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the people and societies of inland China.*

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The Dragon's Roar — *Traveling the Burma Road* —

RUILI, China

March 1999

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
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4 West Wheelock St.
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Dear Peter,

Somewhere in China's far west, high in the Tibetan plateau, five of Asia's great rivers — the Yellow, the Yangtze, the Mekong, the Salween and the Irrawaddy — emerge from beneath the earth's surface. Flowing east, then fanning south and north, the waterways cut deep gorges before sprawling wide through lowlands and spilling into distant oceans.

These rivers irrigate some of Asia's most abundant natural resources, the most generously endowed of which are in Myanmar, formerly Burma.

"Myanmar is Asia's last great treasure-trove," a Yangon-based western diplomat told me during a recent visit to this land of contradiction that shares a border with southwest China's Yunnan Province.¹

Flush with jade, rubies, sapphires, natural gas and three-quarters of the world's teak forests, Myanmar truly is a land of abundance.

So why, almost in the same sentence, did the diplomat describe Myanmar as a "humanitarian disaster, bad and getting worse"?

Beyond impressionistic ramshackle taxis, crumbling buildings and thatch-wall hovels, statistics communicate a grim reality: three of four children do not complete elementary school; universities have been closed for nine years; half of the rural population does not have access to safe water or proper sanitation; HIV / AIDS is spreading at an explosive rate; an unofficial U.S. government survey in 1998 registered 67-percent inflation on domestic goods, 100 percent on imports; and due to poor resource management and cycles of poverty that have led to destructive land and forest use, environmental degradation speeds forward at a wicked pace. The 1997 United Nations' Human Development Index ranks Myanmar 131st of 175 countries, sandwiched between Congo and Ghana for a place among the world's poorest nations.²

But these are more symptoms than they are causes. Myanmar's afflictions

¹ I traveled to the Myanmar / Yunnan region in order to sample the realities of southwest China outside of Guizhou Province, my base.

² *UNDP Human Development Report, 1997*. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also *The Human Development Initiative, 1996-1998*. (United Nations Development Programme, Yangon, Myanmar, Unpublished: 1998).



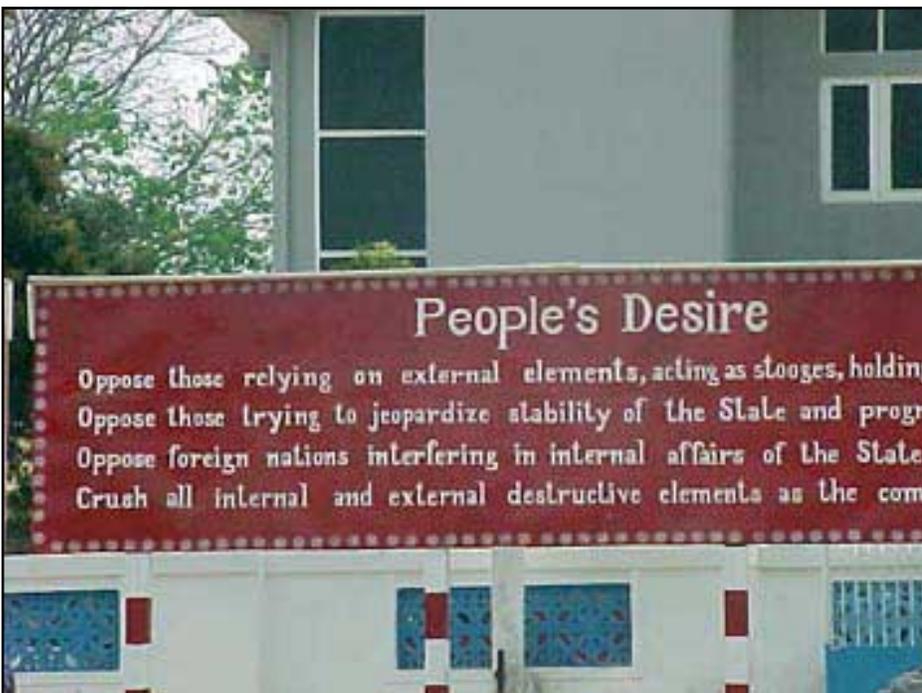
*Irrawaddy River
at Sunset*

are rooted in a complex political environment made fragile by ethnic divisions and colonial history.³

Since 1990, sections of the international community have shunned Myanmar because of a military dictatorship that overturned a popular election won overwhelm-

ingly by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. Sanctions on investment and international financing have taken their toll. But on whom?

The ruling military junta, known as the State Peace and Development Council — and the 200 to 500 families



The People's Desire? Prominently displayed in English and Burmese in each city we visited are signs that read:

The People's Desire

- *Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views*
- *Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation*
- *Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State*
- *Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy*

³ Myanmar's racial picture is extremely diverse. Ethnically-based, semi-autonomous "states" [Chin, Kachin, Shan, Wa, Kayah, Kayin (Karen) are the largest] form an inverted horseshoe around the west, north and east of the country, encircling central and southern regions, which are inhabited by the country's majority, the Bamar (Burmese) people. The upside-down horseshoe forms a mountainous ring, opening toward delta areas.



Works of Merit. Farmers plow along the Irrawaddy River in Pagan (Bagan), with 600-year-old ruins in the background

that form the country's elite — show no immediate or obvious signs of weakening. To date, inertia seems a more accurate word to describe efforts to diminish Yangon's privileged few.

Even so, while the regime remains expert in instilling fear and dividing opposition, it has done little to lead Myanmar toward its potential prosperity. The result is a collection of unruly states; not, many would argue, a unified, integrated nation.

Meanwhile, Myanmar's people suffer, impoverished amid abundance.

GLORY AND ENVY

Burma has had its days of glory; the country has known what it is like to be the envy of its neighbors.

During the Pagan Period (11th to 13th centuries) — the zenith of the country's history — Burma was the jewel of Southeast Asia. In the capital city of Pagan, 9,000-plus Buddhist stupas, with their bell-shaped and cathedral-like architecture and endless frescos, demonstrated high culture and affluence. The era's luster shone until Kublai Kahn and his far-ranging troops from the north pillaged Burma in 1287.

Standing atop one of Pagan's remaining 2,000 crumbling stupas, one can almost imagine hordes of wild-eyed Mongolian warriors on their steeds, roaring through the riverside capital, leaving the empire in smolders. Still, Pagan's Mayan-like ruins, magnificent to this day, remind

the traveler of Burma's once-enviable peace and prosperity.

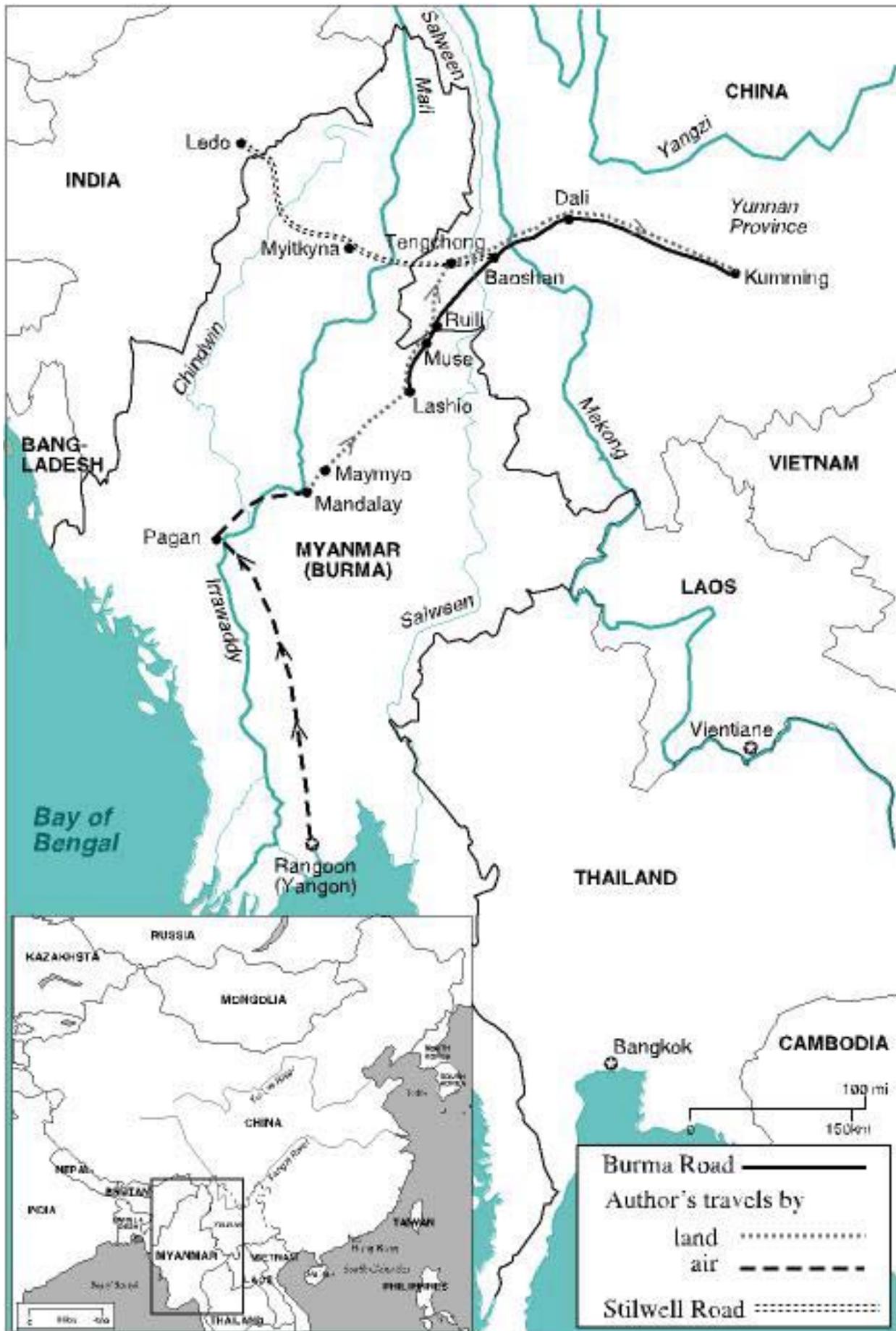
Five centuries later, the British Empire reached its hand from colonized India into Burma's treasure chest. From the second half of the 1800s to 1948, the British colonized Burma, building infrastructure and helping itself to the land's wealth.⁴

After independence from British rule, one proud Burmese told me, neighboring countries sent their best and brightest to Burma to be educated. In turn, Burma sent its most talented to advise nearby governments. Rangoon (now Yangon) also had the best airport in the region. In the early post-war years, Burma would have no doubt received the "most likely to succeed" award among its newly independent Southeast Asian neighbors.

Today, though weak, divided and oppressed from within, Myanmar continues to occupy a significant position in the region, if for no other reason than its geographical location. Look at the map. A recent history of strained relations among some of its neighbors [Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand] guarantees Myanmar a place of importance in the game of regional power politics. This reality alone must create intriguing secret negotiations, aid packages and neighborly arm-twisting.

Regional security aside, the country's most immediate attraction is its natural resources. And from what I heard and observed during my travels in several of Myanmar's towns and cities and along the Burma Road to the Chinese border in the north, the country's remain-

⁴ To illustrate the extent of the wealth, for example, the country was the world's largest rice exporter before World War II.



ing treasures are being sold off at garage-sale prices.

PEOPLES' TRADE

In the American mind, U.S. Army General Joseph Stilwell and his "Can Do" men put Burma on the map in the late 1930s when they constructed the Burma Road. Stilwell's objective was simple: maintain the flow of supplies to the Chinese government in its resistance against Japanese aggression.⁵

From Lashio, the Burma Road's southern terminus and base of the mountainous Myanmar/China border region (referred to during World War II as "the Hump"), the road twists north over rugged, sparsely populated scrubland up to 11,000 feet before descending in a series of spectacular hairpin turns to the Chinese frontier in western Yunnan Province. From there, the road continues to the provincial capital, Kunming, completing its 700-mile long course.

During the war, conditions were so treacherous for unpressurized aircraft that U.S. servicemen were awarded the Purple Heart if they survived, as eventually most of them did, five trips over the Hump.⁶ More than one of Claire Chennault's "Flying Tigers" returned home decorated with a Purple Heart.

Despite the Road's fame in the American mind, the movement of goods through the Myanmar/China mountain region did not begin with the arrival of "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell and his convoys of war supplies. For centuries, countless traders, including Marco Polo in the 13th century, had worn trails through the mountain passes and serpentine valleys of what even now is referred to as China's Southwest Silk Road.⁷

With an asphalt-covered, almost-two-lane-wide surface used by heavy-duty-transport trucks, the Burma Road in 1999 remains the primary artery of trade between Myanmar and China. The movement of goods through the region is brisker than ever. In fact, from the Myanmar



Picture taken by author along the Burma Road deep in the Shan State mountains — The Hump — about 100 kilometers south of the Chinese border.

side of the border, one can almost hear a huge sucking sound coming from the giant to the north.

Dramatic but true, the reality of one village in the Dry Zone, an arid and poor region in central Myanmar, illustrates China's voracious appetite.

The villagers in this small community miss their geckos. Besides keeping the mosquito population down, these small, suction-cup-toed lizards that chirp at night, have served as the villagers' barometers for generations, helping them to anticipate changes in weather.

A few years ago, however, an opportunity for quick cash came from Chinese traders who showed up seeking geckos, snakes and village women's hair — as much of these commodities as the farmers could provide. For a village in poverty, what brings cash today is gone tomorrow.⁸

Troubling as well is the plight of Myanmar's teak forests, one of the country's national prides. Teak is special because it is light yet very strong, the aluminum of woods. It has been used for centuries in shipbuilding because it is corrosion- and insect-resistant. Today it is especially

⁵ For an excellent read on Stilwell, the construction of the Burma Road and American wartime involvement in China, see Barbara Tuchman's *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-45*. (N.Y., New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971).

⁶ Evelyn R. White, *South of the Clouds — Yunnan and the Salween Front, 1944: Memories of a British Nursing Sister*. (London: The China Society, 1985), 2.

⁷ Note: Marco Polo's travels traced the Burma Road south to present day Baoshan, at which he and his caravan headed west through present day Tengchong to Myirkina in northern Burma and on to India. Today the route from Baoshan west to India is known as the Stilwell Road. When the Japanese cut the Burma Road in 1942, Allied forces built the Stilwell Road, opening a corridor to the west.

⁸ After returning to China I learned that geckos are used in varieties of traditional-medicine recipes; snakes in some parts of China are a delicacy; and the hair is used to make wigs and hairpieces, which have become something of a fashion craze in China.

valued in countries around the world for furniture.

The penalty for felling a teak tree in Myanmar is harsh: execution. Even so, I observed a seemingly continuous flow of flatbed timber trucks along the Burma Road, hauling the expensive wood across the Chinese border. In Chinese frontier towns like Tengchong, teak logs pile high in open lots, waiting to be transferred to China's coast and beyond — all this a glaring disconnect between policy and reality in Myanmar.

"How can it be?" I ask a Chinese businessman in Tengchong heavily involved in the timber trade. How does one move the exposed logs along the Burma Road past the four major checkpoints in



A flatbed timber truck hauling teak logs in Tengchong, Yunnan Province.

Myanmar's Shan State and then across the border? The trader raises one hand and rubs the tips of four fingers with his thumb — the international sign for money — indicating that cash bribes smooth the way for even the most precious of Myanmar's treasures to move beyond its borders.

Jade and gems are the more glamorous part of trade between Myanmar and China's "Wild West." Yunnan's frontier towns, like the one I observed in Tengchong, have open-air jade markets where trained eyes rummage through piles of raw Burmese jade. Cutters and grinders buzz as craftsmen process their picks, destined for the rest of China and the world.

Less visible, but pervasive, is the narcotics trade — heroin to be exact. Reduction strategies by Burmese, Chinese and international authorities are trumpeted with occasional success, but casual observation and conversation in the region indicates no slowdown in opium production and narcotic trafficking. Rampant corruption among officials in both Myanmar and China thwart any

serious effort to address the problem.

The transport-friendly nature of heroin makes matters worse; the movement of the drug is not confined to the Burma Road. Opium and heroin move on the backs of rugged porters over the craggy-yet-porous border region. The vigorous narcotics trade demonstrates that, in the case of frontier borders, networks of ethnicity, language and culture pay little attention to national boundaries.

Strong international demand powers the narcotics trade. Efforts to control the localized supply-side of the trade equation — such as sting operations, opium crop replacement programs and education efforts — are simply no match for the instant, big-money payoff to each level of the grower-producer-trader chains that criss-cross the Myanmar/China border region.

Trade between Myanmar and China is not a one-way street. Myanmar's open-air markets overflow with low-end consumer goods brought in from China: hair clips, straw hats, key rings, alarm clocks, clothes, shampoo, batteries, plastic toys — much of which appear to be of inferior quality, as if dumped by struggling state-owned factories.

Besides consumer goods, China's poor-country cousin to the south also receives, both through purchase and as aid, military hardware and infrastructure-related equipment, such as trucks, tractors, land movers and generators.

China has also been active building roads and bridges, part of its efforts to provide political goodwill and, I suspect, paving the way for more efficient access to Myanmar's natural resources.

When visa-free travel began between the two countries in 1988, trade took off. But as one can sense from a general description of the trade-flow, Myanmar has never sat on the top end of the commercial relationship: straw hats, plastic cups and cheap batteries in exchange for jade, teak and rubies — there's something wrong with that picture.

During the heady days of the mid 1990s, China's annual economic growth raced along at plus-ten percent, southwest China began to look beyond its own borders and talk buzzed about regional trade cooperation. In early 1997 there was even talk of a regional railway that would link ASEAN countries and southwest China. Yet while much of the region envisioned its own "free-trade zone", Myanmar remained passive, distracted by internal dissension.

After the Asian financial crisis broke and the bubble of regional cooperation burst, Myanmar openly showed its displeasure toward China, apparently in protest over the

raw deal it felt it had been receiving in the trade relationship. In November 1997, Myanmar closed the border.

Several months later, when Myanmar re-opened its doors, it discovered that an already active black-market trade — what Chinese call “people’s trade” [*minjian maoyi*] — had boomed.

Based on pieces of conversation with foreign diplomats in Yangon, Burmese traders, Chinese businessmen and even a former government official in Kunming, I gathered that 70 percent of the trade volume between China and Myanmar is not recorded or taxed. Even the elephants in a park in Kunming, I was told, were smuggled from Thailand, via Myanmar. Elephant smuggling! Imagine that.

The flow of smuggled goods continues to hemorrhage, with China swapping factory rejects for Myanmar’s national treasures.

INFLUENCE

Trade, however, means more than simply the exchange of goods. Other less tangible commodities piggyback on the trucks that crawl slowly through the hairpin turns of the Burma Road. Call it cultural influence.

Myanmar’s second largest city, Mandalay, for example, is 25 percent Chinese. While in Mandalay I visited one of the city’s four Chinese schools, packed with 5,000 students and in the midst of a building project. Most of the students are offspring of Chinese who came from China during waves of historical change and instability: Cul-

tural Revolution, Great Leap Forward and Communist Revolution, to name a few.

The school headmaster’s family is originally from Yunnan Province, but has lived in Myanmar for several generations. Headmaster Chen has never returned to his ancestral home, though it is just a two-day drive from Mandalay.

Chen told me how primary and middle-school students attend local schools during the day, with special lessons in Chinese before and after their regular class schedule. When the students reach high school, they attend the Chinese school full time, taking the equivalent of an international Chinese curriculum in Chinese classics, arts and sciences, even English. I was taken aback by the emphasis on things traditionally Chinese: Confucius, Mencius and complex Chinese characters, but no politics.

Many of Chen’s graduates go on to university in Taiwan or other Asian countries. Some go to university in mainland China, but very few.

Like many overseas-Chinese communities, Mandalay’s Chinese residents and those of numerous towns like it are in the minority but control much of the commerce. Influence flows from trade.

One hundred years ago, Chinese businessmen in Burma were portrayed as “... smooth-shaven and prosperous as always, whether gaunt and big-boned from Yunnan or Sichuan, or sleek and sturdy from Rangoon and the Straits, defying the most greedy official to rob him of his profits, and drinking his tea and smoking his opium pipe with supreme composure and good humor.”⁹ Aside from the opium pipe, not much has changed.



Author pictured with Chinese school headmaster in Mandalay. He wears Burmese clothes but teaches Confucius and the Chinese classics.

Like thick syrup oozing down over the mountains from the north, Chinese influence follows closely behind the trucks — and the “people’s trade” — that travel back and forth along the Burma Road.

Chinese cultural and commercial influence occasionally touches a sensitive nerve. Like the time in Mandalay a few years back when a Chinese company, powerful but new to Myanmar, placed a billboard-sized logo on top of the building it leased. The sign declared: “China Dragon” — simply the company name. The Myanmar government authorities would have none of it; they made the company take its sign down. The company withdrew its investment, packed up and went home.

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⁹ James George Scott, *The Burman: His Life and Notions*. (New York: Norton & Company, 1963), 546.

“Living Vestiges: An Afternoon Stroll through Maymyo”

A two-hour, 60-kilometer drive northeast from Mandalay, over dusty mountain roads, rests an intriguing town called Maymyo — once the summer getaway of both Burmese rulers and later British colonizers. I spent the night at the Candacraig, a sprawling British estate built in 1904 by a Colonel May as the British bachelors’ quarters. The mansion, trimmed in teak, sits in the middle of a neighborhood of Tudor-style homes, signs of how British expatriates tried at one time to transport England to their posts in northern Burma.

The fascinating physical memories of British influence were surpassed only by the collection of people I met on a stroll through the mountain town one pleasant March afternoon — evidence of, as an elderly Indian resident told me, the “cosmopolitan” makeup of Maymyo.

Down the hill from the Candacraig, a Chinese community center had moved into another Tudor-style home and over the decades built extensions to the structure housing a clinic, a home for the elderly and classrooms. In addition, an impressive temple to the Buddhist goddess of mercy, gardens, even a children’s playground and pagoda rounded out the full-service community center serving Maymyo’s Chinese population.

Elderly women with bound feet hobbled around the property, enjoying each others’ company; Chinese gardeners showed children how to care for the flowers; middle-aged couples walked the grounds after a day’s work.

As I headed toward the gate, two Indian gentlemen walked up, also on a late-afternoon stroll. They spoke beautiful English. The older of the two, a 77-year-old retired inspector general for Burmese military acquisitions, spoke of his parents who had come from Calcutta before he was born. His father worked for the Indian Civil Service’s treasury department (at the time implementing orders of the British). He was responsible for ensuring that all the laborers building the railroads were paid. Before the British came, the man gently reminded me, Burma had no railroads.

The man’s companion, a younger man in his 50s, teaches Hindi at Myanmar’s Defense Academy, located in Maymyo.

I walked on and climbed the five-layer metal pagoda. Leaning over the top railing, overlooking the community center, I struck up a conversation with a Chinese couple, new arrivals to Maymyo. Originally from coastal China, they spoke of their building-materials business, moving glass products from Kunming to Myanmar.

But they are not ready to invest in Myanmar. “The political atmosphere is too unstable,” they said, “and the rule of law is not mature enough.” Interesting. Their alternative? “People’s trade”; otherwise, high tariffs would put them out of business. And though they have not yet sunk money into Myanmar, they want to establish themselves in Maymyo so they’ll be ready one day if things take off — it’s a bet they’re willing to make.

Their child attends the Chinese school in town, another one of Myanmar’s Chinese schools filled with children of adults who immigrated during waves of exodus from China. “Seems like you all just might be part of yet another migration, a money-making wave,” I suggested. They laughed — and agreed.

The only living vestige of the British colonial era I encountered during that almost-surreal afternoon walk stretched her withered hand toward me and spoke in impeccable Queen Anne’s English, “May I have some money, sir. I’m hungry.” A bag lady with features perhaps half British and half Burmese, she said she was born in London and came to Burma with her parents. I contributed a few dollars and she shuffled off.

Living memories.



The Candacraig, est. 1904



The Chinese community center, as viewed from the pagoda, built out from a Tudor-style home now serves the Chinese community in Maymyo

CHINA'S "WILD WEST"

For obvious reasons — economic weakness and political entrenchment in Myanmar — one influence China will not have over its neighbor in the immediate future is spreading Chinese economic dynamism beyond its western frontier.

And the contrast between the 20 meters that separate Myanmar from China is stark. When one walks across the casually-guarded border, through the Chinese-style gate, China's "wild west" smacks you in the face: brilliant neon lights, legalized casinos, unashamed call girls and other purveyors standing on the streets, all obviously waiting for someone to walk up and ask for something.¹⁰

People on the street in Ruili say Asia's financial ills, combined with economic slowdown within China, have negatively affected border trade. Still, the lively trade in this border town on a bad day made me wonder what it's like when things are busy. Ruili hopped.

As one of two windows for Yunnan Province's outward-looking trade, Ruili and the nearby towns of Mangshi, Tengchong and Baoshan sparkle compared with equivalent-size, less outward looking locations in southwest China — like Guizhou Province.¹¹

Though among China's top five provinces in contributing tax revenues to Beijing (due in large part to its number-one position in tobacco production) Yunnan is grain- and oil-dependent. Most of its oil, for example, comes from northeast China by train.

One can see, then, why Yunnan Province is aggressively pushing trade with its neighbors, no longer wanting to depend only on trade via China's coast (out

the Yangzi River and through Shanghai).

Yunnan is promoting all kinds of opportunities for foreign capital to find its way to its distant location, like direct flights to Japan that opened to Tokyo and Osaka on March 28, 1999.¹²

Also in March, Yunnan's first-ever government delegation to India spent two weeks examining and discussing the trade potential between Yunnan and the world's second-most-populous nation. One government official who participated in the delegation told me how talks have begun on exchanging raw materials and consumer goods. "And if we could open a direct flight," she added, "it would take just two hours to get from Kunming to India."

Viewing China from "the front" — the golden rim of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong — border trade out the back door of the western frontier seems distant and sleepy.

Reality, however, communicates a different story: robust "people's trade" — facilitated by the Burma Road — strengthens yet another aspect of China's "giant" position in Asia. Think about it: there's a good chance that that jade bracelet, that ruby pendant, that teakwood piece of furniture, that gecko-medicinal concoction or even, can I say it, that hairpiece was actually "Made in Myanmar," not in China.

Maybe that sucking sound I heard in Myanmar's northern mountains was actually the roar of a dragon.

Sincerely,



¹⁰ Visas are not required for Chinese and Burmese citizens. Plus, this border does not see many westerners, especially those coming into China from Myanmar out of the Shan State. I actually had to show the Chinese immigration officials, step-by-step, how to process my re-entry visa!

¹¹ Foreign trade makes up 14 percent of Yunnan Province's gross domestic product. Compare that with Guizhou Province's five percent. One also has to factor in the large volume of non-reported trade — "people's trade" — which is not reflected in official figures, but boosts the province's economy.

¹² Besides the general attraction of tourism in Yunnan, some claim that Japan's ancestors originated in Yunnan Province. This creates a big draw, Yunnan government officials and business people hope, for direct flights from Japan to Kunming.

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