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Burma: A tale of two schools

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Part 2 of 3

Shrouded in darkness save for the light of a solitary candle flickering across his drawn face, Augustine stares thoughtfully at the well-worn chess board between himself and this reporter. The old man?s body is feeble, but his mind -- and his English -- are as sharp as ever. ?I?ll tell you, studying English and chess are the best ways for a young man to sharpen his mind,? he declares. Augustine?s grown-up daughter, Elizabeth, rolls her eyes and reminds her loquacious father that it?s getting late. But the teacher is just getting started.

Augustine?s tired, squinty eyes widen into bright spheres when he talks about education. Nearly 80 years old, Augustine credits his English skills to his boyhood teachers, brothers at a local Catholic school, whose instruction and discipline molded his formal education and inspired his career as an English teacher.

Despite her father?s mastery, Elizabeth and her teenage daughters are surprisingly lacking in even rudimentary English skills. Augustine laments, ?They have no expertise. What can I say, I tried to teach them but they are just not interested.?

But motivation isn?t likely the only factor. Augustine studied in a highly regarded Catholic school under the tutelage of brothers from Europe. His daughter and granddaughters attended a government school where most instructors had a tenuous grip on the material and oftentimes did not even show up for class.

Paradoxically, Augustine and his daughter attended the same school, separated by an apocalyptic period in Burmese history.

By 1965, a newly installed military junta in Burma had nationalized the schools, banned religious teachers, and kicked out Westerners. The schools reopened with lower-quality teachers and a curriculum redesigned as a vehicle for state indoctrination. By the time Elizabeth was ready for school, the once Catholic school Augustine attended as a boy was now in the iron grip of the junta.

Burma?s schools soon went from being some of the best in Asia to, at best, mediocre. In the 1950s, many saw Burma as the first Asian tiger. But by the 1970s, the dream of a prosperous and educated Burma looked bleaker than ever. It has only gotten worse since.

Although most villages in Burma today have a government school with the mandate of universal education, the quality is almost universally poor. Any villager will tell you that afterschool tuitions (paid tutoring classes) are more important than school-day instruction, and that the tuitions are often taught by the same instructor who didn?t teach the material during the school day. Given the poverty of the general population and the hopelessness of sending kids to government schools, it?s common to see young children working along the roadside or in the fields.

Some religious don?t think it?s any accident that education is lacking in Burma. One particularly candid brother

explained what he sees as two approaches the junta uses to perpetuate the regime through education. The first is ideological: ?Schools are a way to indoctrinate youth and turn them in favor of the government and against Western ideas.? The second is even more practical: ?If you keep the quality low, students don?t learn critical thinking; if they can?t think critically, there?s less chance they?ll take a stand against the regime.?

Another brother put it even more succinctly: ?If you control the education, you control the minds of the masses.?

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