

BURMA, SEPTEMBER 2007.  
CONTEMPORARY ART AND POLITICAL ICONOGRAPHY

*by Max Seidel*

The Saffron Revolution of September 2007 in Burma was not the usual armed popular uprising: after decades of repression by the military dictatorship, the people reacted not with violence but with peaceful demonstrations. On 20 September 2007 a thousand Buddhist monks, their hands joined in prayer, filed through the streets of Rangoon chanting the *Metta Sutta*:

May all living creatures live in happiness and safety!  
May no one trick another,  
nor despise another,  
nor with hatred or anger  
desire another's harm.

Large numbers of people associated themselves with the monks, holding hands and forming a human chain to protect the demonstration, which reached its climax on 22 September with 10,000 monks gathered in Mandalay for a pacific and well ordered protest (fig. 13).

The most reliable account of the Saffron Revolution is to be found in the November and December 2007 issues of the magazine *The Irrawaddy*, printed in Chiang Mai in Thailand, the mouthpiece of the democratic opposition movement.<sup>1</sup> Under the heading "Window on Burma", *The Irrawaddy* proclaimed: "Burma is ruled by secretive and reclusive military men. There is virtually no press freedom. For many years, we have sought to shed light on this darkness — bringing our readers throughout the world breaking news, analyses, in-depth reports and independent viewpoints". *The Irrawaddy*, together with Bertil Lintner's classic *Burma in Revolt*<sup>2</sup>, have been my principal sources. In the November issue of the magazine<sup>3</sup>, the Bangkok-based journalist Thierry Falise whose photographs are reproduced here (figs. 2-6, 28) provides an eye-witness account of the five days of revolution in Rangoon:

*Monday, September 24:* I go to watch thousands of monks gathering at the foot of the Shwedagon Pagoda (fig. 2). A maroon and purple wave cuts through a compact crowd, sweeps through the sacred pagoda and then flows down to the city centre. I feel enveloped by a sweet cyclone of fervour and hope. A huge crowd is now gathering all along the streets (fig. 3). Hundred of thousands of Rangoon dwellers applaud from sidewalks, balconies, apartment windows, the roofs of department stores, from every corner of the city.

*Tuesday, September 25:* Someone announces that members of the National League for Democracy are going to make a speech and loudspeakers are brought. But, at the monks' request, there won't be any political speeches.

*Wednesday, September 26:* Shortly before noon, security forces disperse the crowd with tear gas at the Shwedagon Pagoda. About 100 monks manage to gather on a street below the pagoda. In less than an hour, they are met by thousands of people surging from side streets and buses and are welcomed emotionally by their supporters.

*Thursday, September 27:* A contact tells me that there is trouble near the Ngwe Kyar Yan monastery, in northern Rangoon. I rush there with two colleagues. Soldiers, policemen and vigilantes block the roads. The night before, at least 200 monks were brutally arrested in this monastery, and we hear that one died. Hundreds of local people fill the streets,





1 Wolf Vostell, *Miss America*. Cologne, Museum Ludwig.



outraged by the arrests. We are told that soldiers opened fire on student protesters in Tamwe Township... The whole area is infested with soldiers and policemen. I see two large blood stains and dozens of slippers on the road (fig. 5), and I'm told "a Caucasian journalist has been killed". Later, it's confirmed that a Japanese photojournalist was shot dead (fig. 6). At a large intersection near the central railway station, a small group of monks has emerged from nowhere. In a few minutes, thousands of people gather around them and start to walk on a nearby bridge. Soldiers suddenly appear from the bridge's sides and shoot at us. Run... run! Everyone must run for their lives.

*Friday, September 28:* Crowds defy the military troops in several parts of Rangoon. Groups of people try to reactivate demonstrations but each time, security forces come and separate them. Downtown, dozens of protesters have been arrested, bound and beaten. The troops pursue fleeing people into buildings, singling out those with cameras.

Signs rather than words characterised this revolution. It is significant that Thierry Falaise reports the monks as having told the representatives of the democratic opposition not to make political speeches. But the most striking sign is the image of the massed ranks of Buddhist monks like a red river streaming through Rangoon, all of them tramping with measured pace and with hands joined (fig. 13). Or else remaining motionless, huddled up in disciplined order as the armed soldiers threaten them. Equally symbolic as the hands joined in prayer is the gesture of the reversed begging-bowl (fig. 4): its meaning is that from the soldiers and from those who support them no alms will be requested or accepted. By offering alms, a Buddhist seeks to escape the circle of reincarnation and to attain Nirvana: the refusal to accept alms is therefore tantamount to excluding someone from the community of believers.

The monks' struggle is carried on by the systematic diffusion of images. *The Irrawaddy* defines the nature of the Saffron Revolution: "The junta has its soldiers and guns. The people had the media and the truth in words and pictures".<sup>4</sup> The journalist Kyan Zwe Moe writes: "Compared to the 1988 nationwide uprising when about 3000 demonstrators were killed, the September demonstrations were small. But their worldwide impact was enormous, because of the Burmese people's use of media technology. [...] In retrospect, it took weeks for the world to see a picture of the 1988 demonstrations. But in September, photographs and video clips arrived within minutes of the start of demonstrations in cities such as Rangoon and Mandalay and more and more updated information flowed in by the minute".<sup>5</sup>

The military regime feared this image-based propaganda campaign. The soldiers were given orders to look out for cameras when searching arrested persons, and in an attempt to stanch the flow of images out of the country, internet connections were for a while blocked. The soldiers' hatred of photojournalists appears vividly in the photograph of 27 September showing the killing of the Japanese reporter Kanji Nagai (fig. 6). We can clearly see a soldier who has been chasing the crowd, stop for a moment and shoot the photojournalist who is lying helpless on the ground. *The Irrawaddy* commented sarcastically: "The final shot – Did Kenji Nagai take a picture of his own executioner?"<sup>6</sup>

In conducting their campaign through images, the opposition makes use of a technique also found in the political iconography of European art. The contrast between good and evil is extremely accentuated: on one page we see the peaceful procession of monks, apparently leaderless and guided only by interior conviction (figs. 2, 3, 13; significantly, *The Irrawaddy* writes: "The alliance's true leadership remains a mystery"<sup>7</sup>), while the facing page is dominated by the solitary and demonic-looking figure of a general (figs. 26, 27).

*The Irrawaddy* praises the monks as the true heroes: "Without them, the people of Burma wouldn't have achieved the present political momentum which seems to be building toward a chance of democratic reforms. Without them, the pro-democracy movement wouldn't have





2 Thierry Falise, Monks pray at Swedagon Pagoda. *The Irrawaddy* (November 2007).



achieved to current international pressure that's pushing the ruling junta to engage in a dialogue with the opposition. Without them, there would be no hope for a better future in 2008".<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, the image-based propaganda is not directed against the military in general. According to Bertil Lintner, the only concrete possibility of resolving the conflict would be a national reconciliation with the moderate elements within the army.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the opposition's political iconography is directed specifically against General Than Shwe, the demon in person (figs. 26, 27, 29, 32). As *The Irrawaddy* puts it: "Really, it all comes down to one man: Than Shwe is the junta; the junta is Than Shwe. Than Shwe is the key".<sup>10</sup>

### Paintings on canvas, drawings, caricatures and photographs

In addition to Edward Kienholz's installations *The Eleventh Hour Final* and *The Portable War Memorial*, one of the more significant incunables of recent political iconography is *Miss America*, a painting on canvas (2 x 1.2 m) also created in 1968, by the thirty-six-years-old Wolf Vostell (fig. 1). Vostell combines three techniques: photographs projected onto canvas, silkscreen on canvas, and painting with transparent paints. In this *Miss America* two different meanings are blended together. The unmistakable gesture of the raised left arm recalls the Statue of Liberty. But as she is dancing, *Miss America* also represents the nation devoted to pleasure and luxury that seeks to exorcise the horrors of the Vietnam war — and indeed *Miss America* is blindfolded. The fragments of text on the left edge of the canvas refer to her frivolous nature: "dancing lights... golden... lace... delicious... dress... silk". Superimposed on the female figure are three images from the photographic sequence by Edward Th. Adams entitled *Death of a Vietcong*: a Vietcong guerrilla with his hands tied behind his back and a pistol pointed at his temple, and two smaller photos taken immediately after the execution.



3 Thierry Falise, Demonstration of monks in Rangoon. *The Irrawaddy* (December 2007).





4 Thierry Falise, A monk holds an up-turned alms bowl. *The Irrawaddy* (November 2007).



5 Thierry Falise, Bloodstains and abandoned flip-flops. *The Irrawaddy* (November 2007).



In the tradition of Goya's painting *El Tres de Mayo*, this *Miss America* also transforms victim into hero and launches a powerful assault on military violence. For this reason, in the history of political iconography *Miss America* constitutes a direct precedent to the photographs of the September revolution reproduced here, and to the drawings of Sawangwongse Yawnghwe. The work by Vostell presents additional interesting features with its combination of painting on canvas and photo-reportage: evidently, Vostell intended to amplify the expressive power of the traditional painting on canvas by integrating it with the dominant and most widespread medium of political iconography. In not dissimilar fashion, in the present essay the traditional media of painting on canvas and drawing are juxtaposed with, and placed on the same level as, photographs and caricatures. In my view, it is only within this overall vision that the political iconography of the Saffron Revolution acquires its full expressive force.

### Art and political commitment

In an interview given to Rolf Schmücking in Paris in 1986, Zoran Music stated: "I believe it's impossible to paint what has not experienced first-hand. Otherwise there is a risk of superficiality. There's something inside you that grabs you, but it doesn't appear on the surface immediately. First you have to digest it, think about it [...] Otherwise it becomes mere illustration".<sup>11</sup>

Each of the three Burmese artists presented here could confirm, in differing ways, this observation of Zoran Music: for all three of them, commitment to the struggle for a democratic future of their country has meant imprisonment or exile. Htein Lin (fig. 10), born in 1966 in Mezaligon, a village in the Irrawaddy delta, was incarcerated for six years (from 1998 to 2004) by the military regime. In *The Irrawaddy*, the artist spoke of that terrible period:



6 Thierry Falise, Murder of a photojournalist. *The Irrawaddy* (November 2007).



“When I was released, I thanked the military man who arrested me,” Htein Lin smiled. “He thought that I was poking fun at him. But I said I really meant it, because I did over one thousand paintings in jail.” Deprived of all materials needed to paint, Htein Lin persuaded his prison companions to give up their white cotton uniforms for him to use as canvas. Using his fingers, body, soap, cigarette lighters, and whatever materials were at hand, he managed to paint in his cell by the weak light admitted by his small window. He even managed to organise secret performance art shows. Most of his work was destroyed or disappeared when he tried to smuggle it out of prison. But about 200 paintings survive.<sup>12</sup>

In the same number of the periodical we find an effective account of a performance entitled *Love and Anger* put on by Htein Lin in the Suvannabhumi Art Gallery in Chiang Mai, in an attempt to overcome the trauma of his imprisonment (fig. 10):

Silence enveloped the room as about thirty people watched a man in a white robe meditating before them. Beside him, tubes of oil paint lay on a mat. The man looked around and raised his hands as if he were a captive touching an invisible wall. He then began to pour red paint on the mat, his movements becoming faster and more forceful. Green paint followed the red, and his movements became calmer. Using his hands and feet, he painted the mat, finally taking off his outer robe and laying himself on it, on the coloured surface. The painted mat, the robe and the artist himself were fused into one.<sup>13</sup>

Sawangwongse Yawngghwe (fig. 14), born in 1971 in Shan State, Burma, has not been directly subjected to the violence of the military regime because his family took him with them into exile in 1972, first to Thailand and then to Canada. There Sawangwongse received his artistic training, at the Capilano College of Art (North Vancouver), at the Emily Carr College of Art and at Concordia University. Since 1997 he has lived mainly in Tuscany, where he shares a studio with Heinrich Nicolaus, making long study trips to European museums and visiting Thailand.

Sawangwongse’s relationship with recent Burmese history is linked to the tragedy of his family. His grandfather, Sao Shwe Thaik, was the last saopha of Yawngghwe. Saopha (or chaofa, in Laos and Thailand) literally means “master of heaven”. Sao Shwe Thaik ruled a part of Shan State in north-eastern Burma for many years, and on 4 January 1948, after Independence from Britain, he became the first President of Burma, a position he held until 1952 (fig. 15). Shortly after the military junta seized power, Sao Shwe Thaik was arrested; he died in prison in 1962, officially of a heart attack. To deflect attention from what many regarded as cold-blooded murder, the generals authorised a solemn funeral.



7 A dead body of Buddhist monk floating in river in Rangoon. *Democratic voice of Burma* (1 October 2007).





8 Francisco Goya, *Los desastres de la guerra*, Nada. Ello dirá.



9 Zoran Music, *Nous ne sommes pas les derniers.*



In 1963 Sawangwongse's father, Chao Tzang Yanghwe, joined the "Shan State Independence Army", which from its jungle hideouts waged war against the military regime. Until 1976 he had the position of secretary general, describing his experience as a guerrilla in his book *The Shan of Burma: Memoirs of a Shan Exile* (1987), the cover of which we reproduce (fig. 16). An uncle of Sawangwongse's, Harn Yawnghwe, was from 1991 until 2002 advisor to Sein Win, Prime Minister of the Burmese government-in-exile.

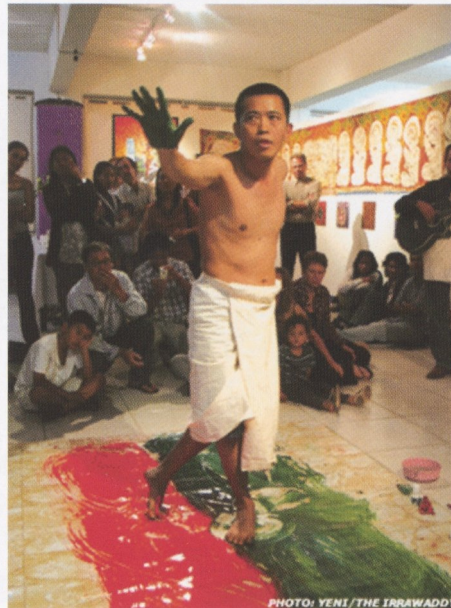
To throw some light on the history of this family desperately seeking to ensure a democratic future for Burma, I should like to recall Sao Sanda, Sawangwongse's aunt who in 2008, under the title *The Moon Princess*<sup>14</sup>, published her memoirs. She describes her childhood in Shan State: her caption to the photograph of her as a young princess (fig. 17) reads: "The author in ceremonial dress, ear-boring ceremony, standing looking disgruntled".

The caricaturist Harn Lay (fig. 27) was obliged to flee from Burma after his involvement in the failed revolution of 1988. His caricatures, published regularly in *The Irrawaddy*, were shown in 2007 in an exhibition at the Burma Centre in Prague.

From the biographies of these three artists it is clear that although they are all originally from Burma, their actual relationship with the homeland varies greatly. Whereas Htein Lin and Harn Lay, despite the persecutions, have remained in Burma or in its immediate vicinity, Sawangwongse, apart from a brief visit to Thailand and India, has spent his entire life in Canada and in Europe. This difference appears very clearly in the works, even though after a closer look it is not possible to speak simply of a contrast between an Asiatic and a European version of political iconography. Indeed, it is fascinating to see how each of the works examined here, none of which is purely Burmese or purely European, combines elements derived from both cultures.

#### The topicality of the political iconography

The works of Htein Lin, Sawangwongse and Harn Lay acquire particular significance if we observe them in terms of the growing interest in the phenomenon of political iconography in modern and contemporary art. This interest shows itself in the increasing number of publica-



10 Htein Lin, performance Love and Anger. *The Irrawaddy* (March 2007).





11 Htein Lin, *Saffron Revolution I*.

12 Htein Lin, *Saffron Revolution III*.







13 Procession of protesting monks in Rangoon. *Democratic voice of Burma* (22 Sept. 2007).

tions<sup>15</sup> and conferences<sup>16</sup>, as well as in the exhibitions recently devoted to this subject. In 2003 the Kunsthalle in Vienna held an exhibition entitled *Attack! – Kunst und Krieg in den Zeiten der Medien* (Art and War in the Time of the Media); in 2000 at the Contemporary Art Center in New York there was *Disasters of War: Henry Darger*, later transferred to Berlin and Zurich; in the same year at the Kunstmuseum in Linz there was *Gegen Krieg und Gewalt* (Against War and Violence), with works by twenty artists. A truly pioneering exhibition seems, in retrospect, to have been the 1987 one entitled *Schrecken und Hoffnung – Künstler sehen Frieden und Krieg* (Terror and Hope – Artists see Peace and War), curated by Werner Hofmann and Christoph Stölzl<sup>17</sup>, which was not restricted to contemporary art but included important examples from the pre-war period, such as the celebrated drawing of 1903 *Der Krieg* (War) by Alfred Kubin<sup>18</sup>, or, with the same title, the seven lithographs by Käthe Kollwitz (1921–23)<sup>19</sup> or the fifty etchings by Otto Dix (1924).<sup>20</sup> Thanks to the choice of subject, still a fairly unusual one in that final phase of the domination of abstract painting, Hofmann and Stölzl managed to rediscover some important works, until then more or less deliberately “forgotten”: such as the lithograph *Schlachtfeld* (Battlefield) of 1915 by Willy Jaeckel<sup>21</sup>, the watercolour *Totenfeld* (Death field) by Hans Baluschek (1917)<sup>22</sup>, the painting by Josef Scharl *Gefallener Soldat* (Fallen soldier, 1932)<sup>23</sup>, the series of etchings entitled *Krieg droht!* (War looms!) of 1936 by Lea Grundig.<sup>24</sup> In this context, the illustrator of Prussian history Adolph von Menzel underwent a genuine re-evaluation as one of the first artists who saw the bloody battles of the nineteenth century not from the point of view of the victorious general, but from that of the ordinary suffering soldier. His works *Leichen auf dem Schlachtfeld von Soor* (Corpses on the Battlefield of Soor) or *Der Tod als Trommler im tiefen Dunkeln der Zeltrihen* (Death dressed as a Drummer-Boy Wanders among the Tents in the Dark), both of 1840/42<sup>25</sup>, may justly be considered forerunners of a kind of political iconography that draws attention to human suffering, and is the subject of the present essay.



Obviously it would be a good idea to devote an exhibition to the Saffron Revolution iconography created by Burmese artists. My plan is to mount such an exhibition — which will explore in depth the subject matter that is here merely sketched — in one of the cities of Tuscany, the region that Sawangwongse regards as his true artistic homeland.

### Historical background

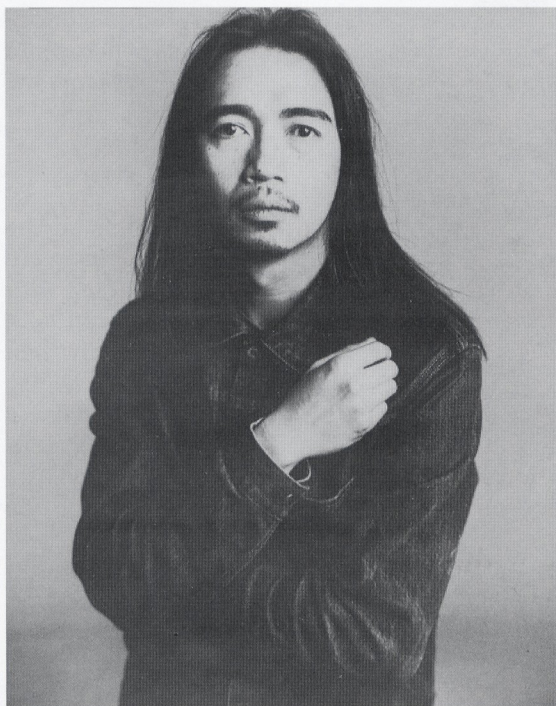
Without a basic knowledge of Burmese history, it would be impossible to understand the iconographic questions ventilated in the pages that follow. I shall therefore give an extremely compressed account of three successive periods: 1. the phase of British colonial rule, ending with Independence (1886–1947); 2. the democratic phase (from 1948 until the end of February 1962); 3. the military regime (from March 1962). The events of the Saffron Revolution (2007) are then given in the form of a chronological table.

1. From British rule to Independence. After the third Anglo-Burmese War, in 1885 Burma was made subject to Great Britain and on 1 January 1886 it was incorporated into the British Raj. In 1937, the student movement of the Thakins with the assistance of Aung San began to achieve its first successes against British colonial rule. Burma, detached from India, acquired the status of a crown colony and thus attained greater autonomy. On 1 August 1943 Burma, which since early 1942 had been occupied by the Japanese, declared war on the United States and on Britain. In March 1945 the Burma Independence Army under the command of General Aung San joined the Allies against the occupying Japanese forces, and in June of the same year the country returned to British rule. Independence was proclaimed on 4 January 1948, and Sao Shwe Thaik became the first President of the Union of Burma (fig. 15).

2. The democratic phase. Democratic Burma was largely the creation of U Nu, who was Prime Minister initially from 1948 to 1958 (except for the brief tenure of U Ba Swe from June 1956 until February 1957). During this period U Nu pursued his plan of turning Burma into a Buddhist and socialist state, declaring Buddhism to be the state religion. In 1958 the army took control of the government, and in 1960 U Nu once again became Prime Minister.

3. The military dictatorship. On 2 March 1962 General Ne Win seized power in a coup d'état, becoming both President of the Revolutionary Council and Head of State (until 1981). On 15 December 1971 the former Prime Minister U Nu, in exile in Thailand, called for a rebellion against the military regime. On 8 August 1988 hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in Burma in favour of democracy. On 18 September that year a new coup d'état brought General Saw Maung to power. The new regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), among other things forbade assemblies of more than four persons, and brutally suppressed all opposition. According to human rights organisations, about 3000 persons were killed. One week later Aung San Suu Kyi (fig. 25), the daughter of General Aung San who had been assassinated in 1947, founded the National League for Democracy (NLD). In 1989 Burma was officially renamed Myanmar, and the capital Rangoon became Yangon. In the first free elections on 27 May 1990, the NLD obtained a landslide victory. The military authorities however refused to recognise the result of the elections, remained in power and stepped up the political repression. On 14 October 1991 Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. On 23 April 1992 General Than Shwe took over the government and became Head of State (figs. 26, 27). After bloody encounters between supporters of the NLD and government-backed squads, Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested on the pretext of protecting her safety. On 20 September 2005 a seventy-page appeal to the Security Council of the UN, signed by former President of the Czech Republic Václav Havel and by Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, called for immediate intervention in Myanmar, following the deteriorating political situation. Despite their policy of non-intervention, on 12 December 2005 the heads of government who had gathered in Kuala Lumpur for the eleventh





14 Sawangwongse Yawnghwe.



15 Sao Shwe Thaik, Saopha of Yawnghwe, President of Burma (1948-52).

pan-Asian summit issued an unusually strong-worded declaration on Burma. The country was exhorted to accelerate its journey towards democracy, and to free all political prisoners. At the initiative of the United States, on 16 December 2005 the Security Council received an update on the situation in Burma. Making reference to the appeal signed by Václav Havel and Desmond Tutu, Ibrahim Gambari described the country as heading for a humanitarian crisis. On 12 January 2007 the Security Council voted for a resolution urging the regime to restore freedom of speech and of association, to free all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi, and to allow the opposition parties freedom of movement. Although the resolution attained the necessary nine votes, it was quashed by the joint veto of China and Russia.

#### 4. Saffron Revolution (from *The Irrawaddy*, XV, 12, December 2007)

*5 September:* “Monks chanting the *Metta Sutta* (the Buddha’s words on loving kindness) in Pakokku, upper Burma, are brutally attacked by police, soldiers and pro-junta paramilitary thugs. Three monks are tied to an electricity pole and beaten with rifle butts and bludgeons”.

*10 September:* “The Alliance of All Burmese Buddhist Monks urges all monks to refuse alms from members of the military regime unless an apology is given for the violent way in which protesting monks were dispersed by the authorities and pro-junta thugs in Pakokku. It warns it will hold *patam nikkujjana kamma* — a boycott of alms from members of the military regime”.

*18 September:* “Hundreds of monks march peacefully through downtown Rangoon and Pegu. They also march in Pakokku and other towns in Magwe Division. The monks walk in procession to local temples, chanting the *Metta Sutta* and *Paritta Sutta*”.



20 September: "On the third day of protest, about 1000 Buddhist monks march peacefully through Rangoon, carrying religious flags, with one monk carrying his alms bowl upside-down as a symbol of not accepting alms from the military government or its supporters (figs. 3, 4). Hundreds of students and young people protect the monks by joining hands to form a human chain".

# THE SHAN OF BURMA

## Memoirs of a Shan Exile



Chao Tzang Yawnghwe



Local History and Memoirs  
INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

16 Cover of the book by Chao Tzang Yawnghwe *The Shan of Burma: Memoirs of a Shan Exile*.



22 September: "Security forces, bearing riot shields, line up in front of monks who are chanting the *Metta Sutta* at Aung San Suu Kyi's lakeside home on Rangoon's University Avenue. She comes to her gate and talks briefly with one leading monk. In Mandalay, about 10,000 monks march through the city in the largest anti-junta protest to date".

24 September: "Tens of thousands of monks and laypeople march in Pegu, Mandalay, Sagaing, Magwe and Kawthaung in Tenasserim Division, as well as in towns in Mon, Arakan and Kachin states".

26 September: "Burmese security forces fire directly at protesting monks and other demonstrators in Rangoon, reportedly killing five monks and one woman in separate clashes".

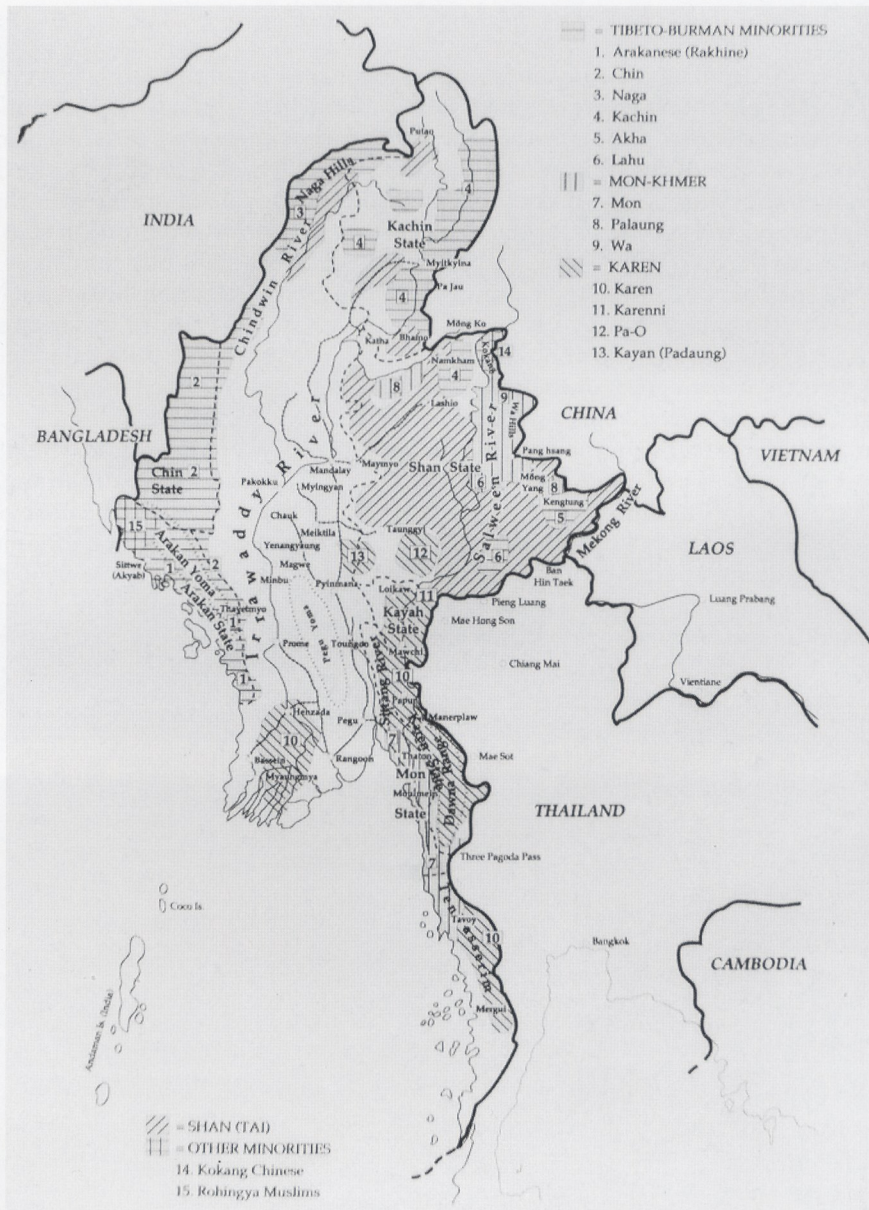
27 September: "Troops and riot police use a vehicle to break down the main gate of Ngwe Kyar Yan monastery. Shots are fired and tear gas used in rounding up about 150 of the monastery's monks. Soldiers also raid Maggin and Mogaung monasteries and arrest monks".



17 Sao Sanda, The Moon Princess.

18 Ethnic Map of Burma (from: *Bertil Lintner, Burma in Revolt*).





28 September: "The flow of Internet information out of Burma is cut off, in response to the flood of photographs, videos, news reports and e-mails sent out of the country to the international media and the rest of the world by Burmese citizens".

31 October: "More than 100 monks in Pakokku Township in Burma's Magwe Division march, chanting the *Metta Sutta*, in the first public demonstration since the government's deadly crackdown in September".

19 November: "Burma's state-run newspaper, *The Light of Myanmar*, reports that there is 'no reason to hold further discussions with any person or any organisation except at the National Convention'".



## Photography

In its image-based campaign, the Burmese opposition makes use of three different types of photograph. Most of the photos show especially dramatic moments of the Saffron Revolution (fig. 6). Besides these reportage photos there are other ones composed with extreme care, like paintings, that manage to convey an idea of the substance of this revolution (figs. 2, 13). Thirdly, the democratic opposition movement relies on the impact made by photos capable of arousing in the observer feelings of compassion and solidarity for the innocent victims of brutal repression (figs. 5, 7).

Characteristic of the second category, with its emphasis on the symbolic content of the image, is the photo "Monks pray at Shwedagon Pagoda" by Thierry Falise, published in the November 2007 issue of *The Irrawaddy* (fig. 2). I have deliberately chosen to publish this masterpiece not as a perfect photograph, as in an art book, but rather as a document of political iconography: I reproduce it directly from a copy of the magazine that has been thumbed by many Burmese in exile and was kindly made available to me by Sawangwongse Yawnghwe.

We are immediately struck by the careful composition of this photograph. The point of the pagoda, whose structure is presented in its entirety, touches the exact centre of the upper margin. The vertical thrust of the building is counterpoised, in the lower register, by the horizontal block comprising the compact mass of praying monks. The ordered rows of monks, innumerable and silent beneath the dominating symbol of the pagoda, symbolise that transcendent power that in the not too distant future will put an end to the military regime. The symbolic significance is further accented by the chromatic interplay: gold symbolises the faith under whose banner the revolutionaries fight, while red recalls the blood of the Buddhist monks who have immolated themselves as martyrs without offering any resistance.







20 Sawangwongse Yawngghwe, For a prayer.

A similarly dense idea of the substance of the Saffron Revolution is conveyed by a photo published online by the *Democratic Voice of Burma* and entitled “Monks protest” (fig. 13). This disciplined and pacific procession of monks passing through the streets of Rangoon on 22 September 2007 emanates such power as to convince the observer that only these monks can emerge victorious from the struggle against the generals, unequal as that struggle is. The size and compactness of the procession of monks is strongly emphasised by the strong perspective. Perfectly parallel to the column of monks is a procession of citizens, who also hold their hands joined in prayer, marching in time with the monks. The composition creates the perspective illusion that at the vanishing-point the column of monks is joined to the column of citizens: a highly symbolic image of the Burmese people united against the military regime.

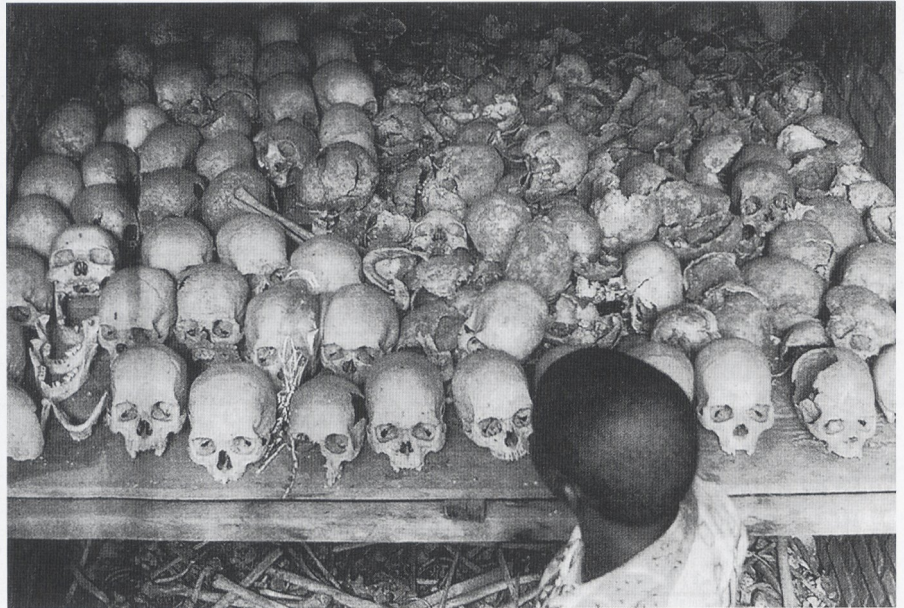
In Thierry Falise’s photograph “Bloodstains and abandoned flip-flops”, published in *The Irrawaddy* (fig. 5), the narrative of a terrible event crystallises into the symbolic denunciation of the martyrdom of innocent people. In contrast to the usual representation of an especially dramatic moment in the revolutionaries’ struggle against the military junta, in this photo we see neither the corpses of the slain nor the killers. Only a pair of bloodstained sandals, abandoned on a paved piece of ground awash with blood, testifies to the horror. Other sandals can be seen in the distance, kicked off by the fugitives who evidently hoped to run faster barefoot. As in the first photo “Monks pray at Shwedagon Pagoda”, published in the same issue of *The Irrawaddy* (fig. 2), we are struck by the same red-gold dichromy: while in the former the two colours symbolised the power of the monks, here the gold stained with red stands for their suffering, for their martyrdom.

19 Sawangwongse Yawngghwe, And nothing can be done.





21 Sawangwongse Yawnghwe, *This is the truth.*

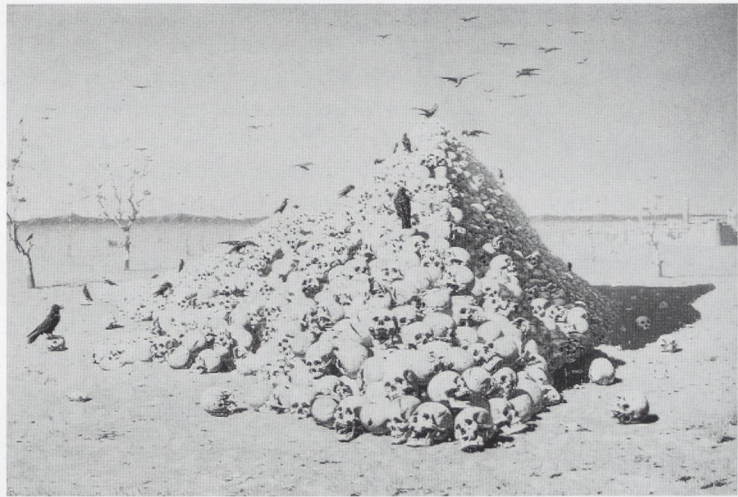


22 Memorial of the victims of the 1994 genocide in Nyamata (Rwanda).





23 The heights of brutality. *The Irrawaddy* (November 2007).



24 Vasilij Vereščagin, *Apotheosis of War*. Moscow, Tretjakov Gallery.

The most telling accusation against the military junta was achieved by the *Democratic Voice of Burma* with the photo published online, taken on 1 October 2007 and entitled “A Dead body of Buddhist monk floating in river in Rangoon” (fig. 7). I doubt that the suffering and death of the victims could have been expressed with greater intensity. The photo calls to mind some words written in 1970 by Jean Leymarie about the drawings of Zoran Music exhibited in Paris with the title *Nous ne sommes pas les derniers*: “His disturbing ‘memento’ exceeds the particular case, extreme as that is, which he is denouncing and bears witness to the return of barbarism and to the universal fatality of suffering and death that man inflicts upon man”.<sup>26</sup> The image goes some way to justify Music’s pessimistic choice of title, *Nous ne sommes pas les derniers*: “Things like those that we, in Dachau, thought could never happen again, are happening now. The horrible is innate in man, and not only in a society that may be regarded as aberrant, and I am conscious of the duty to proclaim the fact”.<sup>27</sup>

This terrible prophecy of what is “happening now”, the repetition of horrors, receives confirmation from a comparison between three works from different times and countries, yet surprisingly similar in their denunciations: the sixty-ninth image in Goya’s sequence *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (fig. 8), an etching by Zoran Music from the series *Nous ne sommes pas les derniers* (fig. 9) and the photo “A Dead body of Buddhist monk floating in river in Rangoon” (fig. 7).



## Htein Lin

The reflections of Htein Lin and of Zoran Music on their attempts to survive as artists, drawing or painting, “nailed to a sheet of paper as to an anchor of salvation”<sup>28</sup>, on the barbarity of prison life, are remarkably similar. We have already mentioned the six years spent by Htein Lin in Burmese prisons: “Deprived of all materials needed to paint, Htein Lin persuaded his prison companions to give up their white cotton uniforms for him to use as canvas. Using his fingers, body, soap, cigarette lighters, [...] he managed to paint in his cell by the weak light admitted by his small window. [...] Most of his work was destroyed or disappeared when he tried to smuggle it out of prison. But about 200 paintings survive.”<sup>29</sup>

Of the terrible period spent by Zoran Music in the concentration camp of Dachau, during the final year of the war, Jean Leymarie wrote:

Arrested as a member of the Resistance in 1944, he was imprisoned in Trieste and then deported by train to Dachau. The convoy passed through the area where he was born and, from Gorizia to Villaco, followed the same route as the train of refugees that took Music to Austria in June 1915. During his final weeks in the concentration camp, in March 1945, German vigilance relaxed somewhat, even though the programme of extermination accelerated. Music managed to conceal some materials in the architects’ office and hid himself in the infirmary, which the Nazis were afraid to enter on account of the risk of infection. From the windows and in the courtyard, he described in a state of ‘trance’ the nightmare that surrounded him, in a frenzy of drawing. [...] For Music, suspended as he was between life and death, [...] it was also a way of surviving. “By drawing I grasped at a thousand details. What tragic elegance was in those frail bodies. Such precise details: those hands, those thin fingers, the feet, the half-opened mouths gasping in the extreme attempt to breathe a little air. And the bones covered with the white and livid skin.” [...] Of about 200 sheets, thirty-five have survived and are now in museums in Basle, Munich and Ljubljana. For a long time these drawings, which Music hesitated to exhibit, but which he jealously preserved, were regarded as mere documents, too harshly realistic to have artistic value — whereas it is precisely their penetrating exactitude that confers artistic value on them.<sup>30</sup>



25 The Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

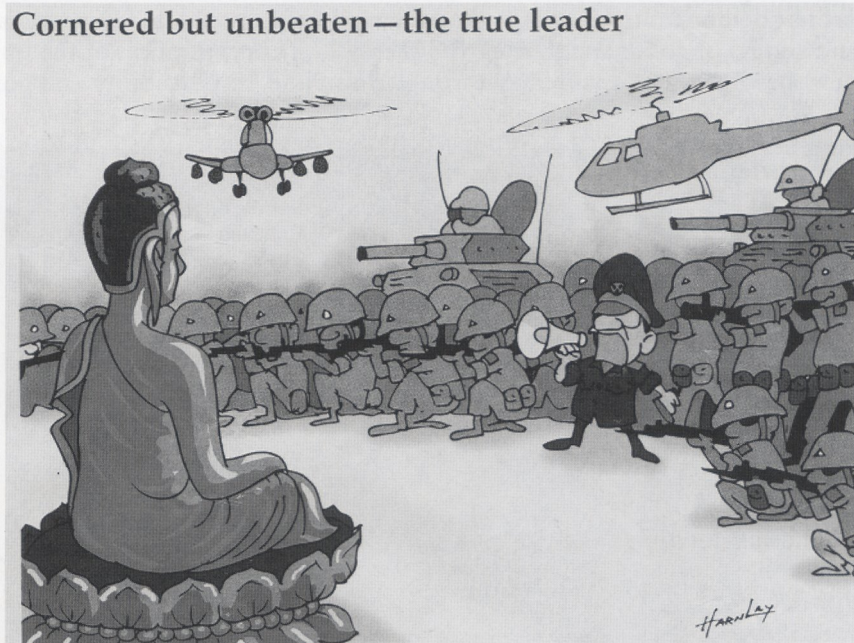


The real test of strength



26 The real test of strength. *The Irrawaddy* (November 2007).

Cornered but unbeaten – the true leader



27 Cornered but unbeaten – the true leader. *The Irrawaddy* (November 2007).

Several decades later, Music sought again to exorcise his terrible experience, once again “nailed to a sheet of paper as to an anchor of salvation”. “I have seen it, and twenty or thirty years later it has come out” was Music’s comment on the series of etchings entitled *Nous ne sommes pas les derniers*<sup>31</sup>, which portray suffering and death with such realism as to be unbearably painful to behold (fig. 9).



In 2004 Htein Lin was released from jail. Four years later he completed the series of paintings on canvas entitled *Saffron Revolution*, in which he too sought to exorcise the trauma of his imprisonment. He paints a circle edged in red, inside which are the black prison bars (acrylic on canvas, 91 x 91 cm; fig. 11). The symbol of prison is surrounded by Buddhist monks forming a sort of aureole, tramping with measured pace around the jail. Outside the red circle, four hands are raised: four signs of suffering, the palms incised with prison bars as with the stigmata.

In the radical difference between the realism employed by Zoran Music to portray the depths of human humiliation and the search for symbols by which Htein Lin strives to overcome the anguish of imprisonment, the differences between European and Burmese cultural memory are powerfully expressed. Music is dominated by the recollection of Goya: in 1935 he spent several months in Spain copying works by El Greco and Goya, and eight years later, in the concentration camp of Dachau, Goya's visions assumed the form: "Yo lo vi!"<sup>32</sup>

Htein Lin on the other hand subordinates the sign of his own pain, the black circle with bars, to symbols that transcend the individual (fig. 11): the red circle, in which the figures of the monks are inserted like the spokes of a wheel, symbolises for the Buddhist the "path of truth": the monks advancing in procession are walking this "path of truth" — a path that will lead to the liberation of Burma from the military regime.

The third painting devoted to the Saffron Revolution (acrylic on canvas, 61 x 61 cm; fig. 12) directly recalls the photo of the procession of the "thousand monks" on 22 September 2007 (fig. 13). But the painter has not restricted himself to interpreting a photographic masterpiece: he has also sought to give voice to an authoritative political doctrine. Recalling the failure of the 1958 revolution, the Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi announced a new tactic: in future, the images of protest demonstrations against the military regime would no longer be marked by mass turmoil and shouts of command, but by the silence and concentration of the opposing thousands. The new message was: "democracy through discipline, responsibility and non-violent struggle".<sup>33</sup>



28 Thierry Falise, A man bows before marching monks. *The Irrawaddy* (November 2007).





29 Sawangwongse Yawnghwe, Feline pantomime.

Htein Lin illustrates the notion of “democracy through discipline” with a painting that radiates harmony and limpidity (fig. 12), affirming the religious and ethical superiority of the Buddhist monks’ resistance. Unlike the other painting with its mandala-like symbol of the wheel, this work is suggestive of European art, in particular that of Romanesque miniaturists.

#### Sawangwongse Yawnghwe

In December 2007 and in January 2008, Sawangwongse Yawnghwe (known as Sawang, fig. 14) produced a series of pen and ink drawings entitled *The Disasters of Military Rule in Burma* (figs. 19-21, 29-30, 32-33), executed at Rishikesh in India on A4 paper from the Sri Aurobindo Paper Factory in Pondicherry.

In contemporary art, any attempt to reinterpret the *Desastres de la Guerra* (fig. 31) is fraught with difficulty. An experiment in the 1990s by the English artists Dinos and Jake Chapman produced somewhat problematic results.<sup>34</sup> Sawang’s project seems even more daring, since he proposes to use the *Desastres de la Guerra* as a source of inspiration for a political manifesto of the Burmese resistance. In analysing and evaluating these drawings we should therefore concentrate on the question of if and how Sawang manages to translate depictions of the horrors of the Franco-Spanish War into images of the Saffron Revolution.

The drawing *And nothing can be done* (fig. 19) derives from Goya’s etching no. 15: *Y no hai remedio*. The substitution of two Buddhist monks for the Spanish combatants condemned to death produces an impeccable transformation, both in artistic and in iconographical terms, of the miserable victims of the Franco-Spanish War into the heroic martyrs of the Saffron Revolution. With deft intuition Sawang selects the most efficacious artistic means for this transformation:





30 Sawangwongse Yawnghwe, *Strange devotion!*

unlike the Spanish combatants, the monks are shown in the foreground, so that their figures are much larger than those of the soldiers, emphasising their heroic status. Their white garments, symbolising the purity of their sanctified lives, make — compared with the model — a stronger contrast with the almost black earth and with the cloud-darkened sky. And whereas Goya disfigures the bloodstained faces of the slain so as to render them unrecognisable, the observer of Sawang's drawing is confronted so directly with the face of the murdered monk as to be unable to avoid pondering his sacrifice.

That the heroic status of the Buddhist monks is Sawang's principal theme emerges with similar clarity from the drawing *For a prayer* (fig. 20). The victim of the Franco-Spanish War (no. 34: *Por una navaja*), unkempt, with his long beard and his expression of stubborn self-sufficiency degenerating into terror, is transformed by Sawang into a Buddhist monk who is spiritually far superior to his adversaries, and who opposes the barbarity of the military regime with nothing but spiritual power derived from meditation. His hands are bound, yet clasped in prayer: and it is on account of his prayer that he is fastened to the execution-post — *For a prayer*, indeed.

In the drawing *This is the truth* (fig. 21), Sawang accuses the military junta of numerous murders of Buddhist monks. *Truth*, shown in conversation with a gravedigger, points with her left hand, which grasps a skull as though it were her attribute, to a huge pile of skulls. The devising of this terrible allegory of Truth has a significance that reaches way beyond the specific case of the Saffron Revolution: with this drawing Sawang has created an iconographic monument to all the crimes against humanity committed all over the world in recent decades. It is not at all surprising that Sawang's drawing, whatever his intentions might have been, resembles to a remarkable





31 Francisco Goya, *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, *Extraña devoción!*

degree the memorial set up in Nyamata in memory of the estimated 800,000 victims of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, in which the Hutu militia attempted to exterminate the Tutsi minority in a bloodbath of unparalleled horror (fig. 22).

Between Sawang's allegory derived from Goya (no. 82: *Esto es lo verdadero*) and the caricatures against the Burmese military junta, there are some evident parallels. In the same issue of *The Irrawaddy* that published the photo of the red-robed monks praying before the golden pagoda of Shwe Dagon (fig. 2) — a photo that presages a happier future — we also find its opposite: a caricature of the dead monks piled up in front of the pagoda, the red of their garments mingling with the red of their blood (fig. 23). This cartoon also shows General Than Shwe, tiny as a dwarf, reading the newspaper *New Lies of Myanmar*, which attempts to minimise the dictator's brutality: "Crackdown on protesters: 2 dead and half!"

It is highly likely that the caricaturist was inspired by a work that many twentieth-century anti-war cartoonists took as their model: the painting by Vasilij Vereščagin of 1871/72 entitled *Apotheosis of War* (oil on canvas, 127 x 197 cm, fig. 24), on the frame of which the artist wrote: "Dedicated to all the great conquerors, past, present and future". For this painting Vereščagin was inspired by tales of the fourteenth-century Turco-Mongol warlord Timur (Tamerlane), who was accustomed to erect pyramids of human heads in sign of victory.<sup>35</sup>



Not by chance did the cartoonist choose as a monument to the victims of the Saffron Revolution the Shwe Dagon pagoda (fig. 2), whose gilded spire can be seen behind the pile of murdered monks (fig. 23). This religious building is in fact one of the important monuments to the Burmese resistance: it was in front of the Shwe Dagon pagoda during the 1988 revolution that Aung San Suu established herself as the charismatic leader of the opposition with a memorable speech.

A huge portrait of her father, and a resistance flag from World War II stood above the stage as reminders of the struggle for independence from Britain half a century before. Loudspeakers were directed towards the enormous crowd [...] Aung San Suu Kyi's first public speech was confident: "The present crisis is the concern of the entire nation. I could not, as my father's daughter, remain indifferent to all that was going on. This national crisis could, in fact, be called the second struggle for independence". [...] During her speech, the daughter of Burma's foremost hero won the hearts of her audience. She emerged as the leading voice for the movement that demanded an end to decades of dictatorial rule.<sup>36</sup>

What followed was the brutal counter-attack of the military authorities on 18 September 1988:

Trucks full of troops and armoured cars with machine-guns rolled into Rangoon [...] The forces were impeccably organised and the operation carried out with cold-blooded efficiency. Any crowd in sight was mowed down systematically as the army vehicles rumbled down the streets in perfect formation. The carnage continued for two days, while the State Law and Order Restoration Council, a new junta headed by army chief Gen. Saw Maung, announced that it had to "prevent the disintegration of the Union" — and that no more than fifteen demonstrators were killed.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, Bertil Lintner concluded his account on a note of optimism: "Burma's democratic movement continued with renewed vigour. A popular leader had emerged at last; Aung San Suu Kyi was seen as a female reincarnation of Burma's independence hero".<sup>38</sup> And that is exactly how the resistance presents its own heroine: delicate as a young girl, dressed in red, with a thoughtful yet determined expression, standing in front of a gigantic idealised portrait in red and yellow of her father, the national hero Aung San (fig. 25).

A caricature published in the November 2007 issue of *The Irrawaddy* shows that the Burmese opposition still has faith in Aung San Suu Kyi. The Nobel laureate confronts on her own a tank driven by the dictator Than Shwe, who enjoys the diplomatic protection of China (fig. 26). Her cry "STOP!" has not yet managed to halt the general in his tracks. The caricature *The heights of brutality*, published on the following page of the same issue, shows that not even Aung San Suu Kyi has the power to save the Saffron Revolution from massacre (fig. 23).

The iconography of the Saffron Revolution is dominated both by the Peace-Prize winner (fig. 25), and by the martyrdom of the Buddhist monks (fig. 23). And it is Sawang, in my opinion, who has painted the most searing image of the martyrs (fig. 20): observing the anguished scene of the Buddhist monks in front of the firing squad (fig. 19) we seem to share the emotion of the artist, who at that moment was undoubtedly thinking of the fate of members of his own family. On 2 March 1962, his uncle Sai Myel was killed in cold blood at the age of seventeen, in front of the house of his grandfather, the first President of the Burmese Republic who was himself later murdered by the army (fig. 15), the first victim of the coup d'état. His elder brother Sai Tzang was at that time in Rangoon: "When I examined my brother, I found two wounds. A rifle bullet had ripped into his ankle and there was another hole, from a small calibre round, in the back of his head. It was evidently cold-blooded killing. He was, it can be said, the first of many thousands of unarmed young citizens of Burma killed with calculated coldness by the military regime".<sup>39</sup>





32 Sawangwongse Yawnghwe, *May the rope break.*

Whereas Sawang's intention was to portray the dramatic events of the military dictatorship in such a way as to transform the fatal confrontation between unarmed men and soldiers acting like unfeeling automatons, transcending the specific moment, into a generalised accusation against military violence and war (figs. 19, 20), a caricaturist must concentrate on representing the current political scene. Thus Harn Lay does not show the conflict between soldiers and monks, but instead shows a large statue of the Buddha (representing the power of the monks), before which stands Than Shwe with his marionette-like troops (fig. 27). The cartoon unequivocally implies which is the "true leader" destined for victory.

To understand exactly how Sawang, in the scenes showing the martyrdom of the Buddhist monks (figs. 19, 20), grasps the central question of the Saffron Revolution, we need to go back to 1990. The electoral victory won on 27 May that year by the National League for Democracy (NLD) founded by Aung San Suu Kyi was completely ignored by the military junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Since it was evident that the NLD had not the strength to defend its democratically acquired rights, the Buddhist monks — who in the 1988 revolution had for the most part remained in the sidelines — felt justified in openly supporting resistance. On 8 August 1990, the second anniversary of the 1988 revolution, thousands of monks demonstrated in the streets of Mandalay. The demonstrators were fired on and several monks lost their lives. On 27 August another demonstration took place in Mandalay, involving seven thousand monks, and there were similar processions in Sagaing, Monywa, Pakokku, Myingyan, Meiktila, Shwebo and Ye-U. The monks refused to accept alms from the soldiers, a gesture which as we have seen is tantamount to excluding people from the community of Buddhist believers.



Whereas originally it was thought that the generals would not have dared to take military action against the monks so highly venerated by the people, it soon became clear that the junta was prepared to adopt any measures whatsoever in order to retain power. On 20 October General Saw Maung ordered the dissolution of all Buddhist communities that had taken an active part in demonstrations against the regime. A new military law allowed all local commanders to despoil the belonging of the Buddhist monks who had offered resistance, and to arrest or kill the rebels. The walls of the monasteries, until that moment regarded as inviolable, offered no protection. On 22 October, armed troops entered the sacred precincts of 133 monasteries and arrested large numbers of monks.<sup>40</sup>

During the Saffron Revolution the soldiers divested themselves of the last traces of respect for the monks so loved by the population. On 5 September a reporter noted in *The Irrawaddy*: “Monks chanting the ‘Metta Sutta’ (the Buddha’s words on loving kindness) in Pakokku are brutally attacked by police, soldiers and pro-junta paramilitary thugs. Three monks are tied to an electricity pole and beaten with rifles butts and bludgeons”.<sup>41</sup> And Naomi Mann reported from Rangoon: “In mid-October, I talked to witnesses living near an army compound in Hle Gu Township, on the outskirts of Rangoon, who reported seeing two large trucks pass by night speed escorted by police blowing whistles to clear the road ahead of traffic. They described seeing around 200 people inside the trucks, hands held behind their shaven heads — obviously monks. Just a little further along the road lies the Yan Kyi An interrogation centre, a military intelligence facility where torture is known to occur. The witnesses were in no doubt that this is where the trucks were heading”.<sup>42</sup> Hla Win, a commander in the northern area of Rangoon who defected to Thailand after refusing orders to fire on the monks, spoke of thousands of demonstrators killed. It appears that many hundreds of monks were executed and the bodies carried into the jungle. On the blog of an exiled Burmese named Ko Htike, an eye-witness describes the soldiers’ assault on the monastery of Ngwe Kyar Yan in Rangoon: “A troop of *lone-tein* (riot police comprised of paid thugs) [...] raided the monastery with 200 studying monks. They systematically ordered all the monks to line up, and banged and crushed each one’s head against the brick wall of the monastery. One by one, the peaceful non-resisting monks fell to the ground screaming in pain. Then, they tore off the red robes and threw them all in the military trucks (like sacks of rice) and took the bodies away. The head monk [...] was tied up in the middle of the monastery, tortured, bludgeoned, and later died the same day, today. Tens of thousands of people gathered outside the monastery, warded off by troops with bayoneted rifles, unable to help their helpless monks being slaughtered inside the monastery. Their every try to forge ahead was met by the bayonets. When all is done, only 10 out of 200 remained alive, hiding in the monastery. Blood everywhere on the walls and floors.”

The ferocious, savage persecution of the monks further alienated the military regime from the people, among whom veneration for the monks increased. A photograph published in the November issue of *The Irrawaddy* shows a Burmese citizen bowing deeply before an image of the Buddha borne by monks, with the English caption “The loving kindness must win everything” (fig. 28). With biting sarcasm inspired by Goya Sawang projects this scene onto the hated dictator: General Than Shwe, excluded from the community of the Buddhist faithful, makes his obeisance to the diabolic beings who encourage him to commit his enormities (fig. 29).<sup>43</sup>

Fearing the tide of world opinion, the government organised a series of mass demonstrations intended to prove that the majority of the Burmese people supported the military regime. According to government sources, 120,000 people took part on 12 October 2007 in one of these demonstrations in Rangoon. Demonstrators declared their support for the government and their disapproval of the opposition, the state press asserted. However, opponents of the regime have plausibly argued that many of the demonstrators were compelled to take part or were promised money to do so.



Once again it is Goya's *Desastres de la guerra* who supply Sawang with inspiration to depict this political farce: in his etching (no. 66) entitled *Extraña devoción!*, Goya shows a group of people bowing down before a corpse in a glass coffin being carried by a donkey (fig. 31). Sawang borrows the donkey as a symbol of the boundless stupidity of the military authorities, convinced that with their sub-machine-guns they can gain not only the consensus but also the hearts and minds of the population (fig. 30).

The political iconography of the opposition risks being fixated on the all-too-uniform image of General Than Shwe, the dictator oppressing the people by force of arms (fig. 26); this image is in danger of becoming stale and of losing efficacy through repetition. To attack the general through images, it is necessary to locate his weak points: Sawang shows Than Shwe ignoring danger, balancing like a sleepwalker on a fraying and knotted rope (fig. 32). And the watching Burmese people has one single wish: "May the rope break".<sup>44</sup>

The propaganda of the Burmese resistance has one principal aim: to reinforce the certainty of victory. In *The real test of strength* (fig. 26) the cartoonist prophesies the eventual victory of Aung San Suu Kyi, though he is well aware that the Nobel laureate — under house-arrest as she is — has very little room to manoeuvre. Harn Lay portrays an army of toy soldiers commanded by Than Shwe, who in the long term will undoubtedly succumb to the "true leader", the Buddha of the monks (fig. 27). In reality Harn Lay knows perfectly well, also from painful personal experience, that the power relations do not correspond to this image, and indeed that Than Shwe was able in a very short time to crush the resistance of the monks, so a short-term victory for the opposition seems highly unlikely. Sawang, like most of the Burmese in exile, is sceptical about the possibility of positive political developments in the near future. From this nightmare of an eternal military dictatorship the artist attempts to liberate himself with an angry drawing: a tiger, symbolising the freedom-fighters concealed in the jungle, bounds out of its hiding-place (fig. 33). Alarmed by its sudden appearance, the black dogs of the military junta skulk fearfully, while the guard-dogs on the right (representing the foreign press and the international organisations) look on with greater or lesser degrees of concern.<sup>45</sup>



33 Sawangwongse Yawngghwe, He defends himself well.



The tiger is the symbol of the “Shan State”, the region of Burma that borders with China and Thailand: a symbol that holds especial importance for the resistance. As early as 1958 students fighting for an independent Shan State chose the tiger, Hsö, as their *nom de guerre*. Sai Kyan Tun, for instance, changed his name to Sao Hsö Wan (Tiger of the Sun), while Sai Kyaw Sein, Sai Myint Aung and Sai Hla Aung took up arms under the names of Sao Hsö Hten (Excellent Tiger) and Sao Hsö Lane (Striped Tiger).<sup>46</sup> And when Chao Tzang, Sawang’s father, joined the clandestine Shan State Army shortly after the military coup d’état, he took the *nom de guerre* of Sao Hsö Wai (a tiger able to fight back when bitten).<sup>47</sup> In the fight against the dictatorship, the inhabitants of “Shan State” have distinguished themselves by raising no fewer than six armies, some of which however have now been disbanded: Shan State Independence Army, Shan National United Front, Shan National Army, Shan State Army, Shan National Independence Army, Shan United Revolutionary Army.<sup>48</sup>

The titles of these armies all incorporate the name of Shan, but never that of Burma — and the name Shan is combined twice with “Independence”, thrice with “National” and twice with “United”. In effect these armies fight for a double purpose: liberation from the military regime, and independence from the Burmese central government, whatever it might be. The central message of Sawang’s drawing (fig. 33) is that “Shan State” must once again be politically free, i.e. independent of the rest of Burma.

To an outside observer, the combination of two different objectives would seem to comport a risk of fragmentation and thus of a weakening of the entire resistance movement. To counter such an eventuality, the movement’s propaganda tends to downplay the second objective, and to concentrate on opposition to the generals. Thus, the political iconography tends also to avoid the independence issue. Only the iconography of the “fighting tiger” devised by Sawang casts light on the internal tensions within the struggle for the liberation of Burma, concerning which the outside world knows very little.

The map of Burma reproduced here (fig. 18) shows how the country is made up of different ethnic groupings, distinguished by different languages, literary traditions and histories. A Burmese state such as the one we know today was the product of British colonial rule. But the British were sufficiently intelligent to concede to about thirty Shan States, each one ruled by a saopha, a certain degree of autonomy. Each saopha had his own police force, his own civil servants and judges. In 1922 the colonial government founded the “Federated Shan States”, which for the first time formed a kind of central government — albeit one directly controlled by the British and with limited powers, for the most part restricted to education, health and housing.<sup>49</sup> After independence from British colonial rule and the establishment of a democratic state, the problem arose of how to preserve self-government. With great diplomatic prudence, the Shan States’ spokesman and future president, Sao Shwe Taïke (Sawang’s grandfather, fig. 15), tried to express Shan aspirations during the negotiations for the establishment of the new state: “We want to associate with Burma on the condition that full autonomy is guaranteed in our internal administration”.<sup>50</sup> But such aspirations remained unfulfilled, especially after the generals’ coup d’état. Chao Tzang Yawngwe, Sawang’s father, wrote bitterly in his 1987 memoirs (fig. 16): “This tragedy can be traced to the very strong distrust on the part of the Burmese élite of the Shan and other non-Burmese tinged with a large measure of belief in past Burmese imperial glories, and a condescending paternalism adopted from the British. Hence, the Burmese élite and policy-makers have not been able to perceive of the non-Burmese as anything other than conquered peoples, or, at best, ignorant and irresponsible natives. As such, one could interpret Burmese efforts at nation-building, especially after the 1962 coup, as campaigns of conquest and subjugation characterized by the destruction of the native leadership structure and their political cohesion”.<sup>51</sup>



## NOTES

*This essay is dedicated to Mario Ruffini, in gratitude for his tireless efforts on behalf of the project Arte figurativa e musica nell'epoca moderna. I should like in the first instance to thank Sawangwongse Yawngghwe, who has allowed me to publish here his drawings from the series The Disasters of Military Rule in Burma. Next, Ursula Winkler, who with great generosity and intelligence has assisted me in the preparation of this essay. Lastly, I thank the translators Marina Bistolfi and Mark Roberts for their excellent work.*

<sup>1</sup> Vol. 15, nos. 11 and 12.

<sup>2</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, Bangkok 2003<sup>3</sup>. Compared with the extremely complex account of Burmese history provided by Lintner, the brief historical notes given here will naturally appear over-simplified. In particular I have had to ignore the conflict between the various political parties, social groupings and regions of Burma that represent very divergent interests, as well as the economic problems arising from traffic in drugs. Such simplification could not be avoided in an essay intended principally as a contribution to art history. For more detailed information, the reader is referred to Lintner's book.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. 15, no. 11, pp. 22-33.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. 15, no. 12, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Vol. 15, no. 12, pp. 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Vol. 15, no. 12, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Vol. 15, no. 12, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Vol. 15, no. 12, p. 13. Together with the "freedom-loving, compassionate monks", an important role was played by the "pro-democracy activists", and indeed by "all of whom bravely joined demonstrations in August and September".

<sup>9</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, vol. 15, no. 11, p. 35: "Burma's only hope is a meeting of minds between elements of the armed forces and the pro-democracy movement. Together, they may be able to hold the country together when the junta falls. But first those alternative military elements have to be identified in order to isolate the top leadership [...] As with a dialogue, national reconciliation can be achieved between more moderate elements of the armed forces and the population at large. But not with Than Shwe and his cronies".

<sup>10</sup> Vol. 15, no. 12, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Rolf Schmücking, *Zoran Music. Das Graphische Werk 1947-1981*, Basel 1986, conversations with Music (unnumbered pages).

<sup>12</sup> Vol. 15, no. 3.

<sup>13</sup> In recent years, the fame of Htein Lin has spread beyond the confines of Burma and Thailand. In 2007 his paintings were shown in the exhibition *Burma Inside Out* at the Asia House Gallery in London, while in 2008 there were exhibitions at the Quest Gallery in Bath and at the former prison "Le Nuove" in Turin.

<sup>14</sup> Published in Bangkok by River Books.

<sup>15</sup> There are so many that here we can mention only a few examples, selected more or less at random: Arbeitskreis Historischer Bildforschung (ed.), *Der Krieg im Bild – Bild vom Krieg* (Hamburger Beiträge zur Historischen Bildforschung), Frankfurt a. M. 2003; Carol Becker, Ghandi's body and further representations of war and peace, in: *The Art Journal*, LXV, 2006, pp. 78-95; Laura Brandon, *Art and war*, London 2007; Barbara McCloskey, *Artists and World War II*, London 2005; Reiner Diederich (ed.), *Plakate gegen den Krieg: Dokumente der internationalen Friedensbewegung seit 1912*, Weinheim 1983; Brian Foss, *War paint: art, war, state and identity in Britain 1939-1945*, New Haven 2007; Ulrich Gerster/Regine Helbling, *Krieg und Frieden in der bildenden Kunst*, Zurich 1996; Nicola Hille, *Zur Darstellung und dem Wandel von Gewalt auf russischen und sowjetischen Plakaten der Jahre 1917-1932*, Amsterdam 1999 (IISR Research Paper 37); Annegret Jürgens-Kirchhoff, *Krieg und Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1993; Irena Kossowska, *Goya or Grottgger?: two cycles devoted to war*, in: Frances Ames-Lewis (ed.), *Art and politics*, Warsaw 1999, pp. 95-104; William J. Thomas Mitchell, *Den Terror klonen: der Krieg der Bilder 2001-2004*, in: Christa Maar (ed.), *Iconic worlds: neue Bildwelten und Wissensräume*, Cologne 2006, pp. 255-285; Peter Paret, *Imagined battles: reflections of war in European art*, Chapel Hill (University of North Carolina Press) 1997; Gerhard Paul, *Bilder des Krieges – Krieg der Bilder: die Visualisierung des modernen Krieges*, Zurich 2004; Gabriele Saure/Gisela Schirmer (ed.), *Kunst gegen Krieg und Faschismus* (37 Werkmonographien), Weimar 1999; Philip Shaw, *Abjection sustained: Goya, the Chapman brothers and the Disasters of War*, in: *Art history*, XXVI, 2003, pp. 478-504.



- <sup>16</sup> To mention one example: *Krieg und Vertreibung. Interventionen von Kunst, Medien und Wissenschaft*, conference held at the Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, 16-17 April 2007.
- <sup>17</sup> The exhibition was shown at the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, at the Stadtmuseum in Munich, at the State Gallery in Moscow, and at the Hermitage in St Petersburg (at that time Leningrad).
- <sup>18</sup> No. 51.
- <sup>19</sup> Nos. 86-92.
- <sup>20</sup> Nos. 98-109.
- <sup>21</sup> No. 70.
- <sup>22</sup> No. 79.
- <sup>23</sup> No. 112.
- <sup>24</sup> No. 119.
- <sup>25</sup> Figs. 12, 14 (pp. 33, 34).
- <sup>26</sup> *Jean Leymarie*, *Introduzione*, in: *Marco Goldin* (ed.), *Music*, s.l., s.d., p. 224.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 222.
- <sup>29</sup> See note 12.
- <sup>30</sup> *Leymarie* (n. 26), p. 222.
- <sup>31</sup> *Schmücking* (n. 11).
- <sup>32</sup> *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, title of etching number 44.
- <sup>33</sup> *Lintner* (n. 2), p. 374.
- <sup>34</sup> *Shaw* (n. 15).
- <sup>35</sup> *Werner Hofmann/Christoph Stölzl* (ed.), *Schrecken und Hoffnung – Künstler sehen Frieden und Krieg*, exhibition catalogue, Hamburg 1987, cat. no. 184 (1987).
- <sup>36</sup> *Lintner* (n. 2), pp. 345-346.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 351-352.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 346.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 210.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 384-386.
- <sup>41</sup> Vol. 15, December 2007, p. 34.
- <sup>42</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, vol. 15, November 2007, p. 37.
- <sup>43</sup> Cf. *Goya*, *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, no. 73 "Gatesca pantomima".
- <sup>44</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, no. 77 "Que se rompe la cuerda".
- <sup>45</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, no. 78 "Se defiende bien".
- <sup>46</sup> *Lintner* (n. 2), pp. 187-188.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 229.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 491-492.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 52-55.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 82.
- <sup>51</sup> *Chao Tzang Yawngbwe*, *The Shan of Burma: Memoirs of a Shan Exile* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), 1987, p. 140.



## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In jüngster Zeit gewinnt die Thematik der politischen Ikonographie auch innerhalb der neueren und neusten Kunst deutlich an Interesse. Eine größere Zahl von Ausstellungen, Veröffentlichungen und wissenschaftlichen Kongressen waren in den letzten Jahren dieser Thematik gewidmet. Weltweit engagieren sich Künstler gegen Krieg, Terror und Genozid. Deshalb erscheint es wichtig, die Aufmerksamkeit nun auch auf bisher wenig bekannte Aspekte dieser politischen Ikonographie zu lenken, auch mit dem Ziel, außerhalb der europäischen und der amerikanischen Kunst liegende Problemfelder zu beleuchten. In diesem Kontext scheint mir der hier erstmals analysierte "Kampf mit Bildern" der für die Freiheit ihres Volkes streitenden burmanischen Künstler eines der bedeutendsten Beispiele. Denn hier wird die Kunst tatsächlich strategisch wichtig, lautet doch eine der Devisen der Gegner der Militärregierung: "The junta has its soldiers and guns – the people has the media and the truth in pictures." Auch der "Kampf mit Bildern" kann gefährlich werden. Htein Lin, einer der vielversprechendsten burmanischen Künstler (Abb. 10), schmachtete sechs lange Jahre in den Kerkern der Militärregierung. Der hohe politische Einsatz erfordert den engen Zusammenschluß der Vertreter aller Kunstgattungen. Maler, Zeichner, Karikaturisten und Fotografen streiten vereint für das Ideal der Freiheit. Der Kampf wird auf verschiedenen Ebenen des stilistischen Ausdrucks geführt. Neben realistischen Darstellungen der unmenschlichen Greuel-taten des Militärs und des qualvollen Leidens der Opfer findet sich die Wiedergabe von Symbolen, die den pazifistischen Charakter des Widerstands der buddhistischen Mönche versinnbildlichen. Im Unterschied zum traditionellen Erscheinungsbild einer Revolution spielen im burmanischen Volksaufstand die Zeichen eine ebenso große, wenn nicht sogar bedeutendere Rolle als die Worte. Bezeichnenderweise verbieten die buddhistischen Mönche während der "Saffron Revolution" im September 2007 jedwede Ansprachen von Vertretern der demokratischen Opposition. Als eines der ausdrücktesten Zeichen erscheinen die streng geordneten Kolonnen der in gleicher Haltung und mit zum Gebet erhobenen Händen durch die Strassen der burmanischen Städte schreitenden, einheitlich rot gekleideten Mönche (Abb. 13), die der von der Friedensnobelpreisträgerin Aung San Suu Kyi ausgegebenen Devise folgen: "Democracy through discipline, responsibility and non-violent struggle". Der Protest konzentriert sich vor allem auf eine Geste: Auf den Fotos sieht man an der Spitze des Demonstrationzugs einen buddhistischen Mönch, der mit beiden Händen eine umgedrehte Opferschale hält, zum Zeichen, daß die Mönche künftighin von Militärpersonen und deren Unterstützern keine Almosen entgegennehmen werden (Abb. 3, 4). Dieser in aller Ruhe ausgeführte Gestus der Verweigerung ist als radikale Kampfansage zu verstehen. Mittels der Spenden versucht der buddhistische Gläubige dem Zyklus der Wiedergeburt zu entinnen, um im Nirwana Erlösung zu finden. Mit der Umdrehung der Opferschale wird folglich das Militär mit dem Ausschluß aus der buddhistischen Glaubensgemeinschaft bedroht.

Im burmanischen Freiheitskampf beobachtet man folglich eine Vielzahl besonders günstiger Voraussetzungen für die Entfaltung der politischen Ikonographie: die den Bildern eine wichtige Rolle zumessende politische Strategie der Widerstandsbewegung, die hohe Bedeutung der Zeichen, die Identität von Künstler und Freiheitskämpfer, die Konzentration aller Stilrichtungen und Kunstgattungen auf ein- und dasselbe politische Ziel. Nach dem Willen der Anführer sollte der Widerstand seinen rein pazifistischen Charakter in aller Strenge bewahren. Nicht Gewehre, sondern die in alle Welt ausgestrahlten Bilder seien die Waffen der Opposition. Selten vertrauten Revolutionäre so sehr auf die Macht der politischen Ikonographie!

Dieses Phänomen führt auf dem Gebiet der Fotografie zu einer reichen Entfaltung verschiedenster Ausdrucksformen. Neben Fotografien, die besonders dramatische Momente der "Saffron Revolution" festhalten (Abb. 6), mißt die Widerstandsbewegung jenen Bildern besondere Bedeutung zu, die die pazifistische Grundhaltung versinnbildlichen: "Monks pray at Shwedagon Pagoda" (Abb. 2), "Monks protest" (Abb. 13). Ferner kämpft die Bildpropaganda mit Fotografien, die in



hohem Maß das Mitgefühl und die Solidarität des Betrachters mit den Opfern der barbarischen Repression stimulieren (“Bloodstains and abandoned flip-flops”, Abb. 5; “A dead body of Buddhist monk floating in river in Rangoon”, Abb. 7).

In diesem Essay konzentriere ich mich auf wenige Werke zweier Maler. Später sollen diese Studien im Rahmen einer in Italien geplanten Ausstellung vertieft und dann auch weitere Arbeiten burmanischer Künstler berücksichtigt werden. Htein Lin vertritt die “symbolistische Kunstrichtung” (Abb. 10). Mit Hilfe seiner Bilder versucht der Künstler das Trauma jahrelanger Kerkerhaft zu überwinden und gleichzeitig dem pazifistischen Gehalt der “Saffron Revolution” Ausdruck zu verleihen. Ein schwarzer, vergitterter Kreis in der Bildmitte, ein deutliches Symbol der Kerkerhaft, wird von einem zweiten, roten Kreis umrahmt, in dem sich die Gestalten der demonstrierenden buddhistischen Mönche gleich den Speichen eines Wagenrades einfügen (Abb. 11). Im Buddhismus bedeutet das Symbol des Wagenrades den “Weg zur Wahrheit”. Zeichen der “Saffron Revolution” und buddhistische Symbole verbinden sich folglich zu einer Aussage: dem Bild des wahren Weges zur Befreiung Burmas von der Militärdiktatur.

Sawangwongse Yawngshwe (Abb. 14) vertritt die “realistische Richtung”, indem er das Wagnis eingeht, Goya’s “Desastres de la Guerra” in “The Disastres of Military Rule in Burma” umzudeuten. Bei aller anfänglichen Skepsis, ob es tatsächlich möglich sei, aufgrund von Bildern des spanisch-französischen Krieges einen Volksaufstand des Jahres 2007 in Asien adäquat darzustellen, muß ich schließlich bekennen, daß ich dieses Experiment für erfolgreich erachte. Sawangwongse ist es vor allem gelungen, das zentrale Ereignis der “Saffron Revolution”, die tragisch endende Führerrolle der buddhistischen Mönche, überzeugend wiederzugeben. In “For a prayer” (Abb. 20) überträgt Sawangwongse Goya’s Vorbild eines verwahrlosten, von trotziger Selbstbehauptung wie von panischer Angst gekennzeichneten Opfers des spanischen Krieges in einen geistig seinen Widersachern hoch überlegenen buddhistischen Mönch, der sich dem barbarischen Militärregime allein mittels der in der Meditation gesammelten spirituellen Kraft widersetzt. Seine Hände sind gefesselt und dennoch zum Gebet verbunden. Allein wegen dieses Gebetes steht er am Marterpfahl: “For a prayer”.

Das Martyrium der Mönche steigert deren Verehrung im Volk. Ein in der Zeitschrift der Regime-Gegner “The Irrawaddy” veröffentlichtes Foto zeigt einen sich vor einer Gruppe von Mönchen tief verneigenden Burmaner (Abb. 28). Mit beißendem Spott überträgt Sawangwongse diese Szene in eine Darstellung des verhassten Diktators. Der aus der Glaubensgemeinschaft der Buddhisten ausgeschlossene General Than Shwe verbeugt sich vor teuflischen Bestien (Abb. 29)!

Erneut findet Sawangwongse bei Goya die Inspiration für die Darstellung einer die gegnerische Strategie parodierenden Groteske. Unter dem Titel “Extraña devocion!” zeigt Goya eine Gruppe von Menschen, die sich vor einem von einem Esel in einem gläsernen Sarkophag getragenen Leichnam verbeugen (Abb. 31). Sawangwongse greift das Bild des Esels als Zeichen der grenzenlosen Dummheit der Militärregierung auf, die glaubt, mit der Maschinenpistole nicht nur die Zustimmung, sondern auch die Verehrung des Volkes erzwingen zu können (Abb. 30).

Sawangwongse bekämpft General Than Shwe ohne das Cliché-Bild des grenzenlos machtbesessenen Diktators zu wiederholen. Alle Gefahren mißachtend balanciert der General gleich einem Mondsüchtigen auf einem schon mehrfach gerissenen und nur notdürftig wieder verknoteten Seil. Das Than Shwe fassungslos bei diesem riskanten Auftritt beobachtende burmanische Volk hat nur einen Wunsch: “May the rope break”!

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