

Art & Social Action: Case Studies from the Mekong Region

Peace Poetry Recitation Festival

A Case Study of Peace with Poetry

MYANMAR



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Peace Poetry Recitation Festival: Peace in Myanmar with Poetry

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*This report is written by Yuichiro Nagatsu based on interviews with the representative and the facilitator.

Introduction

The Peace Poetry Recitation Festival has been held since 2012 on a riverbank in the old town of Bagan, located in the Mandalay region of central Myanmar. This is the only festival of this kind in Myanmar with such a long history. Compared to the visual arts and other literary fields, there has not been enough international promotion of poetry in Myanmar. It is hoped for me that presenting the Peace Poetry Recitation Festival here will lead to a shared understanding of the position of poetry within art and culture in Myanmar.

As a result of the military coup of 2021, Myanmar finds itself in a fluid political situation. This paper has been written by Japanese researchers and Burmese practitioners in this context. Our motivation is, above all, in keeping with the purpose of the Peace Poetry Recitation Festival. That purpose is the building of peace, something that the people of Myanmar have struggled for, and which is still under threat.

Initially, the paper was to be written using online voice call services, but due to repeated Internet outages, it was completed via email exchange. Zun Ei Phyu translated English interview questions suggested by Yuichiro Nagatsu into Burmese, and passed them on to Ze Var Soe. Zun Ei Phyu then translated Ze Var Soe's answers into English, providing supplementary information in English as needed. The following account of the festival is based on remarks by Ze Var Soe and Zun Ei Phyu, and the discussion based on these remarks is by Yuichiro Nagatsu. We would like to thank Shin Nakagawa and Jennifer Lee for their support in communication.

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The Political Situation in Myanmar

Before discussing the festival, let us review the political situation in Myanmar.

A former British colony, Myanmar became independent as a democratic country in 1948, but a coup d'etat in 1962 produced a socialist government in which the military held the actual power. In 1988, a social movement for democracy emerged, but this was suppressed and martial law was imposed. For many years afterwards, there was no freedom of speech and publications were censored. A constitution was established in 2008, which institutionalized the federal status of the country, while also allowing the military to participate in politics and stipulating a mechanism for the head of the military to be given the authority to run the country in emergency situations.

In 2015, with the support of the public, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a major victory in the general election, and a change of government took place. Since then, the right of citizens to speak freely has been restored (however, there have been numerous arrests and penalties under Article 66(d) of the internal Telecommunications Act for activities on the Internet and other media critical of the government).

Then, in February 2021, the military-affiliated vice president declared a state of emergency concerning the legitimacy of the November 2020 general election, seized power, and placed Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the NLD, under house arrest. As a result, there have been repeated protests staged by large numbers of citizens, including poets and artists. These have led to ongoing clashes with the military, resulting in a large number of casualties.

The State of Poetry and the Festival

Here, I will give an overview of what the festival involves.

The impetus for the Peace Poetry Recitation Festival was the frequent conflicts that are readily apparent in Myanmar's history. They said it is not by taking up arms that poets can do anything about this political situation, rather, their sole weapons in the struggle for peace are their poems. In Myanmar, it is no exaggeration to say that after politicians, it is poets who talk about politics the most. Poems can express people's feelings; they represent the voice, the beliefs, and the skills of each individual.

Ze Var Soe said, on reflection, it is that poetry, like other artistic genres, plays an important role in every country (in Japan, for example, this might be the case for *tanka* and *haiku*). The lullabies that parents sing to us as children are also poems, and sometimes people may produce beautiful conversations that sound "poetic." Where

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there is a country, and a people, there is poetry. Moreover, poetry serves as the voice of individual citizens, giving it a great role to play in a culture. Determining if something is truly poetry or not is the job of poets, but in practice, it can be found in all kinds of places. If someone at any moment says “Oh, how poetic this is,” then poetry will continue to play an important role in our daily lives.

Many poets live in Myanmar, but they said that there are not many magazines or journals for them to express their voices. One of the roles of the festival is to provide a much-needed platform for poets to share their voices and poems on peace with the general public.





The Peace Poetry Recitation Festival (Photo by The Peace Poetry Recitation Festival)

The festival was launched in 2012, and has since been held on the last Sunday of December each year. Although initially held as a one-time event, it then became a yearly event because there were so few opportunities for the poets to share and present their work. Since 2016, they have also worked to set up a poetry prize. Because there are few such awards for poetry in Myanmar, the award is given to one poet each year in honor of those who live their lives with poetry.

There is no set schedule for the day of the festival, but it generally proceeds as follows. In the morning, visitors are served breakfast and given souvenirs as they wait for the participants to assemble. When all the participants are present, the greetings begin, followed by a program of poetry recitation in turn. The recitations may be of one's own work or that of others. Afterward, everyone has lunch together, and in the afternoon, the group is divided into groups with the same interests, who talk freely about poetry and peace over snacks and drinks. They reported that about 100 people participate in this festival every year, but in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic meant that only about 30 people were able to attend.

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The festival attracted attention not only from the poetry community, but also from the local community and the media, and was often covered by magazines and broadcasters such as the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). However, given the political situation as of 2021, it might not be likely that such coverage will return easily.

Running the Festival

Next, I will summarize the festival's operations.

Throughout the interview, I sensed that the festival has two main goals, although not explicitly stated. One is to offer a venue for poets to talk intimately about their poems and how peace can be achieved in the context of the political situation in Myanmar. The other is to bring peace to the country by peacefully reciting and sharing messages at the festival.

The core management team consists of six members in their 30s to 50s, who hold jobs as doctors, civil servants, chefs, traders, bookstore owners, etc., while also working as poets and organizing the festival. There is no clear division of roles such as secretary and manager; rather, administration and planning is conducted as the situation requires.

The budget is covered by donations from local poets and artists. These donations can be large amounts, or sometimes just five or ten dollars. The festival enables contributions of even small amounts to its operation. The annual budget is approximately \$1,000 to \$1,500 in US dollars. This is used to cover the costs of accommodation if there are participants from coming from far afield, as well as for actual expenses such as providing meals on the day.

Publicity is mainly conducted via phone calls and Facebook groups. In Myanmar, there is a private Facebook group with more than 10,000 members that includes poets, writers, journalists, cartoonists, and artists from all over the country. The festival is also advertised there, so poets all over the country know about it. The opportunity to give a recitation at the festival is open to anyone, regardless of their expertise as a poet. Moreover, even those who cannot attend during the festival schedule use these social media sites and phone calls to share information and have discussions.

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The Relationship between Poetry and the Political Situation

Here, I will examine the relationship between poets and the political situation in Myanmar.

They said that there is a reason why they do not produce websites or pamphlets for publicity. Compared to the capital, Yangon, and the second city, Mandalay, Bagan is a small city with few people who have sufficient resources or expertise to produce a website. More important than that, however, is the risk that producing pamphlets or websites will lead to government monitoring. Before 2015, the government would come to check up on poetry events in the same way as they would on social movements and political activism. The poet's community in Myanmar have a situation where the military dictators are very afraid of what is said using poetry and the act of gathering itself; they dislike poetry and poets a great deal. Of course, given the current situation in 2021, it is highly unlikely that the festival will be able to take place. "If it is to happen, it will have to be in secret", Ze Var Soe said.

Poets write poetry in response to political movements and while engaging in protest activities. Moreover, as mentioned above, poetry is not something just for the poet, but something that expresses peoples' voices. It is because no distinction can be made between poets and citizens that poets are also arrested alongside other citizens. Falling and dying, poets prove that they fight alongside their fellow citizens.

They said that a number of poets have been arrested, and a number have died during the coup of 2021. Because they still have to deal with this urgent, brutal situation in the present, they are unable even to write poetry. And they work daily on more important issues such as workplace boycotts (the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)) and protests. So, is Myanmar's poetry, with its poets, dead? In fact, it is not just poetry, the whole country is dead. But they believe that "this is only temporary, and that we can rise again like the phoenix".

At this very moment, the people of Myanmar are still struggling in every way possible to resist the military coup, and poets are part of that effort.

Evaluating the Project

Finally, I will discuss how this project can be evaluated and how it can be carried forward to the next stage.

First of all, "evaluation" here does not mean evaluation in the sense of grading, et cetera. When I use the term "evaluation," I am using it in the sense of considering the potential of the activity itself first and foremost, and how it can be channeled in a

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better direction. In recent years, it has become standard practice in Japan to subject arts and culture projects, especially those that are publicly funded, to project evaluation. In this process, the goals of the project for three to five years are set, an evaluation scale (e.g., number of visitors, satisfaction of participants) is determined, and self-evaluation is performed. This is sometimes used to evaluate the project, and also used as a basis for making improvements the next time the project is held. Important here is that evaluation is conducted for the purpose of self-evaluation and self-improvement.

However, this fixed and continuous cycle of evaluation may not be appropriate for all arts projects. This paper has been written by Japanese researchers and Burmese practitioners, and evaluation here would emphasize the power relationships between “Japan as developed country/Myanmar as developing country” and “researcher/practitioner.” In addition, as in the case of this festival, the annual budget may be modest, and the management organization may be unstructured, so the typical evaluation cycle does not work well. Rather, the evaluation called for is as a means of communicating the significance of its activities to society as a form of translation (not only in the sense of linguistic translation). In recent years, the concept of “participation-based evaluation” has been drawing attention as a method of evaluation that creates value. The important point here, too, is to first verbalize what the people involved value, and then to consider what steps should be taken to realize that value.

So how is this self-evaluation of the festival by the people involved carried out? The first thing that may be emphasized is that the project itself is aimed at building peace. To be able to gather poets scattered all over Myanmar in one place and have them actually meet and hold discussions face-to-face is an impressive result. The festival is also significant as a way to introduce the activities of the poets and their ideas on building peace to members of the general public who are not part of the poetry community. One of the major achievements of the project is that it has been able to convey messages for the building of peace to society at large.

Of course, there are still many aspects of the project that need to be developed. It is difficult to establish a formal organization as a governing body for the festival, and also to draw up a long-term plan. The difficulty of making connections with other arts groups outside the poetry community also presents a challenge. However, there is a more practical reason for this. This is because there are many different kinds of artists, and among them are those who work from a perspective of support for the military dictatorship.

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Peace with Poetry

While the project itself holds the building of peace as its goal, it is difficult to develop the project without peace having been achieved. In a situation like this, where peace is under threat, the only thing that can be done in Myanmar is to face the events that threaten peace head on and continue to fight against them.

On the other hand, what can be done from a place or a country far away from the conflict is, given the nature of art, to translate the work or the project into another form and communicate it to the outside world. One of the ways to do this would be to combine the contexts of different countries.

In Japan, the most well-known poet in the context of providing support through arts and culture is Kanayo Ueda. She runs the NPO Cocoroom; her initiative of operating a guesthouse in a day-laborer district has been introduced at many international arts festivals. Cocoroom's practice can be summed up in the words of Shuntaro Tanikawa, one of Japan's most famous poets: "The energy of poetry changes the streets." When Ueda was starting her career as a poet, running small projects and poetry workshops, she used to say, "I want to give people the chance to notice the spirit that lies deep within their hearts and gently express it." As a result, many people with various difficulties in their lives gathered at the workshops and expressed poignant feelings in poetry. Poetry, expressing oneself through words, exists in both Myanmar and Japan as something special, yet always reflects everyday reality.

Art does not come after safety and security (in the context of Japan's COVID-19 situation, it is not "unnecessary" or "non-urgent"). It is right in the middle of these threats to safety and security that art and poetry can be found. We can only hope that by writing and talking about poetry, while sometimes going underground, we can continue to support the creation of common ideas and common experiences among the supporters of peace. The act of writing this paper is itself an example of that practice. Ever since the time I sat waiting in front of a Zoom screen which never connected, I have been constantly thinking about the importance of empathy, communication, and imagination, and of putting them into words.

Finally, I would like to share a poem provided by the festival, written by a poet from Myanmar, about a man in a refugee camp during the civil war. I hope that this can be of some help in evoking that empathy.

စစ်ဟာမြို့ထဲရောက်လာခဲ့

ပြတင်းတံခါးတွေဖွင့်လိုက် အချစ်ရယ်
ငါတို့အခန်းထဲ နေရောင်ကို ဝင်ခွင့်ပြုလိုက်မယ်
မှောင်မည်းနေတဲ့ နေ့တွေထဲ
လောင်ပြီးစ စစ်တလင်းရဲ့
ညမီးတွေ လင်းလှတဲ့အကြောင်း မြန်ရည်ယှက်ရည်ပေါ့။

ရှင်တော့ ရှူးသွားပြီပဲလို့ ပြောပြီး
ရယ်ပေါ့အချစ်ရယ်
စစ်ဘေးရှောင်စခန်းထဲ
ဘယ်မှာလိုက်ကာစလှလှလေးတွေ ရှိပါ့မလဲ။

မရှိတဲ့ ပြတင်းပေါက်လေးကို ဖွင့်ပြီး
မင်းကို နှင်းဆီပန်းခင်းထဲက ငှက်ကလေးကို ပြချင်တယ်
နေရောင်ခြည်တွေ မထိုးဖောက်နိုင်တဲ့ ယမ်းငွေ့တွေထဲ
စိတ်ကူးရှိရင် ရှူးလို့ရပါတယ်။

စစ်ဟာ မြို့ထဲကို ဝင်လာခဲ့
ငါတို့ကလေးတွေ လုံခြုံမှုရှိသေးတယ်လို့
မင်းစိတ်ယောင် ထင်မှားပဲ ရှိရှိပေါ့
မိုးကာစိမ်း အစကြီးကို ငါဖွင့်ဖွင့်ပြမိတယ်။

The War arrived into town (free translation)

Dear Love, please open the windows
Let the rays of light enter our room
During our darkest days
The burned ground due to war
Made the night so bright and eagerly !

Told me I am a fool and
Laught it out loud honey
At the refuge camp
How can there have beautiful curtain!

Want to open the window that doesn't exist
And show you a bird flying in the rose garden
The sun cannot pass through gunpowder smokes
But we can be crazy if we have our imagination!

The war entered the town
If you hallucinate that
Our kids are still safe
I open the green rain cover sheet and show you!

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