



## Burma Studies News

By Michael AUNG-THWIN\*

### *Burma Studies Center*

When in the early 1970s, a group of Burma-philes at the Association for Asian Studies' Annual Meeting in Boston decided to meet for lunch, the Burma Studies Group was founded. It later officially became a "country group" under the Association for Asian Studies and has been active in Burma studies since then. Members included scholars as well as anyone else interested in Burma for any reason. The BSG was and is a very informal group, and personalities, rather than structure, kept the organization alive and active. Nevertheless an executive committee was elected (for life), with Professors F. K. Lehman as President and John P. Ferguson as Secretary-treasurer. A short *Bulletin of the Burma Studies Group* newsletter was begun in which all Burma news garnered by its editor, John Ferguson, was printed. (Anyone desiring this Bulletin should write to Professor John P. Ferguson, Warnerville, New York, 12187.) At first, annual meetings were held when the Association itself met, but subsequently, once every two years, the Burma Studies Group began to hold its own meetings separately from the Association, where papers were presented, research news shared, art work displayed, and Burmese music and dance performed. The first several meetings were held at Granville, Ohio, home of Denison University which had a good collection of Burmese art and also traditional links to Burma via their Baptist missionary alumni. Another was held at Elmira College when one of its members hosted that year's meeting.

In 1984-1985, Dr. Sara Bekker, one of BSG's

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active members, offered her collection of Burmese art, then displayed in Switzerland, to a permanent Burma studies center, if one were established. A committee informally called the *Hlutdaw* (Great Council of State under the monarchy) was elected which invited and then selected proposals submitted by several major universities to establish a permanent Center for Burmese Studies. The University of Michigan, Northern Illinois University, University of Wisconsin, Cornell University, and The California Institute of Integral Studies submitted proposals. Northern Illinois University, for a variety of reasons, won the bid, and it was chosen as the site for the Burma Studies Center. A Burma Studies Foundation was subsequently elected to oversee the Center as a body distinct from the Burma Studies Group which was legally under the Association for Asian Studies. The Foundation will now act as the Board of Trustees of the Burma Studies Center.

The highlights of the offer made by Northern Illinois University include the following. The Director of the Burma Studies Center (currently Richard Cooler), a tenured professor of Art History at Northern Illinois University, will be given half-time off from his regular teaching duties in the Art Department to devote to Center duties at University cost; he will act as curator of the collection; a person who reads Burmese will be hired to assist in the cataloguing; secretarial assistance will be provided by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and the Department of Art; the University will pay for the transporting of the Bekker collection from Switzerland; the University will physically modify the Swen Parson Annex, where the permanent Burmese Gallery will be placed (see attached photograph); the

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Burma Studies Group meetings have access to an adjacent room for their meetings; a Burma Studies Center office will be located close to the Burmese Gallery; the University will assist in publishing material on Burma; the University Library will maintain a central list of bibliographic items in the Center's collection; and the Center will encourage the study of Burma, including offering Burmese language options.

### *Other Research News*

In June of 1986, the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, located in Washington, D. C. held a Burma Conference to which about 33 international scholars on Burma were invited. From Japan, those invited and able to attend included Professor Than Tun from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies; Professor Aung-Thwin from Elmira College, then a research scholar at Kyoto Universi-



Swen Parson Hall, Location of The Burmese Gallery

ty's Center for Southeast Asian Studies; Professor Ryuji Okudaira from the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and Professor Toru Ohno from Osaka University of Foreign Studies. Others from East Germany, France, England, and the United States were also invited to attend. For the Conference, Frank J. Shulman was commissioned by the Wilson Center to compile a work entitled *Burma: An Annotated Bibliographical Guide to International Doctoral Dissertation Research, 1898-1985* which was

given to each participating member (those interested in obtaining a copy should write to Asia Program, The Wilson Center, Smithsonian Institution Building, 1000 Jefferson Drive, S. W. Washington, D. C., 20560); along with *Burma: A Selective Guide to Scholarly Resources* edited by Library of Congress's W. P. Tuchrello and A. Hibler. The Conference was held for three days where Burmese Studies as a "discipline" was assessed. (For a summary report on the Conference, see R. A. Morse's edition *Burma Studies Options for the Future* to be issued by the Wilson Center.)

In brief, Burma Studies, largely in the United States, but also elsewhere, faced several practical and intellectual problems. With regard to the former, concerns expressed include: 1) relatively difficult access into Burma for research, 2) the need to enhance the language proficiency of Burma scholars living abroad, 3) the absence of new students entering the field (the youngest Burma scholar at near Ph. D. level in the United States is in her late 20s), and 4) the haphazard and casual manner in which contact with scholars in Burma is made and vice versa. One virtually unanimous concern expressed was the desirability of easier research access to Burma and the difficulty in obtaining research visas. Because of internal bureaucratic reasons, the process, even given the best conditions, takes a long time. That has often been interpreted to imply a deliberate policy aimed at certain kinds of scholars and research foci. Yet, American, British, as well as Japanese researchers have entered Burma during the past decade and are continuing to do so; which suggests that the problem is more than a matter of hard and fast policy, but one having to do with the differences in the bureaucratic systems involved, the way in which the Burmese government is approached, and the topic of research. It is true that certain research subjects are more likely to attract a favorable response from Burma than others, but a cursory glance at this issue reveals a wide variety of subjects and disciplines approved in the last 10 years, ranging from current

political history to religious institutions. The problem has been exacerbated by outside funding agencies and their budgetary deadlines as well. A temporary solution to the problem might be for these funding agencies to place the Burma budget in a different category so that a grant is not revoked after the usual deadline for acceptance has passed; but held until it is either accepted by Burma (and the scholar) or rejected by Burma.

Apart from practical issues there are intellectual questions of a more academic kind facing Burma Studies outside Burma. Although they do not appear to be vastly different from those of any new and small country specific group, the following areas of study seem to need special emphasis in future: 1) A legal history of Burma, 2) comparative studies of modern Burma, 3) historical demography, 4) Burmese intellectual history, 5) Burma's pre-history, 6) English translations of Burmese literature, ancient and modern, 7) current ethnography, and a variety of other concerns in anthropological and linguistics studies.

Some of the research currently going on or considered "long term projects" include the following. In anthropology, a study of women, particularly Burmese women is being conducted by Melford Spiro, the distinguished anthropologist; Takatani Michio from Kagoshima is studying Buddhism and society in Burma and Thailand; and Mi Mi Khaing's work on the Burmese woman from a personal perspective has been published as *The World of Burmese Women*.

In history, Dr. Than Tun continues to produce several volumes on *The Royal Edicts of Burma* (number IV has been published by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University); Victor Lieberman, who recently published *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580-1760* has a long-term project concerned with Burmese economic history from the fifteenth century to the colonial period; and Michael Aung-Thwin, who recently published *Pagan: The Origins of Modern*

*Burma* is currently writing a history of Ava and hopes eventually to write a new History of Burma. In Japan, Hiroaki Ogiwara of Kagoshima University has recently (1983) published *Tonan Ajia Gendai-shi, IV: Biruma. Tai* [Modern History of Southeast Asia, Part IV: Burma and Thailand] while V. F. Vasilyev of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow and Mozheiko (alias Vsevolodov) are both working on Burmese history as well but no details are available on their works. In India, Krishna Murari has produced *Cultural Heritage of Burma*.

In other areas of research, traditional legal institutions are being studied by Ryuji Okudaira; Karen linguistics is the most recent of Toru Ohno's vast interest (and expertise) in Burma Studies, a subject which R. B. Jones of Cornell, now retired, has been working on; while Vadim Kasevich at Leningrad University is working on Burmese grammar, syntax, and phonology.

In politics, Robert Taylor from SOAS continues to produce works on the Burmese Revolution and recently published *Marxism and Resistance in Burma, 1942-1945: Thein Pe Myint's "Wartime Traveler"*. In the United States, Jon Wiant and David Steinberg's most recent contribution is "The Role of the Military in Burmese Politics" in *Southeast Asia: Problems and Prospects*; while Jo Silverstein and Hugh MacDougall are addressing other current issues such as "Burma After the Fifth Party Congress". Jan Becka from Czechoslovakia is also working on political developments but again we have few details of that work.

In the field of literature, a novel on Burma is being written by John Badgley (now curator of the Cornell Echols Collection) and an English translation of a Burmese novel by Margaret Aung-Thwin is nearly complete. In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, there are scholars who have long been active in Burmese literature. Elena Zapadova from the Soviet Union, Anne Marie Esche from East Germany, and Dagmar Beckova from Czechoslovakia all work on modern Burmese literature, while Yu. Osipor of the

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USSR deals with classical Burmese literature, and Anna Muranova has been addressing Soviet Historiography (of Burma).

The dean of Burma Bibliographers is Denise Bernot of the National Institute of Oriental Civilisations and Languages in France, who recently published her *Bibliographie Birmane, 1960-1970* in three volumes while Thaung Blackmore's *A Catalogue of Burney Parabaiks in the India Office Library* focuses on a special category of manuscripts. Patricia Herbert of the British Library's Oriental Manuscripts Collection, whose earlier research dealt with the Saya San Rebellion, has a very useful list of Burmese sources in the Appendix of the Thaung volume and is currently doing a study of Burmese manuscript painting.

In archaeology and preservation of material cultural, UNDP-UNESCO has been conducting a

variety of conservation projects in Pagan, including treatment of murals and stuccoes, photogrammetric recordings (in effect, "ex-rays" of solid buildings), and seismic reinforcement of Pagan monuments. The experts who conduct these experiments and programs come from several different countries, including Italy, France, and Yugoslavia, who, in the process, also train Burma's own future scientists in this much needed field. (Those interested in the annual reports on such projects <found in *Pagan Newsletter*> should contact UNESCO CLT/CH, 7 Place de Fontenoy, 75700 Paris, France; or U Oak Gar, Director-General, Department of Archaeology, 32 D Prome Road, Kamayut P. O., Rangoon, Burma.) (**Visiting Scholar, 1985-1986, The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University**)