

## Recovering a lost Genealogy : Taw Sein Ko and the Colonial Roots of 'Myanmar Studies'

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### Introduction

The surge<sup>1)</sup> in academic interest about Myanmar helps to inform the agenda for this article, because it is concerned with the ways in which Burma has been studied. This discussion, which represents a fairly early stage of research, will draw upon the work of Taw Sein Ko (1864-1930) as a means to investigate the development and role of British thought about Burma between 1886-1920. This article both in terms of its form and content is predicated on the assumption that both Taw Sein Ko and the British investigation of Burma remained understudied subjects. The bulk of this literature is currently out of print and almost certainly little read, but once consisted of the most organized and systematic examination of Burma which had ever been conducted. In addition, it is worth raising the point that there are ways in which the future study of Myanmar can benefit from an investigation into the history of research about the country. The position taken here is that the contemporary situation has more parallels with context in which the knowledge produced by the British was first

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<sup>1)</sup> Andrew Selth. 2007. Modern Burma Studies: A View from the Edge, Southeast Asia Research Centre (Hong Kong) Working Paper Series 96. 4-5.

produced. After all, students to study the country do so in a similar context: for very different reasons the vast amount of research about Myanmar is being done by and for foreigners. Recovering the genealogy of colonial knowledge may not be an immediate priority for the student of Myanmar history and culture, but it may very well shed useful light on scholarship about the country.

### British thought about Burma

The British contribution to the study of Burma has never itself been systematically studied, yet it was during the period of colonization that a significant amount of writing about the country took place. The needs of the colonial state, the ‘Leviathan’ as John Furnivall would come to famously describe it ensured that the British produced a significant amount of information about Burma. The exploration of things in Burma (and other places in the region) was usually not disinterested: colonial policy making required a working knowledge of the country. As such, many of the discourses which defined British activity were shaped by some of the worst excesses of colonialism: racism, orientalism and often brutal indifference. Obviously, while not formally part of the colonial state, the missionaries who wrote about Buddhism (and other topics) could hardly have been said to have been disinterested.

Nonetheless, it is probably not too much to claim that the colonial effort, as such, was without precedent: never had the country and its peoples been investigated in such a sustained matter. In addition, colonial knowledge was not monolithic, as it involved a wide range of people and multiplicity of discourses. Civil servants examined Burman subjects in great detail, while as private citizens Britons recorded a range of their own interactions with the country. At the risk of stating the

obvious, many of these writings also reflected direct historical circumstance. Identifying authors as British or colonizers may be generally useful, but it hardly goes to the immediate or direct experiences of those who wrote. Those who put pen to paper around the time of the First Anglo-Burman War did so with much less knowledge than their counterparts who wrote on the eve of the Third Anglo-Burman War and the latter were not as prepared by those who published around the time of World War I.

All told, British thought and publications about the country were generally progressive: over the course of colonial rule they became more sophisticated and were almost certainly written with greater accuracy. For example, Henry Gouger wrote one of the earlier books about Burma to reach metropolitan audiences. In *A Personal Narrative of Two Year's Imprisonment in Burmah 1824-26* (1860), Gouger was critical of British policy, but he regarded Burma as a “land of savage ignorance”.<sup>2)</sup> Yet, within a generation a healthy body of literature which was in print, which tended to avoid such imprecations. To be sure, it is possible to find the biases of colonialism stamped in virtually every publication, but the breadth and depth of this body of literature also speaks to its heterogeneity.

To understand the production of knowledge about Burma, it is useful to recognize, as well, the diversity of figures associated with it. Not all of these figures were male colonial civil servants or former soldiers; in fact, they were not all British: indeed, the examination of the intellectual history of the British empire needs to recover the work of indigenous writers. Including Taw Sein Ko into any canon of British writing about Burma speaks to the varied nature of colonial authorship. As we will see, the argument here is that Taw Sein Ko lifted his pen as one of British Burma's leading intellectual figures and he did so as a committed civil servant.

<sup>2)</sup> Henry Gouger. 1860. *A Personal Narrative of Two Year's Imprisonment in Burmah 1824-1826*. London. 301.

Taw Sein Ko remains one of the great understudied figures in the history not only of Burma and Southeast Asia, but the British empire. Sir George Scott and Harold Fielding Hall have been remembered as major intellectual forces in Burma around the turn of the century. Scott did much to introduce Burma to the Western world; Fielding-Hall labored to portray Burma in sympathetic terms to colonial readers. In contrast, like V. C. Scott O'Connor, author of the *Silken East* (1904) and *Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma*(1907), Taw Sein Ko remains both forgotten and unknown. Yet, Taw Sein Ko was a major figure in Burma in first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In fact, in British Burma Taw Sein Ko was almost certainly more important than either Fielding-Hall or O'Connor and possibly as significant as Sir George Scott.

Therefore, the work of Taw Sein Ko, whose most prominent role was Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey in Burma, reveals a great deal about the colonial mind sets which shaped the academic exploration of the country. Taw Sein Ko was active in the administration of the colonial state—but he was also a prolific and wide-ranging writer, whose interests extended from the recovery of Burma's history and culture to contemporary educational policy. Investigating his thought reveals not only a lively mind, but a much larger set of academic conventions which were being assembled to understand Burma. Unfortunately, Taw Sein Ko did not write for popular audiences: in his authorship there was no equivalent to Mrs Ernst Hart's *Picturesque Burma* or the Joseph Dautremer's *Burma Under British Rule* (1913). Instead, Taw Sein Ko's writings appeared in a number of places, but they have been assembled in an under-edited two volume work called *Burmese Sketches*.<sup>3)</sup> While these volumes contain a wealth of interesting material, they do not always identify the context

<sup>3)</sup> Taw Sein Ko. 1913. *Burmese Sketches 1. Rangoon and 1920. Burmese Sketches 2. Rangoon.*

in which these publications appear. That is, it is not always where and when some of these fragmentary pieces were published—if they were in fact published at all. Nevertheless, an exploration of *Burmese Sketches* reveals a lively, wide-ranging mind which grappled with many of the historical, social, religious and political issues of the day. Accordingly, Taw SeinKo's agenda revealed many of the aims and conditions of colonial knowledge production.

In an impressive article which appeared in *South East Asia Research* Penny Edwards explored Taw Sein Ko's thought in depth.<sup>4)</sup> 'Relocating the Interlocuter Taw Sein Ko (1864-1930) and the Itinerancy of Knowledge in British Burma' Edwards identified him as a knowledge trader whose "fluency in diverse cultures and languages enabled him to act as a broker between Burmese, Chinese and European domains of knowledge."<sup>5)</sup> Situating Taw Sein Ko as a knowledge broker allowed Edwards to explore some of the hierarchies of knowledge and status in the world of British Burma, while providing her with an avenue in which to recast the academic exploration of the position of Chinese in colonial Southeast Asia. Without question, Edwards' article is the most sustained scholarly discussion of Taw Sein Ko's life and work yet to be written. Following the work of Homi Bhabha, who articulated the idea of a 'Third space' Edwards concluded that Taw Sein Ko was a good example of a 'third culture interlocutors', which meant that his value came from the fact that he could be a "translator, negotiator and interlocutor between and across cultures."<sup>6)</sup> These formulations have considerable merit as Taw Sein Ko's life and writings reflect many of these impulses and services. Edwards continued that if Taw Sein Ko could be understood in terms of being a knowledge broker, as such, then

4) Penny Edwards. 2004. Relocating the Interlocutor: Taw Sein Ko (1864-1930) and the Itinerancy of Knowledge in British Burma. *South East Asia Research* 12(3): 277-335.

5) Edwards, 278.

6) Edwards, 331.

“we can avoid reducing Taw Sein Ko to the restrictive figure of ‘the hybrid,’ a label that risks mis-translating Taw Sein Ko as a Kiplingesque figure who has ‘lost his own country and not acquired any other.’ Kipling’s configuration of the ‘monstrous hybridism of East and West’ cohered with late Victorian fears of racial, cultural and social degeneration. The hybrid was viewed with horror by European elites, precisely because it threatened to destabilize the striation of the English and native, white and non-white, British Burma and French Indo-China, on whose maintenance and entrenchment the continuation and justification of imperial rule and its global realpolitik depended.<sup>7)</sup>

Whether European elites in colonial settings felt so threatened by hybridity might be debated. It is clear that there were many Eurasians in the British empire and they were often doubly rejected. However, what I want to argue here is that despite the value and many fine points made by Penny Edwards, it makes a great deal of sense to regard Taw Sein Ko as a hybrid—precisely because it should better enable us to recontextualize British writing about Burma.

Recovering the genealogy of colonial knowledge about Burma will reveal that hybridity may have been an essential feature of this scholarship—one which might characterize not only the writings of Taw Sein Ko, but also V. C. Scott O’ Connor , Harold Fielding Hall and, of course, Shway Yoe—that is Sir George Scott. To characterize hybridity in Kiplingesque terms is miss the opportunity to see that it appealed to British writers because it enabled them to try to translate or connect what they had seen to the wider metropolitan audiences to whom they wrote. Intentional hybridity, to coin a phrase, can be seen in O’Connor’s magisterial *The Silken East* because his deep affection for things Burmese probably caused him to make a racist argument. As

<sup>7)</sup> Edwards, 331-332.

I have argued elsewhere, O'Connor identified with the Burmese to the point of making the Indians the 'other' and with it the point of differentiation and invective. Again, Harold Fielding Hall's frustrations were the relative difference of most Britons to Burma and its peoples: his writings, principally *The Soul of the People* (1898), *A People at School* (1906) and *The Inward Light* (1908), sought to translate Buddhism into terms that British audiences might find attractive. However, the most famous has to be Shway Yoe—the pseudonym which he employed as the author of *The Burman* (1882). Shway Yoe was so successful that some reviewers in Britain believed that the book was written by a Burman. To locate Taw Sein Ko within the domain of colonial hybridic author, then, is actually to connect his work to those British authors who believed that it was an essential means to communicate across cultural barriers.

With its built in skepticism about the durability and viability about the way their contemporaries organized knowledge and information, it also reflected a set of cultural anxieties which could be said to fit into some of the main themes of Victorian thought. It might be well to note that British intellectual life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was more diverse than is of ten remembered. While the influence of utilitarianism, liberalism and positivism were self-evident to most, there were other forms of thought which proved to be at least as influential and durable. Many 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals were suspicious of 'political economy' (and its doctrines), the self confidence of scientific advance and secular materialism. It is useful to remember that many of Victorian Britain's most engaging thinkers made their mark precisely by calling into question dominant forms of thought. To cite a few obvious examples, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and William Morris are read today because of their incisive criticisms of Victorian thought and practices. These influential figures wrote in ways which challenged the both content and form of what they perceived to be the essentializing discourses

of their time. That is, when Scott, O'Connor, and Fielding-Hall adopted their hybrid positions, they were in many ways following some of the formulas developed by those who might be regarded as Victorian Britain's intellectual dissidents.

Yet, Taw Sein Ko, whose Chinese/Shan background, modern Buddhist outlook, education in Rangoon and Cambridge, fluency in multiple languages made him more cosmopolitan than simply hybrid, labored with a faith even more central to 19<sup>th</sup> century British thinkers. In exploring Taw Sein Ko's writings, it is clear that unlike O'Connor or Fielding-Hall, he was a confident modernizer who believed that the pursuit of objectivity—which might come through scholarship—was ultimately the best way to understand Burma's past, present and future in the British Empire. To read Taw Sein Ko is to become aware that there was never any real danger that he might be characterized as someone who 'lost his own country and not acquired any other' because, in fact, he functioned as a public intellectual. While this term has its limitations, it useful here because it illustrates the fact that Taw Sein Ko was someone who believed that he wrote and acted to promote the development of his society—at least in part because it always was his society. Finally, situating Taw Sein Ko as an important and engaging public voice in British Burma should alert us to the diversity and richness of the intellectual life which was present in the country from the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

### Taw Sein Ko: Biographical Sketch and Outlook

In order to make these issues manifest, it is useful to recall Taw Sein Ko's impressive rise within the world of British Burma. Since Taw Sein Ko's father was a merchant who had migrated from Fujian and his mother was a Shan Princess, he grew up 'Chinese' in Burma.



Penny Edwards found that Rangoon Chinese community still remembered Taw Sein Ko, principally for his wide ranging influence over local affairs.<sup>8)</sup> The portrait of Taw Sein Ko which emerges from R. Talbot Kelly's *Burma Painted and Described* (1905) is that of a well connected and locally significant figure. Kelly called him the "Government archaeologist" and added that he was a "cultured gentleman of charming and agreeable manner".<sup>9)</sup> Kelly explained that he was "personally indebted for an interesting glimpse at Chinese life in Rangoon."<sup>10)</sup> Kelly, as such, was treated to an exhibition of Chinese prosperity and also possibly an idea of how this community –or at least Taw Sein Ko –regarded Burma's future. Kelly made not only the tour, but the remarks which accompanied it available for his readers. While visiting a temple Kelly related that my "guide explained to me that "the English always like to have few children, one, two, or three perhaps, but we like to have lots and lots!"<sup>11)</sup> Furthermore, Taw Sein Ko stressed not only Chinese religious tolerance, but the way that it made them different from other migrant groups because they were not like the "Mohammedans and Hindus".<sup>12)</sup> Kelly concluded:

Though superstitious the Chinese are capable and industrious, easy to get on with, and ever ready to make light of their mishaps. They are good businessmen and hard bargainers, but once an agreement has been arrived at their given word is literally their bond, and may be implicitly trusted. Several times during my stay in Burma I was brought into close association with the Chinese, and soon found my inborn antipathy and misconception give place to a growing respect and real liking for a people often ignorantly maligned. If,

8) Edwards, 283.

9) R. Talbot Kelly. 1905. *Burma: Painted and Described*. London. 33.

10) Kelly. 32.

11) Kelly. 37.

12) Kelly. 37.

as unfortunately appears to be the case, the pure Burman is destined to disappear in favour of a hybrid race, I cannot help hoping that the preponderating alien blood will be Chinese rather than that of the more servile and less able native of India.<sup>13)</sup>

This episode aptly illustrates the way in which Taw Sein Ko could function as a ‘knowledge broker’, in this case making Chinese migration, prosperity and culture appealing to Westerners. At the same time, it should be pointed out that to many of his contemporaries, Taw Sein Ko was always regarded as simply Chinese.<sup>14)</sup> Yet, his development was decisively affected by the Burman environment. Taw Sein Ko’s family moved to Mandalay in 1871, where he attended a well regarded mission school. The death of his father in 1875 caused him to leave Mandalay. His education would continue at the Anglo-Chinese school in Prome. His examination results were impressive and he was awarded a scholarship to Rangoon College, where he was the youngest student to matriculate. At age 17 in 1881 he went to Calcutta where he passed the Indian Civil Service exams with distinction.<sup>15)</sup> In 1886 Taw went to Mandalay and subsequently the Shanstatesha she helped to support the ‘pacification’ of Burma. After serving the British government in newly conquered Upper Burma he was sent to Cambridge, where he took a degree from Christ’s College in 1893. Subsequently, he was sent to Peking in 1897 to master his understanding of the Chinese language.<sup>16)</sup> Here turned to serve the Indian Empire, particularly in its relationships with China. During the Boxer Rising Taw ensured that the border between Burma and China (unlike Sino-Indochinese border) remained peaceful. By this time, Taw

<sup>13)</sup> Kelly. 37-38.

<sup>14)</sup> Edwards has collected a number of assessments of Taw SeinKo which indicate the ways in which a number of contemporaries and subsequent scholars have come to regard him. See 286-287.

<sup>15)</sup> Edwards. 296

<sup>16)</sup> *Burmese Sketches* 1, 143

Sein Ko was also establishing his presence as a significant and influential voice in public affairs. His articles were appearing in journals such as *Indian Antiquary*, *Asiatic Quarterly Review*, the *Rangoon Gazette*, *Buddhism* and *Our Monthly*. At the same time, he worked as a modernizer in Burma: he was one who argued for the development of trade with and through Southwest China; he served as President of the Society for the Prevention of Infant Mortality and he was a member of the Educational Syndicate. It was in this role that he provided assistance to the Local Government, especially providing guidance over the issues involving try to coordinate monastic and vernacular education. His interests extended to university education as he was active between 1917-1918 on Burma's University Committee. It was in this capacity that he helped to secure the recognition of the Burmese language and literature in the curriculum of the projected university.<sup>17)</sup> These activities also reflected his deep commitment to Buddhism. In 1895 he took part in the revival of the Pali Examinations in Buddhist Theology and during 1902-1903 in the election, recognition and installation of the *Thathanabaing* (or Buddhist archbishop).<sup>18)</sup>

All of these efforts were impressive, but Taw Sein Ko has been remembered as the "Pioneer of Archaeology" in Burma.<sup>19)</sup> A key part of his intellectual development had been working for E. Forchhammer<sup>20)</sup> Upon the death of Forchhammer in 1890, Taw was appointed to edit and publish his papers. Taw Sein Ko would hold a number of positions related to archaeology – the foremost of which was Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey in Burma.<sup>21)</sup> It should be pointed out that subsequent scholars have recognized Taw Sein Ko's

17) *Burmese Sketches* 2, 222.

18) *Burmese Sketches* 2, 222.

19) *Burmese Sketches* 2, 223.

20) *Burmese Sketches* 1. 2, 220.

21) Paul Strachan. 1989. *Bagan Art and Architecture of Old Burma*. Scotland. 4.

limitations as an archaeologist. For example, Paul Strachan in *Pagan: Art and Architecture of Old Burma*(1989) acknowledged that Taw Sein Ko “was responsible for inaugurating the western discipline of archaeology” in Burma.<sup>22)</sup> Yet, here regarded Taw as “highly Sino-centric” and portrayed his work as a bit unsophisticated. Nonetheless, Strachan also recognized that between 1901-1915 the archaeological survey under Taw Sein Ko was responsible for repairing a large number of temples and publishing articles on a number of lost structures. (4) Strachan’s views would come later as he saw the work of Charles Duroiselle and G. H. Luce as playing decisive roles in the development of archaeological scholarship in Burma. Finally, it might be noted that all of Taw Sein Ko’s efforts led to his public recognition as a servant of the empire. In 1903 he received the K. I. H. for meritorious public service and in 1911 he received the Imperial Service Order.

Nonetheless, there was the curious note to the preface of the second volume of *Burmese Sketches* which might raise question about his self-understanding. Reflecting on the future of Burma after the Great War he forecast that it would become “one of the most important Provinces of the Indian Empire” and in that context his “fugitive essays” would make a contribution to the public opinion of this progressive province.<sup>23)</sup> Seemingly, Taw Sein Ko was a public figure, but felt under appreciated. He had achieved numerous honors but was left with “fugitive essays”. Even a cursory examination of some of Taw Sein Ko’s writings reveals that he frequently endorsed many of the policies of the British empire. However, a different picture emerges from his some of his private correspondence and papers. Edwards’ painstaking research enabled her to find places where Taw Sein Ko articulated his frustrations with the British. He complained about ‘the

22) Paul Strachan. 1989. 4

23) *Burmese Sketches*, vol. 2. i

doctrine of infallibility of European views on all Asiatic matters.”<sup>24)</sup> Edwards concluded that Taw Sein Ko’s status was actually problematic: with “his Sino-Burmese parentage, his British education, and later sojourns in London and Peking, Taw Sein Ko aroused discomfort in some Europeans” because he was an “interloper between cultures, races and status”. She claimed that this discomfort could be seen in

“their snide asides and schoolmasterly condemnations of his lack of structure or substance, penned in their prefaces to his Archaeological Reports, several of Taw Sein Ko’s superiors reduce him to the figure of a mimicman, the equivalent of Rudyard Kipling’s ethnologist Hurree Babu, the ‘ontologically funny native’ whose achievements can never quite match up to ‘real’ Europeans in his field, and who, like Taw Sein Ko, aspires to publication in the *Asiatic Quarterly Review*.<sup>25)</sup>

Edwards analysis is suggestive, but exaggerated. In fact, there is no direct evidence to corroborate her interpretation of these brief textual remarks. To be sure, there were undoubtedly a number of Europeans who may have been troubled by Taw Sein Ko’s success. However, a brief review of some of his concerns reveals that he was engaged in a scholarly conversation with Western writers and regarded as an authority on many key issues. In fact, to make a speculative point: there is as much evidence to suggest that his frustrations were as much the result of his inability to write a definitive book on a key subject as it was from cultural prejudices. After all, Taw Sein Ko would hardly be the only scholar to look back on his career and feel frustrated by what he/she had not been able to achieve.

<sup>24)</sup> Taw SeinKo cited in Edwards, p. 279.

<sup>25)</sup> Edwards. 330.

## Making Sense of British Burma: Taw Sein Ko as Colonial Public Intellectual

Taw Sein Ko did not publish a major work of scholarship or memorable autobiography, but it is fair to say that his writings ranged over a vast number of areas. It is instructive to examine a few of these writings about history, ethnography, and archaeology in order to explore ways in which he engaged these subjects. With this framework, it should first be possible to situate his ideas into those which were generated by British writers who sought to understand Burma. In exploring these relationships it may well become evident that Taw Sein Ko's work was actually part of a deep attempt to analyze the land and peoples which are now called Myanmar. In addition, a brief examination of some representative works may support another conclusion as well: namely, that Taw Sein Ko the son of a recently emigrated Chinese family was very much a Victorian.

Taw Sein Ko may be largely forgotten but he is an obvious example to cite when advertising the Victorian world's capacity to develop hybrid figures. However, he was the mirror image of Sir George Scott—who wrote from a deliberately constructed hybrid point of view. The contrast between Taw Sein Ko and Fielding-Hall, O'Connor and Scott will be noted to raise questions about the nature of colonial hybridities, but also to suggest something about the richness of this literature. As we will see, what marks this contrast is Taw's use of scholarship to pursue objectivity because it exhibits a disinterested attempt to understand civilizations and cultures on their own terms. To be sure, Taw Sein Ko's writings are free of neither the 'orientalisms' nor the other limitations frequently associated with 'colonial knowledge'. Yet, it should be remembered that just as writers living under empires produced knowledge under specific historic conditions, so too, the post-colonial assault upon it was not free of circumstance.

Therefore, when Taw Sein Ko's treatment of history, 'the Burman Question' and archaeology are considered in the context of his achievements, it should be clear that they point in the direction of a lively, dynamic set of scholarly voices which helped to define the study of Burma.

### Interpreting History

Understanding the past was of critical importance to Taw Sein Ko because it could enable him to situate Burma into the much broader streams of Asian history. Taw Sein Ko did not write history, but he did frequently comment upon it when he wrote memos, published in journals and reviewed books. More to the point, the basis of his arguments came from a deep knowledge of Asian history. For Taw SeinKo Burma's history fit into a much broader set of historical currents which usually ran from China to India (and sometimes further west) and Ceylon.

One of the questions which Taw SeinKo and others pondered was the origins of the Burman people. In an undated piece entitled "Whence Did the Burmese Come?" Taw Sein Ko mooted the possibility the merits of the Dravidian racial theory, which had some currency in later 19<sup>th</sup> century India. This inevitably implied a view of history which was based upon racial conflict: The Tibeto-Burmans occupied parts of Bengal until the invasion of India by Aryan Hindus drove them eastward:

These black skinned races, about whom the Mahabharata sings... and the earlier Buddhist books make mention under the terms of 'yakkha' or 'rakkhasa,' were easily driven before the fair Aryans, who were superior to the aborigines both in physique and intellect as well

as organization. This displacement of race by race is but an instance of the Darwinian theory of the “struggle for existence” and “the survival of the fittest.” The defeated races were either exterminated, enslaved, or made to seek protection in the jungle and mountain fastness. During these turmoils, the Tibeto-Burman tribes would naturally seek the route through the Patkoi Hills for egress out of Burma. Up to this day, there are straggling tribes in habiting the eastern spurs of the Himalayas commencing from Nepal down to the Assam side, the Burmans, Chins and Kachins form but one ethnic stock.<sup>26)</sup>

Here Taw Sein Ko was doing nothing unusual—he was following the work of Brian Houghton Hodgson (1801-1894) who developed a number of racial theories to help explain developments in Indian ethnology and history. It is worth recalling that in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hodgson, who read and publically argued with Taw Sein Ko, was regarded as a fairly significant intellectual.<sup>27)</sup> Trained in Persian at Hailybury, Hodgs on later studied at the College of Fort William and Calcutta and served the East India Company in and around the Himalayas. He regarded himself as s student of Tibetan Buddhism and devoted a great deal of energy to collecting manuscripts (many of which he donated to libraries). Hodgson was credited with laying the foundation for the orientalist study of Mahayana Buddhism, often publishing his findings in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*. For Taw Sein Ko’s purposes, Hodgson was a major scholar whose provocative Tamulian theory depended on a unitary aboriginal language, which enabled him to trace and compare all of the ‘aboriginal’ peoples of East and South India.<sup>28)</sup> Taw Sein Ko was mooting this theory as a possibility for providing an explanatory basis for early Burman history. Most important, he did not advocate Hodgson’s

<sup>26)</sup> *Burmese Sketches* 1. 2-3.

<sup>27)</sup> *Burmese Sketches* 1. 32-40.

<sup>28)</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann. 1997. *Aryans and British India*. Berkeley. 158-162.



ideas, but he grasped that they might be a stimulus for further research. In essence, this theory was useful as a call to arms:

materials should be collected. A comparative dictionary of the Indo-Chinese languages still remains to be compiled. A good scientific history of Burma giving special attention to the sudden appearance of a tribe called *Mranma*, and to the circumstances leading to the Burman conquest of the maritime provinces under Anawrata (11<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) is still a desideratum. The languages, traditions, myths, songs, ballads, and everything that is likely to afford some quota of evidence before the bar of anthropology and history are still to be studied. And last, but not least, there is the physical ethnic link in the shape of physiognomy. After all these have been attended to, the theory advanced above will stand or fall.<sup>29)</sup>

In other words, historical investigation coupled with the study of culture should be able to answer the plausibility of the Dravidian theory of racial development and change. While Taw Sein Ko was working within a paradigm which might be loosely defined as Social Darwinian, he was also reaffirming his faith in the possibility of recovering an objective understanding of past developments.

At the same time, unlike some forms of didactic writing (popular with many in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) Taw Sein Ko did not employ history to teach moral lessons, but he did use it help his readers to understand contemporary issues. One example of this approach to history could be gleaned from address to the Rangoon Teachers Association in 1896. He explained to his audience that it was a good thing that Burma was under British tutelage:

<sup>29)</sup> *Burmese Sketches* 1. 3-4.

the condition of Burma under native rule, which passed away in 1886, should be compared with that of some well known in country in Europe, and an endeavour should be made to ascertain in what respects similarities and divergences exist. For this purpose, no country can be better chosen than England, to which we all owe our allegiance. Comparing the former country is at least 400 years ahead of the latter in all kinds of progress: social, material, intellectual, moral or political. To know Burma, then, under the native *regime* we must put back the dial of time to the days preceding the revival of letters in England, *i.e* to say, before English thought and English life had been transformed by the labours of Colet, Erasmus and Thomas Moore. In both countries three main principles of modern civilization, *viz*, liberty, justice and self-expression were absent. Thought was hampered in its expression, and vested authority or caprice had to be respected and implicitly obeyed in all matters.<sup>30)</sup>

Against the canvass of Asian history lay the realities of modernity —and how they might impact Burma. Taw Sein Ko was no different from Victorian British writers in assuming that the arrival of modernity in Southeast Asia was at once decisive and irrevocable. Ancient and pre modern history might be measured against the panorama of Asian developments, but modern history was assessed against the belief in empire and inevitability of profound social and cultural changes.

### The ‘Burman Question’

Nowhere was the more evident than in Taw Sein Ko’s comprehension of ‘the Burman Question’. This issue had many facets, but at its heart was whether the Burman people could survive the combination

<sup>30)</sup> *Burmese Sketches* 1, 239.

of immigration, economic competition (with newly arrived immigrants) and the changes which came with the modernization of the countryside. As a Chinese Burman he was in an interesting position: his Sino-Shan roots lay outside the primary population group, but he was also a product of Burma. In addition, as a powerful person inside colonial Burma, he was well positioned to witness (and support) many of the changes which were becoming manifest. In ‘The Upper Burman View of British Rule’, which appears to have been published around the time of the Third Anglo- Burman War he observed:

The Burmans feel the heavy taxation, and they also feel they cannot compete with foreigners in the battle of life. As a rule, they are a jolly, mirth-loving race, well-deserving the *sobriquet* of the “Irish of the East”. ‘Let the morrow take care of itself’ seems to be their guiding motto in life. Look at Rangoon, where the Burmans are gradually being ousted from the town by foreigners; and they are weak in the struggle for existence. To assign a reason for this we shall not have to go far. They are an open-handed people, who invest their brilliant dresses, jewellery, or in storing up merit by building *kyaungs*, *zayats*, *pagodas*, bridges etc.<sup>31)</sup>

The adoption of Darwinian language, like his conversation with R. Talbot Kelly a nearly two decades later, fit Taw Sein Ko’s outlook which regarded the Burman population as culturally disadvantaged. These views would be modified over time: writing in 1919 after the conclusion of the First World War, Taw Sein Ko adopted a position, well known in the United States, when he called Burma a ‘melting pot’. However, this began with a large and wide view of Burma’s history. With echoes of the Tamulian theory he proclaimed that Burma was an “ethnological museum”. The Burmans along with the Kachins

<sup>31)</sup> *Burmese Sketches* 1, 50.

and Chins originated from.

Eastern Tibet, and passed through Suchuan and Yunnan, while the Shans claim the Yangtze Valley as their homeland, Yunnan being a later stage on their journey. Burma, the premier State of Indo-China, therefore, serves as an asylum for refugees from India on the one hand and from China on the other. In India, as Aryan immigration advanced from the Punjab, with its solidarity and its higher form of civilization, into the valley of the Ganges, the indigenous races of Bengal were driven into Burma and the Deccan to the south of the Vindhya Mountains. In China, the Chinese race advanced from the Huangho Valley and gradually spread itself in all directions. Thus the races now found in Burma were outside the Indian and Chinese Politics, and discovered a new home in Indo-China.<sup>32)</sup>

Taw Sein Ko almost piously add that Pax Britannica prevented “perennial bloodshed” among the country’s different ethnic groups.<sup>33)</sup> Unlike O’Connor and Fielding - Hall, Taw Sein Ko welcomed further immigration into Burma. Noting the success of the Indians and Chinese in Burma he observed that “Rangoon is practically an Indian City, and Mandalay is likely to follow her example in the near future”.<sup>34)</sup> Not surprisingly, perhaps, Taw Sein Ko was dismissive of Burmese nationalism:

Among the “Young Burma Party”, there is an insistent cry of “Burma for the Burmese”. If all the foreigners now residing in Burma were withdrawn to-day, the whole country would collapse to-morrow—such is the strong grip of foreigners over the Province.<sup>35)</sup>

<sup>32)</sup> *Burmese Sketches 1*, 2, 322.

<sup>33)</sup> *Burmese Sketches 2*, 322.

<sup>34)</sup> *Burmese Sketches 2*, 323.

<sup>35)</sup> *Burmese Sketches 2*, 323.

The idea of the melting pot was even more interesting for Burma's future. Comparing Burma to the US, he foresaw that Burma would be able to "absorb the surplus population of the adjoining countries, earning the sobriquet of "The Melting-Pot of Races". All foreigners – maybe in the third or fourth generation – and all tribesmen will eventually be proud to be classed as Burmans, Talaings and Karens, the three main races of Burma.<sup>36)</sup> Taw Sein Ko, then, understood the 'Burman Question' as something which was actually rooted in both the ancient and modern history of the country. To put this differently, he thought about it more broadly and deeply than many of his British counterparts; in all probability he was optimistic about the country's future because he assumed that economic and social modernization were strong and positive forces.

However, the status of Burmans went well beyond the economic success or failure of the country's dominant population group because it had implications for the practice of Buddhism and the preservation of language and traditions. That is, while Taw Sein Ko was concerned about the fate of ethnic Burmans, he was much more interested in the behavior and practices of the peoples of Burma. Consequently, it was in these areas that he devoted a significant amount of energy to promote both what he thought were sound Buddhist practices and the preservation of things Burman.

### Taw Sein Ko's Archaeological Thought

Elsewhere, I have suggested that Taw Sein Ko's view of the 'Burman Question' may have fueled his desire to work with things Burman. His work as Superintendent meant that he was involved in the investigation, classification, repair and conservation of Burmese religious

<sup>36)</sup> *Burmese Sketches* 2, 323.

sites. Nowhere was this more clear than at Bagan, where Taw SeinKo's work made it possible for the next generation of scholars—principally Charles Duriosselle and Gordon Hannington Luce to work.

Reviewing just a few of his ideas about Bagan is also useful because it illustrates the cosmopolitan character of mind which marked Taw Sein Ko's analysis. The architectural history of Bagan is beyond the scope of this paper, but one of its hallmarks has been the attempt to delineate its rich origins. Bagan was remembered as a Burmese site—furnishing examples of the nation's architecture and during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural origins of this achievement were contested. Those British writers who sought to be deliberately hybrid and adopt a Burmese point of view took pains to minimize its connections with South Asia. Shway Yoe and V. C. Scott O'Conner were interested making Bagan emblematic of Burman achievements, with the latter also seeing its status in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as indicative of the cultural differences between 'East and West'.

In contrast, there are a significant number of writings where Taw Sein Ko argued that Bagan's architectural achievements were dependent not only on South Asian precedents, but also from the Khmers and China. Emphasizing this last point eventually resulted in the charge of 'Sinocentrism' which does not adequately take account of his writings about other places.<sup>37)</sup> To cite another instance, the archaeological record at Bagan suggested even more complex relationships.

<sup>37)</sup> Paul Strachan has labeled Taw's outlook as "Sino-centric" (4), but an examination of the writings in *Burmese Sketches* does not support such a characterization. For Taw SeinKo, understanding Bagan required a multicultural, cosmopolitan perspective. Bagan's debt to South Asian cultures was obvious: in a piece entitled 'Notable Monuments of Burma' he explained that "both the sculpture and architecture were mainly derived from Southern India" (*Burmese Sketches* vol I, 96). He elaborated that this took place when Anawrata conquered Thaton—which proved to be a "great land-mark in Burmese history." (*Burmese Sketches* I, 96). This event was also critical because it led not only to the expansion of Burmese power, but "also in an outburst of architectural energy, the introduction of the Southern School of Buddhism, the commercial intercourse with Southern India and Ceylon, which infused a new spirit into the Burmese nation." (*Burmese Sketches* 1, 97).

In a brief article entitled “Inscribed Terra Cotta Tablets Found At Pagan” Taw noted that there “was an intimate intercourse between Bagan and Northern India”<sup>38)</sup> much of which preceded Anawrata’s conquest. Again, one of his biggest contributions to the discussions of Bagan came not from connecting different aspects of Indian culture to what developed in Burma, but stressing the importance of Chinese influences. In ‘The Cave Temple of King Kyanzitha, Pagan’ Taw concluded:

The human figures in the frescoes of this Temple appear to have either a Chinese or Pyu cast of countenance, and the Buddhas or monks are depicted as wearing their robe covering both shoulders, or with the right or left shoulder bare, thereby indicating the existence of several religious sects. One of the frescoes depicts the *Buddha-pador* the “Footprint of the Buddha,” which corresponds to *Vishnu-pad*. Up to the time of Asoka, no anthropomorphic image of the Buddha was worshipped, the object revered being the *Buddha-pad*. It is said that the first image of Gautama Buddha was fashioned after the model of Apollo, the Greek Sun-god; and that idolatry was introduced into India by the Greeks of the Gandhara School of Art. The high antiquity of the frescoes is indicated by the entire absence of the numerous symbolical figures usually found on such a Footprint. Political dependence is a great determining factor in the religious or artistic development of a country. It may be presumed that, according to the Chinese annals, when Kyanzitha sent his tribute Mission in 1106 A.D., Burma had been in touch with China, for more than ten centuries, and that, during this period, the arts, religion, and civilization of China had had a great deal to do in shaping the course of development and career of the Burmese nation, as is amply evidenced by the interesting frescoes discovered in Kyanzitha’s Cave Temple at Pagan.”<sup>39)</sup>

<sup>38)</sup> *Burmese Sketches*, vol. 2, 284.

<sup>39)</sup> *Burmese Sketches* 2, 304-305.

Taw Sein Ko's Bagan, then, was an important and critical source for understanding the history of both Burma and Asia. It might be noted that here Taw Sein Ko used European examples not to make Asian phenomenon comprehensible, but to confirm the probability of some inner Asian culturally dynamics. As we have seen, Bagan was indeed a Burmese site—but its origin and development was multifaceted and complex.

Interestingly, the appeal to a 'cosmopolitan' past (just as the future of a diverse Burma living under imperial rule) might well have appealed to the British and many of their subjects. It should be pointed out that much of Taw Sein Ko's knowledge of the subject came from serving the colonial state, but that did not imply that his positions reflected an orthodox British position. If the writings of Fielding-Hall, Scott and O'Connor can be understood to be in any way representative of British thinking, they actually pointed in another direction. These hybrid writers were quite aware of the demographic and economic transformations which were reshaping Burma and, possibly as a result, they were eager to find and define things as 'Burmese'. In other words, some of their writings about Bagan (and other things in Burma) could be called deliberately anti-Indian. These writers, especially O'Connor, sought to identify themselves with Burma and portray South Asians (and not the British) as the invaders of the country. It is probably much more than a coincidence that the robust efforts made to collect Burmese language and traditions came at a time when many wondered out loud about the future of the Burmese. The rigorous scholarship (and conservation efforts) which took place at Bagan and in other places in Burma, after all, were part of a larger quest to find, codify and preserve Burmese history, culture and language. This quest had many motivations, but clearly one of them was to identify, describe, classify things 'Burmese' so that they might be preserved in the face of profound modernization. The quest to identify and value things Burman



also had the consequence of implying that some things belonged in the country and others were somehow foreign.

Taw Sein Ko's writings about archaeology and heritage reflect at once his role within the colonial state and his own individual intellectual passions. Reviewing the contents of the annual Archaeological Reports shows that Taw Sein Ko was intimately connected with the instruments used to produce colonial knowledge. He reviewed books, scholarly journals, field reports and worked to develop a comprehensive knowledge of Burma's museums and their contents. There is hardly a hint of anxiety in his writings about the possibility that the archaeological recovery and preservation might be done to support political agendas. Instead, in archaeology he saw a 'human science' which was removed from political or ideological concerns.

## Conclusion

Taw Sein Ko resists easy characterization—this was true when he lived and for the subsequent generations who may attempt to assess his historical importance. This brief portrait of Taw Sein Ko has recontextualized his work by connecting him to the intellectual history of British Burma in order to better comprehend his achievements. Taw Sein Ko's voice in Burma may have been unique, but it was not uncharacteristic of the environment to produce deliberately hybrid voices. Shway Yoe, O' Connor and Fielding Hall all served either as 'translators' or negotiators and interlocutors—and often for different reasons. Those authors sought to refashion their representations of the 'orient' in a positive way: not only might it be understood on its own terms, but it might even be used to raise questions about the quality and habits of life in the metropolitan world. These figures were markedly different from one another, but they might be connected by their

attempts to make people new or outside Burma sympathetic to it. To understand Burma—or Southeast Asia for that matter—meant to be open to understanding a different place and series of cultures—but it also might imply a challenge to the assumptions about racial and cultural superiority which often accompanied imperial rule.

The nature and purposes of Taw Sein Ko's authorial choices were quite different. He was interested in British readers—but not in the identical audience of these other figures. While these audiences would have overlapped Taw Sein Ko wrote for Britons and colonial administrators and subjects who already possessed significant knowledge about Asia. Perhaps Taw Sein Ko might have been treated better by posterity had he worked as a transmitter or translator—making things Burma palpable to the world outside. Instead, he always understood himself to be part of an international scholarly debate—one whose boundaries went far beyond the borders of Burma. As we have seen, he might write about contemporary Chinese affairs or even Indian temples, but his focus was normally trying to organize and make accurate the study of Burma. From his book reviews, it is possible to see that he understood himself to be an academic expert on Burma's history and cultures. It may be the case that in private correspondence (and elsewhere) he articulated his frustrations with the European bias that he believed affected colonial scholarship. Yet, he was not afraid to engage or draw upon this body of literature to better his subject matter. In seeking to understand a range of Burman phenomenon he adopted a comparative approach—citing European precedents or counter examples to frame topics which might otherwise be regarded as purely Burman or Asian. Writing with a hybrid perspective, in these instances, meant far more than trying to gain acceptance within the British administrative hierarchy because it also implied connecting West to East rather than East to West—as was often the case with colonial authors. That is, instead of being dependent

upon Western concepts to understand Eastern experience, Taw Sein Ko might look to Asia first and then see if there existed parallels in the history of Europe.

Taw Sein Ko did broker knowledge, but it is clear that he did much more. His impact cannot be measured easily, but it is safe to say that it was wide-ranging. He was of critical importance for the development of archaeology in Burma and his impact upon both the Chinese community and wider affairs in Burma was considerable. He played a key role in the arguments which framed the University of Rangoon and was active in other areas of educational policy. As we have seen, Taw Sein Ko did all of this apparently as a long believer in the intrinsic goodness of the British empire. This was done with what subsequent generations would see as obvious blindspots. Taw Sein Ko was eager to proclaim the positive impact of British rule on Burma, but he was silent to the economic exploitation, the unequal distribution of resources, the degradation to the environment, and the often blatant racism which accompanied and, in many cases, defined colonial rule. Taw Sein Ko understood that the resources which Britain mustered to govern this ‘province’ of the Indian Empire were extensive and that in so doing a great deal was learned about Burma itself. However, as Judith L. Richell’s *Disease and Demography in Colonial Burma* reminds us, the British could develop significant knowledge about the delivery of health care in the country, but fail to make improvements which might benefit the population.<sup>40</sup> In addition, Taw Sein Ko was proud of his Chinese identity and heritage, but he seemingly had little to say about the large numbers of Chinese working as coolies, the opium trade and the Opium Wars.

It is not surprising that he would look askance at the burgeoning Burmese nationalism, which eventually would help to destroy the colonial world in which he thrived. What might have caught him off guard,

<sup>40</sup> Judith L. Richell 2006. *Disease and Demography in Colonial Burma*. Singapore.

is the possibility that many of the things he worked for (a university for Burma, the construction and management of Burmese heritage, the revitalization of Pali exams and the practices of Burmese Buddhism) would become useful for those who rejected the idea that Burma could ever be a Province of the Indian or British empire. That is, for all of his efforts, it might be said that Taw Sein Ko did much to help modernize Burma and establish an environment in which ethnic Burman nationalism would take root and flourish.

Having noted these considerations, intellectual productivity is often significant in its own right, but it is even more interesting if it points to larger developments in thought and practice. Taw Sein Ko's achievements were the result of one man's curiosity, passion and energy, but part of their significance today is for their potential to illuminate the lost world of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century devoted to Burma (and to a lesser extent Southeast Asia). Connecting Taw Sein Ko's output to other writings about Burma reveals that he was part of scholarly conversation that drew urgency from the scale of change which was at once evident and threatening. The achievements of these scholars were considerable: the introduction of sustained archaeological enquiry and practice, the organization of the study of ethnography, the attempt to construct a national narrative, the consolidation of a Burmese literary canon and, ultimately, the recognition that things Burmese were worthy of academic merit. The development of the Burma Research Society probably would not have been possible without the work of these late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars.

Many of these authors are hardly read today, but it seems clear that the development of 'Myanmar Studies' owes a clear debt to these colonial figures. The knowledge which is produced under the banner of Myanmar Studies also reflects specific circumstances and may not be as durable as that which was produced in 'British Burma'. In any event, for very different reasons the challenge of studying Myanmar are

now at least as great and it might be pointed out that much of the work is being carried out reflects the ritual behavior of the international academic community. Given these realities, it might be wise to recover not only Taw Sein Ko's writings, but the lost genealogy of the colonial knowledge to better equip the contemporary efforts to investigate Myanmar. The effective brokering of knowledge, after all, is not limited to the negotiations which take place across different languages and cultures, but ought to also include overcoming the difference between generations and historical circumstances. Reclaiming the lost generation of British scholarship, then, may furnish future Myanmar specialists with a surprising and valuable interlocutor.

Key Words : Burma, Intellectual, hybrid, historiography, colonialism

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<국문초록>

## 잃어버린 계보를 찾아서: 또세인꼬와 식민지시대 '미얀마 연구'의 기초

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또세인꼬는 19세기 후반에서 20세기 초 식민지 버마의 지적 발전에 지대한 영향을 남긴 중요한 인물이지만 잊혀졌던 인물이다. '미얀마 연구'의 몇몇 뿌리가 식민지 시대에 있음을 고려할 때, 또세인꼬의 저작은 미얀마를 연구하고 이해하려는 오늘날의 노력에 의미하는 바가 크다. 그는 고고학적 저술로 잘 알려져 있긴 하지만, 그의 저작과 경력을 검토해 본 결과 그는 식민지사회에서 공적 지식인으로 활약했음을 알 수 있었다. 아시아 연구(특히 버마 연구)의 발전이 제국주의적 틀 속에서 이루어질 때, 또세인꼬는 식민지 버마에 존재했던 혼성적 저술전통을 따라 저술했다. 또세인꼬는 버마인의 관점이나 가장 공감할 수 있는 언어로 도회지 독자들에게 호소하는 방법과 같은 그 어느 길에서도 벗어났던 스콧, 오코너, 그리고 필딩-홀과 같은 영국학자들의 그룹에 속한다. 또세인꼬의 저술을 연구하는 것은 식민지적 지식과 버마에 관한 영국인의 저작에 관한 연구가 유용하게 재개념화될 수 있는 기초를 갖추는데 도움이 된다.

주제어 : 버마, 지식인, 혼종(混種), 역사편찬, 식민주의