

Cultural Relations Collection

Edited by J.P. Singh



Soft Power and Civil Society in Myanmar: A Historical Case Study

Su Lin Lewis



Culture

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Foreword

I am delighted at the release and publication of the first contributions to what I hope will be an important collection on cultural relations and the mission of the British Council. Not always easy to describe and at times even more difficult to measure, when you see cultural relations in action you know what it is about: working over the long term with individuals, communities and institutions in a spirit of mutuality.

Our mission is not only about what we do but also how we engage. This is what distinguishes a cultural relations approach from other forms of public or cultural diplomacy. It is about activities and opportunities, but it is also about how relationships are formed and nourished. And in our case as the British Council it happens in over one hundred countries, working with the English language and through cultural engagement in the arts, education and skills.

This collection provides an overview and analysis of diverse examples of this distinctive cultural relations approach and how it is used to further the British Council's charitable objects, and how the approach benefits both the UK and the people with whom we work. The ways of working apply whether convening the global leaders of international higher education, or building partnerships with civil society organisations or artists within a single country. The cultural relations thread also applies across the British Council's largest programmes, including those such as English Language teaching which deliver income.

Over the past decade the British Council has been consolidating its activities in order to increase the commonality across different countries and regions. Yet a cultural relations approach will always necessitate some variety, because mutuality involves degrees of exchange, co-production and adaptation to local needs. An example in this collection shows how in 2016 within Shakespeare Lives, a global programme celebrating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and operating to consistent global production values, a small, country-based arts investment in Nigeria saw the production and touring of a locally relevant Shakespeare play performed in Nigerian Pidgin.

The collection also reflects on the long view and includes two contributions which draw on historical investigation to understand the British Council's role over many decades in Burma/Myanmar and the Soviet Union/Russia, drawing on deep scholarship of post-colonialism and the Cold War respectively. It is to be applauded that the editors and authors allow such critical reflection, avoiding the risk of self-congratulation and enabling organisational learning and growth.

Reading these contributions together as a collection reminds me that while all these different areas constitute cultural relations in their own right, together they add up to more than the sum of their parts. Hard work in one area leads to networks and builds the trust that enables the British Council to undertake activities in different areas and with diverse kinds of partners.

It is not always easy to quantify cultural relations or the impact of an individual institution like the British Council over the arc of time and geography. Today, great effort is put into evaluating both the programmatic and organisational impact of our work. Yet the methodologies to assess the effects of multiple decades of engagement are still developing. Friends made, understanding gained and trust increased are things we know to be important. Proving their worth is harder.

Historical investigation helps, but in the end, as Martin Rose says of cultural relations in his essay in this collection: "It has been said of diplomacy that its success can be measured by wars not fought.... The same might be said of the British Council, though it operates at a more human level with individuals and communities rather than nations." Seen in this way, cultural relations is as much about the absence of negatives as the presence of positives. Cultural relations delivers the calm, reflective response as well as the bustling, creative one. This collection, authored by both well-known scholars and authoritative practitioners shows both. And it does so in a way that I hope you find to be accessible, enlightening and compelling. I commend it to you with enthusiasm.

Sir Ciarán Devane,
Chief Executive, *British Council*

Preface to the Cultural Relations Collection

The British Council is often viewed as an organisation that 'does', and it does a great deal, but it is also a 'thinking' and learning organisation and in recent years has begun to increase its investment in commissioning, using and sometimes undertaking research. It does so for three key reasons.

As an organisation that provides thought leadership in cultural relations it is important that the British Council contributes to, demonstrates and shares a thorough understanding of cultural relations, and of how this approach contributes to the United Kingdom's attraction and trusted connections in international relations. It does this, for example, through regular studies on the influence and measurement of soft power that track perceptions of the UK, particularly among young people across the world.

Second, we commission and undertake research as trusted expert practitioners in the thematic areas in which we work: in the arts, international education, English language teaching and assessment, and activities undertaken largely with young people in communities and civil society organisations, such as through the Active Citizens Programme. In each of these areas we convene informed debates based on the provision, sharing or curating of new knowledge, in many cases disseminated in well regarded publications and series.

A third reason is to increase the evidence and understanding for ourselves and others of what works to generate cultural relations impact and why. We seek to demonstrate engagement of the highest standard to supporters and partners, while also building our capacity as an organisation to benefit from using research and evidence, both our own and work by others', in order to make strategic decisions, engage global stakeholders, and exchange knowledge. Together, each of these research areas contributes useful new knowledge to further our charitable purpose through generating new insights and understanding in areas relevant to our work, in turn enhancing our ability to influence policy or to impact debates.

This cultural relations collection arose out of an early initiative when the British Council first established the small research team that would become part of the new global function led from the Research and Policy Insight Directorate. In commissioning a series of in-house and external studies it had three key aims. The first was to clarify our understanding of cultural relations as an encompassing venture that permeated all our work, whether specific to a sector or not and whether income generating or not. Here the contributions on English language and on assessment are particularly illustrative. The second aim was to provide an opportunity to country offices and regional teams, through a competitive bidding process, to commission research on initiatives that were able to illustrate a cultural relations approach in action at a local level. The fascinating contribution on Shakespeare in Nigerian Pidgin stems from this call. A third aim was to grapple with the challenges of understanding and demonstrating impact when reviewing the British Council's work in an area of activity or in a country over a long period of time. The contributions on science diplomacy and on Myanmar fit here and demonstrate the richness of reviewing cultural relations over time, alongside the challenges of making assessments across the long arc of history.

This cultural relations collection has provided an opportunity to show the work of the British Council in its rich diversity, linked by this common thread and demonstrating that as with the best partnerships, mutuality in approach often produces things that are not what were originally designed, which are often better as a result and that sometimes grow in ways over which no individual or organisation has control.

Dan Shah
Director Research and Policy Insight
British Council

Editor's Note

One of the biggest conundrums in evaluating the success or otherwise of cultural relations efforts is how to assess impact and influence over the very long term. The case of Myanmar offers a fascinating opportunity to do just that and in this contribution the well-known scholar of South-East Asian history, Su Lin Lewis, provides an examination of the changing nature of the United Kingdom's soft power interventions in Burma and Myanmar, from the late-colonial era to the present. This is not an unblemished history on either side. Burma was a former colony and a key target of British cultural diplomacy during the early Cold War, alongside or in competition with other international forces. Myanmar became an authoritarian and increasingly isolated military dictatorship that eventually gave way to nascent democratic forces, emanating in particular from an emergent civil society.

This contribution demonstrates how the growth of civil society was shaped by interactions with international ideas from, for example, the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan, China, France and the United Kingdom. Britain has had a significant influence, given its historical legacies and contemporary engagements around the English language, education, and activities with civil society organisations. Yet it has also competed with other countries and now at a time when the influence of the East is ascendant. This contribution offers a historical and comparative perspective on the impact of the UK's soft power and cultural relations efforts in a single country, through an examination of five phases of British engagement with Burmese civil society. It demonstrates with dispassionate clarity the subtle ways in which cultural influence and attraction operate over time.

Introduction

The impact of soft power is notoriously difficult to measure due to the subtle ways in which cultural influence and attraction operate over time. The exercise of soft power is usually understood as a process by which one country or government deploys its soft power assets, including its political, cultural, and intellectual traditions, out into the world (Hill & Beadle, 2014). It must constantly adapt to political conditions, operational limitations, and the constraints and ambitions of civil society and the creative class. A long-term, historical analysis is thus necessary to understand the ways in which soft power initiatives adapt to changing political contexts and both influence and are influenced by local actors.

Members of civil society pose a critical bulwark to state authority and have an interest and capacity to enact social and political change. This historical case study examines the changing nature of soft power interventions in Myanmar, from the late colonial era to the present. In the modern history of Myanmar, civil society has been both fragile and tenacious. Myanmar has been subject to a violent history of British colonialism and racial subjugation, was a key cultural battleground between competing Cold War powers in the post-colonial era, and subsequently underwent almost fifty years of military dictatorship. Throughout this time, foreign powers, particularly Britain and America, had a major impact on Burmese civil society and the creative class through colonialism and missionary initiatives, education and popular culture, and the quiet cultivation of relationships with civil society actors themselves through various means, including training, scholarships, cultural programming, and the provision of grant aid.

Civil society actors in Myanmar – from anti-colonial nationalists in the 1930s to political activists in the 1980s and early 2000s – have been profoundly shaped by interactions with foreign notions of liberalism, socialism, secularism, and development, and the relationship of such ideas to religious orthodoxy and state power. Britain has had a fundamental historical role in shaping Burmese civil society through education, the English language, and parliamentary democracy. But Britain has also competed with other countries – including the United States, the Soviet Union, and China – in attracting Burmese politicians, activists, intellectuals and artists.

This chapter shows that, while British and other foreign interventions in education and cultural programming have, at times, been viewed with suspicion by sectors of the Burmese public, they have also had a major historical impact on an influential and powerful sector of Burmese civil society and the creative class, one that is open to relationships with the outside world, contrary to the often isolationist attitude of Burma's military government over almost fifty years. Soft power interventions have provided tools for civil society actors to envision and contribute towards a liberal, democratic, and pluralist Myanmar.

This case study examines five phases in Britain's engagement with Burmese civil society through education and cultural programming, seen alongside other foreign interventions. It examines, first, the colonial roots of soft power, including investments in education and the rise of anti-colonialism and modern intellectual culture. Second, it examines the immediate post-war period and the 1950s as a time of optimism as well as heated soft power competition within the context of the early Cold War. Third, it examines the expulsion of foreign cultural centres in the 1960s and Burma's increased isolation under military dictatorship. Fourth, it traces the emergence of quiet, subtle forms of engagement with new civil society actors from 1998 to 2008. Finally, it examines the role of soft power within the context of Burma's democratic transition and the expanded role of civil society.

Colonial Roots, 1800–1940

In George Orwell's short story, 'Shooting an Elephant', a district officer, wielding a rifle, fears laughter among a band of Burmese villagers should he not be able to shoot a wild elephant. The story is a parable of the way in which British rule in Burma hung on a fundamental insecurity of their position in the eyes of the colonised population. Underlying all Britain's 'hard power' as a coloniser was a lack of legitimacy as a ruling class. The necessity to transmit a sense of racial hierarchy that confirmed the position of white Britons at the top became the *modus operandi* of colonial rule. The fundamental difference between the colonial and post-colonial era in Britain's relationship to Burma lay in the former's need to convey a sense of cultural and racial superiority to justify and legitimise colonial rule, rather than cultivate a relationship among equals.

From the nineteenth century, interactions with Western missionaries, colonisers, and traders nonetheless introduced ordinary Burmese to the outside world, and were formative in opening up new channels of communication. All three played a part in investing in education, translation, and communication with utilitarian aims: missionaries sought to convert souls, colonial officials depended upon a group of bilingual elites and interlocutors to aid in administration, and merchants sought to cultivate trade and business relationships by investing in the press and philanthropic initiatives.

In the early nineteenth century, before Britain's colonisation of Burma, missionary interest in the country came largely from America. An American Baptist missionary couple provided some of the earliest investments in the field of education and knowledge exchange in nineteenth-century Burma, engaging in works of translation while transmitting knowledge about the country back home to an American audience. Adoniram and Anne Judson published letters about Burma in Baptist periodicals, translated the Bible, and created the first Burmese-English dictionary.

Traditionally, Burma had high rates of literacy as a result of the education provided to boys by Buddhist monasteries. Europeans often saw Burmese society as relatively advanced in comparison with Indian society, due to a higher level of educational provision. However, in accordance with Theravada Buddhist traditions, which placed men higher than women, educational provision was mainly given to boys. Western missionaries and, later, a small number of government-sponsored 'lay schools' sought to provide education to girls as well as boys (Kaung, 1963).

By the mid-nineteenth century, Western technology and ideas were a source of fascination to Burma's modernising king, Mindon Min. He and his princes sent their children to school in India and beyond, read and financed English-language newspapers, and delved into new fields of science and technology, harnessing knowledge of cannons, mapmaking, and new navigational tools (Thant Myint-U, 2001).

The violent overthrow of the Burmese monarchy in 1886, which put all of Burma under colonial rule, was followed by decades of rapid social change. The Burmese aristocracy was decimated; the Burma Delta was transformed to produce rice for India, and lucrative teak forests in Burma's interior were gutted. The colonial government along with new merchant firms required skilled talent, making English education the key to lucrative employment and social mobility for Burmese. Missionary schools as well as new government schools became the means for Burmese to rise within colonial society.

It was not just Western missionaries, traders and colonisers who influenced the educational and knowledge sector in colonial Burma. In cosmopolitan Rangoon, which attracted mobile trading communities from Persia to Japan, Jewish, Chinese and European communities opened their own schools for children of multiple faiths. Pioneering Burmese educators, schooled abroad in India and England, combined the teaching of Buddhist religious principles with modern science (Turner, 2014). Rangoon became an educational hub, in which local and migrant communities experimented with multilingual, multi-faith educational initiatives (Lewis, 2016). Throughout colonial Asia and Africa, the colonial state invested in colleges to train administrators, doctors, and teachers. By the late colonial era, it established universities to cultivate future leaders.

In 1920, Rangoon University opened with the support of donations from all sectors of Burmese society. Burmese barristers educated in Oxbridge and London argued over initial plans for the university. When plans for a residential, Oxbridge-style system were announced, students instigated a large-scale boycott, seeking to make higher education more widely accessible to those who could not afford the high cost of residential fees.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, nationalist movements emerged across Asia. Students used the languages and ideas they learned to criticise the hypocrisy of their British colonisers, who equated 'Britishness' with notions of liberty but refused to give freedom to their colonial subjects. Colonialism and the onslaught of Western ideas threatened to overshadow the richness and diversity of Burmese culture, but English became a vehicle by which students, legislators, writers and aspiring leaders could read about other cultures and politics, and make their voices heard.

Large Indian and Chinese diaspora communities also began their own periodicals and newspapers at this time, and contributed to Burmese-owned English-language newspapers. With access to news and ideas through the press, book clubs, and their Indian and Chinese student friends, Burmese students were inspired by nationalist figures such as Gandhi, Sun Yat Sen, and José Rizal. These figures remain sources of inspiration and connection between Burma and its Asian neighbours (the Indian Embassy's library in Yangon features a bust of Gandhi in its reading room).

Missionaries, the colonial government, and philanthropists also put in place medical hospitals, staffed by native doctors and nurses trained in England, India, or Burma. The Red Cross began education and popularising public health and infant welfare work in the 1920s and 1930s. International organisations such as the YMCA and YWCA, as well as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and the Rotary Club were also active in Rangoon and other major towns throughout the country, promoting a sense of 'civic internationalism' to a new generation of Burmese youth. These also became models for emerging nationalist movements: the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was modelled on the YMCA and became an early proto-nationalist organisation focused on instilling pride in Burmese culture.

By the 1920s and 1930s, American cinema and jazz emerged as a major tool of soft power, particularly for Burmese youth (Mimi Khaing, 1946). While burgeoning Burmese, Chinese, and Indian cinema attracted audiences from those ethnic communities, Hollywood movies, due to their high production value, attracted all audiences, serving to transmit new visions of American life. The image of white women engaged in romantic relationships onscreen quickly began to erode the delicate racial hierarchy built up by the British colonial administration, where white women were supposedly associated with purity. Westminster Parliamentary debates about censorship in the colonies wrestled with tensions between maintaining white superiority and liberal notions of free speech (Larkin, 2003).

While most Britons serving in Burma were content to sequester themselves in their clubhouses, keeping their social distance from the Burmese, there were a handful of exceptional British individuals who developed lasting relationships and legacies for Burmese civil society that continued through to the post-colonial period. The colonial administrator J.S. Furnivall, established the Burma Research Society with the Burmese intellectual U May Oung, seeking to forge mutual understanding between Burma and Britain, between Burma and neighbouring countries, and between various ethnic communities within Burma itself. A monthly journal, public lectures, and relationships with an educational association which distributed books helped spearhead a new intellectual culture in the city.

In the colonial era, amidst the racial stratification of colonial society in Burma, British and American government officials, missionaries, and business interests began investing in Burmese education and civil society sectors to create intermediaries, devotees, collaborators, as well as consumers. However, these efforts to influence and educate emerged in a context of racial inequality, where colonial intentions to stay in power and dictate the shape of Burmese politics were clear. With the rise of nationalist movements, such efforts were seen with deep distrust by the Burmese people.

Soft power Rivalries, 1946–1962

Anti-colonial movements emerged all over the world in the wake of the First World War. Britain faced a crisis of political and cultural legitimacy in the 1920s and 1930s. With the rise of Hollywood, the success of the Russian revolution, and the growing industrial power of the Meiji Empire, it was America, the Soviet Union, and Japan who provided new models to emulate (Lewis, 2016). Already in the interwar era, Britain began reassessing its empire and its international role, leading to a new kind of cultural diplomacy that would counter the effects of anti-British propaganda and the emergence of the British Council (Taylor, 1978).

The French had been the first to make cultural diplomacy a key part of its foreign policy, establishing the *Alliance Française* in 1884 to repair its shattered prestige after the Franco-Prussian war, inspiring other European nations to follow suit (Nye, 2008). In 1934, the British government established the 'British Committee for Relations with Other Countries', later shortened to 'The British Council' (Taylor, 1978).

British dominance in Burma meant France was not to embark in cultural engagement in Burma again, until 1961 with the *Institut Français de Birmanie*. After the Second World War and Burma's independence in 1947, a fragile Britain returned to Burma not as a coloniser, but as a partner on the international stage. Previously, Burmese students in government schools had to swear allegiance to the king, learn English songs, and read British history. But in the post-colonial era, cultural influence had to be earned, not imposed.

By the 1950s, Southeast Asia became a crucial ideological battleground of the early Cold War (Westad, 2005; Day & Maya Liem, 2010). India, Burma and Indonesia were allied in their strong advocacy of neutralism and non-alignment, inciting competition between Western powers and the Soviet Union and China to win hearts and minds. Compared with other countries in the region, Burma's population was highly educated and Rangoon was one of its most cosmopolitan cities. Throughout the Fifties, there were visits from the Moscow and San Francisco ballets, Chinese intellectuals, Philippine artists, and Japanese performance troupes.

Burmese musicians, dancers, and intellectuals went abroad on cultural missions and delegations to the United States and Europe as well as the Soviet Union and China. In an attempt to counter Soviet propaganda about white imperialism and racism, Americans sent popular African-American singers, such as Marian Anderson, jazz musicians, and labour leaders to Burma. Young, urban Burmese read magazines and took part in film workshops and seminars provided by various embassies and cultural institutions. In 1959, the Goethe-Institut chose Burma as its first cultural institute in Southeast Asia due to Rangoon's cosmopolitanism and potential for fruitful partnerships in culture and music.¹

When the first British Council officer arrived in 1946, the Americans had already set up a US Information Centre, featuring a library and reading room well-attended by university students. The US State Department tried to find American staff with some background in Burma, which often included missionaries; the US Information Services (USIS) librarian, Zelma Graham, was the widow of an American missionary previously stationed in Burma.

Private foundations, namely the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and the Asia Foundation, became a major funding source of American cultural initiatives. The Asia Foundation's programme in the mid-Fifties was heavily targeted towards building relationships with civil society, and included the funding of youth activities and organisations, civic associations, school textbooks, cultural organisations, literary prizes for writers and translation activities, and the training of journalists. It also established a University Recreation Centre, designed in a mixture of modern and Burmese styles, partly to win favour among university students engaged in ideological battles between democracy and communism that mirrored growing political factionalism in the new post-colonial government. The Fulbright Program sponsored scholarships that brought Burmese students to America, and vice versa.

Between them, the Ford and Asia Foundations allotted more than \$12million for the provision of foreign specialists and training for Burmese in the fields of education, agriculture, industry, and social welfare (Disservice, 1962). The Ford Foundation worked closely with universities, providing grants to particular departments (eg. agriculture, international studies, economics) and libraries. The Burmese press criticised these organisations for engaging in work that had an explicitly anti-communist objective under the pretence of educational work, and for a lack of transparency about their aims. When the Asia Foundation, in 1958, finally decided to release a public relations bulletin about its activities after six years of work in the country, it was to the relief of its Burmese partners and political allies.

American soft power efforts were heavily undermined by the widespread, and not unfounded, belief that Americans were arming Kuomintang forces on the Burma border. The Kuomintang participated militarily in ethnic insurgencies in the countryside, trading arms with Karen rebels, and forcing the government to employ a large portion of its scarce military resources to its northern border (Foley, 2009). Against protests from American diplomats in Rangoon about this link, one Burmese politician argued that it was easy to see that one arm of government was blindly unaware of the other, making an analogy with the assassination of the nationalist hero Aung San (father of Aung San Suu Kyi).

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union also engaged in an aggressive approach to create communist allies within Burma and other post-colonial nations. They bought up movie theatres in Rangoon to show Soviet propaganda films and supported the growth of communist cells and the communist insurgency throughout the Burmese countryside. But according to a memoir of a Soviet agent who worked in the Rangoon Embassy, both the Soviets and Burmese communists viewed each other with mutual suspicion, with the Burmese refusing to commit fully to one side, and the Soviets doubting the loyalty of the Burmese to Moscow (Kaznacheev, 1963).

Amidst an atmosphere of Cold War competition, the British Council built its foundation in Burma, taking a less aggressive approach than American cultural institutes by focusing on English education. It strengthened its relationship with universities, focused on the teaching of English at university level, trained English teachers and journalists, and gave adult education classes. It provided foreign scholarships, screened films, and worked closely with the Ministry of Education at the University of Rangoon.

The British Council also established its library in Yangon, providing 15,000 books centred on British life and thought, reference material including medical books, as well as a few books on Southeast Asia. Branches were established in Moulmein, Bassein, and Taunggyi, with a book box system covering other districts (Calder, c. 1950s). As with the USIS Library, the British Council library was open to the public. The USIS Library – with branches in Rangoon, Mandalay, and Moulmein – offered additional reference services to government officials, educational leaders and professionals, as well as an out-of-town lending service to individuals asking for books on loan. It also offered adult programmes of book-reading contests, as well as a junior library service featuring children's programmes of American stories and songs.

¹Correspondence with Franz Xaver Augustin, director Goethe-Institut Myanmar, 15 June 2017.

Burma's Asian neighbours also engaged in soft power interventions. The People's Republic of China invited Burmese diplomatic and cultural missions to tour the country and attend conferences such as the 1952 Beijing Peace conference, devoted to nuclear disarmament and to stopping what was branded as American imperial aggression in Korea. India's new embassy in Yangon opened a library consisting of material about India and India-Myanmar relations. The Ramakrishna Mission hosted a number of vibrant intellectual discussions between Burmese and Indian scholars about religion and world affairs, publishing a monthly journal. Burma's large Chinese and Indian diaspora communities engaged in festivities, philanthropy, and other initiatives that contributed to furthering mutual understanding between Burma and its larger Asian neighbours.

Meanwhile, outside Burma's cities and along its border with Thailand, civil wars raged. The aftermath of the Japanese occupation had left the countryside in disarray, and ethnic minorities dissatisfied with their place in the new nation. With ethnic strife and cleavages between Communists and Socialists split along Cold War lines, the Burmese parliament descended into political factions. In 1960, U Nu invited General Ne Win to take over government temporarily. In 1962, Ne Win's military government seized power for the next two and a half decades. Many of the Burmese partners who were most receptive to working with Western cultural organisations, including the Asia Foundation and British Council – politicians, judges, lawyers – were arrested, many remaining in prison for many years.

Ne Win and Burma's Isolation, 1962-1988

In the twenty-six years during which General Ne Win ruled Burma, foreign agencies were expelled, with a select few, including the British Council, called back and watched carefully. Nationalism reigned in its most extreme form. English-educated Indians, Anglo-Burmese, Indo-Burmese, and Sino-Burmese, many from the civil service, and others whose businesses had been nationalised, left the country. In response to a student protest, Ne Win's security forces blew up the Rangoon University Students' Union, and the university temporarily shut down. In 1964, after the university's re-opening, all the teaching was in Burmese. A generation of Burmese educators used to teaching in English suddenly had to devise with a new curriculum in Burmese, including inventing a Burmese vocabulary for scientific terms.² That year, public performances were banned and libraries maintained by foreign missions, including the British Council and USIS libraries, were ordered to close. Fearing confiscation of its books, British Council librarian Monica Mya Maung hid 200 precious titles in the embassy building.

In 1966, the British Council was expelled from Burma, along with all other foreign cultural organisations. Ne Win's government tightly controlled education, ideology, and flows of information. Rangoon University's philosophy department was dominated by the teaching of one text: *the Burmese Way to Socialism*; Western and other Asian philosophies were banned.³ Foreigners were banned from setting foot on university campuses. Foreign films and materials published by foreign embassies, as well as their mailing lists, had to be scrutinised and approved by the Ministry of Information. In the words of a former American diplomat, Ne Win's aim was to eliminate personal relationships between Burmese people and foreigners.⁴ Despite the heavy cloak of censorship, the USIS continued to put out a monthly glossy magazine *Dawn*, printing 10,000 copies a month from the 1960s through to the 1980s, with glossy pictures and feature stories taken from US magazines including *Time*, *National Geographic*, and *the Smithsonian*.

During the 1970s, the American Embassy's USIS office tried to work with Ne Win's government to restart cultural and educational exchanges. As in the 1950s, it used music and dance as a mode of improving relations, bringing in the Charlie Bird Trio and Martha Graham's Dance Company as part of the company's Asian tour in 1974. This was immensely popular after a drought of foreign cultural visitors, and the Ne Win government, in turn, allowed a troupe of classical musicians and dancers from the Burmese National Theatre to appear in the United States for the first time, hosted by the Asia Society.

In the mid-1970s, Frank Coward, the USIS officer, also set up the new American Center, separate from the US Embassy, which became a popular success with young Burmese foreign service trainees, but had a limited audience with the wider Burmese public. He re-established a Fulbright Program, operating in a limited capacity by bringing in non-political personnel allowed by the Ne Win government, including medical staff and sports instructors (i.e. tennis and swimming) to reach young people.⁵ Burmese students, however, were not allowed to go abroad. Some unofficial contact also occurred, namely between medical institutions, such as the American College of Cardiology and the Cardiac Unit of Rangoon's Institute of Medicine.

Meanwhile, the British Council limited its activities to the support of technical and linguistic advisors in universities, schools and technical colleges, as well as offering a small number of scholarships, including the Burmese Colombo Plan scholarships.⁶ The French, West German, Canadian and Australian governments also offered scholarships at the time. UNICEF focused on a primary education project and provided funds to equip teacher training schools with audiovisual materials.

²Oral history interview. U Thaw Kaung (historian) with the author. 7 April 2016.

³Oral history interview, U Thaw Aung (former American Center staff) with the author. 7 April 2006.

⁴Oral history interview with Cliff Southard, Public Affairs Officer, USIS (1966-1969) (Retrieved from Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Oral History Interviews: Burma Country Reader on <http://adst.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Burma-Myanmar.pdf>)

⁵Oral history interview with Frank Coward (USIS officer 1973-1978) (Retrieved from Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Oral History Interviews: Burma Country Reader, on <http://adst.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Burma-Myanmar.pdf>)

⁶BW 19/17. General Policy English Teaching. British Council Files. National Archives.

During that time, leading Burmese officials had begun to express concern about declining English standards (it was rumoured that Ne Win's daughter was refused entry to a Western university). By 1975, English had become compulsory again for the last six years of schooling. In 1976, a delegation of officials from Burma, including Burma's minister of education, Dr Khin Maung Win (who received his PhD from Harvard), visited the UK to look at the possibility of reinstating British educational assistance in Myanmar. The minister recognised that English was an important medium for communicating to other countries, for research, and technical education, even though this continued to be a politically sensitive issue. The delegation visited a number of UK universities to learn from successful programmes in technical and distance education, including the Open University.⁷

In 1977, after student disturbances the previous year, President Ne Win gave instructions to disperse the large numbers of students from Rangoon and Mandalay. This dovetailed with the Ministry of Education's existing plans, conducted with the input of feasibility studies from the Americans and British, to open regional colleges across the country. The British Ambassador at the time, while welcoming the idea of a returning British Council officer as cultural attaché, cautioned that this was not a time of radical change, and that not too many initiatives should be taken at once.

A small British Council mission was undertaken in March 1977 by Audrey Beryl Lambert, then director of the British Council's South Asia Department. Lambert described Rangoon as a "run down city" with broken pavements and piles of rubbish in its gutters, and overcrowded public transport. Consumer goods were in short supply, with foreign goods available on the "open" black-market.

There was a lack of industrial development and few ships calling at Rangoon; tourism was encouraged but restricted to one-week visas. The Burma Broadcasting Service, she wrote, could be heard in almost all parts of the country, and though expensive to the average Burmese, radio sets could be found in many villages and schools.⁸

Discussion of the return of a British Council representative emerged again during Lambert's visit. The minister of education spoke of a "special relationship" between Britain and Burma, which made the British system of education more attractive than other countries. In 1978, the British Council re-opened as the cultural section of the British Embassy, including the opening to the public of the library of Monica Mya Maung's 36,000 rescued books (the library had been available only to diplomats, the United Nations and Colombo Plan scholars, personally and meticulously cared for up until that time by Monica Mya Maung herself). A British Council senior staff member became the British Embassy's cultural attaché, focusing on establishing an English Language Teaching programme and providing English-language facilities in certain areas of Burmese society, but on a low-profile basis. Visits to schools, colleges and institutes had to be arranged through the ministry, which often took several weeks: a testament to the highly bureaucratic environment in which foreign diplomats were expected to operate.

In 1981, Ne Win reversed his earlier decision and made English the main language of instruction from kindergarten to university. Again, a generation of teachers schooled only in Burmese had to suddenly come up with a new curriculum in English. The drastic changes imposed on Burma's education system caused havoc and confusion, especially for students made to learn in languages unfamiliar to their teachers. An entire generation of Burmese, including mid-level officials, educated in the late 1960s and 1970s spoke no English at all.

In 1982, the British Council officially reinstated their offer of scholarships for Burmese students to study abroad. Throughout the 1980s, the library remained active and a Teacher's Resource Centre was opened. The USIS library also remained open, but neither library attracted readers because of repercussions faced by Burmese from military intelligence forces. By the end of the 1980s, this was beginning to change. Tom White, the British Embassy's cultural attaché from 1985 to 1988, described regular queues of students "waiting to slip in, as unobtrusively as possible" to the library to consult newspapers and periodicals from Britain, and also use the coveted photocopier (White, 1998).

As a cultural organisation with a long history in Burma, the British Council also channelled and managed the UK government's Overseas Development Administration's⁹ programmes in Burma on education and natural resource cooperation. It sponsored study tours for doctors and civil servants to travel to England for educational visits, and worked closely with the Fisheries Corporation and Forestry Department to conserve the fishing and forest industries, under threat from large-scale trawling and logging.

Meanwhile, throughout the 1980s, the Burmese economy plummeted and student protests began to escalate. In 1988, a clash between students and police escalated into the first mass democracy movement in the country. Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Burma's nationalist hero Aung San, had returned to Burma from Oxford to take care of her mother, and became the unifying symbol of the movement and the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD).

In an eyewitness article written for BBC news ten years on, Tom White, the British Council officer working as a cultural attaché in the British Embassy, described the euphoria of that time in August 1988. Chris Gunness, a BBC journalist, had conducted interviews with students and dissidents, broadcast throughout the country from London by the BBC's Burmese Language Service, including announcing the date for the first general strike since the 1962 military coup (White, 1998). On that day, White witnessed crowds of students and monks holding portraits of Aung San, pre-1962 Burmese flags and banners calling for democracy.

In response to the protests, the government announced that elections would be held and established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). SLORC waged a campaign against the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, complaining of Western intervention into local politics. The NLD's landslide victory at the election was immediately ignored, and SLORC reasserted its authority as a military regime, suppressing dissent and keeping the country under martial law.

Throughout this time, while cultural agencies had a limited role, other tools of soft power existed in the form of independent media outlets, namely the BBC, the Voice of America, and Radio Free Asia and their Burmese-language services. The BBC's Burmese-language service, in operation since 1940, served as an important source of news within an atmosphere of government control of state media. Aung San Suu Kyi, activists, and members of the Burmese public have acknowledged their reliance on such media outlets as providers of accurate information.

⁷Letter from Thet Tun, Director, Department of Higher Education, to J.A. Stevens, British Embassy Rangoon, 14 December 1976. BW 19/17. British Council Files. National Archives.

⁸Restricted report on Burma visit by Lambert, March 1977. BW 19/17. British Council Files. National Archives.

⁹The Overseas Development Administration (ODA) was a precursor of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) which is responsible for a large proportion of Official Development Assistance (ODA).

Quiet Engagement, 1988-2008

After the crushing of the democracy protests and the failures of the election, Burma's image abroad was at an all-time low. Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Exile groups and human rights organisations began a campaign for severe Western sanctions to be used against Burma.

Education suffered in response to the events. The government closed universities and jailed students or forced them into exile. Teachers, seen as responsible for inciting the students in 1988, were duly punished through 'refresher courses' modelled on rural re-education camps in the People's Republic of China (Charney, 2009, p. 178).

After 1988, the US State Department downgraded its embassy to a consulate, pulling out its ambassador and instituting a heavy sanctions policy. The American Center nonetheless continued to provide English classes to students, bringing users into the library, and administering TOEFL exams to allow students to apply for university places abroad. Both the USIS Library and British Council built relationships with the 1988 student generation. The USIS library's collection focused on textbooks centring on democracy, human rights, and public policy. The British Council offered free membership to National League for Democracy members as well as classes on governance.

Government officials also sent wives and children to both libraries to borrow books, and also sent books. Monica Mya Maung, the British Council librarian, and other British Council staff, taught English to Ne Win's grandsons, who would arrive escorted by secret police. Some ministers in Myanmar's current government were frequent readers at the British Council Library in their youth. With the increasing popularity of the library, fees were introduced to manage access. The British Council gained a reputation of being the most expensive, but also the most high-status, English-teaching programme in the country. The Teaching Centre allowed those who could not afford lessons to access books, educational material, and audio discs.

Throughout the 1990s, the British Council moved cautiously, maintaining a policy of quiet engagement, focusing on supporting education and building relationships with civil society groups within the country. In 1996, it reopened its Teaching Centre, providing a training programme for English teachers in both the state and non-state sector. It maintained regular contact with women's groups, the Attorney-General's office, the Ministries of Forestry, Education, Information, and Health, radio and television industries, and Institutes of Economics, Archaeology, Medicine, Foreign Languages, and Education at Yangon University.

In 1997, SLORC was replaced by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in an attempt to 'cleanse' the government of corruption and give it more respectability as Burma prepared for ASEAN membership. Severe Western sanctions took hold during this time, as foreign companies pulled out of Burma, arguably reducing Western leverage in the country (Charney, 2009, p. 184). Burma, instead, turned to China, Russia, India, and its ASEAN neighbours.

As relations with the West grew increasingly strained, the British Council assisted ordinary Burmese with access to information, books, English, and internationally recognised UK qualifications. It opened an office in Mandalay and helped establish a network of libraries throughout the country, expanded its Yangon library and teaching centre, and launched diploma courses with the Open University. The British Council was one of the few places that Burmese could watch foreign news; the BBC was unavailable on any other satellite dish. In 2005, as the internet boom took hold in the rest of the world, the British Council offered one of the few places in the country where internet access was provided to the public, for those who could afford its library membership fees. In 2007, the British Council reported roughly 70,000 people coming to the offices for activities including teaching, exams, and use of the library, particularly for accessing outside literature, newspapers, the BBC World Service, and the internet.

From around 2003, the British Council focused on engaging with a new generation of leaders in Myanmar. It began a series of courses on economics, the environment, gender, and human rights that gave aspiring politicians, educators, activists, and ethnic minority leaders resources to reflect on their society and its institutions in a wider and more international perspective. It also offered a space for conversation clubs, started in 2005, for ethnic groups to independently meet, discuss, teach, and learn from each other in a safe environment. Through the British Council's library, a local volunteer network began engaging in fundraising and community initiatives, from working with street-children and the elderly to teaching English at orphanages and schools for the disabled. Participants in all these initiatives continue to be active in politics, the private sector, and in civil society today.

Similarly, the American Center (formerly the USIS library) began extending its operations in 2005. Under new leadership by a young State Department officer, Todd Pierce, the library invested in thousands of new books, a tripled library membership, offering English lessons for monks, political discussion classes, a training workshop for journalists, and a literature book club (Packer, 2008). Whereas previously the library's users were middle-aged and above, the library's new strategy was to attract younger audiences, ordering young-adult books and popular periodicals. Students and library users would post requests for books on the library's bulletin board, requesting everything from the latest Hollywood DVDs, to business management books and books by Samuel Beckett and Michel Foucault. In 2006, the American Center's Library had almost 16,000 members (Perlez, 2006).

As in the 1950s, these initiatives were criticised by sectors of the Burmese press for spreading 'poison' in the form of American propaganda among local reporters through its 'English for Journalism' courses. Former NLD activists were users of both the American Center and British Council libraries, and were involved in activities around human rights and education (some of them are now members of parliament). State-run newspapers slammed Western embassies for offering classes to NLD members (Associated Press, 2006).

A handful of other foreign NGOs began operating in Burma after 1988, some in border areas, and some with considerable autonomy. In Burma: The State of Myanmar, the political scientist David Steinberg – who worked as an Asia Foundation representative to Myanmar in the 1950s – identified three options for a foreign organisation or government in dealing with a pariah regime: 1) denying relations and cutting off dialogue (an approach that was not likely to work in Myanmar); 2) the international business community's approach to invest and encourage the growth of a middle class who would push for liberal change (a very slow process); and 3) the encouragement of local elements of civil society to push for eventual political pluralism (Steinberg, 2001, p. 120). This third path was the one taken by organisations like the British Council and American Center.

Openings

In 2007, thousands of monks protested on behalf of the public at the prohibitive costs of living for ordinary Burmese, in what Western media sources dubbed the 'Saffron Revolution'. Burma saw the rise of 'citizen journalism', as videos and photographs were broadcast via the internet to the world. The failure of the movement to enact political change left many in the country disheartened, as international organisations searched for avenues of support.

When Cyclone Nargis tore up the delta in 2008, hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, and millions were left homeless. In the wake of such a devastating event, an extraordinary volunteer effort followed. Monks and monasteries channelled aid through their networks, while students, artists and taxi drivers drove out to the delta with bags of food and clothing. Gitameit, an independent music school, turned into a rapid relief centre, while photographers went out into the delta distributing food and documenting stories of the hungry. Nargis also led to openings for renewed relationships with the United Nations, Western countries, and ASEAN partners seeking to provide humanitarian assistance.

During this time, the British Council's DFID-funded Pyoe Pin programme, launched in 2007, began supporting grassroots civil society organisations all over the country, particularly to improve the lives of the poor. These engagements lay the foundations for work with farmers' and fisheries' coalitions, HIV/Aids networks, teacher education groups, and journalists, as well as improving access to justice through mechanisms like legal aid. From 2011, Pyoe Pin focused on strengthening relationships between civil society groups, government and the private sector to support collective action on policy reforms. In June 2012, the British Council and British Embassy sponsored a group of eight '88 Generation' student leaders to visit the UK. The group met UK Foreign and Commonwealth ministers, visited the House of Commons and Oxford University, met parliamentarians, and travelled to Northern Ireland to study the peace process.

In 2011, under the leadership of Thein Sein, the Burmese government undertook a series of reforms, including loosening restrictions on the country's media and releasing a number of political prisoners. He began courting foreign investment, seeking to balance out the interests of the Chinese government in the country. Slowly, international organisations and businesses began arriving back into the country, providing new opportunities, as well as challenges, for ordinary Burmese. Thousands of Burmese sought to learn and refine their English skills. Funds, training programmes, and opportunities emerged for civil society organisations operating in an increasingly more tolerant political environment.

Amidst signs of liberalisation in 2011 and 2012, the United States eased its sanctions and restored full diplomatic relations with Burma, marked by two high-profile visits to Myanmar (by Secretary-of-State Hillary Clinton in 2011 and President Barack Obama in 2012). From 2012 to 2017, the American Center established an Institute for Political and Civic Engagement (iPACE) to train emerging leaders in Myanmar in various courses, including peace education, peace-building leadership, electoral observation, peace advocacy, and voter education. In 2013, the Asia Foundation was asked to return to Myanmar after fifty years. Since then, its programme has focused on working closely with civic leaders to strengthen democratic processes, support economic development, contribute to dialogues around the peace process, promote women's empowerment and political participation, and increase public access to education.

In 2012, national by-elections were held with Aung San Suu Kyi running in the campaign, and winning a seat in parliament along with 42 other NLD candidates. The momentum for reform was escalating at a lightning pace. In 2015, Myanmar held its first general elections, ending nearly 50 years of military rule. The National League for Democracy won a supermajority of seats, and although Aung San Suu Kyi was constitutionally barred from the presidency, she became the de facto head of government, appointed in the newly created role of 'State Counsellor of Myanmar'.

From 2012 to 2015, education was one of the key priorities of both the government and Aung San Suu Kyi. Beginning in 2012, Burma's Ministry of Education undertook a Comprehensive Education Sector Review, the first since the early 1990s. This was intended to review the existing education system, from kindergarten level to higher education, and identify strengths and challenge in prioritising key areas of reform. It was supported by the Asian Development Bank, AusAid, UNESCO, and the British Council. The British Council delivered expertise in English-language teaching, assessing and recommending English learning materials, and reviewing the country's basic education assessment system.

Linked to this, the British Council supported a Higher Education Sector Review, which included the organisation of three policy dialogues events in the UK and Burma, and a UK study tour for the Burmese deputy minister of education and parliamentarians involved in the reform process. Aung San Suu Kyi specifically requested the UK study tour to take place, and chaired the two parliamentary committees tasked with redrafting education legislation and the revitalisation of Yangon University. She had a longstanding relationship with the British Council. Her parents were friends with the first British Council officers in Burma, and the British Council sent a gift of a number of books on social welfare to her mother at her request. Her parents-in-law, Evelyn and John Aris, both worked for the British Council from the 1950s to the 1970s. During her house arrest, she was in close contact with the British Council officer, and had a good relationship with Alan Smart, British Council director in 2011. When Aung San Suu Kyi came to London in 2012, she insisted on visiting the British Council and BBC ahead of Whitehall meetings, a testament to the presence of both institutions in her life under house arrest.

In 2013, a delegation of senior policy-makers visited the UK on a study tour intended to raise issues facing Myanmar's education sector, encourage UK institutional links and attract corporate investment in developing the sector. The delegation visited a number of universities in England and Scotland. Meetings focused on university governance (including the role of university autonomy and student associations and representation), and collaborations between universities in the Global North and Global South (Mackenzie, 2013). Key issues raised included the public benefit of universities, academic freedom, and inclusivity. Aung San Suu Kyi participated in the policy dialogue via video from Myanmar, and made a widely publicised plea for UK support in educational reform.

A policy dialogue in Naypidaw followed, which aimed to define a vision for higher education (British Council, 2013). Aung San Suu Kyi reiterated the theme of empowerment. Key areas of discussion were educational governance, management, and policy; decentralisation and autonomy for universities; access, inclusivity, and equity; and internationalisation. Main recommendations were the prioritising of a Higher Education Act, the need for a wider public consultation, the reform of higher education within the context of the wider education sector; and the need for Myanmar solutions to Myanmar problems. As Susanna Galván recalls, what made the dialogue particularly important was having a number of key players, including the military and Aung San Suu Kyi, in the same room to discuss reform of the higher education sector, and to engage with the rest of the world after not wanting to engage at all.

In 2013, Burma's President Thein Sein made a direct request for the UK to support educational reform in Burma, particularly towards Burmese teachers to improve their English and develop their teaching skills. This resulted in continuing policy dialogues, partnerships between UK and Myanmar universities, ASEAN harmonisation in higher education, and leadership training. It also resulted in English-language teacher trainers being placed in State Education Colleges and in two institutes of education, as part of the EFECT programme (2014-2017), a partnership between the British Council, DFID, and VSO.

Other foreign donors have contributed heavily to the education sector. Japan is the biggest donor in higher education, focusing in particular on technology institutes and medical universities, in consortium with Japanese universities. AusAid supported the Myanmar government's school grants and stipends to promote free, compulsory education across 43,000 schools, including funding essential school supplies. AusAid also worked with Myanmar's Education Consortium by supporting 500,000 children without access to government education to access education provided by monastic and community schools.

In 2013, the University of Yangon began accepting undergraduate students, and allowed them to choose their own major. According to a professor at the university, some of the students now have better English skills than their teachers because they have been able to go to the British Council and American Center to access the internet, books, international media, and language resources; traditionally these were sites where the university faculty, as government employees, were not allowed. In the higher education sector today, there are increasing opportunities for university faculty to travel, access resources, and engage in partnerships with foreign scholars and institutions.

The National Educational Strategic Plan was launched in 2016, to continue to 2021, with a focus on nine areas: pre-school education, basic education with improvement in access and inclusion, basic education curriculum, technical and vocational education and training, higher education, and education sector management. This placed a great emphasis on improving the quality of compulsory primary education, addressing the problem of out-of-school children, and development technical and vocational educational training.

Donors have recognised the importance of distance education, which accounts for almost two-thirds of higher education learners. The British Council conducted a study of Myanmar's distance education sector (Fawsett and Gregson, 2017). Distance learning educates almost half a million part-time students in Myanmar and is coordinated by two distance education universities in Yangon and Mandalay. While demand for higher education is growing exponentially, it is widely recognised that only distance education can deliver with the scale and urgency required. This is becoming an important opportunity with the explosion of mobile phone use.

Meanwhile, French and German cultural institutes have worked with Myanmar's burgeoning creative classes, alongside offering French and German language courses. In 2008/9, European embassies in Yangon began the annual EU Film Festival, screening, among other films, *The Lives of Others*, a film about East German surveillance. The Institut Français, which opened in Burma in 1961, offered a multipurpose place for culture and art, gardens, cafeteria space, small and large stages, and an exhibition space and gathering place for Burmese artists. The institute hosts and annual jazz festival and since 2014 has organised & Proud Yangon, Yangon's first LGBT+ film festival.

In 2012, the Goethe-Institut re-established its presence in the country with a focus on supporting the creative sector. Their activities have since included work with the Yangon Film School (founded in 2005), artistic collaborations between Burmese and German artists, cross-cultural musical productions, and a digital educational platform to support multimedia education opportunities and educational broadcasting. They are currently renovating and building a new space for talks, presentations, exhibitions, and an artistic platform.

While Myanmar only ten years ago was completely isolated from the world's communication networks, today technology and connectivity are becoming increasingly important for a country that now has one of the highest rates of smartphone penetration of any emerging market. As education in English and other foreign languages will continue to prove valuable to a population keen on rebuilding links with the wider world, the opportunities afforded by the tech sector may reach new audiences and build new partnerships using creative digital platforms.

Despite the pace of change of the past few years, there continue to be serious challenges for Myanmar ahead. In spite of the liberalising reforms of 2011/2012, there have nonetheless been crackdowns on the press and political prisoners. The inability of the Burmese government to prevent the killings and large-scale expulsion of the Rohingya Muslim minority have not endeared Myanmar to the world's press, and exposed serious human rights violations. Moreover, the conflict has created new divisions within civil society elements in Myanmar, and between Myanmar and global civil society. Nonetheless, foreign organisations like the British Council, American Center, and other foundations and NGOs are likely to continue to engage closely with Burmese civil society to ensure that openness, rather than isolation, provides a path towards a more equitable and inclusive future for Myanmar.

Conclusion

The exercise of soft power must constantly adapt to changing political contexts, operational limitations, and the constraints and ambitions of civil society and the creative class, particularly with regards to education. Soft power is measured by its effectiveness in influencing others, changing minds, and attracting them to one's point of view. Soft power constitutes a two-way process, whereby the response of beneficiaries in the country of operation has a fundamental role in shaping soft power interventions.

In Burma, foreign cultural interventions have had a long history, beginning with the entry of missionaries, traders, and colonisers. In the colonial era, the British education system and parliamentary democracy were imposed under the guise of Western superiority; Burmese political and cultural traditions were disregarded as inferior, creating a deep sense of psychological affront. In the late colonial era, cultural and anti-colonial nationalism emerged as urban-based intellectuals made use of educational opportunities and information channels to make political claims.

In the post-colonial era, relations between Burma and Britain were re-instated with both as equal partners. In the 1950s, foreign powers competed for influence in the neutralist country, creating a vibrant atmosphere of cultural and intellectual exchange. But with rumours of US intervention on the Burmese border and anti-communist propaganda, alongside Soviet and Chinese influence on the communist insurgencies in the countryside, foreign interventions were viewed with deep suspicion by Ne Win as a destabilising force. After the 1962 coup, Ne Win isolated Burma, closing off its economy and its people to foreign relationships. During this time, foreign cultural institutes were expelled and libraries closed. Heavy censorship restrictions were imposed, including on foreign publications. Foreign cultural institutes had to learn to adapt and circumvent the restrictions of the military government.

After pro-democracy protests in 1988, cultural institutes built quiet relationships with civil society actors, particularly with the 1988 student generation. Many students and users of the American Center and British Council libraries continue to have an active role in civil society and government. With the gradual opening up of Burma in the 2000s, new opportunities have emerged to build relationships with civil society and an emerging creative class. Technology and drastically enhanced connectivity are providing windows of opportunity to reach new audiences and build new partnerships.

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