

REVIEWS

Donald M. Seekins. *Burma and Japan Since 1940: From Co-Prosperity to Quiet Dialogue*. Copenhagen: NIAS. 2007.

Donald M. Seekins analyses Burma and Japan's relationship from Burma's colonial occupation to the post 1988 approach of "quiet dialogue" in a compact but all too brief book. These countries have ties which are atypical of relations between Japan and its other aid recipients or former colonies. Seekins refers to original Japanese language sources providing data on economic ties between the countries and cultural and historical articles that explore Japan's perception of Burma in its colonial history and the present day. Beginning with an extract from the controversial revisionist text *Atarashii Rekishi Kyokasho* [New History Textbook] that posits pre-war Japan's Greater East Asia policy as the initiator of Burma's independence, Seekins gives an overview of 1930s British colonial Burma and the gravitation of Burmese nationalists, the Thakins, towards the Japanese military. The Japanese agents working with the nationalists were a major contributor to the elite identity of the Thakins, and the post war aggressive, militant race based military government. The war occupies a sentimental place in Japanese post-war culture, with five hundred books relating to the Burma War written by war veterans. The most famous of these is *Harp of Burma*, a nostalgic look at the experiences of Japanese soldiers in an older, simpler culture; a reflection of Japan's "sadly departed past," rather than a description of Burmese society during the war. Nevertheless, large numbers of returning war veterans visiting Burma after the war attest to the lingering role of Burma in post war Japanese identity.

After the war, on negotiating peace terms, Burma refused to work within the American imposed framework and made bilateral arrangements with the Japanese government. Japanese war reparations made towards Burma were the "first made by Japan with any Asian country," and here the "irrationality" of Japan's massive aid projects in Burma began. The aid was typically tied to benefit Japanese business by building huge and costly projects which ill-fitted Burma's stage of development. Seekins diminishes the role of shared history and culture between the nations, countering this with the example of Bangladesh, another country in which Japanese businesses benefited more from the building of expensive loan projects than the aid recipient. Loans made were of symbiotic benefit, Ne Win receiving much needed foreign capital in a dilapidated state managed economy leaving him free to allocate remaining government resources to the counter-insurgency. Post Ne Win, the Japanese government changed its aid policy towards Burma in light of international condemnation of the crackdown and Aung San Suu Kyi's criticism of the role of aid in bolstering the SLORC government. However, aid and business deals hardly stopped, with the sale of land belonging to the Burmese embassy in Tokyo in 1989 netting the new junta \$435 million. Japan embarked on its programme of 'quiet dialogue' hoping to entice the junta towards reform while continuing significant aid; this programme has failed entirely.

Seekins refers to a wide range of original sources from Japanese texts to interviews with Japanese businessmen involved with projects in Burma. The book is concise and highly informative, including tables of

economic data and diverse cultural and historical references, all the while being an accessible and interesting read. Its brevity is a weakness, necessitating simplifications where a broader scope would have aided an understanding of the role of Burma in Japan's post-war development. Japanese-Burmese relations were already well underway by 1940, with surveillance operations, covert operatives and aid for subversion at a peak. The British were equally responsible in making the Thakins an elite clique, directing their security apparatus towards Thakin activity in the years preceding war. Great attention is paid to political developments in Burma in 1988, and yet the Ne Win coup d'état of 1958 is skimmed over; if it wasn't as significant to Japanese aid as the events of 1988, why not? Some comparison with Korea would better illustrate Burma's distinctness. Seekins blames the state managed economy for impoverishing post-independence Burma, but as Chalmers Johnson notes¹ Japan itself adopted a centrally managed, state planned economy in the post-war period and massively benefited. Other answers must be sought for Burma's impoverishment than its pursuance of a different route from 'capitalist' Japan. Nevertheless, Seekins highlights some important points for further exploration, closing the book by noting the opaque nature of Japanese bureaucracy and decision making processes, paralleled by the similarly dimly veiled power elite in Rangoon. This mysterious and unaccountable facade frustrates rational analysis of the true nature of the relationship between the two countries.

Edmund Clipson

Exeter University

¹ Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy* (California, 1982).

Resources for learning literary Mon: A Commentary on Emmanuel Guillon (2003), *Parlons Mon (Homeri Moun Co): Langue et Civilization*, Paris: L'Harmattan.

The vast majority of languages on university campuses around the world are categorized as “less commonly taught languages” (LCTLs). University budgets do not allow for the permanent hiring of a faculty member to teach most languages. Even though it is difficult to find a traditional language course for these languages, they are still essential for some research projects and jobs after graduation, so ways must be found to provide students with adequate training in these languages (See the *Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTL) Project* and *Journal of the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages*).

The Mon language of Thailand and Lower Burma is an extreme case of such a less commonly taught language. The reasons why someone might wish to learn the language range from working with an NGO providing help to Mon refugees along the Thai border to linguistic research or studying the history, Buddhist religion, and literary traditions of the Mons. It is the later topic, Mon history and literature, that this mini-review of resources for learning to read literary Mon is primarily concerned with.

Some knowledge of basic spoken Mon will be necessary whatever the student eventually wishes to do with the language. Guillon’s *Parlons Mon (Homeri Moun Co): Langue et Civilization* (2003) is perhaps the only book that aims to provide such basic knowledge. The approach of this wonderful little book is simple and geared towards learning to speak and carry on simple conversations in the Mon language. The book has the same practical dialogues that you normally find in textbooks focused on everyday spoken language. This makes the book rather unique since most books on the Mon language written in western languages are highly technical and written for linguists.

The most useful and valuable part of Emmanuel Guillon’s book for most people, whether they are native French speakers or not, will be the last two sections that provide common everyday expressions and dialogues in Mon. These sections demonstrate clearly how Mon sentences are woven together from Mon words and grammar. Each sentence is presented in four different ways: 1. a French sentence, 2. the Mon translation written in Mon alphabet, 3. the same Mon sentence written in a western IPA-style phonetic script that makes the sentence easy to read and pronounce, 4. the Mon sentence translated (glossed) literally word-for-word into French, resulting in a sentence with French words in Mon word order (an interlinear gloss) that has no real meaning in either language but which serves as a bridge between the two languages. Even if you do not know French, the sentences are simple enough that the words can be looked up quickly with a small dictionary. The content of these two sections runs as follows:

Everyday expressions: 1. Greetings, 2. Understanding and being understood., 3. Times and dates, 4. The seasons of the year and climate, 5. Space and directions, 6. Paying at the market, at the hotel, 7. Eating and drinking, 8. Expressing one’s feelings, 9. Talking about health, 10. The family, society, and the army, and 11. At the monastery.

Eight dialogues: 1. Hygiene, 2. In the village, 3. After a visit to grandmother, 4. At the market, 5. Talking about the weather tomorrow, 6. A trip in the car, 7. A telephone conversation, 8. A collection of manuscripts.

Skipping back to the front of the book, the first part of the book provides basic background information on Mon language, literature, and history. The discussion of Mon literary genres describes various forms of treatises, Pali translations [Burmese: *nissaya*], oral folk literature, and other forms of Mon writing in both verse and prose. Guillon (1999) treats most of these topics in greater detail. One of the very interesting works that Guillon discusses is the *Lokapaññatti* cosmology (Denis, 1975, 1979; Mus, 1939), much less famous than the Thai *Traibb mikath* Buddhist cosmology (Reynolds and Reynolds, 1982) but perhaps no less important in the greater context of Southeast Asian history.

The second part of the book provides the basics of Mon language pronunciation, writing, and grammar. Mon's tone-like registers (tense and lax vowels) are a language feature that Mon shares in common with Khmer and sets it apart from other commonly studied Asian languages such as Chinese or Thai. Basic Mon grammar is also explained mostly through lists of words (particles) used to convey grammar and through simple example sentences. Finally, two small Mon-French and French-Mon glossaries are provided in the back of Guillon's book. Hla (1988-89), Sujarilak Wajanarat (1978), Jenny (2001), and Broadwell (no date) also provide the basics of the Mon grammar and pronunciation. Sujarilak (1978) provides the basics of constructing Mon noun phrases, verb phrases, clauses, and sentences. Sentences are provided in the same inter-linear fashion as Guillon's book.

Once the basics of the Mon language have been mastered translations of Mon works accompanied by the Mon text can be used as reading practice. Reading these translations in parallel can help the student progress to the point where they can start reading Mon historical and literary works that haven't been translated yet. For reading practice, Dupont (1954) and Guillon (1983) provide French translations with transliterated Mon. The Dupont volume also provides a glossary. These volumes are invaluable resources for learning the style of literary Mon used in historical and Buddhist texts. Shorto (1958) provides an insightful review of the Dupont translation and its limitations. In a similar fashion to Dupont, Halliday (1917, 1923a, 1923b, 1929) provides texts in the Mon alphabet with an English translation. Hla (1992) provides several legal treatises in Mon script with English translation. San Lwin's (no date) recent English language translation of the Burmese version of the Mon Rajahirat epic [Burmese: Razadarit Ayeidawpon] can also be used as a tutor text to read the recently republished Mon *Pak Lat* version of the epic (Maung Toe, 2003; see Halliday and Bauer, 2000, 143-160; and Paphatsaun Thianpanya, 2003; for background on the Pak Lat Mon press).

Several good dictionaries of the Mon language are available. Shorto (1962) covers the spoken language, transliterating Mon words into a form easy for the beginner to pronounce. Halliday's (1922) dictionary uses the Mon alphabet. Tun Way (1997, 2000) provides the most complete dictionaries. Shorto (1971) is a specialized dictionary that covers the older version of Mon found in inscriptions. Bauer (1982), and Jenny (2005) all provide deeper analysis of Mon grammatical structures. Additional books and academic

papers useful for learning Mon are included in the linguistics section of Bauer (1984, 1988-89). The Mon-Khmer Studies Journal has many useful articles and is now online. There are also several useful books in Thai for learning to speak Mon which space does not permit to cover here.

Jon Fernquest
Bangkok Post

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Mikael Gravers, ed. *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press. 2007. xx + 283 pp. Maps, Illus., Index. ISBN 87-91114-96-9 ²

This volume of papers from the 2002 Burma Studies Conference in Gothenburg helps to fill a twofold gap in the scholarly literature on ethnicity in mainland Southeast Asia, namely a lack of evidence from within Burma and a dearth of historical data on ethnic formation. Following the publication of Edmund Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, a generation of anthropologists extended and refined his ideas about the definition of ethnic categories as contrasting social roles. Most of these conducted field research in Thailand, using synchronic ethnographic methods. One of this generation, F. K. Lehman (F. K. L. Chit Hlaing in this volume), who alone conducted field research in Burma, set spelled out a challenge for historical evidence posed by the relational definition of ethnicity that they helped establish. He wrote, "there should be evidence that...ethnic categories were traditionally defined over a long period of Burmese history by role complimentation and not absolutely."³ The essays in this volume take up the challenge of uncovering such evidence, in varied contexts, with varying results, and in varying degrees of quality. Together, they point to the limitations of the concept 'ethnicity' for explaining the wide range of social identities at work among communities in Burma.

Apart from the curiously placed theoretical chapter (Lehman), each author focuses on a particular ethnic category: Mon (Ashley South), Karen (Mikael Gravers), Karenni (Sandra Dudley), Shan (Takatani Michio), Chin (Lian Sakhong), and Kachin (Mandy Sadan), and another on contemporary Kachin ethno-political geography (Karin Dean). This arrangement is useful for researchers interested in a particular ethnic group. Each chapter stands on its own merits, some more firmly than others. Some of the arguments presented here have already been overtaken by current events or superceded by more recent publications. However, the volume as a whole provides a very useful cross-section of research on ethnicity in Burma leading up to a critical juncture in its history. The contributors use a wide variety of anthropological, historical, linguistic, and political approaches, each seeking to contextualize ethnic identification across borders (Dudley, Dean), in colonial pasts (Gravers, Sadan), or with relation to other units of identity, such as religious or civil society groups, local or linguistic communities (Takatani, Siakhong, South).

Mandy Sadan contributes a rich extract from her groundbreaking doctoral research on the history of Kachin ethnic expression. Sadan unpacks the development of the category 'Kachin' through the colonial era and beyond, questioning the often-repeated mantra that ethnic categories are merely products of colonial expediency. Readers interested in pithy political-economy analysis may be put off at first glance by her methodology, which makes heavy use of ritual and oral tradition. This would be a mistake. The careful reader

² Editorial note: the present review will also appear in the forthcoming issue of *South East Asia Research*.

³ Lehman, "Ethnic Categories in Burma and the Theory of Social Systems," in Peter Kunstadter, ed. *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations* vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967): 108.

will be rewarded by an erudite and historically grounded argument that counterbalances the assertion (echoed uncritically elsewhere in this volume) that ethno-political difference is a colonial imposition. In excavating the rhetorical and ritual expression of Kachin-ness, Sadan shows that the edifice of ethnicity was constructed neither according to a primordial blueprint nor on completely new foundations. This is by far the most complete and nuanced analysis in the volume, and sets a standard by which the others largely fail.

Sandra Dudley presents a study of a particular model of Karenni ethnicity—that of the KNPP—and its institutional setting within Karenni refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. While much has been written about this border and its refugee camps, the Karenni have largely been overshadowed by their more numerous Karen cousins to the south. Dudley's work not only redresses this imbalance, it presents a framework for understanding the dynamics of non-Karenni camps as well. Dudley offers a thoughtful first-hand analysis of the interplay between the KNPP elite, refugee youth, and foreign aid workers in rehearsing and promoting an orthodox Karenni identity. There is much food for thought here. However, following Sadan's contribution this analysis seems limited by comparison. It inevitably leaves questions unanswered that some readers will want to seek elsewhere. Dudley warns that ethnogenesis, history, religion, and 'pre- or post-exile imaginations of Karenni-ness' are not considered in her chapter (p.78), and she helpfully provides references to other works on these topics. Still, she is too dismissive here of historical expressions of Karenni identity, and appears guilty of lumping them into the straw man of a discredited primordial “‘truth’... in what ‘Karenni’ actually means.” (p. 82). The political border between Burma and Thailand cannot separate the refugees from the wider historical and geospatial context of ethnic identification or the human networks that produced it. References to tensions with “ethnic leaders inside Burma” (p. 83) and the comparative cosmopolitanism of refugee life (p. 102–03) hint at the interplay of the refugee experience with different forms of Karenni ethnic mobilization inside Burma. How, if at all, have people reconciled or responded to these differences? Is their presence in the refugee camp itself a response? These questions must be pursued elsewhere. All the same, this chapter helps clarify the intra-camp politics of ethnicity at a time when large-scale refugee resettlement is increasing interest in the border camps.

Karin Dean attempts to define the boundaries of Kachin 'social space' as conceived and enacted by the collection of Kachin/ Jinghpaw/ Wunpawng groups across the political border between Burma and China. While the frame of this story is familiar—the mismatch between colonial/ national borders and geo-social “facts on the ground”—a number of novel and illuminating observations emerge. Dean attempts to “map” more abstract cognitive boundaries of Kachin-identified groups. She presents evidence of self-identification through expressions of “national character” and the like. Of particular interest is Dean's comparison of Kachin identification within and between the defined “minority” regions of Burma and China. She highlights the prevalence of cross-border marriage to show how geographies of kinship cut across national political units and suggest a wider ethnic consciousness.

F. K. Lehman's (here F.K.L. Chit Hlaing) “Remarks upon Ethnicity Theory” provide a useful précis of the author's previous work on this subject, and add much in the way of theoretical context for the other

essays. Lehman draws in ample evidence from more recent studies that, together with his wide-ranging knowledge of the ethnographic landscape of the region, allow these remarks to function as a useful bibliographical essay. Readers unfamiliar with Prof. Lehman's inimitable style may be puzzled by his polyvalent nomenclature (not least in reference to himself) and other quirks of expression. The introduction of "SI" as an abbreviation for "social identity," for example, seems unnecessary to shorten only four subsequent uses of the phrase, all within the final paragraph. Even so, it is this final proposal that proves most important—that ethnicity be construed as one—if perhaps a "maximal" one—of a number of overlapping fields of social identity.

Ashley South briefly traces the history of Mon-Burmese political relations to 2002, culminating in an analysis of the New Mon State Party (NMSP) as a case study for the development role of ethnic cease-fire groups. South examines the role of these groups not only in national politics and international engagement, but also their leadership in the post-ceasefire environment of local politics and economic development—a realm that is poorly understood by most foreign observers. His analysis is, as he points out, necessarily dated. The United Nationalities Alliance, for example, appears to have been bypassed by recent events. However, South's emphasis on civil society groups and the question of armed ethnic parties' future in Burmese politics is more pertinent than ever. The events of the past year—especially the so-called "saffron revolution" and the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis—have drawn attention to the resurgent role of religious and community organizations, particularly the Buddhist *sangha*. This seems to support South's assertion that civil society networks in Burma have been slowly rebuilding. When this research was first presented, civil society groups were only beginning to gain the attention of political analysts, but now it is a common topic of study. The analysis here is largely superceded by South's recent book, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict* (Routledge, 2008).

Takatani Michio outlines the ongoing redefinition of "Shan" in a regional process of cultural standardisation mirroring the national programme of "Burmanization." Attention is given to expressions of both geographic and ethnic classification with Shan and Burmese frames of reference. Takatani uses both colonial records and postcolonial sources, but does not seem to propose any significant shift in identification between the two—leaving the question of colonial impact unaddressed. He highlights the importance of Buddhist literary heritage in Shan script as an important element of cultural identity and preservation. This stands in stark contrast to the other essays in the book, which largely overlook the primacy of language—whether spoken or written—as an attribute of ethnic identity. Perhaps the warnings of Lehman (ch.4 note 5) against equating language and ethnicity have obscured the way in which language is used to mark differences in social identity. Part of this may be an oral bias of most linguistic and ethnographic research, although differences in speech have long been recognized as markers of class or regional identity. Script and canon here serve to shore up Shan identity around the history transmitted in Shan language and literature.

The theme of religion is taken up in the final two pieces, by Lian Siakhong (Chin) and Gravers (Karen). Lian Siakhong provides a rare glimpse into the history and mythology of Chin ethnic formation.

After fragmenting into locally defined groups in prehistory, he claims, Christianity provided a vehicle for re-integration. He shows how Baptist association meetings helped create an imagined community—a story that echoes a common analysis of Karen ethnic integration. Siakhong then takes a unique turn in pointing out the continuity between Christianity and traditional Chin religion. Christians sought and found common ground with Chin stories and rituals concerning the afterlife, propitiation and the sacrificial feast. This perceived continuity is reflected in the stories of Chin, who are some ninety percent Christians, and in the syncretic observance of feasts of the Christian calendar in a traditional vein. The only indigenous contributor, Siakhong might be criticized as being inordinately biased or even naive in embracing the Christianization of Chin culture so uncritically. However, this is a detailed and valuable account of the process of religious transformation, and introduces a much-needed indigenous view of ethnicity in history.

Gravers' recent work has increasingly relied on historical data, and his chapter on Karen religious communalism continues this trend. His chapter attempts to answer a question that was new and vexing during the 1990s, around the time of publication of his last book, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*. The question arose from the unexpected breakaway of a Buddhist faction, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) from the Karen National Union, exposing religious fault lines in the Karen Nationalist movement. This division had been obscured by nearly a century of scholarship examining Karen developments through the lens of ethnography (primarily in Thailand) and nationalism (primarily in Burma)—constructs useful for academic analysis, but often poorly matched to facts on the ground. Gravers delves into the colonial period through the *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, and does as convincing a job as any publication to date of elaborating the standard narrative of Christian-dominated Karen ethno-nationalism into the 20th century. On twentieth century developments, interview data from Saw Ba Thin is particularly illuminating. Although this narrative follows well-established contours, he provides an impressive level of detail on the early Karen national organizations, particularly the 1881 Karen National Association—a group that has often been cited but seldom examined. However, much of the information he cites is not properly contextualized. While he is concerned with religious variation among the Karen groups, he pays little attention to regional or dialect differences that bear on this process. This reflects a limitation of the *Missionary Magazine*, which is internal to the narrative and often careless about publishing all of the relevant information. To provide a convincing picture of religion and Karen identity, the views of Karen Buddhists, as well as Catholics and other Christian groups need to be considered. Sources on these groups exist, though generally not in English.

This brings up a serious limitation reflected throughout the book—the authors make use of very few sources written in the languages of Burma. Even though these authors as a group have sharpened our focus on developments within each ethnic category, the perspective remains firmly an external one. If anything, the finely grained picture of social identity provided in these studies questions the value of ethnicity as a basis of comparison, particularly as it relates to its political expression. The variously expressed social identities examined here—including religion, location, dialect, or political affiliation—show a dynamic and often

competitive environment of social differentiation. Differences that might be called ethnic are not necessarily the most meaningful. This is true even in the realm of contemporary politics, where Chinese leaders conduct business under an organization with the ethnic label 'Wa', and cease-fires are brokered with individual Karen commanders who have no obvious affinity with the government. Ethnicity, if it exists, is not practiced or produced systematically.

A handful of pedestrian flaws affect the way the book is read. Black and white photographs add interest to the text throughout, but one or two seem out of place. For example, a photograph of the Mae La refugee camp appears in Sandra Dudley's chapter about Karenni camps farther north along the Thai border. A few typographical errors are worth noting. Particularly egregious is the map on p.xx that labels Rohingya as "Rohinoya," p. 28, 4th line from the bottom of the page, "analyse" should read "analyses," or perhaps "analyzes," given "burmanization" a few lines later, and "scrutinize," on the previous page. Page 75 wants a heading. Other typographic errors can be found throughout. Notes are placed at the end of each chapter, as is common in edited books. This is inconvenient. The reader must rifle through the pages to find the notes section. The inconvenience is compounded by the use of author/ date citations within the footnotes themselves. Such an arrangement defies the logic of scholarly apparatus, and combines the worst elements of both systems. The hapless reader must search in at least two different places for the first mention of a title. Footnotes with full references would be much easier to use.

In sum, this work provides a set of useful guideposts for future research into a number of topics relating to ethnicity in Burma. Most of these guideposts point away from isolating ethnicity as an objectively identifiable phenomenon. Histories of ethnicity are inextricable from the histories of people who define themselves in a number of different ways. Future studies should continue to question the narrative of colonial/ national ethnicism and look deeper into the local contexts in which social differences have been asserted.

William Womack
Samford University