

## Preface

Burma—the name conjures golden pagodas glowing in the evening light, girls with white thanaka paste on their cheeks, maroon-robed monks before images of the Buddha radiating serenity, young cowherds riding water buffalos, gilded boulders, and glorious sunsets illuminating unique cultural landscapes. These are the images that appear on postcards reproduced in their thousands, in the glossy brochures of travel agencies, or in the countless coffee-table books which flood the market. These are the images of a very picturesque, colorful, mysteriously exotic, gracious, and peaceful Myanmar, images contradicted in our perception only when news of violence and hatred in this “Golden Land” occasionally appears in the international media. This discrepancy between the popular image of Burma and the politically explosive reality illustrates that all those clichés perpetuating the picturesque at best capture only one aspect of Myanmar. They say more about the nostalgic expectations of the viewers for whom they are made than about reality. Examined more closely and more critically, they reveal themselves to be merely staged projections of yearnings and fantasies, which from a Western point of view are all the more easily directed at this land, so long politically isolated and closed.

A preference for the exotic has shaped photographic perception of Burma from the very beginning. The first cameras arrived with the colonial conquerors who used the new technology here, like everywhere else in the world, for photographic appropriation and “mapping” of the subjugated territory. Of course, as elsewhere in Asia and Africa, the images of the people, monuments, and landscapes of the new colonial “possessions” that emerged from this perception (and intention) corresponded to the tastes and expectations of the photographers and their clients, those living locally, and, even more so, those “at home” in Europe. They were permeated by a search for the alien and the surprising, for the picturesque, at times bizarre, occasionally also erotic charms of the foreign culture, as extolled by Rudyard Kipling with pompous nostalgia in his poem *Mandalay*. It can be argued that these motifs and the visual language of colonial photography, born of those projected fantasies, still influence many of the countless pictures tourists take home from Myanmar year after year.

With his images from Myanmar, Hans-Christian Schink radically cuts through this superficial film of exotic and often nostalgic kitsch. Though his photos, too, are unquestionably subjective interpretations of the observable, but anyone with longer observation and experience of the country will see that they come

closer to the ultimately unattainable “truth” than the picturesque clichés ever can. His images of the landscapes and cities of Myanmar are the result of weeks of travel, of hours and days of observation. They do not seek effects; rather they reflect a patient search for the inner essence of the country. Some are meditative in content and form; some seem to be behind-the-scenes glimpses of holy sites and temples. All appear sober and austere, yet are full of empathy and respect—an expression of a very gentle and cautious approach to that which is seen and to the special characteristics of the country. And all are permeated by what could be called the “Schink Sound,” that aura of pastel-colored light and vast expanses, usually deserted. His motifs—the pagodas of Bagan, the bridges of Yangon, or random villages and landscapes of the provinces—appear thousands of times in tourist souvenir photos. But from this flood of images, Schink has succeeded in singling out endlessly seen and reproduced subjects and concentrating them in monumental images, directing our attention anew to the pleasing aspects of everyday life—not the exotic and the curious. His photos show “images of longing” for a world that “may not yet be observed to death, photographed to death” (Kai Uwe Schierz) but is always to be rediscovered and reinterpreted.

For years, Christian and I have enjoyed a special bond of friendship. He has come to all the places in Asia where I have worked—to Vietnam, Indonesia, and now here to Myanmar—often for extended stays, which have resulted in new series of his work. These were important stops on his travels around the world, which have taken him from close to home in eastern Germany to the remotest corners of the Antarctic. He has come to Yangon five times, supported by a grant from the Stiftung Kunstfonds. Some of the magnificent photos that he has created here have already been exhibited at the Goethe-Institut in Yangon, and some are now permanently installed in the new Goethe Villa.

It fills me with great pleasure and gratitude that the Kerber Verlag is now making Hans-Christian Schink’s Burma photos accessible to a broader audience in this wonderfully designed book. Its publication marks the appearance of a volume that is as fascinating as it is unique and outstanding among the many internationally published photobooks on Myanmar.

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Franz Xaver Augustin  
Director, Goethe-Institut Myanmar