

REFERENCE

Scott, James C. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

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Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories under the Burmese Regime. Edited by Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 268 pp.

The theme of this book — everyday lives of everyday people — is taken up with enthusiasm, sympathy and nuance in its ten (excluding the introduction) chapters. The narratives are sometimes poignant, and often compelling, providing us a glimpse into the lives of men and women who have had to negotiate the often inexplicable and unpredictable currents of wider political and economic forces.

This book is a timely and welcome contribution to Myanmar studies, a field that has until recently focused on broader themes such as the military, the political struggle for democracy, ethnic armed conflict and peace negotiations. Where there have been accounts of individual lives, they have tended to be biographies of the elite or well-known individuals such as Aung San Suu Kyi, F.K. Lehman, Ne Win, Than Shwe and U Nu. When we do encounter the lives of “ordinary” people, these have often been presented as collective voices amalgamated into harrowing accounts of human rights abuses and suffering. Undoubtedly, these themes and personages play a fundamental role in advancing our understanding of Myanmar and its people. Nevertheless, these studies only document certain aspects of the diversity of experiences.

This book achieves the goal of presenting the everyday lives of people in Myanmar in three distinct ways.

First, it examines the lives of Burmese people within the context of wider political events, such as the 1988 demonstrations and the Saffron Revolution of 2007. This is elegantly done by the authors, who describe the ways in which personal lives are woven into and

play a part in major political upheavals experienced in the country. It was fascinating to read about certain aspects of well-known political and economic events and about the ways in which they affected the various chapters' protagonists. For example, the devaluation of the currency under Ne Win and the appropriation of bank deposits by the government had a huge and lasting impact on U Thein Aung, as described in Hsin-Chun Tasaw Lu's chapter. The impact of government policies on the everyday lives of people, and how they had to cope are testimony to the resourcefulness, creativity and tenacity of these "ordinary" people.

The second aspect of the book that makes it a success is the way in which the nuances, contradictions and complexities of individual lives are vividly captured. These are exemplified in Hsin-Chun Tasaw Lu's description of U Thein Aung's refusal to perform in public as a protest against attempts to commercialize and politicize music; James C. Scott's chapter on Dr U Tin Win, who finds escape in film and uses it to frame meaning in his life; and Ardeh Maung Thawngmung's account of the political career of Karen activist Maung Sin Kye.

Moreover, many of these narratives show us the way in which individuals have forged their own paths against what appear to be overwhelming odds. Pascal Khoo-Thwe describes the hardships and joys of his mother's life, Ma Thida writes about her determination to live democratic ideals through medical practice and writing, Eric Tagliacozzo introduces the experiences of Muslims who have undertaken pilgrimages to Mecca despite quotas set by the Burmese government, and Wen-Chin Chang details the setbacks and travels of two Chinese traders.

The third exciting feature of the book is the description of people's lives as embedded in social relations. Mandy Sadan's narrative of her mother-in-law, Maran Ja Bang; Maxime Boutry's chapter on the Burman and Moken living on islands off the southern coast; and Karin Eberhardt's account of the agricultural contributions of Sara Brang Awng in northern Shan State speak to the importance of situating individuals within their communities. In particular, Bénédicté Brac

de la Perrière's chapter on her research assistant/informant reveals the way in which the divide between ordinary people and those who hold power and influence in Burmese society is bridged by "professional mediators" or *pweza* (p. 71). These aspects of Burmese society are seldom discussed in newspaper articles, human rights reports and scholarly works.

The strength of the book — the inclusion of non-academic writers and academic ones — is also its weakness. The non-academic writers bring personal sentiments and immediacy to the narratives, while the academic writers do an excellent job of foregrounding the personal accounts in wider social, political and economic contexts. However, the styles of writing are necessarily different in tone and context, and thus one experiences a sense of unevenness when going from an academic account to a personal one. However, this in no way detracts from a book that accomplishes its goal of exploring the lives of ordinary Burmese admirably.

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Remembering the Samsui Women: Migration and Social Memory in Singapore and China. By Kelvin E.Y. Low. Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2014. xii+252pp.

The notion of social memory and the processes of both remembering and forgetting have now become major themes in cultural studies. However, much of this literature remains theoretical and abstract, and relatively little of it addresses issues pertinent to Asia. This volume attempts to address these two concerns through its interrogation of the theoretical literature as a route into the examination of migratory histories, and specifically of the links between China and Singapore as mediated in particular by the experiences of the well-known group of female migrants known as the Samsui women.