



Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia

Thant Myint-U

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The rise of China and India has been endlessly debated; the impact of nearly three billion people entering the modern world via the processes of globalization, industrialization and modernization will clearly have significant importance upon themselves and their own societies and, also, plainly, on the rest of the world. Change will come in terms of production and consumption of goods and resources, upon

the environment within specific territories and in the world as a whole and on the imaginations of billions of other people. Here in the Mekong Region we are increasingly familiar with the rising impact of China and Chinese organizations on daily life as Chinese capital and labour builds the roads linking locations within the region with international markets, as Chinese consumer goods become increasingly common in supermarkets and department stores and as more and more young people decide to learn to speak Chinese as a prudent investment in their future careers. The role of India has been less prominent but, then, India is not a direct neighbour of most of the Mekong Region. It is, however, a direct neighbour of Burma [this book is published by an American company and Burma is preferred to Myanmar in that country]. Indeed, Burma has extensive land borders with both China and India and, of all the countries of Southeast Asia, has perhaps been the most directly influenced by both giant neighbours (not to mention by British imperialism). Cambodia is known as the most Indianized of the Mekong Region states but that influence is in the form of regal, religious and political institutions: in Burma, the influence is also evident in the presence of ethnic Indian people and organisations in the streets of the country's towns and cities. Owing to the nature of the supply of oil and gas in the Gulf of Martaban and the demand for that energy in China and India, the centrality of Burma to the increasing international influence of the two giants is set to increase even further. Chinese money is building the infrastructure which is supposed to lead to the 2015 opening of a pipeline to take oil directly from Chinese tankers keen to avoid the Straits of Malacca to Kunming. It is, in other words, an opportune moment to reassess the position of Burma as a mutual neighbour of China and India and to reflect on the shared histories and societal and cultural links that unite them.

Author Thant Myint-U has attempted to provide exactly this sort of an overview. Drawing upon his own experience and what is evidently a rigorous criss-crossing of the country by the various modes of transportation possible, the author has set his accident as a combination of personal anecdotes with solidly researched history, interspersing the changes wrought from the past to the present as a means of helping to understand the changes likely to occur between now and the future. The style combines popular science with intelligent journalism and the book is both well-written and very readable.

The first section, 'The Back Door,' locates Burma in terms of long-term historical and social change resulting from interest in the country and its people from outside, whether Chinese, Indian or British. The highlight of these competing interests may have been in colonial Rangoon (now Yangon), which appears as a genuinely multicultural urban development recognized as such by the observant travelers and writers of the time. Thant Myint-U balances quite well the history of his country as one which has absorbed cross-border influences and one which has not only modified those influences for local consumption but, also, to exert cultural and political influence of its own in the international world systems of the time. Establishing a proper balance – the exact nature of which can vary considerably as a result of rival ideologies – has been problematic in writing about Southeast Asia in general since as long as people have been writing such things. Thant Myint-U's Burma is one full of mostly calm and compassionate people, albeit people capable of sharp action from time to time. They absorb influences from outside and slowly and patiently adapt them for local consumption. The pace of change, which has now intensified in the age of globalization, has provoked a more rapid change in behaviour and aspiration from those capable of benefiting

from it but, even so, some of the pace of change is removed by virtue of it coming to Burma. This interpretation of events would, no doubt, be challenged by some observers, whether Burmese or not.

The second and third sections, 'Southwestern Barbarians' and 'The Edge of Hindustan' focus on the interactions between Burma and China in the first case and India in the second case. These sections, too, are rich with persuasive and charming detail, informed by a reasonable basis of historical knowledge. This is a book with a minimum of footnotes and scholarly apparatus and readers interested in looking up references will need to search through the small print at the back. These references range in nature from more or less contemporaneous accounts to academic papers to website stories. This appears to be a good mix of sources for a book of this sort although, of course, it will not suit every taste.

It is, of course, possible to criticize the author for writing the book he has and not another book altogether: the activities of the junta and the Tatmadaw are treated lightly, commensurate with an author who would not want to be banned from his own country or to place his sources (anonymous as they remain) in any danger. Readers wanting a hard-hitting account of abuses and violence against the people will need to look elsewhere. That is not the focus of the book. It will be interesting to see what the author will be writing in five years' time, assuming that the current half step towards openness and democracy is maintained.