

CASE STUDY

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A Fulbright Scholar's report on textiles and apparel education in Myanmar

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Abstract

Myanmar, once known as Burma, has a substantial history in the textiles and apparel industry. In the past, the nation's contribution to the industry was small compared to that of other Asian nations. However, Myanmar's global trade in textiles and apparel products has increased dramatically after the European Union suspended its sanctions in 2013 and after the United States issued a waiver and general license in 2012 (Kent, Can manufacturing succeed in Myanmar, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/connorconnect/2012/10/18/can-manufacturing-succeed-in-myanmar/#73630e4c4b7d>, 2012). This trend is expected to continue, with Myanmar's apparel exports projected to more than double by 2020, reaching \$4 billion (www.fibre2fashion.com). Given the economic growth potential of the textiles and apparel industry, it is imperative for Myanmar to support textiles and apparel education regarding design, product development, retailing, and marketing. The author served as a U.S. Fulbright Scholar to Myanmar for the 2018–2019 term. She taught a course in the MBA program at Yangon University of Economics in Yangon, Myanmar, in addition to working in the Myanmar fashion industry to support fashion entrepreneurs using traditional Myanmar textiles and designs. In this report, the author provides her insight on the current status of Myanmar's textiles and apparel education, along with information on the textiles and apparel industry in Myanmar.

Keywords: Myanmar, Fulbright scholar, Globalization, Textiles and apparel education

Introduction

The textiles and apparel industry employs more people than any other industry, offering resources and revenue to millions of people around the world (Kunz and Garner 2012). Myanmar possesses a substantial history in the apparel industry. From the mid-1990s to 2004, the nation's contribution to the industry was comparatively small compared to that of other Asian nations, such that their garment-manufacturing sector relied heavily on exports to the United States (more than 50% of their exports during this period). However, Myanmar's global trade in textiles and apparel products began dramatically increasing after the European Union suspended its sanctions on April 22, 2013, and after the United States issued a waiver and general license on October 19, 2012, to ease the ban on the importation of Myanmar products into the United States (Kent 2012).

With the sanctions lifted, Myanmar's garment industry became the main contributor to the nation's robust economic growth. Apparel products became one of the country's

main exports, bringing revenue and jobs for 450,000 workers—more than 90% of whom are women—in over 600 factories, according to the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (European Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar 2018).

Since 2012, foreign and domestic investors have shown increasing interest in the Myanmar textiles and apparel industry. These trends are expected to continue not only due to the supply of cheap and abundant labor but also due to the extra incentives offered by the Myanmar government, such as investment and tax incentives for certain manufacturers established in special economic zones. Other incentives include a 5-year holiday on tax, custom duty exemptions on imported machinery, and the inclusion of equipment and value of machinery into the capital investment requirement (Kent 2012). In January 2016, the Myanmar Investment Commission approved 30 new investment proposals, 14 of which pertained to the building of new garment factories. Myanmar's apparel exports are expected to more than double by 2020, reaching \$4 billion (www.fibre2fashion.com) (fashion 2016).

International retailers such as Gap, H&M, Marks and Spencer Group, and Primark Stores Ltd. have in total signed contracts with more than a dozen garment factories in Myanmar (Stranger 2015). C&A, New Look, and Muji are other mega-retailers manufacturing their products in Myanmar (European Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar 2018). The 7th Myanmar International Textile and Garment Industry Exhibition, held from December 6, 2018, to December 9, 2018, also signifies the country's favorable attitude toward the textiles and apparel industry. Moreover, almost 9500 visitors participated in this event in 2017. Myanmar's Textile and Garment Industry co-organized this event with the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association, receiving official support from the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Given the economic growth potential of this sector in the Myanmar economy, an increasing demand for preparation of entrepreneurial skills for professionals in domestic and global textiles and apparel markets as well as for specific education related to textiles and apparel is envisioned.

The author served as a U.S. Fulbright Scholar in Myanmar for the 2018–2019 term, teaching a one-quarter Master of Business Administration (MBA) course from December 2018 to February 2019 at Yangon University of Economics, titled Entrepreneurship and Small Business. The author also worked within the Myanmar fashion industry, providing workshops and public lectures on fashion merchandising and marketing as well as fashion product development to support fashion entrepreneurs using traditional Myanmar textiles and designs.

In this report, the author provides insight into the current status of textiles and apparel education in Myanmar, along with some significant information on the country's textiles and apparel industry.

Fulbright Award Program

The Fulbright Award Program was established by William Fulbright, a 20th century American statesman. Following his vision to increase mutual understanding between the U.S. and other countries, this extraordinary exchange program bearing his name was created in 1946 and sent its first participants overseas in 1948 (www.cies.org/about-us/about-senator-j-william-fulbright).

Through the support of the United States government and binational partnerships with foreign governments, the Fulbright Award Program sponsors U.S. and foreign participants in exchanges covering various areas of endeavor to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and those of other countries (www.cies.org/about-us/about-senator-j-william-fulbright) (CIES 2018).

Fulbright alumni have become prominent leaders in many countries, including the U.S. The network includes 59 Nobel Laureates, 82 Pulitzer Prize winners, 71 MacArthur Fellows, 16 Presidential Medal of Freedom recipients, and thousands of leaders across the private, public, and non-profit sectors as of 2018 (Bleich 2018). Since its inception in 1946, more than 380,000 “Fulbrighters” have participated in the program. Receiving a Fulbright Award involves a very competitive process including rigorous review.

Reason for selecting Myanmar

There are several reasons why the author selected Myanmar as the site for her Fulbright Award. First, Myanmar is an appropriate political and economic environment for supporting the textiles and apparel industry, as demonstrated by the recently lifted ban on the importation of Myanmar products into certain countries (e.g., the United States) and the Myanmar government’s favorable support of the industry (e.g., through tax and duty exemptions). Second, interest from foreign and domestic investors in the textiles and apparel industry has increased, creating more jobs and revenue in the current global market. Third, the country enjoys various competitive advantages—such as its cost-effective and ample labor force—that favor its textiles and apparel industry. Fourth, the author’s knowledge and skills can provide support for the challenge of training future leaders in the textiles and apparel industry (due to the current lack of educational programs and experts in global product sourcing, development, and marketing). Lastly, there are ample entrepreneurial opportunities to create domestic brands for domestic consumers and cultivate their growth into brands that can compete in the global market.

The Fulbright Award provided an opportunity for the author to visit Myanmar as an educational ambassador from the U.S. and to leave a positive impact on students who are future leaders of Myanmar and professionals in Myanmar’s fashion industry.

The educational system in Myanmar

Because of decades of isolation combined with limited access to development and lack of government investment in social sectors, the quality of education in Myanmar has steadily declined.

According to a document provided by the U.S. Embassy in Yangon (US Embassy in Yangon 2019), education in Myanmar is characterized by rote memorization, examinations determining one’s course of study, bribery, and high levels of centralization and government control under the Ministry of Education. Although once known as a regional exemplar of education among Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar is currently known for its lack of high academic standards.

Preschool and primary education

Children may begin preschool at the age of two, and kindergarten is available for children starting at the age of five. Secondary education is divided into two parts: lower

secondary (i.e., middle school), or standards 5–8, and upper secondary (i.e., high school), or standards 9 and 10. After lower secondary school, students must pass the Basic Education Standard 8 Examination to enter upper secondary school. This examination is critical for determining a student's prospects for further education (US Embassy in Yangon 2019).

Higher education

At the age of 16, students may attend universities or other institutions of tertiary education, which are operated by the Department of Higher Education. The Department's headquarters are located in Yangon within lower Myanmar and in Mandalay within upper Myanmar. Universities and other institutions directly report to the headquarters that corresponds to their locations (US Embassy in Yangon 2019).

As of 2016, there are 171 institutions of higher education in Myanmar (Education, 2016). The majority of institutions report to the Ministry of Education, while others report to their corresponding ministries, e.g., the agricultural school reports to the Ministry of Agriculture. In total, thirteen ministries oversee these institutions, with the majority being regulated by the Ministry of Education. Each ministry has a strictly regulated curriculum that focuses on specific functional or technical expertise rather than a general liberal arts education. As a result, some necessary disciplines are either completely absent from the curriculum (e.g., political science, geo-politics, etc.) or are underdeveloped (e.g., journalism studies, sociology, and social science methodologies) (US Embassy in Yangon 2019). Arts education in general, much less textiles and apparel education, is completely absent in the educational system.

Myanmar universities offer several programs, including Bachelor's, Bachelor Honors, Master's, and Ph.D. degrees. To earn a Bachelor's degree, a student needs to complete 4 years of schooling (US Embassy in Yangon 2019).

Academic calendar

The academic year is generally divided into two semesters. The first semester runs from the first week of December until the end of March to coincide with Thingyan, the Burmese New Year. The second semester starts in the first week of June and ends by the end of September (US Embassy in Yangon 2019).

Fashion education in Myanmar

Although there is currently no fashion school in Myanmar, in 2017, the Ministry of Education approved the School of Fashion Technology, which is set to open under the Government Technical Institute (GTI). The 120-year-old Government Technical Institute (GTI), located in Insein township, Yangon Region, is scheduled to reopen its doors to teach technical and vocational subjects with the support of the German government. According to Myanmar News, U Aye Myint—the Director General for the Department of Technical and Vocational Education and Training, Ministry of Education (MOE)—has confirmed that the Institute will open under a joint partnership between the Ministry of Education and the German government (consult-myanmar.com/tag/government-technical-institute-gti/). Since 2012, the government of the Federal Republic of Germany has

provided more than 36 million euros (K55 billion) to advance technical and vocational education and training in Myanmar (Ei Shwe Phyu 2017).

The Yangon Technological Education School is the only institution of higher education in Myanmar focusing on textile sciences and engineering. The university provides a Textile Engineering major, and the school's goal is to provide training in basic mechanical engineering subjects and train future leaders in textiles and allied industries, which involves research and engineering principles (ytu.edu.mm/dept/18). The school provides 6 years of undergraduate programming, as well as Master's and Ph.D. programs as shown below (Fig. 1).

The lack of textiles and apparel education and training has long halted the progress of Myanmar's fashion industry. Recently, however, there has been a positive development in the country. Yangoods (www.yangoods.com), one of the top fashion brands in Myanmar, is officially launching a fashion school called Yangoods Fashion Academy, along with the country's first and only fashion and design library. The company plans to launch the project in the spring of 2020.

Reflection on Fulbright work in Myanmar

Since the School of Fashion Technology, Myanmar's only fashion school, is still in the beginning stages of development, the author was instead assigned to teach in the MBA program at Yangon University of Economics (YUE). YUE is a highly renowned university in Myanmar. The author co-taught a course titled Entrepreneurship and Small Business for one quarter, from December 2018 to February 2019. The course content was delivered in English, and the class consisted of about 100 students with an average age of 24 years old. Over 80% of the students were female (Fig. 2).

The author's primary teaching goal was to equip future leaders in Myanmar's academy and industry with a strong knowledge and ethical foundation in global markets, product development, merchandising, and retailing. The author strived to maintain a balance between rigor and nurturing in order to challenge students to exceed their potential, think creatively, and expand their horizons.

The increasing number of foreign investments in Myanmar will likely correspond to increase in job opportunities. With this in mind, the author covered various aspects of professional development and leadership, entrepreneurship, branding, marketing, merchandising, and domestic and global retailing of products in the course. Outside of class, the author also mentored students in the cultivation of professional development skills for employment in the global market. The author provided special seminars on communication skills, professional etiquette, resume and cover letter writing, using LinkedIn, etc. to her students.

In addition, the author collaborated with Yangoods to set up an official internship between the MBA program at YUE and Yangoods. Two students from YUE's MBA program were selected for the first internship, which lasted from April to June of 2019.

The author assumed that the majority of students would not have sufficient proficiency in English to understand the course materials, so she tried not to use excessive jargon or idioms in her lectures. This worked well with the students. Also, the author asked students to provide written feedback after each class in response to questions such as "Do you want the instructor to know anything about your learning?" and "Do you have any

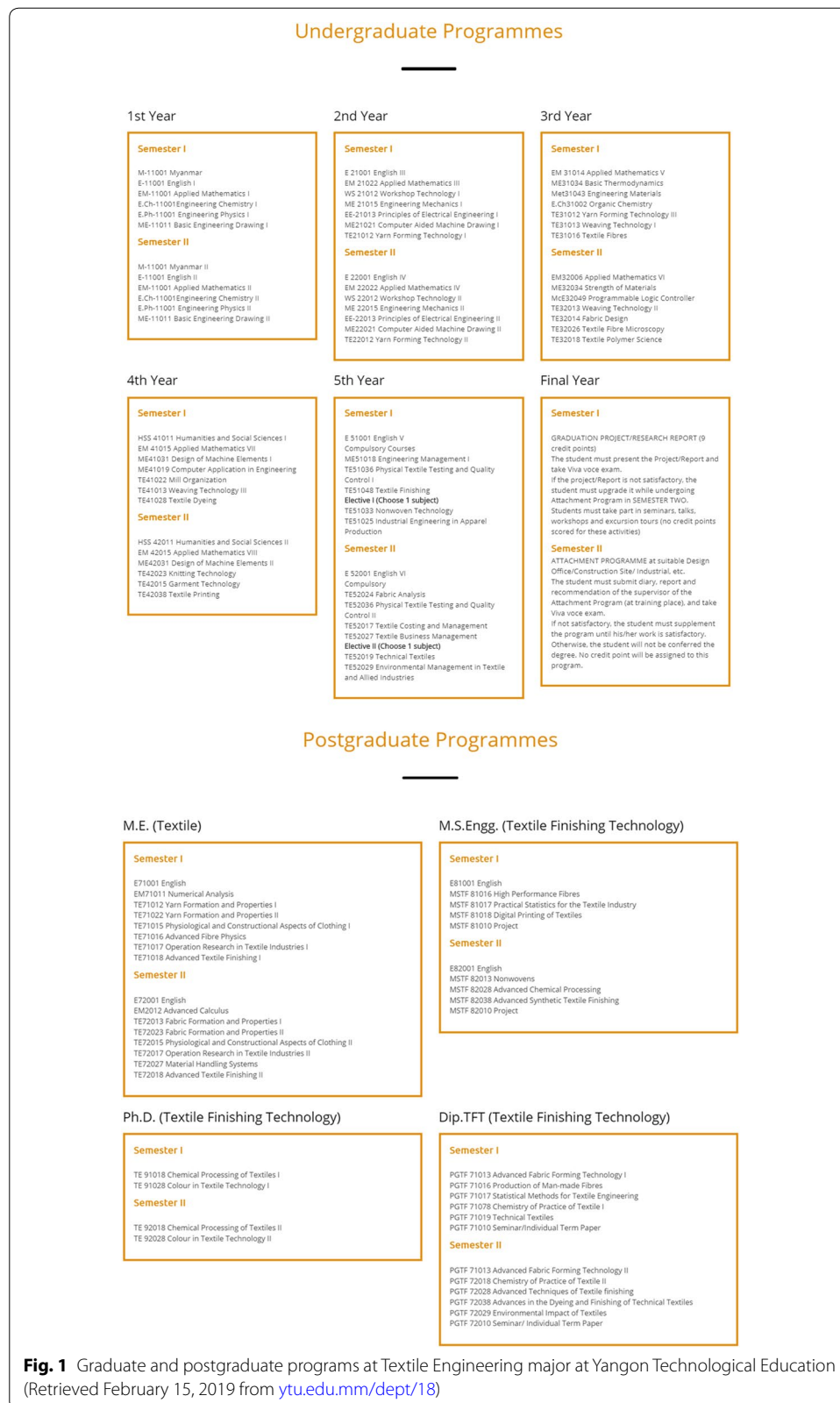


Fig. 1 Graduate and postgraduate programs at Textile Engineering major at Yangon Technological Education (Retrieved February 15, 2019 from ytu.edu.mm/dept/18)



Fig. 2 The author teaching at the MBA program at YUE

questions for the instructor?” The students’ writing skills were well-developed, and only a few students asked the author to speak more slowly or loudly. Indeed, the students’ levels of English proficiency were higher than expected.

The lack of reliable technology for use in course delivery presented a minor challenge. Although the Wi-Fi was inconsistent, the business school had more funding and grant money than other departments, and the classroom had a projector and computer system available. The classroom also had air-conditioning, which can be rare in Myanmar. This was beneficial to the instructor for becoming acclimated to the hot and humid Southeast Asian climate.

There was no online educational platform akin to Blackboard or Canvas available at the school. The students relied heavily on Facebook for communication regarding course delivery and group work, so the author also used Facebook to transmit course materials to the students. As there is no copyright law practiced in the country, students made copies of original textbooks for distribution.

Thanks to previous teaching experience in other countries (i.e., China, Mongolia, and South Korea), the author was aware of cultural differences in Myanmar and the need to adapt pedagogy to accommodate different teaching environments. For instance, students and professors in Myanmar tended to provide email responses more slowly than their counterparts in other countries. Moreover, punctuality was a concern, as many students and professors alike did not maintain consistent class times. The class usually started 10–15 min later than the established time. After many reminders and announcements, the author could see improvement among students in her class.

The author also partnered with the fashion industry as part of her Fulbright responsibilities. She offered workshops with Turquoise Mountain, a local nonprofit organization with a strong connection with fashion retailers, entrepreneurs, and small business owners in Myanmar. The workshop topics covered Fashion Branding and Marketing as well as Fashion Product Development, specifically for retailers and designers using Myanmar fabric and textiles. The author provided expertise on how local designers and retailers can re-establish their brands successfully by reaching out to more customers, in addition to explaining how brands commercialize (i.e., mass-produce) their products. The

workshops were well-received, allowing the author to provide the industry with new insight on competitively re-establishing their brands. The author also contributed to the fashion industry by giving a public lecture. She spoke at Yangoods Fashion Academy's first ever public lecture event on March 4, 2019 (Fig. 3).

Final thoughts on the experience in Myanmar

The author believes that her expertise, experience, and enthusiasm for the subject matter—as well as her sensitivity to cultural diversity and global mannerisms, passion for supporting young students, and positive attitude toward life and learning—offered quality educational services to her students in Myanmar. She also believes that her contributions to the fashion industry in Myanmar will have a positive impact on local retailers and designers.

During her term in Myanmar, the author also won a Fulbright Regional Travel Grant to collaborate with the U.S. Embassy in Phenom Penh, Cambodia, in March 2019. The author traveled to Cambodia and gave public lectures and curriculum reviews to universities in Cambodia, including Limkokwing University, the University of Management (NUM), and the SETEC Institute. In addition, the author spoke at a nonprofit organization called the Harpswell Foundation to support future women leaders of Cambodia and provided a workshop to local artisan groups in the region, including textiles entrepreneurs.

From the experience, the author broadened her understanding of textiles and apparel education and industry not only in Myanmar but also in Southeast Asia overall. The author had opportunities to collaborate with the host institution (Yangon University of Economics) and the fashion industry. The author will continue to support any needs (e.g., related to educational and professional development) of the fashion industry and educational sector in Myanmar and will expand her future research to encompass



Fig. 3 The author giving her public lecture at Yangoods Fashion Academy

curricular development in other newly developing countries. The author believes in the importance of textiles and apparel education, as it enables the acceleration of newly developing countries into becoming developing countries.

Today, the author continues to support a local Burmese community in Seattle through Educational Empowerment (<https://www.educationalempowerment.org/>) as a member of the board of directors. Educational Empowerment is a local nonprofit organization focusing on supporting women and girls in the Southeast Asia region and Seattle, Washington.

Authors' contributions

The author completed this study by herself. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Authors' information

Dr. Jaeil Lee is a professor and chair of Apparel Design and Merchandising program at Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA. She was a US Fulbright Scholar to Myanmar for 2018-2019. Her experience includes teaching and research positions in top universities internationally. Her expertise is apparel product development and technical design, creative teaching and curriculum development, global apparel merchandising, and social entrepreneurship.

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Competing interests

There were no competing interests.

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