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City profile

Mandalay, Myanmar: The remaking of a South-east Asian hub in a country at the crossroads

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A B S T R A C T

This profile on Mandalay examines a frequently mentioned but little studied city, which is undergoing significant changes in its urban fabric and socio-economic landscape. After decades of political and economic isolation Mandalay is set to return to its once-held role of important trade and transport hub in South-East Asia. As it looks at Mandalay's geographical location and physical context, the article highlights the impact of climate change on a city already vulnerable to extreme weather effects. This is followed by an account of how the different historical phases experienced by the city impacted on its physical structure, with different sets of buildings accompanying its historical evolutions. Subsequently, the article describes Mandalay's current socio-spatial structures and reviews key policy and planning developments, before zooming in on a key development project currently in progress. Technical support and funding from the international community are playing a key role in assisting national and local authorities turn Mandalay into a resilient and sustainable city in the heartland of South-East Asia.

1. Introduction

Mandalay is a trade centre and transport hub of growing importance in mainland South-East Asia. At 1.7 m (according to the 2014 census) Mandalay is currently one of Myanmar's three top-tier cities, alongside Yangon and the capital, Nay Pyi Taw (Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015).[1] It is home to about 11% of Myanmar's urban population, 2% of the country's overall population, contributing to 8% of its GDP (ADB, 2015a: 1–2). By 2040 it is estimated that Mandalay will be home to over 4 million people (ADB, 2015a: 6).

Historically, Mandalay was the site of the last royal capital of Burma under the Konbaung Dynasty before upper Burma[2] came under British rule in 1885.[3] Mandalay is also the centre of Myanmar culture and Buddhism, which is reflected in the dozens of pagodas and monasteries that mark the city's skyline. Mandalay's is a story of a purpose-built city that suddenly rose to prominence, came to occupy an important strategic role as Chinese nationalist troops were fighting Japanese forces in the 1940s, and then faded to being a backwater under the socialist regime's isolationist policies before surging back to its role as a trade hub. The city's name derives from Mandalay Hill, a hillock of just 100 m above sea level – an outlier of the Shan carp – that dominates Myanmar's central plains, overlooking the Ayeyarwady river (formerly Irrawaddy). As a result of population growth and rapid urbanization fuelled by recent economic development, Mandalay has become a crowded city, with decaying infrastructure, a lack of public services, including road congestion, high pollution, limited access to affordable public housing, and equally scarce employment opportunities. At the same time, the growing involvement of the international community, especially the Asian Development Bank and the United Nation's Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), coupled with a significant rise in development assistance (Fumagalli, 2017a; Strefford, 2016), has quickly delivered a series of projects focused on urban resilience and green growth across the country, including in Mandalay.

This profile on Mandalay examines a frequently mentioned but little studied city, which is undergoing significant changes in its urban fabric and socio-economic landscape. The article is structured in seven sections. Next, it looks at the city's geographical location and physical context, paying special attention to its vulnerability to environmental disaster and the wide-ranging impact of climate change. This is followed by an account of how the different historical phases experienced by the city (pre-colonial, colonial, post-independence under various political regimes and types of interaction with the outside world)

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[1] Nay Pyi Taw (also spelt Naypyidaw) is another purpose-built city in Myanmar. Construction began in 2002 and was completed in 2005. The new capital was unveiled in 2006.

[2] I use the term 'Burma' to refer to the country prior to independence. For the following period I use Myanmar, although, formally, of course, the country was renamed only in 1989.

[3] Lower Burma, including Yangon (then Rangoon) was annexed in 1852 as a result of the second Anglo–Burmese war. The third and final war ended in 1885 and led to the formal annexation of the whole of Burma, incorporated in British India, from which it was formally separated in 1937 with the formation of a separate Government of Burma (1937–1948).

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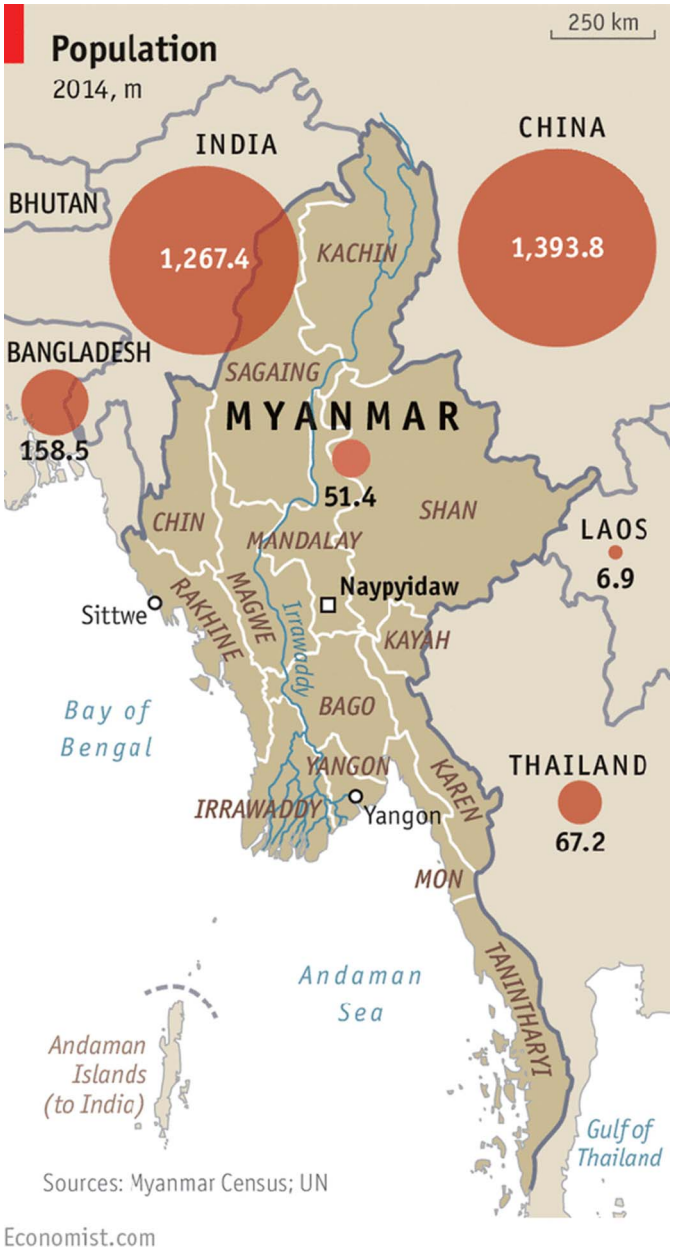

Map 1. Myanmar.
Source: http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2016/03/myanmar-graphics.

impacted on its physical structure. Subsequently, the article turns to Mandalay's current socio-spatial structures and zooms in on a policy framework in rapid evolution. Lastly, it highlights some urban management and planning issues facing Mandalay's future development as a new, complex and growing hub in the heartland of South-East Asia.

2. Location and physical context: the impact of climate change

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar is located in mainland South-east Asia, bordering Thailand, Laos, China, India and Bangladesh (Map 1). The country looks over the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal. At a latitude of 21° 58′ 30″ and a longitude of N 96° 5′ 0″E, Mandalay lies in the heart of central Myanmar, in the central plains surrounded by the Shan hills in the east as the road winds up to the old hill station of Pyin Oo Lwin, the Ayeyarwady river and the Sagaing hills in the west.

Mandalay's landmarks are few but noticeable. First is, of course, Mandalay Hill, to the north of the city (Photos 1 and 2). Secondly, and as important, is Mandalay Palace, surrounded by walls and a moat (Photos 3a and 3b). To the west of the town is the Ayeyarwady river, which has long constituted one of the important forms of transportation (of goods as well as people) many years before the founding of the city itself. As the spiritual heart of the country, Mandalay is home to a magnitude of Buddhist pagodas and monasteries. A reflection of the city's multi-confessional heritage,[4] Sunni and Shi'a mosques, Armenian, Methodist and Anglican churches as well as Hindu and Chinese temples can be found across the town. Although the country is subject to three main seasons (a dry winter, a hot summer and a wet season), climatic conditions in Mandalay have changed in recent years with climate-related extreme weather becoming more frequent, with shorter monsoon seasons, long pre-monsoon droughts and extensive floods, as well as the occasional earthquake (ADB, 2015b: 1).

Due to its geophysical location, Myanmar is prone to a range of natural hazards, such as cyclones, floods, extreme temperatures and floods, and long-term climate change impacts (UN-Habitat, 2016a, b: 36). In fact, Myanmar ranks 2nd out of 183 countries most affected by extreme weather events between 1995 and 2014 in the Global Climate Risk Events (Horton et al., 2016: 17). The central dry zone, where Mandalay is located, is especially vulnerable to floods and droughts.

The effects of climate change are already being felt in Myanmar and will increase in the coming decades (Horton et al., 2017: 48). Recent events include Cyclone Nargis in 2008, extreme heatwaves in 2010 and flooding in 2015, which have had disastrous impacts on people, the economy and the environment (Horton et al., 2017: 6). Moreover, average daily temperatures increased by about 0.25 °C per decade between 1981 and 2010. These are expected to rise further over the coming century, with inland regions getting warmer than the coastal ones (Horton et al., 2017: 23). During the 2020s national annual average temperatures are projected to rise by 0.7–1.1 °C. This is even before large increases in greenhouse gas emissions, of which Myanmar is currently an insignificant emitter, are taking into account. The current situation is about to change as a result of rapid development and urbanization and the changing energy consumption patterns that these processes engender.

Climate change threatens to compound the frequency and intensity of such hazardous events. During extreme events in urban areas, 'failures in one infrastructure system – energy, transportation or water – can quickly cause failures in another system, leading quickly to cascading effects and compound crises' (Horton et al., 2017: 17). To tackle such challenges, Myanmar's new government is taking measures to mainstream climate change into climate-sensitive sectoral policies such as urban management and planning (Myanmar Platform for Dialogue on Green Growth, 2015; Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MoNREC), (2017); UN-Habitat, 2016a, b: 9).

3. History

Mandalay is a relatively new city.[5] Construction only began under King Mingdon of the Konbaung Dynasty (and Burma's last king) in 1856. Construction began in 1856. If by then the bodily relocation of the royal palace from the previous capital of Amarapura was complete, it took well into the 1860s before the various allotments were allocated to the communities moving to the new capital. The idea of building a

[4] A devoted Buddhist, King Mingdon showed tolerance towards other religions. A small mosque, *Shwe Pannet Ya Masjid*, was built inside the royal palace, although this was demolished by the British colonial government to build a polo field. He allowed various sites to build mosques in Mandalay city for Panthays, Chinese Burmese Muslims. He also sent his children to the mission school run by the Anglicans Thant Myint, 2011: 136).

[5] The exact origins of the name are unknown. Mandalay may possibly derive from a Pali word, such as Mandare ('auspicious land'), Manadara (a mountain in Hindu mythology), or Mandala ('circular plains') (Moe and Nyo, 2015: 2). The city has also been known as 'Yadanabon' and 'Ratanapunna' (Fleet, 1911).