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U Nu, China, and the “Burmese” Cold War: Propaganda in Burma in the 1950s

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Abstract

The Nu regime (1948-1962), threatened with intervention by both the PRC and the United States, and its supporters successfully reimagined the Cold War in ways that masked its concerns and sought to weaken the more direct threat of military intervention by the PRC. While the superpowers were able to configure conventional maps in ways that yielded propagandic value, Burma’s Cold War terrain was more difficult to render cartographically in ways that would aid the Burmese government. The Nu regime thus turned to the project of creating, through a play, an “imagined” Cold War landscape. This imagined landscape made it possible to hide from the Burmese the PRC threat and isolate the government’s domestic enemies from the global Cold War context. This Burmese version of the Cold War was so successful in doing so that it would continue to inform the military’s policies after the latter took power in 1962.

Introduction

During the Cold War, Western political analyses and scholarship on Burma tended to dismiss the policies of the government (1948-1962) of U Nu (1907-1995) and his refusal to allow Burma to be drawn into the Cold War as indicative of incompetence, intimidation by the People's Republic of China (PRC) or Buddhist pacivity. The Western response was both contradictory and oversimplified, portraying Burma as merely a PRC sympathizer or, as newsman Edward Hunter urged, a brave state fighting on the front lines against Communism. Since the end of the Cold War, scholars making use of previously unexplored sources have begun to reconfigure Burma's place in it from new angles, whether through the prism of the rise of the military as an institution in the context of a failing democracy or the continuity of pro-western elites into the independence period.¹ As a result, our understanding of Burmese politics and culture during the Cold War is becoming more complex and problematic. One dimension that requires new exploration is how Nu and the Burmese not only understood the Cold War going on around them, but how they engaged with it through intellectual production.

Although the prevailing research locates a major watershed in 1962 when the military took power, the styles and means of disseminating propaganda, the policies of "nonaligned nonalignment" in the Cold War, and the centrality of the reimagination of Burma's relationship with the PRC were all begun under the Nu government (1948-1962). At the centre of these developments was mutual antagonism between Burma and the PRC over their shared border and the simultaneity in Burma of two ongoing domestic communist insurrections and a Kuomintang (KMT) army just inside Burma's frontier with Yunnan. Threatened with intervention by both the

¹ An excellent representative of this new literature is Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

PRC and the United States (US), the Nu government and its supporters successfully reimagined the Cold War in ways that masked these concerns and made possible a number of seemingly contradictory policies, strategies, and tactics that kept the Chinese, the Americans, and the Soviets bewildered about what Burma's actual or potential place in the Cold War really was. It was the success of these approaches, however, that ensured the survival of the Burmese version of the Cold War after the Ne Win coup of 1962. This paper examines this reimagined Cold War.

The Nu Clique

From 1948 until 1962, with the exception of the 1958-1960 period, a clique of Rangoon University educated civilian intellectuals commanded the Burmese state in the context of the emergence of the global Cold War. Nearly all had participated in the 1936 Rangoon University strikes, which provided not only an early baptism in what emerged as national politics, but also provided a training ground in how to fight political opponents and mobilize support through propaganda. Many had also joined the lower echelons of the collaborationist Ba Maw regime (1942-1945), which helped connect this training to actual administrative experience. Nu, for example, had been outspoken in the 1936 university strikes, but had shown that while he could harangue, his personality was too erratic to provide stable leadership, which he left to others. He held a minor post under Ba Maw during the Japanese occupation. When Aung San and his cabinet were assassinated in 1947, assassins had also been sent, but failed, to

find Nu and as one of the few survivors, he emerged as the leader of the nationalist front, known in English as the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL).²

Nu's main expertise was in translating and writing, especially plays and he was a proponent of exposing Burmese to a wide range of Western literature, including leftist literature, which he distributed through the Nagani (Red Dragon) Book Club which operated in Scott Market in Central Rangoon. One of his best circulated works was his translation of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Although completed in the late 1930s, this translation went through various new editions published during the early 1950s.³ Carnegie had an important influence on Nu's approach to politics and many of the observations he made while on tour of the US and the PRC, made to encourage an end to the Cold War, at least between the US and the PRC, were clearly drawn from Carnegie's approaches. Almost as popular were various plays that Nu had written both before and during the War and it would not go so far to suggest that Nu was among newly independent Burma's best respected writers. Many of Nu's plays were political. *Yet Set-Pa-Be Kwè* ("Oh, How Cruel"), for example, had promoted the nationalist struggle against the British and highlighted Burmese anxiety as a result of the alleged excesses of colonial-era Indian landlords and moneylenders.⁴

² These developments are discussed in Michael W. Charney, *The History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³ Dale Carnegie, *Meitta-bala-tiga* [How to Win Friends and Influence People], 2 vols., tr. Û Nu (Rangoon: Burma Translation Society, 1938, reprint 1954).

⁴ Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 182.

Nu's chief ally in government was U Thant (1909-1974), who would later become internationally known as the General Secretary of the United Nations. Thant was more adept than Nu in the practicalities of official state propaganda. From September 1947, Thant served in the AFPFL's Directorate of Information and as Deputy Director, Press. When independence was achieved, Nu named his first as Deputy Secretary of the Information Ministry and then as Director of Broadcasting. From 1949 until 1954, he served as Secretary of the Ministry of Information, which included management of the *New Times of Burma* and the *Burma Weekly Bulletin*. During this period, he also delivered commentaries of domestic and international events on his weekly radio programme and wrote many of Nu's political speeches. As he confided to at least one observer, he believed himself to have been "something of an expert" in psychological warfare as a result of earlier work in censoring Soviet and American comic strips.⁵ In July 1950, Thant also founded the Society for the Extension of Democratic Ideals (*Dimogareisi Pyán-pwà-yè Athìn*) that sought to promote adherence to Democracy regardless of political party affiliation. To achieve these goals, the Society aimed to teach Burmese the fundamentals of a Democratic society, which included the publication of propaganda that promoted this goal.⁶

Mapping, Territorialized and Imagined Space

⁵ June Bingham, *U Thant: The Search for Peace* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1966), 168-70, 174.

⁶ Michael W. Charney, "Ludu Aung Than: Nu's Burma and the Cold War," in *Imperial Retreat and the Cold War in South and Southeast Asia (1945-1962)*, edited by Christopher Goscha & Christian Ostermann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

At the end of the first year of independence, the Nu government found itself in a situation not unfamiliar to other areas of the emerging postcolonial third world. Nation-building in colonial times had been a project directed more at promoting ethnic or religious divisions rather than integration and uniformity, thus reversing processes throughout Eurasia at least for the previous millenium. Special treatment reserved for the minorities identified as “martial races” by the British gave way to fears of being suppressed by the formerly disenfranchised majority populations. In Burma, the Rohingyas, the Karens, and the Mons rebelled seeking to secede. In later years, they would be followed by numerous other groups, including the Shan. In this sense, Burma followed a pattern common on the periphery of the main Cold War turf. While the Cold War suspended the breakup of multinational states in Europe, on the periphery, primary ethnic separatism continued unabated and contributed to the growing connection between ethnic identity and cartographic boundaries.⁷

Even within the majority population, ideological differences that were voluntarily suppressed in order to gain independence resurfaced once that goal had been achieved. The Nu government thus faced two Communist rebellions that would outlive it, as well as less articulate but just as powerful rebellions by the ideologically confused Peoples Volunteer Organizations (PVO). Further, remnants of the KMT armies cut off in Yunnan by the Peoples Liberation Army’s (PLA) great Counteroffensive of 1948-1949 moved their operations inside Burma, without the agreement of the Nu government, and conducted war directed not against Rangoon,

⁷ Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, *The Power of Projections, The Power of Projections: How Maps Reflect Global Politics*, with a foreword by Harvey Scherman (London: Praeger, 1996), 126.

but against the PLA in Yunnan. They were soon supported unofficially by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Very quickly, the Nu government controlled only pockets of territory within Burma's official borders and it seemed likely that the regime would collapse.

The situation of the Nu government in 1949 is a good example of how the Cold War challenged geopolitical representations reliant on territorialized notions of cartographic space. The overlapping treaties of alignment that led Europe into the First World War and the division of the world between Axis and Allies in the Second World War could and were represented in various colour schemes demarcating which countries were on one side or the other. In its postcolonial context, outside of Europe and North America, contests could not be accurately represented by these means. As American experience showed in South Vietnam and Cambodia, demarcations of "national" boundaries did not reflect stable political realities, but masked them, creating imagined political spaces that were useful for propaganda purposes, but were otherwise meaningless.

The most important difficulty was in making meaningful national boundaries when much of the country was in the hands of the White Flags and the Red Flags -- separate Communist groups--, the KMT (whose areas of operation overlapped parts of Burma and Yunnan and who were blind to Burma's national questions), or in those of the ethnic rebels mentioned above. Then there was also the very real possibility that a PRC invasion, to evict the KMT, was imminent. Finally, external intervention by the US, realized by their (and Taiwan's) active supply of KMT forces in Burma, and suspected Soviet support for Burma's communist rebels entered into Nu's imagination. The complexity of Burma's civil/Cold War situation and the fluidity of power flows into and within the country could not be represented on maps in a

meaningful way, at least not one that could bolster the regime. Nu's policy of international neutrality (including nonalignment with the proposed Non-Aligned Movement) was aimed as much at attempting to simplify, intellectually, Burma's situation as it was to break this fluidity, and thus bifurcate into distinguishable categories Burma's domestic and international political terrain.

The Story of a Play I

As a translator, Nu would have been familiar with the disparity in equivalencies, the kinds of problems that Alton L. Becker would later term euphemisms and deficiencies, that is, the meaning that is added to a word or phrase when it is translated to another language or the meaning that is lost in the same process.⁸ Concepts can likewise be enhanced or, conversely, not fully rendered in translation. As a writer, Nu was also used to creating people, places, and events that exist in an imagined world firmly controlled by the writer and visited and accepted by the reader. Unlike the territorialized maps that failed to represent the realities of the Cold War, novels or plays were not bounded by such conventions.

Nu applied his skills in creating imagined spaces to propaganda directed at Burma's problems very quickly after fighting broke out. The initiative, however, appears to have come from Thant. On 18 June 1950, Thant arrived at Nu's home with a small committee of important writers and scholars of literature or stage, all of who had some experience with the public dissemination of information. The purpose of the committee was to compose a play that would make the public aware of the dangers

⁸ Alton L. Becker, "Introduction," in *Writing on the Tongue*, ed. Alton L. Becker (Ann Arbor: Centers for South and South-east Asia Studies, 1989), 1–5.

involved in taking power by force and not through a democratic election. Communists would only be one among many groups portrayed as being in the wrong. The film and stage director (and former Director of Information) on the committee, U Nyana, was at that time selected to write the play, but his draft was rejected at a second meeting of the committee on 5 August 1950. Nu was then asked to write a different version of the play, to be entitled *Ludu Aung Than* (frequently translated as ‘The People Win Through’). This was not the only change; the story would now focus on a man who joined the Communists and lived to regret the decision during 1949, the worst year of the ongoing civil war. Nu wrote the play during his spare time between 16 August and 4 November 1950, with occasional meetings with the committee in-between to discuss stylistic and plot points.⁹

Nu focused the revised play on the March 1948 to March 1950 period, considered the worst years of the civil war. While the original intent of the committee was to have a play that promoted Democracy and admonished those who attempted to take power by force, Nu’s final version of the play reflected additional themes that he played with in many of his public speeches. The most important of these, indeed the central theme of the play, was to warn the Burmese not to allow themselves to be fooled by foreign self-interested countries, in particular the Soviet Union and the US.¹⁰ The completed manuscript for *Ludu Aung Than* was submitted to the Society for the Extension of Democratic Ideals for publication in early 1951, which was soon followed by the performance of the play on the radio, on a one act per week basis, as well as a serialized comic strip.¹¹

⁹ Charney, “Ludu Aung Than: Nu’s Burma and the Cold War.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

During the years in which the play was written and saw the earlier phases of dissemination, Nu suspected that the Soviet Union had instigated and supported the Communist revolts. The Soviet Union, after all, did not warm up to the Nu government until after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953.¹² While Nu identified the Soviet Union and the US as sources of intervention that had to be opposed, *Ludu Aung Than* was silent on the PRC's possible intervention. This silence was not new. While the Nu government, through its ambassador to the United Nations, James Barrington, had joined with other countries in that body in condemning the North Korean invasion of South Korea, it refused to cooperate in condemning the PRC for its support of North Korea.¹³

Nu, understandably, also had to consider Burma's vulnerability to invasion from the PRC. The PRC had resumed claims made earlier by the KMT government regarding the unfair imposition by the British of their own territorial claims at the expense of China. The PLA briefly invaded in 1956 and occupied parts of the Burmese border, but withdrew shortly after. The treatment of this border incursion was in sharp contrast to the ways in which the Nu government handled the KMT presence. During the latter crisis, the regime launched a full battery of propaganda, particularly in a giant 1953 portfolio of evidence, policy statements, and photographs, circulated at home and abroad and intended to demonstrate that the "imagined" invasion was in fact real.¹⁴

¹² Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma* (Stanford: Stanford university Press, 1963), 185.

¹³ John Seabury Thomson. "Burmese Neutralism," *Political Studies Quarterly* 72.2 (June 1957): 273.

¹⁴ Burma, *Kuomintang Aggression Against Burma* (Rangoon: Information and Broadcasting Department, 1953).

The importance of the danger posed by the KMT was emphasized by a strategic positioning of the title against the backdrop of a map of the country. Burma is presented as an undivided entity bordered by a white, politically undivided zone of territory (for the coasts are included) suggesting the lack of an immediate external threat, notably from India and the PRC. Overlapping the Burmese and Chinese border are the words of the title “Kuomintang Aggression Against Burma,” the word Burma itself bounded in a dark-coloured box emphasizing again unity. In this rendering of territorial and political space, a unified Burma stands alone facing a KMT transgressor, the seriousness of whose threat to the Nu government is spelled out boldly.

By contrast, the PRC’s invasion, arguably much more serious though shorter lived, as it included the realization of longstanding Chinese territorial claims made against Burma, was treated with a combination of relative silence and denial (by the Burmese) that any invasion had taken place.¹⁵ This was partly due to embarrassment because it occurred after years of Nu publicly taking the PRC’s side on a number of international issues. Another factor was the scale of the threat, for the Burmese Army was a match for the KMT, even when supplied by the CIA, whereas the conclusion of a land war with the PRC would have predictably negative results for Burma. Further, the invasion confirmed Nu’s earlier warnings that the KMT presence would provide an excuse for intervention by the PRC. Thant shared this perspective. Commenting in 1965 on the Vietnam War, Thant suggested that if US troops had not entered South Vietnam, the latter could have followed the Burmese model for handling communist insurgents. This would have led to better results, he argued, for unlike South Vietnam’s Viet Cong insurgents, in Burma “there has not been a single instance of

¹⁵ Butwell, *U Nu of Burma*, 179-180.

outside help to the Burmese Communists.”¹⁶ For all of these reasons, and perhaps others, Nu chose not to include the PRC invasion in his imagined space of the Cold War and thus decided not to mobilize his propaganda machine against Burma’s gargantuan neighbour.

Hollywood Comes to Burma

Nu’s personal conflict between his role as a national political leader and his a popular writer probably had much to do with the mobilization of *Ludu Aung Than* by US interests as a propaganda piece that worked for the US rather than against it. When an obscure man, George Edman, attached to the US Embassy in Rangoon offered his services in bringing *Ludu Aung Than* to the US, Nu initially offered little resistance. Edman also knew another American, a Hollywood scriptwriter named Paul Gangelin (1898-1961), who happened to be in Rangoon at the time on another project discussed further below.¹⁷ Gangelin was fifty-four at the time and had been writing Hollywood scripts for thirty years, including the story or screenplays for *My Pal Trigger*, *The Daltons Ride Again*, *When Husbands Flirt*, and would later present his final script in 1957, the *Giant Claw*.¹⁸

Gangelin was a staunch anti-Communist who had participated as a witness before the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee and testified

¹⁶ Bingham, *U Thant: The Search for Peace*, 38.

¹⁷ Paul Gangelin, “How ‘The People Win Through’ Became a Film: A Whale of a Tale,” *Guardian* 1.5 (March, 1954): 19-20.

¹⁸ “Paul Gangelin,” Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0304321/>

against his colleagues with alleged Communist sympathies. Gangelin had been hired in April 1951 by the Ministry of Information's Special Films Production Board to make two films, which Gangelin would write and produce. The first would deal with Democracy in Burma and the second with the labour problem in Burma. In writing the labour script, Gangelin admitted that he had international Communism on his mind. As he explained:

The lawlessness of ...[the] KNDO's and PVO's I could say little about. This is an internal problem with which Burma could cope on her own. But Communism is the universal enemy of sanity and civilization, in Burma as here in Hollywood, where I was one of those who opposed it and helped thwart its attempt to control the motion picture industry. Communism is a running force, wherever it is found, constantly and deliberately exacerbated from external sources. However, it may disguise itself its aim is the re-enslavement of man to the state under proletarian tyrants as he was through history enslaved to the state under his monarchs. In my opinion, the Burmese communists' monstrous perfidy lies at the heart of the country's difficulties.¹⁹

The *Ludu Aung Than* play committee had earlier discussed shooting and distributing a film version of the play to reach the general Burmese population and even an English-language version of such a film for world distribution. With Gangelin and Edman's encouragement, Nu gave the go ahead for the transition of *Ludu Aung*

¹⁹ Gangelin, "How 'The People Win Through' Became a Film: A Whale of a Tale,"

Than from play to film and Gangelin was hired to write the new script. Now, Gangelin, Edman, Thant and Nu met together in Thant's office at the Secretariat One in November 1951 and they agreed to work together to get the film production in motion. Thant, as Honorary Secretary of the Society for the Extension of Democratic Ideals, the play's copyright holder, would get the Society's cooperation. Edman promised, vaguely, US assistance. Gangelin would write the screenplay. Gangelin first returned to the US, with a translation of the play and photos Thant had given him of Burmese houses and costumes. It remains unknown who made the particular translation that Gangelin would work with. However, since the Society for the Extension of Democratic Ideals published in 1952 an English version of the play translated by Thant's colleague in the Burma Broadcasting Service, U Khin Zaw,²⁰ Gangelin may simply have been handed Khin Zaw's yet to be published draft.²¹

Gangelin began working on the transition of the play from stage to screen in the US. In the process, he completely changed the script. He claimed afterwards that he had not intended to present Nu's story as an anti-communist homily, which he admitted it was not. Gangelin saw its value as a "grave, trenchant call to the Burmese people to understand the value of true Democratic responsibility, to learn that in our time force and conspiracy must give way to the common will, freely expressed." However, when he changed the script, with the exception of a handful of paragraphs, he increased the threat of communism through the voices of the main characters. That is, Gangelin did indeed turn it into an anti-communist homily. Nu had Gangelin fly to

²⁰ U Nu, *The People Win Through* (Rangoon: Society for the Extension of Democratic Ideals, 1952).

²¹ Gangelin, "How 'The People Win Through' Became a Film: A Whale of a Tale," 20.

Bassein to discuss the script and was unhappy about some of the changes, including one story development. We are not told which part of the script he did not like, only that after an hour of argument, Gangelin and Nu agreed to compromise. After that, Gangelin agreed to Nu's objections about at least one other change and on this occasion Nu reportedly told him "This time, Mr. Gangelin, you're not going to change my mind."²²

While progress had been made on the script, the question of how to fund the project remained, for it was not something that the cash-strapped Burmese government could afford on its own, at the height of the civil war. As mentioned above, Edman had made a vague promise of American help. The reasons for Edman's interest in the play and the nature of the suggested American help remain unclear. There are some clues. Bobker Ben Ali, a director at Gilmor Brown's Pasadena Playhouse, where many future stars of American cinema had their first break, for example, remembered that the State Department had received Nu's help at this time in securing the release of nine US airmen who were being held prisoner by the PRC. Interestingly, this led, a few months later, to a translation of the play being passed to Brown, who agreed to produce the play, but had difficulty finding a director. After being rejected by three or four directors, Brown turned to Ali. As Ali remembered, the main obstacle to doing the play was the enormous size of the script, for it was "a manuscript of newsprint paper ... about the size of the L.A. phone book." As Ali further complained:

I took the play home and read it and it was about the Communist insurrection in Burma where there are something like sixty political parties

²² Ibid.

that are identified by colors -- there are red P.V.O.'s, the yellow P.V.O.'s or the white P.V.O.'s. It had a cast of thousands, it was already this thick, and I read it and I just knew it could never be done.²³

Nevertheless, Ali soon managed to produce a severely truncated version of the script and put on a much less grand version of the play.

The US showed increasing interest in attracting attention to Nu's story. The Voice of America (VOA, then part of the State Department before the 1953 creation of the US Information Agency) became involved and broadcast the Pasadena Playhouse 1952 performance of the play internationally, while the United Nations Newsreel made a documentary of the production of the play. This documentary was then screened "all over Asia and Europe."²⁴ Soon, after, in November 1952, money also turned up to turn the Gangelin script into a feature film. Cascade Pictures had somehow gotten financing for the play, for which it wanted nothing in return, not even for the costs of filming it, and all proceeds were to go to the Society for the Extension of Democratic Ideals. At Nu's request, the Society agreed to turn this money over to religious and other organizations pursuing popular welfare in Burma. Gangelin then made arrangements by flying to New York and meeting several times with Thant, who was then at the United Nations.²⁵

Cascade pictures sent a film crew and its own equipment to Rangoon to begin shooting the play, with an all-Burmese cast, including both professional and amateur

²³ Diane Alexander, *Playhouse* (Los Angeles: Dorleac-Macleish, 1984), 111.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁵ Gangelin, "How 'The People Win Through' Became a Film: A Whale of a Tale," 20.

actors. They then took everything back to Hollywood for editing and then sent the finished film, with English subtitles, to Burma in late 1953. A preview was in Rangoon on 26 December 1953, but was scheduled for general release in Burma almost two months later, with simultaneous screenings in Rangoon and Mandalay on 12 February 1954, Union Day.²⁶

For Burmese audiences, there were mixed reactions. Some saw it, in cinematic terms, as the best movie ever made in Burma. As one reviewer claimed, “the People Win Through is that rare Burmese film in which artistic merit is matched with technical excellence.”²⁷ Others, apparently upset at its anti-Communist theme, would even torch a theatre running the film. And the film had decidedly become more anti-Communist, but with an ambiguous tone. As U Kyaw Tun explained in a review published in the official *Burma Weekly Bulletin*,

The People Win Through is not a propaganda film. It is more like a documentary. It reflects ... what is actually happening today to the Communist rebellion. It portrays ... the good and the bad men who fight under the Communist flag.²⁸

The reworked message of the film was not clear to everyone. Some Burmese viewers only recognized the moral messages originally intended when *Ludu Aung Than* was first written, some commenting that its messages were ‘do not wrest power by force’

²⁶ “The People Win Through,” *Burma Weekly Bulletin* 2.39 (30 December 1953): 310.

²⁷ U Kyaw Tun, “A Review,” *Burma Weekly Bulletin* 2.39 (30 December 1953): 310.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

and ‘do not forsake religion.’²⁹ But for Kyaw Tun and likely many others the film had achieved Gangelin’s goals. As Kyaw Tun recommended, “special efforts should be made to show it in the United States where it can do a lot to dispel the popular misconception that the Burmese government is pro-communist.”³⁰

California would again see the staging of the *Ludu Aung Than* play in 1955, when Nu and other Burmese dignitaries made a tour of the US, including visits not only to California, but also to President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Vice President Richard Nixon in Washington, D.C. This visit was intended not only to repay Nixon’s earlier visit to Burma intended to secure Burmese participation in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), but also to explain to the American people Nu’s reasons for refusing to join that organization and to make some contribution in fostering better relations between the US and the PRC. While in California, Nu insisted on seeing the play performed and State Department officials once again encouraged the playhouse’s cooperation. Nevertheless, Ali, the director of the original 1952 production at the playhouse—given the short notice and the fact that the sets had been dismantled long before—was only able to put on a reading by six actors at the Shakespeare Club. Nu, pleased to see the performance, suggested that he would seek Southeast Asia Foundation funding to bring the ad hoc troupe to Burma and put on a performance in Rangoon. Nothing appears to have come from these plans.³¹

The Story of a Play II

²⁹ “The People Win Through,” 310.

³⁰ Kyaw Tun, “A Review,” 311.

³¹ Alexander, *Playhouse*, 112.

Thus far, *Ludu Aung Than* had emerged as a Burmese-language play, a Burmese-language cartoon, a Burmese –language (perhaps with English subtitles) film, and as an English language play performed at the Pasadena Playhouse. In the process, the play was transformed from Nu’s earlier vision of bifurcating for Burmese audiences the Cold War and the domestic civil war into two intelligible and separable entities into a story for the same audiences of the negative impact of the civil war in which Communists were emphasized as especially notorious. While Thant and Nu introduced the play as a text for use in Burmese schools, efforts were underway in the US to increase the exposure of American audiences to the play. This led to *Ludu Aung Than*’s final incarnation in 1957 with the publication by Taplinger Press in New York of Khin Zaw’s 1952 English translation. This edition was intended primarily for American audiences.³²

What was unusual about the Taplinger edition was not the play itself, but its lengthy introduction. This introduction, almost as long as the play itself, was contributed by Edward Hunter. Hunter was a former propaganda specialist for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the forerunner of the CIA) who became a freelance journalist wandering about Asia wherever Communist movements had broken out, writing books to warn Western readers about the growing Communist threat to the Free World. Hunter was also noted for his testimony before the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee on 13 March 1958 where he unveiled his thesis that on the basis of absolute population and territorial loss, the Free World was losing the Cold War to the Communists.³³

³² Charney, “Ludu Aung Than: Nu’s Burma and the Cold War.”

³³ Ibid; Committee on Un-American Activities, *Consultation with Edward Hunter, Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, 85th Congress,*

Although Nu saw himself as a neutralist leader in the Cold War facing serious domestic rebellions, Hunter's introduction to the play casts Nu mainly as a defender of Democracy on the frontlines of international communist aggression. It would go too far to suggest that this represented mere twisting of the truth by Hunter. In actuality, the Burmese version of Thant's original introduction, presented for Burmese audiences, and the English version, presented for foreign, particularly American audiences, differ in their description of the aggression faced by Burma. In the Burmese version, Thant describes the context of the play as follows: "The main aim in writing this play was that we wanted to reveal the wrongs that occur because of evil plans to take national power by force without asking for it from the people by means of Democracy."³⁴ In the English version published in 1952 and republished in the Hunter edition, the same paragraph reads: "The People Win Through shows what actually happens when Burmese Communists decide to stage an insurrection."³⁵

The reasons for the different characterization of the threat in the two versions of the introduction are not explained. It may be possible that with the American interest in the play and the dogged nature of the Republic's domestic opponents that some leaders, perhaps Thant in particular, felt appealing for American sympathy was a

Second Session, March 13 1958. Washington D. C.: United States Printing Office, 1958. Full text:

<http://www.crossroad.to/quotes/globalism/Congress.htm>.

³⁴ ù Thant, "Pyazat-baw-bauk-la-poún," in *Ludu Aung Than Pyazat*, by U Nu (Rangoon: Dimoga-yei-si-pinya-byán-pwà-yè-haung, 1958), 78.

³⁵ Nu, *The People Win Through* (1952); Edward Hunter, "Introduction," in *The People Win Through: a Play by U Nu*, edited by Edward Hunter (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1957), 49.

sensible step to take if some turn in events necessitated changing course and appealing for outside aid. The English version of Thant's introduction to Nu's play was certainly consistent with the view Hunter took of Nu's struggle and he would build upon this theme in 1958 in his *The Continuing Revolt: The Black Book of Red China*, claiming that the play "expos[ed] the foreign allegiance of the leaders in [Nu's] country's Red Revolt."³⁶

Hunter's forte was "Red China," which he accused of softening the intellect of Asians to make them succumb to Communist ideology, and he even coined the term "brainwashing" in one evocatively entitled book on the PRC.³⁷ With the help of two anti-Communist bodies, International Research on Communist Techniques Incorporated and The Committee of One Million (Against the Admission of Communist China to the United Nations), Hunter published his aforementioned *The Continuing Revolt*. In this virulently anti-PRC book, Hunter elaborated further on his assessment of Nu's situation: "Burma, the first Asian country to recognize Red China...was rewarded with uninterrupted guerrilla warfare."³⁸ In Hunter's view, the PRC's support of Communist insurrection in Burma forced Nu to write *Ludu Aung Than*.³⁹

Through his various works, Hunter helped contribute to the evolution of *Ludu Aung Than* into its final form in the view of American audiences. The Nu government

³⁶ Edward Hunter, *The Continuing Revolt: The Black Book on Red China* (New York: The Bookmailer, 1958), 15.

³⁷ Edward Hunter, *Brain-washing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men's minds*, revised, expanded edition (New York: Vanguard Press, 1953).

³⁸ Hunter, *The Continuing Revolt*, 15, 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15; Charney, "Ludu Aung Than: Nu's Burma and the Cold War."

was a democratic state fighting on the frontlines of the Cold War against international Communism, directed and supported by both the Soviet Union and the PRC. This reworked the mental map of the Burmese position in the Cold War, removing the KMT as ‘hostiles’ in the country, suggesting by silence that they were a kindred force, and erasing the United States’ intervention in the country.

Conclusion

This discussion has focused on the efforts of Nu to reimagine the Cold War in ways that would help Burma survive the extreme challenges of fighting both numerous domestic ethnic and ideological insurgencies and to prevent their intersection with the intervention of the major Cold War powers. Primary to these efforts was the attempt to discourage PRC intervention. Nu, reflecting the intellectual origins of his governing clique, used literature to create this imagined space, which would have been difficult if not impossible to do with traditional cartographic approaches.

What Nu was not prepared for was the manipulation of the resulting play by US interests who turned the play into a documentary, a VOA broadcast, a film, and an English language publication distributed in the US. As a result of the manipulation of the play, encouraged by certain interests in Nu’s own government, Nu was transformed from a neutralist leader attempting to keep his country out of the Cold War into a Cold War warrior fighting against Communist penetration into Burma. His main antagonists were also transformed from the KMT and domestic rebels into international Communists, directed especially by the PRC. Nu was turned into a victim of an alleged PRC campaign to win Asia by subverting it. Ultimately, he found that by creating an imagined Cold War he also presented an opportunity for Western

propaganda to engage on the same ground and reconstruct this imagined space for its own purposes.

Despite Nu's best efforts to keep Burma out of trouble with the PRC and to present to the Burmese an imagined Cold War that did not involve a PRC threat to Burma, on the one hand, and a separation of domestic and international power flows, on the other, these efforts were undone under the Ne Win regime that took power in 1962. Ne Win and the Revolutionary Council turned to Soviet cooperation and assistance from 1963. As relations between the Soviet Union and the PRC cooled and the PRC's aid to Burma's Communists became clearer thereafter, the Ne Win regime would keep its eyes transfixed on the northeast. PRC-Burmese relations then transformed from pretended intimacy to open antagonism. Burma's place in the Cold War thus changed considerably from the 1950s to the 1960s. This also marked the beginning of nearly three decades of PRC support, the much feared foreign intervention that Nu had tried to prevent, of the "domestic" Communist rebels fighting the Burmese state.

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