Yale University and his dissertation research is on Chinese identity in the China-Myanmar borderlands. Josh has been conducting research in Myanmar since 2003, and has conducted fieldwork both in Myanmar and on the China-Myanmar border. He has also worked as a project consultant for Chinese companies researching investments in Myanmar's energy sector.

## 3 Introduction: Change in Burma/Myanmar

Developments in Myanmar since the new quasi-civilian government of Thein Sein took office in March 2011 have brought a country that was once a watchword for isolation to the center of the world media stage. The November 2010 elections, and the 2008 constitution under which they were held, were widely criticized by the West (USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the EU) and Myanmar exile groups as being an exercise designed to abide by the formal strictures of constitutional democratic government, while flouting the underlying principals of open political choice. Thus expectations for substantive change under the new government were minimal. This was reenforced by the fact that the new president, Thein Sein, had been prime minister under the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the last form taken by the military government.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) and the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party that she lead to an landslide victory in Myanmar's 1990 election, boycotted the 2010 poll, and had raised strong objections to the legitimacy of the 2008 constitution and 2010 election.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.modins.net/myanmarinfo/ministry/population.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Prior to 1997 the Tatmadaw (Burma/Myanmar military) Junta was called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

Even ASSK's release from house arrest just after the November 2010 election did not revive hope for political change in Myanmar. But gradually, President Thein Sein's new government, though composed in large part of figures, like himself, familiar as leaders in the SPDC government, began to make rhetorical gestures in the direction of political reform. An important turning point in what has become Myanmar's reform process was reached on 30 September 2011, when Thein Sein suspended work on the Chinese backed Myitsone dam project. Subsequent to the Myitsone suspension the pace and depth of political reform increased greatly, and this has been welcomed by the West with the lifting of some and suspension of most other sanctions imposed against Myanmar.

The unexpected nature and rapid pace of political reform in Myanmar has lead many to look for the cause. Did sanctions work? Was Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) engagement policy the key? Was Than Shwe, the former military strongman, putting in place a system to distribute power and protect him and his family from the fate that befell Ne Win, Burma's first military dictator? Was there a genuine reform party in the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military)? Is the Myanmar government trying to break with China out of fears that dependance on their neighbor to the north has become too strong? Did the junta realize how far behind economically Burma was in comparison with its neighbors and decide to act decisively? Did the relief work done in response to cyclone Nargis create a space for political change? Did the plan to impose a new constitution take on a life of its own just as the perestroika reforms intend to strengthen the Soviet system wound up bringing about its downfall? Was the US review of Burma policy a signal that caused the reforms in response? The questions and attempts to answer them have filled many pages, but I argue that this line of inquiry is wrongheaded, and a there is a potentially more fruitful approach that I will employ below.

While it is tempting to search for the cause of Burma/Myanmar's reform movement at the level of specificity of the questions in the preceding paragraph, there are two reasons why this approach is problematic. First, any satisfying answers to the highly specific questions above, or others of their type, will not be simple, discrete factors. Rather, they will be complex conjunctions of factors and isolating a cause is thus not possible to do in a convincing way. This points towards the second problem with finding a specific cause: the focus on the personal agency of the elite as the area where sufficiently convincing causes are to be found. Burma is known for the personal nature of power, and the Tatmadaw is renown for all decision making being monopolized at the pinnacle of power. But, even in this context, systemic factors play a central role in shaping the directions of decisions and limiting what is possible.<sup>3</sup>

What, then, are we left with as a legitimate direction of inquiry into the changing political situation in Myanmar? Here I draw on a recent discussion of the underlying similarities of the the 2008 financial crisis and the *Arab Spring* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth<sup>4</sup> and William Callahan's work on the *National Humiliation Discourse* in modern Chinese history.<sup>5</sup> Taleb and Blyth argue that an

3 Of course, the idea that the change is the result of individual elite level human agency also poses the problem of how we might come to know the specific personal thought processes of those in the elite involved in these choices. And the question as to whether or not any representations of the mental life of the elites are accurate and complete. After all, even in the unlikely event that Than Shwe, Maung Aye – Vice-Senior General under the SPDC – and others from the SPDC release a tell all memoir and go on a book tour, how are we to be sure that what they relate is not a post hoc rationalization, perhaps even one which they truly, but erroneously, believe to reflect their thinking at the time vital decisions were taken?

4 Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth, "The Black Swan of Cairo: How Suppressing Volatility Makes the World Less Predictable and More Dangerous," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 3, 2011, pp. 33-39.

5 William A. Callahan, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives* Vol. 29,

important reason most analysts failed to foresee both the financial crisis of 2008 and the *Arab Spring* was “confusing catalysts for causes and assuming that one can know which catalyst will produce which effect.”<sup>6</sup> In their view, the specific shape of the ultimate crisis is not subject to prediction, but the potential for crisis is apparent to observers of systems. Callahan convincingly describes China's *National Humiliation Discourse* as the “master narrative of modern Chinese history.”<sup>7</sup> This background story of how China was a great, powerful and prosperous nation until it was brought low and humiliated by the combined causes of foreign aggression and domestic corruption serves as the background knowledge that gives moral directive force to specific contemporary and historical events from Beijing's hosting the Olympic Games, to the Boxer Rebellion.

Taleb and Blyth direct us to focus on the system and Callahan shows the centrality of *ideational frameworks* to understanding meaning in national politics. Combining these two perspectives focuses analysis of Myanmar politics, and especially politics among the Burman majority, on what I call the *Dream of the Golden Land*. This *ideational framework* is shared across the most important divide in Burman, if not necessarily national, politics in Myanmar. It underlies the views of both the popularly supported democratic opposition and the military.<sup>8</sup> According to this framework Burma's rich natural resources and strategic location were the reason for its colonization by the British, and mean that Burma is perpetually in danger of neocolonial interference from covetous foreigners, be they Western or Chinese. Taking account of the *Dream of the Golden Land* gives us better understands of both Myanmar's recent past and the prospects for the near future than contestation over proximate causes of the reform process.

#### 4 A System Centered Perspective

The distinction between catalysts and causes that Taleb and Blyth make is based on a system centered perspective on the analysis of social phenomena. Taleb and Blyth argue that the focus of analysis should be on properties of systems; “[i]t is the system and its fragility, not events, that must be

---

2004, pp. 199-218. William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

6 Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth, “The Black Swan of Cairo: How Suppressing Volatility Makes the World Less Predictable and More Dangerous,” p. 36.

7 William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” p. 204. In his later discussion (William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*), drawing on Raymond Williams, Callahan refers to the *National Humiliation Discourse* as a *structure of feeling*, stressing how the discourse combines emotions and reason and bridges “institutional structures and very personal experiences” (*Ibid.*, p.10). While Callahan's description is faithful to Williams' conception (Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], pp. 128-135), especially in linking lived daily experience with larger social phenomena and institutions, other terms such as schema, frame, ideational framework, master narrative or meta-narrative are theoretically more useful descriptors for China's *National Humiliation Discourse*, and, what I call, Myanmar's *Dream of the Golden Land*. A central aspect of Williams' original concept was that a *structure of feeling* was emergent and partial in nature. He describes *structures of feeling* as “social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic and even isolating” (*Ibid.*, p. 132. Emphasis in the original). Williams further contrasts *structures of feeling*, as aspects of practical consciousness, with official consciousness from which it is almost always different as the former is emergent and the latter fixed (*Ibid.*, pp. 130-131). In contrast to this Callahan's trenchant description of the *National Humiliation Discourse* shows how it is pervasive not only in lived experience but in official discourse.

8 Here is another structural similarity Callahan's discussion of the *National Humiliation Discourse*. Both these ideational frameworks bridge deep and important divides in national politics. In China this is the divide between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Nationalist Guomindang (GMD) (William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, p. 19; William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” pp. 209-210). In Myanmar it is the most important divide in Burman politics, that between the popularly supported NLD and the Tatmadaw leadership.

studied.”<sup>9</sup> It is not the last grain dropped on a sandpile before its collapse, nor the last truck that drives over a bridge before it falls, that is the real cause of the collapse. These are only the final catalytic events that bring to the fore properties of the system. Complex systems, which predominate in man-made or social contexts, as opposed to the linear systems common in the natural world, defy prediction. The specifics of stock markets, revolutions and best sellers make a mockery of expert prediction. Hidden causal links, inexplicit interdependence, and a propensity for nonlinear jumps and gaps make predicting causes in complex systems a fool's errand. Only in after the fact analysis do catalysts come to look like obvious causes.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately for Taleb and Blyth the key comes down to the suppression of volatility, be it in financial markets or politics. Efforts to suppress or control all change, to promote stability, sow the seeds of their own destruction. This is because, in an inertia like phenomenon, the assumption of continued stability becomes stronger and stronger as time passes. This assumption leads to risks being taken based on an overly strong belief in continued stability. Thus the surprise that occurs when and if ignored low probability risks become real, magnifies the depth and pace of change. Based on this Taleb and Blyth make a distinction between two types of politics, those with volatile robustness and those with brittle stability. In the first, changes in government do not lead to drastic changes in policy. The players are committed to the system. Thus, they argue that Italy's frequent changes of government in the post World War Two (WWII) era have not had a meaningful effect on its overall political and economic stability. Post-WWII Italy has been volatile but, ultimately, robust. In the second type of polity, because volatility is suppressed, there are no or few minor alterations in government leadership. Thus, change, when it does come, can be dramatic and the system itself is apt to be a casualty of that change.<sup>11</sup>

Up until Thein Sein's recent reforms Burma/Myanmar had been a byword for stagnation. The Tatmadaw, in various forms had controlled the country since 1962,<sup>12</sup> giving Myanmar one of the longest periods of military rule in modern history. Despite continuing ethnic insurgencies in the country's borderlands, and occasional outbreaks of anti-regime unrest in urban area (the most notable being in 1988), the military has remained in command and brooked no dissent. This scenario fits well the conditions of brittle stability and sets up the potential for “drastic and deeply unpredictable changes.”<sup>13</sup>

Many took the social upheaval of 1988 (and the events of the *Saffron Revolution* in 2007) as the model for how change would come to Myanmar, but, so far, as reform moves forward that has proven wrong. What is consistent with the events of 1988, however, is the drastic nature of the change, though in 1988 real change was ultimately stifled by the Tatmadaw's auto-coup. The post-1988 political stasis in Myanmar encouraged outside actors to position themselves based on the assumption of its continuity. China's investments made under the SLORC/SPDC regime relied for their security on continuity of political conditions. The West's policy of isolation, similarly, did not take account of the possibility that Myanmar would suddenly open up and reform. Thus both governments in China and the West were wrong footed by Thein Sein's reforms and the scramble to adjust policy positions has made the overall situation even less stable.

---

9 Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth, “The Black Swan of Cairo: How Suppressing Volatility Makes the World Less Predictable and More Dangerous,” p. 38.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 35-38.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

12 The Tatmadaw also controlled Burma during the caretaker government of 1958 – 1960.

13 Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth, “The Black Swan of Cairo: How Suppressing Volatility Makes the World Less Predictable and More Dangerous,” p. 38.



In complex man-made systems what we can know is the predominate *ideational frameworks* that shape the identity and orientation of important actors. While these properties of the system do not give clear predictive results, they help point to both areas where change is likely – instability in the system – and to factors that can shape the direction and nature of that change. Besides the this link between a systemic focus of analysis and the importance of *ideational frameworks*, the specifics of Myanmar politics militate for an analytic perspective that takes the role of ideas seriously. In understanding the politics of Myanmar we are faced with a polity where political action is famously divergent from international norms based on notions of “objective rationality.” Native systems of knowledge from Buddhist vipassana to yadaya magic, alchemy and astrology have influenced policy choices from the date and time for juridical independence, to the drive to plant physic nuts as a source for bio-diesel.<sup>14</sup> Even the implementation of such seemingly international, and objective rationality based, policies as socialism has taken on a strong local flavor. Thus the Burma Socialist Program Party's (BSPP) *Burmese Way to Socialism* was focused much more on the Burmese-ness of the way than on the way leading to what might be recognized internationally as socialism.<sup>15</sup> What this suggests is not that Myanmar's leadership is irrational, as it is often portrayed as being in media accounts. Rather, it reenforces the need for analysis that takes into account the *ideational frameworks* in play in Burma/Myanmar, and their cultural and historical origins. This line of analysis fits well with the constructivist perspective within international relations theory.<sup>16</sup>

## 5 Ideational Frameworks

### 5.1 Callahan and China's *National Humiliation Discourse*

Here I am using *ideational framework* to describe a concept similar to what many other authors have discussed using a variety of terms. Perhaps the most effective point for starting a discussion of the concept is with an example. While the scope of an *ideational framework* can vary from the personal to the putatively universal, here we are concerned with discourse focused at the national level. Thus William Callahan's work on the *National Humiliation Discourse* in modern Chinese history<sup>17</sup> provides an excellent relevant example.

Following Callahan, according to the *National Humiliation Discourse*, from the First Opium War, in 1839, until the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, China went through the century of national humiliation. “The discourse recounts how at the hands of foreign invaders and corrupt Chinese regimes, sovereignty was lost, territory was dismembered, and the Chinese people were thus humiliated.”<sup>18</sup> Subsequent to this humiliation, and via the leadership of the Communist Party of China

14 Fieldnotes, Mandalay, February 2011; Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asian and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999).

15 Michael Aung-Thwin, “1948 and Burma's Myth of Independence” in J. Silverstein ed., *Independent Burma at Forty Years: Six Assessments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 27.

16 Rawi Abdelal, Mark Blyth and Craig Parsons, “Introduction: Constructing the International Economy” in Abdelal, Rawi, Mark Blyth, and Craig Parsons, eds. *Constructing the International Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 1-19; Rawi Abdelal, “Constructivism as an Approach to International Political Economy” in Mark Blyth ed., *Handbook of International Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 57-71 (pagination different in draft).

17 William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternatives* Vol. 29, 2004, pp. 199-218. William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

18 William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, p. 19; William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation,

(CCP), the nation stood up and began its journey to cleanse national humiliation and regain its rightful greatness.

Thus the *National Humiliation Discourse* can be characterized as a *master* or *meta-narrative*,<sup>19</sup> *frame*,<sup>20</sup> or *cognitive schema*<sup>21</sup> that imparts a *footing*<sup>22</sup> or *voicing*<sup>23</sup> to specific events through a process of *pragmatic calibration*,<sup>24</sup> as it functions as the meta element that directs/regulates the specific elements. From this we can see China's *National Humiliation Discourse* and other *ideational frameworks* of nation cannot be said to be true or untrue in the sense of accurately reproducing or representing historical events. Rather, *ideational frameworks* of nation are ideological, they shape how we know and thus what we know. This becomes clearer if we examine another, more actively contested, example.

## 5.2 Reagan's America the *Shinning City Upon a Hill*

Ronald Reagan's farewell address invoked a US national *ideological framework* centered on the image of America as the "shinning city on the hill."

"The past few days when I've been at that window upstairs, I've thought a bit of the *shinning city upon a hill*. The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we'd call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free. I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still. And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was 8 years ago. But more than that: after 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home." <sup>25</sup>

---

Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism," pp. 209-210.

19 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

20 Charles J. Fillmore, "An Alternative to Checklist Theories of Meaning," in Cathy Cogen, Henry Thompson, Graham Thurgood, Kenneth Whistler, James Wright eds. *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistic Society* (Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistics Society, 1975) pp. 123-131; Charles J. Fillmore, "Frames and the Semantics of Understanding," *Quaderni di Semantica*. Vol. 6, No. 2, 1985, pp. 222-254

21 Roy D'Andrade, "Schemas and Motivation." In Roy D'Andrade and Claudia Strauss eds. *Human Motives and Cultural Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 29. See also Roy D'Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

22 Erving Goffman, "Footing" in *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 124-157.

23 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in Michael Holquist ed., trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 259-244. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist eds., *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 60-102.

24 Michael Silverstein, "Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function," in John A. Lucy ed., *Reflexive Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 33-58.

25 Ronald W. Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation," Washington DC, January 11, 1989, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreaganfarewelladdress.html>

Here the narrative invokes the Pilgrims' journey in search of religious freedom and the sanctuary that they would find in what later became the United States. Further, Reagan's speech points to the idea of the United States as a beacon and model of freedom. The *shinning city on the hill* intertextually evokes Johnathan Winthrop's famous 1630 sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity,"<sup>26</sup> and, in turn, the "Sermon on the Mount"<sup>27</sup> on which Winthrop drew. These are then all aligned with the mission and meaning of the United States. Here, of course, alternate narratives that problematize this vision are excluded. Issues of slavery, religious persecution and discrimination, witch trials, and the forcible removal of indigenous populations have as little relevance to *the shining city on the hill* as the Taiping Rebellion or Cultural Revolution do to China's *National Humiliation Discourse*.

### 5.3 Myanmar's *Dream of the Golden Land*

The examples of China's *National Humiliation Discourse* and divinely blessed US exceptionalism in *the shining city on the hill* show the ideological nature of *ideational frameworks* of nation. And that in these frameworks what is excluded is often as important as what is included. What then are the important or most important ideational frameworks of nation in contemporary Myanmar? The initial difficulty in answering this question lies in the nature of Myanmar's current political crises. For most of the time since independence in 1948, the national government of Burma/Myanmar has been involved in violent struggles against internal insurgents. While not all of these insurgencies have been ethno-nationalist, many have, and even the most important non-ethnic insurgency, that of the Burma Communist Party (BCP), split along ethnic lines and its successor groups were ethno-nationalist. Thus discussion of *ideational frameworks* of nation, like much else in Myanmar, runs headlong into the divide between the majority ethnic group, the Burmans or Bamar, traditionally living in the Irrawaddy valley and making up approximately two thirds of the population, and the various other non-Burman indigenous ethnic groups traditionally concentrated in an arc around Myanmar's borders. These indigenous groups are highly diverse and have often had fraught and limited involvement with the central government and the public sphere tied to the central state. This means that describing an *ideational framework* shared not only across the majority-minority divide, but also among the diverse minority groups is not feasible in the limited scope of this essay. Thus the discussion of a national *ideational framework* for Myanmar that follows only applies to the Burman population and those from other groups who are integrated into cultural practices and ideologies prevalent among the majority population centered on the Irrawaddy valley.

Given the limitation on scope discussed in the prior paragraph, the most important *ideational framework* of nation in contemporary Myanmar is what I call the *Dream of the Golden Land*. In this understanding Myanmar, the Golden Land or *Thuwunnabumi*,<sup>28</sup> is blessed with natural wealth and a special and important place in the history of Buddhism. But the abundant natural endowments of the country and its location between the giants of India and China are not only a blessing but also a curse. Myanmar's valuable natural resources and strategic location attract the attention of covetous outsiders. These outsiders want to obtain Myanmar's resources and exploit its valuable location. This is what led Myanmar to be the victim of British colonization and it means that the people of Myanmar must be

26 Johnathan Winthrop "A Model of Christian Charity," 1630, <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html>

27 Matthew 5:14, "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden."  
<http://www.bartleby.com/108/40/5.html>

28 On the original and political use of the idea of the Golden Land in Thai politics see Eisel Mazard "Cambodia is not a Province of Thailand," *New Mandala Blog*, August 19, 2008,  
<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2010/08/19/cambodia-is-not-a-province-of-thailand/>.

ever vigilant against outsiders who wish to recolonize Myanmar or subject it to quasi-colonial control.

This understanding of the nation as blessed but under threat from covetous outsiders bridges the most important divide in Burman (though not necessarily Myanmar/Burmese) politics, that between the widely popularly supported NLD and the Tatmadaw. The Tatmadaw junta, the SLORC/SPDC, that ruled Myanmar from 1988 until 2011, has steadfastly promoted what it calls the *Three Main National Causes: Non-disintegration of the Union, Non-disintegration of National Solidarity and Perpetuation of Sovereignty*. Since Burma/Myanmar has had active anti-government insurgencies continuously since independence the idea that national solidarity exists is questionable at best. This leaves maintaining territorial integrity and political independence, as well as developing national solidarity, as the most important goals of the SLORC/SPDC government. These are goals that, at the most abstract level, are shared by the NLD. However, in practice the SLORC/SPDC government has portrayed Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD as a major threat to these goals. Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD and the broader democratic opposition have, in turn, argued that the SLORC/SPDC government is quasi-colonial and removing it is a “second struggle for independence.”<sup>29</sup> These positions will be explored in more detail below but before that we need to examine the origins of the *Dream of Golden Land* and why it is haunted by a nightmare of the loss of sovereignty.

### 5.3.1 Origins and Development of the *Dream of the Golden Land*

The origins of the *Dream of the Golden Land*, with its fear of occupation, exploitation, and partition by covetous external elements can be found in understandings of the colonial experience. In a series of three wars starting in 1824 and ending in 1885 the British gradually annexed the whole of what had been the Konbaung dynastic state. The period of colonial control, lasting until 1948, brought profound sociocultural, political, and economic change to the former Konbaung lands.

Burma was initially incorporated into Britain’s India Empire and was ruled as a province of India until 1937. Integration into India and Britain’s larger global empire brought globalized capitalist modes of economic organization to what had an overwhelming pre-capitalist agrarian society. The British brought with them large numbers of Indian administrators, police and soldiers from their Indian colonies. Under British colonial control the Irrawaddy delta was opened to rice cultivation and Burma became the world’s leading rice exporter. Immigration policies were liberal and commercial opportunities in the colony abounded. The result was large scale immigration centered on the colonial capital at Rangoon. By the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Rangoon became the world leading port of entry for immigrants surpassing even New York City.<sup>30</sup>

This process of economic integration and immigration made Rangoon into a foreign city on Burmese soil. The lingua franca of the city was Hindustani and Europeans in government service had to pass exams in this language but not in Burmese.<sup>31</sup> The elite was made up British and other Westerners<sup>32</sup> and and below them a stratum of Eurasians. Then came the Asian immigrant minorities, mainly Indians and

29 Aung San Suu Kyi quoted in Aung Zaw, “Independence Lost,” *The Irrawaddy*, Vol 16. No.1, January 2008. [http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print\\_article.php?art\\_id=9801](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=9801).

30 Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 19. Than Myint-U, *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia* (Macmillan, Kindle Edition, 2011), Kindle Locations 302-304.

31 Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, pp. 23-24.

32 The poet and later (1971) Nobel laureate in literature, Pablo Neruda, was Chilean Consul in Rangoon in the late 1920s.



Chinese. Rangoon grew to be a predominantly Indian city but it also had a large Chinese population. Many of the Indians were employed in the British service and others among their community and that of the Chinese were successful in business. (However some of the Indians and Chinese were also employed in manual labor, even including, at least in the Indian case, indentured servitude.) The Burmans occupied the lowest social and economic strata in the colonial capital and from 1872 to 1937 their numbers shrank from two thirds of the city's population to less than a third.<sup>33</sup>

The political and commercial dominance of Westerns, Eurasian and the Asian immigrant minorities, though most obvious in the capital was apparent in other Burman areas of the colony. Of most importance was the Irrawaddy delta region. The swamps and jungles that had covered the delta region were gradually cleared for paddy cultivation starting after the British occupation of lower Burma in 1852, and increasing in intensity with the opening of the suez canal in 1869.<sup>34</sup> The opening of the delta rice frontier did initially increase general prosperity in lower Burma drawing in immigrants both from abroad and from the traditional Burman heartland of the Dry Zone in the upper Irrawaddy valley.<sup>35</sup> However, the commercialization of agriculture and its increasing ties to world markets and reliance on credit only served to worsen the impact of the drop in rice prices after 1926 and their collapse in 1930-1931.<sup>36</sup> This period led to large scale land alienation among rice farming peasants in the delta made the Indian Chettiar money lenders into hate figures who exemplified the middleman minority role<sup>37</sup> of the Asian immigrant minorities in colonial Burma.

J.S. Furnivall, a colonial era British civil servant and scholar who was critical of the British colonial project in Burma, described colonial Burma as a *plural society*. This was a social conglomeration focused solely on economic gain in which intra-group relations and the traditions of the native Burman populations were sacrificed in the rush for private profit. Furnivall writes of “a plural society consisting of several groups living side by side but separately, not united for the common welfare or for any common end but divided from one another by the common desire for individual profit.”<sup>38</sup> In the plural society that Furnivall describes “there was a sharp cleavage between the Burman element, rural and agricultural, and the foreign element, urban and commercial and industrial. Moreover the foreign element was by no means homogenous. There were three main groups; Europeans, Indians and Chinese.”<sup>39</sup> The relationships between these groups were such that “Within each group ... economic considerations held a secondary place; but they were the only considerations appealing to everyone, and therefore among the groups and sub-groups, taken collectively, they held the first place.”<sup>40</sup> In this system the most profitable enterprises, those tied to the global economy, fell into the hands of the British and Asian immigrant minorities. “In all that was distinctively modern in the economic life of

33 Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, p. 22.

34 Sean Turnell, *Fiery Dragons: Banks, Moneylenders and Microfinance in Burma* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2009), p.15.

35 Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta. Economic development and social change on an Asian rice frontier, 1852–1941*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), pp. 6-7.

36 Sean Turnell, *Fiery Dragons: Banks, Moneylenders and Microfinance in Burma*, pp.35-36.

37 Edan Bonacich, “A Theory of Middleman Minorities,” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 38, No. 5, 1973, pp. 593-594. Jennifer Lee, *Civility in the City: Blacks, Jews and Koreans in Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). Amy Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (New York: Random House, 2003).

38 J. S. Furnivall, *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma* (Rangoon: Burmese Advertising Press, 1957, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), p. k.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

Burma, the Burmans had no part.”<sup>41</sup>

The Burman response to the plural society of the colonial period was the development of an anti-colonial nationalist movement. Initially this movement was drew on Burman traditions and was thus heavily influenced by Buddhism. From about 1915 on *wunthanu* associations dedicated to Burman cultural nationalism sprung up across the Burman areas of the county. The term *wunthanu* derives from the Pali for preserving one's own kind or lineage, in the colonial Burma of the 1920s it came to mean “patriotism in the form of preference for traditional values and the eschewal of things foreign.”<sup>42</sup> This movement drew on Burman traditions and was thus heavily influenced by Buddhism. But by the 1930s the anti-colonial movement in Burma also came to include a Marxist critique of capitalism that aligned Burmese nationalist thinking with socialism.<sup>43</sup> This mix of tradition based Buddhist nationalism and socialism became central to political thinking in Burma.

The combination of Buddhist and socialist ideals pervaded Burmese politics into the independence era. The parliamentary governments under U Nu combined a strong Buddhist orientation, culminating in the declaration of Buddhism as the state religion after Nu's victory in the 1960 election, with a socialist orientation seen in his *Pyidawtha* program.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the ultimate realization in government of this uniquely Burmese blend of Buddhism and socialism was the *Burmese Way to Socialism*, the guiding ideology of the BSPP the vehicle for the latter stage of General Ne Win's dictatorship from 1974 to 1988.<sup>45</sup> The socialist element in Burmese politics was more a reaction to the loss of Burman domestic control over the economy than a genuine ideological commitment to the principles of Marxist ideology. The Burmese critique of capitalism was based on Burman exclusion from capitalism in Burma, and Burmese socialism was an effort to use the state to reassert control over economic life.<sup>46</sup>

In the plural society of the colonial era, the economy had been ethnically, or in the 19<sup>th</sup> century British parlance still in use in Myanmar today, racially stratified. This meant that a reaction against capitalism and Burman exclusion also took on an ethnic or racial aspect.<sup>47</sup> Besides a reaction against British business this also meant a reaction against the Asian immigrant minorities. Anti-Indian and anti-Muslim riots had occurred are early as 1930 and have continued sporadicly up to the present.<sup>48</sup> Anti-

41 *Ibid.*, p. j.

42 Aung San Suu Kyi, “Literature and Nationalism in Burma,” in *Freedom From Fear and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 143. See also Patricia Herbert, “The Hsaya San Rebellion: Reappraised,” Melbourne: Monash University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Working Paper 27, 1982; Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, pp. 233-236. Eisel Mazard, personal communication, July 2012.

43 Aung San Suu Kyi, “Literature and Nationalism in Burma,” pp. 144-157.

44 Michael Aung-Thwin, “1948 and Burma's Myth of Independence,” in J. Silverstein ed., *Independent Burma at Forty Years: Six Assessments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 27.

45 Ne Win's rule from 1962 to 1974 was institutionalized in the Revolutionary Council (RC).

46 David I. Steinberg, *Turmoil in Burma: Contested Legitimacies in Myanmar* (Norwalk: EastBridge Books, 2006), pp. 98-102; Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p.209; Michael Aung-Thwin, “1948 and Burma's Myth of independence.” There were more ideologically committed leftist in Burma and this lead to two different communist insurgencies that began even before independence from Britain and in the pre-1988 period constituted the greatest domestic threat to the central governments.

47 On issues of how to label classifications of human kinds (e.g. race, ethnicity, minority, etc.) in Burma/Myanmar see Robert Taylor, “Perceptions of Ethnicity in the Politics of Burma,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 10, No.1, 1982) pp. 7-22; Victor Lieberman, “Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1978, pp. 455-482; E. R. Leach, “The Frontier of 'Burma,’” *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1960, pp. 49-68.

48 These include, but are not limited to, the anti-Rohingya violence in Rakhine state. While not all people of South Asian

Chinese riots occurred as early as 1931,<sup>49</sup> but culminated in the 26 June 1967 riots in Rangoon.<sup>50</sup> However, even before the 1967 riots, the implementation of a vigorous program of nationalization under Ne Win's Revolutionary Council (RC, 1962-1974), predecessor to the BSPP, led to the exodus of 300,000 ethnic South Asians and 100,000 ethnic Chinese.<sup>51</sup> The RC nationalizations were an active, if not actively acknowledged, policy to use the state to bring the economy under Burman control. This was part of a larger project to “establish 'real' independence, which necessarily included purging one's colonial past” in an effort to “recover a lost identity.”<sup>52</sup> This drive to “restore” an imagined sense of precolonial tradition also underlay the 1982 citizenship law.<sup>53</sup> This law created a three tiered system of citizenship, theoretically awarding full citizenship only to those who could prove their ancestors had lived in what became Burma prior to the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824. However, in practice, the law serves to reinforce the view that the Asian immigrant minorities are not fully legitimate members of the Myanmar polity.<sup>54</sup>

While the drive to recover the Burmese traditions lost in the colonial era seemed to have reached its peak in the autarkic policies of the RC/BSPP period, the changes that came to Burmese society from 1988 have reopened the never fully purged issue of the influence of the colonial past. “Burma's leaders after 1962 further chose to cut off the country from the rest of the world because that world threatened to perpetuate, not resolve, the problem the majority of the people feared most; namely, the loss of their 'Burmeseness,' manifested in a variety of (economic, social, political, and religious) ways.”<sup>55</sup> The political upheaval of 1988 brought about the collapse of the BSPP and resulted in the Tatmadaw directly taking power as the SLORC. At least on the surface the SLORC's policies were an about face from the RC/BSPP's isolation. The new junta abandoned socialism and embraced a market economy and foreign investment. Thus, at least in theory, and on the surface, the SLORC reorientation of economic policy is a return to that of the colonial era when Burma, as Furnivall argued, was a society organized for capitalist production.<sup>56</sup> The implication of this point is that the policy changes after 1988 once again have brought to the surface the fears of covetous foreign (neo)colonialists. The *Dream of Golden Land* motivated the drive to protect Burma and Burmanness from outside encroachment and resulted in the RC/BSPP autarky. With the abandonment of self-isolation fears of foreign domination once again become pressing.

## 6 Neo-Colonial Specters

---

origin in Burma are Muslim, anti-Muslim and anti-Indian sentiment have been and continue to be deeply intermingled there. In this sense the prototypical (on prototypes see Eleanor H. Rosch, “Natural Categories,” *Cognitive Psychology* Vol. 4, 1973, pp. 328-330) Burmese Muslim is of Indian origin and the prototypical Burmese Indian is Muslim.

49 Renaud Egretreau, “Burma (Myanmar) 1930-2007,” *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*, 2009, [http://www.massviolence.org/Article?id\\_article=408](http://www.massviolence.org/Article?id_article=408)

50 David I. Steinberg and Hongwei Fan, *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence*, (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2012), pp. 93-118.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 82-87; Robert Taylor, *The State in Burma*, (London: C. Hurst, 1987), p. 341. Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Zed Books, 1999), pp. 98, 225.

52 Michael Aung-Thwin, “1948 and Burma's Myth of independence,” pp. 24-25.

53 For a copy of the law see UNHCR Refworld, Burmese Citizenship Law (Pyithu Hluttaw Law No. 4 of 1982, unofficial translation). <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b4f71b.html>

54 cf. General Ne Win “Meeting held in the Central Meeting Hall, President House, Ahlone Road,” *Working People's Daily*, 9 October 1982, [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs6/Ne\\_Win's\\_speech\\_Oct-1982-Citizenship\\_Law.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs6/Ne_Win's_speech_Oct-1982-Citizenship_Law.pdf)

55 Michael Aung-Thwin, “1948 and Burma's Myth of independence,” p. 25.

56 J.S. Furnivall, *The Fashioning of Leviathan* (Rangoon: Zabu Meitswe Pitaka Press, 1939), quoted in Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, p.21.

Though differing in their specific manifestations, the fears of encroachment by covetous outsiders seeking control over natural resources and strategic territory, the key morally directive content of what I call the *Dream of the Golden Land*, are shared across the Tatmadaw-NLD/popular sentiment divide that dominates Burman politics. Both the Tatmadaw in its guises as the SLORC, SPDC and now its proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and the NLD, and the popular sentiment that overwhelming back it, see neocolonial specters lurking in wait to exploit the nation. But the specific specters that each side sees differ.

### 6.1 SLORC/SPDC views

After a short period in the summer of 1988 when the paralyzed BSPP government had nearly ceased functioning, the Tatmadaw launched a coup and took direct control of the government. The newly formed junta, the SLORC, held free elections in May 1990. The NLD swept these elections taking 392 of the 447 seats, but the SLORC did not allow the NLD to form a government or a body to draft a new constitution.

The ideational framework that the SLORC brought to power was a version of the *Dream of the Golden Land* rooted in a Burman nationalist understanding of the colonial experience. In the SLORC/SPDC view, after losing sovereignty to Britain and struggling to gain it back Myanmar's strategic location and rich natural resources have once again put it in the sites of (neo)colonialists. The Western powers that condemned Myanmar in the wake of the 1988 unrest and the 1990 elections are external destructive elements with neocolonial motives. The NLD and its most recognized leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, are internal destructive elements under the control and/or influence of the neocolonialists.

SLORC/SPDC views on the neocolonial danger to Myanmar are apparent in the slogans on public signs and in all periodicals and publications printed during the SLORC/SPDC era, speeches by SLORC/SPDC leaders and in editorials and articles in the official media. The large red and white “People's Desire” signs that dot cities and towns in Myanmar have a strong focus on the potential danger to the state stability presented by locals working in combination with foreign elements. They read:

#### **PEOPLE'S DESIRE**

Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views

Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation

Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State

Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy

Three of the four slogans have an explicit focus on foreign elements or nations. This focus on a foreign threat needs to be understood based on an historical background in which sovereignty was lost, has been regained, but is in danger of being lost again. Senior General Than Shwe's message on the occasion of the 61<sup>st</sup> anniversary of independence argued that “the entire people have to bear in mind the historical background of independence struggles forever and will have to continue to safeguard the motherland for ensuring perpetuity of the nation and sovereignty.”<sup>57</sup> This is because “[i]t is not strange certain covetous, aggressive countries are anxious to gain political control over a geographically

---

57 “Continue Safeguarding the Motherland,” *New Light of Myanmar*, January 3, 2011, p.1.



strategic country like Myanmar.”<sup>58</sup>

In the Tatmadaw view, one of the vehicles through which Western countries try and impose neocolonial control on Myanmar are Burmese language shortwave radio broadcasts. Under the SLORC/SPDC junta, the the government controlled press often ran slogans attacking the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Asia (RFA) and the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). These stations were labeled “saboteurs,” and “Sky full liars attempting to destroy nation.”<sup>59</sup>

In the junta's view, economic sanctions have been another vehicle for Western “destructionism,” leading hopefully to Western domination of Myanmar. Sanctions, which have been actively tied to demands for political change, are seen by the Tatmadaw as part of the West's efforts to prevent Myanmar from becoming developed and thus keep the state in a weakened and exploitable condition. Sanctions policies provide a clear link between the external destructive elements in the West, and the internal destructive elements in Myanmar.

In Myanmar, the support that the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi get from the West has been used to vilify them as tools of neocolonialists. In the case of Aung Suu Kyi, her marriage to a foreigner and long residency abroad have been used to portray her as un-Myanmar, and thus unworthy of the legacy of her father, General Aung San the hero of Burma's independence struggle. In this view, her foreignness makes her unfit for the mantle of political leadership. When her husband sent her packages containing items such as lipstick and a Jane Fonda work-out tape, photos of the contents were published in national media to show “The Lady's Privileged Foreign Connection” and thus her foreignness.<sup>60</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi often has been the target of vitriolic criticism in the government controlled press. Typical of the SLORC/SPDC discourse linking Aung San Suu Kyi to destructive foreign influence is the following:

“It can be said that whenever her [Aung San Suu Kyi] spouse and her children come from abroad they bring directives from the Sayagis [masters] of Western Block [sic]. It is heard that there are criticisms made that diplomats and foreign correspondents are those who are closely supervising and giving her advice. ... In the third week of May, Ma Suu told BBC that in holding a constructive meeting, the concept for negotiation is no longer workable ... All those who heard knew that she meant to say that Myanmar should be attacked using military force to put her on the throne. ... The Nawata [SLORC] is preserving peace and stability in the State by lawful means and directives while the BBC and VOA (neocolonialist group of West) [sic] are giving instructions to Ma Suu and her followers, inciting them to break the laws in order to cause disturbances.”<sup>61</sup>

Here the junta propaganda authorities portray Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD as being used by Western interests to gain control of Myanmar. In the view of the Tatmadaw leadership the NLD are “axe-handles” that facilitate neocolonial effort at renewed Western domination of Myanmar. SLORC/SPDC efforts to connect the democratic opposition to colonial archetypes of colonial

58 Than Shwe quoted in Htet Aung, “Same Day, different Ideas of Independence” *The Irrawaddy*, January 4, 2011, [http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print\\_article.php?art\\_id=20460](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=20460)

59 *New Light of Myanmar*, October 13, 2007, p.16.

60 Barbara Barbara, *The Lady: Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Laureate and Burma's Prisoner* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1998), pp.106-107, quoted in Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, p.173.

61 Kaythari, “Democracy is not Power,” *New Light of Myanmar*, June 12, 1996 in BurmaNet News June 18, 1996, <http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199606/msg00230.html>

exploitation have also included efforts to label Aung San Suu Kyi as a Chettiar.<sup>62</sup>

## 6.2 NLD/Popular views

Though the specific focus is different from that of the SLORC/SPDC, the NLD and the popular sentiment that, especially in Burman areas, overwhelmingly backs it are also rooted in the *Dream of the Golden Land*. As any amount of time spent in Myanmar, and the results of the 1 April 2012 by-elections make apparent,<sup>63</sup> there is widespread popular support for the NLD. Thus the specifics of the ideational framework I describe here apply to both the NLD as a party but more broadly to the popular sentiment that supports it.

In the NLD-popular view the SLORC/SPDC exerts a quasi-colonial control over the country and has cooperated with covetous outsiders by selling off Myanmar's natural resources in exchange for both private financial profit and international political support. In this understanding both the SORLC/SPDC and China exert quasi-colonial control.<sup>64</sup> While the NLD-popular version of *Dream of the Golden Land* in which the junta and China cooperate to exploit in exploiting Myanmar's resources and strategic position has long historical roots, its appeal has increased since 1988 along with China's increasing economic involvement in Myanmar and the country's isolation from the West.

### 6.2.1 The Junta and China

From 1988 on Myanmar gradually became more and more cut off from relations and trade with the West and to a lesser extent Japan. This was a result of economic sanctions and related policy positions taken by governments in the West and Japan to pressure the Myanmar government for democratic reform. At almost the same time relations between China and Myanmar began to improve. The China-Myanmar border trade was re-legalized in late 1988. Political obstacles to China-Myanmar relations lessened with the break up of the BCP which had long received support from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and which controlled large territories along the Myanmar side of the border. As Myanmar was cut off from interaction with the West, and given its geographic proximity to China, and China's rapid economic growth throughout the 1990s and 2000s, China-Myanmar economic interaction increased rapidly. Most of this interaction consisted of China buying primary products from Myanmar and sending manufactured and processed goods to Myanmar in return, as well as investment in energy related infrastructure such as Myitsone. The high levels of corruption in Myanmar and the concentration of power in the hands of the military meant that much of the population did not feel that

62 Axe-handles are made of wood but also used to cut wood. Sean Turnell, *Fiery Dragons: Banks, Moneylenders and Microfinance in Burma*, p. 49, n. 1.

63 The NLD won 43 of the 44 seats it contested in the 1 April by-elections, often with overwhelming majorities of the votes. See, Kyaw Kyaw, "Analysis of Myanmar's NLD Landslide," *New Mandala Blog*, May 1, 2012, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2012/05/01/analysis-of-myanmars-nld-landslide/>; "By-election Special: Myanmar By-election Results," *Network Myanmar*, <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/component/content/article/88/By-Elections>.

64 Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (pp. 175, 179, 181) discusses the importance of Japan as a previous and potential source of financial support for the junta. He also points out (pp. 172-179) the irony of the SLORC/SPDC regime's criticizing the NLD for having foreign ties while itself receiving foreign support from Japan, China and other foreign investors. There is considerable irony in the fact that the NLD-popular version of the Dream of the Golden Land puts China in the role of acquisitive foreign power allied with a corrupted domestic elite as this exactly mirrors China's historical experience as understood in its own National Humiliation Discourse (see William A. Callahan, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,"; William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation*.)

they benefited from this trade. Popular sentiment in Myanmar saw the military elite and those connected to them as giving Chinese companies preferential access to the resources of the nation in exchange for bribes and China's political support in international fora. The Myitsone was seen as the latest and most egregious example of a nexus of political and economic relations that had developed in Myanmar since the start of the latest stage of military rule in 1988.

#### 6.2.1.1 Myitsone

The key event signaling the start of the political transition in Myanmar was, in retrospect, not the adoption of the new constitution in 2010, nor the official transition to civilian rule, nor even the release from house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi. Rather, it was Thein Sein's decision to suspend the Myitsone dam project. This Chinese backed project would have built a huge dam at the confluence of the Mali and N'Mai rivers (where the Irrawaddy river begins) in Kachin State (along with several other smaller supporting dams in nearby but less cultural charged locations). The location of the main dam, at the headwaters of the Irrawaddy, Myanmar's national river, and the mythic point of origin for the Kachin people had special significance. For the Kachin, indigenous to the region, it seem to be a direct attack on their ethnic identity and traditions. For others in the primarily Burman politically and environmentally aware segments of the urban population the Myitsone Dam seemed like neocolonial exploitation of the nation and its environment. After all, ninety percent (90%) of the power the dam was to supply would have been sent to China.

#### 6.2.1.2 The Pipeline

While it has not yet become as politically sensitive as the Myitsone the Chinese backed dual oil and natural gas pipeline, now under construction in Myanmar, has the potential to become another point of conflict in China-Myanmar relations as it fits well into the NLD-popular version of the *Dream of the Golden Land*. The dual pipeline will carry Myanmar sourced natural gas and oil sourced outside Myanmar from Kyaukpyu on the the Rakhine coast into China after crossing the border near Ruili. The pipeline helps China to lessen the amount of its energy imports that will pass through the strategically vulnerable straights of Malacca (though the importance in terms of percentage of imports is much higher for gas than for oil).<sup>65</sup>

The pipeline thus cuts Myanmar in half and, according to Myanmar opposition political leaders, is a strategic threat to Myanmar and its sovereignty.<sup>66</sup> This is because the pipeline and related rail, port and infrastructure projects regularize and increase Chinese commercial interests in these strategic sectors in Myanmar. There is also a real fear that any threat to the operations of the pipeline would be of geo-strategic importance to China, and could prompt direct Chinese intervention.<sup>67</sup> The way in which the Myitsone combined issues of sovereignty and environmental protection also points to potential risks for the pipeline project. Any spill or acute environmental problem related to the pipeline, no matter what its

<sup>65</sup> Based on projection for China's energy use in 2013, the year the pipelines are scheduled to open, the oil pipeline is projected to carry only 5.8 percent of of China oil imports while the gas pipeline can carry 32 percent of its gas imports. Jared Bissinger, "Foreign Investment in Myanmar: A Resource Boom but a Development Bust?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 34, No. 1, p. 45.

<sup>66</sup> Fieldnotes, Interviews, Yangon April 2012; Fieldnotes, Interviews, Yangon and Mandalay, January 2012

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* Given the history of China's and the CCP's involvement with the BCP, and China's continuing ties between with some of the surviving BCP successor armed organizations (primary the United Wa State Army [UWSA]), this fear may be less unreasonable that it initially sounds. See also David I. Steinberg and Hongwei Fan, *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence*, p. 186.

proximate cause, holds the potential to quickly become political. In combination with the underlying ideational framework of the *Dream of the Golden Land*, the foreign nature of the pipeline project makes it especially vulnerable to becoming a target of popular nationalist ire within Myanmar.

### 6.2.1.3 Border Trade, Chinese Migration, and Sinicization

A final set of factors that link present day perceptions of China and the Chinese to understandings of colonial era foreign exploitation is the relationship between the China-Myanmar border trade and Chinese migration to Myanmar.<sup>68</sup> There is a perception that northern Myanmar, and importantly, the city of Mandalay, have been taken over by the Chinese. This discourse describes how, in the wake of two large fires in central Mandalay (12 May 1981 and 24 March 1984), wealthy Chinese began coming to the city center and buying up real estate. This pushed the property market up and forced the longtime Burman residents out of the center of the city and into the new satellite new towns (myo-thit) on its edges.<sup>69</sup> This process accelerated with the reopening of the Burma-China border trade in 1988 and the switch from socialist to capitalist economic model after the SLORC coup. Local industry was driven out of business by competition from cheap but low quality Chinese products brought in through the border trade. As Chinese who made money in the border trade, and often in jade, gem, timber or drug smuggling, moved to Mandalay the character and culture of the city changed. These Chinese immigrants are from Yunnan or even further into China and have to buy Burmese identity cards which has created a market in the identity documents of the dead. Mandalay, as the last royal capital and in the traditional Burman heartland of the Dry Zone, has had special cultural significance for Burman nationalists. Thus Mya Maung argues that “[t]he Chinese takeover of Mandalay and northern Burma replicates the economic consequences of the British colonization of Burma.”<sup>70</sup>

Other Burmese writers argue that this Chinese takeover has cultural consequences similar to the British colonization, namely the loss or endangerment of Burman culture. Thus Ludu Daw Amar, a legendary figure in the world of Mandalay journalism and literature, characterized the the post 1988 period in Mandalay as the *Era of the Chinese Boss (Lawpan Khit)*.<sup>71</sup> Is it accurate to argue that “[r]uled for many early years by Britain, Mandalay is now falling under the influence of a new wave of outsiders—the Chinese?”<sup>72</sup> While Chinese cultural and economic influence in Mandalay, and across Myanmar, has grown in the SLORC/SPDC years, descriptions of Mandalay or Upper Burma as “Baja Yunnan”<sup>73</sup> are

68 On the issue of Chinese migration see David I. Steinberg and Hongwei Fan, *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence*, pp. 247-265; Maung Aung Myoe, *In the Name of Pauk-Phaw: Myanmar's China Policy Since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), pp. 123-125, 170 n47, 171- 174 n48-50. Li Zuqing, 开展缅甸华文教育的探讨 *An Inquiry into the Development of Chinese Language Education in Myanmar*, PhD Dissertation, Wuhan University, pp. 44-87; Mya Maung, “On the Road to Mandalay: A Case Study of the Sinonization [sic] of Upper Burma,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, No. 5, 1994, pp. 447-459.

69 Press censorship and the sensitivity of issues surrounding Chinese immigration, products and investment meant that most written discussion of these issues have appeared in fictional genres. Land alienation has been one of the important theme in these works also resonates with the colonial era. For a discussion of anti-Chinese themes in the work of Mandalay writes see Maung Aung Myoe, *In the Name of Pauk-Phaw: Myanmar's China Policy Since 1948*, pp. 123-125, 170 n47, 171- 174 n48-50; Min Zin, “Burmese Attitude towards Chinese: Portrayal of the Chinese in Contemporary Cultural and Media Works,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 115-131.

70 Mya Maung, “On the Road to Mandalay: A Case Study of the Sinonization [sic] of Upper Burma. p.455.

71 Min Zin, “Burmese Attitude towards Chinese: Portrayal of the Chinese in Contemporary Cultural and Media Works,” p. 123.

72 Min Lwin, “The Chinese Road to Mandalay,” *The Irrawaddy*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2009, [http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=15404&Submit=Submit](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=15404&Submit=Submit).

73 David I. Steinberg, “The Burmese Conundrum: Approaching Reformation of the Political Economy,” In Robert H.



exaggerated, though they fit with the local ideational framework of the *Dream of the Golden Land*, and so circulate widely.

Field research in Mandalay, Upper Burma and along the China-Myanmar border suggest a more complex interpretation. There are few immigrants from Yunnan, and even fewer from more distant areas of China, in Mandalay. Most of the Chinese who have come to Mandalay are from the border areas of Myanmar, the areas that were part of the BCP northeast command and other conflict zones. After the breakup of the BCP, and the initial resolution of many of the conflicts in Shan State, many people from those areas were able to regularize their identities. Some of these people were ethnic Chinese and some were other ethnic groups (especially Kokang and Wa) that were more assimilated to Chinese than Burman cultural practices.<sup>74</sup> On the ground in Mandalay and Shan State the local views in the Chinese community are that the Kokang and the Wa are “really Chinese.”<sup>75</sup> While this is an uncontroversial claim about the Kokang who are considered to be ethnically Chinese (Han), this claim, when made about the Wa requires interpretation. What this means locally is not that Wa are legal residents of China, but that their cultural affinities lie more with China and less with the Burman culture of the Irrawaddy valley. This idea also applies to a lesser extent to the Shan, not in a claim that Shan are “really Chinese” but in a local belief that the Shan and Chinese share strong cultural affinities which leads to the greater stability and use of the concept of Shan-Chinese than Burman-Chinese.

Returning to the idea of the Wa as Chinese, it should be noted that what is usually meant here by “Wa” is not an ethnic designation in the usual sense of a bundle of cultural traits and descent from a common (if fictive) ancestor. What is meant is association with the cultural and economic life of the border and the ceasefire areas. In fact, the use of Wa here is almost devoid of ethnic meaning and varies from being a marker of allegiance to a particular ceasefire group (the United Wa State Army [UWSA]) to that for ties to and origins in the a broader cultural and political economic sphere. This is not strange as the multiple and variable nature of ethnic identity in the border area does not conform well to notions of ethnic identity derived from the European experience and introduced into Burma in the colonial era.

In contrast to exaggerated claims about Mandalay, in the ceasefire areas along the Chinese border sinicization has been occurring. There has been a numerically significant migration (often if only temporary and for business purposes) from China, and in these areas Daw Amar's *Lawpan Khit* is a fair label for the dominate cultural and economic milieu.<sup>76</sup> In this sense anyone, no matter personal ethnic background nor state ascribed ethnic designation, who wishes to achieve status, wealth, and power in that cultural milieu will become sinicized to a degree.<sup>77</sup> In a broad sense this is similar to the shifting nature of Kachin ethnicity described in Leach's classic work on Burma.<sup>78</sup> It also aligns with long standing traditions in Chinese cultural practice where peripheral groups could, through cultural change,

---

Taylor ed., *Burma: Political Economy Under Military Rule* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p.49.

74 Maung Aung Myoe, *In the Name of Pauk-Phaw: Myanmar's China Policy Since 1948*, pp. 124-125; Li Zuqing, 开展缅甸华文教育的探讨 *An Inquiry into the Development of Chinese Language Education in Myanmar*, pp. 51-54.

75 Fieldnotes, Interviews Kengteng, August 2003. Fieldnotes, Interview Lashio July 2004; Fieldnotes, Interview Nankham July 2004; Fieldnotes, Interviews Mandalay, February 2006, December 2010.

76 Raymond Williams' concept of *structure of feeling* (*Marxism and Literature* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], pp. 128-135) fits well with the cultural and political economic milieu of the ceasefire areas and the border.

77 Fieldnotes, Mandalay, Mongla July 2003; Fieldnotes, Interviews Mandalay, February 2006; Fieldnotes, Interviews Ruili, Longchuan, Yingjiang, Laiza, May 2009; Fieldnotes, Interviews, Ruili, Yingjiang, Laiza June, 2011. Fieldnotes, Interviews, Mandalay, January 2012.

78 E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London: Athlone Press, 1959).

become Chinese.<sup>79</sup>

The market in Myanmar national identity cards is also not as simple as the popular conception that Chinese businesspeople buy Myanmar identity cards to be able to immigrate to and settle in Myanmar. Chinese who work in the border trade often buy Myanmar identification cards with no intention of settling in Myanmar. Having a Myanmar identification card is, for such Chinese businesspeople, simply a way to make travel and business in Myanmar, which is beset with regulations and corruption, easier. Most Chinese from China who are involved in the border trade do not wish to settle in Myanmar, a place they often describe as backward, foreign and difficult. While some do immigrate, learn the language and develop deep local ties, my field research indicates that this is a small minority, some of whom cannot return to China for reasons tied to legal and business conflicts. To complicate matters further, many people from the ceasefire areas, and even Mandalay, do not have legal Myanmar identification documents. This due to the corrupt, bureaucratic and ethnically stratified nature of the Myanmar immigration service, and is a problem in several parts of the country. National identification documents can be difficult and expensive to obtain, especially for those who are not Burman Buddhists.<sup>80</sup>

Much of the economic and cultural disruption brought to Mandalay by the nexus of Chinese immigration and the China-Myanmar border trade is similar to the disruptive effects that China's economic rise and its expanding global reach have brought to many parts of the world. Mitt Romey's presidential campaign has focused on how he would stand up to China if elected US president. Similarly, from Caracas to Nairobi local leaders debate the value and danger of increasing interaction with China. In Mandalay and the rest of Upper Burma, the growth of the border trade has created economic opportunities for a range of actors. Chinese traders, both ethnic Chinese from Myanmar (Sino-Burmese) and traders from the China, have been especially placed to benefit. Better access to capital, either from China's more developed entrepreneurial economy or, for some, from profits from ceasefire area based smuggling, have given these groups an additional edge. And, in the case of Sino-Burmese, the combination of linguistic skills – Chinese, Burmese and often other ethnic languages – and local knowledge provide further advantages. This ethnicized Chinese advantage slots into understandings of Burma's ethnicized colonial economy and thus makes Myanmar's interaction with a rising China more sensitive than might otherwise be the case.

In Mandalay and up to the China border, economic opportunities generated from the border trade have improved livelihoods and expanded consumer choice in Myanmar. But the overwhelming dominance of Chinese products, frequent quality problems, the prominent place of Chinese and Sino-Burmese in the trade, and the tendency of traders to engage in smuggling and corrupt practices, with the cooperation of the Tatmadaw and local officials (from the Myanmar government and from ceasefire groups) in Myanmar, color the image of the border trade as a whole. Many in Myanmar see the border trade as an illicit Chinese enterprise that forces shoddy and dangerous goods into the local market. This view fits closely with the *Dream of the Golden Land* and putting the Chinese into the role of covetous foreigners scheming to profit illicitly from control over Myanmar's resources and strategic location.

The NLD-popular understanding of Myanmar's contemporary situation is rooted in the *Dream of the*

---

79 Magnus Fiskesjö, "On the 'Raw' and the 'Cooked' Barbarians of Imperial China," *Inner Asia*, Vol. 1 No. 2, 1999, pp.139–168.

80 Fieldnotes, Interviews, Mandalay, January 2006; Fieldnotes, Interviews Ruili, Longchuan, Yingjiang, Laiza, Tengchong, May 2009; Fieldnotes, Interviews, Tengchong, August 2009. Fieldnotes, Interview, Yangon, February 2011.

*Golden Land*. It sees Myanmar as colonized by the Tatmadaw leadership and the alien Chinese. As Aung Zaw describes it “[s]ixty years after shedding the yoke of the British Empire, Burma is still colonized – by its own military generals. The fight for independence is not over.”<sup>81</sup> But there are also commonalities that link the NLD-popular version of the *Dream of the Golden Land* to that of the junta. These are apparent in Ludu Daw Amar's deprecating the loss of Burman tradition as Burman women abandon the wearing of traditional sarongs for pants, in this era of Chinese influence and Burman cultural decline.<sup>82</sup> At the same time “the army demands the civilian population to wear *longyi* [sarongs] and accuse democracy protesters of westernization.”<sup>83</sup> Both sides of the junta-NLD conflict share underlying fears of external domination and cultural degeneration imposed by covetous external powers. It is simply that those outsiders each side sees as presently threatening differ.

## 7 Challenges for the future

What can the knowledge of the importance of the Dream of the Golden Land as an ideational framework in contemporary Myanmar politics tell us about the likely course of the ongoing reform process in Myanmar? I argue that the underlying xenophobic nature of broadly shared political-historical understandings in Myanmar has implication for what the reform process will bring to China-Myanmar relations as well as for the newly redeveloping ties between Myanmar and the West.

### 7.1 Challenges for China

Anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar is already widespread. While there were other elements in the decision to suspend work on the Myitsone dam, anti-Chinese sentiment was an undeniable part. China's policy towards Myanmar is official based on the notion of fraternal (Paukphaw) harmony, and like China's policy elsewhere in the developing world there is an emphasis on combining non-interference with the promotion of economic development. However, this dual track policy is not convincing because of an inherent conflict between its two aims. Succinctly put, China's policy is too liberal.

The notion that China's investment and trade activities in Myanmar do not constitute interference in the internal affairs of Myanmar, and unproblematically bring the benefits of development to that country, implicitly relies on the doctrine of *Harmony of Interests*. The doctrine holds that if each country pursues its individual interests that will, in the end, create the optimal outcome for the entire community of nations. Thus China's energy, infrastructure, mining and trade ventures in Myanmar are not for the narrow benefit of China, nor for that of China in cooperation with the rent-seeking military leadership in Myanmar. From this point of view China is not plundering Myanmar's national wealth, rather by pursuing its own economic interests in Myanmar, China helps contribute to overall development and thus also Myanmar's own development. But as E. H. Carr long ago pointed out “economically, the doctrine of the harmony of interests was tenable only if you left out of account the interest of the weak who must be driven to the wall, or called in the next world to redress the balance of the present.”<sup>84</sup>

81 Aung Zaw, “Independence Lost.” [http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print\\_article.php?art\\_id=9801](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=9801).

82 Min Zin, “Burmese Attitude towards Chinese: Portrayal of the Chinese in Contemporary Cultural and Media Works,” p. 122.

83 Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, p.181. Houtman then goes on to point out the irony of the military making this demand when themselves wearing pants.

84 E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. **NEED PAGE NUMBER, line just before start of “The International Harmony” section in chap. 4.**

In Myanmar the opinion that Myanmar is being driven to the wall by China is widely shared. Claims that China's relations with Myanmar are simply part of China's wider strategy "to contribute to a harmonious world"<sup>85</sup> remain unconvincing for the activists and politicians who worked against the Myitsone dam and oppose the pipeline and other Chinese development and infrastructure projects.<sup>86</sup> If we move beyond Carr's realism this problem becomes even worse. This is because arguments that assume objective interest, such as Carr's, would allow for discussion based on differing interests and thus at least hold out the possibility of compromise. The constructivist stance I have been using in this essay points toward the need to change long standing *ideational frameworks* as a prerequisite for putting Myanmar's foreign relations on a more constructive footing, and is a dauntingly difficult task. At the present moment, it is relations with China that hold the greatest potential for trouble as Myanmar's *Dream of the Golden Land* grates against the *Harmony of Interest* that, on some levels, guides China's foreign interaction.<sup>87</sup>

## 7.2 Potential Problems for the West

Since the suspension of the Myitsone dam project the environment in Myanmar has changed dramatically. Where once there was widespread dejected resignation at the intransigence of and stagnation under the Tatmadaw government, there is now fervent optimism. This is based on the idea that the end of the political stalemate between the NLD and the Tatmadaw will bring real improvement in the material conditions of the long suffering population. There is also gold rush atmosphere among foreign investors who see huge room for growth in a variety of markets in Myanmar. These two views meet in the hope that investment from the West will bring best practices to a range of business sectors in Myanmar and usher in a era of breakneck economic growth.

While the Tatmadaw and its proxy party the USDP remain wary of the West as possible neocolonialist force, the general mood is one of enthusiasm for increased Western involvement, including investment. This is both for practical and ideological reasons. The USDP position that the NLD will sell the nation out to Western neocolonial interests is not now popular. Anti-Chinese sentiment is much more widespread and common than fear of Western interference. This is, however, largely based on a potentially problematic combination of high expectations of and a low level of actual contact with Western companies and organizations. If the large scale operations of Western investors and donor organizations in Myanmar fail to bring about or accompany rapid and dramatic economic change there will be a potential for an backlash. If disappointment with the pace of economic change sets in the anti-Western neocolonial rhetoric of the USDP will likely become more popular. This is because it relies on the same underlying ideational framework as the now widespread anti-Chinese sentiment, the *Dream of the Golden Land*.

## 8 Conclusion

Burman political culture is shaped by conceptions of the colonial era. Burma/Myanmar is blessed with

---

85 Li Chenyang, "China–Myanmar Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership: A Regional Threat?," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 61. See also, Information Office of the State Council, *China's Peaceful Development*, Beijing, September 2011.

86 Fieldnotes, Interviews, Yangon, Mandalay January 2011.

87 The idea that the nexus of foreign policy and economic interaction is "too liberal" comes from Matt Ferchen (personal communication, May 2012). He and I are working to further develop this in cross-regional perspective in a future article.



a strategic location between China and India, as well as abundant natural resources. But it is just these blessings, and foreign greed, that led to the tragedy of colonization. For the Burmans, the lesson of these events is that Myanmar must be wary of the next foreign effort to control its resources and location. This ideational framework crosses the divide between the the popular NLD and the Tatmadaw backed USDP. The NLD and popular views see the Tatmadaw as in league with Chinese neocolonialist power, and regard the struggle against the Tatmadaw dictatorship as a “second struggle for independence.”<sup>88</sup> The Tatmadaw/USDP view sees the NLD as proxy for Western neocolonialist interests. But, both these views are rooted in a common fear of quasi-colonial threats to the nation's independence and related to a notion of Burman culture that exists in an overlapping, sometimes tense, and never clear relationship with national culture. This orientation, in turn, presents existing problems for Myanmar's relations with China and holds the potential to also negatively color relations with the West in the future, despite the present enthusiasm.

---

88 Aung San Suu Kyi quoted in Aung Zaw, “Independence Lost,” [http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print\\_article.php?art\\_id=9801](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=9801).