

Donald Seekins: *Burma and Japan since 1940. From 'Co-Prosperity' to 'Quiet Dialogue'*

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Contents

Donald Seekins' book is about Japanese-Burmese relations from the time of Japan's initial interest in Burma before World War II, and its subsequent occupation of the country, up to about 2004. The author teaches Southeast Asian Studies at the private Meio University in Okinawa and has published several articles and books on Burma.

The book is divided into six chapters, arranged chronologically. The first ('Burma in World War II: The Paradoxes of State- and Army-Building') emphasizes the significance of the Japanese occupation for the future development of Burma, tracing the 'Burmese tragedy' – ethnic confrontation and the manipulation of the country by its neighbours – back to the foundations of independent Burma laid during this period.

Chapter 2 ('Burmese and Japanese War Narratives') analyses the perception of this period in post-war Burmese and Japanese accounts. The official Burmese assessment depicts this period as a lesson to preserve national unity across ethnic diversity; Japanese novels tend to idealize Burmese people, thus paving the way for a special kind of 'friendship' between the two countries.

The middle chapter (*Biru-Kichi: Burma-Japan Relations and the Policy of Aid, 1951-1988*) deals with Japan's post-war engagement in Burma up to the end of the socialist policies of the Ne Win period. The aid given to Burma was based on an attitude of *Biru-Kichi*, 'Burma craziness', among Japanese bureaucrats and businessmen in line with the romantic picture presented in the Japanese war narratives. The guiding motif of Japan's economic and development aid, however, was the expectation of a 'boomerang economy', that is, an engagement benefiting the interests of certain sectors of Japan's business community. The author argues that without Japanese economic assistance Ne Win's regime might have collapsed even earlier.

The final chapters deal with post-1988 affairs. Chapter 4 ('Japan's Responses to the Post-1988 Political Crisis in Burma') describes the various stages of Japan's policy towards the new regime – distance, recognition of realities, frustration with the lack of democratic progress – concluding with a short note on the 'cooler' attitude of the currently ruling generals towards Japan as compared with the previous regime and an assessment of Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity in Japan. Chapter 5 ('The Ambiguities of "Quiet Dialogue"') highlights the resumption of Japanese business involvement, development aid, and humanitarian assistance as part of an only half-heartedly implemented 'carrot-and-stick policy'. It also discusses attempts by right-wing

Japanese intellectuals to ‘demythologize’ Aung San Suu Kyi and openly advocate assistance to the Burmese state.

The last chapter’s conclusions identify four ‘miscalculations’ in Japan’s post-1988 policies towards Burma. Firstly, internal factors influencing the country’s development were neglected in favour of general assumptions as to how Asian countries could advance economically and politically. Secondly, China’s increased influence on Burma was not foreseen. Thirdly, the appeal of economic incentives for Burmese rulers was overestimated. Fourthly, the stability and cleverness of the Burmese military was underestimated. Finally, the lack of a ‘coherent philosophy’ behind Japan’s policies – and those of other countries – towards Burma is stated as one of the main reasons for Burma’s continued lack of ‘genuine independence’, both internally and in relation to other countries.

Assessment

The book looks at Burma’s ‘tragedy’ as being a result of both internal and external factors, thus placing the country’s history in a global context. It demonstrates that Japanese attitudes and actions towards the country throughout different periods were mainly guided by Japanese self-interest and lacked a deeper understanding of Burma’s ‘real’ problems. Japan did not liberate Burma in 1942, nor did it do so later. This thesis might also be applicable to the relations of other countries with Burma. The country was and is a fine projection screen for fantasies about what Burma ‘is’ in connection with practical self-interests of varying kinds – economic as well as humanitarian.

The book also provides detailed facts and figures on Japanese investment in Burma, as well as the cultural background behind Japanese perceptions of the country and its protagonists. What is missing, however, is an evaluation of the activities of the many Japanese NGOs working in post-1988 Burma; these provided help for many projects in the country and thus contributed to the emergence of segments of civil society in Myanmar.

The preceding observation highlights a weakness of the book. It presents a rather homogeneously dark picture of Burma’s post-war history, following the conventional wisdom of putting most of the blame for Burma’s poor political and economic performance on Ne Win’s takeover of power in 1962, the country’s ‘Eastern European-style socialist economic policies’, and the inability of the post-1988 junta to share power with the opposition represented by Aung San Suu Kyi. Thus, in correctly tracing the shortcomings of Japan’s policy towards Burma/Myanmar, the book doesn’t contribute to any ‘alternative philosophy’ for solving the country’s problems.

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