

## **ASEASUK News (No.45 Spring 2009)**

### **Robert H. Taylor, 'The State in Myanmar' (London, Hurst 2009)**

reviewed by Ashley South

This is an updated version of Prof Taylor's 'The State in Burma' (Hurst 1987), with an additional chapter describing developments over the past two decades. The original book remains the most comprehensive account of the state-socialist period in Burma (1962-88). Unfortunately, this new version adds little of interest, while retaining many of the problems which detract from its predecessor's value.

The first five chapters are reproduced largely unchanged from the earlier volume: in these 373 pages, there are just 16 citations of post-1987 publications. Given the large amount of new scholarship and other material regarding Burma/Myanmar produced over the past twenty years, the selection of new material is somewhat idiosyncratic. Furthermore, Prof Taylor has not updated the non-Burma-specific political science references. In consequence, his theoretical framework is rather dated.

In his Preface, the author notes that some reviewers of the original book were critical of its 'reification of the state'. The new volume likewise focuses almost exclusively on the state, with the justification that this "has been the dominant institution in shaping economic, social and other opportunities for the population" (1). This emphasis on 'bringing the state back in' may have been necessarily corrective in the 1980s, but tends to obscure important alternative perspectives.

Taylor describes the manner in which the state emerged in the pre-colonial era, was 'rationalised' during the colonial period, and was displaced during the chaos of the early years after independence, before being 'reasserted' under military control. The account is replete with useful and interesting detail (often derived from primary sources). However, it fails to acknowledge the manner in which the state was effectively captured (in the 1950s and early 1960s) by a faction within the officer corps, which has since pursued policies designed to perpetuate military rule, and the interests of the military class.

Taylor praises the role of the state in guarding against ethnic recidivism. However, he fails to appreciate that - far from being a disinterested arbiter - the militarised state has come to be identified with the Burman majority, through the attempted imposition of a homogenising cultural and linguistic 'national identity', derived from the Burman historical core.

In the 1980s Prof Taylor produced important work on ethnic politics in Burma. He described how the colonial administration's cod-anthropological

notions of Burmese social structures helped to create (or at least consolidate) the categories of ethnic identity which subsequently came to dominate state-society relations in the country. Unfortunately, this important critique of essentialist notions of ethnicity has been deployed in ways which suggest that all forms of ethnic identity in Burma, beyond the purely decorative, are inauthentic, because partly derived from non-indigenous sources.

Taylor is much concerned with issues of legitimacy. However, such discussions are undermined by his failure to seriously engage with the criticisms of military rule elaborated by a range of opposition actors. He refers to "allegations about human rights abuses" committed by the Burma Army (377; similar wording echoes throughout the book, e.g. 398, 449). In fact, such abuses are very well-documented, in numerous reports produced by (admittedly, often opposition-sympathising) human rights organisations.

Taylor is highly sceptical regarding the positions of non-state actors. This approach is illustrated by a comment attached to the book's updated bibliography (523). The author correctly states that many "advocacy documents are careless in their use of allegations and claims about causality". However, he does not provide similar caveats regarding official (government) publications, which despite their many deficiencies are treated as un-problematically accurate.

Other errors are more banal, but equally revealing. It is claimed that, at the time of the 1988 'democracy uprising', Mon and Karen insurgents were engaged in infighting at the border town of Myawati (389). In fact, the skirmishes occurred about 100 miles further to the South, at Three Pagodas Pass. Although this may be regarded as a minor mistake, it is not one which would be made by anyone with a passing knowledge of Burma's ethnic politics. (A further amusing error occurs two pages later, where - in his determination to avoid using the word 'Burma' - Taylor mistakenly refers to the Myanmar Socialist Program Party, which ran the country in the period before it was renamed.)

Prof Taylor's veneration of the state, and dislike of opposition politicians (particularly Daw Aung San Suu Kyi), colours his account of politics over the past two decades. Rightly sceptical of the activities of exile political formations, Taylor gives very little attention to popular anti-regime sentiment inside the country, devoting just one fleeting reference to the mass protests led by monks in August and September 2007 (447). However, his analysis of the ceasefires agreed since 1989 between the military government and various armed ethnic groups is reasonably balanced.

In general, the military government in Burma/Myanmar is presented as wilfully misunderstood by other commentators, and unjustly put-upon. It is true that many observers fail to understand the manner in which the country's military rulers claim "state legitimacy [on the basis of] their capacity to maintain and protect a number of values held dear by themselves ... including sovereignty and territorial integrity" (471). However,

Taylor over-compensates for such shortcomings, by providing an extended - and strangely naïve - apology for military rule in Burma.

State Dominance in Myanmar: The Political Economy of Industrialization. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Tin Maung Maung Than. Year: 2006. Language: english. ZAlerts allow you to be notified by email about the availability of new books according to your search query. A search query can be a title of the book, a name of the author, ISBN or anything else. Read more about ZAlerts. Author / ISBN / Topic / Any search query. Create. Free ebooks since 2009. support@bookmail.org FAQ Blog. FAQ. Blog. Buy The State in Myanmar Revised ed. by Robert Taylor (ISBN: 9781850659099) from Amazon's Book Store. Everyday low prices and free delivery on eligible orders. I've been studying Burma in some fashion or another for almost a decade now, yet I had always neglected to read Robert Taylor's classic The State in Burma. Now, 20 years later, Taylor updated the book (rebranding it The State in Myanmar), providing me with a great excuse to read it. First of all, it's important to explain what this book is not. It is not a popular history of Burma - for that I would recommend Thant Myint-U's excellent The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma. "Robert Taylor, one of the most prominent scholars in Myanmar studies, has written an illuminating study of Ne Win, the most enigmatic and controversial of the first generation of post-independence Southeast Asian leaders, and how he steered a then largely unknown country, Burma (now Myanmar), through the Cold War years. This book, by perhaps the only foreign political analyst to live in Burma under Ne Win, is a significant contribution to the historiography of Myanmar and its unnoticed role in the Cold War in Asia." - Associate Professor Ang Cheng Guan, Head of Graduate Studies, S Robert H. Taylor - Visiting Professorial Fellow, Institute of South East Asian Studies, Singapore, and author of The State In Myanmar. Aa. Aa. Rangoon: Burma Book Club, 1931; 3rd edn, Rangoon: Peoples' Literature Committee and House, 1957. Taylor, Robert H., The State in Myanmar. London: Hurst, 2009. Thant, Myint-U, The Making of Modern Burma. CambridgeUniversity Press, 2001.