

Tamara C. Ho

Romancing Human Rights: Gender, Intimacy, and Power between Burma and the West
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Reviewed by Xin Huang, 2017

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Romancing Human Rights examines experiences of displacement through a study of representations by and about women in Burma, the Burmese diaspora, and the United States in the twentieth century, and traces a feminist genealogy of Burmese women's flexible tactics of displacement. Ho argues that Burmese women's works articulate "alter/native" epistemologies and offer regionally situated knowledges and decolonizing viewpoints that interrogate the ethical legitimacy of the patriarchal nation-state and destabilize competing transnational hegemonies.

Ho starts with a survey of Anglophone representations of Burma in literature and film in the twentieth century, and highlights discursive patterns in how "Western eyes" have imagined Burma. She presents a feminist genealogy by situating the character of Ma Hla May in George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934) as a literary precursor of displaced and marginalized Burmese women. Ho argues that Ma Hla May represents the ex-centric plotting of Burmese femininity as marginal, monstrous, and outside of heteropatriarchal normativity, and provides an intertextual bridge that links Orientalist or outsider representations of Burmese women and the more nuanced portrait of femininity found in Burmese women's writing.

In chapter 2, Ho offers a historically grounded and fascinating analysis of Ma Ma Lay's 1955 novel *Not Out of Hate*. Ho reads the tragic relationship between a young Burmese wife and her older Anglophilic husband as illustrating the spatial, discursive, and ideological displacement of Burmese women by the transnational modernity and its imperatives of "love," "science," and "progress." Ho also discusses alter/native resistance through autochthonous epistemologies, as manifested in the liberatory potential of writing and Buddhism in the novel, and as registering both gender and race. In particular, Ho finds that in the novel, Buddhist renunciation not only offers a socially sanctioned space of refuge, education, and escape, but also operates as a counterweight to the possessive orientations of Anglo-influenced imperialist masculinity and secularized heteropatriarchy.

Ho examines in chapter 3 the discursive displacement of Burmese women in human-rights exposés such as Inge Sargent's autobiography, *Twilight over Burma: My Life as a Shan Princess* (1994), and John Boorman's film, *Beyond Rangoon* (1995). She interrogates the racialized, privileged, and gendered passing, and the implications and discursive effect of depoliticized white women traveling to the "third world" to save good brown men from bad brown men. She points out that although well-intentioned, these efforts to testify about Myanmar's human-rights atrocities avoid interrogating the geopolitical and racialized hierarchies between the first and third worlds, as well as the ways in which colonial legacies, Orientalism, and human-rights discourses buttress the project of US empire. She points out that these narratives focus on the obvious forms of Burmese masculinist violence, reify Western (female) privilege and superiority by relying on stereotypes of Asian passivity and subordination, while romanticizing individualistic forms of intervention and engagement, and

obscure the voice, agency, political role, and contributions of Burmese women.

In chapter 4, Ho continues the investigation with the flexible and tactical use of displacement by Aung San Suu Kyi, through a comparison of how she is read and inscribed by Western and Burmese sources against how she writes and performs herself. Ho places Aung San Suu Kyi within a long history of Burmese women who have been active in politics, and a genealogy of feminized discursive resistance and tactical displacement. In particular, Ho highlights Aung San Suu Kyi's maternal legacy, and the influential role her mother Daw Khin Kyi played in her life, which is overshadowed by the patrilineal emphasis on General Aung San, the father. Ho also traces the continuing usage of Buddhism by Aung San Suu Kyi as a legitimate escape hatch that eludes control by the structures of masculinist violence in Burma. Ho shows that by tactically deploying transcultural knowledge, such as Western concepts of democracy, civil rights, passion, and Buddhist, Burmese, and Asian doctrines, Aung San Suu Kyi displaces binary divisions of gender, culture, and liberation to model a flexible practice of resistance, reformation, and reconciliation.

In chapter 5, Ho turns to the novel *Irrawaddy Tango* (1993), by the first Burmese diasporic novelist to write in English, Wendy Law-Yone. Ho highlights in particular the imperialist benevolence, passing voyeurism, and the commodification of human rights, and the utilizing of Burmese linguistic and spiritual economies as alter/native paradigms in the novel. Ho sees the prison cell in the novel functioning as Law-Yone's Burmese-inflected version of Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own," a space-time of deprivation to map out the world(s) through which she has traveled. She also points out that the novel offers counterhegemonic modalities by invoking the Burmese "butterfly-soul" (*leip-bya*), which displaces American notions of "reality" and "politics" with a localized form of knowledge.

As the first English monograph to engage in a gender and racial analysis of the relationship between Burma and the West in Anglophone literature and film, *Romancing Human Rights* is a groundbreaking book and makes a significant contribution to transnational feminist studies, area studies, postcolonial studies, and US critical ethnic/race studies. By tracing the experiences of displacement and the rhetorical dexterity of modern Burmese women writers, this book demonstrates a postcolonial, feminist, and deconstructive mode of reading and critical engagement with the politics of writing and representation in a transnational context. Its analysis counters the mass-mediated Anglophone romantic representations in which Burmese women are either marginalized or rendered as exotically alluring stereotypes, and presents a much-needed feminist archive of Burmese women as authors, cultural mediators, and transnational practitioner-citizens.

This book also demonstrates the insights transnational feminist studies could offer to feminist scholarship, particularly on the relationship between the Euro-American subject and the minoritized other, and between the dominant discourses and counterhegemonic articulation. In her analysis of the displacement of Burmese women, Ho criticizes the representations that turn minoritized life-and-death struggles into fetishized objects of consumption, problematizing the ethics of testifying about the oppression of exotic others, and warns against the danger of such narratives in reinforcing scattered imperialist hegemonies and reifying the moral and political privileges of Euro-American subjectivity.

In my view, the most significant and original contribution this book makes is Ho's discussion of what she calls "flexible tactics of displacement," which presents a fresh perspective for thinking about epistemology, spirituality, agency, and translocal knowledge-production. Taking up the term "alter/native" theorized by Chicana feminists and postcolonial scholars of Asia and

the Caribbean in the late 1990s, Ho explores Burmese-inflected alter/native strategies that are grounded in "a perspective that is simultaneously Other: a counterhegemonic standpoint and critical perception that develops from experiences of displacement, gendered trauma, sexual violation, and political marginalization, and Native: a set of epistemologies situated in and emerging from a specific geopolitical place and cultural history shaped by colonization and struggle" (4). Ho illustrates how Burmese women flexibly negotiate nation, gender, and cultural contact through their manipulation and synthesis of competing discourses, and argues that the flexible, polyglot rhetorical tactics in Burmese women's writing and their embodied performances articulate regionally situated knowledges and decolonizing viewpoints, and are examples of *alter/native* epistemologies. Throughout the book, Ho delineates how localized forms of knowledge such as Buddhism and Burmese ontology, and gendered imaginative work might displace imperialist epistemologies and universalized frameworks of understanding "reality," subjectivity, and difference.

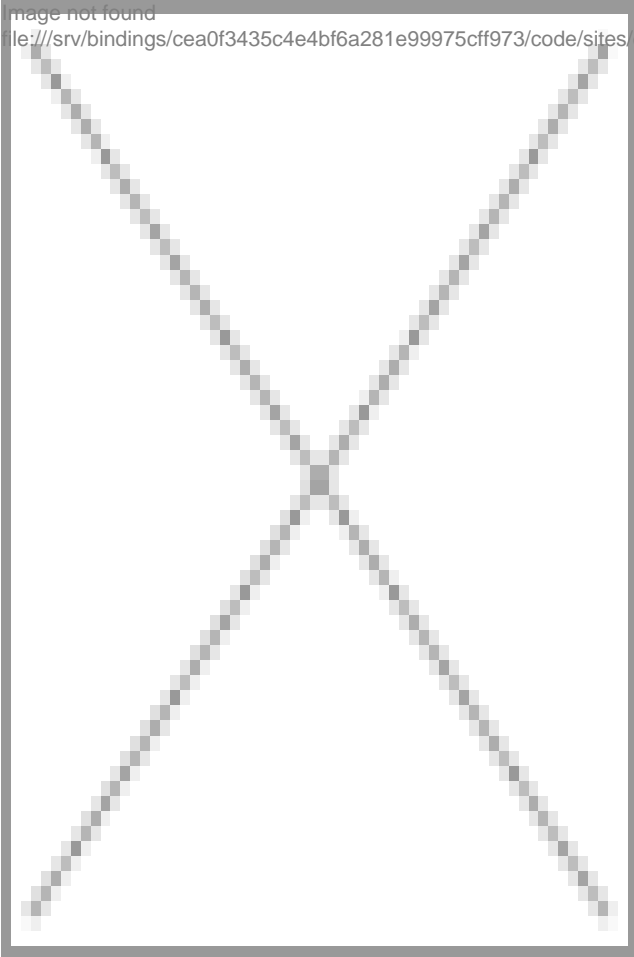
This book consciously contests the boundaries of the nation as an isolated geopolitical formation and the local/global distinction, and avoids essentializing Burmese identities and practices. This enables the book to engage a transnational survey that includes women in Burma, the Burmese diaspora, and the United States, and to situate Burmese women's displacement and struggle in the transnational circulation and negotiation of representations.

I thoroughly enjoyed Ho's analysis of Law-Yone's creative use of puns, wordplay, slips of the tongue, Asian dialects, accented English, and other rhetorical English, and how these strategies make explicit transnational connections, epistemic violence, and discipline. Since the works discussed in the book are all in English but about Burma, it would be interesting to see a discussion of how the English language shapes the ways Burma is translated and represented to the "West."

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