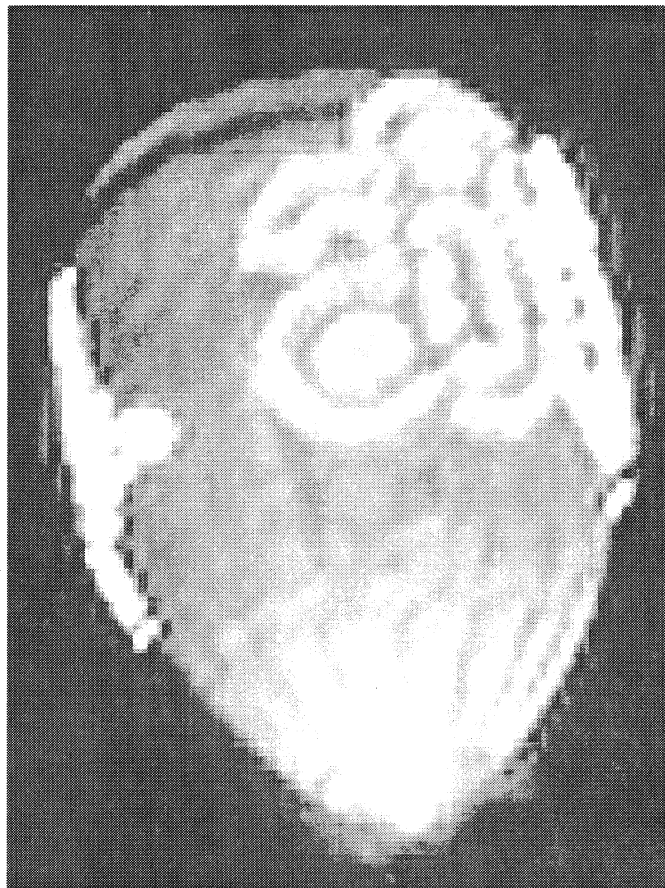

***BULLETIN OF THE
BURMA
STUDIES GROUP***



Fire Balloon

BULLETIN OF THE BURMA STUDIES GROUP
Southeast Asia Council
Association for Asian Studies
Number 66, September 2000

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Subscription rates includes

Journal of Burma Studies:
Two issues: March and September.
Individuals: \$25.00
Institutions: \$25.00

For 2001, make check payable to
The Center for Burma Studies
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, IL 60115-2854

Deadline for March issue is January 31, 2001.

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BURMA STUDIES GROUP MEETING

The annual business meeting of the Burma Studies Group was held on Friday, March 10, 2000, from 9:00-11:00 p.m. at the Royal Palm Three at Town and Country Resort Hotel in San Diego, California. F. K. Lehman, President, called the meeting to order. Elections were held for positions in which the incumbent's terms were expiring. F. K. Lehman was re-elected as President and May Kyi Win as secretary and newsletter editor for another term. The Chair brought to our attention a request from the Southeast Asia Council to sponsor a panel on Burma for the next AAS meetings. F.K. Lehman proposes a panel on Theravada Buddhism, with Mel Spiro as discussant. Consideration of who might participate.

The biennial Burma Studies Conference will be held at NIU from Friday noon October 13 through Sunday noon October 15, 2000. Program chair is Sylvia F. Lu. The deadline for submission of papers has been extended. So far topics include music, painting, refugees, Burma-Yunnan relations and linguistics. The meeting was adjourned at 11 p.m.

BALLOONS OVER BURMA

An Account of the Festival of *Ta Saung Taing*, as celebrated in Taunggyi, Shan State, on the full moon day of November.

Script and video production by
Elaine Koretsky

It is the fifth of November, 1995, and we are in Burma to participate in the Buddhist celebration of *Ta Saung Taing*, the Full Moon Day of this month. *Ta Saung Taing* is an important religious festival, celebrated throughout the country. But we are

witnessing the festival in the city of Taunggyi, capital of Shan State, in the eastern part of Burma, bordering on Thailand and China.

We have chosen Taunggyi to experience this festival of the Full Moon, because here it is celebrated in a very special way, by sending enormous paper fire balloons up to Buddha and the heavens. The holiday marks the end of Buddhist Lent, when Buddha went to heaven to preach. Then he returned to earth, and now, on this day, the faithful Buddhists of Taunggyi are welcoming the Buddha with the lights of the fire balloons.

We are standing in a vast athletic field, part of a crowd of thousands of cheering Burmese, watching the festivities.

We see a balloon coming into view. It was brought in on a truck, and now dozens of people are unfolding it, getting it ready for its ascent into the sky. When the balloon is inflated by hot air, it will be 22 feet height – more than 7 meters, nearly as tall as a three-story building.

In the background we hear the voice of the director of the balloon festival. He acts as the Master of Ceremonies, and continuously informs the crowd as to what is going on. The festival is actually a competition for the balloon-makers. These are ordinary people, volunteers from various sections of the city, who have grouped together to produce the balloons, which will be judged on creativity, performance, workmanship, and a whole list of criteria. At the end of the festival, prizes will be awarded to the winners.

The balloon is starting to take shape. The flaming torches at the base provide the hot air for inflation. Dozens of hands are guiding the balloon. It takes remarkable teamwork on the part of these people who are working on it. They have to handle the burning fires of the torches, and the logistics of getting enough fire in there to produce sufficient hot air, and

yet not allow the paper balloon catch on fire. And now an iron rod – the final fire element – is being inserted in the base of the balloon. There's a circle of bamboo attached at the base of the balloon, and the iron piece is attached to that. On the right another section is being prepared – it's a huge structure of fireworks and rockets. A torch fires up the iron rod in the bottom of the balloon, and the volunteers let their balloon take off. The rockets explode, lighting up the sky with a dazzling display of pyrotechnics.

Meanwhile another group is starting up. Colorful banners are paraded by. We see hundreds of candles being lighted, which will decorate the next balloon. As the balloon starts to inflate, the volunteers are attaching the candles on the outside of the balloon. It's not easy. The balloon is gradually inflating and rising. Each candle is in a little cup, with a hook at the top. The hook is fitted into a small flap on the balloon. Meanwhile the booming voice of the Director of the festival is exhorting the crew to work faster and get their balloon launched, because other groups are waiting. The people hurry to attach all the candles. Suddenly it is finished, and takes off, amid the cheers of the crowd.

These balloons are incredible. Our next mission is to find out how they are made. Our guide Daw Moe Moe promises to take us to a balloon workshop the next morning.

In the morning, we walk from our guest house to a small monastery nearby. The monastery is used as a community center, one of several throughout the city. The local group here – about fifty or sixty people – is engaged in making the balloons. The leader of this workshop is Ko Kyin Thein, and he explains to us how the balloons are fashioned.

We see the iron piece that is attached to the base of the balloon to provide the fire. It is covered with fabric that has been specially

prepared. Strips of old monk's robes are boiled for hours in a mixture of paraffin and kerosene; then they are wrapped around the iron.

Inside the monastery we see a huge balloon that is scheduled to go up this afternoon. It will take the shape of a giant tortoise. Ko Kyin Thein tells us that in the daytime all the balloons that are sent up are created in the shapes of animals, fish or birds. So he has designed this immense tortoise. It is made entirely of handmade paper that he buys from a local papermaker in Shan State. There is no supporting structure inside the balloon. It is simply made from sheets of paper glued together with rice paste. The rules of the balloon competition state that the balloons set up at night must be made of handmade paper. But the daytime balloons can be either handmade paper or commercial paper. The volunteers we see here spend four to eight weeks before the competition to make the balloons. Each big balloon needs at least 500 large sheets of paper.

The man working here shows us how he carefully glues the sheets together. The seams are made very precisely, the paper overlapping in a special way. This particular balloon is made from a waxy commercial paper. All around we see scraps of paper, animals in progress, and high on a counter is a row of gleaming golden Buddha's watching over us. The Buddha images remind us that we are inside a monastery. Even the fireworks and rockets for the balloons are made right here by hand, also using handmade paper. We see dishes containing carbon, sulphur and aluminum, the ingredients for gunpowder. These will be precisely weighed out on a scale.

Outside the monastery we can see up close how the whole rocket assembly is put together. The wicks for the rockets are made

by twisting strips of handmade paper filled with the gunpowder. The wicks will burn at the rate of one foot (or 30 centimeters) per minute, and this will set off the rockets at various intervals.

Our next mission is a visit to one of the hand papermakers in Shan State. Daw Moe Moe takes us to the papermaking house of Ma Htoo in Pindaya, about a two-hour drive from Taunggyi. Ma Htoo is explaining her papermaking processes. The paper in Shan State is made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree. Ma Htoo is holding a piece of it. In the Shan language it is called saa; in China, the paper mulberry is called gou; in Japan, it is kozo.

Ma Htoo buys the stripped saa fiber from wood cutters in the forest. She soaks the fiber overnight, then cooks it for several hours in water with wood ash. Ma Htoo's husband, Ye Mying, is showing us how he prepares the wood ash for the cooking. Ma Htoo uses a large iron barrel for cooking. When the cooking is finished, Ma Htoo rinses the fiber, and then pounds a handful at a time, using two wooden mallets. Each handful will make one sheet of paper.

The next step is preparation of the moulds for papermaking. Each mould consists of a wood frame on which cloth is stretched tightly. Ma Htoo rubs the cloth of each mould with a little oil – this will facilitate removal of the paper from the moulds after the paper dries. The oil that is used is crude oil, the same oil that is used by the people to waterproof their bamboo houses.

Now Ma Htoo fills with water the long concrete trough outside her house. The water had been brought up in pails from the lake across from the house, and poured into a deep concrete pit at one end of the trough. The pit is filled with fresh water every week.

Ma Htoo places six moulds in the trough,

submerging them so that the moulds have a reservoir of water in each of them. Next, she throws a ball of beaten pulp onto each mould. She bends down, and at each mould she picks up the ball of pulp, puts it into a small container, adds water from the trough, and quickly disperses the ball of pulp in the bowl of water, using a pronged stick. Then she pours the watery pulp back into the mould, and forms a sheet of paper by dispersing the pulp with deft motions of her hands. See how she balances herself on the stick stretched across the trough. Now watch closely! Ma Htoo pulls the plug out of the end of the trough, and all the water is draining out, back into the well. Over the years, we have seen many papermakers in Shan State, but this is the first place where we have seen this type of production papermaking. Everywhere else, sheets have been formed just one at a time, in a single raised vat. Subsequently, we discovered that a few papermakers in Shan State make their paper in a small natural stream, laying down several moulds in the running water. This technique is one that was developed from the original methods of the Himalayas (The Tibeto-Burman group from which many Burmese are descended).

As soon as the water has completely drained out, Ma Htoo picks up the moulds and takes them to a sunny spot to dry. When the sheets have completely dried, Ma Htoo simply peels each sheet from its mould, folding the sheet in half as she does this.

And that's the whole process of papermaking here. The paper is not pressed. When it is removed from the mould, it is finished, ready to be sold in the market for paper umbrellas, books, lanterns, and paper fire balloons.

Now we are back in Taunggyi, at the athletic field again, watching the animal balloons go off into the sky and enjoying the

excitement of the people. Two pigs are floating by us. An elephant is being fired up, and soars upward, amid the cheers of the crowd. And now, what's this? A giant bird – oh there's another one behind it! The crowd goes wild. And here's a bird. Now a duck. And we see a huge animal in trouble. The people are valiantly trying to launch it, but it's no use. They are beating out the flames. The fire flares up again. Now the crowd is moving away from the flames. And a fire engine is pulling up to finish it off.

And the parade of the balloons continues. A striped fish is next. And finally, our friend's tortoise is coming into view. We had been wondering when we would see it. Now we are praying it will fly. It's a fantastic sight, and the crowd cheers madly. And a dinosaur is launched.

We are leaving the athletic field, but we see one more strange sight. A tattoo artist has set up shop here, and we're stopping to watch his artistry. We've noticed that the men in the Shan area of Burma are often heavily tattooed. It's quite an art here.

Now we are witnessing another part of this religious festival of Ta Saung Taing. Once a year, the Burmese, most of whom are devout Buddhists, make a special donation to the monasteries. The donations are goods for the monks, and money for the upkeep of the monasteries. The floats are amazing. Looking closely, we see that they consist of pots and pans, calendars, clocks, prayer books, umbrellas, robes, towels, soap, bowls, all artfully arranged in elaborate displays. Here's an owl, made mostly from brooms. Groups of people from all over the area have made these floats, which are paraded through the main streets, finishing at the largest monastery in the city. All the people in Taunggyi contribute to this, and all come out to watch. Everyone is either part of the parade or part of

the audience. Even the money donations are folded into flowers or fans. Here's a shrine, made entirely from folded paper currency. Now a peacock. Here's a money tree, and a big bird made of currency.

The processions end at the monastery. We are heading there also. There are the floats going into the monastery. Inside the monastery dozens of volunteers dismantle the arrangements sorting out all the piles of stuff that has been donated. After they tallied everything, the goods and the money are apportioned to each of the many, many monasteries in the city.

Outside again, we are watching more of the festivities. Here's a procession of young boys on horses. They are being initiated as monks today. And we see another amazing performance. It's a traditional Shan dance. The young men are dressed in the old-style Shan clothing that is seldom seen now. Their dance is an exhibition of mock fighting.

It is evening now, and we have returned to the field for another right of fire-balloon watching. It's hard to stay away. The crowd is cheering a remarkable balloon that is promoting the theme of unity in Burma. Four ethnic groups of Burma are pictured in candles to form the design, taking a long time for set-up. The festival director kept urging the group to hurry, as others were waiting with their balloons. He reminds them that it is getting late, and soon the wind would increase, making it more difficult to launch the balloons.

Another rocket balloon goes up into the heavens. Maybe these are the fireworks we saw this morning at the workshop. We inquire the director of the festival how high the balloons will fly, but no one knows the answer.

This festival has been an extraordinary experience. As papermakers, we have been

enthralled by seeing handmade paper used to make hot-air fire balloons. But also we have been overwhelmed by the music, the dancing, the fervor, the energy of all the people here, young and old, who are exuberantly celebrating this important Buddhist holy day. In many parts of Asia, people no longer adhere to the old ways of practicing their religion, and so the ancient customs have disappeared, occasionally revived for the benefit of tourists. Here we see a truly Burmese celebration, for and by the people, honoring Buddha in these very special ways that we have been privileged to witness on the Full Moon Day of November.

Elaine Koretsky is Director of the Research Institute of Paper History & Technology, at 8 Evans Road, Brookline, MA 02445. She has been involved in the field of hand papermaking for the past thirty years. During that time she has conducted field research throughout the world, examining and documenting traditional papermaking that has existed relatively unchanged, for centuries.

Photographic documentation of the research expeditions is the work of her husband, Sidney Koretsky. Together, they have produced three documentary videos. The first two are "The Last Papermakers on the Silk Road", filmed in Xinjiang Province, China, 1993; and "Papermaking in Sechuan Province", filmed in Sechuan Province, China, 1993. Currently the Koretskys are working on several more documentary videos, based on prior expeditions to remote villages in Asia.

Mrs. Koretsky is the author of several books, *Color for the Hand Papermaker*; *Papermaking in Nepal*; *The Goldbeaters of Mandalay*; and is the editor of *Chinese Handmade Paper and a Gathering of Papermakers*.

Information about the books and videos may be obtained from Mrs. Elaine Koretsky at the

Research Institute of Paper History.
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NEWS ABROAD

ANCIENT BUDDHIST TEXT FOUND IN BURMA

An Australian researcher says he's discovered in a library in Burma a copy of a lost, original Buddhist text. The researcher, Dr. Primoz Pecenko, says he found the copy, written in the nineteenth century on a palm frond, during a visit to a university in Rangoon in March 2000. The original text was compiled more than a thousand years ago. It offers people instruction on how to live according to the Buddhist doctrine and according to Dr. Pecenko finding a copy of it can be compared to biblical scholars discovering a new commentary on one of the gospels.

MYANMAR ISSUES NEW HIGHER DENOMINATION COINS

The Central Bank of Myanmar put into circulation a new series of coins in denominations of 100, 50, 10, 5 and 1 kyats. The announcement from the Central Bank, published in state-controlled newspapers Saturday, March 18, 2000, said that all current banknotes and coins will remain legal tender. The new issue coins, with lion motifs on both sides, will become legal tender from March 24, said the Central Bank.

Currently, coins are issued only in smaller denominations: 1 kyat, and 50, 25, 10 and 5 pyas, 100 pyas being equal to 1 kyat. Most of these coins are rarely used or even seen,

except for the 1 kyat coin which can be used to make calls from public telephones. But because the 1 kyat coins also are not common, people often must purchase them at a premium when they need to use a public phone. The new coins are the second new currency issue since the Asian economic crisis of 1997. In November 1998, the Central Bank put 1,000 kyat banknotes into circulation, the highest denomination banknote to circulate in Myanmar since the country gained independence from Britain under the name Burma in 1948.

BURMA AND THE ART OF LACQUER

The British Museum and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) are jointly hosting a symposium on Burmese Art and Archaeology, in conjunction with the British Museum's exhibition 'Visions from the Golden Land: Burma and the Art of Lacquer'. To be held on Saturday and Sunday, the 17th and 18th of June, 2000, the symposium seeks to present the latest developments in the field of Burmese Art and Archaeology. Topics include wooden architecture, sculpture, manuscript and wall painting, lacquer, recent ceramic discoveries and archaeological finds, and textiles.

This major exhibition covers Buddhist sculpture and manuscripts, Burmese music, theatre, cooking, medicine, warfare, architecture, and the ubiquitous habit of chewing the betel nut. Much new research on the subject is revealed such as the identification of lacquer masters, workshops and inscriptions. The core of the exhibition is the Isaacs Collection, a recent gift to the *British Museum by Mr. and Mrs R. Isaacs*, which is complemented by loans from national and regional collections around the U.K.

NEW RESEARCH IN THE ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF BURMA

Host: British Museum

SOAS, 17-18 June

Papers include:

Elizabeth Moore (SOAS) Defining Myanmar prehistory; settlement in the Chindwin and Samon river regions

John Guy (Victoria and Albert Museum).

Early Burmese sculpture

Bob Hudson. Recent archaeological discoveries at Pagan

Donald Stadter (California). The enigma of the Mingun plaques

Sylvia Fraser-Lu (Washington, D.C.).

Problems and prospects for the preservation of wooden monasteries in Burma

Mandy Sadan (Green Centre for non-Western Art). The evolution of the modern symbolism of Kachin *Manau* posts

Benedicte Brac de la Perriere (CNRS, Paris)

Cults of the *nats*

Ralph Isaacs. The inscription on various types of lacquerware

Uta Weigelt (Munich). The Sherman collection of Burmese lacquerware

Patricia Herbert. Burmese cosmology manuscripts

Alexandra Green (SOAS). Mural paintings in Burma

Richard Blurton (British Museum). Burmese sculpture in the collections of the British Museum

Charlotte Galloway. Relating text and image in Burmese Buddhist art

Susan Conway (Brighton). Eastern Shan textiles

Sandra Dudley (Oxford). Forms of traditional dress from the Kayah (Karen) State

BOOK REVIEWS

Burma's Military Secrets: Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) from 1941 to Cyber Warfare, by Desmond Ball Bangkok, White Lotus Press. 310 pp., illus., pbk., US \$25.00. ISBN 974-8434-50-8

SIGINT is all about snatching secrets from the ether, gathering intelligence through the covert interception of communications running the gamut from tactical radios to sophisticated diplomatic telecommunications and, increasingly, the voluminous chatter from the ubiquitous cellular phone. Governments vigorously protect their SIGINT capabilities, especially their skill in decoding enciphered capabilities, since revelation of their success often results in the targets of their interception implementing communications security (or COMSEC) measures to protect themselves. Although SIGINT has been a fact of government intelligence since the introduction of telegraphy, it was not until 1974 when W. F. Winterbotham published *The Ultra Secret* that the public was given a small window on this secret enterprise and the role the interception of German and Japanese communications played in the Allies winning World War II strategy. Subsequently, SIGINT studies have been the source of a veritable publishing industry with revelations ranging widely across the world's intelligence services and causing no end of concern at Fort Meade or Cheltenham. To this collection we now add Desmond Bell's *Burma's Military Secrets*, a little monograph from Bangkok's White Lotus Press that offers up a smorgasbord of SIGINT stories, tempting tidbits that will tease the appetites of both intelligence officers and Burma watchers but leave neither very well satisfied.

Ball, a professor in the Strategic and Defense Studies Center at Australian National University, is a widely respected observer of Southeast Asian political developments and a longtime commentator on intelligence, including nine monographs on SIGINT subjects. He has drawn extensively on these earlier works to flesh out *Burma's Military Secrets*, especially in his discussion of Russian SIGINT capabilities in Burma and his review of SIGINT operations by Burma's neighbors. He also includes a brief commentary of World War II SIGINT operations in Burma. This is a welcomed addition to an understudied area of military history. However, interested readers would be well served by tracking down Alan Stripp's immensely informative and entertaining *Codebreaker in the Far East* (1995, New York: Oxford University Press) for a splendid account of the SIGINT role in the Allied victory in Burma.

Burma's Military Secrets, however, makes its real contributions to Burma studies and an interesting addition to intelligence studies by its blow-by-blow account of the *Tatmadaw's* (Burma Army) successful siege of the insurgent Karen National Union (KNU) headquarters at Mannerplaw in January-February 1995. This was a critical battle in a brutal war, an insurgency waged for more than 45 years. For whatever reason, the Burmese government decided to publish its extensive intercepts of the Karen National Liberation Army communication during the battle. Besides giving evidence of the *Tatmadaw's* impressive SIGINT capabilities and thus demonstrating to the KNU leaders the vulnerabilities of their communication, the intercepts provide Professor Ball with a window to observe the Karen command structure breaking up under the assault of 10,000 *Tatmadaw* troops. From these

snippets of unguarded conversation one feels the fog of war settle in on the Karen as field commanders uncertainly report assaults on their positions, desperately query on the status of re-supply of ammunition and reinforcements, and increasingly quarrel among themselves as to what is happening. One Karen commander orders a subordinate to conduct a reconnaissance probe against the Tatmadaw only to be told, "The enemy keeps firing at us day and night and we can't even raise our heads. Which animal would go and ask how many enemies were hurt?" At this point the account notes that the subordinate turned his radio off. Others would have been wise to do the same but even after the Burmese press began reporting the intercepts the Karen commanders continued communicating, providing the Tatmadaw an uninterrupted flow of SIGINT that materially contributed to its eventual victory at Mannerplaw.

While concentrating on the Tatmadaw's SIGINT capabilities, Professor Ball also surveys the SIGINT operations of the many insurgent groups that populate The Golden Triangle and he speculates about the assistance they have historically received from Taiwan, Thailand, China, and the United States. He treads now familiar ground initially developed by Alfred McCoy in his important *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (1972, New York: Harper). He updates McCoy's account of Taiwan's Intelligence Bureau of the Ministry of National Defense's (IBMND) SIGINT cooperation with Kuomintang remnants on the Thai-Burma border with reporting from Bertil Lintner and others on SIGINT operations among the numerous opium and heroin trafficking insurgent bands. While Taiwan no longer provides support, Ball cites Burmese accounts of Thai armed forces SIGINT support for the

KNU, claiming in February 1995 during the battle at Kawura, "(Thai) message intercepting gadgets were in full function".

Contemporary military doctrine focuses war fighting strategy on "the dominance of information space", a new "cyber warfare" where battles are won by depriving the opponent of his ability to communicate. Professor Ball concludes *Burma's Military Secrets* with a description of the powerful advantage Rangoon, whose SIGINT capabilities have been substantially enhanced by Chinese technical assistance, enjoys over its opponents by its command of the communication spectrum. He warns the democratic opposition that its reliance on faxes, long distance calls, e-mail, and cellular phones leaves its every move transparent to the Burmese government. Sadly, the quest for democracy is once again up against the meanest refinements of modern tyranny.

Jon A. Wiant
U. S. Department of State

The views expressed here are Mr. Wiant's and do not necessarily represent those of the Department of State of the U. S. Government

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