

Diplomacy, Law, and Annexation: The Institutional Foundation of Burma's Syncretic Modernity

Dominiquo Santistevan

Abstract

Annexation, as the Crown's legal counsel, Henry Maine, explained to the Secretary of State of India, Lord Randolph Churchill, would dissolve preexisting treaties between Burma and foreign powers—a protectorate would not. While international law is a formal institution, and thus a document like the 1886 Proclamation of Annexation can assert the subordinate status of a political entity like Burma by its own conventions, the assertion was also historical. Standard historiographical approaches to this period, however, often explain annexation as though it were a singular event. But international legal convention is not unilateral and instead requires multilateral assent. China was not eager to lend its assent. Prior to Britain's declaration of annexation, China and Burma were more than geographically adjacent kingdoms. Their adjacency also shared a deeper "traditional" content—what, from the outside, might be called historical content beyond the material conditions. The two kingdoms, in other words, shared an understanding of obligations and practices that came with a political relationship of close contact, but after the declaration of annexation, though "Burma" and "China" remained geographically adjacent entities, this latter historical content became the object of British scrutiny. Specifically, China's desire to maintain Burma's "decennial mission" was an attempt to maintain traditional obligations between China and Burma even after the declaration of annexation, which was supposed to sever colonial Burma from tradition. The desire to close this question, and the role it played in motivating the search for a regional *modus vivendi*, remained a concrete historical force until at least 1895, thereby complicating the standard association between "annexation" and its declaration.