VIII
Burmese Days
Yangon, Myanmar and *The Strand Hotel*

Words and Photography by Kennie Ting

Fig. 1 – The offices of The Myanmar Times.

> "…[a]n agreeable life, luncheon at this club or that, drives along trim, wide roads, bridge at this club or that, gin pahits…then back through the night to dress for dinner and out again to dine with this hospitable host or the other, cocktails, a substantial meal, dancing to a gramophone or a game of billiards…"
>
> W. Somerset Maugham, *The Gentleman in the Parlour*

The times, they are a changing'

Growing up as a young adult in the '90s and '00s, there were only two things that came to mind when one mentioned "Burma." The first was the faceless (military) junta. The second was the familiar face and figure of Aung San Suu Kyi. These two facets of Burma were always presented as being hopelessly opposed to each other. As in, there could not possibly be a Myanmar with Aung San Suu Kyi in it; and conversely, there could not be a Burma with the junta.

In the last two years alone, something close to miraculous has happened. And that is the resolution of this seemingly hopeless dialectic into a single unifying truth: there *could* be a Myanmar with both junta *and* Aung San Suu Kyi, and in fact, this was a Myanmar that *had* to be so constructed, by necessity.

It all happened when Ms Aung San was rather suddenly set free in 2010, after 15 years of house arrest; and the momentum of this singular event was followed up less than two years later with the lady's formal investiture as a Member of Parliament (in her capacity as leader of the opposition National League for Democracy Party). Now sceptics may say that this was simply a result of the junta bowing to international pressure, and Ms Aung San's own gracious concessions to the former's less than ideal conditions. But I say that it takes two hands to clap, and if Ms Aung San was the left, then the junta, led by the reform-minded President Thein Sein, was a resounding right.

Fig. 2 – Business as usual in the rural outskirts of Yangon (view from the Yangon Circular Train).

On this, my first trip to Yangon (and to Myanmar), I had the chance to witness, first-hand, how this change was impacting the nation and its people. Which was to say, not very much, or at least, not very obviously or not yet. There wasn't any uncertainty in the air. But neither was there an exuberant glow of optimism.

Rather, life continued as usual, as it had always been: vibrant, riotous, entrepreneurial and surprisingly multi-cultural (more of this in just a moment). People were open enough when you talked to them, but, in general, somewhat blithely oblivious to the general state of events. I felt constantly like I was more excited about the changes in Burma than the Burmese themselves.

Fig. 3 – Burmese crossing Strand Road towards the British Embassy building.

Just a week before I arrived, US President Barack Obama had addressed an assembled crowd of students on what was the first ever visit by a sitting US President to Burma. On my way in from the airport to the hotel, my taxi coasted along the shores of the beautiful Inya Lake, where the sprawling, colonial-era campus of the University of Rangoon sat. As we passed by the campus, my taxi driver rather lackadaisically pointed out a crumbling, hulking building within which Obama had apparently delivered his address. It was the "Graduation Hall," he said, "where students came to graduate." And that was that. There wasn't another word on the matter. We continued talking about where I came from ("No I'm from Singapore, not Japan"), and where he originated from ("I was born in the Shan States, but I have lived throughout Myanmar"); but the conversation didn't stray back towards where it started off. There was no talk about change, as if it was completely irrelevant.

The next evening I got to talking to a expatriate academic, however, and he informed me, most emphatically, that change had indeed taken place, though it may not be so obvious to the visitor passing through. For starters, all the big-wigs in the Government, who had grown fat on political patronage from local companies wishing to do business in the country, had woken up one morning to find that they no longer had a monopoly over the local markets, what with MNCs clamouring to enter and all. There had also been a very public protest by Buddhist monks against the construction of a new mine in North Burma by a Chinese company. After a spirited crackdown by the police, during which some monks had been brutally assaulted, President Thein Sein had actually come forward to issue a public apology for the assault. Clearly, the times they were a changing, even if day-to-day life in Yangon hadn't yet registered any significant shift.

Fig. 4 – The old market, and the many diverse peoples and religions on display, on a single morning.

Eventually, I had to admit that I was far *less* taken in by the shifting political climate, than by this surprisingly multi-cultural and multi-religious day-to-day life in Yangon. Not knowing very much about Burma (and for good reason), I had come expecting a population that would be primarily Burmese and Buddhist. Imagine my surprise, when, upon taking to the streets of the old town, I found myself in the midst

of one of the most cosmopolitan cities I had yet seen in Southeast Asia, quite on par with Singapore where diversity and tolerance was concerned, at leat outwardly.

In the old town, often sitting on adjacent blocks, were a dizzying array of religious buildings – Burmese temples, Chinese Temples, Hindu Temples, Anglican Churches, Catholic Churches, Sunni Mosques, Shia Mosques, Jewish Synagogue and even an Ismaili khanaqah. The faces of the people were similarly multi-hued, with South Indians, of both Hindu and Muslim persuasion, being the most obvious minority group (the Chinese often looking largely indistinguishable from the Burmese themselves). I found, to my delight, that *roti prata* – a kind of pastry and curry dish that is a staple of South Indian food in Singapore – also featured ubiquitously as street food in the many alleyways and markets of the old quarter! As did chicken rice (another staple of dish of Southern Chinese origins in Singapore), albeit in a more rough and ready form.

Fig. 5 – The High Court of Rangoon, an imposing Victorian confection in red brick.

This multi-culturalism is a lingering after-effect of the heady days of British Burma, when Yangon, or Rangoon, rather, was the political and economic capital of the territory, and (for a time) the furthest-most point of the British Raj. The British were here for just under a century (1852 – 1942), but inscribed into the urban fabric,

some of their most spectacular and over-the-top pieces of imperial architecture this side of the Indian Subcontinent. Along Strand, Pansoedan and Merchant Roads near the Yangon River waterfront sit some of the most impressive and monumental civic and commercial buildings the British built in the entire region, trumping those in Singapore. Many of these buildings still retain their names – "Rander House"; "Ascott & Co.", "Government Telegraph Office" – evoking a time when Rangoon had been a key gateway to international trade and commerce, and, as a result of that, an extremely wealthy city. For signs of this past wealth, step out into the suburbs of Ahlone, or Inya, where there is still a proliferation of grand colonial-era villas standing in relatively good condition. Today, these areas are a kind of latter-day Embassy Row – most of the nation's foreign embassies have occupied and refurbished many of these once-dilapidated properties. Sixty years ago, however, these would have been private domiciles of British Civil Servants and wealthy resident merchants.

Fig. 6 – A Buddhist monk gazing on the past (or is it the future?) at the Shwedagon Pagoda complex.

Buddhism, however, remains at the heart of Burmese culture and identity. The Buddhism practiced here, as with most of continental Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, is Theravada Buddhism infused with traces of Brahmanism. At the Burmese national symbol – the magnificent and somewhat surreal Shwedagon Pagoda in

Yangon, I saw the usual array of Buddhist icons alongside statues of celestial beings and mythical beasts from the *Yama Zatdaw*, the Burmese incarnation of the Ramayana. I also got to witness just how deep the religion runs in Burmese everyday life. Civilians far outnumbered the monks worshipping at the Pagoda, and I observed many of the former building karma by slipping alms to latter, sitting quietly at prayer amidst the forest of smaller pagodas and pavilion-temples that dotted the entire complex.

Fig. 7 – Washing the Buddha at the Shwedagon Pagoda complex.

The most intriguing practice I observed, however, had to be the ritual washing of the Buddha. I stood transfixed for some time as ordinary citizens of all ages and backgrounds stepped up in an orderly manner to the dozen or so strategically placed white statues of Buddha around the central Pagoda, and proceeded to douse the statue with cup after cup of holy water. *Here*, I thought, encapsulated in this ancient practice, was the reason why the British colonial project was doomed to failure, and why Obama was a distraction, rather than a sign of change.

I stepped up in an attempt to try my hand too at Buddha-washing, but the collective stares of the assembled pious, unimpressed by my garish foreign-ness, told

me only too clearly that I should not be taking this ritual lightly. I deferred to their timeless wisdom.

No. 92 Strand Road

Fig. 8 – The Strand Hotel, Yangon.

Speaking of timelessness... The delicious irony about all the legendary colonial hotels in the region is that change had come often drastically to these grand old dames, in order that they may look as though no change had touched them at all. *The Strand Hotel* in Yangon certainly looked, both outwardly and inwardly, as though it still stood in Victorian Rangoon, despite, or perhaps because of a significant restoration and refurbishment effort in the late '90s. Opened in 1901, the hotel is the third and last extant property established by the illustrious Sarkies Brothers[1]. It was the brainchild of Aviet Sarkies – the youngest of the brothers, and his older brother Tigran, who had established the *Raffles Hotel* in Singapore. It is the shortest-lived of the Sarkies hotels, having only remained in the Sarkies brothers' possession for 24 years – they would sell it to a fellow Armenian businessman in 1925.

[1] The *Hotel Majapahit* in Surabaya was established by a son of one of the original brothers and was never part of the same network

In the early 1900s, the Strand sat across a small road from a large waterfront park on the banks of the Rangoon River, near the port of Rangoon. Today, this road – Strand Road – is a huge and busy multi-lane thoroughfare that is notoriously difficult to get across and makes taking shots of the hotel exterior fiendishly difficult. Strand Road is lined with almost a dozen of the most impressive colonial-era buildings in the city, and strongly recalls the Shanghai Bund. In those days, British tourists, alighting from their luxury cruise liner from Calcutta, would have found the view from their hotel shuttle most familiar and edifying, a pompous display of the wealth, might and power of the Empire. A short ten to fifteen minute ride in the carriage later – the port was within eyeshot of hotel then, as it still is today – guests would be deposited at the entranceway to the hotel, and ushered in by a waiting Sikh footman (a Burmese footman in traditional *longyi* today).

Fig. 9 – Entrance to the hotel, and longyi-clad doorman.

Once inside, the view they would have taken in would have been pretty much the same as today's; which is to say, that the traveller would have stepped into a delightful, other-worldly paradise of palm trees, marble floors, wicker chairs and leisurely whirling fans. The ambience would have been convivial – there would be a slight buzz of activity and symphony of human voices from fellow guests having afternoon tea in the lobby lounge, or gin pahits in the hotel bar. Secreted at the corner

of the lobby, one might spy a novelist or journalist, leisurely taking notes while smoking a cigar. Service would be close to impeccable. Our traveller would be whisked up to the suite in a matter of minutes, followed by his entourage of boxes, trunks and manservants, ready to commence his month or even year-long residence in this home away from home.

Fig. 10 – The hotel lobby, in the afternoon.

My experience that first morning at the Strand resembled this fanciful idyll, save for minor differences – the hotel was exceedingly quiet (a busload of tourists would show up later that day), and the lilting melody of a Burmese xylophone completed the illusion of my having been stepped back in time. I had arrived slightly early, and while waiting for my room to be prepared, the concierge sat me down and explained, in almost impeccable English, what the hotel's services and amenities were. I was informed, to my delight, that I had been upgraded from a Superior to a Deluxe Suite. And then butler promptly appeared, genie-like to take me up to my suite. Which was, in a word: sumptuous. There simply wasn't any other word to describe it. It was the largest hotel room I had ever seen both in floor area, and in height. The ceilings must have been a good four meters, and there were separate writing, sitting and bathing areas, as well as a walk-in closet *and* walk-in boudoir.

What was most magical about the space however, was the light – which streamed in through the mile-high windows and suffused the space with a homely glow.

Fig. 11 – My room: the Deluxe Suite, complete with 4-metre high ceilings and heaps of character.

My butler sat me down at the writing desk, where all documentation had already been prepared. With a quick flash of a pen, the suite was mine (for two days at least). As a special touch, I had been given a complimentary bottle of chardonnay for my stay, and my butler asked if I did not want to sample it there and then. I said "no thank you, it was a little too early in the day for wine," and sent him on his way politely, before hooting like a child and diving onto one of the beds to luxuriate in the fresh, lightly scented sheets.

Mad Dogs and Englishmen

Fig. 12 – Sunlight streaming through the Strand Café.

Apart from the Raffles Hotel in Singapore, the Strand is probably the most literary of the grand hotels in Southeast Asia. Since Rangoon was the gateway to the Far East, e*veryone* with any intention to get to Asia, would have had to pass through here. And if they were visiting royalty, or merely obscenely wealthy, they would have had a suite at the Strand. It was here, that Rudyard Kipling supposedly wrote part of *The Jungle Book*. Here, that George Orwell purportedly penned parts of *Burmese Days*. Here, also, that Somerset Maugham, ensconced in the corner of the Bar, observed and took notes for what would become his book of short stories, *The Gentleman in the Parlour*.

The welcome letter from the Manager of the hotel, thoughtfully placed on my writing desk, rather glowingly (insofar as a letter could be glowing) informed me of my sharing the Guest Register with the likes of all the "royalty, nobility and distinguished personages" mentioned above. Noel Coward, another guest on the register, came to mind, and the words of the song, *Mad Dog and Englishman*, which immortalised his trip through the Far East, went through my mind:

> "Mad Dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun.
> The toughest Burmese bandit can never understand it.
> In Rangoon the heat of noon is just what the natives shun.
> They put their scotch or rye down, and lie down.
> In the jungle town where the sun beats down,
> to the rage of man or beast,
> The English garb of the English sahib merely gets a bit more creased.
> In Bangkok, at twelve o'clock, they foam at the mouth and run,
> But mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun."

Fig. 13 – Corner table at the Strand Bar where the likes of Noel Coward and Somerset Maugham may have sat at.

Since I was clearly not an Englishman, I must have been a mad dog, for after an energetic spate of rolling around in my bed singing ditties from the 1920s, I stepped out into the noonday sun for my photoshoot of the colonial quarter. I returned close to sundown, and headed straight for the Strand Bar for their famous Happy Hour (5 – 11 p.m.), popular with expatriates and (Western) tourists. The Bar,

oozing colonial atmosphere, was still empty when I arrived and I got to talking with the only other person seated at the bar, who happened to be an expatriate academic and expert on Burma's political economy. Without going into too much detail, we got to talking heatedly about cities, culture and the economy in Southeast Asia, in London (where he was from), and in New York (where I had just moved back to Singapore from). As we talked, the bar gradually filled up and by 8 p.m. the place was so packed that there was hardly any space even to think. I was surrounded by French, Spanish, American and English voices, and the occasional Japanese and Korean. *Some things don't change*, I thought to myself. Then, as now, the Strand Bar would have been the place to be to meet a fellow traveller like one's self, or some other interesting person, and to engage in a conversation about everything under the sun.

Fig. 14 – Reflection of a chandelier at the Strand Café.

Finally bidding my goodbyes at 9.30 p.m., four and half hours and five glasses of wine after, I adjourned for dinner. The manager of the hotel – whom I had briefly met at the Strand Bar, had rather kindly suggested I check out a list of fine Burmese restaurants in the suburb of Ahlone. But, since it was rather late, and I was spectacularly drunk, I decided it was best to stay in for dinner. Eschewing the Western Menu at the more formal Strand Grill, I opted for local flavours at the Strand

Café. The atmosphere in there – in stark contrast to the heaving Strand Bar – was ghostly but evocative. I contented myself with a not-so-bad Burmese Tea Salad Trio, and staggered back to my room, done for the day.

A Singular Experience

Fig. 15 – Mohingya: the typical Burmese breakfast.

The morning of departure, I went down to the Strand Café as usual for breakfast and opted for a Burmese breakfast staple – the *mohingya*, which is rice noodles suspended in a thick fish-based stew, enhanced with a variety of pungent Burmese spices, as well as aromatic slices of edible banana stem. That, at least, is the mohingya I'm used to having at my favorite Burmese restaurant in Singapore. The mohingya I had at the Strand was insipid and flavourless, completely neutered to cater to European tastes. It didn't even look like a typical *mohingya*, which presents a somewhat messy and unappetising appearance and odour to the uninitiated, as does most other Burmese cuisine. The curry chicken noodle I had the morning before – the only other Burmese item on the breakfast menu – had been similarly uneventful, and it made me wonder if it was the lack of demand (all the other Western guests at the café invariably ordered the American-style breakfast) that made the quality of local offerings so, well… uninspiring.

The same could not be said of the merchandise available in the hotel's shopping area. After breakfast, I spent some time browsing through the numerous arts and indigenous craft stores housed on the ground floor of the hotel, intent on purchasing a gift for my mother, whose birthday it was that very week. The stores were well stocked with everything from gigantic wooden carvings and statues to tiny vinyl figurines of Burmese hill tribes. The ambience was deliciously period, reminding me of a Victorian-era museum of ethnography and curios (Sir John Sloane's Museum in London came to mind), with every single item on display being largely a unique piece. I felt not unlike a Victorian antiques collector on a quest, patiently scrutinising and handling every single piece in a bid to uncover a treasure. As it was, my efforts paid off. I discovered, amidst all the bric-a-brac, a black lacquer jewellery box adorned with a gold rose. It wasn't big, but it spectacularly beautiful (and a success with my mother).

Fig. 16 – The Hotel Shoppe, like a 19th century Museum of Curios.

Back in the room, I finally got the butler to pop open my complimentary bottle of chardonnay so I could soften the wait till departure. I offered him a glass of wine in an attempt to find out more about his life and his experience in the hotel. But, bashful and perhaps adhering to the Hotel's policies, he politely declined.

As I sipped at my wine and reflected on my experience at the hotel that weekend, I thought that the most memorable part of my stay had been the quality of the service, in particular that of the 24-hour team of butlers stationed on each floor, and who, each time I stepped out of my room, far down the corridor from the second floor landing, could be seen rushing out from whichever room they were attending to at the moment to greet me and ask if I had not had a pleasant afternoon or evening so far. They were all very attentive to me, since I was quite likely the youngest and very possibly the only Asian guest in the hotel that weekend ("Where you from, sir?" "I'm from Singapore." "Ah!!"); and since also, I had had a series of minor "mishaps" in the room (my bathroom lights didn't work and had to changed; and then I accidentally touched and smashed one of the light bulbs, which had to be dealt with; and then I made a complaint about the water running into the bath, which was disconcertingly sepia-toned), which had me fixed rather prominently on their radar the day I checked in.

Fig. 17 – In my bathroom: a bouquet of deliciously scented local flowers, and a lacquer box with the hotel's logo.

I am a fair person, however, and I could honestly say that everything that was imperfect about the Hotel was more than compensated for by the professionalism and

personableness of its people. And *that*, ultimately, is the mark of a good hotel establishment, whether at the turn of the 19th century, or the 21st.

I left my butler a massive tip in appreciation for his team, since he could not accept the glass of wine with me.

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Essential Reading

Andreas Augustin, 2001. *The Strand Treasury* (E-Book). The Most Famous Hotels in the World.

Michael W. Charney, 2009. *A History of Modern Burma*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

W. Somerset Maugham, 1935. *The Gentleman in the Parlour: A Record of a Journey from Rangoon to Haiphong*. UK: White Orchid Press.

George Orwell, 1934. *Burmese Days*. UK: Oxford City Press.

Fig. 18 – The iconic driveway to *The Strand Hotel*.