Dear UNC Alumni and Friends:

While visiting her hometown of Salisbury, NC a few weeks ago, my wife paid a visit to an antiquarian bookstore and picked out a book for me: A 1908 volume simply entitled *Burma* by one R. Talbot Kelly, a veteran of the “British Raj,” a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and Commander of the vessel *Medjidieh*. Kelly’s little book is delightful, part of a series endearingly entitled “Peeps at Many Lands.” Early on Kelly tells his readers that his purpose is “to tell [them] something about Burma, a country, which, though one of the most interesting and beautiful in the world, is comparatively little known to the majority of people.” (p.3)

More than a century has elapsed since Kelly wrote those words, and they still hold true. Over the course of my thirty-year career as a professor and administrator at UNC-Chapel Hill, I have had the opportunity to travel all over the world both for research and as an official representative of the university. I can candidly say that out of the many, many places I’ve visited, Burma is my favorite. I’ve been there 13 or 14 times since my first visit in 1993 and, though it is changing rapidly, its allure continues unabated. There is no place that can match its combination of natural beauty, magnificent temples and ruins, traditional trappings, and warm and gracious people.

With its recent reforms and reopening to the world, Burma is much in the news today. It is considered by many to be Asia’s “last frontier,” which is another way of saying that the country isn’t yet just another outpost of global capitalism (you won’t find any Mickey D’s in Burma, indeed, the country has only recently gotten its first functioning ATMs!). The pace of life is picking up, but in terms of hustle and bustle, noise and din, most of Burma shares more with the world of R. Talbot Kelly—or, better yet, Kipling or Orwell-- than it does with sophisticated 24/7 urbanites in fast-paced 24/7 Shanghai, Bangkok, Seoul, or Hong Kong. As Burma edges into the modern world, it retains its venerable, if not timeless qualities, which make for priceless experiences, even epiphanies. A trip to Burma means exploring the mysterious temple complex at Bagan, watching with amazement the foot-rowing boatmen on misty Inle Lake, visiting the stunning golden-domed Shwedagon Paya (Pagoda) in Rangoon, and cruising silently down the mighty Irrawaddy. And that’s just for starters. The food, the dress, the customs, and, most of all the people, make a visit to Burma an unusually rich—and deep—travel experience. Come join me. You’ll be glad you did.

*Peter A. Coclanis*

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