

Prologue

At the time I conceived and embarked upon this study, the world was still wide open (at least to those with the “right” passport) and Myanmar was well on its way towards weaving a new society that was to be marked by democracy, peace and prosperity. Not even eighteen months later, both assumptions appear like mirages of a lost paradise – along with all of the projects, hopes and dreams inspired by Aung San Suu Kyi’s rise to power in 2015. Some people had even lulled themselves into believing that the past, with its ponderous historical burdens and never-ending strife, with the slightest disagreements capable of sparking eternal enmity, had been overcome, or at least that a resolution was in sight. And I had let myself be taken in by the tempting notion that I could spend a few more years exploring Myanmar and trying to comprehend it on my own terms by seeking what was familiar in a world so foreign to me, thus making my own humble contribution to the emergence of the One World. But things turned out differently, with the coronavirus pandemic that broke out in early 2020 suddenly (and for the foreseeable future) imposing new boundaries on our world, and the coup d’état of 1 February 2021 forcing Myanmar back into a dark past that has by no means been overcome. Overshadowed by the naïve principle of hope, Myanmar’s supposed democratisation process since 2011 has revealed itself to be just another form of military rule. After setting that process in motion of their own accord with the 2008 Constitution, however, the military gradually came to see its hegemony as being threatened.

My research into Mandalay has consequently been curtailed by the double restrictions resulting from the coronavirus and the military coup, while my colleagues and contacts in Myanmar, women and men who have supported me in word and deed and who have courageously and often frantically tried, each in their own way, to resist military force, must today fear for their lives. Travel is out

of the question. Libraries and archives are inaccessible, and there is no longer any opportunity for the urban flâneur to try to locate long-lost sites from the early days of the city based on maps, old photographs, memoirs and the research of others. For that matter, the time allotted to me here on earth is running out, so that what I am presenting in this publication is no more than a rough outline of what I had originally set out to discover. I will have occasion to return later to the circumstances and consequences of the two invasions into my research – the pandemic and the coup d'état. They came out of the blue, when the study was progressing apace, along with my increasing realization of the complexity of the topic. I have thus placed COVID-19 as a caesura before my discussion of the historical stages of the city, and the military coup as a lament at the end.

Focus and structure of my observations

Burma, officially known as Myanmar,² has had many capitals throughout its long history, and each of them stands for a historical or dynastic epoch. Since the mid-nineteenth century, there have been three capitals: Mandalay from 1859 to 1885; Rangoon, or Yangon; and since 2005 Naypyitaw.

Mandalay, whose construction began in 1857 as the capital of Upper Burma north of the colonial British border, and which became home to the royal court two years later, can be seen as the symbol of the last Burmese Buddhist rulers' revolt against British colonialism, and it is thus pervaded by an aura of tragic futility. This would scarcely have been apparent to *Burmese* contemporaries, or perhaps sensed only vaguely, but the actions of the dramatis personae – King Mindon, Prince Kanaung and King Thibaw – inevitably led to its downfall. Lower Burma, the southern part of the country annexed by the British, with the regions Arakan, Pegu, Martaban and Tenasserim and its centre in Rangoon/Yangon, which was the main port of the Burmese empire and afforded access to the sea, became the province British Burma in 1862. The two parts of the former Burmese empire, united in 1755 by King Alaungphaya, were thus symbiotically linked in an unequal struggle from which only the empire of modernity, armoured with technology from Europe, could emerge victorious. And thus Mandalay embodies the very essence of nineteenth-century colonialism, fated to fail from the start, a destiny that was fulfilled in 1885 with the British annexation of the remainder of the Burmese kingdom. Originally intended as a fortress of old Burma *and* the stronghold for its renewal through economic, administrative and intellectual modernisation, Royal Mandalay, when confronted

² Burma/Myanmar are synonymous; the old indigenous name is Bamar or Myanma. The dominant ethnic group in the country are the Buddhist Bamar. The inhabitants of the national territory are collectively referred to as Myanmarese or Burmese.

with the onslaught of European military technology, ultimately took on the guise of a hopelessly sentimental, oriental Versailles with its incomplete attempts at reform and industrialisation.

The considerations in this essay focus predominantly on the early period of Mandalay. They follow on the heels of an account of Yangon (Berlin 2017) and an approach to Naypyitaw (Yangon 2018, Berlin 2019) – a trilogy spotlighting the three capitals on the territory of present-day Myanmar as urban figures in which historical epochs of upheaval and the political-economic regimes of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries played out. The studies were originally initiated, accompanied expertly and with critical sympathy, and sponsored by the Goethe Institut Myanmar under its former director Franz Xaver Augustin. I owe the Goethe Institut a great debt of gratitude for many years of manifold forms of support for my work.

Yangon, originally known as Dagon and then as Rangoon, began to be developed in the mid-nineteenth century as the base of the British-Indian colonial province of Burma and represented the urban triumph of extractive colonialism; in 1948 it became the unpopular capital of independent Burma. The city was thus marred from the start by the taint of colonialism, leading Myanmar's military rulers to relocate the capital in 2005 to the newly built city of Naypyitaw as a way of proclaiming their independent future. Mandalay for its part was the last capital of the Burmese Buddhist Konbaung dynasty and – like Naypyitaw and British Rangoon – was a more or less *ex nihilo* planned city. Mandalay's glittering palace precinct, *shwe myotaw*, with the adjacent urban centre of economic and industrial development, represented an attempt to counter the advance of colonialism. Naypyitaw was then finally built as a consequence of the military dictatorship – its unimaginably vast territory, shrouded in mystery and emptiness, a mirror of the visions, interests and claims to power of Burmese elites at the dawn of the twenty-first century. As will be shown, Mandalay is also a largely unknown, little explored locus of myth and legend, an indeterminate city that has shed many skins and emerged each time in a new manifestation. All told, the accounts of the three urban

capitals provide a rough outline of Burma/Myanmar's history from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.

These considerations thus constitute an attempt to return to the origins of Mandalay, to grasp its historical *raison d'être* and its development through the various epochs and myriad transformations since its founding as capital of the Burmese kingdom after its southern provinces had been amputated by the British-Indian colonisers. Following a military surprise attack in 1885 known as the Third Anglo-Burmese War, more a lightning raid than an actual war, Mandalay became the seat of the colonial British-Indian province of Upper Burma. In 1942 Burma was dragged into the Second World War through an attack by Imperial Japan, to which the former royal city also ultimately fell victim. After the Japanese captured Rangoon in March 1942, and amid the chaotic withdrawal of the disbanding British administration and the disintegration of their army, Mandalay became the destination for hundreds of thousands of refugees from the south.³ Subsequently, it was repeatedly the focal point of armed conflict as the emerging Burmese resistance began seeking independence under the political military leader Aung San, who pursued his goals first in an alliance with the Japanese (against the British) and eventually in cooperation with the returning British (against the Japanese). The last bloody clashes took place amidst the magnificent temples on Mandalay Hill. After present-day Myanmar gained independence in January 1948 – and even more so since General Ne Win's military dictatorship from 1962 onward – Mandalay (like the country as a whole) lapsed into provinciality. A turnaround finally came in 1988 with a popular uprising against oppression and poverty as a consequence of Ne Win's Burmese socialism. The military junta that then seized power held out the prospect of a transition to democracy – and yet in mid-2021,

³ Hugh Tinker, "A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942", in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (March 1975); Maurice Collis, *Last and First in Burma (1941–1945)* (London, 1956), 63–64, 130–131; Alan Warren, *Burma 1942: The Road from Rangoon to Mandalay* (London and New York, 2011), 163, 170, 220.

at the time of writing, the fulfilment of that promise seems more unlikely than ever.

The Mandalay of 2020 has little in common with its early days in 1859, when the royal court relocated to the new capital from the neighbouring former capital of Amarapura. This comment on the nature and composition of the city in the course of history may seem banal, but Mandalay has in fact experienced more than its share of dramatic ruptures leading to complete overhauls of the urban space. Its identity was and is fluid and must be interpreted as a consequence of war and political violence, of destruction through conflagrations, and of the intentions of radically contradictory political-economic interests. Rather than trying to establish whether the city emerged from these many upheavals as a radiant phoenix from the ashes or rather as a victim in the stranglehold of a python, this descriptive account will trace Mandalay's transformations as reflections of divergent concepts of society in order to arrive at a historical understanding.⁴

In geostrategic terms, Mandalay is situated along the middle reaches of the Irrawaddy, or Ayeyarwady, River, which crosses Myanmar from north to south and has always been the key transport artery integrating the country. The city is thus located halfway between southern China and the Indian Ocean at the geographical centre that, avoiding the Straits of Malacca, potentially connects China with South Asia, the Middle East and Europe, via land routes, railways and the sea. Today gas and oil pipelines that carry Myanmar's hydrocarbons from the Andaman Sea to Yunnan in China run through Mandalay.⁵ Research on Mandalay has been rudimentary to date, and what little is available in Western languages, including documents translated from Burmese, is scattered and often difficult to access. There are no

⁴ By understanding I mean the search for points of contact between the Other and the self, and this entails the attempt to discover the Other as a possibility within the self. Such re-search necessarily cannot ignore the person of the researcher – his own experiences and cultural conditioning.

⁵ YM Kim, "Mandalay, Myanmar: The remaking of a Southeast Asian hub in a country at the crossroads", in *Cities*, vol. 72, no. B (2018), 12.

comprehensive historical, sociological or urban planning accounts of the city. Therefore, this text, which evaluates the available literature and collates it to a modest degree with empirical investigation in the field, and which strives to orient itself on the historical framework, must of necessity remain unfinished; at best, it can be understood as an encouragement for others to undertake further study.

The first section touches on the circumstances resulting from the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 that limited the progress of the investigation that had only just begun. This is followed by a brief explanation of the largely historical, i.e., man-made, environmental conditions in Myanmar's so-called Central Dry Zone, the original settlement area of the Buddhist Bamar or Burmese. *Marginalia on colonialism* outlines the historical, i.e., political-economic, background that gave rise to Mandalay. *First steps, impressions, the Sinicisation of Mandalay and the Hotel Marvel* examines the upheavals in the wake of the political events of 1988 that gave rise to the city we know today. *Historical stages, analyses*, the main section of the study, deals with the founding of Mandalay in the mid-nineteenth century and its early history. This is followed by reflections on the history and cultural significance of the city, impressions upon traversing the city on foot, and associations resulting from these experiences and from the literature, along with the question of the essence of Mandalay. The book concludes with an attempt to assess the military coup of 1 February 2021. The final question is whether Mandalay in the late Konbaung period can perhaps serve as an object lesson for present-day politics in Myanmar. My answer to that question admittedly does not go beyond providing food for thought.

In *Historical stages, analyses*, the literature is reviewed in a number of different sections and interpreted here and there through personal investigation; it will become evident in many passages how incomplete our knowledge of Mandalay's history and evolution truly is – a systematic study would require extensive empirical and archival investigation that is not possible at present. Nevertheless, an attempt is made here to paint a picture of Mandalay in its entirety since its founding by King Mindon in 1857. Due to the

limited material available, the subsequent historical stages have so far remained largely untreated: the colonial era after the British-Indian occupation in 1885; the Japanese invasion in 1942 until Burma's independence in 1948; the years up to the military dictatorship in 1962; the decline of the economy as a result of the autarchy-based Burmese socialism of the Ne Win dictatorship until the uprising of the exhausted population in 1988; the gradual economic opening, including the growing preponderance of Chinese capital in Mandalay that continues to this day; and the Aung San Suu Kyi-inspired resistance to the military regime leading up to the 2015 elections and the project to make Mandalay a "smart city" – one of the five core goals sought in 2018 through the massive use of digital technology was to establish smart traffic lights, and water and solid waste management were also to be operated sustainably.⁶ Only here and there in the last chapter do I attempt to build bridges to the present day based on historical hindsight and the impressions of the *flâneur*, or *urbexer*.⁷ Where there is a lack of verifiable data derived from scientific research, stories that would appear to be symptomatic as well as fleeting experiences of historical events that have left traces in the present day gain in importance; although they remain in the realm of the hypothetical, they nevertheless beg to be recorded. What I am writing is not based on the assumption of a prefabricated theory but, guided by a desire to understand, relies on the flow of thoughts and words and formulations that, once set in motion, frequently lead to insights that point the way forward – perceptions and experiences, writing and understanding. Such a flow cannot be planned, and the result is surprising even for the writer.

⁶ The project is part of ASEAN's Smart Cities Network and is sponsored by the Asian Development Bank and the Agence Française de Développement, among others; see Hein Thar, "Mandalay: City of the Future?", in *Frontier Myanmar*, 1 August 2019.

⁷ On the term "urbexer", see Pablo Arboleda, "Heritage views through urban exploration: the case of 'Abandoned Berlin'", in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2016, vol. 22, no. 5; Nicolas Offenstadt, *Le pays disparu. Sur les traces de la RDA* (Paris, 2018).