

Book Review

Thawngmung, Ardeth Maung. (2019). *Everyday economic survival in Myanmar*. University of Wisconsin Press. 320 Pages

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After decades under military dictatorship and a struggle for democracy, the 2008 constitution and three consecutive general elections in 2010, 2015, and 2020 gave hope to people that Myanmar is on the right track to democracy. However, the hope perished when the Myanmar army, "the Tatmadaw," overthrew the elected government again in February 2021, turning the clock back to 1962 and 2010. The people's resistance then erupted. As a result, Tatmadaw violently suppressed the movement; the UN estimated that more than 2,000 lost their lives, and more than 14,000 were jailed (Al Jazeera, 2022). The situation forced them to go underground and continue the fight. Tatmadaw strictly controlled the media, the outside world had little to know about the everyday life of the Myanmar people. To understand the context and possible scenarios, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung's fascinating book entitled "Everyday Economic Survival in Myanmar" covers much of the same ground. The book offers readers enriched narratives and in-depth analysis from many years of her fieldwork during the period of political transition between 2008 to 2015. Unlike other political economy accounts of Myanmar's transition that mainly focus on the macro-level, the book examines coping strategies of ordinary people to deal with their daily social, political, economic, and psychological challenges.

From the preface, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung cleverly draws readers' attention by sharing her coping strategies during childhood as an intro. In the introduction, she discusses the debate of "everyday politics" by scholars across disciplines and clearly states the gap the book would like to fill. She then creatively adapted Albert Hirschman's work (1970), which originally studied the loyalty declination of consumers toward firms, organizations, and states, to be an analytical framework called the "LPVE" (Loyalty, Passive Resistance, Voice, Exit); she uses to examine grassroots populations' coping strategies.

Chapter 1 argues that ordinary people's ability to cope with their challenges is greatly influenced by social capital and social identity, namely, socioeconomic background, ethnicity and religion, geographic location, and gender. The chapter identifies four types of general economic coping strategies: firstly, cutting expenses, saving and pooling their resources; secondly, relying on social networks, mutual obligation, receiving assistance from community-based organizations or international aid groups; thirdly, turning to religions, supernaturalism, astrology, or gambling for psychological and emotional healing; and lastly, employ political coping strategies of complying, accommodating, and bribing state actors to seek protection.

In the following chapters, from chapter 2 to chapter 6, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung uses the "Thick description" method deepening her arguments on four types of coping strategies previously stated. Chapter 2 describes how people cope with economic constraints and financial difficulties. To live with poverty, they apply various coping strategies of cost-cutting in food, education, and healthcare; conserving, sharing, recycling, and maximizing resources; selling their assets, pawning, and borrowing. While chapter 2 is defined by the author as self-defeating, chapter 3, which discusses income-earning strategy, is self-enhancing. Those strategies include: having home-based small-scale businesses such as backyard livestock; extracting natural resources they could get, such as fishery and forestry; mobilizing themselves to a place with a better economic opportunity; and involvement in deception activities ranging from opium cultivation to impersonating Buddhist monks.

Chapter 4 shows how social networks play an essential role. Relationships among people in their community and collective actions help elevate their standard of living. For example, when government fails to provide basic infrastructure, villagers raise funds to install electricity by connecting with the government's main power grid. This chapter also discusses external aid and development assistance from NGOs, INGOs, and foreign governments and agencies, for its positives and challenges. Chapter 5 examines psychological coping strategies in terms of people's morality. It shows how different cultural elements, for instant, religion and superstitious, mentally heal and maintain people's hope. While devotion to religion may psychologically help to cope with their hardship, it may also lead to hostile action toward other religious groups, as happened in the Rakhine state and elsewhere. The last chapter reveals different strategies for those who can still accommodate the systems, those who openly voice out and resist the system, and those who choose to avoid by using the 'exit' strategy of leaving home society to reside abroad.

Though the data collection process took place a few years back, the present situation after the 2021 coup could not be much different. Ardeth Maung Thawngmung's *Everyday*

Economic Survival in Myanmar provides a notable, insightful account not only for academia in Myanmar studies but in various fields of studies. With a well-fitting framework and well-structuring writing, the book offers an encompassing and profound understanding of ordinary people in Myanmar. With implications worthy of consideration and further exploration over the years to come.

References

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