

Myanmar, the country formerly known as Burma, is in the throes of a historic transition. The military has given up direct rule after more than a half century in power. Parliamentary elections have been held, and the long-imprisoned democracy campaigner, Aung San Suu Kyi, has been sworn in as a member of parliament. She visited Thailand in late May – the first time she has been allowed to travel abroad since 1988 – followed by a visit to several European countries, including Norway to collect the Nobel Peace Prize that was originally awarded to her in 1991.

The University of Hong Kong has been lending support to Aung San Suu Kyi and the people of Myanmar for years, inside and outside the country. Since 2006, at least 20 students from Myanmar have enrolled in a variety of programmes at HKU, including Arts, Education, International and Public Affairs, Journalism and Media Studies, Law, Medicine and Social Work. Aung San Suu Kyi herself was awarded a degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa* by HKU earlier this year. Students and faculty members have worked with Myanmar refugees along the Thai-Myanmar border and visited five European countries this month.

This programme of support has operated largely under the stewardship of Professor Ian Holliday, the former Dean of Social Sciences. Holliday says there is a “massive need” to build capacity at the universities inside Myanmar itself.

“During the interwar period, Rangoon University (now Yangon University) was one of the most successful universities in Asia,” he says. Aung San Suu Kyi’s father, General Aung San, was once the editor of Rangoon University’s student newspaper. But following a pro-democracy student uprising in 1988, the quality and accessibility of tertiary education in the country decreased dramatically.

As the country rebuilds its universities, Holliday says, HKU is ready to offer support. “The University of Hong Kong is an Asian leader, operating on an Asian canvas, with an Asian mandate.”

In March, he and other representatives from HKU met with the deputy minister and the director of higher education in the Myanmar capital, along with the rectors of Yangon University and the Yangon University of

To Myanmar



Foreign Languages. Plans are underway to bring faculty and administrators from Myanmar universities to Hong Kong to shadow their counterparts at HKU, as well as to train staff in country to develop curricula and research programmes.

The HKU library has launched a book drive, "Books for Myanmar", in order to begin rebuilding the collections at Yangon University. The library has already identified 6,000 of its own duplicate titles for donation. It is also collecting books on a variety of topics from HKU's faculty and staff.

HKU students have been passionately involved with the people and culture of Myanmar

A key part of HKU's engagement with Myanmar has been the MOEI programme, which was formed by the Faculty of Social Sciences to provide intensive English-language education for Myanmar migrant children and adults located along the Moei River, which forms the border between Myanmar and Thailand. The organisation also works to boost external engagement with Myanmar and to promote Myanmar advocacy.

Every summer since 2008, between 30 and 35 HKU students have participated in the programme, to teach English to thousands of refugees and unofficial migrants in the border area.

Participants in the MOEI programme have also been instrumental in promoting awareness of Myanmar culture on campus through such student groups as "Connecting Myanmar", a non-profit initiative that aims to provide medical, educational and other services to the Myanmar refugees and to nurture HKU students as leaders in solving the problems the country faces during its reconstruction.

This year, a new pilot scheme facilitated by U Aung Kyaw Oo, the Consul General of the Union of Myanmar in Hong Kong, sent two HKU undergraduates to

teach English at the Yangon University of Foreign Languages. In addition, the Campus YMCA programme

will take students from HKU, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Polytechnic University on a trip to Myanmar this summer to help provide medical care and other services.

Here in Hong Kong, there has been a student-organised "Burma Week" on campus for the past four years, featuring forums on Myanmar current events, cultural exchanges, and a film festival. In mid-June this year, the sixth annual HKU Myanmar conference, with the theme "Myanmar in Reform 2012", was held on campus, bringing together prominent Chinese- and English-speaking scholars as well as political leaders from Myanmar.

The University of Hong Kong is proud to have stood side by side with the people of Myanmar in the past, and continues to do so at the dawn of this hopeful new era.

With Love



AUNG SAN SUU KYI

Photo courtesy: Reuters/OTHK

“... you (HKU) have done so much to help the cause of democracy in Burma...”

In recognition of Aung San Suu Kyi’s commitment to the non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights, The University of Hong Kong bestowed upon her a degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa* at its 186th Congregation on March 15, 2012.

“Laws concern us in many ways, not just the making of laws, but the administration of laws,” she told the assembled audience by video link. “We are, at the moment, thinking of laws in many ways, laws as part of the legislative process, laws as part of the judicial process.”

“Only with a strong, independent, honest judiciary, and a strong, independent legislature that truly reflects the will of the people, will we be able to look on laws as a protective body for our people. That is why I am so honoured to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Laws,” she said.

“People should not be categorised as good or evil, wise or stupid. It would be much more sensible to divide them simply into learners and non-learners. The highest form of learning would be that which makes us caring and responsible citizens of this world, and equips us with the intellectual means necessary to translate our concerns into specific deeds.”

In presenting her to the congregation, Professor Michael Wilkinson of HKU’s Faculty of Law said, “Daw Suu’s influence has been and remains truly global. She is an inspiration to us all.”

At the conferral, Daw Suu said she hopes to visit HKU in person in the near future, and lauded HKU’s ongoing support for the Myanmar people. “I will be able to come to you, and be part of your campus life, for perhaps just

a very short period,” she said. “But even a short period, even a matter of days, or even a matter of hours, would mean a great deal to me, as you have done so much to help the cause of democracy in Burma, simply by your interest and your enthusiastic support.”

Aung San Suu Kyi was a key figure in forming the pro-democracy party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), in the late 1980s. She was already under house arrest by Burma’s military regime when her party won the 1990 general election in a landslide victory, and the ruling generals never allowed the NLD to take power. By the time of her release in November 2010, she had spent a total of 15 years under house arrest. She had also been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1991.

HKU’s Centenary Distinguished Lecture <http://www.hku.hk/socsc/assk/>



Follow Your Heart

Carl Browne
(Internship Programme Co-ordinator,
Faculty of Social Sciences)

In 2008, an e-mail changed Carl Browne's life forever. "I was a politics and law student in the UK and was about to graduate," Browne says. "Then I got an e-mail from my university saying if you want to go to Myanmar for the summer, send this person an email."

Browne's MOEI journey began with an email to Professor Ian Holliday, then Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at HKU.

"I knew absolutely nothing about Myanmar back then," Browne says. "It was the first year when MOEI launched. Of all the MOEI participants, I was probably the least informed."

He was sent to the Myanmar refugee camps along Thailand's border with Myanmar, populated mainly by Karen refugees, and became fascinated by the people and culture he found there. Browne stayed in Nupo refugee camps, sharing rations with residents, then moved to Mae La camp to teach English. Three years later, Browne is funding a new school in Mae La Oon camp so that more of the children there can receive an education.

"I never thought of going back to London," Browne says. "The only reason why I left Mae La last month for Hong Kong is because I am managing things for MOEI. I am still connected to Mae La and Nupo and I still get to go back."

When asked why he is so passionate about working with the refugees, Browne says he is simply following his heart.

"In the refugee camps, you wake up in the morning and you are in the middle of a jungle. The food is basic, you eat two meals a day and you wash your bucket every day. People respect each other. There is a strong sense of community. Everyone is well cared for."

"My three-year experience there was amazing," Browne says. "If I'm 70 or 80 and have a few breaths left, I can say I've had more experience than any of my friends who sat at offices doing banking for five years."



An Unforgettable Experience

Edward Tsoi
(Psychology and Politics, Year Two)

Edward Tsoi, a second year social sciences student from Hong Kong, joined the MOEI programme in summer 2011 and was sent to Mae Sot, a town in Thailand bordering Eastern Myanmar that receives many refugees from the Karen tribe.

"I was shocked by how cruel the reality can be on the other side of the same continent," says Tsoi, who taught refugee children English in Mae Sot.

"I had this student. He's 14 years old, not even five feet tall. He told me his mum was killed in the civil war between his Karen tribe and the military regime. He has no siblings and his dad is away in Bangkok to earn a living."

Tsoi also recalled his shock when he assigned students to write a composition on the subject of "An Unforgettable Day".

"Unforgettable it was, for me to read what was written," Tsoi says. "My simple lesson became complicated when I got the assignments back. There was a ninth grader who described the day he saw his friend die right in front of his eyes – shot by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army."

"They think it's normal because it happens so often," he says. "This was the most shocking of all, to believe that it is common to see family and friends get killed every now and then."

For Tsoi, his unforgettable experience with the young refugees was the beginning of a new journey. "There was a bond," he says. "How could there not be? I did not want to leave, I want to do more for them."

He started planning what became HKU's "Connecting Myanmar" programme, which will do more than teach the refugees English. "We have architecture students, journalism students, nursing and medicine students," he says. "We can build schools, report news, and help with health education."



Don't Forget Us

Anushri K Alva (BSocSc 2010)

Anushri K Alva, a graduate in International Politics and Sociology from India, first entered the MOEI programme in 2008, with a three-week placement at the Mae La camp for temporarily displaced people.

"I find the phrase 'temporarily displaced people' amusing," says Alva, "because many people in Mae La have been there for more than a decade and the situation in Myanmar has only worsened in that time."

She found that the camp, home to more than 50,000 refugees, reminded her of her hometown in India. "It had the charm of a quiet, scenic village," she recalls. "The chickens protecting their young ones, the pigs and their nonchalant manner, the bamboo huts and the muddy road were all so familiar."

Familiar, that is, except for the armed guards, the jeeps of the various international organisations, and the unavoidable presence, in the minds of the refugees, of the troubles that drove them from their home.

"I remember we would play a game where one student would stand in the middle of the circle and say, 'Everyone who is wearing a red shirt stand up and change places', or something similar," Alva says. "One time, one of my students said, 'Everyone whose mother is dead, stand up and change places.'"

Stunned, Alva watched as the students laughed and scrambled to change places, as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

A week before Alva was due to return home, one of her students suggested that the teachers at the camp "are like the weather: they keep changing."

"He wasn't angry with me," Alva explains. "He was just stating a fact. Many of [my students] had no idea where their family was anymore, and they had escaped from Myanmar years ago. Being abandoned was part and parcel of life for them."

She returned to Mae La in January 2011 and once again her students grabbed her hands. "Teacher, please don't forget us," the child pleaded. "Please come back."

Speaking Out for the Kachin

**Luxi Fang
(Psychology and French, Year Two)**

While the world celebrates the apparent return to democracy in Myanmar and Aung Sang Suu Kyi's landslide victory in parliamentary elections there in April, Luxi Fang, a second-year undergraduate in social sciences, is working to help some of the country's still beleaguered ethnic minorities.

"More people need to know about Myanmar in depth," says Fang. "Not just in a superficial way from BBC or CNN news, which only talk about the changing democracy, coming peace and Aung San Suu Kyi all the time. That is not true for the whole of Myanmar. Many ethnic groups, like the Kachin, are still suffering from the civil war."

The Kachin ethnic minority has been fighting the Myanmar army intermittently for more than 60 years, and oppression is still a fact of life.

Many Kachin people fled as a result to border areas controlled by the Kachin Independence Organization, or across the border into China's Yunnan province, says Fang, a mainland Chinese. "There is not so much information about the Kachin compared with Karen refugees in Thailand. I think it's mainly because of the Chinese government's denial of any foreign interference."

Determined to do something for the refugees, Fang packed her bags in May to head for Kachin State, in the northernmost corner of the country. She found it was difficult to get there via Yangon, so she drove in directly from Yunnan. "I crossed the border on a motorbike, illegally," she says. "It is easy for me since I am Chinese. Many Chinese cross the border every day to do business with Kachin people."

Fang is spending the summer visiting refugee camps and meeting community-based organisations to explore the possibility of involving HKU's "Connecting Myanmar" programme with local social services.

Her experience with the refugees was transformational, Fang says, and "I don't want to take my easy life for granted anymore."

"After my graduation, I want to do documentaries related to Myanmar, possibly with Filmaid international," she says. "I want to provide refugees with another way of being heard."



Photo: Christopher Davy

Writing Stories for a Global Audience

Swe Win (MJ 2009)

Swe Win, one of the Myanmar students who studied at HKU's Journalism and Media Studies Centre, has been signed on by the *New York Times* to write opinion pieces from Myanmar several times a month.

Swe Win returned to Myanmar in February, after receiving his Master of Journalism degree and then working for a Myanmar exile newspaper in Thailand. The *Times's* web site published his story in March describing how it felt to return home after years of exile.

He has since written several op-ed columns for the newspaper.

While happy to be home, Swe Win said he remains cautious about the recent and much-noted reforms by Myanmar's former military regime.

Referring to Aung San Suu Kyi, the long-imprisoned democracy campaigner who is free after many years and is now a member of Myanmar's new parliament, he wrote: "As a friend of mine quipped recently, while freedom may have come for her, it has not for the rest of us yet."

Swe Win's participation in a student movement in 1998 led to his arrest for anti-government activities. He went on to spend seven long years in Myanmar's notorious prisons.

With a scholarship from the Open Society Foundations, he enrolled in HKU's Journalism and Media Studies in 2008 under the pseudonym Kyaw Kyaw Thein.

He returned to Yangon, the former Myanmar capital, in February to work for *The Irrawaddy* as the magazine's first correspondent there.

He says his studies at HKU "gave me an understanding of how to write stories for a global audience" – a skill he is now putting to practical use.



Protecting the Rights of the Voiceless

Pum Kai Htang (LLM 2010)

An internationally known human rights lawyer, Aung Htoo, who visited the HKU Centre for Comparative and Public Law in 2010, looks for the day that common law is re-established in Myanmar. In a paper, "Seeking Judicial Power: With a Special Focus on Burma's Judiciary," he called for a judiciary "that is not only independent from legislative and executive controls but also neutral, objective, competent and free from all external influences."

Perhaps that time is coming, as Myanmar struggles to transform itself from a military dictatorship to a democracy. Until that time, HKU Law graduate Pum Kai Htang is working to improve the rights of Myanmar citizens outside the country.

"I am currently with an international organisation in an Asian country where thousands of Myanmar migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees are struggling with life's challenges," he says. "My main job: protecting the rights of the voiceless."

While studying for a Master of Laws degree in Human Rights, Pum Kai Htang worked at the Hong Kong Refugees Advice Centre, meeting asylum seekers from many countries. The work improved his professionalism, he says, and also taught him about "changing people's lives for the better".

Of his current work, he says, "It's no easy job working to protect the rights of your own people in a foreign land. However, the knowledge, the skills, the confidence and the experience that I acquired while at HKU have always helped me overcome obstacles and challenges, and move forward amid difficulties." ■

"My law studies have transformed me and made me a professional with the power and the ability to change individuals and societies for the better."