

Book Review

Metamorphosis: Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar. Edited by Renaud Egreteau and François Robinne. IRASEC Series on Contemporary Asia, Singapore: NUS Press, 2015. 428 pp., \$42.00 (cloth).

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This edited volume brings together contributions from some well-seasoned and respected experts of Myanmar. In itself, the book is an important achievement and the result is readable and highly informative. The pieces in the book are eclectic, but this is a strength. The authors delve into new and original research questions, such as MP behavior in parliaments or the role of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar; and also present original data and use fruitful methods, such as a textual study of protesters' signboards and chants.

The book is structured in four parts. Part 1 looks at Myanmar's "evolving political ecologies". In chapter 1, Egreteau observes an evolution in the legislative behavior and political significance of the military members of parliament (MPs) in the national parliament since 2011. Rather than acting as veto players, as originally expected from them, military MPs have increasingly shown their skills at participating in parliamentary debates and acting as arbitrators. If lack of legitimacy drives military MPs toward finding an alternative role in parliament, how do normal citizens build their political credential in the absence of a political culture? Looking at the life story of a newly elected Rakhine MP, de Mersan (chapter 2) reveals that the politician draws his political legitimacy from previous cultural activism and the ideal of the "learned man", both forms of covert political contestation under the Junta. Moving to the grassroots, Prasse-Freeman (chapter 3) observed nascent conceptions of "the political," yet important "tactical ambivalence" in protesters' chants and signboards, especially concerning notions such as "rule of law."

Part 2 looks at the struggles for nation building, which continue to characterize Myanmar's political development. While most studies take for granted the homogeneity of the majority Burman group, Boutry (chapter 4) finds a great deal of flexibility in the daily life of local interethnic relationship in the Tanintharyi Region (southernmost region of Myanmar). These findings contrast well with Leider's chapter on Rakhine's Buddhist-Muslim conflict. He observes how rigid and mutually exclusive are these two groups' claims to the history and geography of the region and how the use of history conceals the politically constructed nature of identity (especially of the Rohingya). Jaquet (chapter 7) looks at the narratives surrounding the resumption of Kachin's armed rebellion and argues that Kachin armed leaders try to win the war ideologically by painting themselves as victims and hope to restore their challenged legitimacy. Finally, Fergusson (chapter 5) looks at Shan and exiled-Shan perspective on the Shan State and the changing views on their "minority" status.

Part 3 looks at the "trajectories of social change". This section is, however, less about the trajectories of social change than the space in which agents of social change can operate. This is especially true for Banki (chapter 9) who highlights the continued and changing nature of Burmese activists' precarity. The unpredictability of the current system of governance, rather than punishment alone, shapes activists' cautious use of their new freedom, such as freedom of the press. Metro (chapter 8) focuses on a new locus of activism and observes that Burmese students and teachers actively seek and implement solutions to the challenges they face such as ethnic discrimination, language barriers, out-dated teaching methods, and corruption. Finally, Coderey (chapter 10) shows the weakness of Rakhine local health system and argues that accessibility to biomedical services in the region is characterized by long-lasting inequalities.

By far the most enlightening section of the book, Part 4 looks at the changing Buddhist landscape. Kawanami (chapter 11) discusses the socio-religious position of Myanmar growingly large contingent of Buddhist nuns. Marked by legal ambiguity and lack of social recognition, Buddhist nuns nevertheless increasingly play a role in social and religious work. Like Kawanami, Brac de la Perrière (chapter 12) goes beyond the horrifying image of intolerant and anti-Muslim Burmese monks as recently portrayed by the press. She argues that monks' social involvement in the humanitarian sector, mass preaching, and defense of Buddhism are ultimately tied to the question of the sangha's role in Burmese society. Through social involvement, monks seek to secure greater

autonomy and a role in state's affairs. Robinne (chapter 13) looks at the increasing correspondence of ethnic and religious identities. He describes a process in which ethnic groups have Christianized local cultures and Muslim associations have Islamized Burmese Muslims. Looking at anti-Muslim mobilization, he suggests that what is changing today is not so much the forces at play (e.g. essentialist conception of the nation), but the choice of the community targeted.

As it is often the case with edited volume, the book is conspicuously lacking a conclusion. What are the main trends of change? How can we compare 'metamorphosis' across fields? For example, why is change happening so fast in the religious field and more slowly in the ethnic relations field? Without an editors' summation, the book leaves to the reader the task of finding common ground and comparative threads from disparate contributions. For this rapidly changing part of the world, a conclusion chapter might have ensured a longer life for the book, while highlighting some of its best and most enduring contributions to our understanding of Myanmar's emerging polity.