

Accepting Foreignness Hans-Christian Schink in Conversation with Photography Historian Ulrich Rüter

Ulrich Rüter: Let's start with a question pertaining to the title: How important is the use of the term "Burma" to you?

Hans-Christian Schink: "Burma" was and is the familiar sounding name for this country that was so foreign to me for a long time. It includes both my ideas about this country before my first trip there and my experience while working on this project. This is why, in a certain way, it has become independent of its official meaning and other standard terms in use.

UR: How did this project emerge and when exactly were the pictures taken?

HCS: Artistic work is always based on some kind of inspiration, whether actively sought or brought from the outside—in this case, from Franz Xaver Augustin, who has been active for many years for the Goethe-Institut in Southeast Asia and whom I met in Hanoi in 2005. After the political transformation in 2010–11, as director of the Goethe-Institut in Yangon, he reorganized the work that had been interrupted during the military dictatorship and established the Goethe-Institut as an important cultural institution in the country. In 2011, he invited me to take photographs in Burma. In his view, the subject of British colonial architecture and its gradual disappearance as a result of the economic transformations taking place would have been an interesting point of departure.

For me, the decision to take up such an inspiration and to derive a photographic project is mainly dependent on the extent to which my own interest goes beyond this first impulse. Here, it developed from the impression that Burma is a virtually paradigmatic example for how the perception of a country can be shaped by various projections of our Western perspective, dominated by the media. This applied both to the past and the present.

This phenomenon in combination with developments current at the time, the sudden opening of the country after decades of isolation, formed the foundation for a proposal that the Stiftung Kunstfonds found worthy of funding.

Originally I had planned a two-year project. But the work stretched for a period of four years. After two visits in 2013, over the next three years I took several trips to Burma for a few weeks at a time.

UR: Did you have a previous affinity to the country beforehand?

HCS: No, but I had already been in Asia quite often, in Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Japan, usually for photography projects. In the process, I was inevitably confronted with the myth of this entirely different world, the myth of a country that has fallen out of time, peacefully at rest with itself and its religiosity. But this sense of time at a standstill was actually the work of a dictatorship that had remained in power for almost fifty years and increasingly drifted toward the irrational near the end of the regime. In fact,

there was something of an inner bond. Having grown up in East Germany, I spent almost half of my life up until now under the impression of time standing still. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the forced "quaint" quality of the GDR has often been viewed with a similarly romanticizing view. Of course there are very real reasons for such projections: just as in the eastern part of Germany there still are romantic-seeming landscapes in the countryside with roads lined by very old trees, Burma is also covered with thousands of golden pagodas, everywhere processions of barefoot monks in dark-red robes on their daily procession in search of a bowl of rice. In both cases, the supposedly exotic is just a tiny part of the whole and in my view should not be taken as typical. So I experienced Burma much more as a country that had almost been destroyed by mismanagement and political paranoia. And this is also comparable to the GDR. But while East Germany's abrupt opening took place before running cameras, the actual motivations for the Burmese generals' change of mind will most likely remain a mystery. This surprising political transformation and the transformations to be expected became a motivation for my work.

UR: How did you prepare for this project?

HCS: First with the usual material: fiction and nonfiction relating to the country, press articles. But there wasn't all that much available: I'd like to emphasize one book in particular, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma*, which was published in 2009. The historian Thant Myint-U, grandson of the former UN Secretary General U Thant, tells in an impressive way the complex history of Burma as a series of constant struggles for power. This reading alone renders all romanticizing perspectives absurd.

Illustrated travel books served as a model for a visual reading-between-the-lines. Not to develop a counter-position, but as an additional form of approach, translating this visual language into an atmosphere of the everyday. Internet research was especially important here. Almost obsessively, I studied all the tourist photographs that had been uploaded to *Panoramio*, the former photography platform on Google Earth, now no longer in operation. Here, in contrast to the shots of professional travel photographers, there was an unfiltered, often entirely banal approach to the image, free of all pretenses of reflection. Since all these motifs were given a geographic position, I was able to get a sense of what places might be worth a visit.

UR: Were you able to move around freely in the country?

HCS: It wasn't as complicated as I'd expected. Generally speaking, as an individual tourist you can move around the country without any real constraints. But there are still restrictions for certain areas where the presence

of foreigners is undesired. This is true, for example, of the border provinces in the Golden Triangle, well known for drug cultivation and smuggling, and the regions with ethnic and / or political conflicts.

UR: Do current political events have a general influence on your work?

HCS: Not very much. But this is indeed a question that concerned me repeatedly in Burma. During my work on this project, the long smoldering conflict between Buddhists and Muslims was always present. On a local level, there were frequent outbreaks of violence. Of course, I saw the discrepancy between international and local reporting. Ultimately, I had to make a decision of where my focus should lie. But let me be clear: I am not a reporter. I can only grasp and depict a few aspects of the reality. And of course, my own perspective is also shaped by projections. It is a selective, subjective view with a documentary approach. This in turn means that I quite consciously include visible changes in public space in my photographic work that are a result of general political and economic developments.

But we're having this conversation in February 2018. Last year, the violence against a Muslim minority group in Burma, the Rohingya, which was obviously organized by the government, was an important issue in all the Western media. Although still not solved, this conflict has now largely disappeared from our sights, following the logic of the mechanisms of media attention. Naturally, these events have an impact on the perception of Burma in general. The reception of my own work will be influenced by this as well.

UR: When we speak of a selective view, how does a work like this emerge?

HCS: My point of departure, generally speaking, is not a concept worked out in detail, but rather a basic scaffolding, where the foundational points are formed by my photographic interest and also by visual ideas that ensue from my research. This results in a certain interaction with what I find on site. In the process of exploring motifs, I pursue at first several strands of a possible narrative that change over the course of time. In so doing, I am sure that I will encounter other motifs along the way to the few fixed destinations I have planned, and that they will gradually form my own emphases, since it is by no means clear that the destinations planned from the beginning are really worth photographing. Of the eighty-five photographs in this book, only six were the result of situations that I was familiar with beforehand.

The range of shots taken needs to be condensed in the final process. In my work, the amount of the entire visual material is already a concentration of what I have seen.

UR: Your photographs are usually taken with an analogue large-format camera using a tripod. Why this effort with very real ballast?

HCS: I don't really see it as ballast. The crucial element here is the form of decision-making linked to this. The actual photograph taken is usually at the end of a longer phase of preparation. To explore the potential of a location, I begin by walking around the area in question, seemingly without a goal. With the help of a "notebook" in the form of a small digital camera, a collection of possible motifs takes shape. In Burma, I had a great deal of time for this part of the work because the weather conditions appropriate for my actual photographs are very rare indeed. I prefer the non-dramatic light of a cloudy sky to generate a certain atmosphere in the image, withdrawn from a concrete situation. Another decisive factor for such an atmosphere is that the photographs should almost always be totally free of people, and in Asia that really takes considerable patience. Sometimes I worked with a medium-format handheld camera to be able to react more flexibly to given moments.

UR: Photographs of religious sites are a major element in your series. How do you see the role of religion in Burma?

HCS: Of all the countries that I have visited up to now, Burma is the one most strongly shaped by religion, especially the dominant Buddhist religion. From the *stupa* of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, which dominates the city skyline, to the *nat* shrines in almost every bodhi tree, public space is virtually saturated with religious symbols.

Religion is more strongly interwoven with the structure of everyday life than in other cultures, for example, in a much less ritualized way than in Christianity. As a whole, I found the dominant role of religion to be very ambiguous. The interpretation of Buddhism as a peaceful religion, that is surely quite widespread in Burma, stands in stark contrast to the unfortunate role that some religious leaders play in the country's political conflicts with their close contacts to the military elite.

Due to my general skepticism, I am more interested in religious depictions in terms of their cultural importance and less due to their spiritual aspects.

UR: These forms of religious representation seem very foreign for observers from other cultures. What kind of access did you have to them?

HCS: The existence of a concrete divine counterpart in the figure of Buddha is actually quite comparable with the adoration of the Savior on the Cross or images of Mary in Christianity. But the embodiment of the divine takes on an entirely different expression in the Buddha figures, because for me the fascination comes primarily from their extremely androgynous aura. This impression is even more striking in comparison to idealized representations of other mythological figures and the naturalistic portrait sculptures of famous monks or real people who are attributed supernatural powers.

Looking at the example of the Buddha figures, there is a very different approach to historical monuments. The conservation of an original state of affairs, defined in terms of cultural history, is given no importance. Regardless of their actual age, the sculptures are kept in an almost perfect state, constantly renewed, quite a contrast to the rapid decay of all other structures, simply due to the climate. At the same time, the spaces of Buddhist sites in Burma have no recognizable sacred function. There is no staging of space, no dramaturgy of location and perspective, of narrowness and expanse, proximity and distance. Space serves as pure surroundings.

My own photographic vision, in turn, is shaped by Western art and architecture. The utter lack of consciously placed lines of vision and vanishing points proved to be a real challenge when it came to looking for just the right image to capture. Usable constellations often resulted randomly from the technical structure of a building. This could be a very simple hall construction that, as it often seems, was erected after-the-fact over a Buddha sculpture, and where there was no special effort spent on its external appearance.

UR: What relationship does the formal solution of the Buddha typology in the second part of the book have to this?

HCS: Space serves here as a stage for the various constellations of Buddha figures. Their emergence was only very rarely the result of artistic mastery. They are usually more the result of practical craftsmanship, and for me more of an expression of religious everyday life. I am especially interested in the

arrangements of sacred and profane objects that seem virtually coincidental, and the resulting fullness of detail that must seem alien to the Western observer.

UR: How would you define the relationship of foreignness and familiarity when it comes to your Burma photographs?

HCS: The term “foreignness” is very decisive here. In all my projects to date, at a certain point there was always the feeling of finding the familiar in the foreign on a certain level, and this was an important part of their becoming emotionally accessible. The fact that phenomena of the globalized world can now also be found in Burma has nothing to do with the level of familiarity to which I am referring.

A subjective impression of fundamental foreignness set in from the very start, so I took this as a condition for my work. This is why the book seems more like a travelogue that explores this foreignness, but cannot dissolve it: I decided to refrain from providing explanatory texts to accompany the photographs. The images stand on their own.

UR: Would you now say that you have completed the project definitively with your selection of photographs for the book?

HCS: I never have the feeling that I have exhaustively treated a certain subject. But it has found a fitting conclusion in a form that for me is valid for the moment.