The Second Trip To Burma.

The second trip to Burma. In the past year or so, there have been a cluster of trips, which I want to write about; they can be included in this part of "Fragments Of China".

During the winter holiday of 2006, I traveled again to S.E. Asia with a Beijing friend and her daughter. We went to Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. I am glad we went, but when they had departed to Beijing, I went back to my run-down hotel in Bangkok in a sorrowful mood. There were only ten days left before I had to return to China! The expected trip to Burma was cut in half. What to do? Stay in Bangkok and mope? However, I chose to go to Burma anyhow, and make the most of it. (I am very glad I did, as the next trip, in 2007, has been cancelled). I booked with my favorite Bangkok travel agent, and went on the next plane to Rangoon, with both money and time running a bit low.

In term of travel routes, this trip was much more limited than the first trip. I took two journeys: one trip went down south-east to Moulmein, where George Orwell was stationed with the police in the 1920's, and back to Rangoon; the other one took the overnight boat west to Pathein, with the bus back to Rangoon. They were "little wings" etched onto the long map of Burma. Make no mistake, Burma and Kyrgyzstan are the two best "neighboring countries", next to China, for interesting travel—Burma in the winter, and Kyrgyzstan in the summer.

Rangoon was pretty much the same as before—noisy, dirty, dilapidated, crowded, the capital of anomie, full of friendly strangers who are a thousand personalities away from you, the perfect place to go emotionally penniless, mad and commit suicide in. (Only Lhasa comes close in this respect.) However, after getting used to the local emotional and cultural climate, Rangoon has its own peculiar attraction, one that brings people back for more. Mountain crocuses do indeed bloom among the rubble, so to speak. Like certain other countries, Burma maintains a tight hold on an essential quality that hardened travelers crave: that abiding feeling of living on another planet, in another epoch of history, somewhere far from the groove of today's globalization trend, and wherever or whatever it was they came out of. Well, that is not quite right, but there is something about Burma that one just cannot find elsewhere.

I went straight back to my Rangoon watering hole—the Motherland 2 Inn, and dug in. (All over east and south-east Asia, I have picked up these "watering hole"-type places, and carefully filed them away in my consciousness. Maybe I should be a "Fuller Brush" salesman after all, with this huge landmass as my sector.) The Motherland 2 Inn is typical of the "Lonely Planet"-style enclaves that have sprouted up all over S.E. Asia. It caters to foreign tastes, with the inevitable dishes that tourists and backpackers alike crave when they are away from home—New York cheesecake, apple pie, fruit smoothies, the usual range of basic Italian pasta and Mexican dishes, and chocolate cake. It also offers some of the more well-known local dishes, but cooked to western sanitary standards. Laundry service is available all day long. The rooms are air-conditioned, and also have ceiling fans. The toilets are clean. The staff can speak basic English—and sometimes even more—and they are scrupulously polite. Bob Marley, as well as all the usual reggae, fusion, pop and country musicians can be heard during the "happy hour"—or at many hours. The floors are very clean. Day trips of all shapes and sizes can be arranged. (How strange it is that similar trips are available in most of the other guesthouses all over the entire region! How did such standardization ever evolve?) There is a front porch / patio, or a back courtyard somewhere nearby, for quiet reading. A bookshelf near the front office holds all the usual travel books, along with a sign that warns, "No pop psychology, religious, classic literature books, please!" (What does that leave, then, I wonder.) There is a computer with

Internet connections in the lobby; either that, of there is an Internet bar down the street. Foreign tourists come and go: the typical "Lonely Planet"-type guest house is like a swallow cave or bat cave in Indonesia, Thailand, or Mexico, with backpackers constantly coming and going. They are symbols of the rich symbiosis that has evolved all over the relatively stable parts of the world, between the local communities and the wandering, usually young backpackers. It is, in short, a very helpful infrastructure to "hop-scotch" over vast parts of the "Third World". Some would say this is one of globalization's "externalities", but I have come to appreciate it. Sometimes, I cannot handle the undiluted, full-strength local culture. One other thing: these "backpacker communities", like certain ecosystems in harsh environments, are razor thin; step one or two paces away from the familiar, and you are plunged straight back into the ammonia-strength, raw local culture, with all its interests, inconveniences, and dangers. It is indeed a very delicate balance.

I first went down to Moulmein, south-east of Rangoon. I wanted to go farther down the south-east "arm of Burma, but was afraid of being too far from the capital, with too little time to return in a hurry, so I took a night bus to Moulmein. I figured that I could arrive in Moulmein in the morning, look around, and then get on another bus going back to Rangoon. (At this time, I was not very adventurous or imaginative.) I sat down in the seat (not reclining), zipped up my light jacket all the way up, crammed my hat onto my head, and tried to sleep my way through the night. Good luck, traveler. The roads were paved but narrow, and our route wound over the alluvial flat-land that seems to make up much of the country. At three in the morning, we stopped in some mid-journey tea house known to the driver, drank strong milk tea and ate some unknown, deep-fried dough, or something like that, and scouted for the toilet. It was the usual truck-stop latrine: that story from "The Decameron" always haunts me, every time I step onto the latrine boards, with no clear view of what is below. We got back into the bus. On into the night we went, until the new day came up, and revealed Burma in its cool, early morning beauty.

Although Burma near the great rivers is flat, and although the scenery is very repetitive, it never seems to become boring. The gold-and-white stupas, the wooden monasteries, the green rice fields, the dull-black ribbon of pavement winding its way around natural obstacles like irrigation ditches, the come-and-gone-again-in-a-minute settlements all exist in a world quite beyond time, without need for aesthetic improvement, and harmoniously beautiful. Living in Burma is like living in statically vibrant amber. The days come and the nights pass by; the land is soaked by the monsoon rains and then it dries up under a make-up of unwashed dust; the people follow the dictates of the growing seasons and life's many rituals. Everything is held together by countless glasses of strong milk tea, shielded by "thanaka" (the natural sunscreen used by the Burmese), and governed by the sun.

The sun was driving the last grey out of the sky and painting a little color when the bus went over the Thanlwinn (Salween) River bridge, and began the final approach to Moulmein. This bridge is quite long, and very narrow—I think just two single lanes, with a single railway track in between. The Thanlwinn is not navigable to big ships as it is too shallow for them, but it is very wide at this point. In half an hour we were in Moulmein.

This is the place where George Orwell worked during his time of service in the Imperial police. I enjoyed reading his "Burmese Days"—and his other work, too. However, at this time I was in bad humor, so after buying a cheap plastic fan, visiting yet another public toilet, and looking around the bus station, I did the unthinkable—I bought another ticket, and prepared for the long journey back to Rangoon. (I still have that plastic fan, which I keep in my travel bag.)

The journey back was just as long, but since it was daylight, I could see the countryside we passed through. When riding a bus in S.E. Asia, it pays to guess which side the sun will shine on, and choose a seat on the shady side, as the sun is very strong. The buses are often very old, and maintained very carefully, as Burma has been under various sanctions for a long time, and spare parts are either rare or must be machined in local workshops. Some buses were 1940's vintage British buses, and still going strong. I wonder if Cuba is the same way. Living in conditions of strict hardship have an effect on the people, and either pulverize them, or bring them together. I sensed more of the latter, in a quiet sort of way. Once the bus had re-crossed the Thanlwinn River bridge, the driver stopped briefly for some reason, and I got out to look at a bread-oven that had caught my eye.

All over south and S.E. Asia there are bread-ovens, tandoors, which are used for baking various forms of flat breads. In Xin Jiang, the Uighur "nan" breads are baked in this way: a coal fire is lit at the bottom of the clay (or brick) oven, and when the bricks are hot enough, the coals are removed, and the "dough disks" are slapped onto the vertical sides of the oven, and they stick there, like limpet mines; when the bread is baked, it is peeled off the brick wall, and is ready to eat. The Uighur ovens make a good bread, but it is hard to make the "dough disks" stick to the wall of the oven (at least I think so). The Burmese variant had a big hole on one side of the clay fire-chamber, and some form of tray or platform on the floor of the fire-chamber, inside. It seemed a very good way to make bread. The people there thought it very funny that a tourist would take such interest in a common, mud-brick tandoor.

The bus went on. As usual, music was piped in. In Laos, Thailand and Burma the popular / folk music seems to have a lot in common, especially with the twanging guitar and the wooded knocker percussion instrument. Frequently, there were charity drives along the road. These drives were organized by the Buddhist monasteries, but I did not know where the money went—I assume it was for local community development. Strong loudspeakers blared out religious music, chanting, or encouragement to donate. Children with silver-painted alms bowls waited for the money. Since there were so many collection points along the road (in eight hours of driving, we must have gone through fifteen or more), and since stopping the bus and paying would have taken so long, the bus conductor folded many small-denomination bills into thin strips, and tucked them behind a long elastic band (mounted on the bus door) that was able to hold a row of ten or more folded bills. Each time the bus came to a collection point, he drew out one folded bill, and flicked it to the waiting children. He was very accurate, and sometimes scored a hit in the collection bowl. The bus driver did not have to stop. The Buddhist religion, the monasteries, the monks, the charity drives, the all-night loudspeaker preaching services are totally a part of the life of the people here. Nowhere, no, not even in Tibet, have I seen a people so totally absorbed in and a part of their religion, and their religion a part of them.

It was a long drive back into Rangoon, a long drive. At times, I wanted the city to suddenly appear and the ride to over, but at times it was better just letting Burma "happen" around me. It is sure psychological and cultural death to allow agendas, timetables, objectives and petty personal projects to dominate one's life in a place like Burma; you have to be a part of, or at least benignly accept being a part of the "vibrant amber". The roads in Burma are often like paved English country lanes—without the immediate hedges, mind you—and they meander everywhere at times. This is not surprising, given Burma's colonial past. Potholes were not really a problem, although it appeared the people were forced into doing the corvée, which is really

horrible work. At noon, the bus made the lunch stop. I liked the curries, stews and grilled fish, but never liked the "side salads" of watercress, half a small lime and thin chili pepper, as I was deathly afraid of schistosomes and other evil parasites lurking in the raw vegetables. The cooked food was fine. The restaurant had no walls, contained ten or fifteen small food stalls and tea stands, had a concrete latrine out back, and was fine to eat in. I was in my usual "culture-shock / lone-wolf" mode; I ate my food, and talked to nobody. On many occasions, I am afraid to speak, or don't know what to say, or just want to be alone. It was hard to choose the dishes, as the serving pots were covered, and I did not know what was inside. With some vendors, I could pick up each lid and look inside, but here, in a busy lunch canteen during the lunch hour, I did not feel comfortable doing that. Language was essential, but since I did not have it, I either pointed, or was helped by someone. I thought: one must adapt to the conditions one faces... one must adapt, and never complain, or one will fall down one more level into anomie. Since I was isolated, almost completely, I felt that the best way to deal with these surroundings was to float, to drift through the Burmese cultural sea like a piece of plankton in the Sargasso Sea. When one is with the general population in a place like Burma, there is no viable alternative. In time, I came to think that this "drifting through life" approach is not a "cop-out", and it is more than a survival strategy; it is a way of life, and a way of coming to terms with one's surroundings, transcending them, and even enjoying them. When one reaches this point of acceptance, then Burma can take on a new level of meaning, and life becomes easier.

After lunch, the bus continued on its way to Rangoon. We passed oil-palm trees and small settlements, passed some more charity drive money-collection points, and crossed the same rail line from yesterday. Every five or ten minutes, somewhere amidst the interminable green sea of rice fields, resting on the horizon, sat a gold-painted stupa atop its whitewashed base; some rested inside a small grove of ancient trees, since there was a monastery there, and not out in the open field. The irrigation canals started to become bigger, and down some of them chugged "long-tail" boats carrying their freight, as they had for such a long time. In time the dream ended, the bus passed through the thronged streets of Rangoon, and we arrived. I went straight back to the Motherland 2 Inn, and with it, the archetypal "Lonely Planet" guesthouse culture, showered, ate, and slept.

I stayed in Rangoon for a day or so before the next side trip, to Pathein. During this time, I did my shopping. It seems strange that, in all of Asia, I should consider the Aung San market in downtown Rangoon to be the place where I "do my shopping". I have dragged my sorry tail through countless bus stations, train stations, cheap hotels, trash restaurants, public toilets of all descriptions, airports, a few genuine tourist sites, wayside cafés, markets, barbershops, and much else besides. I feel as if all of S.E. Asia, east Asia, and now, a slowly growing part of central Asia is becoming my playground. I like to wander around the Aung San market. It is a two storey affair, built in drab late-Imperial style (1920's?), with a colonnade around much of it. There are six parts, or blocks, to it. Inside, as in any major market or bazaar of the East, one can find almost anything one wants. There is cloth in profusion, ethnic products made in lacquer or hardwood, as well as Burmese musical instruments and recordings. However, the market is most well-known for its jewelry. "Licensed dealers" are packed into the central block, and their shops overflow into the surrounding blocks, and into the upstairs spaces. Jewelry made with rubies and gold is most common, but there is a steady trade in the other stones too. The tourists come here with the inevitability of rainfall; the dealers are waiting for them, and charge very high prices.

I went to the markets without a purpose, and with a purpose. First, I will discuss the "without a purpose" part. There were many times when I wanted only to drift about, buying nothing, letting the dreams of purchase or observation wander where they would, seeing something and letting the imagination carry me forward through five dream sequences in the space of one or two minutes. There is something about S.E. Asia that makes drifting, wandering, aimlessly blowing around like cottonwood "fluff" very easy; in fact, many people from the west have done this. In the Aung San market, as in many other places in Asia, one can disappear and drift among people, as if they were walking trees—people in shape, and appearance, but not in speech or interaction. This is highly addictive. While wandering among the stalls, I had to "sweep" the immediate area with one glance and move on, all in the space of one or two seconds. If I lingered, even for so much as a second more, the shopkeeper would call out to me, and try to persuade me to buy something. Two things are very clear here. First, the Burmese have extraordinary powers of knowing what your eyeballs are looking at, even at oblique angles; they can pull off the item you were looking at, even when the range is fifteen or twenty feet, and the item is small, and surrounded by other objects. Second (and this I resented), the culture of the local salesmanship seemed to follow the dictum, "We will do your choosing for you. We will choose for you; you just pay." I prefer, "I will do my own choosing! Don't choose for me. You are here to serve me, and not the other way around." So, here is another point of "cultural misunderstanding". Therefore, I would walk somewhat quickly around the stalls, scanning globally for general things, always trying to stay one step ahead of the shopkeeper's eyes—and they were so very perceptive! They did not like this. I think the best thing to do in these Asian bazaars is to know exactly beforehand what one wants, know which stall or stalls the object can be found, and then launch a "hit-and-run" raid on that dealer: walk in, strike a deal, and leave quickly, before the others realize what has happened. Do not bring a friend, especially a "browsing shopper"! Keep your "close relationship" shopkeepers separate from this strategy: they can be cultivated, and the relationship enjoyed; the "one-off" shopkeepers are expendable. Also, use small change, especially when dealing with the poorer dealers, as they hate "breaking" large bills. Keep your money in various places about your body, so as to make life more difficult for the thieves: the "big stuff" deep against your bosom, and the "small stuff" in different, easily accessible pockets. If you know the price of what you want, you can have it near at hand. Successful bazaar buying is like planning and executing an assassination in a busy café. Of course, if you want to be "social" and "culturally appropriate", then you should not behave this way. Social etiquette has its place, and "getting results" also has its place... but do not, under any circumstances, mix them! The truly successful social misfit / wanderer itemizes and subdivides and compartmentalizes everything—and keeps it that way. The way of "integrity" leads to dissolution, and the path of fragmentation holds you together. This has been my experience, as a "global wanderer".

Second, I also went to the Aung San market with a purpose. My sister Fanny likes jewelry, so on most of the S. E. Asia excursions I bought her hairpins, bracelets and ear-rings. I like Fanny: she takes anything of interest and value; hold out a Burmese bracelet made in *lapis lazuli*, and she will take it from you in a flash—and she is grateful, too. Burma is a jewelry shopper's paradise, so far (2006) equaled by none. Usually, the Burmese taste in jewelry is much too heavy; their women are literally dripping in precious stones, and it is way overdone. However, if one looks for basic materials, or the occasional stray piece of jewelry, one can satisfy one's taste in

minimalist jewelry. So, in my quest for basic jewelry for Fanny, I found some useful stones. One gem merchant provided me with six sapphires, for three pairs of ear-rings. Some of the stones were two or three carats. Of course, they were flawed all over, but at a distance of ten feet, with the stones dangling down from the ears, who is going to know they are not gem-quality sapphires? In any case, Fanny liked them. Going back to the market, there are good purchases out there, but one must be willing to wander endlessly around the market, both downstairs and upstairs, paying very little attention to the shopkeepers, who want you to follow their own ideas. Wander, scan and digest; digest, scan and wander. Hour after hour, throughout the day; hold your own counsel, and don't heed what they ask. The day outside, with its impossible hot afternoons, passes very quickly. Inside, the light is a little bit dim, and gets dimmer when the city electricity supply fails—which is quite often. As a result of power problems, there are many small generators inside the building, so during a power outage, the air is heavy with exhaust fumes. All this is normal operating procedure here; this is one of the stranger reasons why the East is such a liberating place to be. Kipling was right when he made the comment in "Mandalay": "Take me somewhere east of Suez, where there ain't no Ten Commandments...."

Of course, life here was not always a party; at times, the East is ruthlessly destructive, the way overpoweringly sweet honey is destructive to the insects that are drowning in a bowl of it, on a hot summer afternoon. Burma is one of the archetypes in this matter. There was a restaurant section in one of the central blocks of the Aung San market. Inside, there were about four or five establishments, delineated only by their tables and stools. The light was poor, the dirt was hidden to a point, and the noise was enough to fray the nerves of anyone who liked a quiet place. The restaurant bosses all shouted at me to come to their place. After I had chosen one place, I kept on coming back there; the other bosses did not like that one bit, but I did not care. (Here is another "cultural pointer": when you are depressed, it is so much easier to "blow off" or passively insult someone, so be careful! At these times, the stakes in the "cultural game" are raised very high, at once, almost as if one of the demons playing roulette over your life throws down a huge pile of chips onto the table and says, "I'm raining the stakes". These times are potentially very dangerous.) I sat down and ordered some kind of curry (I do not remember what kind; I was too drowned in syrupy depression), coconut juice, and lemonade made with real lemons or limes, and which had a strange taste. The noise around me became a sort of sound shield, tuning out all that was happening around me. A little sound can disturb any deep thinking; a room full of loud people threshing out the day's commerce somehow turns into the isolation of the grave, where no one disturbs you. You are left utterly alone with your thoughts: only hope that your thoughts on that day are peaceful and pleasant. Yet, when one is unhappy, dispirited, down-and-out in one's heart, or depressed, the combination is very effective—the world goes "zoom-poof!", and you enter a new reality (or unreality), and everything is different. Was it also the heat, and the complete anomie of Burma? Probably all of them.... How strange it is! Here I am in Xin Jiang, just before my next sophomore writing class, writing this before getting dressed to go to work, and yet that restaurant in Aung San is as real to my thinking as if I were there now. Sometimes, I wish I *was* there now, just to wander around.

A few days after I had returned to Rangoon from Moulmein, I decided to go west to Pathein. To get to Pathein, you can take an overnight boat through the network of waterways making up the lower Irrawaddy River, or you can take the bus. I went out by boat, and back by bus. Everything takes so long to process in Burma—as in many other countries—but the secret to

dealing with slow paperwork is to book your tickets two or more days in advance, to use very new and crisp dollar bills (they detest old bills, and big bills too), and bring a book with you when you are waiting for the ticket seller to show up. Losing your patience will profit nobody. As before, I booked a cabin, for the sake of privacy; I just wanted to stare out at the passing river-banks, with no one to disturb me. If you have the money, then the ticket comes—but not always.

Two days later, I came to the booking office a few hours early, just to establish my position; I sat down and read. Somehow, the local snack bar was not suitable, and the staff was not so welcoming. I just wandered around, looking at the world going by. The river is forever muddy, and never lets you see into the deep waters. Boat traffic goes back and forth, up and down without rest. Sometimes the boats are tied up parallel to each other, so that to get to your boat, you have to walk across two other boats, all of them full of baggage, passengers and screaming children. I locked myself into the cabin and waited for the boat to leave Rangoon. About an hour later, the flow of life seemed to become quieter and the engine beat a steady, reassuring background sound, and I came out onto the middle-level starboard deck to have a look. The imposition of the city was gone, and the high banks of the ferry channel hemmed in the boat. Over the banks, the flat rice-bowl of Burma stretched away into the distance. As the sun had just gone down, the light quality was very pleasant, and the colors were peaceful and subdued. The workers had left their labors and gone home; the fields showed no sign of movement. The "puh-puh-puh-puh" of the diesels bounced back off the river-bank walls, and the splashing bow wake washed the mind free of all the unhappy thoughts of the city, and of anomie. There was no one on the deck at that time. This peaceful time lasted about twenty minutes before the boat passed under a large bridge under construction. After a while, all was stable again. I did not stay out on the upper deck at all hours of the deep night, the way I had the year before, but that short time looking out over the evening landscape from the boat was very peaceful. There now remains one last boat journey in Burma—from Rangoon up the Irrawaddy to Mandalay, a journey of three or four days. Hopefully, I can do that later on... soon.

The boat's galley served up some stir-fried vegetable dish, as well as the usual Burmese milk tea. The food was hot, safe and clean enough; the deck was shabby; I would not have it any other way. If everything was spotlessly clean, with a sanitized world inside, the landscape passing by through the plate glass picture windows, and that land outside a living version of a magazine picture, what good would it be? I would far rather ride up the muddy-brown river, appreciating the variations in the light and shadows on the floor of the galley, as the naked light bulb swung gently about from the ceiling. What a paradox...I was obviously among the Burmese people, going up their river, sitting with them, eating their food, happy to be there; at the same time, I was a million miles from them in terms of identity, communication and purpose.

The boat arrived in Pathein the next morning. Pathein is famous for its parasols; these locally made "sun umbrellas" are essential equipment here, since the sun is so strong. Once again, I shocked the local restaurant owner, as I had in Moulmein: I chose to take the first available bus back to Rangoon. What?! No trip to the coastal beaches? No visit to the parasol workshops? This time, they really thought I was crazy. I saw something that really turned me off in Pathein. There was a foreign couple in that restaurant (I will not say which country), and they also wanted to go to Rangoon. The husband was placid and stoical, but his wife complained to him about the dirt, the poor condition of the bus, road safety, and so on. I could not wait to be rid of them; I also pitied the husband, for having to live the rest of his days with someone like her.

The day was very, very hot, and the sun was harsh on the skin. I can see now why Pathein became famous for the manufacture of parasols. In time I was given a seat in the front of a bus. I waited there for a while, "cooking" some more; after twenty minutes we set out for Rangoon. The roads were the usual "super-capillaries" that Burma runs on; it is very rare to see anything bigger than a dual-carriageway, save on the major routes approaching Rangoon. Again, I saw some local people doing the corveé, laying crushed stone, by hand, for the road-bed. Why didn't they use machinery? It seemed very cruel to do that. (I also saw such road-bed, made with broken, hand-placed pieces of limestone, in certain mountain roads in Yunnan. Most of S.E. Asia lies in an enormous limestone belt.) As usual, I looked out at the land, and thought about many things. I will not bore you with other details; besides, I have forgotten them. We reached Rangoon, and I retreated back to the cocoon-like security of the Motherland 2 Inn. I cannot understate how significant places like Motherland 2 are! It is almost like home.

A day or two later, I left Burma, and went back to Bangkok; in a short time, I was on my way back to Kunming to see friends. Was this second trip to Burma worth it? I made some seemingly pointless trips, bought a lot of jewelry for someone else (not Fanny), who I later broke up with, got hot, spent the usual money, and not much more. However, I am still glad I went, for I have come to realize that both Burma and Kyrgyzstan are the best travel countries around China to visit. They each have their own charm; moreover, since they are located at different latitudes, one serves for the summer, and the other for the winter. It is the almost perfect seasonal rendezvous for an "Asian expat snowbird". I like Burma very much. The people there do not bother you. The country is still charming, because of its remaining behind while the rest of the world got drunk on globalization and modernization. However, even I hope that the basic "pillars of infrastructure" (i.e., roads, schools, hospitals, railways, bridges, tunnels, forests, reservoirs, basic agriculture, cottage industries, and so on) will be developed, making the life of the people happier. I hope I will not, in my lifetime, see the Burmese forests raped, and the land discarded for lack of any further use. In today's crazy, hyper-developed world, we all need back-water, sleepy, laid-back, seemingly unconcerned nations like Burma. I do not want people to be angry with me for saying this (although I think they would be); however, I do think that Burma and its people have something valuable to offer all the rest of us. If I did not run off to Central Asia, or stay in Xin Jiang, I would consider buying an apartment somewhere in Rangoon, and setting up shop as part-time English tutor, hack-writer, and short-term traveler. In this respect, Burma has it all.

However, perhaps it will not turn out this way, for the winds of change, the pressures of geopolitical reality, the demands of trade and grand strategy are encroaching on Burma in a way that may prove to be irresistible. Burma is one of the most important of the "border nations" surrounding China, because China needs south-west ocean frontage to engage in its future African and Middle East interests. (This is why Kunming in Yunnan, and Urumqi in Xin Jiang are such important regional capitals; they will play a major role in the unfolding events of the 21st Century. Both S.E. Asia, as well as Central Asia will be influenced through these two cities.) In addition, there is an extensive network of trans-national highways appearing throughout S.E. Asia, and the increase in commerce and trade will affect how the region looks. Much of this is good for the well-being of the people, but I, for one, wish to enjoy Burma and the other S.E. Asian nations in their present form, and now. In the future, when they are doing well, I hope to be running around in old buses in Afghanistan, or Turkmenistan, or Tajikistan, before they too "come of age".