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Gustaaf Houtman's book offers an insightful and innovative analysis of the present day political crisis in Burma. Houtman's primary aim is to demonstrate the central importance of mental culture, which he defines as the practices of *vipassanā* ("contemplation") and *samatha* ("meditation") for understanding Burmese political ideology and the shape of the ongoing political conflict between the military regime that seized power in 1962 and the democracy movement. Houtman describes his agenda thus: "It [this book] focuses on how the terminology and practices of mental culture inform, indeed constitute coherent internal cultural debates surrounding the politics of the military regimes since 1962, and in particular since 1988" (p. 9). He provides a focused analysis of the most recent events in the conflict together with discussions of the historical development of Burmese politics, beginning with the anti-colonial movements against the British.

Houtman's argument is shaped by his direct challenge to the military regime's claims that no foreigner can participate in the current political debates in Burma because foreigners cannot understand the Burmese ideas and traditions that shape the crisis (p. 5; p. 80). Houtman argues that this is an attempt by the regime to shut down all debate by labeling any critic of the regime "foreign," an attack that has been directed not only at non-Burmese critics, but also at Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in particular (pp. 31-32). Houtman develops a substantial challenge to

this position by entering deeply into the world of Burmese political discourse. He seeks to show that the political ideology and actions of Aung Sang Suu Kyi and the NLD are firmly grounded in and shaped by a long-standing Burmese political tradition engaged with mental culture of which they are legitimate successors (pp. 79–80). At the same time, he enumerates the many ways in which the military regime stands in direct opposition to the traditional categories that they claim to uphold (pp. 88–89). For example, Houtman demonstrates that the regime’s attempts to prove Aung San Suu Kyi a foreigner run counter to Burmese ideas of identity (pp. 90–91). In effect, Houtman turns the tables on the regime by using its terms of debate to prove its own hypocrisy.

Through his analysis of the foundational role of mental culture in Burmese politics Houtman effectively becomes a participant in the Burmese political debate. He says straightforwardly that it is impossible to remain neutral in the crisis; he clearly writes in support of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD (p. 277). Houtman is not simply taking sides in the conflict; his goal is to move constructively toward reconciliation by highlighting how mental culture provides resources for resolving the current crisis and building an ethical government in Burma (p. 5; p. 343). Though Houtman aims to inform a non-Burmese readership of the local concepts operative in Burmese political culture, he also seems to be addressing a Burmese audience. I imagine that he would welcome the opportunity for this work to be read inside Burma, with the hope that his study of the import of mental culture could reshape the current political atmosphere.

The first section of the book, “Myanmafication – Imprisoning Burma,” addresses the regime’s attempts at engineering a unified, consolidated (rather than conciliated) country as a response to the challenge to power created by Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. Houtman argues that the regime’s loss of the symbol of Aung San—the founder of the modern Burmese army and leader of the Burmese independence movement—as their legitimate forebear to his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the democracy movement was the impetus for the creation of “Myanmar culture.” Houtman describes the regime’s Myanmafication policy as an attempt to keep complete control over the country through a rhetoric of a unified culture that silences differences in ethnicity, language, and history (p. 53). Houtman states that “The regime is interested not so much in preserving culture, but rather in constructing a Myanmar culture that permits it to have people relinquish their anachronistic local cultural elements for the common good of Myanmar” (p. 100). The *Myanmafication* policy that the regime claims is a true expression of traditional values and culture is shown by Houtman to be an instrument of oppression against the people of Burma that is based in part on foreign influences (p. 71; p. 91). For example, he shows that the regime’s ideas of culture are drawn from outdated German and American anthropological theories (p. 92). Houtman’s analysis points to a conclusion

that, in fact, though claiming to protect the country from colonial powers, the regime has stepped into the role of the colonizer, oppressing its own people from within by essentially turning the entire country into a prison (p. 181; p. 193).

Many readers may be generally familiar with the regime's policies and actions that Houtman describes in great detail. He helps us more clearly understand the rhetoric surrounding the *Myanmafication* project. Houtman's analysis of the regime's use of Buddhist concepts for their own aims may be of particular interest to those interested in Buddhist ethics. For example, Houtman shows that the regime has attempted to base its policy of forced labor of the population on the traditional ideas of merit making and voluntary gift giving in support of the *sangha* and Buddhist institutions. The regime claims that those who "voluntarily" give their labor to improve the country will gain a better rebirth in their next lifetime (pp. 124–126). Houtman's analysis of the Burmese context demonstrates that the very concepts taken as foundational for building an ethical life can become instruments of oppression. The misuse of Buddhist practices like merit making raises the question of whether these ethical ideals contain an inherently ethical meaning or value.

The second half of the book, parts II through V, give a focused study of Buddhist mental culture and the democracy movement. Houtman contrasts the imprisonment of the country by the military regime with the freedom found through mental culture as practiced by the leaders of the NLD. Part II, "Mental Culture Transcends Prison," gives compelling biographical accounts of the periods of imprisonment of several NLD leaders by the regime in this decade. Houtman describes the ways in which these democracy leaders developed *vipassanā* practices in prison in order to find a kind of freedom that transcended both the prison walls and the oppression of the regime.

Houtman describes mental culture as acultural and ahistorical. He shows that Buddhist practices of *vipassanā* and *samatha* have been both the basis for an ethical government and a resource for acting against political oppression from the colonial period to the present (p. 198). What is more, Houtman equates mental culture with what he sometimes calls "high" Buddhism, which he distinguishes from other Buddhist practices such as merit making (like pagoda building) magic, and astrology (p.231). Houtman further argues that these kinds of practices—frequently employed by the military regime for their own ends—are a part of vernacular Burmese Buddhist culture that is distinct from mental culture (p.182). Houtman's treatment of mental culture creates an essentialized vision of high Buddhism that enforces a hierarchy of Buddhist practices where "high" Buddhism is implicitly equated with "good" Buddhism as distinct from these other forms of Buddhist practices implicitly labeled "low" Buddhism. Houtman identifies this vision of mental culture as a universal form of Buddhism

in the writings of Aung San as well as Aung San Suu Kyi (pp. 245–258). Houtman's own analysis of Buddhism seems to closely follow that of these leaders who are at the center of his study. Houtman's analysis of Buddhism leaves us with valuable insight into the ethical potential of mental culture engaged in political contexts. However, separating "high" Buddhism from other forms of Buddhist practice limits an analysis of the positive contribution that these practices could also make toward resolving the conflict if they were genuinely followed and supported. However, a thorough analysis of the ethical potential of a full range of Buddhist practices in Burma is outside of Houtman's main interest and goals.

His emphasis on the universal quality of mental culture is productive for the major argument in the book. Houtman sees mental culture as an entry point into the current political crisis, which the regime has tried to keep closed (p. 182). He is able to show that mental culture has played a prominent role in Burmese political history, beginning with figures such as Hpo Hlaing, a minister to King Mindon in the first part of the eighteenth century (pp. 198–202). Thus, Houtman is able to show that mental culture is a legitimate part of a distinctly Burmese political ideology of democracy, yet the universal dimensions of mental culture open the debate to a wider audience that need not be Burmese to understand the value of mental culture or to participate in its practice. By separating universal dimensions of Buddhism from what he sees as practices belonging to a Burmese vernacular culture, Houtman is able to hold onto mental culture as the most viable resource for resolving the political crisis. He notes that "This practice addresses a myriad of positive benefits—it promises national independence, harmony, law and order, good government, good health, and all that requires some kind of transformation of identity for the good" (p. 198). At the same time, Houtman acknowledges that Buddhism has also been appropriated by the regime as an instrument of oppression. In a context where both the military regime and the NLD portray themselves as upholders of Buddhism, it is understandable that Houtman distinguishes "true" expressions of Buddhist practice by the NLD from the regime's engagement with Buddhism as a device to gain legitimacy with the populace.

The position that Houtman takes in his book raises a range of interesting questions on the role of authors upon which any scholar could profitably reflect. Scholarship on Burma that could open the discussion of the political crisis to a wider audience, including foreigners, is perceived as a threat by the military regime, which purposely creates obstacles to scholarship for both Burmese and foreign scholars (p. 82). The regime's attempts to maintain total control over the production of ideas and scholarly works has impoverished the study of Burma's culture, history, and political system, both within and outside the country. Houtman points out that, in this climate, any scholar must be attentive

to how his/her work might be positioned by the regime (p. 147). Houtman's analysis of the Burmese context shows us that no scholar can remain neutral in an intellectual environment that also falls under the control of the military regime. Whether scholars address current day issues or more distant historical time periods, scholarship on Buddhism and Buddhist cultures is often conducted in an inescapably political context. Houtman's study raises the significant point that all scholars must give attention to the possible ramifications and appropriations of their studies even when they do not intend to engage in political debates.

Though Houtman does not draw comparative implications from his analysis of the Burmese political context, his study offers a useful case to consider on-going debates on approaching the issue of human rights through universal vs. particular categories. The tension between these two perspectives runs throughout much of the book. In his discussion of the human rights debate in Burma, Houtman emphasizes the importance of defining human rights with Burmese and Buddhist concepts and categories. He argues that appeals to universal human rights are ineffective in the current Burmese political climate because such arguments are quickly dismissed by the regime as foreign and therefore illegitimate (p. 225). Houtman argues that the Burmese human rights crisis has to be evaluated and negotiated through these and other indigenous categories and concepts. Houtman's concern is to focus the conversation about human rights in Burma on these local categories in order to promote human rights *within* Burma on Burmese terms.

Houtman expects a lot from his readers; they must be able to keep up with the complex mass of journalistic reporting of political events, as well as the Buddhist ideas and concepts that are at the center of his argument. His research is exemplary; he leaves no pamphlet unread, no stone unturned in his efforts to give a comprehensive analysis of the import of mental culture for understanding and resolving the Burmese political crisis. This book is intended for an audience already well versed in both modern Burmese political history and Buddhist concepts and practices. Readers who do not have this specialized background will likely find the book challenging. His book will be an important resource for those who are willing to make the commitment that this book and conversations on the Burmese political crisis demand.