AS THE CORNELL SOUTHEAST ASIA PROGRAM TURNS SEVENTY, we take this occasion to reflect on the Burma and Burma/Myanmar scholarship that it has nurtured since the 1950s. With such a rich history of people and projects, we humbly approach this task: What follows is only a sketch of this biography. Perhaps also without towering Cornell figures in the field of Burma studies (as, for example, Indonesia studies would contend with in its counterpart SEAP biography), we can see more clearly the diverse contributions of Cornell Burma scholarship over the last seven decades.

EARLY YEARS (1950s)

The simultaneous diversity and rigor of Burma scholarship at Cornell took root early. In its first decade, SEAP supported foundational historical, anthropological, and linguistic scholarship on Burma. Much of this early postwar expertise was produced by people whose knowledge of Burma was deeply informed by their own experiences as colonial civil servants, missionaries, and teachers in Burma from the 1900s to the 1940s.

Most recognizable among those names were visiting faculty John F. Cady (1952-1953), John S. Furnivall (1954-1955), and D. G. E. Hall (1955 and then a recurring visitor from 1959 to 1973). Together they laid a solid foundation for Burma studies at Cornell through the “Burma seminar” that Cady taught first and which then moved hands to Furnivall, Hall, and other Cornell faculty, staff, and visitors in later years.

Cady had been a lecturer in history at the University of Rangoon just as Burma was splitting from British India before WWII (1935-1938). While visiting Cornell from Ohio University, he inaugurated the Burma seminar and contributed his work on precolonial Burmese political institutions (shattered by British rule—and now, circa the 1950s, in need of reconstitution) to SEAP’s Data Paper Series (an early publishing initiative). Hall had preceded Cady at the University of Rangoon, becoming Burma’s first professor of history and holding his appointment there from 1921 to 1934. He was well into his career by the time he first came to Cornell, and after retiring from School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 1959 he regularly taught classes to SEAP students through a visiting professorship until the early 1970s. During this later stage of his career Hall broadened his focus from historical Burma to take on the wider history of Southeast Asia.

Furnivall, who is arguably the most significant figure for a bigger history of Burma scholarship, arrived at Cornell with a deep and multifaceted relationship with Burma. This relationship started in 1902 when Furnivall arrived in Burma to work as a district settlement officer for the colonial government. He founded the Burma Research Society in Rangoon in 1910 and devoted himself full-time to scholarship after he retired from the Indian Civil Service in the early 1920s, writing on a wide range of topics including early book-length studies on political economy and British rule.

By the time Furnivall was a visitor at Cornell, he was several years into his service as a national planning adviser to the government of the newly independent Union of Burma. It is Furnivall whom many colleagues remember for shaping SEAP’s Burma seminar, which later continued to be offered on a four-year rotation until it was reconfigured as Benedict Anderson’s graduate seminar, “The Plural Society Revisited,” in the late 1980s. With this adaptation, Anderson was paying homage to Furnivall, who had pioneered the study of comparative colonial administration with his work on the Netherlands East Indies. Thus, in the spirit of Furnivall, Anderson’s seminar used Burma as a case study to understand wider developments in colonial Southeast Asia.

The earliest SEAP doctoral student to work on Burma was William D. Hackett, who began his studies in rural sociology at Cornell after growing up as part of the American Baptist Mission in Burma. The “missionary-ethnographer” completed his PhD in 1953 and focused his work on the Pa-O people of Shan State.

Two other early doctoral candidates to work on Burma were Charles S. Brant (PhD 1951) and John Frank Brohm (PhD 1957), whose research interests in Burma stemmed from their experiences as US Army medical corpsmen in the China-Burma-India Theater of WWII. Brant may have conducted the earliest postwar Cornell field research in Burma with his village study of Tagadale (Insein District) in 1949-50. Brohm continued the village study model with his own field research in Old Kuangzau (just a few miles east of Mandalay) in 1952-53. This work contributed to his doctoral thesis, which sought to advance the “scientific evidence of culture” through its study of Buddhist revival in Burma since WWII.

The arrival of Robert B. Jones in 1955 as a professor in Cornell’s Division of Modern Languages marked the beginning of a continuous Burma presence on campus. Jones had studied the Karen language under Mary Haas at the University of California, Berkeley. At Cornell, he continued his research on Tilti-To-Burman and Tai historical linguistics while also spearheading the
development of pedagogical materials for Burmese language teaching in the 1990s. This included teaching Burmese, and he remained in charge of Burmese language teaching at Cornell until his retirement in 1986.²

Burma continued to be the object of research and instruction at Cornell from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, but with the changed political situation in the early 1980s, scholars outside Burma faced restrictions on access to the country. Likely the last two PhDs to do sustained work in Burma were Josef Silverstein and David Pfanner (PhD 1962), whose work only began in 1956, conducted his sociological field study of Mayin (Pegu District) in 1959-60.²²

In 1960 and was able to conduct extensive field surveys in Burma as part of his doctoral work on “the institutionalization of organizational autonomy in a transitional culture.”²³

MIDDLE YEARS
(1960s to mid-1980s)

John Ferguson’s model of the Burmese sample as a “cultural gyroscope” with 4 bonded dimensions (continuums of belief and behavior along which the Buddhist monastic order shifted historically) Ferguson’s conceptual work in part underscores the limitations he faced accessing Burma as a field site while he did his doctoral work. Image reproduced from his PhD thesis (1973, see page 8).

With limited country access, two trend-setting Burmese scholars returned to Cornell’s campus from the early 1960s through the mid-1990s. First, many of the doctoral students interested in Burma pursued it in a comparative manner. This included work in economics by Thant Quin Tran (PhD 1963)²⁴ and Margaret Ruth Harris Pfanner (PhD 1966)²⁵ and work in history by Robert Sigfrid Wicks (PhD 1983)²⁶ and Sanatit Chhuntatanarond (PhD 1990).²⁷

Doctoral students working on the history of colonial Burma in the early 1960s, like Sarah Heminway Maxim (PhD 1992)²⁸ and Anne L. Foster (PhD 1995),²⁹ took the comparative approach as well. Notable exceptions to this comparative studies trend included Robert H. Taylor (PhD 1975),³⁰ who was studying Burma with only a couple other students in the early 1970s (early 1970s and whose research on the Burmese political elite was conducted without ever visiting Southeast Asia.³¹

In more recent years, Burma scholars at Cornell have benefited from three developments: (1) the increased number of Burmese scholars on campus starting in the mid-to-late 1980s; (2) the opening up of the country as a site for archival and field research in the 1990s; and (3) the mobilization of Burma/Myanmar research, outreach, and language study through explicit SEAP initiatives.

In the 1990s—a complex and slow-moving process of economic and political reform by the military government in response to the strengthening democracy movement and international pressure—scholars outside the country slowly began to get access again to research sites in the country. Most notable at Cornell was Mary Callahan’s doctoral thesis on “The Origins of Military Rule in Burma” (PhD 1996), which involved research in army archives (the Defence Services Historical Research Institute) in Rangoon in the early 1990s, where due to political sensitivities she never knew which files she would have access to.³² Through a connection with Callahan, Kyaw Yin Hlaing (PhD 2003) was encouraged to join the Government Department’s doctoral program in 1994.³³

By the early 2000s, the SEAP community included a wide set of junior scholars pursuing doctoral work in history, anthropology, ethno-linguistics, and Buddhist studies, including: Chie Ikeya (PhD 2000)³⁴; Jane Ferguson (PhD 2008)³⁵; Heather MacLachlan (PhD 2009)³⁶; and Christian Lammerts (PhD 2010).³⁷ In the 2010s, work continued in these fields and also in education, international relations, city and regional planning, and industrial and labor relations with doctoral students such as Rose Metro (PhD 2013),³⁸ Chika Watanabe (PhD 2013),³⁹ Tom Patton (PhD 2014);³⁹ Thanetan Soe (PhD 2015);¹⁰ Emily Hong (PhD 2019);¹¹ and Jinyoung Park (PhD 2019).¹²

This outpouring of Cornell Burma/Myanmar scholarship in the last two decades can be credited to SEAP’s support of Burma/Myanmar language study on campus (which made Cornell one of a handful of American universities to offer Burmese) as well as external factors that have made field sites more accessible. In even more recent years, explicit efforts by SEAP have brought greater visibility to Cornell outreach and scholarship. Thamora Fishel, who joined SEAP as Outreach Coordinator in 2007, immediately spearheaded the Burmese/Karen Outreach Project after receiving numerous requests from Ithaca area teachers for information about local refugee communities. This work on Karen cultural preservation was done in collaboration with linguistics professor John Whitman, who had already been developing connections with the local Karen community through his linguistics field seminar. In 2014, with pivotal leadership by Cornell graduate students and anthropology professor Magnus Fiskesjö, SEAP launched the Burma/Myanmar Initiative. This initiative brought scholars to Cornell for two installations of the Burma/Myanmar Research Forum in 2014 and 2015, both conferences achieving a wide reach—international, cross-disciplinary, and multi-modal scholarship.

RECENT YEARS
(late 1980s to 2020)

John Ferguson’s gyroscope model of the Burmese sample as a “cultural gyroscope” with 4 bonded dimensions (continuums of belief and behavior along which the Buddhist monastic order shifted historically) Ferguson’s conceptual work in part underscores the limitations he faced accessing Burma as a field site while he did his doctoral work. Image reproduced from his PhD thesis (1973, see page 8).

Right: A Burmese martial arts workshop led by Marjorie Moseneef (MA 2014) during the 2015 Burma/Myanmar Research Forum. The second major conference of the Burma/Myanmar Initiative, the 2015 Forum was organized by SEAP graduate students and showcased their commitment to international, cross-disciplinary, and multi-modal scholarship.

In recent years, Burma scholar John Ferguson has been credited with the following achievements: (1) the mobilization of Burma/Myanmar research, outreach, and language study through explicit SEAP initiatives; (2) the gradual opening up of Burma/Myanmar in the 1990s—a complex and slow-moving process of economic and political reform by the military government in response to the strengthening democracy movement and international pressure—scholars outside the country slowly began to get access again to research sites in the country. Most notable at Cornell was Mary Callahan’s doctoral thesis on “The Origins of Military Rule in Burma” (PhD 1996), which involved research in army archives (the Defence Services Historical Research Institute) in Rangoon in the early 1990s, where due to political sensitivities she never knew which files she would have access to.³² Through a connection with Callahan, Kyaw Yin Hlaing (PhD 2003) was encouraged to join the Government Department’s doctoral program in 1994.³³

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Today, SEAP Burma/Myanmar scholarship continues with the strong support of the United States Department of Education’s National Resource Centers Program and Cornell’s Office of the Vice Provost for International Affairs. This support, alongside enthusiastic encouragement from wider colleagues in the field, has enabled SEAP to continue offering Burmese language study with the recruitment of Yu Yu Khair (PhD 2019), Burma/Karen Outreach Program director, in 2015 to fill a new, permanent line. Deeply involved in language pedagogy
initiatives and already having trained dozens of undergraduate and graduate students (including through the development of novel remote methods to teach students at partner universities—now even more useful in the time of coronavirus instruction), Sayum Yu Yu gives Cornell the fundamental basis for future Burma/Myanmar scholarship.

We end by acknowledging that many more (as yet) unnamed people—students, faculty, staff, and visitors—have contributed to Burma/Myanmar scholarship at Cornell throughout the years, and we encourage SEAP alumni to get in touch with any recollections that might inform a longer history of Cornell Burma/Myanmar studies in the future. Please contact Allegra Giovine (arg328@cornell.edu) and Ava White (avaw383@cornell.edu).

### The SEAP Photography Archive: A Call for Contributions

Photographs are strange things: They exist simultaneously as markers of both past and present—the past of the event, and the present of viewing. As objects of memory, they are fleeting, yet permanent. “You had to have been there,” they sometimes say, as by themselves and despite their beguiling openness, there is so much to them that is incomprehensible. They are mute despite the idiomatic perception of “a thousand words” to the image. It is not so much that images themselves can speak, but that they become occasions simultaneously as markers of both past and present—

Perhaps there is no better time than now—in this year when we celebrate SEAP’s 70th anniversary—for us to look back upon these images of our shared past and through the stories and recollections of those of us who were there, to bring them into the present. We have been putting together an archive of old SEAP photographs as part of the anniversary celebration. In addition to the authors briefly mentioning to Noyes Lodge on north campus, there was of the LRC, to practice Burmese orthography, vocabulary, and grammar circa 2003-2006. So it is that images be an important part of this history, documenting the life of (and life in) the program.


Sayum’s doctoral research was carried out in London (at the India Office Library) in the mid-1980s, and he brought this expertise back to Burma when he took up a post in Southeast Asian history at M.I.T. See The Politics of Survival in Burma. Diplomacy and Slenderlaw in the Reign of King Mindon (1848-1878). (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1985).

The SEAP Photography Archive is an important part of this history, documenting the life of (and life in) the program. Perhaps there is no better time than now—in this year when we celebrate SEAP’s 70th anniversary—for us to look back upon these images of our shared past and through the stories and recollections of those of us who were there, to bring them into the present. We have been putting together an archive of old SEAP photographs as part of the anniversary celebration. In addition to the authors briefly mentioning to Noyes Lodge on north campus, there was of the LRC, to practice Burmese orthography, vocabulary, and grammar circa 2003-2006. So it is that images be an important part of this history, documenting the life of (and life in) the program.


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