

Myanmar Librarians' Research and Study Tour at the Rutgers University Libraries

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Myanmar Librarians' Research and Study Tour at the Rutgers University Libraries:

A Report

Triveni Kuchi

Introduction and Background

Change was imminent in Myanmar. Initiatives led by President Thein Sein since March 2011 brought reforms: political prisoners were being released, the country was opening up to international observation of elections, and foreign investment was being welcomed to help rebuild Myanmar. Most notably, charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and political prisoner under house arrest since 1989, was finally released. Her party, the National League for Democracy of Myanmar (NLD), re-registered for elections and gained a major victory in April 2012. Considering all these transformational changes that were propelling Myanmar toward democracy, the United States undertook significant steps to encourage Myanmar's efforts toward positive change. In a show of strong support, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar in November 2011, and in November 2012, President Obama became the first sitting United States president to visit Myanmar. The United States and other countries lifted sanctions on Myanmar and significant foreign investment flowed into Myanmar.¹ Through all these changes, Myanmar's endeavor has been to establish itself on a path of progress and development. One of the significant reform movements in Myanmar was aimed specifically at higher education, which was in a state of disrepair from decades of neglect. A thorough and complete review to make higher education stronger and "independent" was pledged through national commit-

tees that were set up for “drafting a new higher education law” and for the “revival of the University of Yangon.”²

In the summer of 2012, two new faculty members from the Rutgers University School of Arts and Sciences’ history and religion departments began conversations about a Rutgers University Myanmar Studies Initiative (RUMSI). The initiative’s mission was “to foster Myanmar-related scholarship and teaching at Rutgers and to strengthen collaborative research and intellectual exchange among Rutgers faculty and academics in Myanmar.”³ During the fall of 2012, the professors coordinated several meetings in collaboration with the Centers for Global Advancement and International Affairs (GAIA Centers)—the Rutgers administrative unit responsible for “facilitating collaborative projects and strategic partnerships around the world.”⁴ Along with the mission, they also circulated a brief background document describing the history and current state of Myanmar among participants of the initiative. The group also reviewed and planned to apply for an USAID/Burma call for concept papers. This call encourages “university-private sector partnerships involving US businesses and US and Burmese institutions of higher education to address Burma’s critical short, medium and long-term development needs.”⁵

Around this time, the Institute of International Education (IIE) also put out a call for a Myanmar Initiative. With the momentum gained from activities of RUMSI and the GAIA Centers, the opportunity to participate in IIE’s International Academic Partnership Program (IAPP) with Myanmar was ideal to advance academic relations in a country transitioning into the new era. In February 2013, the chair of RUMSI and the Vice President of the GAIA Centers from Rutgers University, along with representatives from other universities, took part in a historic delegation by ten universities to Myanmar. This delegation, co-led by IIE and a representative from the United States Department of State, visited various higher education institutions in Yangon, Mandalay, and Naypyidaw as “part of a broader IIE Myanmar higher education initiative which seeks to help the country rebuild its higher education capacity.”⁶

The purpose of the delegation was to observe and learn about the state of higher education in Myanmar. Higher education reform became one of the several priorities for Myanmar government, for which the Myanmar government specifically announced its support. The delegation noted multiple challenges for re-energizing higher education arising from lack of existing capacity in physical buildings, technology, academic curriculum, and faculty education. The delegation determined that urgent investment in infrastructural development to support both undergraduate and graduate students as well as sustain advancement in curriculum design and faculty development was required. In particular, they observed:

One other area that requires revitalization and upgrading are university libraries; most lack access to the world of electronic databases and digital publications. The majority of libraries do not have adequate funds for subscribing to the most important journals and magazines. And the books, textbooks, and other publications that already are in hand have been updated three or four times since the 1980s in most university libraries abroad. The modernization of library facilities is badly needed to encourage students and faculty to view their university libraries as reservoirs of new, relevant information, data, etc.⁷

The delegation members further discerned that development of the infrastructure for university libraries was one of the essential foundations that would move Myanmar's higher education forward. In light of this context, they suggested a training tour for Myanmar librarians in the United States as a first step toward modernizing Myanmar university libraries' resources and services:

As an example of helping to inform the vision of Myanmar higher education, we recommend a study tour from Myanmar librarians to the United States. This study tour would allow librarians to visit multiple sites in the United States, spending a few weeks at each. Arizona State University, Northern Illinois University, Rutgers University and the University of Washington have volunteered to host such a study tour, provided funding can be identified for transportation and related costs.⁸

Planning and the Proposal

The libraries were abuzz with the news by the time the Rutgers members of the delegation returned from Myanmar in March 2013. The vice president of information services and the university librarian of Rutgers University were debriefed on discussions that occurred in Myanmar and were asked to help in determining the feasibility of hosting a librarian study tour at the libraries. Several conversations took place among RUMSI faculty, the vice president of the GAIA Centers, and the university librarian. Many questions were raised in these initial discussions and an internal team within RUL was formed consisting of the university librarian, associate university librarian, and the librarian for South Asian studies (the author) to brainstorm and address the potential for the study tour. The university librarian also held conversations with her counterparts collaborating in this venture viz., Arizona State University (ASU), Northern Illinois University (NIU), and the University of Washington (UW) to study the feasibility and gauge RUL's role in this effort. Moreover, the leaders of the four universities consulted with Cornell University library to gather information about Cornell's ongoing participation in a project for Myanmar through the Open Society Institute (OSI).⁹ At each of the four institutions, South/South East Asian studies or international studies librarians were selected as primary contacts for planning this study tour. Thus, the libraries of the four institutions formed a Myanmar Library Consortium within the United States (USMLC).

During May 2013, the librarian representatives from the four libraries set up an initial telephone conference to discuss each library's approach for hosting the Myanmar librarians. Most agreed that their libraries would be able to provide overall library-wide rather than collections-specific training, given the relative weakness of their collections in Myanmar or South East Asia materials. NIU was the only institution within this consortium that was unique with a Center for Burma Studies and strong collections in that area. During the discussions, all agreed that the Myanmar librarians should at the very least have some ability to communicate in English. This was important because three of the four libraries did not have Burmese language expertise, nor could they arrange for translation services required for training and hosting non-English-speaking international librarians. Despite unclear budget availability at this point, the librarian representatives

were asked to go ahead with the planning for the study tour. The consortium determined that spring or fall of 2014 would allow sufficient time to make all the arrangements to host Myanmar librarians for the study tour.

The chair of RUMSI and vice president of information services and the university librarian at Rutgers drafted a proposal for a Department of State grant for funding international travel and other related costs for the study tour. USMLC also participated in the preparation of this proposal. In addition, during July of 2013, the librarian from ASU visited Myanmar and held conversations with the Myanmar Library Association and heads of Myanmar libraries to determine their needs. He presented the idea that a “program focusing on library management and services” was feasible for USMLC.¹⁰ With all these various processes in motion, as well as the discussions that faculty and administrators had during the February 2013 IAPP IIE study tour, a model of a “one-month internship” program for Myanmar librarians began to emerge. There was further discussion about different types of study tour models and the feasibility of implementing them at various locations. Given that the consortium planned to host librarians in either the spring or fall of 2014, and not having heard information from the Department of State grant yet, the librarians from ASU and UW visited Myanmar in early 2014 to continue and push forward the conversation. They held preliminary discussions with librarians (including contacts at the Myanmar Library Association), determined the Myanmar librarians’ communication abilities in English, then interviewed and selected participants for the program. This helped consolidate the study tour and training program plans for the USMLC.

In January 2014, after further discussions via email, the program to bring six Myanmar librarians to the United States was decided. Of the six librarians, a set of two would spend a month at one of the three USMLC libraries and then all would gather at the fourth library, NIU, for an additional ten days for collections-specific training and workshops. Based on librarian and staff availability and arrangements they could make at their universities, ASU, UW, and NIU librarians were planning to bring over the Myanmar librarians during May 2014. However, this date did not work out for RUL because housing arrangements were impossible to make on short notice, and the month of May being the end of the semester was not ideal for the Myanmar librarians to observe the dynamic activities of the library with users. Finally, USMLC determined that four Myanmar librarians would come in May 2014 and two would arrive in October 2014. The split in the arrangements also worked for the two Myanmar librarians, one of whom had a dissertation defense and could not travel during the month of May.

By this time, it was already March 2014. With the dates decided, USMLC libraries quickly confirmed the proposal for the study tour, which was sent for approval to the Myanmar Ministry of Education. In addition, each of the USMLC libraries created an institution-specific profile and training program for inviting the Myanmar librarians to the United States. At Rutgers libraries, the internal team for Myanmar discussed availability, priorities, and possibilities for training the two librarians during October. The university librarian and associate university librarian created the institutional and library profile for Rutgers University while the author created an outline of the curriculum for training at Rutgers libraries.¹¹ UW collated all the proposals on behalf of USMLC, included the list of the six Myanmar librarians and the criteria used for their selection, and described an overall study tour plan in a letter addressed to the Myanmar Ministry of Education. The overall curriculum included areas within library management and lead-

ership, library services, digitization and preservation, and management of e-resources. USMLC sent the letter by mid-March 2014 and the Myanmar Ministry of Education approved the study tour proposal around early April 2014.

ASU, UW, and NIU now only had a few weeks to get the paperwork, visas, housing, and other arrangements done before the Myanmar librarians' visit in May 2014. Rutgers was advised to start the visa process early along with the others since these processes have deadlines and can take an unusual amount of time. The RUL internal team, along with the head of Human Resources, formulated a budget required for the Myanmar librarians' study tour that included costs for training materials, lodging, meals, stipend, travel, and other incidentals. Since the Department of State grant had not come through, the university-wide collaboration made up of the GAIA Centers, RUMSI, and RUL collaboratively funded this project. It was decided that RUL would conduct all the training as well as provide for housing on the Rutgers New Brunswick campus, and the GAIA Centers and RUMSI would cover the rest of the expenditure.

Next, the RUL vice president of information services and the university librarian sent out invitation letters offering a paid study tour and training for the two Myanmar librarians by email and by postal mail. Soon after this, RUL human resources began conversations with Rutgers Global services offices and international staff contacts at UW and NIU to determine the type of visa required for the month-plus-ten-day stay of the Myanmar librarians. Even though RU began the visa process early for the October visit, a constant uncertainty of whether this project would take place was felt throughout the summer months as the process moved slowly into September without any final confirmation. Several follow-ups later, finally on September 17, 2014, visas for the two Myanmar librarians were approved. So, within the last two weeks of September, all plans for the Myanmar librarians' visit that had started nearly two years earlier materialized.

Implementation

At the end of a long flight from Yangon, the Myanmar librarians arrived at Rutgers mid-week on the afternoon of October 1. After brief introductions, the author drove the librarians to the two-bedroom housing arranged on campus and gave them a brief rundown of the next day's itinerary. The tentative study tour schedule was a detailed list of daily activities, events, and meetings for each week, based on the broad curriculum outlined by USMLC's proposal for the study tour. To the extent possible, the schedule was kept fluid, leaving space for Myanmar librarians' expectations, plans, and any unforeseen appointments.

An informal reception was held on October 2 on the New Brunswick campus of RUL. During the first few days, the Myanmar librarians learned to travel on campus buses across different campuses, acquired their Rutgers identity cards, set up login information for wireless access, did some banking, and a few other activities that were necessary to begin campus life at Rutgers. An office in the library was assigned for the two librarians and they were given laptops and storage devices to record and organize information for their study tour at Rutgers. During this week, the librarians were also introduced to the overall organizational structure of RUL with information and brochures about the campuses, departments, committees, and so on. With some preliminaries taken care of, the two librarians planned a trip to Washington DC for their first weekend for a tour of the Library of Congress (LOC).

During the second week, GAIA Centers and RUMSI organized a faculty meeting to welcome the Myanmar librarians. There was a brief discussion about needs and availability of resources and archives in Myanmar. They compared some ideas and methods to consider for use and implementation upon their return. In the next few days, the content of the Rutgers library website, access and availability of resources, reference and information services, and the library's consortial arrangements for borrowing and sharing collections were discussed. In addition, they observed different types of library instruction classes, including a seminar-style course taught by a librarian. This informed them about the variety of ways information literacy is adopted for a course or curriculum often taught in collaboration with professors at Rutgers.

On October 14, the Myanmar librarians visited the Rutgers School of Communication and Information and held conversations with professors. The following day, they attended the Rutgers Teaching and Technology Conference about the transformation of information and education. After the conference, the librarians participated with Rutgers students in a special and fun event at the Kilmer Library Pumpkin Decoration—a mid-term stress buster—where they painted pumpkins and shared conversations with students.¹² Next, the librarians attended the Library Resources Council meeting for system-wide collections management information. This teleconference meeting helped the librarians interact with library representatives from all campuses online and in-person. The librarians then toured most of the libraries on New Brunswick campus and squeezed in a tour of the Health Sciences Libraries, Dana Library, and the Institute of Jazz on the Rutgers Newark campus. Also, during the weekend, a Rutgers librarian treated them to a whirlwind tour of the New York Public Library and some of New York city's renowned museums.

Throughout the week of October 20, the librarians heard presentations from several RUL departments, including the Scholarly Communication Center, Integrated Information Systems, Central Technical Services, Acquisitions, Distributed Technical Services, and Cataloging including East Asian cataloging. At the end of all these meetings, they shared their impressions of American libraries and provided an overview of their experiences with Myanmar libraries. Despite their packed agenda, they further squeezed in a meeting of the User Services Council where system-wide public service issues are discussed and policy updates and changes recommended. Their next stop was at the Special Collections and University Archives, where they spent an entire day with rare books, digital projects, archives and manuscripts, and state and regional historical collections. The librarians were also able to observe activities of RUL administration, Human Resources, and the Planning and Coordinating Committee.

GAIA centers hosted an international scholars' reception, where the Myanmar librarians were guests of honor and the mission and spirit of the study tour at RUL were highlighted. The Rutgers student newspaper wrote: "This year is the first time Rutgers welcomed scholars from Myanmar to Rutgers.... They came to study the advanced library system at Rutgers.... A scholar from Myanmar said, 'There is a lot to learn from Rutgers.'" ¹³ On October 28, a forum entitled "Conversations with Myanmar Librarians" was held to celebrate the completion of the study tour, share the librarians' impressions and experiences, and discuss plans for future collaborations. The librarians gave a presentation about Myanmar libraries, history, collections, archives, and services and discussed what they learned during the study tour. After the presentation, RUL awarded certificates to the Myanmar librarians for their effort and participation. Subsequently, a discussion

took place about library partnerships, higher education in Myanmar, and potential collaborations with Rutgers. This program was well attended by librarians and staff from various departments of RUL, faculty from several disciplinary departments, RUMSI, and the GAIA Centers, and guests from the Center for International Partnerships in Higher Education at IIE, New York.

The Myanmar librarians concluded their study tour by visiting several local public libraries, which provided them with a glimpse of how local public libraries (of different sizes) serve their community's needs. The author and the librarians then had a wrap-up conversation to discuss impressions, exchange feedback, and share future contact details. The Myanmar librarians left for NIU to continue their training and tour for another ten days and then returned to Myanmar on November 10, 2014.

Lessons Learned

The research and study tour of the Myanmar librarians at Rutgers University libraries was part of a unique and valuable undertaking carried out by four university libraries that formed the United States Myanmar Library Consortium, as well as by Rutgers University partners. The objective of this study tour at Rutgers was to provide the Myanmar librarians with an opportunity to observe the complex operations and management of a large American academic library system. RUL was also a perfect example for the librarians to experience the environment and workings of a large, multi-campus, multi-site library that caters to the needs of more than 68,900 students.¹⁴ Specific presentations and programs to engage the Myanmar librarians were arranged alongside regularly planned RUL meetings to not only provide them with specific training but also allow for an immersive experience of activities as they occur during the semester.

Given the geographic distances between Rutgers campuses, it was a challenge to balance meetings, programs, and objectives of the study tour across the four campuses. For instance, to accommodate meetings on the New Brunswick campus and the Myanmar librarians' plans, the tour of the library on the Camden campus was difficult to fit in along with the other events on the New Brunswick or Newark campuses. Although not quite the same, Myanmar librarians were still able to interact with some of the librarians from the Rutgers Camden library, when the latter attended meetings through video teleconference or in-person on the New Brunswick campus. However, for future iterations of such study tours, obtaining a balance in the tours among locations is an important factor to consider for even representation of the different locations of the libraries. In this regard, it is worth pointing out the significance of providing apartment-style housing for the librarians to live on campus, which enabled them to have a "home" to go back to at the end of the day's events, to entertain guests, and to review or make plans with each other. In addition, although not connected across all the campuses, the librarians were able to ride the University's campus buses for meetings on different New Brunswick campuses to derive a taste of academic life at Rutgers.

The various partners involved in bringing together the Myanmar Study Tour were proud to have been able to participate in a program that hosted the international librarians. The IIE mentioned the significance of the first historic delegation of universities from the United States to Myanmar and the important and much-needed commitment by United States libraries for training librarians.¹⁵ Rutgers GAIA Centers promoted the significance of the Myanmar librarian's study tour saying, "Rutgers is hosting its first

Myanmar scholars for the first time—in library studies.” More significantly, they noted that “a meet and greet presentation that allowed the Myanmar librarians to exchange knowledge and ideas with Rutgers faculty” was organized by the libraries.¹⁶ In addition, RUL administration announced that they “were pleased to host this intensive research tour and cultural encounter” with the Myanmar librarians.¹⁷ Generally, there was agreement that the Myanmar Study Tour was a successful program that created new partnerships, strengthened relationships, and promoted goodwill across several national and international entities—namely, Rutgers libraries, Rutgers University, partner libraries in the United States, and the Myanmar libraries and universities.

The study tour required comprehensive planning, time commitment, and understanding in order to successfully organize activities. It involved considerable effort from several RUL staff and library faculty, who generally felt that the experience was rewarding because it gave them an opportunity to view their roles outside-in while answering the Myanmar librarians’ questions. The interactions, communication, and care needed to engage and ensure that the Myanmar librarians felt at ease during their month-long stay were undoubtedly intense, but the librarians and staff at RUL participated with enthusiasm and warm hospitality. Some went out of their way to give the Myanmar librarians a tour of the area, parks, and shopping centers. In fact, one was thrilled to make the librarians’ acquaintance because he was planning a visit to Myanmar and now had access to knowledgeable tour guides. Several RUL librarians and staff commented how much they enjoyed making contact with the Myanmar librarians and hoped to continue those connections via email. One of the heads of the department said they “were delightful and we really enjoyed their visit... [and at lunch] they told us although the food was good, the company and conversation were better.”¹⁸ The numerous photos and videos that the Myanmar librarians took as they traveled through RUL interestingly revealed their perspective of the complex network and structure of RUL’s functions and departments.

This report serves as a practical example for planning and implementing a broad training and experiential program for international librarians at a large academic library system. The Myanmar librarians’ study tour at RUL represented an important opportunity to enhance intercultural understanding between American and Myanmar librarians. Despite some difficulty experienced due to weak communication in English, it was gratifying to see the positive effort that went into preparing, anticipating, and collaborating to make the research and study tour a success at RUL.

Soon after the study tour ended on October 31, 2014, several events and personnel changes occurred concurrently within Rutgers, prompting a temporary pause in international librarian training programs and tours. The leadership that promoted, funded, and brought together this partnership changed. The vice president of the GAIA Centers left Rutgers, key RUMSI faculty members were away on sabbatical, and the vice president for information services and the university librarian retired. In addition, RUL’s New Brunswick Libraries were undergoing reorganization.

Despite the temporary hiatus of international exchange programs at RUL, some faculty from RUMSI have continued activities by teaching courses, hosting workshops, and participating in other types of academic and educational engagement with the academics at Myanmar.¹⁹ In fact, an important change after the RUL New Brunswick reorganization took place was the formation of the Global Experience Team. This team made up of librarians and staff was created to continue serving and supporting international students, study abroad, and visiting scholars programs at Rutgers. This setup would likely

help the future hosting of international exchange, training, and tour programs. In addition, USMLC successfully pursued funding for future training programs for Myanmar librarians through a Henry Luce Foundation grant for 2016 and 2017.

The success of the planning, organization, and implementation of the Myanmar librarians research and study tour can be attributed to the strong collaboration, communication, and resolve maintained by various individuals at multiple levels of the libraries, university, and external institutional partners. The commitment and responsibility of so many individuals to bring this project to fruition in such a large geographically spread-out organization as Rutgers is truly a matter of pride and achievement. The RUL participation has indeed been a valuable experience, and the bonds established with the Myanmar librarians remain a source of fulfillment. The Myanmar librarians keep in touch every so often, reporting excitedly about new projects they are embarking on, such as teaching library research and information literacy for their first-year students.²⁰

Notes

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3. "The Rutgers Myanmar Initiative," *South Asian Studies Program (SASP), Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences*, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://southasia.rutgers.edu/initiatives>.
4. As the Director of SASP, Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, the author was invited to participate in these discussions. During 2010–2013, the author served as both the director of SASP and the social sciences/instructional services & South Asia librarian at Rutgers University libraries; "About Us," The Centers for Global Advancement and International Affairs (GAIA Centers), accessed June 5, 2017, <http://global.rutgers.edu/about/about-gaia-centers>.
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8. *Ibid.*, 26.
9. RUL University Librarian email correspondence to author, April 9, 2013.
10. ASU librarian's email correspondence to author, October 15, 2013.
11. The Rutgers University Libraries comprise twenty-six libraries on New Brunswick, Newark,

Camden, and Rutgers Biological and Health Sciences (RBHS) campuses that operate as a unified library system with coordinated public, technical services, and collection development programs. More information is available from <https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/>. The Rutgers University New Brunswick campus is the largest of the four regional campuses of the university. Located in central New Jersey, it is one hour from New York City and two hours from Philadelphia. Supporting over 33,000 graduate and undergraduate students in approximately 100 undergraduate programs, it has more than eighty graduate/professional programs and sixty doctoral programs as a Carnegie Classification Research University (very high research activity) campus. The Myanmar librarians were housed on this campus for the study tour. Rutgers Newark campus is about forty minutes or so north of the New Brunswick campus. It is considered to be the “most diverse university” in the nation and has more than 12,000 students and nearly 1,300 faculty and staff. RBHS is New Jersey’s academic health center with eight schools, six centers and institutes, and a behavioral health network. In addition to being located in New Brunswick and Newark campus, it has several other locations across New Jersey. Rutgers Camden is located about an hour and half south of the New Brunswick campus. It is a smaller campus but offers more than forty majors, fifty minors, and twenty-nine graduate programs, plus special programs. More recent information about all the four campuses is available from <http://www.rutgers.edu>.

12. Kilmer Library on the Rutgers New Brunswick Livingston campus is popular library used heavily by undergraduates for study. The library’s gate counts during mid-semester have often nearly reached 4,000 per day.
13. Jeff Hammond, “Reception Helps Scholars Make Global Connections,” *The Daily Targum*, New Brunswick, NJ, October 27, 2014, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://www.dailytargum.com/article/2014/10/reception-helps-scholars>.
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