

# 63

## **Burma puts its stamp on the world: Philately and foreign policy**

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*Postage stamps are easily dismissed as colourful curiosities or ephemera unrelated to affairs of state. However, they can provide a window into the domestic and international politics of individual countries. In this regard, Myanmar's philatelic record can offer a number of insights into the thinking of successive governments.*

When subjects like soft power and public diplomacy are discussed in forums like this, few people have postage stamps in mind, but there has long been a close connection between philately and foreign policy. In themselves, stamps express sovereignty, but they are also examples of political iconography and visual indicators of official attitudes and policies, aimed at both domestic and international audiences.

The use of stamps as projections of national identity can be traced back to their origin in 1840, when stamps carrying portraits of Queen Victoria began to be used throughout the British Empire. Even before the Universal Postal Union was formed in 1874 to permit the free flow of international mail, stamps were used to mark a country's independence, stake territorial claims, record military victories, honour statesmen and women and support multilateral institutions.

There are now about 600 stamp-issuing entities, or 'authorities', around the world. Over the past century and a half, they have produced an estimated 250,000 different designs. Through the use of unique and often striking visual statements in a small two-dimensional space, they have covered themes as far-ranging as nationalism, history, politics, economics, art, cultural identity and foreign relations.

Authoritarian governments in particular have been quick to recognise the propaganda value of stamps and to utilise them in international campaigns. During the Cold War, for example, the Soviet Union utilised stamps to trumpet the glories of communism. North Korea is still one of the most prolific issuers of stamps portraying icons of its own and other revolutionary movements. Cuba's stamps display a stubborn attachment to such themes.

These days, China has become particularly adept at promoting its relations with other countries through the issue of commemorative stamps, usually celebrating the establishment of diplomatic ties and other major events.<sup>1</sup> Some joint issues have been paid for entirely by Beijing. Not only do such stamps promote China as a friendly global power, they also help strengthen its ties with strategically important states.

It is also possible, through the study of a country's postage stamps, to see the historical development of its foreign relations. Afghanistan's stamp issues between 1948 and 1992, for example, mark the 1973 coup that toppled the monarchy, the 1978 Marxist revolution that overthrew the republic, the Soviet invasion in 1979, the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 and the short-lived government that collapsed in 1992.<sup>2</sup>

In Burma's case, successive governments have been quite conservative in their use of postage stamps as diplomatic tools.<sup>3</sup> Issues have been used almost exclusively to promote official programs and to mark major events within and outside the country. From independence in 1948 to the 1988

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1 'What Stamps Tell Us (II): Philatelic Imperialism or Social Networking?', *Commonwealth Stamps Opinion*, 3 September 2013, [commonwealthstampsopinion.blogspot.com.au/2013/09/301-philatelic-imperialism-or-social.html](http://commonwealthstampsopinion.blogspot.com.au/2013/09/301-philatelic-imperialism-or-social.html).

2 Lawrence E. Cohen, 'Afghanistan's Foreign Relations through Philately', *American Philatelist*, September 2012, [stamps.org/userfiles/file/AP/feature/Feature\\_09\\_12.pdf](http://stamps.org/userfiles/file/AP/feature/Feature_09_12.pdf) [page discontinued] [now at [digital.ipcprintservices.com/publication/?i=121983&article\\_id=1143485&view=articleBrowser](http://digital.ipcprintservices.com/publication/?i=121983&article_id=1143485&view=articleBrowser)].

3 Bertil Lintner, 'Stamping Out History', *The Irrawaddy*, January 2008, [www2.irrawaddy.org/print\\_article.php?art\\_id=9796](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=9796) [page discontinued] [now at [www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=9796&page=2](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=9796&page=2)].

prodemocracy uprising, about 37 per cent of stamp issues emphasised broad nationalist themes, while 18 per cent were on revolutionary and military subjects.<sup>4</sup>

During this period, the U Nu and Ne Win governments pursued strictly neutral foreign policies. A few countries commemorated state visits to and from Burma on their postage stamps<sup>5</sup> but no bilateral relationships were recognised on Burmese issues. Rather, emphasis was given to multilateral institutions and international events. Between 1948 and 1988, some 40 per cent of Burma's stamps were dedicated to UN-related themes.

After a new military government took over in 1988, however, there were a number of significant changes in this approach.

Over the past 25 years, UN-related themes have almost disappeared from Burmese stamps, probably reflecting the deterioration of relations since the UN began to criticise Burma for its human rights abuses. Emphasis has been given instead to the achievements of the military regime and political milestones, such as the inauguration of a new government in 2011.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, attention has been paid to Burma's evolving foreign relations.

Burma issued a stamp to mark the thirtieth anniversary of ASEAN in 1997—the year it joined the association. In 2007, Burma collaborated with other member states to produce a mini-sheet commemorating ASEAN's fortieth anniversary, and in 2012 it issued a set of stamps to mark the eleventh ASEAN Telecommunications Senior Officials Meeting in Naypyidaw.<sup>7</sup> It is expected that Burma will issue a new stamp this year when it assumes the ASEAN chair.

In a notable break with past practice, Burma and China jointly issued a stamp in 2000 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties. This was followed in 2010 by a stamp to celebrate

4 'Stamps of Burma', *Burma Philatelic Blog*, 21 March 2012, burmaphilatelic.blogspot.com.au/.

5 'The State Visit of His Excellency U San Yu, President of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', [www.pennfamily.org/KSS-USA/870608-1496.htm](http://www.pennfamily.org/KSS-USA/870608-1496.htm) [page discontinued].

6 'Myanmar Issues Postage Stamps to Mark Establishment of New Gov't', *Xinhua*, [Beijing], 16 June 2011, [news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-06/16/c\\_13933177.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-06/16/c_13933177.htm) [page discontinued].

7 'President U Thein Sein Delivered an Address at 11th ASEAN Telecommunications and IT Ministers Meeting (11th TELEMIN) at Myanmar International Convention Centre', President's Office, Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Nay Pyi Taw, 8 December 2011, [www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks/2011/12/08/id-726](http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks/2011/12/08/id-726) [page discontinued].

the sixtieth anniversary.<sup>8</sup> In 2013, there was another joint issue, this time with Russia, to mark the sixty-fifth anniversary of diplomatic relations between Burma and that country. No other states have been recognised by Naypyidaw in this fashion.

Unlike most other countries, Burma has eschewed portraits of prominent individuals. Independence hero Aung San was an occasional exception before 1988, but even his face disappeared from stamps (and the national currency)<sup>9</sup> after his daughter began to challenge the military regime. It has been suggested that this was in part because Aung San Suu Kyi bore a striking resemblance to her father.

Indeed, when Aung San Suu Kyi's portrait was included in a set of eight stamps issued by Norway in 2001,<sup>10</sup> to mark the centenary of the Nobel Peace Prize, the stamps were banned in Burma.<sup>11</sup> The country's opposition leader has appeared on the stamps of several other countries and on unofficial issues produced to mark special events, such as her receipt of the Sakharov Prize last year.

Another Burmese figure who has been portrayed on foreign postage stamps is former UN secretary-general U Thant. He has been honoured in this way by more than a dozen countries, but not Burma, largely because Ne Win resented the global standing of U Nu's former secretary. In 2009, the UN Postal Administration issued three stamps to commemorate the 100th anniversary of U Thant's birth.<sup>12</sup>

The only time a senior Burmese military figure has been portrayed on a postage stamp was in 2000, when a picture of Senior General Than Shwe (then chairman of the SPDC) was included in the world's largest mini-sheet, which was issued by Liberia. It depicted the heads of state of all 190 UN members.

8 'Myanmar Issues New Stamp to Mark Sino-Myanmar Relations Anniversary', *People's Daily*, [Beijing], 8 June 2010, [english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/7017150.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/7017150.html) [page discontinued].

9 Htet Naing Zaw, 'Gen Aung San to Once Again Feature on Burma's Banknotes', *The Irrawaddy*, 15 November 2013, [www.irrawaddy.org/politics/gen-aung-san-feature-burmas-bank-notes.html](http://www.irrawaddy.org/politics/gen-aung-san-feature-burmas-bank-notes.html).

10 Burma Lawyers' Council, 'Burmese Junta Violates UPU Constitution', *Legal Issues on Burma Journal*, No.10, December 2001, [www.burmalibrary.org/docs/LIOB10-BKSen.2.htm](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/LIOB10-BKSen.2.htm) [page discontinued].

11 Win Htein, '2,500-Postcards for Aung San Suu Kyi', *The Irrawaddy*, 19 December 2001, [www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=3650](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=3650).

12 United Nations Postal Administration, '1st Day of Issue, 6 February 2009: 100th Anniversary U Thant', *Information Circular* (New York: UN Secretariat, 15 January 2009), [unstamps.un.org/unpa/en/products/100th\\_Anniversary\\_U\\_Thant/index.html](http://unstamps.un.org/unpa/en/products/100th_Anniversary_U_Thant/index.html) [page discontinued] [now at [digitallibrary.un.org/record/646761?ln=en](http://digitallibrary.un.org/record/646761?ln=en)].

Some attention is now being paid to postage stamps by academic researchers, but they remain a neglected source. They are easily dismissed as colourful curiosities or ephemera unrelated to affairs of state. However, they can provide a window on to the domestic and international politics of countries. Stamps are emblematic devices that illustrate how the issuing states wish to be seen, not only by their own citizens, but also by those beyond their borders.

It is possible that in this era of email, Skype and social media, the heyday of the postage stamp is over, but they are still important. This is particularly so in countries like Burma, where electronic communications are underdeveloped. In any case, given the dearth of reliable information about Burma's domestic politics and foreign relations, no source should be seen as unworthy of serious consideration.

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