

2021

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WEICHOLZ GLOBAL FILM SERIES

WRITTEN PRE-FILM LECTURE BY DR. JOHN PFEIFER

THE ROAD TO MANDALAY Directed by Midi Z
Myanmar/Thailand (2017)



WEDNESDAY, JULY 14 AT 7PM

“Mandalay” is a poem written by Rudyard Kipling. It was published in 1890 when Burma was still a part of colonial India (1824-1948) and a British protectorate. The short poem expresses a British soldier’s longing for the exoticism of the East and the Burmese girl he left behind. Four of the six stanzas of the poem end with the line, “... On the Road to Mandalay.”

BY THE old Moulmein Pagoda, lookin’ lazy at the sea,
There’s a Burma girl a-settin’, and I know she thinks o’ me;
For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they say:
“Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!”

Midi Z’s contemporary drama, *The Road to Mandalay*, lacks the sincere longing for Burma and the girl he left behind implied by the Kipling poem from which it derives its name. In my opinion, the director’s choice of title may suggest a sense of sarcasm or irony. *The Road to Mandalay* is paved not with fond memories and opportunity but rather hardship and uncertainty. His film reflects a Shakespearean-type tragedy with a young hero possessing an urgent desire to escape his war-torn, poverty-stricken homeland while at the same time struggling with a sense that he has abandoned his family and friends.

The story follows a young couple from the same Burmese hometown, Lashio, who meet while smuggling themselves into Thailand, but their love is doomed as they begin their new lives as illegal immigrants in Bangkok. According to Midi Z, “The tragedy lies with the man’s wish to return to Burma with enough money to open a business in his homeland, but the woman who is more ambitious wants to find a better life overseas.” (Cinevue Film Revue, September 27, 2017)

Note: In 1989, “Myanmar” replaced “Burma” as the official name of the country. Many Myanmar people still call their country Burma, as does Midi Z in most of his interviews

In order to better understand tonight’s film, I want to share some interesting facts about the film, the film’s director (an emigrant himself) and his extraordinary use of visual metaphors, and a little about the war-torn country of Burma, now Myanmar.

FACTS ABOUT THE ROAD TO MANDALAY

The Road to Mandalay was written and directed by Midi Z. The first draft of the script was finished in 2010, but it would take him five years and a dozen more revisions before the final script was ready. It was the first time that he had a fully written script before shooting the film, as his previous films were all made guerrilla-style on a shoe-string budget that required constant improvisations.

The project became the first four-way co-production between Taiwan, France, Germany and Myanmar. According to Patrick Mao Huang, the film's principal producer, "The majority of the funding was from Taiwan, Midi Z's adopted homeland." Although the actual budget is not disclosed, Huang claims that "it is Midi Z's biggest budget film, bigger than all his previous films added together." It should be noted that by American standards this is still a very small amount. The average of his first three films was approximately \$15,000 U.S. dollars.

The shoot took place entirely in Thailand over 23 days. Around 70% of filming was on location in Bangkok, with the remainder taking place along the Thai border.

The film premiered at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival (2016), the world's oldest film festival and one of the "Big Three" along with Cannes and Berlin. The film was not selected to compete in the main competition for the Golden Lion Award for Best Picture, but it did receive the FEDEORA Award for Best Film. FEDEORA is the Federation of Film Critics of Europe and the Mediterranean. The group selects one film at each of the major film festivals to receive the award. The film was selected for screening in the Contemporary World Cinema section at the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF).

The Road to Mandalay won four awards at the Asia-Pacific Film Festival in Los Angeles including Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Art Direction. It also won the Press Award at the Taipei Film Festival. *The Road to Mandalay* is the first of Midi Z's films to be shown in his home country, Myanmar.

The film earned 7.1 million New Taiwan Dollars (NT) during its distribution in Taiwan, the equivalent of \$255,600 U.S. dollars. The U.S. distribution rights were purchased by Film Movement. The film did not receive a U.S. theatrical release, but digital streaming and the DVD became available in January 2021.

THE LIFE OF MIDI Z, AN ASIAN FILM DIRECTOR AND TAIWANESE IMMIGRANT FROM BURMA

According to the film's director, the Burmese people believe that there are only three ways to escape poverty. "One is to become a drug smuggler, one is to work in the jade mines, and the third is to smuggle yourself into another country... Thailand is always the main destination for the Burmese. Many of my family members and relatives have done it." (*Screen Daily* interview by Silvia Wong, Aug. 31, 2016)

Myanmar-born, Taiwanese director Midi Z (born Chao Te-yin) knows first-hand the experience of leaving Burma for a better life. He was born in Lashio, Myanmar, to parents of Chinese descent on Dec. 18, 1982. The youngest of five children, Chao Te-yin grew up poor as the son of a cook and a doctor who was unable to practice because of a chronic illness. "My mom ran a very small noodle shop, which was not a very stable business. My father was sick quite often, even though he's a doctor. Besides running the noodle shop, my mom also worked as a cook for weddings. My eldest brother worked as a jade miner and sent us money, but not very

often, only once in three years. Mostly, our mother took care of us.” (*Asia Society* interview, Feb. 27, 2015)

At age 14, Chao won a scholarship to attend high school in Taiwan. He credits his mother and older sister for supporting his dream to leave Burma. “My mom and sister supported me by getting me a passport, which wasn’t easy at all at that time. We needed half a million kyat, which was enough to buy a house. It was very difficult. My sister was working illegally in Thailand. She sent me some money and my mom borrowed the rest to get me the passport to escape my hometown... Before I passed the exam, I had a plan to work as a drug dealer. I really did plan that! I have to say that if I didn’t come to Taiwan, I could have been a gangster, a drug dealer, or a minority recruit in the army. I did plan to work with my friends and relatives [to sell drugs] when I was 14 after graduating from junior high school.” (*Asia Society* interview)

Over the course of the next decade, Chao Te-yin became Midi Z, one of Asia’s most promising film directors. He received both his bachelor’s degree and master’s degree in design at National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. Although he thought that he might eventually return to Myanmar, he renounced his Burmese citizenship in 2011, and became a naturalized citizen of Taiwan. Democratic reforms in his home country have enabled him to visit his family on occasion, but his films and criticism of Myanmar make him an unwelcome guest.

Most of his films serve as explorations into his roots as an ethnic Han Chinese person living in Myanmar. His first feature, *Return to Burma*, follows the homecoming of a Burmese guest-worker in Taiwan who must bring back the ashes of a friend who died in a fatal accident in Taipei. His second film, *Poor Folk*, is a tragicomic film about his poverty-stricken country where everything revolves around money. The male protagonist is forced to work as a hustler in Bangkok, Thailand, in order to save his sister from the hands of human traffickers in Burma.

Ice Poison, his third feature film, was selected as Taiwan’s Submission for Best International Feature Film at the 87th Academy Awards (2015). This film follows the partnership of a poor young farmer and a young woman who has just escaped an arranged marriage. The pair are lured into one of the few lucrative business opportunities available in Myanmar: selling crystal meth around town.

Midi Z was named Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker of the Year at the 53rd Golden Horse Awards in 2016 upon the release of his fourth feature film, *The Road to Mandalay*. According to the director, the character of the young woman in this film is partially drawn from the real-life experience of his own sister who worked illegally in Bangkok for years. The young man in the film works at a textile factory, which was the first job of his brother as an undocumented worker in Thailand.

Although Midi Z has lived half his life overseas as an immigrant and now a citizen of Taiwan, he still has firm roots in his homeland, and plans to continue making small, independent productions about Burma/ Myanmar.

“...People, coming from Yangon (Rangoon - the largest city in Myanmar), think that only movies that use Burmese are ‘Myanmar movies’, then it shows you haven’t been to any other place in Myanmar. Ninety percent of the country does not have running water, only Yangon does; and only 40 percent of the people dress the way you do, so if the actors are not dressed in sarongs in the movie, it doesn’t mean it’s not Myanmar... All of you who live in Yangon, have you traveled to 90 percent of Myanmar like I have? No. Why aren’t you willing to do so? Because the roads are too rough? ...Otherwise, why aren’t any of you filming the many things that can be filmed in Myanmar? Why is it left to me, someone based in Taiwan?” (Interview with Midi Z, *Cinema Escapist*, Dec. 22, 2016)

THE DIRECTING STYLE OF MIDI Z

If one were asked to describe the directorial style of Midi Z, most critics and reviewers would classify his style as social realism. “The broad term of social realism has come to represent numerous examples of films that reflect a range of social environments and issues, in a manner that rejects the artifice and escapism of more classically oriented narrative models” (David Forest, “Social Realism: Art, Nationhood and Politics,” 2013). Simply put, social realism is a term used by film critics and reviewers to describe films that employ candid portraits of character and plot without embellishment. Social realism as a genre of film focuses on topical issues alive in a modern society which is represented by different ideologies. Themes such as money, drugs, prostitution and sex are quite usual in modern contemporary social realism films, as well as, class, religion and political views.

Some examples of social realism that you may have seen in past Weicholz Global Series offerings are the following films: *Corpus Christi* (2019), directed by Polish film director Jan Komasa; *I Daniel Blake* (2016), directed by British film director and social activist Ken Loach; and *11 Flowers* (2012), directed by Chinese director Wang Xiaoshuai over the frequent objections of Chinese censors. This year’s Academy Award-winning film *Nomadland* (2021), directed by Chloe Zhao, is a masterpiece of the social realism genre.

Although Midi Z is a social realist, he often employs images as visual metaphors that are striking, provocative and surreal. *The Road to Mandalay* clearly fits the criteria of a socially realistic film, but the director at times substitutes his dedication to social realism in favor of an aesthetic dream-like metaphor. Two examples from this film serve as evidence.

First, the textile factory in which the lovers work is an unusually well-lit, clean environment. Midi Z resists the temptation to portray the factory as a miserable sweat shop, instead making it appear to be a favorable place in which to work. The young woman is placed into a production line of workers. As the tangle of white strings automatically weave their way into fabric, the strings form what looks like a spider web entrapping the young woman. A snare that confines her in a dependent enslavement to both the young man’s desires and the exploitative nature of illegal immigration.

Perhaps the most striking example of visual metaphor and Midi Z’s purposeful abandonment

of social realism in favor of the dramatic is the hotel scene near the end of the film. After a setback at the textile factory, the young woman stands alone in a dimly lit hotel room prepared to sell her most precious commodity. There is an ominous knock at the door, and the realism is replaced by a touch of magical surrealism that seems even more distressing than the harsh reality of the real event. The naive viewer may think this is a bizarre experiment, out of place and nonsensical, but the result is a well-intentioned denunciation of the politics surrounding human migration and the sexual exploitation of those forced to live by those rules.

Midi Z's dedication to social realism, his brilliant command of visual metaphors, and the documentary-like intimacy with his characters make this a disquieting study of the costs of human displacement.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF BURMA/MYANMAR

Myanmar, also known as Burma, is the northernmost country in Southeast Asia. The country is bordered by China to the north and northeast, Laos to the east, Thailand to the southeast, Bangladesh to the west, and India to the northwest. The country also possesses about 1,430 miles of coastline along the south and southwest bordering the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. The borders are fairly porous and extremely dangerous due to human traffickers, terrorist groups, ethnic militias and rebel groups, and corrupt military forces.

Myanmar has a population of about 54 million, made up of 135 ethnic groups, not counting Chinese living in the country. Approximately 40 percent of the population doesn't speak Burmese even though Burmese is the only official language. Government authorities claim that most people in Myanmar speak Burmese. As much as 90% of the Burmese population practice Buddhism. Christianity is the second largest religion, comprising about 8% of the Myanmar population. The rest, about 2% of the population, follow Islam.

Most of the people who follow Islam are Rohingya Muslims living in the southwestern coastal area along the Bengal Bay and the border of Bangladesh. The Rohingya of Myanmar are one of the world's most persecuted minority populations without citizenship in their own homeland. "Their status is due to a long history of discriminatory and arbitrary laws, policies, and practices that have deprived and denied Rohingya people from obtaining citizenship in their native Myanmar. This further complicates their access to asylum abroad, and subjects them to a wide array of rights violations." (Alice Cuddy, BBC News, March 18, 2021)

Thousands of Rohingya have been killed and more than 700,000 fled to Bangladesh following an army crackdown in 2017. These victims of forced migration are now living in refugee camps, often in conditions of abject poverty, malnutrition and without proper access to shelter or work permits. Many of them are now compelled to take to the seas in a perilous journey to other countries in search of a better life. The Bangladesh government is asking many to return to Myanmar, but without any promise of citizenship or an end to ethnic and religious persecution, few seem willing to go back.

Burma/Myanmar has been a country that is also plagued by poverty and drug trafficking. In 2013, the Myanmar government conducted its first-ever countrywide study and found that 37 percent of the nation's population is unemployed and an average of 26 percent of the population lives in poverty.

Myanmar is the largest producer of methamphetamines in the world, with the majority of the drug "ya ba" (meaning crazy pill) passing through China and Thailand. These "crazy pills" were originally given to horses when pulling carts up steep hills and for other strenuous work. In 2009, Chinese authorities seized over 40 million tablets that had been illegally trafficked from Burma. Myanmar is also the 2nd largest supplier of opium in the world, surpassed only by Afghanistan. Illegal narcotics generate approximately 2 billion U.S. dollars in exports annually. Ethnic militias, rebel groups, and corrupt Burmese military units are believed to be heavily involved in the production and trafficking of the drugs.

Myanmar has been in the news of late because of the military coup that took place on Feb. 1, 2021. Long before this most recent political upheaval, Burma was a country most often ruled by armed forces. The country gained its independence from Britain in 1948. The first 14 years of independence were marked by several communist and ethnic-based insurgencies that sought control of the country. Despite the conflicts, Burma remained a republic until 1962, when a military coup d'état overthrew the civilian government. The military ruled the country directly or indirectly for nearly 50 years, with reports of torture and widespread human rights abuses leading to international sanctions.

In 2011, the military junta dissolved, setting the stage for national elections in 2015 that gave dissident and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi's party an overwhelming majority in parliament and a return to civilian rule. However, constitutional rules that had been established in 2008 allowed military leaders to maintain prominent positions and a number of seats within the parliament.

On Nov. 8, 2020, general elections were held again in Myanmar, and Ms. Suu Kyi's party was re-elected with even a greater majority than the previous election. Days after her landslide victory, the democratically elected administration of Aung San Suu Kyi and the members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) were arrested and detained. The military under the leadership of General Min Aung Hlaing took control of the country and declared a year-long state of emergency.

The armed forces had backed the opposition, who were demanding a rerun of the vote, claiming widespread election fraud. However, the country's impartial election commission said there was no evidence to support those claims. Ms. Suu Kyi and the leaders of the NLD have been held at an unknown location, and they all face various charges, including violating the country's official secrets act, possessing illegal walkie-talkies and publishing information that may "cause fear or alarm." Protests against the military regime have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians, including many children.

Many Western democracies have condemned the actions of the military and have placed sanctions on General Hlaing's military leadership. Southeast Asian countries have been pursuing diplomatic efforts to end the crisis to no avail. U.S. President Joe Biden launched a new set of sanctions targeting the Burmese military and its leaders, as well as their business interests.

“The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated 10 individuals and three entities for their association with the military apparatus responsible for the coup... Under the new Executive order signed by President Biden, Treasury can also target the spouses and adult children of these individuals... Three entities, including Myanmar Ruby Enterprise and Myanmar Imperial Jade Co., LTD., which are wholly owned subsidiaries of a conglomerate owned or controlled by the Burmese military, have also been designated.” (White House Fact Sheet, Feb. 11, 2021)

CONCLUSION

The history of Myanmar is marked by ethnic violence and widespread impoverishment. The young country has wrenched itself between democratic freedom and brutal authoritarian rule. It is a hostile environment for the underclasses despite their ethnicity or religion. Kipling's romanticized view of Burma holds nothing for the thousands of poor people who are forced to leave in search of freedom, safety, and prosperity. Like most roads, *The Road to Mandalay* goes to and from in both directions. For many of Myanmar's poor and persecuted, The Road to Mandalay goes nowhere in both directions.