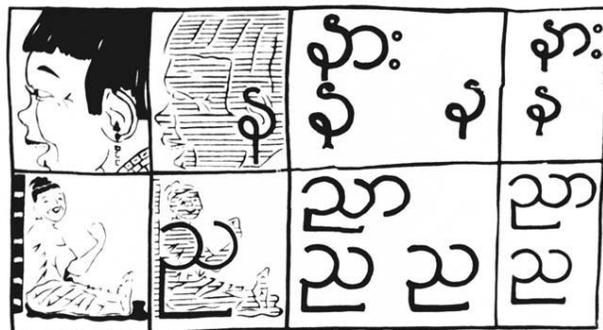


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# ***BULLETIN OF THE BURMA STUDIES GROUP***

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*Instructional material (wall-hanging) for primary education in Myanmar/Burma,  
silk-screened onto light cotton. Gift of John and Elizabeth Musgrave:  
Burma Collection, Northern Illinois University*

# Bulletin of the Burma Studies Group

Southeast Asia Council  
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## Next Issue

Fall 2007  
(Submissions due September 2007)

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## Learning Burmese: Challenge, Trial and Opportunity

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Having enjoyed in our last issue Anna Allott's and John Okell's reminiscences of their experiences learning Burmese, we continue to focus on Burmese language study in this issue. Since Justin Watkins has now taken charge of Burmese instruction at SOAS, it is only appropriate that he lead off with his account of how he got there apparently quite by accident—via Chinese and Russian and a number of other languages.

San San Hnin Tun, who teaches Burmese at Cornell (but also French!), gives us a state of the field essay about new opportunities and long-standing challenges for those people wishing to learn Burmese and the instructors who try to help them. One point San San makes cogently is how important it is for students to have access to good materials with which to study, and she notes approvingly—reiterating a comment Anna Allott made in our last issue—how many more materials are available now than were ready to hand until quite recently.

San San has in mind primarily texts and audio materials. But most valuable of all for students of a language is a good dictionary. It turns out that Nance Cunningham and Aung Soe Min have put huge efforts into compiling a new Burmese-English dictionary over the past several years, and in her article Nance provides us with a great deal of useful information about how such a project is accomplished in these days of computers and specialized programs. From what I can gather, these technological advances make the task easier than it used to be, but it must still be a bear of a job—or should I say, a Russell's viper.

I recall John Okell saying many years ago, when I had the great good fortune of attending his SEASSI Burmese classes while I was teaching Javanese at the University of Michigan, that he thought

Burmese was “a walk-over.” This comment has stayed with me both because I had never heard the phrase and because I couldn't believe, if it meant what I thought it meant, anyone would ever apply it to Burmese! Careful checking revealed that yes, John did mean that he thought learning Burmese was a breeze. Many years, vocabulary lists, despairing moments, and embarrassing gaffes later, I remain incredulous. But I agree with another point San San makes in her article: that studying Burmese constitutes an intriguing, if frustrating, puzzle. No language has caused me such torment (my record pales in comparison with Justin's, but I have studied a fair number), but none has proved as endlessly interesting as Burmese. At this point in my life, I have decided to treat studying Burmese like Scrabble and playing music, that is, as a form of mental exercise with which to stave off age-induced cognitive loss. Many younger learners appear to find it less taxing. But all of us can take comfort in the fact that the contributors to this issue are devoting their considerable talents to helping us in our efforts to master this difficult but enthralling language.—The Editor

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### Justin Watkins' Linguistic Adventures

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*Think of any language you have ever thought to yourself you would like to know and then imagine setting to work—and speaking it. You have just imagined what it would be like to be Justin Watkins. Or so I gather, both from the astonishing chronicle that follows of Justin's language-learning endeavours, and from seeing him spouting one and another language on various continents over the years. I have just learned that at the moment Justin is about to start studying Khmer at SEASSI this summer. “Polyglot” hardly seems to do justice to Justin's accomplishments. Shall we say “polyglottissimo”? —The Editor*

I came to Burmese almost completely by chance. In 1994 I arrived at SOAS to start an MA in Phonetics. As part of the course, I had to complete a module on ‘the sound system of an Oriental or African language.’ My wonderful supervisor, the late Katrina Hayward, told me that the mystery language that year was to be Burmese, and so she sent me to report to John Okell’s office. I was the only MA Phonetics student that year, so the instruction was one on one. It is odd, now that Burma and Burmese play such a central role in my working life, to think that I could just as easily have ended up lecturing in Zulu or Georgian at SOAS rather than Burmese. I confess that at the time I had to be shown where Burma was on the map. Nevertheless, I was intrigued, both by John Okell and by the prospect of learning about the phonetics of this mystery language, and I decided that it would be more interesting to learn about Burmese sounds and pronunciation if I signed up to actually learn the language.

#### *To Rangoon via Mogadishu and Kiev*

I’ve been fascinated and passionate about languages and language learning my whole life, so at the point of learning to say *da-ba-lèh* and *mingāla-ba* in my first Burmese class in October 1994, it’s fair to say that I had chalked up a lot more language-learning experience than most, and had been lucky enough to have inspiring and charismatic teachers along the way.

Learning to ask *où est la toilette* on family holidays in France first taught me the pleasure of hearing foreign languages’ sounds and the usefulness of learning to produce them accurately. So did being taught, at age six, to count to ten in Italian and Somali (which I can still do, thirty years later), pacing up and down the corridor in the *Croce del Sud* hotel in Mogadishu, repeating the numbers as spoken by a housekeeper called Chu Chu.

I went on to pick up further linguistic baggage on a long and circuitous route, starting conventionally at age eight with French and Latin at school, and then German at thirteen. It wasn’t long before I

started wanting to go linguistically off-piste. I did a school exchange to Hungary: for three months before going to Nagy Lajos High School in Pécs I had Wednesday afternoon Hungarian lessons with a moustachioed and patient teacher from the exchange school, using a stout Soviet bloc textbook which taught me to say *a parasztok boldogok és gazdagok* (‘the peasants are happy and rich’). On another school exchange to Warsaw a Polish friend helped me decipher the fiddly diacritics and digraphs of romanized Western Slavic, with the help of a very old-fashioned *Teach Yourself Polish* book, containing exercises with such gems as *Podaj mi tę rękawiczkę, przyszyję ci guzik*. (‘Give me your glove and I will sew a button on it for you.’) My Swedish-speaking German teacher organised Monday evening Swedish classes for anyone interested. What I learnt then was still useful enough to order *en öl till* (‘another beer’) at the Burma Studies Conference in Gothenburg in 2002 (provided I could get the Swedes to stop speaking English). I had pestered my parents for a Russian *Linguaphone* course when I was about eight, and then had more Russian classes in the last two years of high school, which whetted my appetite for more.

When it came time to start my university studies, the UK university course handbook listed a five-year BA course at Leeds University in Chinese and Russian, so I applied and before long was driving up the M1 from Northamptonshire to West Yorkshire in a Citroën 2CV to get my first taste of the rhythm of university life. This suited me so well I’ve never since left it.

As part of the BA we were sent to China, still reeling in 1990 from Deng Xiaoping’s reforms and the events of 4 June 1989, and I studied for a year alongside North Koreans and Soviet Kazakhs at Tianjin Normal University. In 1992 we were sent to Kiev State University, ostensibly to undertake the period of study abroad prescribed for the Russian side of the degree. However, at a time when Ukraine was starting its complex separation from the newly post-Soviet Russian Federation, the nationalist sentiments of our teachers predisposed them

to teach us Ukrainian rather than Russian. So for the most part we skipped classes and I learnt Russian from my dormitory room-mates and while travelling around the country, which cost pennies with a Soviet student card. In the final year of the degree, I took optional courses in Czech and Cantonese and finished with a BA in 1993, and decided to apply to teach English in Japan, to satisfy a growing curiosity about Japanese. On the way to Osaka, I stayed in Brno, the Moravian capital, then still in Czechoslovakia, to spend six weeks on a Czech government-funded language course. My Czech language classmates were all Danes and we had a fine time.

I taught English for a year in Osaka (paying off student debts in the process) on the excellent JET Programme run by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Knowing Chinese before going to Japan gave me a head start on Japanese, because I knew a large number of Chinese characters. I came back to London in 1994.

At the root of all these choices was an addiction to the experience of being able to speak to people who rarely, if ever, encounter foreigners able to understand or speak some of their own language. I did a lot of travelling around countries where foreigners were a relative novelty. More than anything, I discovered it was more interesting to escape the goldfish-bowl of the European linguistic scene, with its few dozen in-bred sister-languages, in favour of the open oceans of real, world-wide linguistic diversity. I was a linguistic magpie.

#### *Getting Serious about Burmese...*

I had, in short, a broad range and variety of linguistic patterns and processes to draw on when I started Burmese. Not surprisingly, since it is not closely related to any of them, Burmese is quite unlike any of the languages I had learnt before or have learnt since. A possible exception to this is Japanese. Japanese syntax is at times uncannily similar to Burmese. The basic order of constituents in a sentence (subject object verb) is the same; there are postpositions instead of

prepositions (compare *Yangoun-hma* 'in Yangon' and *Tōkyō-de* 'in Tokyo'); 'also', most easily analysed as an adverb in English, is a noun-phrase suffix in both Japanese and Burmese (compare *cundaw-lèh thwà-deh* and *watashi-mo itta* 'I also went'). One of the odder coincidences between the two languages is the similarity of the Burmese quotation suffix *-téh* to its Japanese counterpart *-tte* (compare *kàun-deh-déh* and *yoroshii-da-tte* 'he said it was good'). Beyond these important basics, the languages part company: Japanese has a much simpler sound system,

From the beginning, I found that certain aspects of the structure or mechanics of Burmese had similar counterparts in certain other languages which I knew. But there was a great deal in Burmese that was just completely new to me as a linguist, and this made learning the language stimulating and rewarding.

In that first year at SOAS I was in a class of about five people, and had occasional classes on Burmese phonetics with John Okell. At this stage, Burmese was still a side-dish alongside the MA Phonetics classes. I was developing an interest in the phonetic detail of tones. I found the fluidity of Burmese tones and their interaction with sentence intonation a lot harder to pin down than the tones in Chinese. The four Chinese tones are pronounced in any context more or less with the same contour they have when pronounced in isolation, while the Burmese tones jump around a lot more. 'High' and 'low' tones seemed to be pronounced sometimes high, sometimes low; the exotically named 'creaky' tone was sometimes falling and sometimes low, and sometimes sounded exactly like the 'killed' tone. I developed an interest in the phonetic characteristics of tones besides pitch, namely in phonation types, or the different ways in which the ways in which the vocal cords can vibrate to produce different types of voice, such as 'breathy' or 'creaky'.

#### *...And Wa*

It was at this point that I discovered Wa, the Mon-Khmer language spoken on the border

between Yunnan and northern Shan State. Wa has only contrasting phonation types, not pitch-based tones, and I developed a PhD research proposal to examine exactly how this worked. An added advantage was that Wa is spoken in both China and Burma, so I would have to go to both countries to do fieldwork, as well as to Thailand. So I would be able to keep up my Chinese as well as testing out my Burmese.

At that stage, my Burmese was terrible. I remember my first encounters with Burmese speakers, most often with Daw San San May who was then still working in the SOAS Library (where her presence is much missed) before she moved to the British Library. I recall the frustration that every early-intermediate learner of Burmese has when trying to produce utterances consisting of more than one short sentence. At this time I was also taking beginner's Thai classes with Rachel Harrison, and having occasional language classes with John Okell.

I arranged to spend three months in 1996 at the Yunnan Minorities Institute in Kunming, where I had daily Wa language classes at the home of Professor Wáng Jīngliú and his Wa wife Xiāo Yùfēn. I was speaking only Chinese in and outside class at this point, and I could feel my Burmese stagnating. Throughout this time I was surviving on a British Academy PhD scholarship, and I supplemented it by translating articles from Chinese to English on the history, culture and literature of Macao for the glossy and lavishly tri-lingual journal *Revista de Cultura*. In Kunming I learnt enough Wa to follow what was happening in my teachers' home. I spent a lot of time with them. Now and then, visitors would arrive from the Wa areas near the border at Cangyuan, and we would prepare a festive meal of *moic ia* (Wa-style chicken rice stew with mint, ginger and lots of chili) to celebrate, along with whatever Wa food the visitors had brought with them: dried deer meat, tamarind and jars of *plai num* (maize beer).

Later I made the 24-hour bus journey to Cangyuan and stayed in a dingy government guesthouse but spent each day with Sam Jai and his family. Sam Jai was an old friend of

my teachers who had worked in local government in Cangyuan Wa Autonomous County, and written books on Wa history and culture. His wife and relatives were from the surrounding villages and I discovered they were the source of the excellent *plai num* I'd enjoyed in Kunming. Sam Jai had lived on both sides of the border. He told me that many Wa had moved from Burma into China during the 1950s and 1960s, and back to Burma following the problems of the Great Leap Forward and then the Cultural Revolution. Sam Jai and I wanted to organise a short trip together over the border from Cangyuan into the UWSA area in Burma, known in Chinese as *Wǎbāng*, which started just a few fields away from the centre of Cangyuan. We went to call in a few favours with the foreign affairs official in the local government office where Sam Jai used to work. The Wa official spoke good Burmese, and however charmed he was to be able to sit and chat over cups of green tea in Wa, Chinese, Burmese and English, there was no way he could grant me permission to go into Burma for the day, although he agreed privately that if we had just walked over the border quietly, it would probably have been fine. So my first opportunity to visit Burma was thwarted.

As my planned 1997 trip to Burma to make more field recordings of Wa approached, it was time to get more serious about speaking Burmese, because I was going to be working alone and interviewing Wa speakers using Burmese. In May 1996 I went straight from China to the US to attend the SEASSI intensive language summer school in Burmese, that year at ASU in Tempe, outside Phoenix, Arizona. A strange place for a British researcher to end up en route from China, but once I'd got used to the 110-degree heat I discovered I was in good company. My fellow Burmese-language students at SEASSI in 1996 included several people active in the Burma studies community: Gavin Douglas, Will Womack, Pat McCormick and Tammy Ho, and we were blessed with two of the best teachers in the business, Hsaya Saw Tun and Hsaya Than Than Win. The sustained intensity of a SEASSI course, with four hours of

Burmese class a day, really did drag my Burmese to a higher plane.

I returned to London for a few months to write up the Wa material I had collected in China and to prepare for my first Burma trip in early 1997. John Okell passed on to me a couple of Burmese translation jobs which he had been asked to do for the BBC Burmese service radio, which kept my SEASSI-improved Burmese fresh. I had to transcribe and translate news and sports features delivered by the resonant and engaging U Kyaw Zan Tha (who is at the time of this writing leaving the BBC for VOA in Washington).

### *To Burma*

Finally, in early 1997, I packed my bags for Burma, armed with a list of Wa contacts for my research work and a bag of cards and gifts (including Tricel cardigans in a selection of colours) to distribute for John Okell. I arrived at Mingaladon with some trepidation, but all went well. I changed the required cash into Foreign Exchange Certificates and took a taxi to the Lucky Hotel, which is in a lane somewhere off Kaba Aye Paya Lan near Shwegondine. To find it, I was told simply to tell the taxi driver that it was next to the house of film actor U Kyaw Hein, and these directions worked every time.

At this point I realized the true value of the grounding in Burmese that John Okell's course *Burmese: an Introduction* had provided. I had a set of rehearsed situational dialogues embedded deeply in my brain, and for as long as the situation matched one of these I could relax and switch my Burmese to autopilot while I frantically marshalled strings of Burmese linguistic material in my head to talk about topics which were not covered in the Okell course.

I spent some time in Yangon and then made trips, one to Keng Tung and another from Mandalay to Lashio by train, to meet and record Wa speakers. On the latter trip, I spent time in Yunnan and Northern Thailand to make recordings in more Wa villages, and found that many Wa were as happy to speak

in Burmese as in Chinese, and could switch seamlessly between the two. This was something I was not prepared for: while I'd often been in—and enjoyed—multilingual situations, I realised that I had never found two languages clashing in my head the way that Burmese and Chinese did. A few years later, I made a trip to Menglian on the Yunnan side of the Wa State border near the Wa capital Pang Hsang to meet with educational representatives from the UWSA authorities to secure their approval of my plans to start a project to compile a Wa dictionary. The Wa delegation arrived in a shiny Pajero with Wa State licence plates, and roused me from jetlagged sleep in my hotel room very early in the morning. We immediately went for a lavish breakfast, with compulsory ingestion of *baijiu* spirit to lubricate our lexicographical negotiations, which were soon flowing freely in Chinese, the local language. After a while, Tax Kat, the chief Wa representative, turned to me and told me solemnly that some members of their party were not so comfortable in Chinese (although this was empirically untrue). He invited me to make my case for the dictionary in Burmese for their benefit. The table fell silent in expectation of slick transition into Burmese, at which point my brain circuits shuddered to a halt: I couldn't dredge up a single word of Burmese. I had travelled with Wa teacher Sam Rang and his Chinese wife from Chiang Rai in Thailand, and had not spoken a word of Burmese in days. Every time I tried to say something Chinese words formed in my mouth, verb phrases wouldn't wait until the end of the sentence and subordinate clauses wouldn't form ahead of the main clauses to follow. In this moment of distress, Sam Rang sat beside me and offered words of encouragement in fluent Burmese, and after a few minutes I was limping along in Burmese which made enough sense to convince my Wa assessors that I was competent to write the dictionary. (It didn't seem to worry them that I couldn't converse in Wa). I salute anyone who can speak Chinese and Burmese concurrently.

In 1998 I finished and submitted the Wa PhD dissertation and left for Ithaca to teach phonetics in the Linguistics department at

Cornell as a sabbatical replacement. There I found congenial Burmese company in the person of San San Hnin Tun. It looked for a while as if I was going to become a phonetician, and I think there was a job for me at Cornell if I wanted it. I didn't want to leave the UK permanently, though, and went back home in December. I was living in Guildford making a living as a translator of Chinese when the powers that be at SOAS were finally persuaded to advertise a post in Burmese to replace John Okell, who was due to retire in August that year. I duly applied and was summoned for an interview. The selection process was prolonged for complex reasons and it wasn't until July that a decision was made. I had decided to spend another summer at SEASSI to nudge my Burmese up a level, in anticipation of the possibility that I might be teaching it. This time, in Eugene, Oregon, my classmates included Pat McCormick (again), Lisa Brooten and Vicky Billing, who was finishing off her Burmese language training before going to work in the British Embassy in Yangon, and the teachers were John Okell and the Hsayamas Than Than Win and San San Hnin Tun.

### *Teaching Burmese at SOAS*

In September 1999 I started the Burmese job in the South-East Asia Department at SOAS which I have been doing now for eight years and am likely to carry on doing for many years to come. The number of students taking Burmese at SOAS has stayed reasonably constant: there are typically between five and ten students in the beginners' class each year, about half of whom are British and the rest from other countries in Europe and further afield. The reasons people come to SOAS to learn Burmese have also stayed fairly constant. There are some people with a family connection to Burma, some (often postgraduate research students) with an academic interest in Burma, and some with experience of living or working in or near Burma who want to learn more. There are also students of the other languages taught in the department (Thai, Vietnamese, Indonesian and classical Malay) who decide that they would like to try a year of another

South-East Asian language. At the second- and third-year levels, there are usually only a few students: they are usually taking degrees combining Burmese with one of the other subjects taught at SOAS.

The first year I started teaching Burmese, I was anxious that my Burmese wasn't good enough, and I have to admit that at times it did feel that I didn't know the language to sufficient depth to answer the more curious students' questions about the structure and mechanics of the language. My spelling and vocabulary were rather lacking, and I played safe by using only teaching materials that I knew in detail. In the years since then, I've tried to read a little Burmese as often as I can, mostly short stories and journal articles, and I listen to Burmese radio over the internet. I've kept up my Burmese by visiting Burma as often as I can—usually every year or two—and speak Burmese with friends, contacts, taxi drivers and shopkeepers. In London there are two or three people I speak to mostly in Burmese. At work I speak mostly in Burmese to the teaching assistant, who for the last several years has been Tharaphi Than. Tharaphi ably shoulders a significant portion of the Burmese teaching load; her contribution authenticates and greatly enhances the experience of students learning Burmese at SOAS.

More recently, I have spent a lot of time working on Khumi, the southern Chin language spoken in and around Paletwa, with the Khumi Literacy Committee in Yangon. We have been collecting Khumi stories and are mining them for vocabulary to prepare a Khumi-Burmese-English dictionary, which should appear in the next few years. This work is conducted entirely in Burmese.

So I'm able to dip into a variety of Burmese-speaking situations during the course of everyday life and this stops my Burmese from declining between trips to Burma. It is a language which continues to fascinate me and one I'm greatly privileged to be able to work with.

Justin Watkins

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## **Burmese Language Instruction: A Teacher's Perspective**

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*One day during my Fulbright year in Burma, in 1987-88, I found myself among members of the French diplomatic community. I can hardly recall who it was that picked me up at the Fulbright House in Golden Valley (Rangoon) to go along to some event, but I do recall my surprise at being introduced to another passenger, a young Burmese woman who seemed equally fluent in English and French. This turned out to be the redoubtable San San, who soon after popped up at Cornell and who provides us with the following account of what is happening in the world of Burmese language instruction.—The Editor*

I was trained as an English teacher, with a formal education in linguistics, in Yangon. By chance—but with no regrets—I became a Burmese language instructor at Cornell in 1989. I started with two students. One of them was Mary Callahan, who is now a renowned specialist of Myanmar's political scene. Enrollments increased to three in the following semester: a fifty percent increase! At the time, and for many years to follow, the majority of students learning Burmese were graduate students in various fields, mostly political science and history, who were specializing in Burma.

The classroom situation was less than ideal, with four to five people crammed into Julian Wheatley's small office (Julian occasionally joined the class, sitting on the floor or on a waste basket). We, the lecturers, shared space with five or six other language instructors in a big common office, and classroom requests had to be done in advance, which was impossible for Burmese since I never knew who would show up to take Burmese until the beginning of the semester. That was almost 20 years ago. Now the total number of students in Burmese at Cornell has become relatively stable, at between six and nine, including undergraduate students, and it is taught at two to three different levels.

Generally speaking, as Myanmar gradually "opens up" to the outside world, the number of foreigners who have either started learning Burmese or are interested in learning the language has increased. Yet compared to other Southeast Asian languages, the opportunities for getting structured language instruction remain relatively limited. For instance, students in Indonesian, Thai, and Vietnamese can choose among several study abroad programs, whereas the Yangon University of Foreign Languages (YUFL) in Yangon is the sole institution in-country where Burmese is officially taught as a foreign language. I don't imagine it would be an easy process (to put it mildly) to establish an official study abroad program in collaboration with YUFL, to bring about something along the lines of "Cornell Abroad in Yangon". Besides, the regulations imposed upon students by YUFL would probably put off students from this part of the globe:

Rules and Regulations to be Observed by Foreign Students at the Yangon University of Foreign Languages:

1. A minimum of 75% class attendance is essential for the students to be able to sit the final examination.
2. In case of absence from class due to health or other unavoidable reasons, students must ask the Head of Myanmar Department for leave.
3. Prior approval of the Rector is necessary for travel within Myanmar and for trips abroad.
4. Students must comply with the rules and regulations of the YUFL as well as the laws and conventions of the Union of Myanmar.
5. Students must refrain from involvement in political affairs.
6. The decision of the YUFL is final in all matters regarding the students' study in Myanmar.

Students must also fill out the Pledge to the Rector as follows:

1. As a student of the YUFL, I solemnly pledge:

(1) to refrain from violating the existing regulations of the YUFL;

(2) to refrain from disturbing the social order in Myanmar and from participating in any political activities;

(3) to accept the decision of the YUFL on matters relating to my studies and my stay in Myanmar;

(4) to devote myself full-time to my studies;

(5) not to take on any employment, paid or unpaid, and not to engage in activities that would affect my studies at the YUFL;

(6) to accept all financial responsibilities incurred by me in Myanmar.

2. If I have breached any of the above rules and regulations, or made false statements on my application form, or been subjected to disciplinary action by the University, or failed in my studies, I will not lodge any complaint regarding the judgment of the YUFL.

Looking on the bright side, we might expect these rules and regulations to be advantageous to language study, and we could find inspiration in the example of John Okell and Anna Allott who give (partial) credit for their success in learning Burmese to the amount of time they spent working in the language in the country—formally or informally. Well perhaps except for the part where travel options are restricted. As for the rules regarding political activities, we could say that it is understandable, given the current situation in Myanmar. Nonetheless such a list of rules and regulations might strike students coming from other cultures who are not used to such restrictions as too severe.

Foreign students who are doing research or field work in Myanmar could as an

alternative find private tutors. But tutors with solid training in language pedagogy, and in particular, training in teaching Burmese as a foreign language, are scarce. Employing an experienced tutor might also be too costly for students who come with limited funds.

Recently I met a Korean lecturer at Cornell who has done her Masters in "Teaching Korean as a foreign language." This inspires me, as I think about how good it would be to have a similar program for Burmese, and discourages me at the same time, as I think about the many difficulties one would be likely to face. Nevertheless, I do not think that a lack of structured language instruction poses insuperable problems, especially if a student can experience a full immersion in the country. John Okell and Anna Allott both show evidence for how effective such immersion can be. My own experience of learning languages using the most primitive methods shows that all one needs is an open-mind and willingness to learn from any opportunity that arises. Among several languages that I have tried to learn, the two that that I have learned the best—namely English and French—were learnt in Myanmar.<sup>1</sup>

Outside Myanmar, according to the list provided by MLTA (Myanmar Language Teachers' Association) in 1997<sup>2</sup>, which I

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<sup>1</sup> At this point San San put in modest disclaimers about still having much to learn to attain mastery of either language. But anyone who knows San San appreciates that her English and French are both phenomenal so I have deleted those remarks.—The Editor

<sup>2</sup> The MLTA, of which John Okell and U Saw Tun were president and vice president respectively, was originally founded in the mid 1990s. In 1996 they attempted to organize a first MLTA meeting in Yangon, but after the lack of permission from the authorities in Myanmar caused its (last minute) cancellation, no activity took place over the following few years. In 2002 MLTA was revived at the Burma Studies

consulted when I was doing a survey as a member of LLF (the Language Learning Framework) for Southeast Asian languages, Burmese was taught at 24 (academic) institutions across the globe. Two other private organizations were also listed, one in Myanmar and one in the US. However, at that time only ten institutions responded to the survey, and as it turned out, not all institutions offered Burmese on a regular basis. This remains the case today. The current list on the MLTA website [[www.soac.ac.uk/departments/departmentinfo.cfm?navid=719](http://www.soac.ac.uk/departments/departmentinfo.cfm?navid=719)] includes 28 institutions/centers; the CARLA (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition) website has a much smaller list (nine in total). On neither list is it clear if Burmese is offered on a regular basis: for instance, at the University of Oregon in Eugene on the CARLA list, Burmese is said to be "offered regularly, but not annually" and "offered occasionally" at the same time. Moreover, through personal connections and personal experiences, I know that the University of Washington in Seattle has made arrangements with a part-time instructor to offer Burmese courses. Yale university has a DILS (Directed Independent Language Study) program which allows students to learn Burmese with a tutor (usually a native speaker who is studying or working at the university) during the semester, and students are required to take an oral interview from an external examiner, which serves as a final exam for the students. I have conducted such interviews for two students in the past, following the ACTFL MOPI guidelines.<sup>3</sup> In

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conference in Gothenburg, after a meeting between a number of teachers of Burmese/Myanmar. But it now exists mainly in the form of a website, which is maintained by Justin Watkins of SOAS.

<sup>3</sup> MOPI stands for Modified Oral Proficiency Interview, which is a standardized procedure for the global assessment of functional speaking ability based on a face-to-face or telephonic interview between an interviewer certified by ACTFL (the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) and an

addition there are various private organizations, that sponsor short-term courses, mainly for NGOs and business people.

What all this information makes clear is that although the statistics are not entirely reliable, there is an increasing number of people learning Burmese, and various academic institutions in the US are also doing their best to offer support to students who want to learn the language. Last year, Cornell was approached by the University of Washington in Seattle to arrange a distance-learning course for one of their FLAS (Foreign Language and Area Studies) recipients. After consultation among various parties involved, including the Language Resource Center at Cornell,<sup>4</sup> we decided to carry out the plan as an experiment beginning in Fall 2006: the idea was to have the student attend an intermediate course at Cornell through video conferencing, which we thought was the least costly and the most immediately feasible plan. In the end, the plan was not carried out for some administrative reasons at the University of Washington's end, but we all hope to try

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examinee. In order to become a certified MOPI tester, one has to attend a workshop (usually two to four days long) organized by ACTFL, during which mock interviews are conducted with volunteer testees and rated as a part of the training. One then has to conduct and rate 25 interviews (each about 15 minutes) within six months following the workshop, which are evaluated by a certified tester in the language, who possesses proficiency at the superior or native level. It should be obvious from this brief explanation that it is practically impossible to become a certified OPI tester in Burmese at present.

<sup>4</sup> LRC has played an important role in providing technological as well as pedagogical support for developing CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) materials, and supporting language learning and teaching in general, in particular with technology-based resources for language learning.

again either with the same university or other universities in the near future.

In the last five to ten years at Cornell, the make-up of the student population has also changed. Now I have not only undergraduate students in various fields, such as linguistics, hotel management, and engineering, learning Burmese, but also heritage students in my classes.<sup>5</sup> Along with this demographic change in Burmese courses at Cornell, there has also been an increasing support for undergraduates to learn (Southeast) Asian languages.

For instance, for the last five years at Cornell, the Department of Asian Studies has been granting Freeman Summer Travel scholarships to undergraduates who are willing to commit to two years of language study. This grant is available for undergraduates who want to study any Asian language, including East, South, and Southeast Asian ones. It allows students to visit the country of the language they are committed to study during the summer, in exchange for a short written report upon their return. In Burmese, five students have taken this opportunity to visit Myanmar, and they came back more enthusiastic and their mind broadened further than general undergraduate education typically affords. Some want to go back, not just as a tourist, but also to do some volunteer work in various sectors such as education, health care, etc. (Unfortunately, it has not been easy for me to help them find organizations that are willing to accept young, inexperienced college students with nothing to offer beyond great enthusiasm.)

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<sup>5</sup> Heritage students are defined here as students who have at least one Burmese parent. There is a large population of Burmese immigrants and their children who were born or have grown up abroad, especially in the UK and the US. Yet compared to other language programs such as Vietnamese or Tagalog, very few heritage students have come forward for formal language instruction at the academic institutions where Burmese language courses are offered.

Furthermore, this year SEASSI (the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute) is also offering undergraduate tuition fellowships, presumably to encourage a new generation of students to start their language training earlier.

These trends have had some impact on my work as an instructor. In the past, I used to accept anyone who wanted to study Burmese. But given that I am only half time in Burmese (my other half time is in French), and given the culture of the new generation of students—who tend to be less independent—the job of the instructor has become more administratively and logistically demanding. For example, formal evaluation of students' work and progress was virtually unnecessary when I had just one or two students with specific needs and a strong determination to learn the language. But nowadays formal testing has become indispensable. Creating an exam that tests the students' proficiency (as opposed to testing the vocabulary learnt in Lesson X, for example) requires a careful test design. Moreover, since 9/11 the federal government has taken a greater interest in foreign language training, and has been putting more pressure on departments and programs to evaluate students' language proficiency. At the same time, the task of assessment has become much more time-consuming. Grade inflation combines to unfortunate effect with misconceptions about language learning. Some people, for example, take knowledge of grammar rules as indicating mastery of a language, but this hardly guarantees that someone can apply the rules in actual language use. Others show a lack of attention to details, especially at higher levels, on the grounds that a "communicative approach allows for imprecision." Yet in all objectivity, I think it is hard to say how accurately our individual assessments reflect students' true proficiency. We need well-established proficiency guidelines and standardized tests to evaluate students' proficiency levels accurately and fairly.

Be that as it may, we can conclude that the possibilities for learning Burmese have improved, in that more institutions make its

study possible and more resources are available for learning the language. As Anna Allott pointed out in the previous issue of the *Bulletin*, with more resources and guidance at hand, the task of learning Burmese has become easier. When I started teaching Burmese at Cornell in 1989 the only textbooks to be had were *Beginning Burmese*, by Cornyn and Roop (Yale University Press, 1968) and Roop's *Introduction to the Burmese Writing System* (Yale University Press, 1972). Learners of Burmese today have access to a variety of language learning materials and resources, including abundant materials on the internet—in written as well as spoken text formats. In institutions where the medium of instruction is English, John Okell's *Burmese: A Course in Four Volumes*, with accompanying audiotapes (NIU Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1994), are commonly used for the beginning level.<sup>6</sup> Other institutions, such as those in Japan, France, and Germany, use materials written in the respective medium of instruction. There are also web-based language learning materials developed by U Saw Tun, from beginning to intermediate levels, which are now available on an NIU website [<http://www.seasite.niu.edu/Burmese/>], along with audio files and lessons for learning Burmese script. At Cornell, we have a script animation page available at [[http://irc.cornell.edu/asian/courses/bu/materials/script\\_anime](http://irc.cornell.edu/asian/courses/bu/materials/script_anime)]. Recently I have come across two new introductory-level books: *Burmese for Beginners*, by Gene Mesher (Paiboon, 2006), accompanied by 3 CDs; and *An Introductory Course in Myanmar Language*, by the YUFL (Yangon, 2006), which also comes with a CD-ROM. (I have not yet had a chance to review these materials.)

Beyond the beginning level, however, the selection of language learning materials

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<sup>6</sup> Some of the audio materials are now available on line, at present time exclusively for students at Cornell who are officially enrolled and have bought the textbooks, in compliance with a special copyright arrangement made between Cornell and the publishers.

varies from one institution to another. In my own experience teaching at Cornell and at SEASSI prior to 1999, material selection has even varied from one academic term to another, depending on the students' needs and interests. In general, once students have reached an intermediate level, most instructors have to rely more on materials originally published for a Burmese audience rather than on materials published specifically for students of Burmese. This is due to the lack of textbooks available for intermediate students, but it is probably to the advantage of the students' language acquisition process. According to the 1998 LLF survey, almost all programs use materials, both written and audio, intended for Burmese speakers that are taken from various resources available in print and on the web. Some instructors provide glossaries, supplementary exercises for practicing vocabulary and structure, or for testing comprehension of the texts. Some of the same materials may be used by different instructors, but with different approaches and different sets of supplementary materials. There seem to be a considerable amount of such materials—including listening materials—developed by various individuals. Yet since they are not published, they do not become more broadly disseminated: instructors may be reluctant to share their supplementary materials, perhaps because they don't deem them of publishable quality. Of course, publishing takes great time and effort, but I strongly believe that it would be worthwhile trying to have the materials that already exist in various formats more widely available. It was agreed upon at the MLTA meeting in Gothenburg in 2002 to make this option possible by creating a page on the MLT website and inviting all language teachers to share materials. Yet no one seems to have stepped forward to make a contribution.

Selecting materials from available resources seems to me an important and challenging task for a language instructor. "Authentic" materials, that is, those originally intended for a Burmese audience, pose particular difficulties. There are undeniable advantages to exposing students to different genres of authentic materials. However, for a number

of reasons, selecting Burmese materials in print requires special care. First, there is the problem of finding materials containing what Westerners would consider substantive content. For example, many language programs have students reading newspapers. But in Myanmar, until recently, it was more typical in newspapers to find news that is not politically sensitive such as government officials' visits to factories and pagodas, or their charitable acts, and religious or prize-giving ceremonies at schools and monasteries. A Japanese scholar of Burmese literature was once asked during an interview with a magazine if she would not be interested in translating non-fiction instead of her usual practice of translating fiction. Her answer was that fiction reflects the situation in Burma, and she would only be interested in translating newspaper articles when things changed in Burma. Her response suggests that foreign learners of Burmese might find fiction better reflects the culture and society in Burma and that they would therefore find it more interesting.

A further problem in drawing on authentic materials is that the quality of print in Burmese materials is often far from ideal for learners. Although the Myanmar Language Commission has made an increasing effort to enforce standardized rules on language use and orthography in publications, it is not uncommon to find typographical errors and orthographic inconsistency in printed materials, especially materials published over two decades or so ago and those published by small private printing presses. I have the impression, furthermore, that Burmese language instructors have a relatively hard job finding authentic materials that are usable for students of Burmese, as the language used in a large percentage of publications does not seem easily accessible to students who are not yet at an advanced level or who lack special training in dealing with specific genres of texts. On the positive side, modern technology has given us a great many possibilities to develop materials that can facilitate language training, and to create more opportunities for exposure to the target language and culture. In the age of

information technology and globalization, it is getting easier to obtain authentic materials from abroad. Newspapers and periodicals may reach here after a short delay, and there is an enormous wealth of Burmese language materials available on the web, including audio and video materials. For instance, there is an increasing number of journals, which have invaded the world of media in Myanmar. Such journals present local as well as international news, and depict the current economic and social scenes in Myanmar. They are also a good source of newly coined words, which inevitably accompany globalization and Myanmar's contact with modern technology. Currently, Cornell is in the process of negotiating a deal with a local bookseller in Myanmar to have such journals made available in an electronic format. If all goes well, this option will also be available to other institutions outside Myanmar. Furthermore, advanced technology of the 21st century has allowed us to develop some CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) materials. For instance, I have created learning materials based on a feature film in Burmese, and other WAL (Web Audio Lab) materials using radio plays broadcast in Myanmar, for developing listening skills. These materials are designed for students at intermediate levels and beyond. However, developing such materials, especially listening materials, is usually very time consuming and requires a great effort. This makes it discouraging to do for just a limited number of students at one's own institution.

Despite growing opportunities to study Burmese and increasing materials with which to do so, the difficulties involved in learning the language seem to remain the same. I sometimes joke that basic Burmese grammar can be learned in about forty lessons. After all, there are no verb conjugations or shifts in tenses to worry about in changing from direct to indirect speech, etc. In reality, I sympathize with students' frustrations. I myself am still puzzled by some aspects of my own language, especially where particles are concerned. Nor am I surprised when students cannot hear the difference between two different tones in isolation: I can't

"hear" them either, although I can figure it out faster if there is an adequate context.

In general, judging from my experience teaching Burmese for close to two decades, the areas where students have the most difficulties are pronunciation, tone discrimination, and the use of particles (which often do not have one-to-one equivalents in English). I am convinced that a key to all those problems is a listener's ability to make use of the available context: this is in fact my main advantage as a native speaker. While it is impossible for foreign learners to have the same depth of linguistic and cultural experience as native speakers, I believe that we can train our learners to make good use of a given context, in combination with the knowledge of grammar, to make sense of what they hear. (I will discuss the point further at another time.)

In sum, Myanmar language instruction is obviously expanding. Demand for instruction, support from various funding bodies (including the US Government), and available resource materials are all increasing. Thanks to constant technological advances, distance-learning courses are in the picture for the near future. Nonetheless, there is a lot more work to be done: establishing proficiency guidelines, along with appropriate (and objective) assessment methods; developing material for intermediate levels and beyond, as well as learning aids to use in conjunction with authentic materials; doing systematic research on Burmese language as it is actually used; and generating professional development opportunities for teachers of Burmese, such as training in language pedagogy. In the meantime, I encourage all those who are involved in learning Burmese to persevere, and enjoy the unique experience of learning Burmese. It is like a puzzle-solving activity, both intriguing and challenging. It should be gratifying, as well, when you think of all the research you will be able to conduct in the field of Burma Studies using primary sources.

San San Hnin Tun

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### What Made Us Think...?

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*The following account, part mini-history of Nance and Aung Soe Min's dictionary project, part self-help guide for those brave souls interested in compiling a dictionary, raises some questions to which Nance is not yet ready to provide a response. That is, many readers may well wonder how soon they'll be able to get their hands on a copy of the dictionary. Nance tells me that negotiations with publishers are in progress but that any greater specificity would be premature. But having had access to an early, on-line version that Nance mentions, I can affirm that the dictionary, particularly because of its many illustrative sentences, will provide a great deal of help to Burmese language learners. We will ask Nance to send word when publication plans become clearer. —The Editor*

So here we are with a 450-page မြန်မာ - English dictionary draft.

It started out with me knowing little Burmese. I had completed one eight-week SEASSI course and was travelling around trying out what I had learned. I bought many phrase books and small, blocky dictionaries. I would fill in useful words and phrases, as the phrase selection was not always adapted for the traveller ('Drop your gun!'), and make corrections, as the proofreading was rather poor (ကလေးသိပ်သူ *n.* a lutter). As anyone might. It had not yet got out of hand.

Hundreds of people helped me, some just with one word or sentence. One who contributed more suggested that we make a small dictionary together. His name was Aung Soe Min. I said, 'When I get back.' I did not have specific plans to return yet, and the next few years did not look promising for travel, but anyone who has been caught by Burma will know the confidence with which the words were said.

*We start*

Three years later I had a job in Yangon, and Aung Soe Min had moved to the capital as well. After a month or so, he brought up the idea of making a pocket dictionary again; I declared that it would be more sensible to make a full-size dictionary and cut it down, rather than make a small one and later expand it. We started in. Rough estimate: six months of work. That was 1999.

As soon as we started to work we began to hear rumours about Myanmar lexicography. That the man who ‘really wrote’ the excellent green Myanmar Language Commission dictionary had ‘died in action’ before it was quite finished. That typesetting that dictionary alone had taken one year. That a team of Oxford professors had worked on a Burmese–English dictionary for twenty years and given up with it unfinished. We heard about various monolingual dictionaries which seemed to be fantastical, but now sit on our reference shelves.

Undeterred, we acquired lexicography software, learned how to alter fonts, and started in. We reached the last word, (ဥဆုံ ငါတၢ်န့ၣ် *n.* all) in 2006, and are now slowly correcting errors and bringing it into a final form. Many people have been using a partial draft which was distributed to anyone who asked, and which was available on the Internet for a few years. (The draft was called ‘Peacock’, but the published dictionary will probably be လင်းဒိုးတၢ်ရာ Lin U Taya.) We have taken the Peacock down, as we are too close to publication; we should have that pocket version (about 7000 words) coming out in 2007, with Paiboon. For the full version (about 30,000 words), we still need more time.

*Sound like fun?*

So you are thinking about making a dictionary too? An Internet search reveals a surprising range of lexicography software. We used Shoebox, created by JAARS Computer Sales for SIL. The latest Windows version has been renamed Toolbox, and it is now free and can be

downloaded from the SIL website <[www.sil.org](http://www.sil.org)>. It is available for Mac or Windows operating systems, but the Mac version is only for OS9. An OSX version has been in the works for years but is always six months away. When Macs could run OS9 and OSX simultaneously, this was not a problem. Now that new Macs can run either OSX or Windows, it is no longer sure that an OSX version will appear; while the website still mentions an OSX version under development, I was advised just to use the Windows version. This is a pity, as Burmese is much easier to type on a Mac than on a PC. This is particularly important for a lexicographer, who needs little-used characters which are time-consuming to find on a Windows keyboard-keypad, all the more so for laptop users using Win-type fonts, who have to switch to keypad mode to enter numeric combinations for some characters.

Shoebox/Toolbox creates a flat-file database which, as plain text, is small, not vulnerable to corruption, and easy to handle. You can change this file without using the Shoebox interface, which is sometimes useful for making large-scale changes.

The interface is not particularly intuitive but can be learned in a few hours with the help of the very good documentation. As the software is capable of more than lexicography (it has many more features for linguists, such as parsing and interlinearisation), there are many available database fields, such as specialised plurals, a way to indicate that something is animate or not, and so on. We found a set of fields called MDF 4.0 adequate, although we altered the use of some of them.

Shoebox/Toolbox has many useful features, such as a Search and Replace command which can be applied to the whole database or just the open entry, a Paradigm field which can be used to group terms that are connected to a certain concept, and the possibility of using filters, which would make specialised dictionaries (i.e., of legal terms, agricultural terms) easy to create. You just create some kind of a tag in the entry, indicated in the filter (e.g., in a ‘notes’

field set not to export, so you will not have to remove it from the exported text). You can also determine the sort order of the font you choose for a certain language. More about this tricky issue of sorting later.

I found that the software crashed fairly often, usually after multiple pastes of text. I suspect that this is because the Burmese font I am using has backslashes for င, and this might cause some misreading. Crashes result in work lost beyond the entry being edited, or time-consuming restoration, so I adapted by quitting and reopening every half hour or so. The software closes down and starts up quickly, so it was not too burdensome, and it cut down on crashes dramatically.

You can easily work in up to four languages (called vernacular, national, regional for the target languages, plus the external language, such as English or French). Thus if one were making a Khün-Shan dictionary, one could make Khün the vernacular, Tai Yai the national, and Thai the regional one). Each language can be assigned a different font.

When you are starting, you will want to try out various fields and see their properties. Some fields sort themselves in the definition automatically, others stay in the order you enter them. For example, if you have a phonetic field, it will always come directly after the entry, and before the part of speech. If you have more phonetic fields (for example, if different senses have different pronunciations), they will be placed unpredictably, not where you put them.

### *Exporting*

Shoobox/Toolbox exports your dictionary as a handsome word-processor file, with detailed formatting. Some tweaking of formatting is likely to be necessary, but once done, it will be remembered in future exports. The first step of the output is a rich text (.rtf) file, which can be opened by most word-processing software. However, due to the way the styles are determined, the formatting is easiest in Microsoft Word, and would require extensive setting of styles, spacing, and so on in other popular word-processors such as Nisus Writer, AbiWord,

or Pages. I worked directly in the .rtf file, though there is a macro that converts it to a Word file.

I delved into some code to stop Shoobox from sealing each entry with a period, which I felt was unnecessary for the English definitions, and could be confused with the *auq-ka-myi* in Burmese entries. This was a confusing process helped along by my slight, long-buried familiarity with Unix. I would not really recommend doing this without some programming experience, or with as little experience as I have. Unwanted bits could be removed more safely by a careful search-and-replace of the file in a word processor, with the font of the offending punctuation defined using the Format > Font option of the search dialogue box. In fact, there will probably be a series of changes, such as changing straight quotes to curly ones, that you would like to do to fix up your final file. Once you are sure of the series, these successive searches can be combined in a macro.

There is another piece of freeware, Lexique Pro, which can turn your Toolbox database into a functioning hypertext dictionary, with very little effort. Inconveniently, this works only in Windows. You can find it at [www.lexiquepro.com](http://www.lexiquepro.com).

### *Fonts*

I found that being able to alter a font was useful for the work. I could add symbols to the definition font so that I could indicate that a word was obsolete, a botanical term, etc., without bringing in a separate symbols font. I also patched together a simplified font for the phonetic field to speed the typing. In addition, we used a non-commercial Burmese font and subsequently altered it to make piracy less attractive, as we wanted to make electronic versions available. Fontlab and Macromedia's Fontographer made this easy. I found Fontlab came with better documentation. Font-making software provides many opportunities to trip up (though it is getting better), so if you do not have someone who can explain it to you, you will likely spend some time with the manual.

## Sorting

Back to sorting. While there are now some draft Unicode fonts for Burmese, I do not find them very tempting to use. They require extra typing, and the software to take advantage of the features is not yet widely available. I used an old-fashioned font, in which the Latin range of symbols has been replaced by Burmese ones.

In Shoebox/Toolbox, there is a lexeme field which is meant for the entry word. Your dictionary will be sorted by this field. Once Unicode is ready, you will be able to type Burmese in this field directly; languages with a more straightforward orthography (with Latin scripts, for example) can be put in directly.

However, scripts such as Burmese and Shan, which have characters coming before the character used for sorting (i.e., *ya-yiq*) pose difficulties. In fact, you *could* create a font which would sort. You would have the characters appearing before the consonant cast to the left far enough that you could type them after the head of the syllable, but they would appear before it. Or you would instruct Shoebox to ignore the characters coming before the consonant, and you could create invisible, zero-space characters which you would type after it, and you would include them in the sort order. However, this would create proofreading horrors for any but a perfect typist. This could be avoided by making these special sorting characters visible, and then removing them from the exported file. But this would be burdensome.

There are a few more reasonable ways to get around the problem. Shoebox includes a citation form field, allowing you to put anything you like in the lexeme field, which then does not appear in the exported file (unless specified). The Burmese consonant sort order can then be specified in the Language encodings options, and the sort order of the rhymes can be codified, i.e., 11 for ၵ creaky-tone 'a', 12 for ၶ low-tone 'a', 13 for ၷ high-tone 'a'; 21 for ၸ creaky 'i', 22 for ၹ low-tone 'i', 23 for ၺ high-tone 'i', etc. You will enter this code in the

lexeme field after the head consonant or consonant cluster.

If you already know the words you will use (i.e., if you are working from a list that is by and large complete), an easier way is to sort them manually, number them and put that number in the lexeme field. You can always insert more entries in between them by adding an extra digit, i.e., 101 comes between 10 and 11, and 1011 comes between 101 and 102. Don't forget the leading zeros when you are beginning your series.

*Try it, you'll like it*

Lexicography is not everyone's favourite leisure activity, but such software can be useful to make lists that are too unwieldy for manual ordering. Those dealing with a particular subject with specialised vocabulary (such as history, law, the military) for an extended time may find it saves time and improves flexibility when dealing with long lists, as each entry is part of both a Burmese-English (or other sortable language) and an English-Burmese list, and can be searched on the computer.

There are two remaining font issues that will concern you if you decide to take a stab at lexicography: one is the backslash, suspected of causing crashes, the other is phrase breaks. I would suggest using a font which does not use a backslash in its normal character set, as this will also make searches easier. As for phrase breaks, one can always put in many spaces and let the phrases arrange themselves on the page. But too many spaces is a poor typesetting style and takes more space. If any Mac users would like it, I have available an AvaLaserLex font which puts an *a-thaq* on the F key (the one on the backslash key remains as well), and has replaced the hyphen with a breaking micro-space. When you type the hyphen key, it will not show a break in your line of text unless it is at a place where the line needs to break. Thus you can pepper your sentences with breaks, without creating unsightly gaps. When you change margins or font sizes, the gaps close and lines break at new spots, avoiding extensive re-editing.

E-mail me for it at <inkish@gmail.com>. (Windows users can read the font, of course, but it would not be convenient to use extensively for editing.)

Nance Cunningham

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### **Tin Moe: An Exiled Burmese Poet of Simplicity and Humanity**

Tin Moe, (b. 19 November 1933 in Kan-Myei village, Myingyan Sub-Division, Upper Burma; d. 22 January 2007, Baldwin Park, Los Angeles, California, USA)

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*No use of language presents greater challenges to the non-native speaker, but then again none communicates more effectively for those who can tap into its riches, than poetry. So it is fitting to close this issue of the Bulletin, concerned as it is with the Burmese language, with a tribute to a man revered for his contributions to Burmese literary life. —The Editor*

Tin Moe, a Burmese poet who lived in exile from July 1999, died in a suburb of Los Angeles on January 22, 2007.

Tin Moe (whose real name was U Ba Gyan) was born in Kan-myei village in Myingyan sub-division, Upper Burma, on November 19, 1933. While studying at the University of Mandalay, he won a literature prize from a government literary institution for his collection of poems *The Lantern* in 1959. This was just the beginning of Tin Moe's distinguished literary career, in which he achieved fame mainly but not exclusively as a poet. In the last ten to fifteen years of his life, however, Tin Moe was blacklisted by the authorities. Not only his poems and other literary works, whether recent or from his earlier years, but even his name could not be mentioned in Burma's tightly controlled and heavily censored press.

Among the over one thousand poems that he wrote, a poem which he first composed in 1959, titled (in translation) 'The "Big" Guest,' was one of the best known. It reads:

the cigar's burnt down  
the sun's brown  
'return' me back, will you?

An apocryphal story—which I was not able to verify with the poet during the few times that I met him over a period of thirty years—says that when Tin Moe and a group of friends were in a teashop in 1959, someone in the group stated that it was perhaps time to leave the teashop since the cigars they had been smoking were literally 'burnt down.' Following this lead, Tin Moe composed the poem impromptu. More than forty-seven years later, in January, 2007, while having some refreshments in a cafeteria ('tea-shop') with a visitor in Baldwin Park, California, where he was a 'guest' (political refugee), Tin Moe collapsed and soon died.

Tin Moe was the poetry editor of the leftist *Ludú* ('The People') *Daily* newspaper in Mandalay during the period of 1966-67, until the newspaper was shut down permanently by the government in July, 1967. From 1967 to 1984 he worked in government jobs in Rangoon, first as editor with the Universities Printing and Publications Unit, then later as a curriculum development officer for basic education syllabi for high schools. In 1970 Tin Moe won Burma's national literature prize for his book of children's poems entitled *Má Ni with the Little Umbrella*. (Má Ni is the name of a young Burmese girl.)

After the failed 1988 uprising in Burma, Tin Moe became involved with the activities of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). He was a member of the NLD's intellectual circle and he wrote poems in praise both of the students who were at the forefront of the 1988 uprising and also of Aung San Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Laureate. Needless to say these poems were only published clandestinely. Due to Tin Moe's involvement in the democracy struggle, he was imprisoned for more than three years, from 1991 to 1995.

In July 1999 Tin Moe left Burma for Belgium, where one of his daughters lived. Though the force of circumstance virtually

compelled Tin Moe to leave his beloved land, it remained constantly in his heart. Many of his poems written from abroad reflected his longings for his native land. In September 2002, at a Burma Conference in Gothenburg, Sweden, I had the privilege of presenting in English translation a synopsis of his paper about modern developments in Burmese poetry. He wrote a poem at the end of this paper, and in the last lines he touchingly wrote about how he would return to his homeland to the welcoming beats of drums and dances by lads and lasses. In the mid-1960s, when he had no inkling that the last years of his life would be spent in exile, he wrote a poem about the simple beauties and charms of 'our native land' and wrote that however 'alluring' foreign lands were he would die in his own country. Alas, for the author of 'The Guest', the cigar burned down and the sun set in a foreign land very far away from his native village of Kanmyei in Upper Burma.

During his exile years Tin Moe traveled extensively in the US, the UK, Belgium, Japan, Australia, Thailand, India and elsewhere. Everywhere he was received with affection and admiration by expatriate Burmese, who crowded his literary talks. In 2004, he was awarded a Prince Claus Award, sponsored by the Dutch Government, for 'his outstanding literary achievements and for his role in sustaining culture as a source of strength, inspiration and identity.'

On January 23, 1973, almost thirty-four years to the day before his death, Tin Moe composed a poem entitled 'The Poem of the Epoch and the History of the Epoch.' It reads (in my translation):

heads are shaken [in dismay]  
a poem is born  
heads being scratched [in  
bewilderment]  
another poem arises

heads forced to bow down:  
a glimpse of history

heads trying to hide [look away]

from the [shameful, oppressive  
phenomena] of history

When I met him in Rangoon in May, 1974, Tin Moe told me that he composed the poem when the then Rangoon University 'History Association' invited him to contribute to its annual magazine. He contributed the above poem and he told me—with a chuckle—that the editor of the magazine did not or rather dared not publish his poem. Later, he published the poem in his own collection of poems entitled *Sleeping On a Rose*. It is a sign of the times that more than thirty years later, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, such a poem, whether by Tin Moe or any one else, would not pass the Burmese literary censors.

On January 20, 2007, just two days before his death, the prolific poet wrote another poem, probably his last, whereby he expressed his hopes and support for the young '1988 generation' (though its members are now somewhat aged, since 'cigars' continue to burn). Part of this last poem reads (in my translation):

with truthful statements  
suffused with the honey of loving-  
kindness  
without arrogance and without  
illusion  
responding to difficult challenges  
with equanimity  
[your words and actions]  
will be as piercing as the cut  
of diamonds

The cigar has burnt down and the sun has set for Tin Moe. The lantern-carrier is no more, but the light from the lantern will continue to cast its light. Likewise his message of love, courage, longing, determination, hope and freedom will continue to 'cut' through the ages. Current and future generations of Burmese, especially poetry lovers among them, will (to paraphrase Tin Moe) unashamedly hold their heads high with pride and affection for him. And we will remember him not only for his poems but also for his simplicity, sincerity and humanity.

Myint Zan