

This Chinese vision of Burma as a corridor for the southward flow of goods reversed the nineteenth-century ambitions of the British, who, like their imperial rivals in Paris, plotted to gain access to China's huge market. Britain's conquest of Upper Burma was motivated in part by the desire to open a trading route into southwestern China, a plan advocated by the explorer Archibald Colquhoun and later adopted by British officials as a retroactive justification for the war that ousted Thibaw, Burma's last king, in 1885. "The wealth of Upper Burma and also the resources of western China and the Shan States are incalculable," Colquhoun wrote in 1898, "but they lie fallow at present for want of connections, both internal and with the outer world."<sup>12</sup>

Beijing's efforts to forge these connections and realize Pan's "opening to the southwest" were greatly aided by Burma's slide into international pariah status after 1988, and the sudden collapse in April 1989 of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). While China had cut off effective aid to the CPB several years earlier, its disintegration removed one of the main sticking points in bilateral relations. It also helped stabilize a restive borderland that sat directly in the path of China's envisioned corridor to the sea. The CPB fractured into four well-armed rebel groups that inherited both its large "liberated zones" and close ties to Beijing, and quickly signed ceasefires with the central government in exchange for local autonomy.<sup>13</sup> As the borders opened up, trade between China and Burma began to flow.

By the time of Thein Sein's reforms, the southwest corridor was well on the way to becoming a reality. China had built new highways and refurbished the old Burma Road running from China into Shan State. It had constructed a pipeline that brought natural gas more than a thousand kilometers overland from offshore platforms in the Bay of Bengal deep into Yunnan's fast-growing interior. A second, parallel pipeline pumped tanker-loads of Persian Gulf and African crude oil from Burma's coast to refineries in Kunming. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), plans were in the works for a new expressway linking the Chinese border to the sea, and a \$20 billion high-speed rail line following the same route—a project once envisioned by the British. All this would be capped off by a deep-water port and industrial zone at Kyaukphyu, where the Chinese pipelines terminated on the Bay of Bengal.

Here, too, geography cut both ways: just as proximity put Burma at the center of Chinese interests, it also fed Burmese misgivings about Chinese

intentions. In precolonial times, a thick buffer of forested hills and mountains had mostly kept the Chinese imperial state at bay. Early Burmese encounters with northern power nonetheless left a deep impression. In 1271, Kublai Khan's Mongol armies swept into China, defeated the Song dynasty, and declared a new Yuan dynasty in its place. When the Burmese kingdom of Bagan refused to offer tribute, the Mongols launched a series of invasions, precipitating Bagan's defeat and collapse. Ever since, the Burmese have referred to the Chinese as *tayouk*, their term for the Mongols.<sup>14</sup>

The Burmese found themselves tangled up in Chinese affairs once again after the Ming dynasty fell to a series of Manchu invasions in 1644. After the fall of Beijing, Prince Yongli, the last successor to the Ming throne, retreated south to Yunnan, crossed into Burma with his dwindling army, and sought refuge in the Burmese capital of Ava, close to present-day Mandalay. The new Qing emperor promptly dispatched a military force to apprehend the pretender, who was captured in 1662, hauled with his remaining retinue back to Kunming, and executed by strangulation. The fighting devastated wide regions of northern Burma.<sup>15</sup> This pattern would recur three centuries later, when the victory of Mao's communists once again sent a defeated Chinese army—the Kuomintang—spilling into Burmese territory.

This history of turbulent encounters with Chinese power has shaped Burma's view on the challenges of living under China's shadow. The country's predicament was voiced in the mid-eighteenth century by a famous Burmese general following another series of wars between 1765 and 1769, when the Qianlong Emperor sent four well-equipped armies south to check Burma's burgeoning power. Each met ruin and defeat, and on the final occasion, when the Chinese commanders sued for terms, the Burmese generals refused to negotiate until Maha Thiha Thura, their commander-in-chief, intervened: "Comrades, unless we make peace, yet another invasion will come, and when we have defeated it yet another invasion will come," he said. "Our nation cannot go on just repelling invasion after invasion of the Chinese, for we have other things to do. Let us stop this slaughter and let their people and our people live and trade in peace."<sup>16</sup>

In conceding the stubborn fact of geography, Maha Thiha Thura foreshadowed the policy of neutralism that Burma would adopt in modern times. Following its independence from Britain in 1948, the new nation quickly found itself confronting a unified communist China to its north. With Cold

War tensions mounting, and their attention consumed by the eruption of a raft of civil conflicts soon after independence, Burma's leaders hoped that their neutralism would prevent the country from being sucked into the orbit of China or one of its rivals. In September 1950, Prime Minister U Nu described his country's vulnerabilities during a speech to Burma's parliament: "We are hemmed in like a tender gourd among the cactus," he declared. "We cannot move an inch. If we act irresponsibly . . . and thrust the Union of Burma into the arms of one bloc, the other bloc will not be contented to look on with folded arms. Oh, no!"<sup>17</sup>

Non-alignment both advanced and constrained Burma's ties with China. In 1950, it became the first non-communist state to recognize Mao's government, and later coined the special term *paukphaw* to describe the two countries' "fraternal" ties.<sup>18</sup> Yet the policy of non-alignment kept China at arm's length, frustrating the leadership in Beijing. Relations soured, reaching a low point with the outbreak of anti-Chinese rioting in several cities in 1967. This prompted China to bolster its support to the CPB, and to dispatch a heavily armed communist force, including hundreds of Chinese Red Guard "volunteers," which secured a "liberated zone" for the CPB along the Chinese border. In the 1970s and 1980s, Burma's neutralism was married to a policy of autarky and isolationism under the fatidic reign of General Ne Win. While Ne Win succeeded in sealing Burma off from the worst ravages of the Cold War, he did so at the cost of turning the country—once among the most economically advanced in Southeast Asia—into a repressive dictatorship and economic basket case.

In the late 1990s, Myanmar's neutralism was compromised by the imposition of Western sanctions and boycotts, which forced the country into a greater reliance on China. The two nations' snaking, porous border became an economic lifeline for the military government and an important source of products, including consumer goods, basic chemicals, and light machinery. When the junta began to relax economic restrictions in the 1990s, Chinese firms were among the main beneficiaries. From 1988 to 2013, China was the single largest foreign investor in Burma.<sup>19</sup>

During this period, a number of Sino-Burmese tycoons were able to amass huge fortunes by acting as bridges between the junta and its Chinese patron. The most curious case was that of Lo Hsing Han, an opium and heroin trafficker who rose to become one of Burma's richest men. Lo was born in 1935 in Kokang, an ethnically Chinese territory in northern Shan State inhabited by

descendants of Ming refugees who fled to the remote region after the collapse of the dynasty in the mid-seventeenth century. By the 1960s, Lo had become a key player in the narco-economy of the Golden Triangle. At one stage he commanded a militia of 3,000 men that guarded multiple heroin refineries in remote and impoverished parts of Shan State, leading the Nixon administration to describe him as “kingpin of the heroin traffic in Southeast Asia.”<sup>20</sup> After the collapse of the CPB in 1989, Lo played a central role in brokering the cease-fires between the government and the former communist armies occupying large territories along the Chinese border.

As Burma opened its economy in the early 1990s, Lo used his drug profits as seed capital to build a corporate empire named Asia World. Founded in 1992, Asia World would become a leading business partner of Burma's junta during the years of Western sanctions, as well as a conduit for Overseas Chinese investment from other parts of Southeast Asia. By the time of his death in 2013, Lo's commercial empire included a container shipping business, Rangoon port buildings, and concessions to import fuel and mine rubies and jade. Wherever China was active in Burma, Asia World was never far away. It was the local partner in the Myitsone dam project. It had a hand in the planned Chinese port in Kyaukphyu and the pipelines pumping oil and gas to Yunnan. In partnership with the Sino-Malaysian tycoon Robert Kuok, Lo built Rangoon's luxury Traders Hotel (now the Sule Shangri-La), and was a donor to the Myanmar China Chamber of Commerce. His firm was also one of the main contractors that built Naypyidaw, the junta's sprawling new capital in the flatlands of central Burma. During Lo's funeral in 2013, *The Economist* reported, “a cavalcade of cars, some carrying his portrait garlanded with flowers, processed through the streets of Yangon . . . to his high-walled villa, right by the 16th tee of the city golf club.”<sup>21</sup> Asia World remains one of Burma's largest and most prominent companies: an emblem both of the continuing economic dominance of ethnic Chinese tycoons in Burma, and the dense interleaving of the country's licit and illicit economies.

Today, the main economic gateway between China and Burma is the old Burma Road. Built before World War II to supply Chiang Kai-shek's embattled forces in the interior of China, and since extended south to the former royal capital of Mandalay, it has become a busy viaduct of trade. Each year, billions of dollars' worth of goods—more than half of Burma's overland trade—passes down this winding ribbon of tarmac from the wild frontier

towns of Ruili and Muse. As far as anyone knows, this figure is exceeded by the illegal trade, which includes vast quantities of jade, timber, and animal parts, and coming the other way, Chinese precursor chemicals that feed the drug labs scattered across the rebel zones of eastern Shan State. Signs of China's presence are visible all along the Burma Road, from the lantern-adorned restaurants catering to Chinese traders to the semi-trailers rumbling north to the border, laden with logs of hardwood and other raw materials. In Lashio, the lowering hill town where American and British wartime supplies were once loaded from trains onto military lorries for the long journey up the Burma Road into Yunnan, the main drag is frequently jammed with trucks and motorcycles hauling Chinese goods. Today, Chinese migrants and traders make up around a third of the city's population.<sup>22</sup>

In 1998, the Burma Road was widened and resealed by none other than Asia World, which for years collected tolls along the road. But parts of the highway have since fallen into terrible disrepair, battered by heavily laden trucks and torrential monsoons. Accidents are frequent, as 22-wheeled Nissan diesels filled with watermelons and timber lurch around the hairpin bends. However, as a crucial link on China's planned economic corridor to the coast, several sections of the road are earmarked for improvements, and will in time become the final link in a new, expanded Burma Road running from Kunming to Mandalay—and onward to the sea.

The distance-demolishing effect of economic integration has amplified long-standing Burmese anxieties about China. Much of the angst fixates on the multitude of Chinese immigrants who have swept down the new highways from Yunnan. As in Laos, the thinly populated upland regions of Burma have exerted an almost irresistible pull on China's surplus population. As Archibald Colquhoun observed in the late nineteenth century, "Burma and its Shan States provide an admirable absorbing ground for the ever-increasing and dense populations of India and China. There is ample room for an increase of scores of millions to the present population of Burma."<sup>23</sup> By one estimate, as many as 2 million Chinese citizens have entered Burma since the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> Most are poor but entrepreneurial immigrants, some of whom have obtained identity papers through a variety of underhand means. According to one method described by Bertil Lintner in 1998, when a Burmese national died, their family were able to sell their identity card to a broker who would then pass it on to a foreign citizen, usually Chinese.<sup>25</sup>

While Chinese settlers, petty traders, and businesspeople can now be seen throughout the border regions, a particular angst surrounds the supposed Chinese “takeover” of Mandalay, an important cultural and religious center 450 kilometers—about a day’s drive—down the highway from Yunnan. In recent decades, Chinese investors have bought up hotels, restaurants, karaoke bars, and commercial property in Mandalay’s downtown. Shop signs abound in simplified Chinese, and the city’s bustling jade market is frequented by snappily dressed Chinese dealers from the border town of Ruili opposite Muse. At first glance this city of wide boulevards and golden-spined *zedis* seems to be thriving on its proximity to China. New buildings stud the downtown and the streets are filled with new cars; by night, mobile phone shops and “beer stations” glow on the numbered city streets. But Mandalay’s importance to Burmese Buddhism, and its status as the one-time seat of Burma’s last royal house, makes the arrival of Chinese immigrants and expats an especially sensitive issue.

Chinese are hardly strangers to Mandalay society. A Yunnanese-style mosque, built in 1868, still rears its octagonal minaret over the traffic on 80th Street. But the new arrivals overwhelm past waves of migrants, both in their sheer numbers, and their marked cultural differences from the city’s old Chinese. The complaints mirror those elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia: locals blame Chinese migrants for spoiling the city’s tranquil character, and for a steady rise in real-estate values that has forced many locals to relocate to scrubland and former paddy fields on the city’s outskirts.

The new Chinese presence in Mandalay dates back to 1984, when a fire tore through the center of the city, destroying around 2,700 buildings and leaving more than 23,000 people homeless. Many locals, lacking the money to rebuild gutted homes, subsequently sold their land to newly arrived Chinese immigrants. In 1988, the local writer Nyi Pu Lay wrote a short story titled “The Python,” which satirized how these Chinese arrivals were squeezing out the Burmese. A similar theme was taken up two decades later by the Burmese folk singer Lin Lin in a song titled “Death of Mandalay”: “Who are they in this city? / Neighbors that arrive from northeast,” he plaints over a simple guitar accompaniment. “I close both my ears in utter shame / Messed up with strangers / The death of our dear Mandalay.”<sup>26</sup>

Nobody really knows how many *xin yimin* live in Mandalay today. Inter-marriage and fraudulent papers make it hard to know who exactly counts as

Chinese. Some local estimates put the number as high as 50 percent of the city's population of 1.4 million.<sup>27</sup> While this is almost certainly a wild exaggeration, it points to the depth of the anxiety felt by many Burmans: the fear that their culture could be engulfed by a flood of outsiders from the north.

Despite all these signs of growing discontent, the Chinese government seemed surprised by the anti-Chinese sentiment that burst forth in 2011 and 2012. When Thein Sein announced the suspension of the Myitsone dam, Beijing responded at first with denial. Hinting at a conspiracy, Chinese analysts blamed Washington, which had given small grants to anti-dam groups. While years of Western sanctions on Burma had played to Beijing's advantage, the sudden shift demonstrated the downside to China's brand of pragmatic engagement: by using the junta to bulldoze through major infrastructure projects in the face of entrenched public opposition, it had become the predictable subject of popular anger.

The Chinese government had little choice but to adjust to the changing circumstances in Burma. As the scholar Enze Han observed, China faced much the same dilemma in Burma as the US did in Thailand after the 2014 coup: "neither side could afford to alienate the local government by exerting pressure that could push it into the embrace of its rival."<sup>28</sup> Beijing responded with a public relations offensive. Dignitaries, politicians, and journalists from across the political spectrum were invited on all-expenses-paid trips to China. The State Power Investment Corporation, the Chinese company building the Myitsone dam, set up a website debunking "myths" about the project and touting its benefits to Burma. The Chinese embassy appointed a new political counselor, who used Facebook (a service banned in China) to communicate more directly with the public. "If you don't walk the walk and just talk the talk, you won't win the hearts and minds of the local people," Counselor Gao Mingbo told *The New York Times*.<sup>29</sup> The handle of the embassy's Facebook page—@phaukpawfriendship—referenced a past era of Sino-Burmese amity.

China's most significant move was to begin courting the NLD. In June 2015, while the party was still in opposition, it invited Aung San Suu Kyi to Beijing for a meeting with President Xi Jinping, treating her to a reception befitting a visiting head of state. When the NLD government took office the following year, the first high-level diplomatic caller was Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who pledged renewed support, including backing for infrastructure development. A few months later, he was followed by an equally important though



less well-known figure: Song Tao, the head of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) International Liaison Department, which managed China's relations with Burma's profusion of armed rebel groups. In the euphoria of her party's massive election victory, many outside observers assumed that the Oxford-educated Aung San Suu Kyi would seal her country's embrace of the US and other Western democracies. But before long, the democratic idol, like Burmese leaders past, would find that China was too important to ignore.

In late August 2017, violence spread like a prairie fire across the swampy coastal littorals of Arakan State, a western region of Burma nestled against the British-drawn border with Bangladesh. The targets of the violence were the Rohingya, a mostly Muslim ethnic group who lived in villages concentrated in the northern part of the state. The perpetrator was Burma's military, backed by vigilantes from the state's Arakanese Buddhist populations. Although journalists and human rights workers were barred from the area, horrific reports quickly leaked out, of rape, torture, and extrajudicial killings of Rohingya civilians by soldiers and police. This was accompanied by a string of arson attacks, with satellite photos showing ash-colored blotches scarring the green rice paddies of northern Arakan. As the campaign advanced, hundreds of thousands of people fled over the Naf River into Bangladesh.

The military's "clearance operation" in northern Arakan was launched in response to a series of attacks by a ragtag Rohingya insurgent outfit calling itself the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). The group was led by Ataullah abu Ammar Jununi, a half-Rohingya, half-Pakistani militant who grew up in Saudi Arabia and later received military training in Pakistan or Afghanistan. Jununi and a group of Rohingya exiles set up the ARSA in 2012, following an outbreak of communal violence between Rohingya Muslims and Arakanese Buddhists. ARSA had first attracted international attention on October 9, 2016, when a small force wielding mostly homemade weapons killed nine policemen during a surprise attack on three border posts in northern Arakan. The military responded with a fierce counterinsurgency operation involving the destruction of villages and the displacement of their inhabitants: an ominous foreshadowing of the ethnic cleansing to come.

Like many of Burma's ethnic conflicts, the Rohingya crisis was an outgrowth of the nation-building problems that had plagued the country since its independence in 1948. Many of these could be traced back to the colonial era, when



Great Britain, after seizing Burma in a series of conquests between 1824 and 1885, arranged the nation's ethnic and racial hierarchies in such a manner as to best facilitate the extraction of profit for shareholders in London and Glasgow. Importing institutions and methods from its Indian colony, to which Burma was administratively conjoined until 1937, the British placed different parts of the country under different forms of administration, while favoring certain ethnic minority groups over the majority ethnic Burmans. It also imported hundreds of thousands of Indian immigrants from the Raj, who, arriving with little more than the rags on their backs, squeezed the livelihoods of the Burmans. "Burma was born as a military occupation," Thant Myint-U writes, "and grew up as a racial hierarchy."<sup>30</sup>

At independence, the British handed the new Burmese state an historically incongruous territory, in which around a third of the population belonged to a passel of non-Burman minority groups, many of them dwelling in outlying regions, like Kachin, Shan, and Arakan states, which had never been under effective central control. The British anthropologist Edmund Leach described the new nation as "a map maker's fiction": "Burma as represented on a modern map is not a natural geographic or historical entity," he wrote in 1963. "It is a creation of the armed diplomacy and administrative convenience of late nineteenth-century British Imperialism."<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, since colonial policy had accorded many minority groups preferential treatment over the Burman majority, ethnic relations were poisoned from the outset. Immediately after independence, the Union of Burma was engulfed by ethnic and civil conflict, pitting the central government and the military, both dominated by ethnic Burmans, against ethnic minority groups seeking autonomy or independence from the central state. Things worsened after the military seized power in 1962, pursuing a chauvinistic Burman ethno-nationalism that inflamed opposition further.

The Rohingya crisis, in Martin Smith's words, represented Burma's various postcolonial failures "in microcosm."<sup>32</sup> Things there were complicated additionally by the fact that the Buddhists of Arakan, the main local antagonists of the Rohingya, harbored their own host of grievances against the Burmese state. Many nurtured a distinct Arakanese identity linked to the independent kingdom of Mrauk U that was conquered and annexed by the Burmese state in the late eighteenth century, and defined itself against the influx of Bengali Muslims who entered the area during the British period.<sup>33</sup> In 2018, an armed

group calling itself the Arakan Army began fighting government forces in northern Arakan State, further complicating any solution to the Rohingya crisis.

One of the few things Burman and Arakanese nationalists could agree upon was their distaste for the Rohingya. While many Rohingya claimed to have lived in Burma for generations, many within both communities had long viewed them as illegal “sneak-ins” from Bangladesh, whose creeping presence was eroding Burma’s (and Arakan’s) distinct Buddhist identity. Many refused even to utter the word “Rohingya,” instead referring to them as “Bengalis” or *kala*, a derogatory word used to refer to foreigners who had an Indian appearance. Even though Burma’s 1982 Citizenship Law gave the Rohingya a theoretical pathway to citizenship, prejudice in its enforcement rendered most effectively stateless.

Given this historical background, the military “clearance operation” of August 2017 seemed like an attempt to erase an unwanted community from Burma’s territory once and for all. Within a year, around 800,000 terrified people had been forced over the border into Bangladesh. The aid group Médecins Sans Frontières estimated that 9,400 people were killed in the initial phase of the clearance campaign, including at least 730 children.<sup>34</sup> A UN fact-finding commission later concluded that the military’s campaign amounted to possible genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

The resurgence of sectarian and ethnic violence in Burma formed a dark underside to Burma’s reform drive. As in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the loosening of political controls inflamed long-dormant disputes. As Thein Sein’s government opened peace talks with some ethnic armed groups, fighting with others erupted in remote parts of Shan and Kachin states, reaching levels not seen in years. Anti-Muslim pogroms broke out in the central cities of Mandalay and Meiktila, leaving dozens dead. In May 2012, the trouble spread to Arakan State, where attacks by Buddhist vigilante groups left almost 200 people dead and drove around 140,000 Rohingya into internal displacement camps.

The spread of anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya animus was aided by the sudden appearance of the internet and social media, particularly Facebook. Before 2011, these had barely existed in Burma. Under the junta’s paranoid strictures, mobile SIM cards had cost thousands of dollars, and most people accessed the web at rickety internet cafés, where data dribbled in a few kilobytes at a time. When Burma opened its doors to foreign investment, two

international telecoms firms built new mobile phone networks, bringing prices down sharply. By mid-2014, when the first 1,500-kyat (\$1.60) SIMs went on sale, phone shops in Rangoon were mobbed by people eager to get their hands on the precious plastic chips. Nearly overnight, Burma leapfrogged from crackly landlines to web-enabled smartphones. In the two years after 2014, it saw one of the fastest surges in internet access of any country in history.<sup>35</sup>

Burma would turn out to be a signal lesson in the ambiguous effects of digital technologies. Among the savvier of Burma's new social media "influencers" was Ashin Wirathu, a monk from Mandalay. As the head of Burma's 969 movement, an ultra-nationalist Buddhist association, Wirathu peddled anti-Muslim poison perfumed with jasmine scent. On his Facebook page, he railed against the purported crimes of Muslims, and argued that their allegedly rapid demographic growth rate posed an existential threat to the country's Buddhist Burman identity. "The intention of Islam is to influence the whole world through rapid population [growth]," he said when I interviewed him in 2015, in the stuccoed monastery hall in which he instructed novice monks. If the Rohingya were accepted as citizens, Wirathu claimed, "Myanmar might become a wholly Muslim country, like Pakistan or Bangladesh." Outside the hall stood a billboard covered with gruesome images: acts of violence supposedly committed by Muslims in different parts of the world.

After the ARSA attacks of October 2016, Facebook helped fuel public vitriol against the Rohingya, conjoining them to broader fears of global Islamism. In March 2018, the UN reported that posts on Facebook had "substantively contributed to the level of acrimony and dissension and conflict" surrounding the Arakan crisis.<sup>36</sup> By this time, the NLD government had banned Wirathu from public preaching. Facebook had also canceled his account. But the damage had already been done.

The severe treatment of the Rohingya cracked the prevailing Western optimism about Burma. To outside observers, and many of us in the international press, the country's "transition to democracy" had had all the qualities of a fairy-tale, pitting the beautiful Aung San Suu Kyi and her downtrodden people against a villainous cast of generals and junta toadies. With the NLD's huge election victory in 2015, the story appeared to reach its happily-ever-after conclusion, as the heroine was borne into office on a wave of public adulation. One reason the story was so powerful was that it seemed to confirm the prevailing ideological assumptions of much of the Western media and policymaking elite: that the

world was moving inexorably, if sometimes haltingly, in the direction of liberal values. Relying on international support to pressure the military, Aung San Suu Kyi did little to discourage this perception.

When it came to the Rohingya, however, Wirathu voiced a view that was disturbingly common among Burmans, including prominent NLD figures and pro-democracy activists. Many agreed with him that the Rohingya were a fake ethnic group, and supported the military's actions to expunge these "Bengalis" from Burmese soil. In May 2015, I attended an anti-Rohingya protest in Rangoon in which demonstrators, many of them supporters of the NLD, held banners denouncing the international press—the very same press that had once supported their struggle against military dictatorship. Banners and T-shirts described the Rohingya as "boat people" and called on the media to "stop blaming Myanmar."

Most deflating of all was the silence of Aung San Suu Kyi, an inspiring figure who had been garlanded by the world community for her brave opposition to military dictatorship. While the constitution gave the NLD government little direct power to restrain the military's actions in Arakan State, her State Counselor's Office took a leading role in trying to counter and discredit international reporting about the crisis. In September 2017, it blamed "terrorists" for "a huge iceberg of misinformation" around the Arakan crisis.<sup>37</sup> As 2018 dawned, pundits and journalists were calling for Aung San Suu Kyi to be stripped of her Nobel Peace Prize and other baubles of international recognition. A portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi was removed from the walls of St. Hugh's College at Oxford University, where she had studied as an undergraduate. Amnesty International withdrew its highest honor, telling her that "you no longer represent a symbol of hope, courage, and the undying defense of human rights."<sup>38</sup>

Before the reforms, Aung San Suu Kyi had dwelt in a realm beyond serious scrutiny. While some foreign officials who met the famous dissident commented on her apparent rigidity and intolerance for criticism, calling attention to these qualities was seen as carrying water for the junta. As Barbara Victor, one of her biographers, wrote in 1998, "deconstructing Aung San Suu Kyi is not part of the game."<sup>39</sup> But the elevation of "The Lady" into an emblem of liberal values had a distorting effect, flattening her country's complex realities into a simple redemptive struggle between a freedom-loving people and a heinous military dictatorship.

In reality, military rule was as much a symptom of Burma's problems as their cause. As the political scientist Mary Callahan argued in 2005, army rule was simply one solution—however baneful and self-defeating—to a centuries-old challenge: how to build a state in outlying regions of Burma that had rarely, if ever, been under effective central control. Presciently, Callahan argued that this would be a problem not only for the military junta of the time, “but also for any future regime, democratic or otherwise.”<sup>40</sup> The election of Aung San Suu Kyi, an ethnic Burman politician who expressed affection for the Tatmadaw (her father Aung San had been central to its founding), did little to address these structural problems, nor to reconcile a chauvinistic Burman nationalism with Burma's multiethnic realities. Along the country's periphery, Aung San Suu Kyi was seen not as a goddess but as the least bad option—and sometimes regarded with open suspicion.

As international pressure mounted over the Rohingya crisis, and the US and European Union threatened to reimpose economic sanctions, “The Lady” turned in a familiar direction for support. China swiftly reassured the NLD leaders that it took a position of “non-interference” on the question of the Rohingya. When the UN Security Council drafted a statement condemning Burma's actions in 2017, Chinese diplomats vetoed its release. Indeed, they went further, echoing Naypyidaw's narrative justifying the attacks on the Rohingya on the grounds that the army was “fighting terrorism” and preserving “national security.” Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared that the crisis was an issue between Burma and Bangladesh, and should not be “complicated” or “internationalized.” On a visit to Beijing in April 2019, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the Tatmadaw, praised China for its support and described it as an “eternal friend.”<sup>41</sup>

As Burma's international isolation deepened, China took the opportunity to regain lost ground, pushing for the resumption of stalled infrastructure projects. In November 2017, the two countries signed an agreement on the construction of the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a new catch-all for the raft of BRI infrastructure projects designed to connect Yunnan to the sea. China's proposed railway from Muse on the Chinese border to Kyaukphyu on the coast of Arakan State, shelved by Burma's government in 2014, was revived, and Chinese engineers began surveying a 431-kilometer stretch running from Muse to Mandalay.<sup>42</sup> Other projects under the CMEC included a strand of border trade zones in Kachin and Shan states opposite

Yunnan, and an ambitious plan to construct a “new city” in the outskirts of Rangoon. The linchpin of the CMEC was the deep-water port and Special Economic Zone at Kyaukphyu, not far from the conflict zones of Arakan State.

The Rohingya crisis aside, the NLD government had good reasons to maintain workable relations with Beijing. This was something that Aung San Suu Kyi had long recognized. “I have to be careful with China,” she told an interviewer in March 2003, during a short interregnum between stretches of house arrest. “They are a big and important neighbor, and I cannot afford to offend them.”<sup>43</sup> After taking office, Aung San Suu Kyi chose China as the destination for her first state visit and, to assuage the concerns of Chinese investors, approved the resumption of operations at the Letpadaung Copper Mine in central Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi’s rebalancing was a recognition that she needed Chinese cooperation if she hoped to achieve her main domestic policy priority: forging peace and bringing development to Burma’s restive periphery.

Shortly after entering office, Aung San Suu Kyi pushed for the completion of the national peace talks initiated by Thein Sein’s government, convening a series of large summits that brought together leaders from most of Burma’s thirty-odd armed ethnic groups. If her peace drive was to succeed, China’s support would be pivotal: it had been involved in some of the conflicts since their inception, and retained close political and economic connections to the ethnic rebel statelets distributed across northern and eastern Shan State. Its relations were particularly close to those territories lying directly along the Chinese border, some of which had over the years grown into virtual Chinese annexes.

One of these was Mong La, the largest town in Special Region No. 4, a 4,946-square-kilometer crescent of autonomous territory along the Chinese border run by a militia calling itself the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA). For the past three decades, the leaders of this miniature Golden Triangle fiefdom had survived by attaching themselves like a limpet to the grimy underside of China’s domestic tourist industry. Mong La’s economy—the model for the casino tourism enclaves that would later sprout in Laos and Cambodia—revolved around gambling and its subsidiary ventures: nightclubs, brothels, restaurants, and massage joints. The NDAA’s territory was especially notorious for its brazen trade in endangered wildlife products, including pangolins, ivory, and tiger bone wine, all of which were sold openly

at boutiques and eateries around town. Many Chinese patrons crossed the border illegally. When I traveled up to Mong La in 2014 to research the illicit wildlife trade, a Burmese motorbike driver carried me over the border to China and back for about \$20 worth of Chinese yuan.

The NDAA is led by the warlord Sai Leun, a former Maoist Red Guard who broke away from the CPB when it collapsed in 1989 and signed a cease-fire with the central government, in exchange for autonomy. While Sai Leun (Lin Mingxian in Mandarin) rules Mong La with little outside interference, protected by an army of 4,500 men that US officials have described as a “James Bondian private police force,”<sup>44</sup> it is an effective economic extension of China: a neon-lit island of Chinese urban modernity in a furrowed highland landscape dotted with Akha and Lahu villages. It operates on China Standard Time and almost entirely on Chinese yuan. The NDAA leadership speak Mandarin and cooperate closely with local officials in Yunnan, which may account for the ease of illegal border runs. In fact, China probably has more say in what happens in Special Region No. 4 than Burma does.

Chinese officials have good reasons to keep a close eye on Burma’s rebel groups and ethnic conflict zones, especially those abutting its sensitive southern border. For one thing, many of the peoples fighting for autonomy in Burma have ethnic brethren across the border, raising fears that instability there could spread into China itself. For another, China’s planned corridor from Yunnan to the Indian Ocean runs directly through fractious regions contested between the Burmese government and a range of armed groups. Stability in these regions is a prerequisite to the fulfillment of China’s broader strategic objectives in Burma.

Chinese fears of unrest flared in August 2009, when the Tatmadaw launched an offensive against Kokang, another autonomous “special region” bordering China in northern Shan State, and ousted its leader Pheung Kya-shin (Mandarin: Peng Jiasheng), a former communist and ethnic Chinese drug trafficker with close connections to China. The fighting caused around 30,000 people to flee into Yunnan. Beijing was jolted by the incident. As the International Crisis Group noted at the time, the Kokang conflict “dramatically changed China’s view” of Burma’s ethnic armed groups. Previously, Chinese officials saw them as buffers that could be played off against Naypyidaw for strategic gain. Once it became apparent that Burma was willing to use force to root out recalcitrant armed groups, Beijing began to see these rebel groups as a liability.<sup>45</sup>



Chinese concerns were exacerbated in 2011 and 2012, when political reforms coincided with the breakdown of old ceasefires and renewed fighting along its border with Burma. In June 2011, skirmishes in Kachin State broke a 17-year-old ceasefire between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Late the following year, the escalation of the conflict led the Burmese military to bomb Chinese territory and sent thousands of refugees fleeing into China.

The renewed fighting drew China more deeply into Burma's ethnic armed conflicts. After the Kokang incident, China centralized control of Burma border policy, transferring responsibility from the Yunnan provincial government back to the capital. It also stepped up its involvement in the country's peace talks. In 2013, Beijing appointed Wang Yingfan, a veteran diplomat and former ambassador to the Philippines, as a special envoy to mediate armed conflicts in Burma. Shortly after Wang's appointment, China organized two rounds of dialog between KIA leaders and the Burmese government in Ruili.

The Chinese government claimed that its involvement in Burma's peace process was consistent with its principle of "non-interference." Sun Guoxiang, the current special envoy, argued that China was "only doing [its] duty as a friendly neighbor."<sup>46</sup> But the Chinese government's real aims were more nebulous. As mentioned, one pressing Chinese goal was to ensure the stability necessary for the completion of vital corridor infrastructure projects. Another was to neutralize the involvement of rival powers in the nationwide peace process initiated by Thein Sein's government. After 2011, outside powers, including Japan, the US, and Norway, had become active in the peace negotiations. Beijing had long viewed the Burmese border region as an exclusive sphere of influence, like the South China Sea. The prospect that competing powers were making inroads there was intolerable.

Chinese leaders were particularly alarmed when, in April 2014, General Gun Maw, the deputy commander-in-chief of the KIA, paid a visit to Washington, where he publicly called for the US government to deepen its involvement in Burma's peace talks. The following January, an American delegation traveled to Myitkyina for consultations with Kachin civil society organizations and political leaders. The delegation included General Anthony Crutchfield, the deputy commander of the US Pacific Command. At this point, Thant Myint-U writes, "the leadership in Beijing started to take notice: fighting was bad, but the wrong kind of peace could be worse."<sup>47</sup>

To secure its objectives, China has taken a dual-track approach to Burma's ethnic conflicts. On the one hand, it has used the peace negotiations to contain active conflicts along its border and push forward CMEC infrastructure projects. On the other, it has maintained close relationships with key ethnic armed groups, and used them to exert leverage over the government in Naypyidaw. The largest of these levers is the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Burma's most powerful rebel force, which occupies two expansive territories in Shan State guarded by a standing army of 30,000. Like minuscule Mong La, which borders its main territory to the south, the UWSA signed a ceasefire with the central government in 1989, and is led by an ageing ethnic Chinese former communist rebel, Bao Youxiang. The UWSA's economy is arranged around a network of industrial-scale drug labs, which for years have flooded mainland Southeast Asia with cheap *yaba* pills and crystal meth. Recognizing its importance, China has turned a blind eye to the UWSA's involvement in narcotics and other illicit trades, and has reportedly provided it with military equipment—including portable air-defense systems, armored vehicles, and heavy artillery—that have helped its leaders safeguard their autonomy from Naypyidaw.<sup>48</sup>

Beijing's relationship with the UWSA is a prime example of its approach to Burma's ethnic conflicts. As Yun Sun, a researcher at the Stimson Center in Washington, DC, argued in a 2017 report, the UWSA leads a coalition of ethnic armed groups that have been skeptical of taking part in nationwide peace talks. Given the Chinese influence over the UWSA, Beijing's cooperation is necessary if this coalition is ever to join a credible peace process—a sine qua non of any meaningful nationwide deal. This gives China considerable leverage over Burma's government. As Yun concludes, "China uses its involvement in that peace process as both a carrot to induce more cooperation from Myanmar and a stick when Myanmar appears to be deviating from the policy course that China desires."<sup>49</sup>

In late 2015, the stick was used to signal Beijing's displeasure at the creeping Japanese and Western inroads in the peace negotiations. In the run-up to the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement that took place in October of that year, China's envoy Sun Guoxiang reportedly persuaded key armed organizations, including the KIA and UWSA, not to sign.<sup>50</sup> The following year, as relations improved under the NLD government, the stick was swapped out for the carrot. China not only supported the three large

peace conferences organized by Aung San Suu Kyi's government; it also ensured that wavering insurgent armies fronted up, going so far as to force their representatives to board a chartered flight from Kunming to Naypyidaw to attend a key meeting in May 2017.<sup>51</sup> Instead of picking a side between Burma and the ethnic armed groups, Yun observes, Beijing "maintains good relations with both, and each serves a distinct purpose."<sup>52</sup>

A similar logic has guided China's approach to the Arakan crisis. In November 2017, three months after the military "clearance operations" against the Rohingya, Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced that the Chinese government was brokering a "three-phase plan" to bring about "a final and fundamental solution" to the humanitarian emergency in Bangladesh. The vaguely drawn plan involved a ceasefire, the repatriation of Rohingya refugees back to Burma, and unspecified measures to promote long-term economic development in Arakan State. Again, China's involvement was motivated less by humanitarian concerns than by the need to stabilize an area of strategic interest. Arakan, after all, is the site of the planned Kyaukphyu deep-water port: China's long-cherished outlet to the western sea.

Even as Burma's relations with China improved under the NLD, they remained hesitant and uneasy, feelings that have been encapsulated by Beijing's efforts to revive the Myitsone dam. After its suspension in 2011, the Chinese lobbied hard for the resumption of the project. When Burma's relations with the West deteriorated after 2017, they became pushier. In December 2018, Hong Liang, China's ambassador to Burma, flew to Kachin State and announced that further delays to the Myitsone project could hamper bilateral relations. "If this issue fails to be resolved," a statement published on the embassy's Facebook page quoted him as saying, "it will seriously hurt the confidence of Chinese entrepreneurs to invest in Myanmar."<sup>53</sup> For good measure, he warned Kachin political leaders against forging close relationships with Western diplomats, threatening unspecified "serious consequences."<sup>54</sup>

By leaving office without making a final decision on the Myitsone dam project, President Thein Sein had handed his successor a thorny dilemma: cancel the project and anger Beijing, or resume it and alienate a large slice of Burma's electorate. Aung San Suu Kyi's government chose Option C—none of the above—and left the Myitsone dam in a state of suspended animation, an unbuilt monument to Burma's eternal quandary: how to live with China?

During my visit to the Myitsone area in May 2016, I was surprised to find that anger at China had been partly displaced onto the NLD government for not canceling the project outright. One of the local residents I spoke to was Daw Kam, a 32-year-old Kachin shop owner evicted from her village by the dam's construction in 2010. Like most of her neighbors, she had voted for Aung San Suu Kyi in the 2015 election. "The people believed that she would stand for the people," she said, sitting under the eaves of the shop she ran in Aung Myin Thar, a relocation village set up to house the 2,500 people displaced by the project. Her shelves were a shrine to the thriving border trade, stacked with Chinese umbrellas, rubber shoes, backpacks with images of Disney princesses, crockery, plastic toys, insect poison. If the NLD government resumed the dam project, Daw Kam said, locals would "fight against Aung San Suu Kyi."

In January 2020, Xi Jinping paid a state visit to Burma, the first by a top Chinese leader in nearly two decades. He came bearing a bouquet of infrastructure funding commitments and memorandums of understanding. After meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the two nations agreed to elevate their relationship to a "Sino-Myanmar Community of Common Destiny," Burma becoming the third nation, after Cambodia and Laos, to adopt this Chinese formulation officially. Despite China's unpopularity among the Burmese population, its no-questions-asked approach to the situation in Arakan State had won it a special pass to the chambers of power in Naypyidaw. Just the previous month, Aung San Suu Kyi had appeared at the International Court of Justice in The Hague to defend Burma from allegations of genocide in Arakan State, in a case brought by The Gambia.

But if a constructive relationship with China was vital for any government that ruled in Naypyidaw, old fears of overdependence were never far behind. Even as NLD and Tatmadaw leaders spouted paeans to Sino-Burmese amity, they whispered concerns about Chinese debt, and Beijing's ties to breakaway rebel groups in the borderlands. To address the debt issue, China and Burma renegotiated the Kyaukphyu deep-water port agreement, reducing its price tag from \$7.3 billion to just \$1.3 billion.<sup>55</sup> Burma set up a special committee chaired by Aung San Suu Kyi to scrutinize BRI infrastructure developments. As one Burmese diplomat told the academic J. Mohan Malik, "We don't want Myanmar interests trampled on by China on its road to greatness."<sup>56</sup> Xi's state

visit in 2020 abounded in the usual frothy diplomatic language, but saw relatively scant progress on China's cherished infrastructure deals.

As the continuing opposition to the Myitsone dam indicates, China's new era of influence in Burma might once again contain the seeds of its own negation. In a March 2018 report, researchers from the London-based International Growth Centre argued that public trust in China remained as low as ever. "There is an explicit bias against Chinese investments in Myanmar," the researchers concluded, warning both governments of "the potential local resistance they may face if their investment strategies do not consider the local context carefully."<sup>57</sup> China's hectoring efforts to get the Myitsone dam project back on track suggested that its imperious brand of "great-state autism" remained firmly entrenched.

Like Thailand and Vietnam, Aung San Suu Kyi's Burma sought a judicious balance in its foreign relations, an update of its old neutralism for a new era of superpower competition. To offset China's looming presence, it sought closer economic and security relationships with the region's other major powers, including its traditionally close partners Japan and India, both of which harbored apprehensions about China's activities in Burma. At the same time, the nation's tortured ethnic relations, and the systematic human rights abuses that flowed from them, have made constructive relations with the US and other Western democracies difficult to sustain.

From the beginning of the reform period, many Western governments came to see Burma as a place where values and interests aligned: where advancing democracy would also yield a strategic dividend. In so doing, they allowed their hopes for Burma to outpace the country's realities. As Thant Myint-U argues, the West's nostrums of democracy and free markets did little to resolve the deep racial divisions bequeathed by British rule. Indeed, they merely served to widen existing economic disparities and to "inject a new layer of partisan competition on an already fractious landscape." At a time when this neoliberal package was increasingly being questioned in Europe and North America, he writes, it had become Burma's "only prescription for the future. Twentieth-century answers are being offered as the default answers to the country's 21st-century challenges."<sup>58</sup>

China isn't offering any better answers. Its plan of sluicing BRI money into the conflict zones of Shan and Arakan states is no solution to these regions' problems, and will in all likelihood inflame the situations there. Yet for all its

## BURMA

deafness to Burmese concerns, the Chinese government remains keenly attuned to the intractability of the nation's problems. Unlike many Western governments, it is willing to engage Burma's troubled realities in order to push forward vital strategic interests. As long as they persist, Burma's dynamics of ethnic conflict and division will therefore continue to exert a steady pressure in China's direction. All this puts the Burmese government in a liminal bind. Apprehensive about China's intentions, yet unable to escape its magnetic power, it remains stuck partway between the poles of fear and attraction, moving only so far in one direction before events send it sliding back.

# 7

## SINGAPORE

### THE GREAT LEAP OUTWARD

Southeast Asia's oldest church sits on a low hill above the Malaysian city of Malacca, overlooking the famous neck of water that shares its name. The small chapel of St. Paul's was erected in 1521 by the Portuguese nobleman Duarte Coelho, as an act of gratitude after he made a miraculous escape from a storm in the South China Sea. Today, all that remains of the church is a shell of laterite walls, open to the sky, and a whitewashed bell tower with blue shutters. On a brick plinth outside, the Spanish missionary St. Francis Xavier gazes coastward, frozen in white marble. His left hand clutches a cross to his chest, but his right is missing, lopped off clean on a windy day in 1953, by a falling branch from a casuarina tree.<sup>1</sup> Unperturbed, St. Francis extends his stump toward the distant Straits of Malacca, where container ships hang suspended, melting into the haze.

At the time of St. Paul's consecration, Malacca was one of the largest emporiums in the Orient: a fulcrum of the first great era of globalization. Founded at the beginning of the fifteenth century by the Malay prince Parameswara, it quickly grew into the center of a prosperous Muslim sultanate whose power extended across the Malay Peninsula and large parts of northern Sumatra. In addition to controlling access to the straits—then, as now, an artery of international trade—Malacca was situated at the mid-point of the wind-driven maritime trade routes running from the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

At its height in the mid-1400s, Malacca's harbor was thick with Chinese junks and Arabian dhows, its bazaars alive with foreign tongues and an overflow of exotic merchandise: cloth and gemstones from Gujarat and Bengal; spices and sandalwood from Sulawesi and the Banda Islands. Malays hawked tin, gold, rattan, and tortoiseshell; Chinese sold silk, porcelain, and camphor. "No trading port as large as Malacca is known, nor any where they deal in

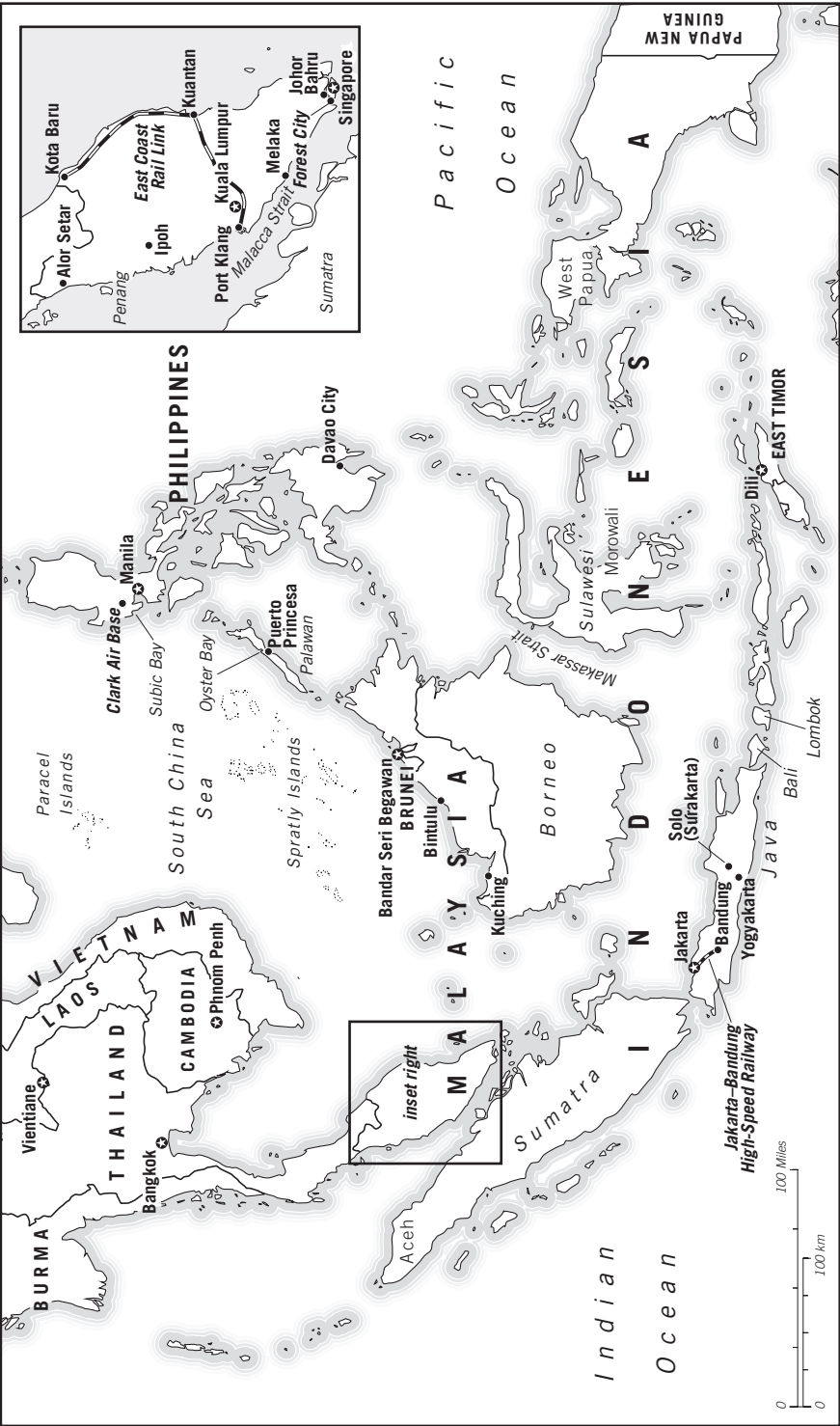


such fine and highly prized merchandise,” wrote the Portuguese apothecary Tomé Pires, who lived in Malacca in the early sixteenth century. So important was the city to international trade, he declared, that “whoever is lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice.”<sup>2</sup> Coveting its control over global commerce, Portugal seized Malacca from its Muslim rulers in 1511, an event that marked the beginning of more than four centuries of European domination of Asia.

Malacca’s subsequent history is a fable on the fickleness of globalization. By the middle of the nineteenth century, after periods under Dutch and then British rule, the town’s port had silted up and the flows of commerce—now driven by coal and steam—had long passed it by. “The stillness of death reigns through the streets,” one traveler wrote of Malacca in 1837, “and even the laborious Chinese, seem here to catch the general spirit of quiescence.” A few decades later another described Malacca as “a town ‘out of the running,’ utterly antiquated . . . a veritable Sleepy Hollow.”<sup>3</sup> The trade that once made Malacca prosperous passed instead to the British settlements at Penang, further up the Peninsula, and Singapore, at the southern entrance to the straits. Singapore grew into a bustling town under British administration, and later, into a global trans-shipment hub and offshore financial center: a Malacca for the shipping container age.

Old Malacca, meanwhile, has settled into a sleepy afterlife as new Melaka, a provincial capital and tourist center trading on its association with a vanished era of globalization. At the bottom of its church-crowned hill, visitors can examine the last remaining section of the fortress erected by the Portuguese after their conquest of the city. Once nicknamed *A Famosa* because of the unusual size of its keep, the pockmarked stone structure seems to have diminished with time, an antique icon of Iberian prestige now dwarfed by the Dataran Pahlawan Melaka Megamall across the street. Another popular sight-seeing spot is the old Dutch town square, dominated by a terracotta-colored church dated 1753 and a British fountain bubbling in honor of Queen Victoria. The surrounding streets are a warren of narrow Chinese shop-houses.

In particular, Malacca’s tourist industry abounds in references to Admiral Zheng He, the seafaring explorer of China’s Ming dynasty, who steered seven massive armadas through the Indian Ocean between 1405 and 1433, before the Ming emperors abandoned their maritime ventures and turned inward. While Zheng’s “treasure fleets” ranged as far as the Arabian Peninsula and the



5. Maritime Southeast Asia



1. Chinese President Xi Jinping participates in a parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in Beijing on October 1, 2019. Under Xi, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has tightened control at home and asserted its power abroad, seeking to recapture China's former status as the preeminent power in Asia.



2. A cartoon published in *Le Petit Journal* on January 16, 1898, depicting the Western powers and Japan scheming to partition a weakened imperial China. Memories of this “century of humiliation,” inculcated by decades of state nationalism, have fueled the CCP’s drive to restore China’s wealth and power.