

## ***The Myanmar Literature Project - Starting with an Investigation into the NAGANI BOOK CLUB***

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### **1 General Information**

The project is about the intellectual and literary heritage of mainland South-East Asia's biggest country. Due to the decades of problems concerning the country's connections with the world, this issue hitherto has received almost no attention - neither academically nor outside of the academic realm.

The project, therefore tries to connect these aims -

- *it intends to document the publications of the Nagani Book Club founded in late 1937 which was a landmark in the Burmese struggle for independence and is almost unexplored in the Western academic world;*
- *it wants to shed light on the role of Burmese/Myanmar literature as a medium between the world and the county's society from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until today;*
- *it seeks to establish a network of people who are interested in Burma's/Myanmar's intellectual and literary life past, present and future both inside and outside of present day Myanmar.*
- *it aims at the implementation of training courses in the fields of literary, historical and social sciences for scholars and students of Myanmar studies.*

## **2 Starting Point: The Nagani Book Club**

The *Nagani* (Red Dragon) Book Club was founded in 1937 in Rangoon by some Burmans after the model of Victor Gollancz' Left Book Club in London. The most prominent of the founders was Thakin Nu, who later became the first Prime Minister of independent Burma. The purpose of the Club was to publish books in the Burmese language containing the essence of the contemporary international literature, history, economics, politics and science at a low price. Till 1941, the club issued more than 70 (or some 100, if the books published by the co-founder of Nagani Tun Aye are included) books and a monthly newsletter. The club was popularised by a song still well-liked today that was sung by a film star and may be regarded as Burma's crypto national anthem of the educated class. The club was closely linked with mostly young Burman nationalists, particularly from the *Thakin*-movement. The *Thakins* formed the core of the Burmese army and the political body that achieved Burma's independence in 1948.

The *Nagani* Book Club linked the Burmese independence movements with the contemporary international "world of knowledge". It was dedicated to serve the purpose of establishing a cultural and political revolution in Burma that benefited the masses of the Burmese population.

## **3 State of Research**

Independent Burma has been isolated from the international world for a long period of time. This fact has affected research on Burma badly - both on the national and the international level - including the study of the *Nagani* Book Club. Filling this gap may shed some light upon the antecedents of independent Burma's particular role in the family of nations.

The *Nagani* Book Club was founded at a crucial period of Burma's struggle for independence between the introduction of a constitution for Burma as a distinct part of the British Empire separated from British India, which came into effect in April 1937, and the outbreak of the war in Europe in September 1939. The establishment of the Club lies on the intersection of two lines of tradition. With the foundation of the Club, the demand for abolishing and replacing the British "slave education" was taken up, a demand that formed a golden thread through Burma's independence movements since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the Club by familiarising its readers with current international developments, knowledge and literature placed Burma into an international context and took up the demand of the British administrators that the Burmese had to be educated and Burma had to be modernised as a prerequisite to the country's independence.

Thus, it can be expected that the study of the *Nagani* Book Club, its origins, its impact on the making of independent Burma and its role as a symbol of Burma's struggle for independence until today will contribute to a better understanding of Burma's political culture before and after the re-gaining of independence in 1948.

#### **4 The Project's History**

The project was implemented in January 2005 with the financial assistance of the German Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation. People inside and outside Myanmar were asked to write book reports on the books published by Nagani. The reviews were intended to be published together with commentaries and additional material in English.

The response was great. Up to today, some 140 reviews on more than 70 Nagani books have been submitted by some 70 contributors. That opens the prospect of getting a satisfactory overview about the publication of the Club as well as an insight into the way Burmese people concerned with the intellectual and literary heritage of the countries are reporting on the publications and interpreting as well as assessing the legacy of the Book Club.

At the Burma Studies Conference in Singapore (July 13-15, 2006) the project together with some first reflections of the role of literature for the development of Burmese society was presented by participants in the project from Myanmar.

South-East Asian Studies at the University of Passau publishes a series of working papers containing the project's results..

Seven volumes of working papers are currently available.

- No. 10:1, An Introduction into the Nagani Book Club*
- No. 10:2, Material on Thein Pe, Biography of Saya Lun and Royal Advisers*
- No. 10:3, Material on Ba Hein, The World of Capitalists*
- No. 10:4, Material on Thein Pe, Student Boycotters (Two Volumes)*
- No. 10:5, Material on Ba Khaing, Political History of Burma*
- No. 10:6, Material on Nu, Gandalarit*
- No.10:100, Papers, Presented at the Burma Studies Conference in Singapore 2006*

They are accessible through the website of the University of Passau: <http://www.iseap.de/content/view/89/>. It is planned to publish one more paper each month.

## 5 Call for Participants

The project's success depended and still depends on the readiness of people to take interest and participate in it. Some books still need to be reviewed, many book reports have to be translated From Burmese into English and a lot of reports have to be commented upon.

Anybody interested in the subject is invited to participate in the project by

- *writing comments and reviews on the contents of the volumes already published;*
- *contributing essays on Burmese/Myanmar literature as a medium between the international world and Burmese society;*
- *providing material, which sheds more light on the Nagani Book Club, its context and impact on Burmese intellectual and literary life;*
- *offering assistance as translator, commentator, or assistant editor.*

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