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Twenty Years of Burmese Writers in The IWP

Founded at the University of Iowa in 1967 by the American poet and teacher Paul Engle and the Taiwanese novelist and translator Nieh Hualing Engle, the International Writing Program (IWP) had from its very beginning the goal of bringing together writers from all over the world and presenting them to American audiences—at that time infinitely more isolated in the Cold War and pre-internet era from global literary influences. Because of the founders' background, there was always a special interest in writers from Asia. It would take less than ten years to host writers from the two Chinas around the same table in Iowa City. Yet another two decades passed before the first writer from Burma joined the IWP. That writer was U Win PE, and the year was 1994.

Since then eighteen Burmese participants have participated in the program, at least one per year since 2000. While the initial writers came under the auspices of the US Department of State, the majority have been generously and consistently supported by the Open Society Institute's

Burma Project. Thus we have had the privilege of hosting several distinct generations of Burmese writers, becoming familiar, in broad contours at least, with changes in the literary agendas, styles, and concerns in this politically volatile period. Discovering the remarkable artistic versatility of writer, painter and filmmaker U Win Pe (1994), the spiritual and political intensity of the poetry of U Moe Hein (2006), the intimate realism of Mya Hnaung Nyo (2001) and Khet Mar (2007), the powerfully symbolic prose-poetry of Ma Thida (2005) and the high experimental poetic style of Pandora (2012) and Zeyar Lynn (2013), we were often guided by the critical commentaries and literary-historical glosses of a Maung Swan Yi (2003) or, more recently, by the eye-opening surveys of movements in Burmese poetry that Zeyar Lynn delivered in lecture form to students at the University of Iowa. Interspersed with the writers came occasionally journalists like the indefatigable Khet Mar, filmmakers (Cho Tu Zaw, 2011) and, most recently, as the political climate was breaking, bloggers working in the digital environment of topical prose and mixed media (Nay Phone Latt, 2013, Myay Hmone Lwin, 2014). Almost all of our participants have also had careers as translators, whether from English or other world languages; and almost all in turn contributed to better general knowledge of Burmese literature and culture in this country by participating in the annual Burmese Studies conference at the nearby University of Northern Illinois. In turn, we met with them again on their home terrain during a 2013 Reading Tour in Yangon, widening the web of connections spun year by year in Iowa City.

On my first visit to Yangon, during the darkest days of Burma's recent history, Ma Thida described for me how

she survived her long years in solitary confinement and the importance of books, which she and her fellow political dissidents referred to as vitamins. A book is indeed a form of nutrition for the soul. And we could not be more pleased to have the writing of our Burmese friends, produced or translated for the IWP's benefit during these twenty transformative years, gathered in one volume. We are eager to continue reading your work in years to come.

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