

The “Supplement Section – Myths from Asia” (pp. 111–186), which follows, contains six contributions from a second workshop under the broad framework “Myths from Asia”. Kasturi Dadhe’s article is an interesting contribution on the complexities of a tribal creation myth of the Bhil. Almuth Degener writes on the construction of a mythic history spanning 2,500 years in the famous Urdu novel *Āg kā daryā* by Qurratulain Hyder. Degener relates her interpretation to the subject of the volume, since the novel reveals a “utopia of a golden age, consisting of the peaceful coexistence of free and equal citizens” (p. 124) in contrast to the deep enmity in the present hostile relationship between India and Pakistan.

Ivo Ritzer, in his second contribution “Legends of the Fist” focuses on nationalism and transnationalism in the myth of the superhero in films from China and Hong Kong, while Hans Ruelius discusses the mythic origins of the *yakṣa* in traditional Sinhalese literature, particularly in the *Licchavikathā* (story of the Licchavi clan). Masako Sato’s article describes the symbolic dimension of the spider and her net in traditional Japanese literature, while Markus Stiglegger analyses the myths of the everyday in the film *Mythopoetic* of the contemporary Japanese film director Mamoru Oshii. The last section of the book contains pictures, which relate to some of the articles.

All in all, the volume provides a multi-faceted and entertaining overview of various interpretations of the utopian and the mythological from both ancient and modern Asia and is a fine contribution to the intercultural landscape.

Heinz Werner Wessler

ELLEN WILES, *Saffron Shadows and Salvaged Scripts. Literary Life in Myanmar under Censorship and in Transition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 288 pages, \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-2311-7328-5

Over decades of military rule, Myanmar developed an extremely harsh censorship regime that had a profound impact on developments in literature – writers gained fame for creative ways of coding their messages that were unintelligible to the censors. Paradoxically, censorship had at once a very restrictive impact on Myanmar literature and was at the same time, as one writer phrased it, “the best thing that happened to it” (p. 235), unwittingly forcing writerly creativity and encouraging “public lust for books that are forbidden fruits, which goes hand in hand with intense respect for writers” (p. 251). But what has happened to Myanmar’s literary scene since the end of prepublication censorship in 2012? Ellen Wiles’s book, an “ethnographic investigation of literary culture in Myanmar” (p. 1), sets out to answer this question.

At the core of the book are the accounts of nine writers speaking about their experiences of living, writing and publishing under the censorship regime and

after its end. It also includes new translations of examples from their work, chosen by the authors themselves. This rich material is framed by Wiles's introduction and conclusion. The introduction provides background information to place the writers' accounts in their historical context. Trained as a lawyer, the author discusses the legal framework of censorship, though some of this section seems to be taken from Anna Allott's *Inked Over, Ripped Out: Burmese Storytellers and the Censors* (New York: PEN American Center, 1993).

Wiles's introduction to literary history contains substantial errors, however, such as referring to "the Bagan dynasty in the mid-fifteenth century" (it had collapsed by the end of the thirteenth) having left its earliest works of literature engraved on "stone tablets" (p. 28; the inscriptions were usually incised on large stone steles). Moreover, she characterises Inwa period poetry as a "secular form", although the characteristic genre of the period is poems composed by Buddhist monks on religious themes. And the *yadu* genre originated not in Siam (p. 29) but was first composed by Caturingabala in upper Myanmar around 1340, with no known Siamese influence at all.

The featured writers are grouped into three generations: The oldest (60–90 years), the middle-aged (40–60 years) and the youngest (20–40 years). The oldest generation experienced the period before the censorship regime and subsequently had to adjust to it. This generation is represented by Win Tin (b. 1929), a journalist, founding member of the NLD, political prisoner, recipient of the World Press Freedom Prize, and poet; by Shwegu May Hnin (b. 1940), a radio broadcaster, writer and former NLD Member of Parliament, as well as former political prisoner; and by Pe Myint (b. 1949) a writer and editor (who was appointed Minister for Information by the NLD-led government in 2016). While the first two are chiefly admired for the political heroism that earned them long-term prison sentences – and the veneration of many political supporters – Pe Myint was known as a writer of many widely read short stories, as a recipient of the National Literary Award (in 1995) and as a clever businessman involved with several magazines and publishing companies.

The middle generation "had never known life outside of the regime" and thus, according to Wiles, faced a great challenge "to become good writers" (p. 117). This generation is represented by Ye Shan (b. 1961), who regularly publishes short stories and in 1986 won the National Literary Award; by Ma Thida (b. 1966), a well-known writer and public intellectual who, for some time, was active for the NLD and ended up in solitary confinement; and also by Zeyya Lynn (b. 1958), a former university lecturer in English who is arguably one of the most influential poets in present-day Myanmar.

The youngest generation of writers has experienced the least censorship, but in their early works were still affected by it. They are represented by Nay Phone Latt (aged 31), a blogger, short story writer, political activist and former political prisoner who has received numerous awards, including the Reporters Without Borders' Cyber-Dissident Award and the PEN American Freedom to

Write Award; by Pandora (31), a poet who, after working and writing poetry in Singapore, returned to Myanmar recently and published an anthology of poems by Myanmar women poets, and finally, by Myay Hmone Lwin (26), a young novelist, short story writer and successful publisher.

Wiles's conclusion draws out common themes and key issues from the writers' accounts: the political transition in Myanmar has resulted in a major crisis of the literary scene. Many writers are "at a loss to find subject matter that is as passion-inducing and incendiary as that which they were motivated to tackle under censorship". Given that "the literary devices frequently used to get around the restrictions are no longer as potent or necessary as they once were" and that "in combination with socialist realism, those devices had formed the backbone of literary style and form" (p. 251), it has become difficult to continue writing fiction. Older writers, who are celebrated for their political activism and resulting imprisonment, are now in demand to give "literary talks" (that are hardly about literature at all, but usually about politics), and write essays and articles about political topics or memoirs retelling the story of their struggle with the regime – yet have mostly ceased to write fiction. Some regret the extent to which "politics have usurped the literary" (p. 232), and the fact that economic changes have led to a "flurry of commercialization" resulting in "a plethora of fashion and style magazines [...] with glossy pictures and celebrity stories" (p. 237) that have come to replace the formerly popular literary magazines featuring poetry, short stories and essays on literature and the arts. Younger authors break with all kinds of literary and cultural taboos by writing in slang language explicitly about sex and violence. However, Wiles remains optimistic, seeing literature as so deeply engrained in Myanmar culture that the current crisis can be but a "temporary post-censorship phenomenon: a dip in literature's place in the cultural hierarchy for a short time before an ascending peak of activity" (p. 253). Without romanticising censorship, Wiles does observe how difficult writing has become without it for those who had grown accustomed to struggling against it.

The book presents a multifaceted and vividly polyphonic account of Myanmar's current literary scene based on field research and interviews conducted in 2013. It does, however, have its flaws. The author's admitted "inability to speak Burmese" (p. 11) is a serious one: isn't it too daring to embark on an "ethnographic investigation of literary culture" without being able to read the literature or to talk with the writers – the artists of the word – in their own language? All but one interview were conducted in English with writers who had mostly already published in English; six out of the nine authors had participated as writers in residence at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program; several had featured as prominent NLD politicians or political prisoners in the English language media. How representative are they of Myanmar's literary scene? While Wiles claims that her selection is based on "asking numerous writers and readers for recommendations" (p. 12), I suspect that her linguistic abilities

did indeed play a more important role in her choices than she is conscious of or willing to admit. This brings with it the danger, in a kind of self-amplifying circle, of again featuring only those writers who are already known to an interested international public and of failing to give a voice to those who might be at least as or even more prominent and important for the local literary scene, but have not yet published in English. Another serious issue is that of the translations of the authors' accounts and texts which Wiles claims she "did" on the basis of "initial translations" provided by either the author or by a local translator (p. 12). Without being able to read the original, one cannot do a translation; one can only modify someone else's translation – and in this process, distortions of the original meanings happen easily. Not having access to the original texts (which would have been a major asset to the book), the reader can only hope that the fact that Wiles asked the authors to check "her" translations has minimised misunderstandings. However, some of the translations and transcriptions do contain errors evident to anyone who knows the language.

Her point that there are so few translations (to provide her better access to Myanmar's literary scene) because there are few able translators in Myanmar is not really valid; good translations of literature have to be done by those translating from their second language into their native tongue (and not the other way round) in order to achieve a quality that meets international standards. We can therefore only hope that in the future Wiles and other native speakers of English, French, German or other languages take upon themselves the effort to learn the language and start translating more of the wonderful literature of Myanmar. Her fascinating and very readable account may well be a very good incentive to do so.

Georg Noack

MARIE LALL, *Understanding Reform in Myanmar. People and Society in the Wake of Military Rule*. London: Hurst, 2016. Xviii, 352 pages, £20.00. ISBN 978-1-8490-4580-3

Since the transition of Myanmar to democracy or as some say, a less repressive form of rule, observers and experts have guessed at the reasons for the change of heart of the military government. Generally it remained just that: guesswork.

Marie Lall does not furnish clear-cut reasons or a deep analysis of the process either, but that is not her objective. What she provides is a very detailed, very knowledgeable survey of the processes that led to the changes from 2004 up until the present. What she also does is to discount many of the myths surrounding the transition, such as that the sanctions against Myanmar led directly to the junta bowing down before the international community. She is very decisive about this; the sanctions definitely did not make the military government blink. Yet even if the junta did not suffer under these measures, others like civil