

70

Aung San Suu Kyi and Kipling's Burma

(10:00 AEDT, 31 October 2014)

Aung San Suu Kyi had long demonstrated her affection for the works of the 'bard of empire', British author Rudyard Kipling, and for classical music. Her tastes were seized upon by both her detractors and her supporters to promote their respective political agendas.

One of the inevitable side effects of Burma's long struggle for democracy has been the demonisation, or canonisation, of its main political actors. This phenomenon has been reflected in countless articles in the news media and on the web about figures like Ne Win (who effectively ruled Burma from 1962 to 1988), Than Shwe (who led the country's military council from 1992 to 2011) and of course opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

There are very few books published (in English) about the country's military leaders. The first full-length biography of Than Shwe appeared in 2010 and a scholarly account of Ne Win's career is currently in preparation. Aung San Suu Kyi, by contrast, has been the subject of more than a dozen biographies, ranging from books for children to major studies. She has also published three semi-autobiographical works.

This is not counting Luc Besson's rather imaginative account of her place in modern Burmese history, as seen in the feature film *The Lady*, starring Michelle Yeoh and released in 2011.¹

Given the close attention that has been paid to Aung San Suu Kyi's background and career since she first rose to prominence during Burma's 1988 prodemocracy uprising, it would be surprising to discover anything new about her. However, there remain a few areas of her private life that have not been thoroughly explored.

These can sometimes be revealed in unlikely ways.

For example, a Griffith Asia Institute research project about the influence of Rudyard Kipling² and popular Western music on perceptions of colonial Burma has unexpectedly thrown a new light on Aung San Suu Kyi's affection for both the 'bard of empire' and classical music.³

When Aung San Suu Kyi began to challenge Burma's new military government after 1988—a campaign that saw her awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—Kipling's 1890 poem *Mandalay*⁴ was used in state propaganda against her. The generals likened her to the 'unpatriotic' Burma girl who had turned her back on her own race and, by implication, her own country. As David Steinberg has explained:

They cite the marriage of Aung San Suu Kyi to a British academic, Michael Aris, as disqualifying her from leading the country. This colonial issue, as exemplified in Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The Road to Mandalay' (and its paean to Burmese women who had relations with British soldiers) ... thus continues today.⁵

1 Luc Besson, dir., *The Lady* (2011), *IMDb*, www.imdb.com/title/tt1802197/.

2 'Rudyard Kipling', *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudyard_Kipling.

3 Griffith Asia Institute, 'On the Road to Mandalay', *Newsletter*, Vol.15, No.2, Winter 2014, pp.1–3, www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/637760/Newsletter-Two-2014-web-version-2.1.pdf [page discontinued] [now at issuu.com/griffithasiainstitute/docs/newsletter_two_2014_web_version].

4 Rudyard Kipling, 'Mandalay', *Poetry Lovers' Page*, www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/kipling/mandalay.html.

5 David I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.39–40, books.google.com.au/books?id=bWBE6Z9U6JsC&pg=PT50&lpg=PT50&dq=david-steinberg-suu-kyi-road-to-mandalay&source=bl&ots=UEP'TwmtwQL&sig=ZnmMp_eIOPM8QysHIFQ9FUIJQ5A&hl=en&sa=X&ei=RIhRVKqcJ9fX8gWyzIKwDw&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=david%20steinberg%20suu%20kyi%20road%20to%20mandalay&f=false.

There is no denying that Aung San Suu Kyi is an admirer of Kipling. In 1972, extracts from *Mandalay*, referring to 'a neater, sweeter maiden in a cleaner, greener land', were read out at her wedding. She and her husband named their second son Kim, after the lead character in Kipling's famous novel of the same name, published in 1901. Also, she ended her first Reith Lecture for the BBC by quoting her favourite lines from Kipling.⁶ They were taken from his poem *The Fairies Siege*:

I'd not give way for an Emperor
 I'd hold my road for a King—
 To the Triple Crown I would not bow down—
 But this is a different thing.
 I'll not fight with the Powers of Air,
 Sentry, pass him through!
 Drawbridge let fall, 'tis the Lord of us all,
 The Dreamer whose dreams come true!⁷

Despite the views of some postcolonial scholars, Aung San Suu Kyi seems always to have associated Kipling with the idea of freedom. Referring to his poem *If*, published in 1910, she said 'the poem that in England is often dismissed as the epitome of imperialist bombast is a great poem for dissidents'. The verse most often associated with the opposition leader and her struggle for democracy in Burma was the second:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
 If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
 If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
 And treat those two imposters just the same;
 If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
 Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
 Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
 And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:⁸

Aung San Suu Kyi even distributed a Burmese-language version of the poem to inspire her supporters. The report in a recent biography that she translated the poem herself, however, is incorrect.

6 'Aung San Suu Kyi: Liberty', *The Reith Lectures*, [BBC Radio 4], 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b012402s.

7 Rudyard Kipling, 'The Fairies' Siege', *Poetry Lovers' Page*, www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/kipling/fairies_siege.html.

8 Rudyard Kipling, *If* (Chicago: Poetry Foundation, June 2015), www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46473/if---.

There is no easy segue from Kipling to classical music, other than to say that, thanks to modern technology, the musical settings of his poetry were often better known than the original texts. Aung San Suu Kyi was familiar with both, but it would appear she preferred the printed versions. Also, if her carefully chosen selection of recordings for the BBC radio program *Desert Island Discs* in 2013 is any guide, her musical tastes, while mixed, are inclined more to the classical than the popular end of the spectrum.⁹

Because of her public standing, and the challenge she posed to Burma's military regime, Aung San Suu Kyi was kept under house arrest for almost 15 years. During that time, part of her daily regimen was to practise on the piano. Until the instrument was completely out of tune, she played pieces by a range of classical composers, including Pachelbel, Telemann, Scarlatti, Bach, Mozart, Clementi and Bartok. At one stage, she was forced to sell much of her furniture to generate money for food. One of the few items she refused to let go was her piano.¹⁰

As Jonathan Webster wrote in 2013, Aung San Suu Kyi's piano playing 'in rebellious isolation' became a powerful symbol of her continuing resistance to military rule:

Concerned supporters reportedly snuck within earshot for assurance that she was still alive. Famous Europeans who publicized her struggle sympathised with her as musicians. U2 called her 'a singing bird in an open cage'. Annie Lennox tried to send her a new piano. The top prize in the Leeds International Piano Competition was recently renamed the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi Gold Medal for its fiftieth anniversary.¹¹

Aung San Suu Kyi's supporters around the world turned the image of her sitting at the piano in her closely guarded Rangoon home into a symbol of her country's struggle for democracy. Some also equated the military regime's efforts to curb the appreciation of Western music in Burma with

9 'Aung San Suu Kyi', *Desert Island Discs*, [BBC Radio 4], 1 February 2013, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01q7gvl.

10 'Aung San Suu Kyi Under House Arrest', *Facts and Details*, factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5_5b/entry-3017.html.

11 Jonathan Webster, 'Solitude and *Sandaya*: The Strange History of Pianos in Burma', *The Appendix*, Vol.1, No.3, 7 August 2013, theappendix.net/issues/2013/7/solitude-and-sandaya-the-strange-history-of-pianos-in-burma.

their attempts to silence the respected opposition leader. In 2012, the *Los Angeles Times* even called the piano itself 'a symbol of Myanmar's struggle for democracy'.¹²

In these as in other aspects of Burma's struggles over the past few decades, there is a fair degree of exaggeration and mythmaking—on both sides of the political divide. That said, Aung San Suu Kyi's devotion to Western music and her determination to make Burma a more respectable international citizen have some interesting historical parallels. Also, rather than denoting Aung San Suu Kyi's abandonment of her country, as suggested by her domestic opponents, her affection for Kipling suggests quite the opposite.

Indeed, one could say that, in several ways, the wheel has come full circle. As Burma gradually emerges from its long period of military dictatorship, economic hardship and international isolation, there are millions of people both inside and outside the country who hope that it keeps turning.

12 Mark Magnier, 'Suu Kyi's Piano Tuners Play Small but Key Part in Myanmar History', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 November 2012, www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2012-nov-15-la-fg-myanmar-piano-tuner-20121116-story.html.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.