



A Short History of Burma Scholarship at Cornell

c. 1950-2020



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AS THE CORNELL SOUTHEAST ASIA PROGRAM TURNS SEVENTY, we take this occasion to reflect on the Burma and Burma/Myanmar scholarship that it has nurtured since the 1950s. With such a rich history of people and projects, we humbly approach this task: What follows is only a sketch of this biography. Perhaps also *without* towering Cornell figures in the field of Burma studies (as, for example, Indonesia studies would contend with in its counterpart SEAP biography), we can see more clearly the diverse contributions of Cornell Burma scholarship over the last seven decades.

William (Bill) Hackett (1915-1990) was SEAP's earliest doctoral student to work on Burma (PhD 1953). Photo of him as a young man in Shan dress courtesy of Nancy Hackett and the Hackett Mission Legacy.

EARLY YEARS (1950s)

The simultaneous diversity and rigor of Burma scholarship at Cornell took root early. In its first decade, SEAP supported foundational historical, anthropological, and linguistic scholarship on Burma. Much of this early postwar expertise was produced by people whose knowledge of Burma was deeply informed by their own experiences as colonial civil servants, missionaries, and teachers in Burma from the 1900s to the 1940s.

Most recognizable among these names were visiting faculty John F. Cady (1952-1953), John S. Furnivall (1954-1955), and D. G. E. Hall (1955 and then a recurring visitor from 1959 to 1973). Together they laid a solid foundation for Burma studies at Cornell through the "Burma seminar" that Cady taught first and which then moved hands to Furnivall, Hall, and other Cornell faculty, staff, and visitors in later years.

Cady had been a lecturer in history at the University of Rangoon just as Burma was splitting from British India before WWII (1935-1938). While visiting Cornell from Ohio University, he inaugurated the Burma seminar and contributed his work on precolonial Burmese political institutions (shattered by British rule—and now, circa the 1950s, in need of reconstitution) to SEAP's Data Paper Series (an early publishing initiative).¹

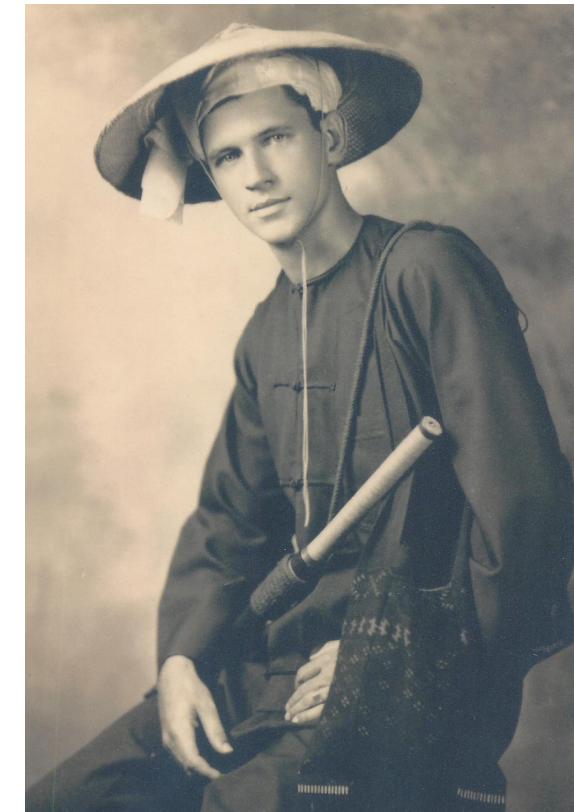
Hall had preceded Cady at the University of Rangoon, becoming Burma's first professor of history and holding his appointment there from 1921 to 1934. He was well into his career by the time he first came to Cornell, and after retiring from School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 1959 he regularly taught classes to SEAP stu-

dents through a visiting professorship until the early 1970s. During this later stage of his career Hall broadened his focus from historical Burma to take on the wider history of Southeast Asia.

Furnivall, who is arguably the most significant figure for a bigger history of Burma scholarship, arrived at Cornell with a deep and multifaceted relationship with Burma. This relationship started in 1902 when Furnivall arrived in Burma to work as a district settlement officer for the colonial government. He founded the Burma Research Society in Rangoon in 1910 and devoted himself full-time to scholarship after he retired from the Indian Civil Service in the early 1920s, writing on a wide range of topics including early book-length studies on political economy and British rule.²

By the time Furnivall was a visitor at Cornell, he was several years into his service as a national planning adviser to the government of the newly independent Union of Burma. It is Furnivall whom many colleagues remember for shaping SEAP's Burma seminar, which later continued to be offered on a four-year rotation until it was reconfigured as Benedict Anderson's graduate seminar, "The Plural Society Revisited," in the late 1980s. With this adaptation, Anderson was paying homage to Furnivall, who had pioneered the study of comparative colonial administration with his work on the Netherlands East Indies.³ Thus, in the spirit of Furnivall, Anderson's seminar used Burma as a case study to understand wider developments in colonial Southeast Asia.

The earliest SEAP doctoral student to work on Burma was William D. Hackett, who began his studies in rural sociology at Cornell after growing up as part of the American Baptist Mission in Burma. The "missionary-ethnogra-



pher" completed his PhD in 1953 and focused his work on the Pa-O people of Shan State.⁴

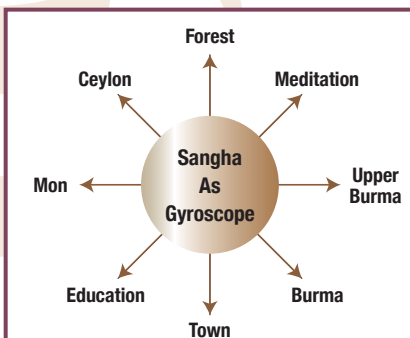
Two other early doctoral candidates to work on Burma were Charles S. Brant (PhD 1951) and John Frank Brohm (PhD 1957), whose research interests in Burma stemmed from their experiences as US Army medical corpsmen in the China-Burma-India Theater of WWII. Brant may have conducted the earliest postwar Cornell field research in Burma with his village study of Tagadale (Insein District) in 1949-50.⁵ Brohm continued the village study model with his own field research in Old Kaungauk (just a few miles east of Mandalay) in 1952-1953. This work contributed to his doctoral thesis, which sought to advance the "scientific evidence of culture" through its study of Buddhist revival in Burma since WWII.⁶

The arrival of Robert B. Jones in 1955 as a professor in Cornell's Division of Modern Languages marked the beginning of a continuous Burma presence on campus. Jones had studied the Karen language under Mary Haas at the University of California, Berkeley. At Cornell, he continued his research on Tibeto-Burman and Tai historical linguistics while also spearheading the

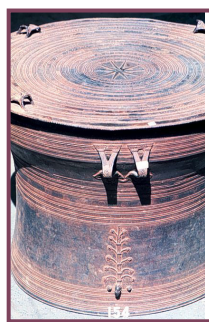
development of pedagogical materials for Southeast Asian languages and Japanese. This included teaching Burmese, and he remained in charge of Burmese language training at Cornell until his retirement in 1986.⁷

MIDDLE YEARS (1960s to mid-1980s)

Burma continued to be the object of research and teaching at Cornell from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, but with the changed political situation in the early 1960s, scholars outside Burma faced restrictions on access to the country. Likely the last two PhDs to do sustained work in Burma were Josef Silverstein and David Pfanter. Silverstein (PhD 1960), a student in the Government Department, did the field work for his thesis c1956.⁸ Pfanter (PhD 1962), whose doctoral work only began in 1956, conducted his sociological field study of Mayin (Pegu District) in 1959-60.⁹



John Ferguson's model of the Burmese *sangha* as a "cultural gyroscope" with 4 bonded dimensions (continuums of belief and behavior along which the Buddhist monastic order shifted historically). Ferguson's conceptual work in part underscores the limitations he faced accessing Burma as a field site while he did his doctoral work. Image reproduced from his PhD thesis (1975, see page 8).



One of over 370 Karen bronze drums documented by Richard M. Cooler for his doctoral research in the 1970s. This art historical work, which began as an "emergency data gathering project to identify and record as many drums as possible before they were forever lost to research," is a rare example of research that could be conducted in Burma by outside scholars during the middle years. Photo courtesy of Dr. Cooler and SEASite (Northern Illinois University); see: http://www.sea-site.niu.edu/burmese/cooler/BurmaArt_TOC.htm.

With limited country access, two trends characterized Burma scholarship on Cornell's campus from the early 1960s through the mid-1990s. First, many of the doctoral students interested in Burma pursued it in a comparative manner. This included work in economics by Than Qui Tran (PhD 1963)¹⁰ and Margaret Ruth Harris Pfanter (PhD 1966)¹¹ and work in history by Robert Sigfrid Wicks (PhD 1983)¹² and Sunait Chutintaranond (PhD 1990).¹³ Doctoral students working on the history of colonial Burma in the early 1990s, like Sarah Heminway Maxim (PhD 1992)¹⁴ and Anne L. Foster (PhD 1995)¹⁵, took the comparative approach as well.

Notable exceptions to this comparative studies trend included Robert H. Taylor (PhD 1974), who remembers studying Burma with only a couple other students in the late 1960s/early 1970s and whose research on the Burmese political elite was conducted without ever visiting Southeast Asia.¹⁶ Informed instead by archival research in London, Taylor's thesis explored how Burmese politics were in part the product of British and Indian interests in Burma before WWII.¹⁷ The other exceptions were John Ferguson (PhD 1975), whose fieldwork on the Burmese *sangha* (Buddhist monastic order) took place mostly in Thailand with only two short trips to Burma,¹⁸ and Richard Morrall Cooler (PhD 1979), whose art historical focus documenting Karen bronze drums in an "emergency data gathering project" made his field research more permissible in the 1970s.¹⁹

Another trend in the field of Burma studies was the greater visibility of scholars from Burma, whose access to the country was not hindered in the same way and who carried their expertise to Cornell and back or otherwise collaborated with SEAP remotely. Khin Maung Kyi (PhD 1966), who had stud-

ied and later taught commerce at the University of Rangoon, was one such scholar. He began his studies at Cornell in 1960 and was able to conduct extensive field surveys in Burma as part of his doctoral work on "the institutionalization of organizational authority in a transitional culture."²⁰

Other Burmese scholars to spend time at Cornell included Hla Myint, rector of the University of Rangoon (visitor in 1961 and 1985) and Myo Myint, doctoral student in history (PhD 1987).²¹ During this time SEAP also supported the dissemination of Burma scholarship through its Data Paper Series, with Hall publishing recent historical work by Sao Saimong Mangrai (who had been Chief Education Officer of Shan and Kayah states before the 1962 coup)²² and David Wyatt encouraging publication of the memoirs of the Burmese Army leader Smith Dun (the "four-foot colonel").²³

RECENT YEARS (late 1980s to 2020)

In more recent years, Burma scholarship at Cornell has benefited from three developments: (1) the longer-term presence of Burma scholars on campus starting in the mid-to-late 1980s; (2) the opening up of the country as a site for archival and field research in the 1990s; and (3) the mobilization of Burma/Myanmar research, outreach, and language study through explicit SEAP initiatives.

John Badgley, who worked on contemporary politics in Burma and had been a visitor at SEAP in the 1960s and 1970s, joined Cornell as the Echols Collection Curator in 1986. Hiring Swe Swe Myint as a cataloger and traveling to Burma every year, he greatly expanded the collection's Burmese language holdings, focusing especially on current political campaigns and using microfilm to preserve many newspapers and pamphlets that were printed on acidic (and highly degradable) paper.²⁴

Badgley was joined in the late 1980s by two Burmese language experts: Julian Wheatley, who studied Burmese linguistics and taught at Cornell from 1987-97, and San San Hnin Tun, who taught Burmese (and French) starting in 1989 and in later years simultaneously pursued her own research in Burmese



Left: The workshop "Burmese Language Teaching: Present and Future" convened at the Kahin Center in October 2016. This 2 day workshop brought together international experts in Burmese language pedagogy, including presentations by Tharaphi Than (Northern Illinois University), San San Hnin Tun (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris), Yu Yu Khaing (Cornell University), Kenneth Wong (University of California, Berkeley), Ye Min Tun (Johns Hopkins University), and Justin Watkins (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London).



Right: A Burmese martial arts workout led by Marjorie Mosereiff (MA 2014) during the 2015 Burma/Myanmar Research Forum. The second major conference of the Burma/Myanmar Initiative, the 2015 Forum was organized by SEAP graduate students and showcased their commitment to international, cross-disciplinary, and multi-modal scholarship.

corpus linguistics.²⁵ During her time in charge of Burmese language instruction at Cornell (which lasted over three decades until 2012), she developed all levels of pedagogical materials to fill a serious void in Burmese language learning resources. *Sayama* San San also worked closely with the Language Resource Center to pioneer the production of digital language teaching tools.²⁶

With the gradual opening up of Burma/Myanmar²⁷ in the 1990s—a complex and slow-moving process of economic and political reform by the military government in response to the strengthening democracy movement and international pressure—scholars outside the country slowly began to get access again to research sites in the country. Most notable at Cornell was Mary Callahan's doctoral thesis on "The Origins of Military Rule in Burma" (PhD 1996), which involved research in army archives (the Defence Services Historical Research Institute) in Rangoon in the early 1990s, where due to political sensitivities she never knew which files she would have access to.²⁸ Through a connection with Callahan, Kyaw Yin Hlaing (PhD 2001) was encouraged to join the Government Department's doctoral program in 1994.²⁹

By the early 2000s, the SEAP com-

munity included a wide set of junior scholars pursuing doctoral work in history, anthropology, ethnomusicology, and Buddhist studies, including: Chie Ikeya (PhD 2006)³⁰; Jane Ferguson (PhD 2008)³¹; Heather MacLachlan (PhD 2009)³²; and Christian Lammerts (PhD 2010).³³ In the 2010s, work continued in these fields and also in education, international relations, city and regional planning, and industrial and labor relations with doctoral students such as Rose Metro (PhD 2011)³⁴, Chika Watanabe (PhD 2013)³⁵; Tom Patton (PhD 2014)³⁶; Thethan Soe (PhD 2015)³⁷; Emily Hong (PhD 2019)³⁸; and Jinyoung Park (PhD 2019).³⁹

This outpouring of Cornell Burma/Myanmar scholarship in the last two decades can be credited to SEAP's support of Burmese language study on campus (which made Cornell one of a handful of American universities to offer Burmese) as well as external factors that have made field sites more accessible. In even more recent years, explicit efforts by SEAP have brought greater visibility to Cornell outreach and scholarship. Thamora Fishel, who joined SEAP as Outreach Coordinator in 2007, immediately spearheaded the Burma/Karen Outreach Project after receiving numerous requests from

Ithaca area teachers for information about local refugee communities. This work on Karen cultural preservation was done in collaboration with linguistics professor John Whitman, who had already been developing connections with the local Karen community through his linguistics field seminar.

In 2014, with pivotal leadership by Cornell graduate students and anthropology professor Magnus Fiskesjö, SEAP launched the Burma/Myanmar Initiative. This initiative brought scholars to Cornell for two installations of the Burma/Myanmar Research Forum in 2014 and 2015, both conferences achieving a wide reach—international, cross-disciplinary, and multi-modal—into current scholarship and activism.

Today, SEAP Burma/Myanmar scholarship continues with the strong support of the United States Department of Education's National Resource Centers Program and Cornell's Office of the Vice Provost for International Affairs. This support, alongside enthusiastic encouragement from wider colleagues in the field, has enabled SEAP to continue offering Burmese language study with the recruitment of Yu Yu Khaing, Burmese language lecturer, in 2015 to fill a new, permanent line. Deeply involved in language pedagogy

initiatives and already having trained dozens of undergraduate and graduate students (including through the development of novel remote methods to teach students at partner universities—now even more useful in the time of coronavirus instruction), *Sayama Yu Yu* gives Cornell the fundamental basis for future Burma/Myanmar scholarship. ✨



We end by acknowledging that many more (as yet) unnamed people—students, faculty, staff, and visitors—have contributed to Burma/Myanmar scholarship at Cornell throughout the years, and we encourage SEAP alumni to get in touch with any recollections that might inform a longer history of Cornell Burma/Myanmar studies in the future. Please contact Allegra Giovine (aeg32@cornell.edu) and Ava White (amw383@cornell.edu).



- ¹ John F. Cady, "Political Institutions of Old Burma," Data Paper No. 12 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, April 1954). The Data Paper Series was SEAP's earliest publishing initiative. It was founded "to foster research and broadcast original scholarship" on Southeast Asia and produced 116 papers between 1950 and 1982. For more information and the digital repository, see: <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/57469>.
- ² Furnivall's longer works included *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma* (Rangoon 1931), which was based on a series of lectures he gave at the Department of Economics at the University of Rangoon in the mid-to-late 1920s, and *The Fashioning of Leviathan: The Beginnings of British Rule in Burma* (Rangoon 1939), which was informed by his studies on colonial administration in England and the Netherlands after he left Burma in 1931. For a full list of works see Frank N. Trager, *Furnivall of Burma: An Annotated Bibliography of the Works of John S. Furnivall* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1963).
- ³ J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948). This work was based on Furnivall's study of colonial administration at Leiden University and research in Java in the early 1930s. See also his earlier *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939).
- ⁴ Bill (as he was known) was born in Rangoon in 1915 and more information about his family's missionary work can be found at its website: <https://thehackett-missionlegacy.org>. For more on his place in mid-century anthropological work as a "missionary-ethnographer," see U. Chit Hlaing, "Anthropological Communities of Interpretation for Burma: An Overview," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2008): 239–54.
- ⁵ Charles S. Brant, "Tadagale: A Burmese Village in 1950," Data Paper No. 13 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, April 1954). At the time the field research was conducted this was a side project for Brant, who was working on a dissertation focused on the Kiowa Apache Indians in the United States.
- ⁶ For more on this framing see Brohm's introduction to "Burmese Religion and Burmese Religious Revival" (Ph.D., Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, 1957).
- ⁷ Jones taught Burmese grammar and recruited Margaret Aung Thwin to teach spoken Burmese. He also recruited the Burma-born J. Marvin Brown to teach Burmese in the late 1950s and early 1960s while Brown pursued his own doctoral work in Thai linguistics (PhD 1962). Gordon Luce apparently taught Burmese briefly in the 1950s, likely before Jones's arrival (personal communication with John Badgley, July 2020).
- ⁸ Josef Silverstein, "The Struggle for National Unity in the Union of Burma" (Ph.D., Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, 1960).
- ⁹ Pfanner's thesis, which sought to tease out the relationship between economic and religious behavior, was another contribution to postwar village studies along the lines of Brant and Brohm. See: David Eugene Pfanner, "Rice and Religion in a Burmese Village" (Ph.D., Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, 1962).
- ¹⁰ Thesis: "An Appraisal of the Lending Policy of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development: With Special Reference to Burma and Thailand."
- ¹¹ Thesis: "An Examination of the Postwar Shift in the Balance of Trade of Primary Producing Underdeveloped Countries with Particular Reference to Burma, Ceylon and the Philippines."
- ¹² Thesis: "A Survey of Native Southeast Asian Coinage circa 450-850: Documentation and Typology."
- ¹³ Thesis: "Cakravartin: The Ideology of Traditional Warfare in Siam and Burma, 1548-1605."
- ¹⁴ Thesis: "The Resemblance in External Appearance: The Colonial Project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon."
- ¹⁵ Thesis: "Alienation and Cooperation: European, Southeast Asian, and American Perceptions of Anti-Colonial Rebellion, 1919-1937."
- ¹⁶ Personal communication (July 2020). The other two students Taylor remembers working on Burma were Ward Keller (AB 1970), who resumed his research on Burma in the late 1980s after pursuing his doctoral studies on Indonesia at the University of Chicago, and Jon Wiant, who had been enrolled as a doctoral student in the Government Department in the early 1970s, leaving Cornell to join the Foreign Service in 1975 but remaining active in Burma studies.
- ¹⁷ See: "The Relationship between Burmese Social Classes and British-Indian Policy on the Behavior of the Burmese Political Elite, 1937-1942" (Ph.D., Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, 1974). For more of his reflections on studying at Cornell, see also Nicholas Farrelly, "Interview with Professor Robert Taylor," *New Mandala* (blog), November 7, 2007, <https://www.newmandala.org/interview-with-professor-robert-taylor/>.
- ¹⁸ Thesis: "The Symbolic Dimensions of the Burmese Sangha."
- ¹⁹ Thesis: "The Karen Bronze Drums of Burma: The Magic Pond."
- ²⁰ Khin Maung Kyi interviewed hundreds of government officials in Burma to test his hypotheses about how one's background (rural/urban, Westernization, childhood socialization) affected one's relative commitments to "traditional" hierarchical authority vs. "modern" legal-rational authority. See: "Patterns of Accommodation to Bureaucratic Authority in a Transitional Culture (A Sociological Analysis of Burmese Bureaucrats with Respect to Their Orientations Towards Authority)" (Ph.D., Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, 1966).
- ²¹ Myo Myint's doctoral research was carried out in London (at the India Office Library) in the mid-1980s, and he brought this expertise back to Burma when he took up a post in Southeast Asian history at Mandalay University. See "The Politics of Survival in Burma: Diplomacy and Statecraft in the Reign of King Mindon, 1853-1878" (Ph.D., Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, 1987).
- ²² Sao Saimong Mangrai, "The Shan States and the British Annexation," Data Paper No. 57 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, August 1965).
- ²³ Smith Dun, "Memoirs of the Four-Foot Colonel," Data Paper No. 113 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, May 1980).
- ²⁴ Personal communication with John Badgley, July 2020. The Echols Collection contained mostly Indonesia materials prior to Badgley's arrival, although in 1979 SEAP was gifted a large collection of photographs of Burmese architecture and sculpture (originally belonging to Gordon Luce and donated by Alexander B. Griswold); this collection is currently held in RMC.
- ²⁵ San San Hnin Tun remembers holding Burmese class in Wheatley's office in the early days, with him sometimes joining and making an impromptu chair out of a trash can when space was short (personal communication, July 2020). She first studied linguistics at the University of Rangoon in the early 80s. For more on her career, see her reflections in the 2009-2010 Bulletin (<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/42438>) and on the LINGUIST List: "Featured Linguist: San San HNIN TUN," *The LINGUIST List* (blog), March 14, 2017, <https://blog.linguistlist.org/fund-drive/featured-linguist-san-san-hnin-tun/>.
- ²⁶ One of the authors fondly remembers trekking to Noyes Lodge on north campus, then home of the LRC, to practice Burmese orthography, vocabulary, and grammar circa 2003-2006.
- ²⁷ as it became referred to in acknowledgment of post-1989 nomenclature and its politics.
- ²⁸ In addition to her thesis see also her recollections of this archival research in her later book, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).
- ²⁹ Thesis: "The Politics of State -Business Relations in Post-Colonial Burma."
- ³⁰ Thesis: "Gender, History and Modernity: Representing Women in Twentieth Century Colonial Burma."
- ³¹ Thesis: "Rocking in Shanland: Histories and Popular Culture Jams at the Thai-Burma Border."
- ³² Thesis: "Revealing the Heart: The Popular Music Industry in Yangon, Burma."
- ³³ Thesis: "Buddhism and Written Law: Dhammasattha Manuscripts and Texts in Premodern Burma."
- ³⁴ Thesis: "History Curricula and the Reconciliation of Ethnic Conflict: A Collaborative Project with Burmese Migrants and Refugees in Thailand."
- ³⁵ Thesis: "Ambivalent Aspirations: Aid and the Cultural Politics of Proximity in a Japanese NGO in Burma/Myanmar."
- ³⁶ Thesis: "Bearers of Wisdom, Sources of Power: Sorcerer-Saints and Burmese Buddhism."
- ³⁷ Thesis: "Institutional Factors Affecting a Transitional City: An Integrated Perspective on Housing Market Development in Yangon, Myanmar."
- ³⁸ Thesis: "Imagining Political Futures in Kachinland: The Struggle for Self-Determination through Legal Activism and Indigenous Media."
- ³⁹ Thesis (a comparative study of Myanmar and Cambodia): "Institutional Implantation: The International Communities and Their Roles in Building Industrial Relations Systems in Emerging Markets."



THE SEAP PHOTOGRAPHY ARCHIVE:

A Call for Contributions



by Juan Fernandez, PhD candidate in history

Photographs are strange things: They exist simultaneously as markers of both past and present—the past of the event, and the present of viewing and contemplation. As objects of memory, they are fleeting, yet permanent. "You had to have been there," they sometimes say, as by themselves and despite their beguiling openness, there is so much to them that is incomprehensible. They are mute despite the idiomatic ascription of "a thousand words" to the image. It is not so much that images themselves can speak, but that they become occasions for speech and narrative, for memory.

Perhaps there is no better time than now—in this year when we celebrate SEAP's 70th anniversary—for us to look back upon these images of our shared past and through the stories and recollections of those of us who were there, to bring them into the present. We have been putting together an archive of old SEAP photographs as part of the anniversary celebrations—and indeed as part of a larger push to bring together material for the history of the Southeast Asia Program. The visual is no less an important part of this history, documenting the life of (and life in) the program.

Above Left: Outside 102 West Ave.

Above Right: Reception, Willard Straight Hall Terrace, September 1963.