Documentary Film Review


In collaboration with the Democratic Voice of Burma, the news group made famous by the Oscar-nominated documentary, Burma VJ, Jeanne Hallacy and Ellen Bruno present Into the Current: Burma’s Political Prisoners. The documentary consists of in-depth interviews with a number of former political prisoners, and presents background history of some of the major events in the history of social movements in Burma so the viewer new to politics in Burma would understand the context of the documentary’s protagonists. The documentary incorporates some incredibly poignant footage from the 1988 uprisings inside Burma, as well as scenes of strife in border ethnic nationality areas. The message is altogether clear: Burma’s political prisoners have made a great sacrifice for their vision for a democratic Burma, and they continue to work for that today, even in exile.

Viewers are presented with the heart-rending stories of a number of former political prisoners in Burma, both male and female, and also with a sketch of the situation for current political prisoners in the country. We learn of how Aung San Suu Kyi came to prominence during the 8 August 1988 uprisings, or 8-8-88 as it is often referred to. There are inspiring scenes of a massive, non-violent peoples’ movement, and one that is later cracked down upon and dispersed. From the former prisoners themselves, viewers learn how they coped emotionally while in the prison, even solitary confinement, from writing and memorizing poems and songs, to feeding the ants that crawled on the cell floors and walls. One former prisoner, Khun Saing, narrates how he had written a song about Nelson Mandela, “Echo for Mandela,” and would sing it when the authorities were just barely out of earshot. From there, other prisoners learned the song, and it was able to spread throughout the prison.

Many of the former prisoners interviewed recount times when the Burmese authorities treated them brutally, beating and kicking them into submission. From testimonials of former prisoners who have been released, we learn how some, for fear of rearrest, migrated to Mae Sot, Thailand, and were able to gain refugee status and resettlement in a third country. Khun Saing, for example, was resettled to England, but had to leave his wife and small daughter behind. Another former prisoner, and the main personality in this documentary, Bo Kyi, claims that he would like to leave Mae Sot, but
his dedication to helping to work for those still imprisoned in Burma keeps him in the region.

The film also incorporates interviews with the comedian Zaganar, who has been repeatedly imprisoned for his satire comedies, and later for his relief efforts to assist victims of cyclone Nargis in 2008. Regarding the former, *Yayzan Lan* amazingly was able to acquire some footage from “Beggars’ Convention,” the comedy stage show for which Zaganar was arrested and imprisoned by authorities for four years.

While the work is important and their cause is indeed noble, some scenes paint a picture of stark contrast where some nuance is due. For example, in the opening scenes the narrator states, “my grandparents knew a time when Burma was free,” but does not specify how and why colonial independence meant freedom, nor are any of the political developments leading up to the 1962 coup brought to the attention of viewers. In this sense, the film provides general impressions of social problems in Burma, inequities between expenditures on the military and those on health and education, and thus gives viewers a background to the political activists’ motivation.

Importantly as well, viewers are informed of the offenses which provoked the imprisonment of the political activists. “Crimes” such as document delivery to Aung San Suu Kyi are shown on the screen, along with the individuals’ lengthy sentences as a result. One point which could be shown is that political prisoners are arrested under existing laws, and it would be even more illuminating to show viewers the actual law instead of just the initial offense. But again, this critique might be taking from the expediency of the documentary’s ability to portray the story of political prisoners to viewers unfamiliar with the context. Continuing on this tack, viewers are shown Burmese political activists in exile in Mae Sot, Thailand, as well as scenes from refugee camps near Mae Sot. Nothing is mentioned of the tenuous relationship between migrants and refugees from Burma and the Thai government which often does not allow them legally to stay on Thai soil.

Those relatively minor quibbles aside, *Yayzan Lan* can profitably be used in the classroom, especially in courses dealing with issues such as human rights in Southeast Asia, or courses on Burmese politics and democratization. It would make a good in-class viewing companion to an assigned reading such as Christina Fink’s book, *Living Silence*, so that students would get more background context to the issue of political prisoners and the broader political movement of which they are a part.

A great deal of this has changed in the past year, but *Yayzan Lan* is valuable in depicting the history and struggles of the democracy movement in Burma, particularly as the “88” generation of students takes a more prominent role in the country’s politics. One of the most famous political prisoners, Min Ko Naing, as portrayed in the film, has been released and has come to greater prominence in his activism over continued issues of political repression in the
Book Reviews

past year. Overall, the documentary is an important and valuable contribution to teaching outsiders the social history of Burma during a difficult time.

The University of Sydney, Camperdown, Australia

JANE M. FERGUSON

New from Stanford University Press

One Alliance, Two Lenses
U.S.-Korea Relations in a New Era
GI-WOOK SHIN

“A detailed study and analysis of newspaper coverage in the two countries . . . Real and fresh.”
—J. E. Hoare, Asian Affairs

“Based on solid research, . . . a jargon-free and interesting study of the alliance, offering useful policy insights on how to improve this ever-expanding partnership.”
—Victor D. Cha, Georgetown University, former White House Asia advisor (2004-2007)

Studies of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center
$23.95 paper  $65.00 cloth

Most Stanford titles are available as e-books: www.sup.org/ebooks

800.621.2736  www.sup.org

Stanford University Press