University of Technology- Sydney

“Popular education, cross-border civil society and possibilities for democracy in Burma”

By

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts and Social Science in fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Technology, Sydney

March 2012

CERTIFICATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Sai The Naing Oo

March 2012

“Education is about enhancing students’ knowledge and ability to face challenges in their lives. School education is important, but there is also a kind of education that takes place outside of the educational institution. We need to take on both kinds of education, and since the schooling education system in our country does not adequately prepare young people to face challenges later in their lives, they must find ways to improve their knowledge and ability with education occurs beyond the school.”

Aung San Suu Kyi

A translation of an interview in Burmese by Myat Lay Ngon of the Yan Gon Time Media Club (14/9/2011)

Abstract

I grew up in Burma and went to the *Rangoon Arts and Science University*. I participated in the student-led democracy uprising in 1988 and was forced to flee the country to avoid imprisonment or worse. The military regime may have suppressed that and subsequent uprisings, but the spirit for restoring democracy in Burma has remained strong. After the democracy uprising in 1988 was crushed by the military regime, some members of the opposition groups chose armed struggle to continue their struggle for regime change while many have formed organisations outside the country and focus on mounting international community pressure on the military regime to bring about change in Burma. The movement for democracy has taken place not only inside Burma but also among Burmese exile and refugee communities. The most important site outside Burma for the democracy struggle has been Thailand and in particular in the Thai-Burma border region. The purpose of my thesis is to contribute to the ongoing struggle to combat the military dictatorship and work towards a democratic future. While focusing on the particular task of democracy-building for Burma my interest also extends to the wider question of how informal adult education can build democracy in the face of dictatorships. This study argues that the Burmese opposition movement has, by and large, overlooked the value of grassroots social change, community development and education.

Successive Burmese military regimes have crushed any possibility of sustained people power. Public space for social action inside Burma is almost nonexistent. The declining Burmese economy since the 1970s, authoritarian rule and ongoing civil war are major push-factors behind unprecedented numbers of Burmese leaving their country. More than one hundred and fifty thousand refugees and over two million migrant workers from Burma are currently in Thailand and the numbers are increasing. In the 1990s, most armed ethnic groups that had been waging war

against the ruling regime since the 1950s, entered into cease-fire arrangements. Although these agreements were widely subjected to criticism among opposition groups, they have subsequently provided an opportunity for civil society groups to emerge along the border regions with Thailand. "Civil society" in this thesis refers to traditional, social, welfare, humanitarian, local self-help and advocacy organisations. These cross-border civil society groups initially emerged in response to a humanitarian crisis among Burmese refugees and migrant workers. After a decade, they have transformed into a hub of capacity building for the democracy movement. In here I analyse the nature of teaching and learning democracy in the everyday life of Burmese labourers in Thailand. Burmese migrant workers in Thailand are mostly illegal and face various forms of marginalisation, exploitation and unfair treatment by their employers, local government authorities and human traffickers. Unlike political leaders and activists in the movement, they are pre-occupied with everyday survival and cannot take part in political programs. My findings reveal that teaching and learning democracy amongst migrant workers tends to occur informally, often in unexpected locations and under unlikely circumstances. Informality is an important element in workers learning because it allows them to express deep-held feelings, make use of their practical wisdoms and make critical inquiries about the nature of their exploitation. This study also found that workers develop capacity for active citizenship as a result of participation in small and unlikely social spaces.

The challenge to bring about democratic change in Burma is far greater than replacing an oppressive authoritarian regime with a democratically elected government, since the legacy of more than six decades of oppressive rule has led to the building up of internalised fears amongst people and passive attitude toward collective actions for changes. Many of these anti-democratic characteristics are deeply embedded in social and cultural practices. The oppressive military rule is not the only barrier to democracy in Burma because, in addition, there are non-political factors such as the top-down spoon-feeding education system and hierarchical

socio-cultural practices that breed patron-client relationships amongst people which are equally destructive to the development of democracy. The military dictators have built on such cultural traits and led the people to be so passive about their own power to make democratic changes. Enabling common people in and outside Burma to become active citizens remains perhaps the great challenge to, and represents the most sustained possibilities for, the Burmese democracy movement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Through this long journey of six years, the support of my supervisors, friends, colleagues and family were the guiding lights that kept me going in the right direction. Their invaluable support was essential to not only keep me going but also from breaking my spirit at times when I was so close to giving up this ordeal. Although the contributions from many people made it possible to complete this tremendous task, I would like to mention some specific names.

I am grateful for the support of my supervisor Dr Rick Flowers who patiently guided and helped me by challenging my assumptions, cautioning me to be as objective as I could be, editing and commencing on my drafts. English, as my fourth language, was challenging for me to produce academic writing. I was so lucky to have my supervisor Dr Rick Flowers and my co-supervisor, Professor John Macdonald as my friends and colleagues. Rick gave me friendship during the isolation years of dissertation writing and John always provided me guidance and moral support. This dissertation would not have been possible without the warm friendship and emotional sustenance of Dr Rick Flowers and Professor John Macdonald.

I owe a great debt to my parents who were teachers themselves and did their best to ensure their children receive education all the way to the university. I grew up in a remote town in Burma where only a small number of young people of the town reached high school. My parents sent me and all my siblings to schools in major cities of Burma in order to help their children access good education. I am so lucky to have parents who saw education as prime importance for the future of their children. My father, who passed away in 2008, inspired me by his ethical actions and helped me understand values in education at young age. I will always remember advice and wisdom I received from him and they will be my guiding lights forever.

Fieldwork for this study is an outcome of the effort of many minds and hearts. I have so many people to thank for their support, advice and work, particularly, Sai Mawn of *Ethnic National Council*, Dr Thein Lwin and Saya Sai of *Migrant Learning Centre* (Chiang Mai), Ko Aung Myo Min of *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma*, Ko Aung Myo of *Protection of HIV/Aids Among Migrant Workers in Thailand*, Steve Thompson of *Environmental Desk of Images Asia*, Nang Hseng Nong of *Shan Women Action Network*, U Theing Oo of *Burma Lawyer Council*.

Finally to my children, Sai Mong, Khaee and Roshan who have made this intellectual exercise in tune with the rhythms of everyday life. I am sorry I could not spend time with them as much as I wanted to. They made my life busy and messy in this journey but they always lifted my spirits and cheered me up.

Source: Lambert Conformal Conic Projection (Map of Burma with cities)

Http://www.vidiani .com/maps

Burmese Refugees camps locations (Map: TBBC)

ABBREVIATIONS

AAPP-	Association for Assistance for Political Prisoners
ABSDF	All Burma Students Democratic Force
ABSU	All Burma Student Union
AFPFL	Anti-Fascist and People Front League
Aids	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome
Altsean	Alternative Association for South-east Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BRC	Border Rescue Committee
BSPP	The Burmese Socialist Program Party
BWU	Burmese Women Union
CBOs	Community Based Organisations
CDCE	Community Development and Community Empowerment
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DAB-	Democratic Alliance of Burma
DTP	the Diplomacy Training Program
DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
ECS	Economic Corporation Strategy
EBO	Belgium based the Euro-Burma Office
ENC	Ethnic Nationalities Council
EDD	Doctor of Education
E-Desk-	Environmental Desk
ERI	Earth Rights International
ESC	Economic Cooperation Strategy
EU	European Union
FBC	Free Burma Coalition
FCC-T	Foreign Correspondent Club -Thailand
GONGO	Government Organised Non-Government Organisation
GHRED	Grassroots Human Right Education and Development
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HREIB-	Human Rights Education Institute of Burma
IDP	Internally Displaced People
ICG	International Crisis Group
INGOs	International Non-Government Organisations
IRC	International Rescue Committee
JACDB	Joint Action Committed for Democracy in Burma
KED	Karen Education Department

KF	Karuna Foundation
KIO	Kachin Independent Organisation
KNU	Karen National Union
KNOW	Karenni National Women's Orgaisation
KWAT	kachin Women's Association-Thailand
KWHRO	Kuki Women's Human Rights Organisation
KWO	Karen Women's Organisation
LWO	Lahu Women's Organisation
MAP	Migrant Worker Assistance Program
MDSA	Myanmar Dental Surgeons Association
MFO	Myanmar Film Organisation
MHAA	Myanmar Health Association
MLC	Migrant Learning Centre
MMA	Myanmar Medical Association
MNA	Myanmar Nurses' Association
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPs	Members of Parliament
MRC	Myanmar Red Cross Society
MTAA	Myanmar Tradition Artists Association
MTO	Myanmar Theatrical Organisation
MVA	Myanmar Vocalists Association
MWDA	Myanmar Women's Development Association
MWEA	Myanmar Women Entrepreneur Association
MWJO	Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association
MWSF	Myanmar Women Sport Federation
NCGUB	National Coalition of Government of Union of Burma
NCUB	Nation Council for Union of Burma
NDD	Network for Democracy Development
NDF	Nationalities Democratic Front
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NHEC	National Health and Education Committee
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations
NED	Karen Education Department
NHEC	National Health and Education Council
NLD	National League for Democracy
NLD-LA	National League for Democracy- Liberated Area
OSI	Open Society Institute
PDC	Political Defiance Committee
PHAMIT	Protection of HIV/Aids among Migrant Workers in Thailand
PWO	Palaung Women's Organisation
PWU	Pa-O Women's Union
RASU	Rangoon Arts and Science University
RFA	Radio Free Asia

RIT	Rangoon Institute of Technology
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
RWU	Rakhaing Women's Union
SBEZ	Special Border Economic Zone
SHAN	Shan Herald News Agency
SSA	Shan State Army
SWAN-	Shan Women Action Network
TWU	Tavoy Women's Union
TACDB	Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma
TBBC	Thai Burma Border Consortium
TOT	Training for Trainers
UNLD-LA	United Nationalities League for Democracy (Liberated Area)
UNHCR	United Nation High Commissioner of Refugees
USAID	U S Assistance for International Development
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
VOA	Voice of America
WLB-	Women League of Burma
WRWAB	Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma
WVO	War Veteran's Organisation
YCOWA	Young Chi Oo Worker Association
3Ds jobs	Dirty, Difficult and Dangerous jobs

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE

Abstract …….…….…….…… ….....II

Acknowledgement …….…….…….… ……..V

Map of Burma…….…….……... ……VI

Acronyms …….…….….……....……VIII

Appendix one. …….…….……..XIX

Appendix two …….……..……..…XIX

Bibliography…….……..….……XIX

List of Figures …….…….…..……XIX

List of Tables ……..……. XIX

Chapter one

Note to recent political development in Burma …….…….…….……..….1

1.1 Purpose of the thesis……..….……...2

1.2 Explaining my focus on informal, adult and popular education…….…….…….....2

1.2.1 Opposition groups or civil society organisations ……..……...6

1.3 Structure and logic of the whole thesis……..…….7

Chapter two

Analysing the Burmese democracy movement through the lens of popular education and a concern with grassroots political capability

2.1 A lack of attention to building grassroots political capability…….. 13

2.2 Defining popular education…….18

2.3 Analysing popular education in Burmese cross-border civil society…. ….22

2.3.1 The challenge of raising political consciousness with Burmese people ……..……26

2.3.2 Raising consciousness requires changing social and cultural values and traditions …….……..…29

2.4. Emancipatory learning …….……..31

2.5 Popular education in the experience Latin Americans' liberation movements..32

2.5.1 Paulo Freire and the literacy movement…….…..……34

2.5.2 Church and popular education…….……37

2.5.3 Consciousness rising and participation of women in public spheres..40

2.5.4 Popular education for low-paid workers……44

2.6 Drawing lessons from Burma's anti-colonial movement: Literature movements for the development of mass consciousness ……...…….……45

2.6.1 The rise of nationalist spirit…….…….……..46

2.6.2 Transforming political consciousness of the masses…….……49

2.6.3 Resistance identity and the literature movement……...49

2.6.4 Using media and practical issues…….……50

2.6.5 Traditional art and culture for political literacy…….……51

2.6.6 Expanding the spectrum of alliances ……..…….……52

2.6.7 We must work with the people…….…….……52

2.7 Conclusion…….…….…..…54

Chapter three

Formation of political identity: a reflection on my own learning and politicisation experiences

3.1 Introduction…….……..56

3.2 Growing up: learning to recognise oppression…….……...….. 57

3.3 Ethnic minority groups and the Burmese Socialist Program Party's (BSPP) rule…….……..61

3.4 Burmese racism and my political and ethnic identity…….…….…62
3.5 Learning civil courage…….…….……..63
3.6 Teashops: a place of political formation and informal learning……...66
3.7 Learning the limits of teacher-centered education…….……70
3.8 Learning through participation …….…….…….73
3.9 How have I overcome my fears? ……..78
3.10 Learning in accidents …….……..……79
3.11 Conclusions…….…….……..81

Chapter four

Research Approach and Field Work Method

4.1 Epistemology…… 83
4.2 Field trips and the research participants……. …….86
4.3 Nature of the data that I sought to gather…….. …….91
4.3.1 Defining experience……..93
4.3.2 Pre-understanding…….94
4.3.3 Fusion of horizon…….……..94
4.3.4 Prejudice ……...…….95
4.3.5 Language as universal medium…….…….……95
4.4 How I gathered the data…….…… 96
4.5 The actual data I managed to gather…….……..…. 97
4.6 Ethics and challenges in field work …….……..…98
4.7 The way I reported the data…….……. 100
4.8 How I interpreted and analysed the data……..…….. 102
4.8.1 Using personal experience as a starting point……..……102
4.9 Quality standards for my interpretative research……..……..….. 106
4.10 Conclusion ……108

Chapter five

History and Politics in Burma

5.1 A long history of authoritarian rule ……..……...110
5.2 The repression of independent, and establishment of state-sponsored, 'civil society' ……..…..……..113
5.3 Military rule and barriers to democracy …….…….…….....115
5.3.1 Understanding militarism in Burma……...…….……...115
5.3.2 Army as modern men…….……...……...117
5.4 Four factors that hamper the development of democratic culture in Burma
5.4.1Divisive politics…….…...…..…….……119
5.4.2 An authoritarian and banking model of education …….....……122
5.4.3 Socio-cultural practices that discourage democracy……..……127
5.4.4 The undemocratic exercise of power through patron-client relationships…….…….129
5.5 The people's movement for democracy in 1988 and onward……..……133
5.6 Refugees, Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and the reality of cease-fire agreements…….……134
5.7 Lack of public space and the emergence of cross-border civil society ….….136
5.8 Burmese opposition groups and their focus on regime change, not cultural change…… 137
5.9 Popular education ……... 140

Chapter six

Cross-border civil society and the struggle for democracy in Burma

6. 1 The nature and importance of civil society …… ..143
6.1.1 Why is civil society important for the Burmese democracy struggle? ……...…143
6.2 Defining the nature of civil society……148
6.3 Public sphere and emancipatory learning……..… 153

6.4. Historical perspectives on modern Burmese civil society……..155

6.5 The nature of civil society in Burma today ……..….. 158

6.6 Six types of civil society related to Burma ……159

6.7 The emergence of cross-border civil society…….…… …….170

6.8 Thai-Burma border relationships…….…..……171

6.9 Ceasefire arrangements and the emergence of civil society in ethnic frontier areas …….……..…173

6.10 The economic crisis and Burmese migrant workers in Thailand…….……175

6.11 Burmese exiles, refugees in Thailand and cross-border civil society…..….176

6.12 Conclusion…… ……177

Chapter seven

A review of Burmese political literacy programs in Thailand

7.1 Introduction…….…….……..….179

7.2 Cross-border civil society and democracy……..181

7.3 Political literacy and training programs of Burmese in Thailand…..…….182

7.3.1 Type One: Political groups and their activities……...……183

7.3.2 Type two: The women movement across all ethic groups……...….185

7.3.3 Type three: The environmental movement ……..…….….187

7.3.4 Type four: human rights, community development and leadership training …….……..…188

7.3.5 Type five: Training and internship for community activists and organisers …….…...190

7.3.6 Type six: Teacher training program……...……191

7.3.7 Type seven: Workers organisation and labour rights training…..191

7.3.8 Type eight: Media training …….…….……192

7.4 A critique of Burmese political literacy and training program in Thailand.193

7.4.1 Education is schooling ……..…….194

7.4.2 Elite level approach to change……..…196

7.4.3 Women organisations and the opposition movement……197
7.4.4 Funding bodies ……..……198

7.4.5 Moving beyond training to political literacy . ……..……199

Chapter eight

Learning to become activists: Experiences of three Burmese community activists in Thailand

8.1 Introduction……..…….…….…..…..202

8.2 Informal and Social learning……..……..……..…..…204

8.3 Perspective transformation……...…….…...…....205

8.4 Everyday experience and emancipatory learning……..…….……206

8.5 Embodied learning and the importance of emotion in learning...…..……207

8.6 Brief backgrounds of the activists……...……...……209

8.6.1 Learning from experiences in an oppressive environment…… 209

8.6.2 Nang Si Pang's alterative learning experience…..……..…..…… 215

8.6.3 Mu Sae's perspective change experiences ……...…..…..219

8.7 Conclusion…….....…...224

Chapter nine

The importance of informal and emancipatory learning in community settings free of surveillance and suppression

9.1 Introduction ……..…….…….…...225

9.2 Burmese migrant workers in Thailand ……..…….....….. 226

9. 3 Informal education and emancipatory learning……..…….…229

9.4 The situation of Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot……..…..…..…231

9. 5 Creating conditions for learning in a factory area in Mae Sot…....…..234

9. 5.1 A story of an informal education site…….…..…..…..235

9.6 Discussion: forms of learning at the library……..…. 239

9.6.1 What kind of learning does the library facilitate?..... 239

9.6.2 How and what people learnt at the library? ……...……242

9.7 Conclusions……...…..…… 245

Chapter ten

Informal education for social capital at the Migrant Learning Centre (Chiang Mai)

10. 1 Introduction…… 247

10. 2 Social capital and adult learning……. 248

10.3 The Migrant Learning Centre (MLC) – Chiang Mai ……..……253

10.4 Migrant learning Centre with a vision (for social capital)…..……. 256

10.5 Some personal stories at the migrant learning centre……..……. 258

10.5.1 Saya Hsai: education is the future of young people…..…….258

10.5.2 Sai Lin: "I believe I am helping my country men" …….……261

10.5.3 Sai Hla's experiences of perspectives change ……..….. 264

10.5.4 AikYai……...…… 266

10.6 Discussion……..……. 268

10.6.1 Informal learning and conversations…….…….…. 268

10.6.2 The migrant learning centre (MLC) and social capital……...271

10.6.3 Becoming active citizens: An example of collective action to support the common cause…….…..……. 274

10.7 Conclusion…….…..……276

Chapter eleven

Non-formal education for Burmese community activists in a clandestine location

11.1 Introduction…….…….. 278

11.2 Getting together …….…….……...278

11.2.1 Secret location…….…….…….. 280

11.3 Multi-ethnic groups: difficulties and advantages……..…….…. 281

11.4 HREIB: the history and the idea …….…..……...283

11.5 Participants …….…..……...285

11.6 The relevance of human rights education to activists working in diverse fields…….……285

11.7 Learning ownership and control through participatory ways of working and decision making…….……...…..287

11.8 Learning responsibility and solidarity with metaphors……..…...….. 289

11.9 Learning equality……...…..… 291

11.10 Learning in small-groups hypothetical problem-posing exercises and drawing from practical knowledge ……..……...292

11.11 Learning to develop their own projects and make peer assessments..294

11.12 Some participants' experiences and stories …….…..……296

11.12.1 Mya Mya Win: A woman participant's impression and idea.296

11.12.2 A Mon ethnic participant's experience and vision……...…299

11.12.3 An Arkanese participant's idea to advocate for migrant workers ..301

11.13 Conclusion……..…….……...……304

Chapter 12

Conclusions and Implications

12. 1 Conclusions…….…….....305

12.2 Cross-border civil society as the movement for an alternative public space..307

12.3 Breaking silence and political consciousness …… 309

12.4 The nature of pedagogy and learning in grassroots community development in cross-border Thai-Burma civil society ……..…...….310

12.4. 1 Learning to understand the oppressive system ……..……311

12.4.2 Learning to cooperate, network and plan for a better future (MLC)..312

12.4.3 Learning to understand the power of unity ……...…….312

12.4.4 Learning from experiences and being exposed to new perspectives..313

12.5 Implications for practice ……..…314

Appendix one: Popular education programs for Burmese migrant workers in Thailand…….317

Appendix two: To call Burma or Myanmar ……... 323

Bibliography …….…….. 325

List of Diagrams

Fig. 1 A landscape of thesis argument…….……...….……5
Fig. 2 thesis structure diagram…….…..……8

Fig. 3 Scope of social interaction and learning at the Migrant Learning Centre…273

List of Tables

Table 1: Time line of my field study…….…….…….88

Table 2: stages of data collection and analysis…… 104

Table 3: Major Burmese political organisations based in Thailand…….185